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**Understanding Professional Community and Professional Identity Through
The Experiences Of Bahraini Teachers Working With British Teachers In
A Partnership Project.**

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Presented

at

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an exploration into the nature of the professional community that is formed when teachers from different nations work together. The research presented here consists of the findings from a small-scale exploratory case study that is the scoping study for a larger piece of research on this same theme. This larger piece of research is my doctoral study that I am currently undertaking at Cambridge University. This paper specifically involves the presentation of data drawn from interviews with teachers from Bahrain who have been involved in working with teachers from Britain via programmes run by the British Council and others. In this paper I discuss how identity is constructed within a professional community that crosses national boundaries. I conclude by suggesting that teachers who are working with colleagues from other nations build their professional identity together in innovative and exploratory ways. I also suggest that they actively construct professional communities with these colleagues and that they find this rewarding and significant.

This paper responds to several of the identified themes of the ECER Conference 2015. These include 'ways in which teachers learn and develop throughout their professional career'. In relation to this, this paper also addresses issues around the conference title 'education and transition'.

KEYWORDS: community of practice, teacher leadership, professional community, professional identity

Introduction

In preparation for my doctoral study I conducted a scoping study in which I interviewed four teachers from Bahrain who over a number of years have been engaged in teacher networking via programmes arranged by the British Council. The purpose of this scoping study was to initially explore the ways that involvement in international networking had shaped their professional identity and their perceptions of the professional communities that they defined themselves as belonging to. The research questions for this specific conference paper, in which I discuss the data from these interviews, are as follows:

- do teachers who are engaging in networking programmes that cross national boundaries perceive themselves as belonging to a community of fellow professionals?
- if so how do they define this community?
- in what ways, if any, does participation in such projects or programmes shape their professional identity?

This paper is presented in two parts. In the first part I discuss the methodology that informs this paper. In the second part I discuss the data from the interviews using the five most dominant themes that emerged during the process of data analysis as sub-titles with which to structure this section. I then return directly to my research questions in my conclusion.

Part 1: Methodology

In the following paragraphs I describe my approach to data collection and data analysis for this paper, in the following order: the data collection instrument, then the sampling process and finally the method of data analysis.

The data collection instrument

The method of collecting data for this scoping study was semi-structured interviews. The instrument was a first iteration of the interview schedule that I intended to use for my doctoral research. This is included as an appendix to this paper. This schedule consisted of a short list of questions and topics that I wished to raise. At the start of the interview the

interviewees were also asked to draw a diagram in any form illustrating the professional communities that they perceived themselves as belonging to. There was one exception to this as one interview was conducted by voice only via skype.

The sample and population

The method for choosing the sample was largely opportunistic. The only requirements I had for the participants were that they were practising teachers who had been involved in formally arranged international partnership projects; also that they could speak fluent English, thereby enabling me to conduct the interviews in English. However, their prior involvement in such projects meant that as a corollary they may have shared some distinct characteristics which might not be shared by the wider community of teachers in or internationally. This is discussed further later on in this paper.

The following teachers were interviewed, names have been changed.

Tawheeda (teaching in a girls secondary school)

Mariam (teaching in a girls secondary school)

Habib (teaching in a boys secondary school)

Anwar (teaching in a boys secondary school)

All these teachers teach in large secondary schools in Bahrain. Within their schools at the time of interview all held the post of international coordinator and therefore had responsibility for coordinating all international partnership projects within their school. In all cases this post was initially created in response to engagement with the Connecting Classrooms Programme run by the British Council, which connected their school with schools and teachers in the UK. However, in all cases the intention with the post was that the teachers would perceive of it as having a broader scope than simply being to develop this single project. It was intended that they would actively seek to become involved in and potentially lead the school in terms of other international programmes.

The Connecting Classrooms Programme at that time was a large partnering programme run by The British Council that linked 150 British teachers in each new cohort, each year with 150 partner teachers from the Gulf States. Each partnership was planned to last three years and included a yearly exchange visit to each school by the teachers involved. It was also

expected that teachers would work together both long distance via the internet and across the schools they work in to develop shared lesson planning within at least some subjects.

It may therefore be reasonable to presume that these teachers who had chosen the post of international coordinator, with specific reference to a large British government project may be people who already perceived themselves as belonging to an international community of teachers and who also have a specific interest in education as it is practised in Western nations. This is referred to below when discussing the responses that they gave in interview. Finally, it should be noted that three of the interviewees are English teachers and one (Habib) is a maths teacher. As all the teachers come from just one country, Bahrain, it is not possible to do more than suggest that some concepts that would emerge through these interviews would re-emerge in other contexts where international teacher networking is taking place. However, my intention is not to reach broadly generalisable conclusions but in the case of this specific conference paper, it is rather to generate and contribute to discussion (Robson, 2012).

Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed and coded using NVIVO. The codes that emerged are discussed in far greater detail below. The second part of this paper is presented under five subheadings relating to five of the themes that emerged from the analysis of the interviews. I return to the research questions in the conclusion.

Part 2: a discussion of the interviews

In this section I identify themes that emerged from these interviews. I have discussed these under five sub-titles that were generated by my analysis of the interviews.

Learning new teaching strategies

I was interested in the role learning classroom strategies would have for teachers for a series of reasons. Firstly, because it can be argued that it is through the sharing of practice that teaching moves from being an artisan or craft-based activity to a profession (Frost, 2011). Also because, I wanted to know whether there was a perception that English or Western teaching could provide a model of potential good practice and whether this was a reason for

involvement in working with British teachers. I also wanted to explore whether perceptions of education in the West, which I expected among these particular participants to be positive, would mean that there was a stronger or weaker sense of shared professional community with their British colleagues. Therefore although I was interested in the sub-division of codes that would emerge from within the boundaries of this broader theme, this was also a theme that was inserted into the interview process. Therefore it should be noted that this particular code was predicted rather than found through an inductive process.

All the teachers discussed at length issues around bringing teaching strategies into their own classrooms from the West. Tawheeda's first response confirmed my expectations that there would be a sense in which these teachers from Bahrain would have a very positive perhaps even an idealistic image of teaching in the West. Meanwhile, the most telling phrase within Mariam's answers was the repeated use of "Western teaching methods" to describe more flexible approaches. This phrase was also used by all the other Bahraini teachers to describe teaching practice which they considered to be particularly innovative. However, in expanding their answers a more complex picture developed. Although they defined innovative teaching with the term 'Western', it emerged that their most creative ideas had in fact been their own or had been inspired by 'Western' ideas learned from Bahraini colleagues. I therefore remain unsure as to why such methods are perceived by them as Western methods rather than simply good Bahraini practice and also whether 'Western' was being used as a synonym for innovative with no real connection to the geographic West.

If this is the case it could indicate that there is a greater commonality amongst teaching professionals across nations than might be expected and that differences in teaching practice between many nations may be more nuanced than I had originally thought it would be. It could also potentially indicate that part of the professional identity of some teachers could be a perception of themselves as innovative teachers and even part of a sub-community of such professionals. If this is the case it could be a significant motivating factor for working with teachers from other cultures, an experience which they had all found to be very positive. However, it could also indicate that this definition of professional identity may be dependent on a defined other group of non-innovative teachers and that as the geographical boundaries for those teachers that we define as belonging to the same community of practice widens, other boundaries narrow its membership in other terms. It may be that in exploring this further Wenger's definition of a community of practice may prove to be a useful conceptual

lens Wenger (1999) defines ‘a community of practice’ as an entity which is more tight-knit and has a stronger identity than may be implied by the term professional community. However, it may be as he suggests that integration into such a community can only occur when boundaries that define those outside as well as inside are created and shared by its members.

Reflection

Three of the participants referred to reflection as something which defined the community of teachers that they belong to with the use of the word ‘reflection’ in their diagrams. All identified an ability to systematically reflect on practice as something that is distinct in helping to create their own professional identity as a teacher and something that they expected to find in colleagues they worked with from other countries. To this extent it emerged as a trait or characteristic, which perhaps identifies teachers as being part of a shared professional community, or even as referred to above, a community of practice. However, in relation to this, when asked directly about whether they saw themselves as conducting research, none of the interviewees perceived themselves as doing so. Indeed, Tawheeda insisted that the more appropriate word was reflection, yet in the following sentence explained how this reflection was a public process as she would frequently engage in online discussions and wrote a blog, therefore fulfilling one commonly accepted definition of research (Stenhouse, 1981). Her response perhaps demonstrates how hard it is for teachers to perceive their reflective thought processes as unprocessed research and that they do perhaps see these two as distinct.

When discussing the process of reflecting upon lessons and refining them, Mariam described herself as “rebellious sometimes”, she also described herself as creative. In fact each of the other interviewees also described themselves in similar terms possibly affirming the importance of individuality as well as of professional community to teachers. This raised the issue of whether part of the professional identity of some teachers is one of being ‘rebellious’ and what role this may play. If a significant concept for teachers’ self-efficacy is a perception of themselves as rebellious it possibly presents obstacles for teachers in terms of developing a sense of belonging to a professional community. However, other discourses have developed the concept of the possibility of a community of teachers that is based on both community and individual self-identity and which does not see these as irreconcilable opposites. An

example is the description of the teacher who is embedded in a community and leads change, which is discussed in research into teacher leadership (Frost, 2014).

An international audience for teachers' work

The significance of creating an audience for students' and teachers' work was touched upon by all the interviewees without prompting. As just one example Anwar felt that having teachers in a school in Bahrain networking with colleagues in Britain across a range of subjects could potentially impact upon school culture by building an audience in which teachers' professionalism could be celebrated beyond the boundaries of their own classroom.

Mariam saw it as significant in that it provided students as well as teachers with an audience for their work beyond just their teacher. Perhaps most significantly though she also found that by using the Connecting Classrooms Programme to create a culture of innovation it enabled other ideas to be developed within the school that were not directly related to the original project. To this extent the value of international networking could be that it leads to a process of creating a new sense of professional community rather than revealing a common professional community that already exists. This sense of being part of an international community of professionals, that provides an audience for each other's work, seems to have been seen by all the participants as being positive and enabling.

Equally though it seems that where international networking is part of school culture it has fragile foundations often based on an individual or a small group within the school community. All the interviewees spoke about feelings of isolation and of feeling that they were putting forward a vision that was not bought into by the entire school. It is perhaps the case that some teachers perceive themselves as belonging to an international community of professionals and actively seek engagement with this community but that many others do not and do not see any gain in becoming so. This may explain the significance to these teachers of this broader international community of teachers who they perceived as having a distinct set of shared values.

Building relationships locally

As I expected, these participants related international networking to a goal of building relationships with colleagues from other nations. However, more surprisingly two of the interviewees also raised the importance of involvement in this programme in terms of

building relationships locally; whether that be with colleagues within the same school or other schools or with their own students. Tawheeda described how being part of the programme helped her build relationships with her students. She also spoke about how this programme linked to her work with other teachers engaged in public reflection or practitioner research. Anwar, spoke about the importance of the 'networking' between Bahraini schools that had developed through this programme.

It is possible that the process of engaging with colleagues from other nations, as well as building a sense of international community, creates a new culture of teacher relationships locally. It may even be the case that by throwing light on similarities and differences with other nations a coherent sense of local teacher identity is built through identifying differences and that this is more professionally significant than reaching commonalities with teachers from other nations.

Personal history and personal friendship

One of the interesting aspects of the teachers' motives for participating in this programme was the importance of personal history. I had not included a focus on this in my original interview schedule nor had I included questions directly related to the building of friendships. However, all the interviewees referred to their personal history on the diagrams that they had originally drawn and all described their own stories with detail and enthusiasm when interviewed. Tawheeda saw involvement in the programme as part of an ongoing journey of personal development connected to the UK and Mariam had a similar experience in that she identified a transformative period in her life, in terms of her approach to teaching, as being a year that she spent in the USA teaching Arabic. Neither of the two male teachers interviewed had been to the UK or any other English speaking nation before joining this programme. However, one of them Anwar still connected his interest in these projects to his personal history and interest in the English speaking world. For all of the interviewees, commitment to the international programmes they worked with was perceived as being connected to developing personal relationships either for themselves or their students.

Conclusion

To return to the research questions posed at the beginning of this paper it seems that those teachers involved in international networking programmes do strongly perceive themselves to be part of a community of fellow professionals that crosses borders. They describe this

community in highly positive terms as a community that is innovative, reflective and supportive in that it enables an audience that takes interest in each others' work to be developed. It is appropriate to use Wenger's (1999) concept of a community of practice to define such a community. However, issues raised by Wenger also emerge when defining this community. As the geographical boundaries become more fluid other boundaries are created, to the extent that these teachers perceived themselves and this community that they belong to as distinct from that of those who they perceived to be their less reflective and less innovative colleagues. However, these boundaries are also permeable and one of the benefits these teachers saw with international engagement was that it enabled the creation of stronger relationships locally. Finally the term 'Western' remains problematic and this also indicates challenges when working with the West. These teachers were deeply interested in dialogue with the West but wanted that dialogue to be equal and not to consist of one way traffic in terms of learning strategies as they had a high degree of self-efficacy and were confidently aware that they had considerable skills in teaching and lesson planning. It seems that for these four teachers perception of belonging to a community of practice that is international and scope was entirely positive, whether the boundaries of such a community in other senses can be broadened to encompass a larger proportion of the international teaching workforce is more open to debate.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Schedule

Purpose

- To explore the ways in which teachers perceive themselves as belonging to an international community of teachers.
- To explore the ways that working with teachers from other nations have shaped this perception.

Nature of the interviews

The interviews will be semi-structured. They will last between 20 and 40 minutes. The interviews will be recorded. **The themes below will provide prompts for the interview, this is instead of a schedule of questions.**

Preliminaries as follows

Prior to the interview I will explain some points relevant to the interview process.

Explain the purpose of the research.

To understand more about teaching as a profession via the experiences of individual teachers.

Explain relevant ethical practice related to the interview

That the interview data will be anonymised.

That they will have the opportunity to comment on a summary of my thesis before submission.

That they can withdraw from being a participant at any stage.

Visual presentation

Prior to the interview they will be asked to sketch in any form they want the professional groups and communities that they perceive themselves as belonging to and how these inter-relate. I will refer to this during the interview.

Themes

Their personal story including their experiences of working with teachers from other nations:

Their reasons for involvement in international programmes.

Their experiences working with teachers from other nations.

The nature and requirements of programmes that they have been part of.

Whether they built long-term professional relationships through such programmes.

Their definitions of success or otherwise for such experiences.

Definitions of professionalism:

Whether the way of working is different to that they have with colleagues from their own nation, in what ways.

Whether it was easier or harder in any way to build relationships with colleagues from other countries.

What it means to be an education professional a 'teacher'.

Learning new strategies:

Whether they learnt new teaching strategies by working with teachers from other nations.

Whether they shared teaching ideas without learning strategies.

Goals other than those related to teaching:

Whether they had other goals for working with teachers from other nations: