

## **International communities of practice: what makes them successful vehicles for teachers' professional development?**

This study examines teachers' perceptions of the specific factors and conditions which shape international communities of practice into successful vehicles for their professional development. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with thirteen teachers in Poland who have extensive experience working in a wide range of international professional development settings. The findings indicate that teachers perceive international communities to be a unique platform for their professional development because they: offered multi-layered topographies for professional growth; created space for the collective organisation of development activities in diverse, autonomous teams working on challenging topics; and allowed for sharing teaching stories, reflecting on practice, as well as feeling affirmed and affirming others. Based on the results, recommendations are made for future research and policies which enrich communities within and across schools by providing teachers with the flexibility to discover and build international communities.

**Keywords:** international communities of practice, teacher professional development, international networking, community working processes

### **Introduction**

Contemporary teachers – no matter where in the world they work – confront teaching and learning challenges which are global in nature. Therefore, policy makers and scholars call upon teachers to reach beyond the boundaries of their immediate workplace communities, in order to seek collective knowledge and solutions to shared problems (Alfarao and Quezada 2010; Baecher and Chung 2020; Biraimah and Jotia 2013; Brown 2019; Prenger et al. 2018). Indeed, a growing number of studies show that international networking has the potential to enhance teachers' professional development by nurturing their personal and professional skills and capabilities, including: global competencies (Alfarao and Quezada 2010), intercultural awareness and cultural responsiveness (Byker and Putnam 2018; Marx and Moss 2011),

tolerance and respect for diversity (Pence and Macgillivray 2008), reflective thinking (Okken et al. 2019), teamwork and collaboration skills (He et al. 2017), open-mindedness toward alternative education approaches (Okken et al. 2019; Schiveley and Misco 2015), language competences (Çiftçi and Karaman 2019), and intellectual growth and personal development (Shoffner 2019). Although these studies document a wide range of the positive effects international experiences have on teachers' professional development (TPD), less is known about what exactly makes international networks successful vehicles for their professional growth. Drawing on broad theoretical discussions about building professional learning communities, this paper aims to fill this gap by exploring teachers' perceptions of the specific factors and conditions which shape international communities of practice (ICoPs) as a powerful means for their professional development.

## **Theoretical background**

### ***Teachers learning internationally as communities of practice***

Communities of practice are a form of professional learning community (PLC). Communities of practice, regardless of profession, are set apart from other models of PLCs by core characteristics which include: affirmation and recognition of other community members through the sharing of practice; creation of boundaries delineated by expertise and experience, rather than workplace and geography; trajectory towards perceived mastery within the community; and recognition and leadership existing beyond and separate to positional leadership roles (i.e. non-positionality) (Frost 2013; Liu and Xu 2011; Wenger 1998).

Communities of practice, unlike some other PLC models, are not bounded by workplaces: they may exist through the use of travel and technology between countries and cultures (Coleman et al. 2018; Davidson and Hughes 2018; Wenger 1998). These communities that cross national boundaries may autonomously define alternative boundaries; likewise, ICoPs may be flexible regarding the kinds of knowledge they value and exchange (Underwood 2017). Indeed, in such communities, as Mortensen (2017, 272) notes: '[...] people from diverse backgrounds regularly find themselves in situations where they have to negotiate solutions to shared problems without being able to rely on extensive shared linguistic experience or sociocultural habits'. Indeed, all of these potentials are contained within the inherent and fundamental flexibility of defining a learning community as a community of practice (Webber 2019; Wenger 1998).

### ***Teacher professional learning in professional learning communities***

PLCs, whether workplace-focused or not, are generally considered an effective tool for teachers' professional growth, given the evidence of their potential to change teaching practices and student outcomes (Darling-Hammond and Richardson 2009). The results of recent meta-analyses, by Doğan et al. (2016) and Doğan and Adams (2018) respectively, indicate that teachers' participation in PLCs can lead to substantial improvements in their skills and knowledge; their instructional practices, including using more student-centred practices; student learning outcomes; as well as non-academic student gains, including teamwork and student engagement in inquiry. Moreover, research has also shown that PLCs can change a school's professional culture by building relationships and fostering collaboration among teachers (Turner et al. 2018; Vescio et al. 2008) — significantly, demonstrating that 'establishing a PLC contributes to a fundamental shift in the habits of mind that teachers bring to their daily work in the classroom' (Vescio et al. 2008, p. 84).

On the contrary, some researchers point out that such favourable effects are not always guaranteed to be the result of PLCs, rather a number of specific conditions within the PLC must be established. For example, Bolam et al. (2005) identify eight key characteristics of effective PLCs: shared values and vision; collective responsibility for pupils' learning; reflective professional inquiry; collaboration focused on learning and group; individual, professional learning; inclusive membership; mutual trust, respect, and support; and openness, networks, and partnerships. To this widely adopted basis, further characteristics of effective PLCs are added by researchers such as Turner et al. (2018) who stipulate the importance of positioning teachers as leaders. In addition, further mediating factors can influence the implementation of a PLC and any associated professional development (Schneider and Kipp 2015), including: teachers' beliefs regarding self-assessment and self-efficacy; management of learning communities; proximity of a community's horizon of observation; and presence or lack of a shared language.

In sum, recent research has shown that teachers' engagement in a variety of PLCs expands their opportunities 'to learn from others and to increase overall instructional quality' (Turner et al. 2018, p. 51). In order to extend this existing knowledge base, this paper examines the specific factors and conditions which shape ICoPs as unique spaces for teacher professional development.

### **The context of the study**

This study is part of broader collaborative research carried out in Poland between 2018 and 2020 (Underwood and Kowalczyk-Walędziak 2019), exploring how teachers engage in ICoPs — shaping their identities and building their professional knowledge.

From 1989, when the communist regime in Poland ended, the country began its shift towards internationalisation — a process which was accelerated from 2004 onwards, when Poland joined the European Union. This recent internationalisation has yielded a rich, new repertoire of professional possibilities for cross-border cooperation between teachers: ranging from networks such as Erasmus+, an exchange programme for individuals and organisations to share knowledge and experience between both EU and non-EU countries (European Commission 2021), through to programmes delivered by national and local governments or non-governmental organisations (Śliwerski 2020). Over the last five years, online networks have also expanded and, of these, the Erasmus+ eTwinning programme has attracted the greatest number of Polish teachers, growing to 67,486 members by 2020 (FDES 2020). Via its easily accessible interface, this free online community enables individual teachers to establish and develop collaborative projects, without the need for investing in travel. Teachers registered for the programme can find partner teachers, develop thematic projects with them, and participate in professional development activities (e.g. courses and working groups) organised at both European and national levels. Furthermore, it offers a well-developed system for awarding and certifying teachers, which is crucial given that Poland's teacher development policy recognises international cooperation (Act of 26 January 1982, The Teachers' Charter, as amended).

Despite this increasing trend towards internationalisation, there is an ongoing debate in Poland over whether or not teachers and policy makers searching for transferable teaching strategies from more developed countries for use in less developed countries is a desirable or achievable goal (Śliwerski and Szkudlarek 2010). Concerns have been raised that this pedagogical 'importing' and 'exporting' may be a part of broader neoliberal processes that involves the commodification of learning through the reification of what are perceived to be Western approaches. (Kwieciński 2012; Potulicka and Rutkowiak 2013). As such, these concerns could inhibit mutual recognition of learning outcomes within a common, cross-border professional community of teachers. However, we suggest that building international relationships between teachers via smaller scale projects (for example, eTwinning projects) may be one way to achieve change, free from the risk of enhancing the perception of

inadequacy within the Polish context. Thus, it is this very potential for teacher networking to create uniquely fruitful international communities that this study explores.

## **The study**

### ***Sampling and participants***

A combination of purposive and snowball sampling (Creswell 2013) was used to recruit participants for this study. In order to better understand the specific factors and conditions which render international communities of practice uniquely conducive spaces for teacher professional development (Freed et al. 2019, p. 3), we selected teachers with at least five years' experience engaging with other teachers on an international basis through a range of formal and informal initiatives.

The sampling process had two stages. In the first stage, potential participants were identified by analysing short, professional biographies of teacher-ambassadors registered on the eTwinning programme in Poland. We chose this means of participant selection because, as mentioned earlier, eTwinning is currently a popular form of international collaboration in Poland's teaching community. Only those teachers who had clearly indicated long-standing and broad experience of engaging with teachers from other countries were considered — producing a pool of 14 teachers with whom interviews could potentially be arranged. In the second stage, these teachers were invited by email to participate in the study. Nine of them replied and, of these, seven agreed to participate. After these interviews, some teachers suggested other people from their networks who might be suitable for the study. In turn, using these suggestions led to 'snowball' sampling and, cumulatively, 13 teachers agreed to be included.

The participants who contributed to this study were predominantly female (n=11) and had an average of 20 years' teaching experience (5-35 years). All of the participants worked full time in primary and secondary schools in a range of subject areas: English, Polish, mathematics, physics, or history. At the time of the study, all participants were involved in at least one international project via the eTwinning programme, covering a wide range of topics and activities related to their taught subjects or personal interests. However, all participants were also involved in other international initiatives — from physical mobility projects developed within the Erasmus+ programme to projects funded by governmental and non-governmental foundations.

### ***Data collection and analysis***

The data for this study were collected via semi-structured in-depth interviews (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015). The interview schedule contained open-ended questions and prompts organised around two main themes: (1) teachers' perceptions and experiences of working with teachers from other nations, and (2) the impact of these experiences on teachers' professional practice and identities. The first version of the interview schedule was prepared in English since it was a common language for both researchers and the intended interview language. The interview guide was piloted in English with two participants who then gave feedback — they suggested that we clarify two questions and conduct the interviews in Polish. Although these teachers were fluent in English, they strongly emphasised that they felt much more at ease in their mother tongue for expressing their experiences and attitudes with nuance and accuracy. Therefore, to avoid any confusion and allow for the interviewing process to flow naturally, all interviews were conducted in Polish by the first author.

The interviews took place between October 2018 and January 2019 in the way most convenient for each teacher: six were interviewed face-to-face in their workplaces, six via phonecall, and one via Skype. The interviews were between 40 and 70 minutes long. All interviews were audio-recorded, then transcribed by an external agency for further analysis.

Qualitative content analysis was used to examine the interview transcripts (Miles and Huberman 2018). The data analysis process took place via a series of structured phases. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, we did not create an initial inductive coding frame, or 'road map' (Silverman 2019), for the data. Instead, the coding process began with the transcripts themselves. Firstly, the Polish transcripts underwent initial coding by the first author. This generated a deductive framework of primary codes which were checked and verified by another Polish researcher. The second stage involved challenging, expanding, and refining the initial framework, which produced the secondary hierarchically structured coding frame. At this point the codes were grouped and categorised into themes. The third stage comprised the categories and coding frame being translated into English by the first author — plus proofreading and translation checked by an academic proofreader. This was then sent to the second author, along with extended translations of participants' responses which had been through a similar process of translation and verification. The final stage was undertaken by the first and second author together: refining the coding and categorisation, without any further expansion, during two meetings (one via Skype and one face-to-face) in order to reach the final set of categories that informs the presentation of the data here.

### ***Ethical considerations***

The research was conducted in accordance with the Polish Academy of Sciences Code of Ethics for Researchers (2017) and the British Education Research Association Guidelines (2018). This is a low risk study as it involves highly qualified and competent adults fully capable of understanding the concept of consent. Even so, every effort was made to ensure that participants were not discomforted in any way. Participation in the study was voluntary and the interviews were designed as professional conversations in which the participants were engaged respectfully and as equals. In order to protect their identities, numerical codes, from #INT1 to #INT13 represent the teachers in the reported data.

### **Results**

This paper focuses on teachers' perceptions of the specific factors and conditions which make ICoPs successful vehicles for their professional development. Data analysis resulted in five overarching themes: a) multi-layered topographies for professional growth; b) organisational elements; c) content of international community projects; d) community working processes; and e) leadership structures and relationships between members. These themes are explained in the following sections, illustrated by quotations from the interviews.

#### ***a) Multi-layered topographies for professional growth***

All of the interviewed teachers mentioned that ICoPs provide a unique platform for their professional growth on three interconnected levels: firstly, on an individual level; secondly, in terms of their students; and, thirdly, regarding the schools they work in.

On the personal level, engagement in ICoPs increased participants' subject matter and pedagogical knowledge beyond what was embedded in their own cultural, social, and educational contexts, specifically via extending their repertoire of new teaching strategies and digital tools (e.g. devices and software).

I've learnt many new methods that I didn't know before despite thirty-five years of teaching experience. [#INT1]

During the conference in Portugal I first saw how to use Kahoot interactive quizzes. [#INT10]

Some participants added that being a part of ICoPs developed skill sets that they would not have had access to without international exchange with peers in other countries, emphasising skills such as: the ability to create and maintain foreign contacts; refinement of linguistic communication with native speakers; international project management aptitudes; and the ability to facilitate and participate in multicultural and multi-ethnic interactions.

Furthermore, teachers gained first-hand knowledge and experience of the workings of other countries' education systems, namely in terms of: structure, underpinning principles, government policies, school management, and teachers' everyday practice, including alternative (or even unexpected) methods and strategies for achieving the same education goals.

[International project work] gave me a unique opportunity to see various approaches for teaching the same things across the world [...]. Thanks to this I understood that there is no agreement about the 'right' way to teach. [#INT8]

In addition, many interviewed teachers said that international experiences helped them to broaden their worldview and deepen their knowledge about different cultures and traditions.

Furthermore, a few participants stressed that engagement in ICoPs gave them direct insights into the strengths and limitations of education policies, trends, and approaches originating in 'western' countries which were later implemented in Poland.

And in England I saw that formative assessment, which in Poland was a real 'wow', was no longer such a 'wow' there. I saw it had some advantages but also some disadvantages. [...] I saw how both the children and the teacher were bored and tired of formative assessment [...]. [#INT3]

For other teachers, belonging to an international community of peers was invigorating as it renewed their passion for their taught subject, enhanced their motivation for self-development, and boosted their job satisfaction:

If you feel burnt out [...] or you feel that the, let's say, traditional teaching is not enough for you, an [international] project can have a very positive influence on the level of motivation, satisfaction, and happiness you have with what you are doing. [#INT4]

The second layer of teachers' professional growth via ICoPs was articulated in terms of consequential benefits for their students: more concretely, all of the interviewed teachers



described how these benefits resulted from increased flexibility, creativity, and cooperative teaching in their pedagogies after their own ICoP-involvement. Indeed, the standard model of teaching in Poland was one of top-down knowledge dissemination centred on syllabus content; however, teachers' involvement in ICoPs has prompted them to incorporate less hierarchical, more cooperative and student-centred teaching strategies (e.g. problem-based learning and signing learning contracts with students).

I was delighted that they [teachers in other countries] gave students the freedom to decide what should be done in a particular situation and strongly supported their autonomy and creativity. I noticed that I limited my students very much because I actually prescribed to them ways of doing and thinking. [...] Now my students are free to choose their own way to perform different tasks. [#INT7]

This pedagogical shift, in turn, has led to students engaging more deeply in learning, adopting more positive attitudes toward subject matter, achieving better results in exams or competitions, and strengthening cooperation with other students to achieve common learning goals.

In addition, several teachers reported that their students profoundly developed their own cultural knowledge and competencies, plus became more open and tolerant towards people of different races, religions, traditions, or worldviews to themselves.

My students had some stereotypes before we started to cooperate internationally. [...] And then when working together in an international group, they fit into those relationships very well. And it was no problem for them that someone had dark skin or wore a head covering [...]. [#INT5]

The third level of teachers' professional development via ICoPs was how international co-working experiences contributed to their practice in wider school contexts beyond the classroom. First of all, the participants built new communities of practice in their schools. Although these communities were primarily aimed at developing staff networks for new international initiatives, they also proved to be an important element in creating a collaborative culture on a local level, i.e. building better relationships with their colleagues and headteachers. This is clearly explained by one teacher:

And I simply collaborated a lot with other English teachers, which is an extra advantage of such projects, because it also made us closer to all the English teachers [in our schools]. [#INT3]

In addition, teachers reported developing deeper, more mutual relationships with students and their parents, specifically learning to treat them as partners in terms of knowledge and trust:

The international projects taught me to ask students about everything, as they are experts (one hundred times better than myself) in modern technologies. [#INT2]

International cooperation helped me build stronger partnerships with the children's parents. They travelled with me and the students for a project in Lithuania — they helped me to organise meetings for international guests, took part in workshops, etc. [#INT8]

Furthermore, several participants also reflected on their ICoP experiences in terms of developing the internationalisation process in their schools. As a result of their international activities: increasing numbers of students interested in the prospect of international mobility were recruited to their schools; more international projects were carried out in these schools than in other schools in the region; and the teaching staff developed greater interest in international cooperation. Ultimately, the pupils of the teachers who were part of an international community, in turn, enjoyed international mobility during the next steps of their education journeys.

### ***b) Organisational elements***

With regard to the fundamental organisational elements of ICoPs, the participants highlighted the community's following factors: their transient and long-distance nature; collectively-planned activities; flexibility and autonomy; and diversity and internationality.

The main defining feature referred to by participants regarding the uniquely international character of these communities was their transient and long-distance nature. Indeed, many participants appreciated the brief timeframe offered by, for example, the eTwinning projects, which allowed them to maintain a high level of attention and engagement for the full span of the project and avoid conflict emerging between members.

These are not long-term projects, which is — in my perspective — very beneficial. We have no conflicts, because there is no time to produce them. [...] Distance is also important — we do not see each other very often. [#INT5]

In addition, some teachers put value on the centrality of collectively building activities within their international communities, particularly in contrast to the top-down organisation of more local TPD opportunities.

Other major factors which set ICoPss apart from local TPD were flexibility and autonomy. Indeed, teachers reported that these factors allowed them to adapt their ICoP project plans as and when they gained new knowledge in the process — both during decision-making and at the final outcome stage.

I very much appreciated the flexibility in these [international] projects. A simple example: we had planned to make greetings cards in many languages for Christmas, but the kids found it boring; instead of cards there were... Christmas computer games. [#INT8]

For many teachers the fundamental heterogeneity, diversity, and internationalism of their ICoP work was inherently interesting and inspiring. In fact, two teachers added that it was this very international diversity which gave them a sense of prestige and pride in their local workplace settings.

### *c) International community project content*

The teachers highlighted that their ICoPs were specifically built around shared project content, i.e. both the topics/themes and the methods of realisation. In all cases, they reported that the project material was very interesting, encouraging, and inspiring as it featured new methods or ideas that they had had little time and space to develop in their everyday practice, due to formal curricula pressures and exam schedules:

[The international project] gives me a lot of joy; my job is now not boring. [#INT6]

This sense of passion was expressed by all teachers, with the explanation that participating in ICoPs allowed them to incorporate their own professional interests into the projects that they developed together with teachers from other countries.

### *d) Community working processes*

After the contents of the projects were agreed upon, the teachers' ICoPs needed to be committed to and they needed to develop effective working processes, in order to achieve their goals and create a conducive space for successful teacher professional development. Our data analysis showed that these work processes included the following conditions: building an open and stimulating work environment; sharing teaching stories; ongoing reflection on practice; feeling affirmed/affirming others; collaboration and dialogue; and the opportunity to make productive comparisons.

### ***Building an open and stimulating work environment***

The teachers reported that international networking allowed them to work in a community where individual differences were not only respected, but strongly valued, and where they could more freely raise thought-provoking questions and talk critically about classroom practices than they could in their local TPD settings. One teacher explained:

I feel accepted and more secure. I don't feel that if I make a mistake, it immediately means something horrible. [#INT8]

Furthermore, working in an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect allowed the teachers to share and discuss their perspectives on teaching processes, engage in self-reflection, and gain a better understanding of their own practices. This, in turn, made them feel more confident about their professional capabilities, and allowed them to proactively integrate what they had learned via ICoPs in their own classrooms and schools.

### ***Sharing teaching stories***

All of the participants acknowledged that specific classroom strategies could be exchanged via ICoPs. However, they highlighted that this was not simply the case of copying the mechanics of teaching methodologies from other teachers, but a much deeper, mutually enriching process of sharing and listening to teaching stories, i.e. providing and seeking new sources of inspiration and perspectives on teaching.

Even though I observed a lesson in a subject that wasn't my own taught by teachers from other countries, I could also learn something new from this experience. My brain was more focussed on understanding the overall frames of the education process, on

gaining a sense of a vision, on seeking inspiration — rather than remembering concrete procedures or steps of a teaching strategy. [#INT3]

As this quotation exemplifies, the teachers perceived the stories that their ICoP peers told as not simply informative, but more purposeful and inspiring than localised discussions about pedagogy or practice. Indeed, some teachers mentioned that they utilised the knowledge collectively developed via sharing these stories, by tailoring them in individual and creative ways in their own classroom and school settings.

I do not want simply to adapt what I learnt in the projects. [...] I tried to use those tools and technologies in my classroom, but in my way and for my own purposes. [#INT11]

Interestingly, some teachers referred to the idea of the co-construction and validation of knowledge in ICoPs as being similar to gaining and building knowledge via international comparative research.

This cannot be automatically transferred to the Polish context [...] just the same as in the case of comparative research. [...] We should be aware that western European teachers work in economic and socio-political conditions that are often different to ours. [#INT13]

Indeed, these teachers were aware that teaching techniques, approaches, and perspectives are constructed in relation to their institutional and socio-cultural settings; therefore, their subsequent analysis and implementation should be carried out with careful regard to a wide range of socio-economic, political, national, and local factors.

### ***Ongoing reflection on practice***

The teachers' processes of co-constructing new knowledge were facilitated by reflective debate — both aloud and alone, on their own teaching strategies and the strategies offered by teachers from other nations. According to the interviewed teachers, they reflected at different stages of collaboration with their international peers: during preparations for visits and shared activities, as well as after the visit, when they implemented the results of international collaboration in their own schools. For many teachers, this multi-stage reflection was a crucial step in

transforming their perspectives and values, and of making adjustments when selecting new teaching styles.

### ***Feeling affirmed/affirming others***

Many teachers also highlighted how ICoPs offered a space for them to feel affirmed and to affirm others in their professional practice, particularly through sharing their expertise to a knowledgeable audience outside their own schools and national cultures, as well as having this expertise recognised and valued.

Or when I did something in my international community and people appreciated things that I felt were [...] oh God, they were hopeless [...] but someone was commending me for them! [#INT11]

Each teacher [in the ICoP] would present their ideas for solving some teaching problems. It was so nice when people, after my speech, said “thank you [...], it was so interesting”, something that was very lacking in teachers’ communities in Poland. [#INT4]

These teachers identified that this solidarity was possible specifically because they identified with the commonality of being teachers and education experts.

### ***Collaboration and dialogue***

Many of the teachers also explained that they highly appreciated the interaction and collaboration of working with teachers from other countries, as well the importance of giving and receiving constructive feedback in ICoPs:

During the [international] project, we are a team. We talk, contact each other, share our experiences, and ask others to help us. [#INT1]

It was the first time in my life that feedback was uplifting for me; I learnt what was good in the [international] project and what needed improvement. [#INT11]

### ***Comparison***

Lastly, comparison was a key factor driving the professional growth of the teachers in their ICoPs — not only encouraging them to explore similarities and differences between national teaching and learning styles, but also leading to reflection on their personal values and perspectives. This, in turn, resulted in them revising the visions and ethos underpinning their own teaching approaches, and strengthened their motivation for self-improvement. For example:

It seemed to me I was a guru and I knew just about everything. But when I went to that first [international seminar], I saw what teachers in other countries were doing and honestly, [...] my arms went down and I felt very, very small. [...] I decided to start learning, because what teachers in other countries do is really good, and you can use what is done all over the world in your classroom. [#INT9]

#### *e) Leadership structures and relationships between members*

The teachers spoke about how the relationships — initially professional and later personal — established within their ICoPs were developed on the principle of professional symmetry, not on hierarchical power structures. They highlighted that the leadership within these international groups was based on non-positional structures, with individuals sharing their own expertise and demonstrating a deep/real sense of responsibility for their tasks. Indeed, as many teachers mentioned, this equity was different to their national or regional TPD communities, yet essential to the development and maturation of their group work.

There is a tendency in our Polish TPD courses to being constantly ordered by someone to do something. In international spaces we are all equals. There is no boss there — we divide tasks by ourselves and we modify them, of course, by ourselves. And this is enough motivation to be responsible for my work here. [#INT8]

Several teachers also celebrated the long-term friendships they had developed with international colleagues and their families.

### **Discussion and implications**

This paper has reported on a study into teachers' perceptions of the elements which make international communities successful vehicles for their professional development. More specifically, this study found that there is a complex interplay of five predominant factors and conditions through which international networks offer a unique platform for teacher

professional development, namely: multi-layered topographies of professional growth; organisational elements; the content of international community projects; community working processes; and relationships between members. In the following section, we summarise the key insights and theoretical contributions yielded by this study, as well as the corresponding implications for policy and practice.

Firstly, similar to previous research (e.g., Baecher and Hung, 2020; Biraimah and Jotia 2013; Okken et al. 2019), this study has demonstrated that the unique TPD potential of ICoPs is mainly linked to multi-layered topographies of professional growth, impacting teachers individually and, in turn, their students and schools. This individual level varied from teacher to teacher: for some, it was fruitful to gain specific knowledge on subject matter and teaching strategies; for others, first-hand knowledge of other countries' education systems, cultures, and traditions was more pertinent. However, for many teachers there was a commonality in that ICoPs changed their practices, beliefs, and attitudes, and enhanced their professional skills beyond what was offered via localised TPD. The participants, in varied and nuanced ways, all articulated the benefits gained from ICoP membership which they could not have gained in their workplace settings. In most cases, relationships within local TPD networks provided support and regular engagement, while those found within international community provided inspiring and rejuvenating ideas and dialogue regarding the professional roles of teachers and the purposes of education — a finding in line with most studies into long term networks (e.g., Hord and Sommers 2008; Madrid, Thapa, & Halladay, 2020). In addition, the teachers described how, in international communities, they felt less inhibited in publicly exercising leadership and more able to discuss ideas freely, including building and identifying shared professional values (Frost 2013; Joshevska & Kirandziska, 2017). These results imply that ICoPs are especially significant in building teachers' resilience for operating within professional contexts they find comparatively less conducive to their professional development, such as their own schools.

Moreover, the teachers reported how not only themselves, but their students and schools, benefited from their ICoP experiences. As regards students, this was manifested by higher engagement in learning; more positive attitudes toward subject matter; better results in exams and competitions; and increased interest in future international mobility. As regards schools, this was manifested by elevated school visibility and prestige in local environments, as well as increased recruitment of internationally-minded students.

However, the most significant — and unexpected — of the benefits of ICoPs this study discovered was the development of new communities of practice within a local context.



Although the possibility of such a positive ripple effect from the global level to the local level has been mentioned in previous studies (e.g., Underwood and Joshevska 2019), none have explicitly explored it in real depth. The factors which facilitate ICoPs enabling the building of local communities seem to be the affirmation teachers gain from being part of such communities, and the commonalities in outlook that they establish with peers similarly drawn to international engagement. Furthermore, outwith professional communities — through engagement in international cooperation — the teachers also built new partnerships with students and parents based on mutual respect, communication, and the recognition of all parties' expertise.

Secondly, all of the teachers — when discussing the uniqueness of ICoPs in influencing their professional development — attached particular significance to community working processes, among them being affirmed and affirming others. According to many participants, one of the most rewarding aspects of being an ICoP member was the mutual acknowledgment of expertise between peers. The teachers found that the recognition they gained from other professionals inside their field but outside their workplace, had a uniquely important role in reaffirming their sense of professionalism and building their self-confidence. This is robustly accounted for in research into communities of practice which stresses the importance of interaction with peers (e.g., Wenger-Traynor & Wenger-Traynor, 2015) and having an audience with which to share and demonstrate expertise in strengthening teachers' professional learning (Wilburn, 2019).

Thirdly, within the Polish academic community writing about international engagement in education, there is a vibrant, ongoing debate about the risks of neo-colonialism in terms of the wholesale copying of teaching approaches from Western countries (e.g., Kwieciński 2012; Potulicka and Rutkowiak 2013). However, the teachers in this study did not perceive this as a risk or note it as something they had to navigate when working with peers from other countries. Indeed, no participants placed any particular significance on the direct transferring of specific teaching strategies from one national setting to another. The teachers were open to this possibility but did not prioritise it or see it as the fundamental goal of working with others across national boundaries (Underwood 2017). Instead, they placed the most emphasis on the richly contextual nature of ICoP knowledge co-creation and the processes of sharing teaching stories, inspiration, and new pedagogical perspectives.

Fourthly, the teachers perceived these communities as successful vehicles for their professional development in that they enabled them to exercise non-positional leadership in a

formally defined sense (Frost 2015) — the absence of a boss afforded space for their mutual roles as leaders to, instead, be affirmed by the positive perceptions that they had of each other.

Finally, this study found that the teachers' professional growth via ICoPs was influenced by organisational elements, such as the communities': transient and long-distance nature; collectively-planned activities; flexibility and autonomy; and diversity and internationality. It is interesting to note that — in contrast to a few previous studies — that some participants considered the definitively transient character of ICoPs as a factor which contributed positively to their professional development.

Simultaneously, working collaboratively was another critical factor fostering the teachers' professional growth via ICoPs. This is a critical finding for the Polish education community as, although teacher collaboration is essential for effective TPD, recent Polish studies have suggested that the actual practice of teaching in Poland's schools is hindered by teachers' preference for individualism over teamwork and collaboration (e.g. Kamińska 2019). However, in the ICoPs explored in this study, the intentional inclusion of participants from different countries who were experts and, in most cases, passionate in their fields allowed participants to experience real co-planning and co-teaching — sharing their values, knowledge, and expertise within the group.

This study has key implications for policy makers and TPD providers. Firstly, there is immense value, on both local and national levels, in funding and supporting international networks of teachers. The teachers involved in this study consistently confirmed how being involved in international communities had improved their professional confidence, their classroom practice, and their students' learning — i.e. all aspects of teachers' professionalism that any school or country would surely seek to develop. However, for these processes to be successful and sustained, local-level support from schools, principals, and TPD leaders is essential.

Secondly, this study highlights that those teachers who become involved in ICoPs do not expect or want to simply copy classroom strategies on a mechanical basis. Rather, the knowledge they expect to gain and co-create is multi-dimensional. Therefore, in the process of encouraging teachers to work with their peers across national boundaries, policy makers and TPD providers should not promote either the untailed transfer of pedagogical strategies from country to country, or the experience of reflecting without putting into practice. Instead, ultimately, ICoPs should be understood, advocated for, and funded as uniquely fruitful spaces for the sharing of teaching stories, out of which expert — yet non-hierarchical — leadership

emerges, allowing for pedagogical knowledge to be co-created between teachers and across borders, ready for tailored application to local education settings.

### **Limitations and future research**

This study has some limitations which may be addressed in further research. Firstly, this study was small-scale and exploratory in nature, located in the Polish national context — thus, its results may not be generalised to other settings. Secondly, the participants involved in this study may be viewed as ‘extended’ professionals (Hoyle 2008) in terms of having broad and deep perspectives on classroom processes and constantly seeking to expand and improve their own teaching practices — thus they may not be generally representative of all teachers. Furthermore, the study used only one method of data collection, i.e. interviews — thus is based mainly on the subjective perceptions of the teachers participating. In order to address these limitations and validate the results, it would be necessary to conduct a larger, mixed-method study, involving teachers from different countries, and representing more varied levels of teaching experience.

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### **Conflicts of interest**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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