

CREATING CONNECTEDNESS: ASSESSING THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA BY MISSOURI
MIDDLE SCHOOL EDUCATION LEADERS TO DEVELOP THEIR PROFESSIONAL
LEARNING NETWORK

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

Creating Connectedness: Understanding the Use of Social Media

By Missouri Middle School Education Leaders to Develop Their Professional Learning
Network

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ii
ABSTRACT	vii
Section 1: Introduction to Dissertation.....	1
Introduction to the Background of the Study.....	2
Statement of the Problem.....	2
Existing Gap in the Literature.....	4
Purpose of the Study.....	5
Research Questions.....	6
Conceptual/ Theoretical Framework.....	6
Constructivism and Connectivism.....	6
Connectivism in Professional Networking.....	8
Design of the Study.....	9
Setting.....	10
Participants.....	11
Table of Participant Leaders.....	13
Data Collection.....	13
Interview Protocol.....	14
Data Analysis.....	14
Credibility of the Study.....	15
Limitations and Design Controls.....	17
Definition of Key Terms.....	18
Findings.....	20

Intentionality of Building and Seeking Knowledge.....	20
Exposure and Use of Social Media Platforms.....	20
Professional Expectations.....	21
Voyeurs and Consumers of Information.....	22
Growth and Connection.....	23
Accessibility to Resources.....	23
Navigation of Social Media Platforms.....	23
Taking the Time.....	24
Experts in the Field.....	25
Global Views and Diversity.....	25
Making the Connections.....	26
Stepping Out of Isolation.....	26
Translatability of Ideas.....	27
Missing the Personal Touch.....	28
Surface Level Interactions.....	28
Chance of Misrepresentation.....	28
Research Question One.....	29
Research Question Two.....	31
Summary of Research.....	33
Significance of the Study.....	34
Expanded Literature from Findings.....	34
Putting Into Practice.....	34
Summary.....	35

Section 2: Practitioner Setting for the Study	37
Introduction.....	38
History of Organization.....	38
Organizational Analysis.....	39
Leadership Analysis.....	40
Seeking Knowledge.....	41
Individualized Learning.....	42
Summary.....	43
Section 3: Scholarly Review for the Study	45
Introduction.....	46
Professional Development vs. Professional Learning Networks.....	48
Evolving Forms of Professional Learning Networks.....	50
Benefits of Social Media as a Professional Learning Network.....	52
Collaborative Communities.....	54
Connections with Experts.....	54
Bridging Gaps by Connecting in High Need Areas.....	55
State of Missouri Funding Model for Professional Development.....	56
Conceptual Framework.....	57
Traditional Learning Theory.....	58
Connectivism.....	59
Summary.....	62
Section 4: Contribution to Practice	63

Creating Connectedness: Assessing the Use of Social Media by Missouri Middle School Educational Leaders to Develop Their Professional Learning Network.....	64
Section 5: Contribution to Scholarship.....	86
Assessing the Use Social Media by Middle School Leaders in Developing Their Professional Learnings Networks.....	87
References.....	118
Section 6: Scholarly Reflection.....	127
Scholarly Practitioner Reflection.....	128
Change as an Educational Leader.....	128
Change as a Scholar.....	130
 <u>APPENDIX</u>	
A. Letter of Informed Consent.....	132
B. Interview Protocol.....	134
REFERENCES	138
VITA.....	157

Abstract

Educational leaders are increasingly required to have knowledge over a wide range of topics. They are seeking ways to engage with colleagues and other educational leaders by connecting in meaningful learning and collaboration. Online communities are offering networking opportunities to educational leaders by turning social media platforms into communities of learning and connecting. While education budget cuts can limit district training opportunities, geographic distance can also isolate educational leaders. With the constant need for professional networking that is easily accessible and fairly inexpensive, administrators are becoming more reliant on social media networks to help develop and expand their district's professional development offerings (Chen, 2017; Davis, 2017). This study uses qualitative means through interviews of middle school educational leaders in the state of Missouri to examine their use of social media platforms for enhancing their professional learning networks.

SECTION ONE:
INTRODUCTION TO DISSERTATION

Introduction to the Background of the Study

Educational leaders are increasingly required to have knowledge over a wide range of topics as they relate to serving their school communities. They are seeking ways to engage with colleagues and other educational leaders by connecting in meaningful learning and collaboration. Online communities are offering networking opportunities to educational leaders by turning social media platforms into communities of learning and connecting. While education budget cuts can limit district training opportunities, geographic distance can also isolate educational leaders. With the constant need for professional networking that is easily accessible and fairly inexpensive, administrators are becoming more reliant on social media networks to help develop and expand their district's professional development offerings (Chen, 2017; Davis, 2017).

As many educational leaders access these online support networks, they are choosing to do so through social media platforms. These social media platforms offer educators the opportunity to connect not just with those close to them but also with those around the globe. Educators are trying to create and engage in opportunities that they can personalize and that implement professional learning. The “core-principles of [high-quality] professional learning transcend both face-to-face and online platforms” (Holmes, Signer & MacLeod, 2011, p.77). Social media provides for personal consumption and connection, allowing educational leaders to tailor their experience to their needs.

Statement of the Problem

Poorly designed, one size fits all professional learning opportunities can inhibit educators' growth in their profession and their ability to connect with other educators (Knight,

2011). Demonte (2013) from the Center for American Progress found through a multi-state study over professional development for educators that:

The complaints about professional development have been well documented and most often cite the following shortcomings:

- It is usually disconnected from the everyday practice of teaching.
- It is too generic and unrelated to the curriculum or to the specific instructional problems teachers face.
- It is infrequent and implemented as a one-shot event or led by an outside consultant who drops in to conduct a workshop and never returns to the school or district (p.4).

Professional learning for educators should involve them as partners in the decision-making process of their professional growth and networking plans rather than as passive bystanders to their own learning (Concepts, 2017). Educators learn best when concepts emerge in a variety of ways, allowing them to be active participants in the learning and choice of new concepts. Providing opportunities for educational learners to connect and collaborate with others outside of their school environment offers them opportunities for learning and growth (French, 2015; Knight, 2013;).

The ideal situation for professional networking among educational leaders would include direct communication and engagement that is content-specific and self-paced. However, for many districts, the struggle with these professional opportunities is with expense and time out of the building (Gulamhussein, 2013). The problem of achieving individual, specific professional networking is amplified for those who are in districts that are geographically isolated, such as rural settings. They often have smaller professional development budgets and

are physically further from professional learning opportunities in suburban and urban areas (Howley & Howley, 2005; Little, 1993).

Monetary and physical barriers have led educational leaders to think beyond the physical walls of their schools as they look for professional learning opportunities. Since 1995, “Technology has reorganized how we live, how we communicate, and how we learn. Learning needs and theories that describe learning principles and processes, should be reflective of underlying social environments” (Siemens, 2005, p.3). Online learning platforms, such as Blackboard, Canvas, etc., have been used for years in universities and are slowly being adopted into secondary education systems (Darling-Hammond, Jonnasen & Marra, 2012; Richardson, 2012).

These platforms have made it possible, through online mediums, to break down some of the physical barriers that exist when it comes to getting information to educators. "Ultimately, everybody wants to ensure great professional learning for their educators, but in many cases, [districts] never investigated what that really means" (p.1), Hirsch (2107), Executive Director of Learning Forward stated. Leaders are taking these ideas of online learning platforms and slowly transforming them into personal educational networking opportunities on social media sites.

Existing Gap in the Literature

As technology has evolved, so have the ways by which educators can collaborate and interact with one another. Social media platforms offer educational leaders the ability to tailor their experience to fit their individual needs for professional networking. Educational leaders are utilizing these social media platforms to create collaborative, timely, personalized, and professional networking opportunities for themselves (Demski, 2012). Most of the data focus

on the individual's use of social media but not on its use as a professional development tool to develop personalized learning networks for educators at the middle school level (Waters, 2015).

Often, social media usage and impact on educational leaders' trust is broken down into primary, secondary, or collegiate users. The middle school leader, for this study, will be viewed as someone who is an educational leader for grades 6 through 8. Many studies group grade 6 as primary and grades 7 and 8 as secondary. As more districts across the nation are moving to buildings that include 6th grade in their middle school or junior high buildings, more specific data are needed in exploring educational leaders' professional networking systems in that grade range.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to determine if middle school educational leaders in Missouri were using social media platforms to grow their professional learning network and if tailoring their specific experiences using social media platforms offered them the collaborative form of professional networking they are seeking.

Trust (2012) found “highly effective educators model this process of information analysis and knowledge acquisition by continually learning through collaboration, professional development, and studying pedagogical techniques and best practices. Many educators have extended their learning by developing online professional learning networks (PLNs)” (p.133). Zeavi (2013) examined if these social media outlets allowed educators the instant access to professionals for collaboration across a wide variety of educational topics and specialties (Zeevi, 2013). Ross et al. (2015) considered the effectiveness through which social media platforms gave, Middle school educational leaders opportunities to build their professional learning networks in ways they could not through traditional in-person means.

This study will utilize qualitative methods. Using qualitative methods to analyze study responses will provide rich descriptive answers from educational leaders. The researcher hoped to determine if the use of social media platforms changed the perception of traditional professional networking since there are no issues of physical boundaries or time constraints that the educator must strictly adhere to for their professional learning.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study are:

RQ1: How do middle school educational leaders in Missouri use social media platforms as part of their professional learning network?

RQ2: How have the professional networks of Missouri middle school educational leaders been enhanced by the use of social media?

Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

Learning theories have shifted from that of the educator to the learner (Felix, 2007). With the introduction of cognitive psychology, educators began to look at the way information was internalized by the learner in different processes (Craik & Lockhart, 1972). “Cognitivists see learning as an internal process that involves memory, thinking, reflection, abstraction, motivation and metacognition” (Anderson, 2008, p.21). The ultimate goal is for the learner to process information through internalization, adding to the learner's existing knowledge base and personal interactions (Ausubel, 1974; Cook & Yanow, 1993). This shift from traditional theories began to see learners as an active participant in the learning exchange.

Constructivism and Connectivism Theories

The constructivist theory sought to make learners the active participant in their own learning. Under this theory, learners construct knowledge from their processes and experiences

instead of being given knowledge from an outside source. This moves away from learning as a model of one-way communication to learning as a model of discovery and creation of knowledge (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996). A newer theory that builds on the changing rate of how learning happens is that of connectivism. Connectivism is a theory based on the learning changes that have occurred as a result of the integration of technology into society (Bowker & Tuffin, 2004; Simeons, 2005).

As users of technology, people no longer learn in a closed system. They learn through a series of open networks, constantly changing the information that is presented (Davis, 2015). Since learning is happening in a networked environment, the ability to learn and unlearn at a more rapid rate is critical. Learners must be able to distinguish the meaningful information from the unimportant information at a faster rate (Anderson, 2008; Siemens, 2005). Since learning is no longer constrained by time or geographic location, networked learning can happen at any time or any place through a variety of digital mediums (Brady, Holcomb & Smith, 2010).

The static nature of educational leaders' training is moving to a more dynamic, interactive, and individualized learning experience that has the ability to create connections and ownership of learning (Blau, Mor, & Neuthal, 2009). The current learning model for professional networking in education is not geared toward the individual needs and growth of the educational leader. Educational reform asks educators to design lessons that include elements that incorporate collaboration and discussion in their classrooms; professional educational leaders have the same needs and need similar experiences (Gulamhussein, 2013).

Educators across the country are preparing students to interact and compete in a 21st century digital world where collaboration and creation do not stop at the classroom doors (Bottino & Robotti, 2007). They are creating learning opportunities that are diverse and give

learners ownership of knowledge (Richardson, 2012). However, when it is time for educational learners to learn and connect, many of the professional networking opportunities are “one-size-fits-all, sit-and-get” geared toward professionals who have a small pool of colleagues to collaborate with (Killion, 2011, p.4).

Providing time for meaningful collaboration is a struggle for districts that do not have the monetary resources to pay for substitutes, travel, programs, and conferences. When educational leaders are given the time to engage in high-quality collaboration, there is benefit for both the individual and the collective. Leadership collaboration has positive effects on the school community as whole. Bringing in new ideas from outside districts can inject new spark into isolated buildings and create new partnerships (Farmer, et al., 2015).

Time is a limited resource for educational leaders who are trying to meet, making collaboration among themselves scarce (Killion, 2015). Using social media as a medium allows for collaboration and learning among education peers, despite geographical locations. As a model of learning, connectivism recognizes that learning is not something that is done internally or in isolation and that how people do things is dependent upon the tools and resources available to them. While those in education have not readily acknowledged the role of learning tools and the environment on how people learn, connectivism focuses attention on what learners need in order to thrive in the age of technology (Siemens, 2005).

Connectivism in Professional Networking

Meaningful professional learning, specialized to educator growth and practice, is the ideal scenario for districts and their educational leaders. Certain districts with small professional development budgets, especially rural and poor urban districts, are underrepresented at these professional networking opportunities (Howley & Howley, 2005).

The goal of professional networking is to empower and grow the individual. Learning through technology can serve to enrich the user's experience and offer a more dynamic learning experience. Social media provides opportunities for geographical and monetary boundaries to become obsolete. Professional networking focuses on the humanistic side of being a leader by promoting idea exchanges and open conversations with other educational leaders (Hassel, 1999). These opportunities offer a connectedness among educators with similar interests and backgrounds at the convenience of the learner. Social media gives educators the opportunity to share and collaborate across various communities (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Bruffee, 1999). These opportunities for networking via social media can create interpersonal relationships and become a place of support for isolated educational leaders (Kim, 2014).

Design of the Study

Determining the right research methodology sets the foundation for the research taking place and establishes how best to proceed with the research questions (Thattamparambil, 2020). The qualitative research approach was found to be beneficial for the collection of data and personal narratives in examining the research questions (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Merriam, 2009). Utilizing in-depth personal interviews provided a deeper understanding of experiences from participants than would have been possible using quantitative collection techniques (Creswell & Clark, 2007; James-Ward, et al., 2013). Qualitative means were utilized in the form of open-ended questions during one-on-one interviews and provided a deeper illustration of how educational leaders use social media to develop their professional learning networks (Dillman, et al., 2009; Turner, 2010). The researcher conducted interviews via a virtual platform (Google Meets) due to geographical and COVID-19 concerns at the time the study took place (Sullivan, 2019).

Within the data collection process, a constant comparative method was utilized, allowing for the comparison of commonalities amongst collected data as it used an inductive coding process (Given, 2008; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The constant comparative method derived from researchers Glaser and Stauss (2017) and their research with grounded theory around the systematic methodologies for analyzing qualitative data.

Interviews were the primary data source for this study (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Semi-structured questions allowed for expansion and detailed explanation from the participants. Semi-structured interviews were characterized for their loose, flexible structure, their ability to gather insight from the participants' perspectives, and a deeper exploration of their thoughts and experiences (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). These interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes using the semi-structured, conversational style to gain the personal experiences and insights from each participant (Jamshed, 2014).

Setting

The design of this study was determined predominantly by gaining insight into individual experience. This was done using the most common qualitative research method of semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2014; Jamshed, 2014). Interviews were conducted via virtual meeting software, Google Meets. The settings for these interviews varied by participant, depending on the educational leader's choice of location at the time of the interview.

In the state of Missouri, there are 6,053 PK-12 public and private schools with 833 educational leaders at the middle school level (DESE, 2020), from which the educational leaders interviewed were selected. The criteria for these participants was that they had served in an educational leadership capacity in Missouri in a building that contained grades 6th through

8th grade, either singly or in any combination. The educational leaders came from districts throughout Missouri in both rural and urban/suburban settings.

Participants

To determine how Missouri middle school educational leaders use social media as a professional networking tool, there needed to be a selection of participants that were reflective of urban/suburban as well as rural middle school leaders from a variety of school districts across different regions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These educational leaders all have served in an administrative capacity in buildings with grades 6 through 8, either singly or in combination in Missouri, found relevance in the topics, and were willing to share their experiences.

Further, these Missouri middle school educational leaders were broken down into two groups based on the type of district: urban/suburban and rural/township. In the state of Missouri at the time of the data collection, there were over 917,000 students PreK through grade 12. Of that total student population, 53.2% came from the urban/suburban districts. Students from the rural/township districts made up 46.7% of the total student population (“List of school districts in Missouri - Ballotpedia,” 2016). The researcher conducted interviews via a virtual platform (Google Meets). The interviewees consisted of 16 middle school educational leaders in the state (Mertens, 2005).

The middle school educational leaders came from eight different regions across Missouri. They had varying degrees of administrative experience, ranging 1 year to 18 years as an administrator, with the average years of experience being 10.75 or roughly 11 years. Types of districts the participants were selected from were determined by the U.S. Census Bureau (2021) as characterizing a township, territory, or area by population. urbanized areas are defined as having a population of more than 50,000 and urbanized clusters as having a population of at

least 2,500 and no more than 50,000. Rural areas were limited to having a population of no more than 2,500. The following table describes the participants of this study.

Table 1

Table of Participant Leader Descriptive Demographic

Participant	Region	Type District	Public or Private Institution	Years of Experience as an Administrator
Jesse	Central Missouri	Rural	Public	12
Sophia	Eastern Missouri	Rural	Public	6
Lynne	Suburb of Kansas City	Urbanized Area	Public	11
Chantel	Suburb of Kansas City	Urbanized Area	Public	18
David	Southwest Missouri	Rural	Public	11
Robert	Suburb of Kansas City	Urban Cluster	Public	15
Evan	Kansas City Proper	Urbanized Area	Public	15
Bailey	Eastern Missouri	Rural	Public	13
Craig	Suburb of Kansas City	Urbanized Area	Public	1
Jana	Suburb of Kansas City	Urbanized Cluster	Public	11
George	Eastern Missouri	Rural	Public	17
Jose	Suburb of Kansas City	Urbanized Cluster	Public	14
Mark	Eastern Missouri	Rural	Public	12
Emanuel	Ozark	Rural	Public	11
Nina	Suburb of St. Louis	Urbanized Cluster	Public	3
Patrick	St. Louis Proper	Urbanized Area	Private	2

Data Collection**Interview Protocol**

Interviews with participants were conducted using the virtual platform Google Meets. This medium allowed for of the interviews (Creswell, 2014 & Sullivan, 2012). A copy of the transcript was given to the participants after the completion of the interview to avoid any potential misunderstandings from the interview process. During the interview process, the

researcher took notes to document any additional information that was not reflected in the recorded interview sessions (Creswell, 2014).

Researchers stated that in face-to-face interview environments, short, open-ended questions can help the interviewee feel less overwhelmed than with longer multi-layered lines of questioning (Madill, 2012; Potter & Hepburn, 2012). Using virtual meeting software allowed for the intimacy of face-to-face interviews with the safety of participants not being worried about exposure to COVID-19, creating a relaxed and open interview environment (Janghorban, Latifnejad Roudsari & Taghipour, 2014). The researcher developed an interview protocol form (See Appendix A) to organize data for analysis. The interview protocol consisted of twelve open-ended questions (Appendix B) developed by the researcher and guided by the research questions to identify the impact that social media has had on middle school educational leaders in Missouri and their professional networking.

Data Analysis

After evaluating the different methods used to analyze qualitative research data, for this study it was determined the most effective was coding. As researchers evaluate the information, they break down data to find patterns or themes. Coding is considered an “almost universal process in qualitative research” (Creswell, 2015, p. 156). Coding allowed the researcher the ability to break down a large amount of data to look for meaningful connections and potentially find new ways of organizing that data to create new areas of meaning or themes. Using the open-ended questions can lead to more cumbersome coding; however, these types of questions reduce research bias within the study (Creswell, 2014).

When analyzing the interview answers, the researcher used the constant comparative method of analytical dissection of information (Fink, 2009; Merriam, 2009). Curry, Nembhard & Bradley (2009) discuss the constant comparative form of analysis process:

As the concept became apparent, a code was assigned to that segment of the document (or an entire document). To ascertain whether a code was assigned appropriately, the researcher compared text segments with segments that had been assigned the same code previously and decided whether they reflected the same concept and/or theme (p.142).

By using the constant comparison method, the researcher looked for themes of preconceived notions from those that use social media for professional networking. This provided a method to ensure validity and transferability from the multiple leader participant interviews (Merriam, 2009). The data collected from the interviews was then triangulated with other data obtained from the notetaking at the time of the interviews (Yin, 2003).

Credibility of the Study

Credibility is the first aspect within a study that had to be established by the researcher (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Building credibility is essential as the researcher connected the findings of the study to present academic knowledge of the topic. Credibility in the study established the internal validity within the findings and led to the generalizability and transferability of the work. In order to enhance the credibility of this study, the researcher triangulated the data to increase the trustworthiness of the findings (Grenier & Merriam, 2019). Triangulations occurred through the use of semi-structured interviews, aligning multiple perspective from stake holders, to attain a more comprehensive understanding of themes in the findings of the study. The use of member checking was also utilized to increase the validity of the findings.

Interviewees were middle school educational leaders from the state of Missouri. These school leaders came from two separate areas: rural and urban (areas and clusters) school districts. This provided the researcher with participants from two different educational settings for the potential of broader perspectives on the subject matter (Bettez, 2015; Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Member checking was utilized to enhance the credibility of the study. Member checking included the sharing of data, interpretation, and conclusions from the researcher via transcripts (Bettez, 2015). This allowed participants to clarify feedback as well as check for inaccuracies and any additional information that was pertinent to the study. Member checking also allowed an additional opportunity for participants to withdraw from the study if they did not feel comfortable with their participation (Grenier & Merriam, 2019; Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

The transferability and dependability of this study is dependent upon the researcher using rich, descriptive writing. The writing of the findings should be able to connect with the reader so that they may begin to see the possibility of transferring the study to another population of individuals (Grenier & Merriam, 2019). The researcher conducted the study so that the context is clear to the reader and the design of the study is transparent through semi-structured questions (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Tracy, 2010). To ensure confirmability and reflexivity, the researcher kept an audit trail in order to record the research path during the study. This, in conjunction with a research diary, helped to check for any explicit or implicit assumptions, preconceptions, or bias held by the researcher during the study (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

The researcher attempted to maintain the least plausible harm or discomfort to participants to ensure the fidelity of the qualitative data. Because the researcher has the same

occupation as the participants, it was possible to set a collegial tone and ensure the researcher had as little influence as possible on the collection of data. Participants were interviewed individually. This allowed for open dialog and confidentiality (Grenier & Merriam, 2019; Holmes, 2020).

Limitations and Design Controls

Limitations of the study relate to study participants and the instrument for gathering qualitative data. The design of this study was to capture a representative sample of middle school educational leaders in Missouri who are using social media for professional networking. While the researcher had interviewees from eight regions of Missouri and from urban and rural locations, there are limitations due to the number of participants and limited locations represented within the study (Almeida, Faria & Queiros, 2017).

The instrument for collecting data during this study was in the form of semi-structured interviews conducted one-on-one by the researcher. While individual interviews are noted as being one of the most reliable forms of gathering qualitative data, there are limitations to its design in the form of semi-structured questions (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). The researcher utilized this design in order to minimize any bias or constriction by the researcher of the participants' responses (Roller, 2011). The design is noted for putting interviewees at ease, and it allows them an opportunity for expansion of their answers. However, it can lead to problems with length of answers, timing of interviews, and application of generalizations to expansive topics (Holmes, 2020).

There was no incentive for participating in the study and, as such, participants were willing volunteers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). No contact with the participants' districts was

made, and identifiable information about participants was kept to a minimum in order to foster honest dialog about the subject matter (Almeida, Faria & Queiros, 2017).

The study was not a longitudinal study and did not have the advantage of tracking educator opinion over a length of time. The data collected came over a 60-day period of interviews. The transferability of this study to other educators should be cautioned if they are not using a stratified random sampling approach (Creswell, 2013).

Design controls for the study were formed from Creswell's (2013) and Roller's (2011) recommendations for qualitative research. The researcher had participants who volunteered, who provided a cross-sampling of middle school leaders from across Missouri, and who represented multiple regions, years of experience, and district types.

Definition of Key Terms

Connectedness. This is defined as the time in which we feel connected to one another through a common experience. According to DeKoven (2013, p. 6), "Perhaps not as profoundly, perhaps not to the world at large, but to something deeply human. And when it is best, so are we. We are, for that moment, connected not only to one thing, but also to each other: each other's presence, each other's intelligence."

Educators. For this study, an educator is defined as anyone who works with students from Pre-K to 12th grade in an academic capacity.

Personalized Learning Networks. As noted in Whitby (2017), "A PLN is a tool that uses social media and technology to collect, communicate, collaborate and create with connected colleagues anywhere at any time. Participating educators, worldwide, make requests, and share resources. (p.1)" The Personalized Learning Network for an educator is an ongoing

process and can be viewed as a “living organism” that changes and adapts to the educator’s needs and demands.

Professional Development. According to the Glossary of Education Reform (2017), professional development is the ongoing process of advancement in a person's skillset. This development could take place in a variety of forms and is not limited to workshops, conferences, or self-guided study (Brauer, 2017).

Professional Learning Communities (PLC). Professional learning communities are a strategy for promoting intense teamwork, including groups that learn and practice collectively to make improvements in instruction and achievement on a regular basis (Wei et al., 2010). PLC’s can be established in both a physical space or through technological means.

Rural. This is defined by the US Census Bureau (2021) as any population, territory, or housing not in an urban setting. In the 2010 US Census, 60 million people lived in rural areas in the United States.

Social Media. Generally referred to as “specific set of online offerings that have emerged over the past three decades – including blogs, social networking sites, and microblogging” (Treem, et al., 2016, p.4).

Urbanized Areas. This is defined by the US Census Bureau (2021) as having a population of 50,000 or more.

Urbanized Clusters. This is defined by the US Census Bureau (2021) as having a population of at least 2,500 and no more than 50,000.

Findings

The data from the participant interviews were coded and themes were developed. Of the 16 middle school Missouri educational leaders who were interviewed, all but one had experience using a social media platform at some level to develop their professional network.

Intentionality of Building and Seeking Knowledge

Of the fifteen participants who were actively engaged in social media platforms for professional networking, the beginning of their experiences was centered around the intentionality of finding a venue that would help them build their professional knowledge. Lynne described their movement towards social media platforms “as a way to refresh my skill set. I was on Facebook and something related to principal learning popped up and I said, ‘Well, let me click this,’ and that was the beginning.”

“I was looking for a way to extend the classroom beyond the four walls,” Evan said of their reasoning for seeking out social media. “I wasn’t a proponent of social media initially, but that was my own personal view. I saw there was power in it for learning.”

Location of participants did not appear to be a factor for those using social media. Those who sought out the use of social platforms came from all urban clusters, urban areas, and rural environments. The one participant who did not use social media for professional networking was Chantel from a suburb of Kansas City. The one identifiable characteristic of Chantel from the rest of the participants was that she had the most years of administrative experience.

Exposure and Use of Social Media Platforms

The participants who used the social media platforms were largely influenced by the exposure they had to other colleagues, instructional coaches, and prominent staff in the district (i.e. Assistant Superintendents, Directors, Superintendents, etc.). Sophia, from rural eastern

Missouri, increased her professional use of social media as her superior was a huge proponent of Twitter. “She opened my eyes to all of the resources and connections that you could make through Twitter. I would say she really pushed me to use it a lot more.” Nina, who was from a public school in a St. Louis suburb, recounted, “When I was a content leader, we had a technology content leader who met once a month and we essentially had technology PD. So that was one of the things that we talked about, Twitter, specifically in that connection and how it is a wealth of information.”

Professional Expectations

The participants, regardless of whether they represent urban or rural districts, all have a social media presence on at least one platform. All of the schools from which the leaders hail have their own social media account, and all have a Facebook page. Three participants' individual schools do not have a Twitter account, and the rest have both. All of the participants were encouraged to use social platforms by their districts. David, from southwest Missouri, indicated that the upper elementary in his district has a Tik Tok page. Also, all but the district in rural central Missouri, provided some form of professional development for their staff on harnessing the power of social media for learning and connecting. Patrick, from urban St. Louis, was part of a professional development session their first year in the district. “We were strongly encouraged to partake in Twitter Chats. They showed us different chats we could join in, related to our content. Even if it was to watch and learn as we figured it out. They wanted us to put our toes in the water.” Jose, from an urban district outside of Kansas City with 14 years of administration experience, defined his district stance on administrators using social media as, “we’re encouraged to use social media pretty much anytime.” None of the districts represented

by the participants designated time for administrative leaders to participate in social media platforms, whether that be for networking or earning professional development credit.

Voyeurs and Consumers of Information

In the beginning of their social media use on a professional level, 13 of the 16 participants started out as observers and consumers on social platforms. They used social platforms to gain and exchange information and ideas. Sophia described her initial experience by saying, "I pretty much was just a voyeur for a long time. Didn't post. I'd kind of steal ideas and be like that's amazing, I should try that!" For George, the "Twitter world was a lot of looking and watching other professionals. Finding authors and resources. Also, following along during specific conferences, watching the hashtags to see what information was out there I may have missed." Jana reported using social media during her dissertation process. "I think the first goal is to consume and creep a little bit... it wasn't really a two-way street. I was just consuming and I was not necessarily sharing anything, just getting ideas about what other people were doing."

Of the other participants who did use social media, the remaining participants who used social media did so by both engaging and consuming information. Lynne recounted her initial engagement as "intrinsic. I was needing to grow because I feel that if I didn't I would be stagnant in my position. I joined a Principal's Facebook group and started posting questions about how to improve my leadership capacity." Mark, from a rural district in eastern Missouri, started using social media as a teacher. "I jumped into it pretty early on. I knew this was a really powerful tool. You can literally talk to anybody in the world!"

Growth and Connection

Looking for ways to grow, whether by consumption and exchange of knowledge or by connecting to other educational professionals, all but one of the educational leaders felt social media met these goals and offered these opportunities.

Accessibility to Resources

Fifteen participants indicated they had used social media at the professional level to find articles and videos and even to seek out like-minded professionals and experts. “Gaining a new understanding about current events and seeing what’s happening globally, because the world is bigger than just where we are,” related Evan from urban Kansas City as he described social media’s ability to connect him to resources from all over the globe in one place.

Navigation of Social Media Platforms

The ability to consume information from multiple sources in one place drove all of the participants to seek out social media. The social platform of preference was not impacted by the geographic data of participants or their years of experience. The determining factor of preference was linked to the introduction and the ease with which the participants could interact on the platform. Craig explained, “initially I was on Facebook for Marketplace [Facebook Consumer Side] for myself. Then I started connecting with some colleagues to see what they’re about, what programs they were into, just to be more aware.”

The majority of the participants, 12 out of 15, identified Twitter as their social media platform of preference for professional networking. The interviewees noted that Twitter had appealed to them for both ease of use and the ability to take in several ideas in a short amount of time. Jose described the appeal of Twitter by saying, “There’s some brevity to it. There’s some ease of using it. I like things that can be short and impactful.” Jana noted in regards to using

Twitter, “I find that there is a good deal of educational practitioners on there and I feel that it is a very easy format to navigate and consume. Instagram tends to be to hashtag heavy and it makes it difficult to sift through.”

Taking the Time

The amount of time each participant used social media to connect professionally varied greatly. The more consistent users were from the rural areas of Missouri. Although it was not discouraged by districts to use social media during the work day, only two participants mentioned trying to jump on during the day; both mentioned it was during their lunch time if they had a moment. The 15 participants who utilized the platforms noted that they did their heaviest viewing and interacting during the evening or on the weekends. One leader mentioned that even though they were encouraged to use it in his district, they “felt guilty doing it [connecting and learning on social media professionally] even though I wouldn’t feel guilty sitting down and reading an article during the day.” Participants noted that most of those interactions on platforms happened from their phone instead of their computer.

Experts in the Field

Participants across all regions, geographic locations, and experience levels mentioned that social media platforms gave them quick access to experts in multiple fields. With the quickly changing dynamics of education, participants appreciated the ability to search social media to find someone who had experienced or had knowledge of new trends or problems they were facing. Evan gave the example of when his district shifted to Next Generation Science Standards. As the administrator for their building, he had to build their knowledge base quickly to help their teachers in the shift. “I jumped on Twitter and started following all of these individuals that were experts in Next Generation Standards,” reported Evan. “I had to gain

understanding for my staff and quick; it helped me with that and to connect with different professionals in the area as well, making that transition.” A participant from a rural district conveyed that despite her geographic isolation, they could still connect with top experts in her field in a more direct manner than any other option of contact. David, a leader from a rural district in southeast Missouri, related that when finding expert connections “they always talk about who the smartest person in the room is. So now, [using Twitter] just expanded your room exponentially.”

Global Views and Diversity

Across participants who used either Twitter or Facebook or both, there resonated a theme of social media platforms opening up views and the ability to bring in diversity, despite location or subject matter. One of the participants was able to connect one of his classroom teachers through a connection they had from Twitter. His teacher was studying the US Mexico War and he helped to coordinate the streaming of a classroom in Mexico with his teacher’s classroom here in Missouri. Students were able to see the different perspectives from opposite sides of history. Another participant is heavily involved in the Latinx Education Collaborative and gave credit to social media for getting out messages and connecting individuals, noting that “with it [social media] I don’t know if they would have ever heard about our collaborative here in the city... we connected with folks all over the country.”

Making the Connections

One of the most prominent themes that rang true with the rural educator participants was the ability to make connections with other individuals that had districts or schools that looked similar to their geographic location and community populations. George from eastern Missouri explained that, “I just feel it can help you to not feel alone in this great big world. Definitely

different regions have different approaches towards different initiatives, but it helps to diversify your own thinking.”

Stepping Out of Isolation

Nearly all participants from all regions and school district classifications mentioned in some fashion the ability that education has to make you feel isolated as a leader. Emmanuel from a rural district expressed his experience with social media as,

The ability to connect with educators almost globally...literally there are some [educators] from other countries and across the United States that have similar positions to me or what I aspire to be. I can get that. Whereas even if I went to a regional or state conference or even national I may not have the opportunity to connect with those people in person. I've been to the National Principals Conference, but you don't sit around with a lot of people. Honestly, you go to sessions and you might have breakouts, but on Twitter, you can have a conversation with individuals from all across the United States at any time.

George, another rural leader, described moments in education as being very isolating and alone. He felt that his use of social media for connecting with others “helps you to feel not alone in this great big world.” Patrick noted that being a leader in a private school left him with the feeling of being alone. He felt there was always an assumption that educational leaders all came from public schools. When they took part in chats on Twitter, “in those chats public educators think everyone is from public schools... they realize that private and public schools have experiences in common and can be experiencing the same thing.”

Translatability of Ideas

Participants universally agreed that social media provided them with resources and access to education professionals. Twelve of the fifteen educational leaders who used social media for professional purposes also found ideas from their platforms that they were able to replicate to fit their own school communities. George recalled a time when his staff was really struggling with morale. His school community had just suffered a loss and he were looking for ways to boost morale and bring people together. He had gone onto Twitter and had seen a video that another administrator they followed had posted about staff morale. He adapted the activity for his staff, and it was a great success. “You can take these ideas from real, collaborative and collegial conversations [on Twitter]”, Robert described, “and take these ideas from others and mold them into what your own circumstance needs.”

Missing the Personal Touch

Participants found that social media allowed for a broader reach and the ability to make more connections. There was mention of the loss of intimacy and potential of the audience not having regional knowledge when they are utilizing online interactions. Jose spoke of the drawback regarding the audience, “the audience may be bigger than you really want it to be... not everybody’s experience is the experience that you’re looking for.”

All participants but one used social media for professional reasons. Chantel did not use social media at all to connect with other professionals. They stated that, “education is a series of human interactions. Using a social media platform to connect with others, cheapens the human element that I feel is so vital to education.”

Surface Level Interactions

About half of the participants surmised that the interactions they did have with other professionals felt very surface level. Many of the exchanges between leaders on social platforms were asynchronous, which left some with no direction as they did not get an answer to questions they posed or had to wait long intervals before they had someone respond. Jana described her experiences on Twitter “as a snapshot. You don’t have the depth or the degree of the conversation that you otherwise would have had in person. You don’t get tone or facial gestures, you can miss too many parts to the overall picture.”

Chance of Misrepresentation

One of the most common disadvantages of using social media that participants expressed concern about was the chance of something they had put out on social media being misconstrued. They were worried about an answer to a question being taken out of context or an old comment being misrepresented. Some were hesitant to post their success stories for fear of being seen as showing off. One leader conveyed her hesitancy by saying, “You are not sure what administrators or district leaders are also out there. Also, if someone is going to judge you based on a question or answer you posed without the full context of the situation.”

Research Question One

Research question one for this study is “How do middle school educational leaders in Missouri use social media platforms as part of their professional learning network?”. Overall, all of the participants but one had experience utilizing social media platforms as part of their professional learning network. Chantel, a leader from urban Kansas City, had the most administrative experience of 18 years, but had not used social media at all for professional means. She explained, “I have done this job for a long time. I just never saw the value in it. If I

had more time left, I would probably think about using it.” All other respondents had used social media for networking, but in varying degrees. Bailey from eastern rural Missouri, described her use,

It really depends what I am looking for or what challenges I am facing. If I have a unique situation for my school, I get on Twitter to see if this is happening somewhere else. So, some days I am on more than others. Just depends what I am looking for or how much time I have.

Those that used social platforms felt encouraged by their districts to seek out connections and learn on these platforms. Sophia recalled that her Assistant Superintendent was a big proponent of Twitter. “Seven years ago, I began working with Dr. Smith and she was a huge advocate of Twitter,” recalled Sophia. “She really opened my eyes to all of the resources and connections that you could make.” As her district was implementing the Workshop Model for reading and writing, Sophia described part of their training was to use Twitter as an example to find teacher and student examples. This led to more administrators in her district using the social platform since it had been encouraged so heavily by their Central Office team.

Participants indicated it was highly encouraged for them to collaborate and find resources via social media but no formal credit was given or time offered outside of the initial professional development to expand on their networking and collaboration. Nina, from a suburb of St. Louis, described herself as very active on her professional social media accounts. “Our district really pushed social media for us [administrators] a few years ago,” she recalled, “I even led one of the Twitter chats for our district. They put it out as something we could do but it wasn’t a blanket demand, because they could not give us time to participate.” All but one of the districts had offered some form of professional development on using social media, however no

participant indicated they were given time beyond that initial professional development training to engage in the promoted platforms.

Many participants recalled using these platforms in the beginning of their professional networking as merely consumers of information or voyeurs of the professional exchanges of ideas. “I pretty much was just a voyeur for a long time,” remembered Sophia, “I didn’t post, so I would go through and steal ideas off Twitter I just thought were interesting.” One participant, Jana, described their first interactions on the social media platform of Twitter, “I think the first goal is to consume and creep a little bit... it wasn’t really a two-way street. I was just consuming, and I was not necessarily sharing anything, just getting ideas what other people were doing.” Some participants have remained or moved back to this base level of interaction on social media platforms. One participant, Jesse, elaborated on her use, “I used to be on Twitter and Facebook all of the time. With the chaos of the last two years, I feel like it’s one more thing,” she explained. She has moved back to only using it to promote her own school community and no longer uses it to participate in Twitter Chats or Facebook discussions for her own professional networking.

About half of the participants had ventured beyond the basic function of only consuming information off of the platforms. These participants reported participating in two-way communication in Twitter chats and Facebook groups. Lynne recounted her rationale for participating in the social media platforms as, “intrinsic. I was needing to grow because I feel that if I didn’t, I would be stagnant in my position.” Participating in making active connections with other educational professionals and experts helped them feel their professional learning opportunities were vaster than the immediate landscape in front of them. “Our school community was researching restorative practices,” said Robert, a leader from Kansas City, “in

my district there was not good professional conversation around the movement. I was able to find that positive collaboration outside of my own district through Twitter.” Many of these connections between professionals consisted of giving advice, posing questions, and highlighting activities in their school communities to forums on the platforms for advice or feedback.

Having availability to an infinite number of resources, experts and other education educational leaders expressed that the use of the social media platforms was a symbiotic experience. “Without social media, I don’t think my connections to the LatinX educational community would be nearly as strong. My collaboration would more than likely be mostly people from Kansas City,” reported Craig. Some participants described that the effort they put in was what they would get back. Jose explained the benefit he saw by participating in Twitter chats as, “you can pick the time and place you interact at, if you are posting something it’s easy to get lots of ideas quickly.” There might be times that they utilized it more than others, depending on time constraints and what information they were seeking.

Research Question Two

Research question two for this study is “How have the professional networks of Missouri middle school educational leaders been enhanced by the use of social media?” Participant responses indicated four areas of enhancement to their professional networking by engaging in social media platforms. The first was the ability to connect with experts in their field. Leaders commented on the unique opportunity to directly contact an expert or pose a question to a field of experts. No other outlet or forum gave them this opportunity. One leader, David, from a rural district related about finding expert connections that “they always talk about who the smartest person in the room is. So now, [using Twitter] just expanded your room

exponentially.” He expanded on this explaining, “I find it’s a good way to kind of connect and just to see what’s out there and stay current. You have access to so many people and it moves at the quicker pace I need.”

A second enhancement to educators was that they saw the opportunity to connect globally and have access to more diverse perspectives. When given the opportunity to link with multiple cultures and even countries, it broadened their potential for resources and connections. George explained that “I just feel it [social media] can help you to not feel alone in this great big world. Definitely different regions have different approaches towards different initiatives, but it helps to diversify your own thinking.”

For the rural educational leaders and the leader in a private school, there was a strong view that the utilization of social media enhanced their professional networking by introducing them to similar leaders across the United States and the globe. The sentiment of working in a vacuum or silo was echoed in several of the rural educators’ interviews. Emanuel recalled a time he was looking for help with their school’s Advisory class. “I live in a rural area, but with Twitter I have the possibility of getting a response from a suburban or urban school, even a more rural school like I am. It gives you opportunities for multiple connections.”

Bailey, also from a rural district, saw it as enlarging her collaborative circle and support network. Sometimes people [leaders] are really struggling with ideas, trouble in their school, a multitude of different things. Even if they do not get an idea, they’ll get support. So, I feel like it does give people a sense of getting out of their silos and not feeling so alone. Like we did 15 years ago. Our only collaboration then was once a month, maybe with the districts in our region.

For participants, the last enhancement they noted was the unintentional benefit they saw to their school communities. Leaders found that viewing ideas and successes highlighted by

their connections on these platforms led them to try similar actions in their own school communities. Patrick, the only participant from a parochial school, turned to social media as a way of connecting with other schools similar to his. “What I found was a community of both public and private schools that had similar issues we were dealing with here in St. Louis,” he explained, “I was able to get ideas from all over the nation on problems we were having and bring those possible solutions back to my school.” Several reported finding successes with the transference of ideas from social platforms to their own schools. “You can take these ideas from real, collaborative and collegial conversations [on Twitter]”, Robert described, “and take these ideas from others and mold them into what your own circumstance needs.” School leaders reported that the referenced ideas they found through social media did not just encompass one type of topic. They went to social media in search of academic, behavioral and even social emotional ideas for their school communities.

Summary of Research

This study helped to highlight how middle school education leaders in Missouri are using social media to connect with other educators and how it has enhanced their professional learning networks. The data collected by the researcher allowed for coding to develop themes that aided in answering the research questions. The research in this study offers an opportunity for leaders and districts to explore varying options for how they develop their leaders and their professional learning networks. While disadvantages were found within the study for leaders, the benefits to not only education leaders but their school communities were considerable. Education is consistently progressing, and how educators connect with one another is also an evolving process. This study provides an opportunity to demonstrate how a variety of leaders use social platforms to make connections and interact with other educational leaders.

Significance of the Study

The present study contributes to the scholarship and practice of educational leaders at the middle level by assessing their use of social media and its impact on the expansion of their own professional learning networks. Additionally, the results are intended to help school districts have a supplementary tool to create personalized learning networks that are specific to educator learning at a minimal cost.

Expanded Literature from Findings

This study aimed to expand the literature on professional networking for educational leaders and discover collaborative ways for educators to come together. For the practitioner, information about the use of social media amongst middle-level educators led to literature aimed at the misconceptions, weaknesses, or strengths of professional networking as revealed by the participants in the study.

Putting into Practice

As learning platforms and abilities to interact move from in-person to online open network mediums, it is necessary to discover the opportunities of broader professional networking and its implications to the middle-level educational leader (Gil, 2018). Social media outlets have the potential to provide open forums for collaboration and communication among communities that were previously closed to one another through traditional styles of collaboration (Moran, Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2011; Senge, 1990). Through this study, the researcher gained an understanding of social media as a professional learning option for educational leaders. The favorable findings from participants could open a large pool of professional learning opportunities to school districts that are restricted by budgetary and geographical confines (Beetham, 2013).

“The art of reframing uses knowledge and intuition to make sense of the current to find sensible and effective ways to channel the flow” (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 411). The ideal form of PLN’s is one that is personalized, evolving, and ongoing. Educators learn best through active participation in their professional journey and using social media as a learning tool allows them to collaborate and learn in real time (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). Giving Missouri educational leaders time to complete their contractual obligations, including coaching and other extra-curricular or co-curricular activities, as well as collaborate with like-minded educational leaders requires a significant amount of time outside of the school day (Killion, 2013). As educational leaders look for ways to reframe professional learning options for their staff, new opportunities that may have not been considered before are being looked at from different perspectives in order to meet the demands for professional learning and collaboration (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

Summary

Technology has changed the way society consumes and uses information. With the amount of information available to users at their convenience, these new technologies offer new opportunities for collaboration across different networks (Kassens-Noor, 2012 & Siemens, 2005). “Along with being easy to use, technology also provides constant access to both the information needed and the tools needed for authentic learning” (Pahomov, 2015, p.5).

Educators need collaboration with other individuals in their field. Professional networking is necessary for educators to grow their craft and expand their mindset for their school community. Understanding the current use of social media as an authentic form of professional networking could open up a whole new portal for gathering and tailoring information for educational leaders. As social media outlets continue to grow, so do the

possibilities for educators to connect with other members. Social media provides collaborative communities specific to the educator's needs and desired outcomes for personal and professional growth.

SECTION TWO:
PRACTITIONER SETTING FOR THE STUDY

Introduction

In the past, professional learning opportunities in school districts were often provided for educational professionals from a variety of sources. Also, they were generally provided for a group of educators and not the individual (Hunt-Barron, Howell & Kaminski, 2015). As the shift to individualized professional learning continues, there are organizational and leadership learning insights that must be reviewed to assess the process of high-quality, meaningful professional learning available in education (Holmes, Signer & MacLeod, 2011). To meet the need for personal, professional learning, educational leaders are turning to online platforms and communities to create their own professional learning networks. These networks, often via social media, can be reflective of a person's values, expertise, passions, and background in education (Crowley, 2014).

Professional learning opportunities amongst educational leaders can be difficult for a variety of reasons. While some urban and suburban districts have financial constraints that do not allow their educational leaders to have networking opportunities, rural school districts are often faced with both geographical and monetary constraints. The myriad of constraints that face each district have created organizational and structural inequities that are forcing educational leaders to seek out networking opportunities on their own. Many of those leaders are seeking out those networks via social media (Beesley, 2011; Manner & Rodriguez, 2012).

History of the Organization

Networking in education began out of the pursuit for knowledge. If there were information one did not have knowledge of, they sought it out (Bauman & Kame'enui, 2012). As educators began to face a variety of complex issues, they sought outside collaboration with individuals other than those within their own school or district (Brown, 2019). The goal of these open networks was to improve the variety of educational communities these leaders

collaborated with and to bring positive change and new ideas back to their personal school communities (Brown & Poortman, 2018). The stronger and more engaging the network, the more it has to offer its members (Brown, 2019).

As professional learning networks grew, they did so slowly. Originally, meetings had to be held in person or over the phone. With the advent of the internet, educators began finding platforms that allowed them both asynchronous and synchronous learning and networking opportunities (Davis, 2015; Flannigan, 2012). Many educational professionals are finding communities via social media forums and networks that allow them to broaden their knowledge base and to reach out to other educational professionals that might have circumstances that mirror their own (Brown, 2019; Crowley, 2014). Social media platforms draw educators from various age groups and tenure. Over half of the educators surveyed in a 2019 *Digital Trend* survey reported they turned to social media platforms as a means to collaborate and connect with their educational counterparts from all across the globe (Murphy, 2019).

Organizational Analysis

Whitby (2017) defined professional learning networks as, “a tool that uses social media and technology to collect, communicate, collaborate and create with connected colleagues anywhere at any time. Participating educators, worldwide, make requests, and share resources” (para.1). These interconnected professional groups improve the learning of the individuals (Hatfield, 2010).

The primary purpose of these networks can be viewed through the lens of Bolman and Deal's (2013) human resource framework. The success of professional education networks is dependent on the success and investment of the individuals in it. The members obtain a deeper understanding of educational material and have a willingness to receive input and feedback.

These educational networks offer differentiation to each member based on their needs and commitment to contributing to the organization (Bolman & Deal, 2013; Snyder, 2018).

The level of a person's individual participation in a network will largely depend on their level of interest. There are positive correlations between individual interest and performance/collaboration in a network within the human resource framework (Farnsworth et al., 2015). As educational leaders seek out different professional networks, they tend to be drawn to the ones that meet their own needs or interests. The benefit of having so many networks available via social media is that they allow choice and differentiation for each educational leader. If an educational leader is not happy with the direction of the network, they can choose to leave and find one that better matches their needs (Graetz & Smith, 2010).

The networks then become organizations themselves, within which the individuals create relationships. As is true of any organization, the more the leaders interact, the more they benefit. The stronger the connections and collaborations, the more invested and involved the participant becomes. If participants feel that the network no longer honors their needs or meets their expectations, they are more likely to withdraw or act in a negative way (Snyder, 2018).

Leadership Analysis

Just as within any other organization, education has a system by which leadership is attained. Using the Northouse (2013) definition, leadership is a process instead of a characteristic or trait, an interactive event instead of a linear, one-way action. He goes on to identify four main components of leadership (p. 464):

- a. Leadership is a process.
- b. Leadership involves influence.
- c. Leadership occurs in groups.

d. Leadership involves common goals.

Leadership within the educational organization can vary dramatically from building to building within a single school district. The leadership style in each building largely determines how leaders will use their power to influence the educators under them (Earley & Greany, 2017).

The educational leader who uses social media as an avenue for the PLN shows characteristics found amongst transformational leaders. Northouse (2013) described transformational leadership as the “process whereby a person engages with others and creates a connection that raises the level of motivation and morality in both the leader and the followers” (p.162). This leadership style is about seeking out information and action that strengthens others and their communities. Through collaboration and work, these leaders look to promote change and growth within their school communities (Bass & Riggio, 2014).

Seeking Knowledge

The transformational educational leader is one who seeks out knowledge from varying resources (Zand, 1997). The information they are seeking may not be found within the immediate organization or school district they are part of. In order to gain access to the knowledge they are seeking, they must look beyond their organization to other networks that offer access to that knowledge (Bass & Riggio, 2014). Social media platforms provide an open networking opportunity for educational leaders to seek out information and collaboration they are missing within their immediate organization (Ahlquist, 2014; Crowley, 2014).

Transformational leaders want to see their followers succeed and grow. These educational leaders largely lead by example (Northouse, 2016). When they are presented with problems, they show perseverance and ingenuity to find creative solutions, and they listen to

input from others (Zand, 1997). They are role models for those they lead by taking advantage of every opportunity to acquire knowledge. Creativity and communication are encouraged by transformational leaders, and they look for ways to intellectually stimulate those around them while pushing them to think beyond the familiar (Björk & Gurley, 2003). They are not self-serving, pretending to be an expert on topics they do not have an understanding of. Rather, they show vulnerability that is genuine by seeking expert advice from outside organizations and bringing it back to their home base (Bass & Riggio, 2014; Northouse, 2016).

Individualized Learning

Within an organization, individualization is important to transformational leaders. Educational leaders understand the importance of letting people within their school community cultivate a learning path that is unique to them (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2009). Transformational leaders recognize the importance of guiding their followers to the knowledge that they need but by means that resonate with that individual (Bass & Riggio, 2014; Guskey, 2000). For professional learning to be effective for the individual, it is important that it is directed at the specific area of questioning and aligns with their prior knowledge and experiences (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Levi, 2014). Educational leaders must assess their needs and tailor their learning to address specific situations (Gulamhussein, 2013). Easton (2008) stated:

It is clearer today than ever that educators need to learn, and that's why *professional learning* has replaced *professional development*. Developing is not enough. Educators must be knowledgeable and wise. They must know enough in order to change. They must change in order to get different results. They must become learners, and they must be self-developing. (p. 756, emphasis in original text)

For transformational educational leaders to serve as role models for the people within their organizations, modeling their own professional learning is key (Zand, 1997). As an educational leader within a school community, those within the organization take notice of how their leader approaches learning challenges (Frey, et al., 2013). Leaders who take advantage of collaboration opportunities and a willingness to connect to those outside of their immediate circle show those within their organization that they take control of their own learning, even if it stretches the boundaries of their comfort (Bass & Riggio, 2014; Northouse, 2016).

Social media platforms are available to educational leaders in the space and time that they can control. Leaders can seek out networks that resonate with their personal learning outcomes. Those networks have the ability to expand a leader's perspective as well as their ability to communicate with other professionals in their field (Crowley, 2014). All of these opportunities within social media networks give educational leaders attainable personalized, professional learning networks (Lee, 2017).

Summary

A person's knowledge and charisma, as well as their dynamic personality, often make them a natural leader. These people often have a large following because they are influential and are known to make people feel good (Manketelow et al., 2017; Northouse, 2013). Transformational leaders are holders and seekers of knowledge, but they are not exclusive keepers. They may use various networks to obtain information, but they share that knowledge with others inside of their organization and networks.

The sharing of information within an organization is one of the key functions of social media networks. As educational leaders use these networks, they obtain information from these collaborative sessions and then share and adapt the information for their school communities.

Transformational leaders have the ability to take information and create inspiring messages that motivate their followers (Ahlquist, 2014; Ann, 2017).

SECTION THREE:
SCHOLARLY REVIEW FOR THE STUDY

Introduction

Knowledge does not come from one book, from one person, or from one source. Knowledge comes from the collective. In the field of educational leadership, the amount of knowledge available can often seem overwhelming in some areas and underwhelming in others. Finding ways to connect with the right type of knowledge can be problematic in itself (Kimmerle, et al., 2015). Therefore, many educational leaders have turned to a more informal system that puts them in control of their own learning. Professional Learning Networks (PLN's) are systems of informal learning (Davis, 2015). These PLN's create a system of connections and resources for a personalized learning experience, resulting in a network that is tailored to the learner (Trust, 2012).

The knowledge that educators seek allows them to grow and develop skill sets needed to develop in their craft (Gulamhussein, 2013). Educators learn best when drawing from their own personal experiences; they can anchor their learning in a context they are familiar with and can make those personal connections. Being dynamically engaged and participating in the learning of their choice deepens the learner's experience (Bottino & Robotti, 2007; Davis, 2015). This allows educators to be active participants in their own professional learning, choosing when and how they want to engage to increase their knowledge (Davis, 2015; Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Margolis, 2009).

Professional Learning Networks are focused on the individual and are meant to be personal. These are activities and venues, sought out by an individual, that are pertinent to their skills, knowledge, and expertise (Barrett, McCulloch & McIntosh, 2011; Davis, 2015). As educators take part in professional learning opportunities, those activities are the most beneficial when they can collaborate and build with other educators who work in similar educational

settings. “The complexity of today’s schools requires teacher collaboration and leadership” (Margolis, 2009, p.3).

Educational leaders can only benefit from professional opportunities that are available to them. District budgets, geographical barriers, and time constraints all contribute to the type and amount of professional learning that educators have access to. In the traditional professional model, educators often go to a given location or bring in an expert to participate in professional learning (Killion, 2013).

In the United States, 43% of school districts are considered rural (Berry, et al., 2011). For two of the three factors named above (district budgets and geographical barriers), many smaller districts are often underrepresented at professional development conferences. They often lack the funding to bring in content experts, limiting collaborative opportunities for smaller district leaders (Glover, et al., 2014).

As online platforms have expanded, educational leaders have been given access to a wealth of knowledge, as well as access to professionals from various areas of expertise. Just as teachers are incorporating technology into their lessons, districts are beginning to incorporate technology as a means of professional learning for their educators. The advent of online learning first brought about the ability to access information on demand. The World Wide Web provided a new way for people to gather and consume information.

Collaboration has evolved so that educational leaders theoretically do not need to meet face-to-face (Irving & Shirley, 2015). The evolution of the internet and access to the web have provided new platforms for educational leader collaboration. Perhaps the most commonly used are social media platforms (Lowe, 2016). These platforms allow users to share content, thoughts, pictures, videos, or websites through community forums (McDermott, 2011). These

forums include Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google +, Instagram, and almost limitless online communities (Murphy, 2019; Trust, 2012).

Educators have begun utilizing social media as a means of professional networking, joining communities that offer an active learning environment and provide a connection to the knowledge they are seeking (Meel, 2009). This environment allows for meaningful collaboration with other experts in their field as well as access to both synchronous and asynchronous learning. Rather than trying to find local educational leaders with similar circumstances, who may not be readily available, educators can use social media to gain instant access to experts in the field (Hardman, 2012).

Studies are emerging on the positive impact that social media is having on the ability to bring educators together and the benefits that spill over into educational communities (Murphy, 2019). The majority of these studies focus on educators, specifically teachers, who are choosing to use social media for engagement opportunities with other teachers. There is little written literature on how the middle-level educational leaders are using these resources to develop their Professional Learning Network (Glover, et al., 2014; Trust, 2012).

Professional Development vs. Professional Learning Networks

Professional development refers to the formal continuing education that a person needs in order to evolve, move forward, and stay current within their professional field. There are several fields that request professional development or continuing education credits in order to keep their licenses and certifications (Antley, 2020). Educational leadership is one of the fields that require a significant amount of professional development to stay in step with educational learning trends, academic resources, and engaging school climate, just to name a few (Cook, 2015).

Professional development in education can appear to be the result of top-down decision-making. Bringing in a consultant is often a decision made by high-level administration and not by the collective educational community. The goal of effective professional development is structured professional learning that results in teaching outcomes that change the outcome of students' learning in a positive direction (Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner, 2017). Often, these programs are directed toward an entire school audience instead of personalized based on the needs of the individual. These formalized professional development sessions can include everything from the more traditional whole school learning modules, conference presentations, and one-day workshop sessions to book studies and educational site visits (Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner, 2017). For a professional learning series to be effective, it should meet three criteria (Diaz- Maggioli, 2004):

1. Directed toward specific aims relevant to the learners' needs.
2. Congruent with the learners' prior experiences and knowledge.
3. Focused on the learners' multi-sensory and multi-dimensional engagement.

These design elements of effective learning were echoed again in 2017 by the Learning Policy Institute in their review of effective teacher professional development (Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner, 2017). They identify that professional learning needs to be content focused on the learners' needs, it should incorporate active learning from previous experiences, and it should support job-embedded collaboration and engagement.

In a study conducted by the Center of Public Education, researchers found that while 90% of educators reported participating in professional development, most of those also reported that it was totally useless (Darling-Hammond, Chung Wei, Andree & Richardson, 2009). When educators have no voice in the professional development that is intended to

change the way they perform their craft, there is little motivation for them to be personally invested in that professional development (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004).

Educational leaders are evolving away from static learning methods and moving towards more dynamic development and collaborative learning opportunities found within professional learning networks. Opportunities to collaborate with like-minded educational professionals through professional learning networks can provide elevated critical thinking exchanges between participants. These exchanges can evoke change in the way educators' practice and view their professional systems and open up more dynamic learning opportunities. PLN's offer instant access to support, feedback, and educational expertise (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2009; Hunt, 2012). It is through the PLN, then, that educators have the opportunity to think critically about the profession and make the changes necessary to perfect their craft.

Evolving Forms of Professional Learning Networks

Professional Learning Networks were generally established as a system of interpersonal connections between professionals that would lend support to educators with similar backgrounds or credentials (Trust, 2012). Before the advent of the internet, the PLN for educational leaders would likely be face-to-face or via phone. This made it difficult to collaborate with professionals or to gather information quickly from a diverse range of educational leaders (Alford, et al., 2009). As the way educators have used the internet has evolved, PLN's have expanded to websites, social media sites, and a host of other options for educational leaders to come together and/or gain access to these open networking sites (Schuetz, 2013).

Educational leaders need to be knowledgeable over a variety of areas that impact the school community. Professional development alone cannot fill this need for knowledge in its

entirety (Gulamhussein, 2013). “It is necessary to reposition professional development so that the collective effort of teachers, students, and administrators result in enhanced learning for all members of the teaching community” (Diaz- Maggioli, 2004, p.2).

With the constant need for professional development that is accessible and inexpensive, administrators are becoming more reliant on alternative forms of professional learning to help develop the educational repertoire of leaders. One of the more easily accessible and fairly inexpensive alternatives that administrators are looking to is social media networks (Ritter, 2013). These networks make it possible for leaders to develop and expand their connections and professional resources. Social media for professional learning allows users to tailor their learning experience to their needs. Learning through social media can come in the form of resources, feedback, connecting with other educational leaders, and much more (Trust, 2012).

When educational leaders participate in these open networks of learning, they can assume the role of either learner or leader. Leaders are seeking out not only the knowledge, but they are also adding to the collective of their personal learning network (National Research Council, 2000). Social media is at the center of this, allowing the participants to create a network where their learning is customizable and pertinent to their needs. Creating those networks requires an understanding of how social media works and how to find the right people to connect with (Nielson, 2015; Trust, 2012).

Benefits of Social Media as a Personalized Learning Network

Social media provides a variety of open platforms for adult learners. A Pew Research Study in 2014 revealed that over two-thirds of the adult users of the internet had a social media presence. In an interview with administrators from across Ohio, education reporter Amy Hansen (2013) explored the purpose for administrators using social media for professional networking. One superintendent responded, “We have great discussions,” adding that social media offers a “24/7 free professional development” outlet. Stacy Hawthorne (2018), an Educational Strategist and former President for International Society for Technology Education (ISTE) Administrator professional learning network replied, “Social media’s not just for sharing what you’re doing. It’s for opening that dialog to get feedback on what your ideas are or how to improve those and that’s when you find the value in it.”

Opening limitless possibilities of professional networking to educators allows them to develop personalized plans that are specific to the content and needs of the individual. Research from the Center for Education (Gulamhussein, 2013, p.24) suggests that there is a “strong relationship between communal learning, collegiality, and collective action.” Administrators do not start out with the intent to make professional networking difficult. When factoring in time, geographic limitations, and the availability of resources for developing face-to-face professional learning networks, educational leaders are turning to the options afforded them through social media (Schuetz, 2013). Professional learning should be authentic, and the content should address a real concern for the individual. As leaders seek knowledge and collaboration, they develop clear courses of action or promote ongoing thinking through two-way collaboration social platforms (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Knight, 2013).

Much of the learning that happens in traditional professional learning is declarative knowledge, through books, lectures, and texts. When educators shift to authentic learning, the knowledge gained by the participant is through interacting. By applying knowledge gathered from these open-source social networks, educators are engaging in authentic learning forums. Social media allows educators to seek out information that leads to the fulfillment of their queries by gathering direct information from other educators using social media (Moskaliuk, Schwämmlein & Wodzicki, 2012; Knight, 2013).

According to a 2009 study conducted by the MMS Education Group, a research group that works with nonprofit and government entities, of 1,400 educators who use social media, the top five reasons that educators gave for using social media for professional learning are to:

- Share information and resources
- Create Professional Learning Communities (PLC's)
- Connect with peers and colleagues
- Improve school-wide communications
- Create groups to collaborate on projects

The goal of most professional learning is to fulfill all of these objectives, and social media allows people the opportunity to seek out the connections that make that possible (Murphy, 2019).

Collaborative Communities

As organizations, districts provide educators the opportunity to meet with their educational peers in a collaborative effort to build their professional learning community. Based on the size of the district, there may not be a large professional learning network available to educational leaders within the organization (Beasley, 2011; Bolman & Deal, 2013). The learning that happens in social media platforms occurs because of the dialog and interactions of the users at their rate of choice; they can choose to participate in asynchronous and synchronous learning (Sawyer, 2014). PLN's are not stifled by geographic location or access to the same planning time. Educators have access to an unlimited number of experts in any given field (Ritter, 2013). Warlick (2015) wrote about the first time he realized there were no physical barriers between him and the people he was collaborating with:

For 40 minutes, it didn't matter that we were a quarter of a planet away from each other. It didn't matter that we spoke different native languages, that we grew up in different cultures, or that I was middle-aged. What mattered was that we had ideas, that we knew how to express them and that we had the technology and the skills to do it. (p. 16)

Technology can allow groups to come together around common interests. Those groups have the capacity to direct social exchanges with a larger selection of individuals than those immediately accessible to the person seeking the exchange (Bruffee, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978).

Connecting with Experts

Where once only those who were lucky enough to attend conferences were able to meet field experts, social media provides that same opportunity to many through social networking (Fisher, 2013). In previous times, educators had to wait for a time when they could meet the

expert they wished to collaborate with and plan out a time and location to meet (Killion, 2015). Nielsen (2015) explained the advantages of evolving from traditional professional learning:

Social media allows you to change the paradigm from “teacher” as expert to “group” as an expert. Rather than asking around between classes or sending and tracking emails to multiple people who “may” know answers, you can ask a global community via social media. This saves the asker time because there is a large audience and the traditional “askees” time because participants realize there is a whole community of knowledge out there. This reduces emails and increases access to good answers and connections. (para. 5)

Broadening the pool of experts that educational leaders have access to for collaboration benefits not only them but the school community as well. They reap those benefits in the instructional practices, lessons, and teacher development (Brunett & Marston, 2010; Schuetz, 2013).

Bridging Gaps by Connecting in High Need Areas

Rural schools tend to have fewer educational leaders, and those leaders are generally responsible for leading larger grade ranges, meaning it is less likely that they will be able to find good matches for in-person networking opportunities. They also have a higher tendency to have administrators in multiple grade ranges, i.e., K-12 buildings or upper and lower buildings. Several small towns are often put together as county schools that cover a large geographical area in order to have enough students to establish a school community. Rural districts face additional pressure to meet like-minded leaders in their own school organizations (Miller, 2012).

“Nearly 740,000 rural school teachers, 23% of the nation's public school workforce and more than one-fifth of all public students attend rural schools. From the small size of schools to geographic remoteness, rural schools face challenges unfamiliar to urban and suburban schools” (Beasley, p.1, 2011). R² Ed (National Center for Research on Rural Education) researchers found that rural educators have less access to school/district highly qualified personnel for professional learning opportunities than their non-rural counterparts. Most of the professional learning rural districts offer is through workshop-style sessions conducted by outside state agencies (Tekniepe, 2015). Rural districts vastly differ across the state, but due to the geographic location of certain rural districts, they have a hard time drawing and keeping “highly qualified” leaders in their schools (Arnold, et al., 2005; Glover, et al., 2011).

State of Missouri Funding Model for Professional Development

Missouri’s funding model for school districts and professional development monies is outlined in Title XI, Section 160.530. It directs one percent of the total monies given to the district to be set aside for the allocation of professional development. District state money from state funding comes from general state revenues (income taxes, sales tax, etc.), gaming, lottery, and other miscellaneous taxes. As the funding formula is broken down, the areas with higher state income tax, corporate revenues, and sales tax generate larger amounts of state revenue (Shuls, 2012).

Funding for the school districts at the state level is dependent upon these streams of revenue. Hence, districts with larger state revenue streams have more money that goes back into their schools. The one percent of professional development money is drastically different from city to city based on the area's state revenues (“Missouri Education Funding Formula and Interactive Maps | Children’s Education Alliance of Missouri,” 2016). Areas of low state

revenue may not have the ability to develop adequate professional development opportunities to meet the needs of the educators in their district. These districts of low state revenue tend to be the more rural districts in the state of Missouri. Districts with less than 350 students do receive a flat rate grant per student for additional school funding. Those rural districts or combined county schools do not qualify for this additional grant program (“EdBuild | Funded - State,” 2018).

Conceptual Framework

Learning for educational leaders has undergone a series of transformations over the last 65 years (Bransford & Darling-Hammond, 2005). The environment in which people engage with their school communities is far different today than the more archaic environments of the past. With the emergence of new educational practices, several aspects of how people learn and process knowledge are being reevaluated. The process of learning is a complex one and has undergone intense research dating back over a hundred years (Moskaliuk, Schwämmlein & Wodzicki, 2012).

Learning is not a static action (Trust, 2012). The ways people learn and gather information have evolved from the time when only the rich were educated and sent off to become specialists in their fields. Now anyone with an internet connection has access to unlimited knowledge (Davis, 2015). The changes in education are not just based on who has access to information but also on how people process that information. Learning is complex. It would be nearly impossible to identify a single theory that encompasses all of the aspects of learning, including the evolution of learning from the “sit and get” of the past to the more active role of the learner today (Driscoll, 2000; Sheninger, 2019).

Traditional Learning Theory

The shift in learning has shown a move away from the learner passively enduring lessons or obtaining information from one-way communication resources to a more dynamic process (Sheninger, 2019; Skinner, 1984). The behaviorist theory in education promoted the idea that learners did best when they were allowed to proceed with their learning based on how quickly and easily they acquire knowledge (Fisher & Goodman, 1995; Skinner, 1984). Behaviorism added momentum to the shift in learning theories, resulting in a role reversal of the educator and the learner.

With the introduction of cognitive psychology, educators began to look at the different processes used by the learner to internalize their learning (Craik & Lockhart, 1972). “Cognitivists see learning as an internal process that involves memory, thinking, reflection, abstraction, motivation and metacognition” (Anderson, 2008, p.21). The ultimate goal is for the learner to process information through internalization, adding to the learner’s existing knowledge base (Ausubel, 1974; Cook & Yanow, 1993).

The constructivist theory sought to make learners an active participant in their own learning, constructing knowledge from their processes and experiences instead of just being given knowledge. This moves away from learning as a model of one-way communication to that of discovery and collaboration (Cook & Yanow, 1993). In a series of articles, Ravenscroft et al., (2009) began to examine the potential of these burgeoning mediums beginning in 2009:

Through social and more open technologies we are creating new spaces and contexts which have the potential for dialectic and dialogic learning through new and developing digital literacies. These contexts can often be conceived as ‘democratic spaces’ that are either

generated or populated by the users, whose relationships mediate learning as much as the processes and tools that are in play. These contexts are clearly creating new forms of intersubjective orientations where learning can happen, that are shaped through open participation, collaboration, multimodal language, the provisionality of representations and could potentially contribute, generally, to a more “democratic epistemology”. (p. 418)

As time has elapsed, these open spaces of learning from digital means begin to provide more opportunity for knowledge building in a collaborative group construct, i.e. professional learning networks (Davis, 2015). Users are not only learning by sharing their individual knowledge with members of their professional learning networks but are actively sharing mutual experiences with similar environments that add to the collective knowledge exchange in these open forums between academic leaders (Chan, 2013; Bereiter & Scardamalia, 2010).

Connectivism

“Behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructivism are the three broad learning theories most often utilized in the creation of instructional environments. These theories, however, were developed in a time when learning was not impacted by technology” (Siemen, 2005, p.1). A newer theory that builds on the changing rate of how learning happens is connectivism. Connectivism is a theory based on the learning changes that have occurred as a result of the integration of technology into society (Siemens, 2005).

Connectivism presents a model of learning that acknowledges the tectonic shifts in society where learning is no longer an internal, individualistic activity. How people work and function is altered when new tools are utilized. The field of education has been slow to recognize both the impact of new learning tools and the environmental changes in what it means

to learn. Connectivism provides insight into learning skills and tasks needed for learners to flourish in a digital era (Siemens, 2005, p.5).

As users of technology, people no longer learn in a closed system. Rather, users of technology gather information through an open network that requires different learning processes (Trust, 2012). The principles of connectivism as laid out by Siemens (2005) include:

- Learning and knowledge rest in a diversity of opinions.
- Learning is a process of connecting specialized nodes or information sources.
- Learning may reside in non-human appliances.
- Capacity to know more is more critical than what is currently known.
- Nurturing and maintaining connections are needed to facilitate continual learning.
- Ability to see connections between fields, ideas, and concepts is a core skill.
- Currency (accurate, up-to-date knowledge) is the intent of all connectivist learning activities.
- Decision-making is itself a learning process.

Choosing what to learn and the meaning of incoming information is seen through the lens of a shifting reality. While there is a right answer now, it may be wrong tomorrow due to alterations in the information climate affecting the decision. Knowledge is effectively ever changing and growing in these climates (Goldie, 2016).

Rather, users of technology gather information through an open network that requires different learning processes. Information development was slow. The life of knowledge was measured in decades. Today, how knowledge develops has changed (Cronin, 2015). Knowledge is growing exponentially. In many fields, because of how rapidly information changes,

knowledge is now measured in months and years. Since learning is happening in a networked environment, the ability to learn and unlearn at a more rapid rate is critical. Learners must be able to distinguish meaningful information from unimportant information at a faster rate (Anderson- Inman, 2008; Downes, 2012; Goldie, 2016).

Learning is no longer constricted by time or geographic location. Networked learning can happen at any time or any place through a variety of digital mediums (Cronin, 2015). “The significant use of electronic media in everyday life requires new considerations about learning, about communication, about being in the spaces of ubiquity” (Bocciolesi, 2013, p.3). Formal types of education no longer comprise the majority of our learning. The act of learning happens in many informal mediums: the act of collaborating with colleagues, the quick exchange between two educators over the internet, even researching a subject matter on a college database. Learning is layered through the exchange of knowledge from both small and large medium digital platforms (Goldie, 2016; Kop & Hill, 2008).

The opportunities for educators in rural areas to meet and collaborate among themselves are scarce. Using social media as a medium allows for collaboration and learning among educational peers, despite geographical locations. “Connectivism presents a model of learning that acknowledges the tectonic shifts in society where learning is no longer an internal, individualistic activity. How people work and function is altered when new tools are utilized” (Siemens, 2005, p. 3). Meaningful professional learning happens all around the world. Through snapshots, blog posts, conferences, and much more, professional learning is accessible to educational leaders everywhere (Cress et al., 2015).

Learning is a social activity linked with the connections between individuals in either a passive or active action. Active learning can happen within professional learning networks

between educators via social media networks as the learner can be actively involved in the participation and direction of their learning (Social Constructivism | GSI Teaching & Resource Center, 2021). The active learning of the participants in Professional Learning Networks is collaborative in nature, due to the exchange of information and ideas. As learners participate in their knowledge communities, they are increasing their knowledge base exponentially over isolated learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

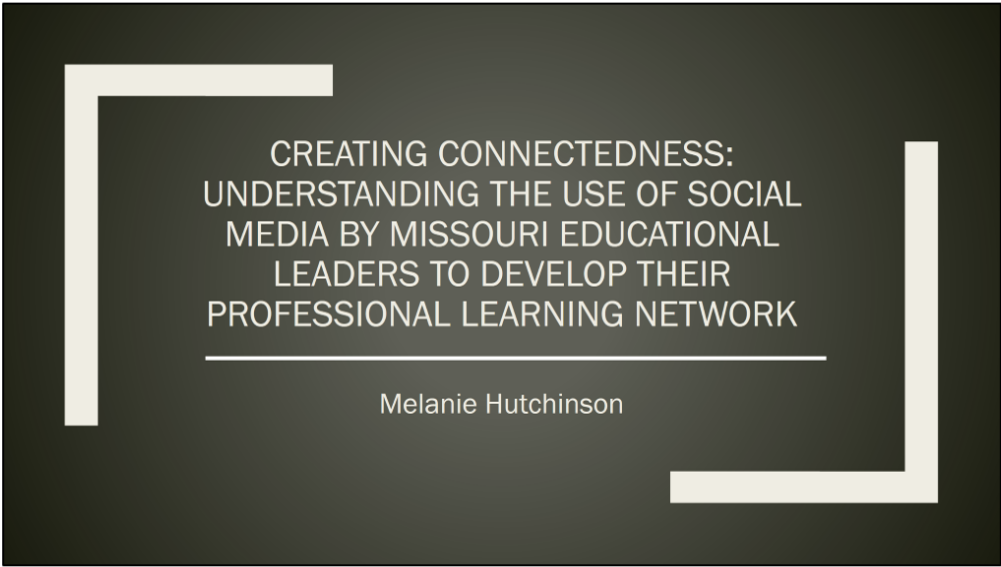
Summary

Learning is evolving, and there is constant change in what educational leaders need to know and how they acquire that knowledge. The geographical, financial, and time barriers that educators are faced with when trying to garner access to professional learning networks can vary. Despite those variations, however, adult learners need individualized learning networks that are meaningful, and they need to have access to content-specific information that addresses their needs (Levi, 2013).

With the use of technology, the world is becoming a smaller place. Where once reading about a specialist in a book would require you to visit your local library, through the use of social media forums there is access to thousands of experts. As individuals learn within the context of the communities or networks, they are making connections from within these organizations that influence the way learning happens (Cook & Yanow, 1993; Darling-Hammond, Jonnasen, & Marra, 2012). Every individual has a different learning style and preference. New ideas and theories must consider the rate at which learning has evolved and will continue to evolve in a time where both digital and traditional learning take place (Schuetz, 2013; Sheninger, 2019).

**SECTION FOUR:
CONTRIBUTION TO PRACTICE**

The following PowerPoint was created as a presentation for the spring 2022 Missouri Association of Secondary School Principals (MASSP) conference as a breakout session. The PowerPoint will highlight the design and purpose of the study, including findings and potential advantages. The presentation will be most impactful to educational leaders and professional development personnel. While the study could be transferable to other levels of education experience, the study will be most specific to those in the middle grades. The entire presentation and dissertation findings are linked via QR code and will be placed in the directory of the conference for ease of access during and after the session times.



CREATING CONNECTEDNESS:
UNDERSTANDING THE USE OF SOCIAL
MEDIA BY MISSOURI EDUCATIONAL
LEADERS TO DEVELOP THEIR
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING NETWORK

Melanie Hutchinson

Good afternoon. My name is Melanie Hutchinson and I am a middle school leader in the Lee's Summit School District. Presently, I am the assistant principal at a 7th and 8th grade building that has approximately 1,000 students. I have been in the Middle School environment for over 15 years and I have been an administrator for the last seven. Today's presentation will be an overview of a study that I did as part of my doctoral program through the University of Missouri. This study will particularly look at how Missouri middle school educational leaders are using social media in order to develop their professional learning networks

Statement of the Problem

- Learning opportunities for educational leaders are often given in one size-fits all professional development and not tailored to the specific needs of the leader or their school communities.

Often, in professional development learning opportunities can be given in a one-size-fits-all model. Generally, they are not tailored to the specific needs of a leader or their school communities. Professional learning should allow educators to become partners in the decision making process on how best they can network and grow professionally. The traditional professional development model offers a passive approach for leaders to engage in colleague collaboration. The ideal situation for professional networking would include direct communication and engagement that is content specific and self-paced constructed by the learner.

Purpose Statement

- The purpose of this research was to determine if middle school educational leaders in Missouri were using social media platforms to grow their professional learning network and if tailoring their specific experiences using social media platforms offered them the collaborative form of professional networking they are seeking.

The purpose of this research was to determine if middle school educational leaders in Missouri were using social media platforms to grow their professional learning network. As well, did tailoring their specific experiences using social media platforms offer them the collaborative form of professional network they were seeking. The study considered the effectiveness through which social media platforms gave these leaders an opportunity to develop their professional learning network in ways they could not through in traditional in person experiences.

Existing Literature Gap

- Focuses on individual use in social media for educational leaders centered around professional development.
- Data breakdowns often categorize middle school leaders in two separate categories.

The existing literature on this area focuses on the individual use of social media by educational leaders specific to professional development as a broader category. There is little on the narrow focus of how middle level educational leaders are using social media platforms to develop their personalized learning networks. Oftentimes, the data is broken down into sections of primary and/or secondary groups. Generally, assigning grades five through eight in either the primary or secondary only levels or a split of the grades to either group. For example Kindergarten through sixth as primary and seventh through twelfth as secondary.

Key Terms

- **Connectedness.** This is defined as the time in which we feel connected to one another through a common experience. According to DeKoven (2013, p. 6), “Perhaps not as profoundly, perhaps not to the world at large, but to something deeply human. And when it is best, so are we. We are, for that moment, connected not only to one thing, but also to each other: each other's presence, each other's [intelligence](#).”
- **Educators.** For this study, an educator shall be defined as anyone that works with students in an academic capacity between the grades of Pre-K through 12th Grade.
- **Professional Development.** According to the Glossary of Education Reform (2017), professional development is the ongoing process of advancement in a person's skillset. This development could take place in a variety of forms and is not limited to workshops, conferences, or self-guided study (Brauer, 2017).

Before we look at the overall data from the study we need to identify a few key terms for explanation. We will be using the theory of connectedness to define how educational leaders are feeling whenever they are connected to someone through a common experience. When I am speaking of educators in general for this study it will be defined as somebody who works with students in an academic capacity between the grades of pre-K through 12th grade. If I am referring to the group of study participants as a whole those will be identified as middle school leaders. Professional development will be defined through this study as the ongoing process of the advancement of someone's skill set. Development could take place in a variety of forms but is not limited to workshops conferences or even a self-guided study.

Key Terms

- **Personalized Learning Networks.** A shift from Professionals Learning Networks requires the individual to participate as both a personal and professional learner. As noted in Whitby (2017) from his work and collaboration efforts with Edutopia, “A PLN is a tool that uses social media and technology to collect, communicate, collaborate and create with connected colleagues anywhere at any time. Participating educators, worldwide, make requests, and share resources.” The Personalized Learning Network for an educator is an ongoing process and can be viewed as a “living organism” that changes and adapts to the educator’s needs and demands.

Personalized learning networks will be described as an individual participating as both a personal and professional learner. Social media platforms and technology can be used as a tool to communicate and collaborate with colleagues anywhere at anytime. Allowing participants to connect with educators worldwide and an ongoing process that changes and adapts to the educators needs and demands.

Key Terms

- **Rural.** Is defined by the US Census Bureau (2021) as any population, territory or housing not in an urban setting. In the 2010 US Census 60 million people lived in rural areas in the United States.
- **Social Media.** From the text, *What We Are Talking About When We Talk About Social Media: A Framework For Study*, the definition used by “most scholars and practitioners invoking social media are referring to a specific set of online offerings that have emerged over the past three decades – including blogs, social networking sites, and microblogging” (Treem, et al., 2016, p.4).
- **Urbanized Areas.** Is defined by the US Census Bureau (2021) as having a population of 50,000 or more.
- **Urbanized Clusters.** Is defined by the US Census Bureau (2021) as having a population at least 2500 and no more than 50,000.

In identifying the populations for this study the most recent US Census Bureau definitions are being used. Rural is defined as any population, territory or housing that is not found in an urban setting. Urbanized areas are defined as having a population of 50,000 residence or more and urban clusters are identified as having a population of at least 2,500 and no more than 50,000. Social media is defined from the text *What We Are Talking About When We Talk About Social Media: A Framework For Study*. They define it as a specific set of online platforms that includes blogs, social networking sites and micro-blogging.

Research Questions

- RQ1: How do middle school educational leaders in Missouri use social media platforms as part of their professional learning network?
- RQ2: How have the professional networks of Missouri middle school educational leaders been enhanced by the use of social media?

The first research question is, "How do middle school educational leaders in Missouri use social media platforms as part of their professional learning network? The second research question focuses on, "How have professional networks of the Missouri middle school educational leaders been enhanced by the use of social media?"

Conceptual Framework

- **Constructivism** - Learners are the active participant in their own learning. Learners construct knowledge from their processes and experiences instead of being given knowledge from an outside source (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996).
- **Connectivism**- theory based on the learning changes that have occurred as a result of the integration of technology into society (Bowker & Tuffin, 2004; Simeons, 2005).
 - *Connectivism in Professional Networking*
Ability to connect with professional through technological means (Kim, 2014).

The conceptual framework for the study looked at two theories: constructivism and connectivism. Constructivism looks at the learner as an active participant in their own learning. Learners actually construct knowledge from their processes and experiences instead of just being given knowledge from an outside source. Constructivism moves away from the traditional learning model of one-way communication to a model of learning through discovery and the creation of knowledge instead of just the delivery of information. Constructivism can be viewed as an example of one getting information from a lecture or textbook versus learning from one's own actual experience. Connectivism is based on the theory that learning changes have occurred as a result of the integration of technology into our everyday society.

Connectivism in professional networking by means of social media gives professionals the ability to connect with a broader range of learners and leaders through technological means. This could be on a computer, a phone or a tablet device. Connectivism allows for learning through open networks instead of closed systems. Open networks allow for the processing of constantly changing information. Learners using these open networks must be able to identify meaningful information at a faster rate. Learners using social media platforms are able to gather information and collaborate with other professionals at a more rapid rate. Users can also specify the type of information or connections they are seeking.

Design of the Study

Qualitative Means

- *In-person, semi-structured interviews via Virtual Meeting Software*
- *16 individual interviews*
 - Rural, Urban Areas and Clusters
 - Years of Admin Experience
 - Regional location
- *12 open-ended questions*

In order to get the most descriptive data from middle-level educational leaders the study was designed to be qualitative. There were 16 participants of the study. They were interviewed via virtual meeting software through Google Meets. The interviews were semi-structured, using 12 open-ended questions. The individuals interviewed represented rural, urban areas and urban clusters. Noted in the participant information was their years of administrative experience and their regional location in the state.

Population

- District Type
 - 7 Rural
 - 9 Urban
- Public or Private School
 - 15 Public
 - 1 Private
- Years of Admin Experience
 - Avg Years 10.75

Participant	Region	Type District	Public or Private Institution	Years of Experience as an Administrator
Jesse	Central Missouri	Rural	Public	12
Sophia	Eastern Missouri	Rural	Public	6
Lynne	Suburb of Kansas City	Urbanized Area	Public	11
Chantel	Suburb of Kansas City	Urbanized Area	Public	18
David	Southwest Missouri	Rural	Public	11
Robert	Suburb of Kansas City	Urban Cluster	Public	15
Evan	Kansas City Proper	Urbanized Area	Public	15
Bailey	Eastern Missouri	Rural	Public	13
Craig	Suburb of Kansas City	Urbanized Area	Public	1
Jana	Suburb of Kansas City	Urbanized Cluster	Public	11
George	Eastern Missouri	Rural	Public	17
Jose	Suburb of Kansas City	Urbanized Cluster	Public	14
Mark	Eastern Missouri	Rural	Public	12
Emanuel	Ozark	Rural	Public	11
Nina	Suburb of St. Louis	Urbanized Cluster	Public	3
Patrick	St. Louis Proper	Urbanized Area	Private	2

The population breakdown for the 16 participants was seven rural and nine urban district types. Fifteen public schools and one parochial school were represented. The average years of experience totaled 10.75 years. Each of the middle school educational leaders were given a pseudonym in order to eliminate as much identifiable information as possible.

RQ1: How do middle school educational leaders in Missouri use social media platforms as part of their professional learning network?

- District encouragement and presence on social media platforms
 - *PD Offerings*
 - *No restrictions times on professional use of social media networking*
 - *No Credit for participating in professional learning networks*

Examining the first research question of, “How do middle school educational leaders in Missouri use social media platforms as part of their professional learning network?,” all of the participants responded that their districts had a presence on at least one social media platform. None of the districts had restrictions on administrators having social media accounts for professional development and or networking. Facebook and Twitter where are the most commonly utilized. Many of the participants began using the social media platform they were most comfortable with based on the professional development they had received from their districts. In the more urban schools there was a higher level of usage of Twitter than there was Facebook.

In all of the districts represented in the study there had been professional development offered to the educational leaders on using social media for their own development as leaders. In all of the districts none offered credit to Educators for participating in professional learning networks via social media. Participants indicated it was highly encouraged for them to collaborate and find resources via social media but no formal credit was given or time offered outside of the initial professional development to expand on their networking and collaboration.

RQ1: How do middle school educational leaders in Missouri use social media platforms as part of their professional learning network?

- Consumers of Information and Voyeurs of Interactions
 - *Sophia described her first interactions on the social media platform of Twitter, "I think the first goal is to consume and creep a little bit... it wasn't really a two-way street. I was just consuming and I was not necessarily sharing anything, just getting ideas what other people were doing."*
 - *Patrick used his Twitter in the beginning to gain a better grasp and understanding of the challenges that other educators are facing in the world, by following Twitter Chats, but not participating in them in the beginning.*

Of the 16 participants, 13 indicated that in the beginning of their social media use they were merely consumers of the information that they were reading. Some indicated that they were merely voyeurs of the interactions that they viewed from the collaborative chats. Sofia described her first interactions on the social media platform Twitter as, "a goal to consume and creep a little bit it really wasn't a two-way street I was just consuming and not necessarily sharing anything just getting ideas of what other people are doing." Patrick, from a parochial school in St Louis, started using Twitter to gain a better understanding of the challenges other educators were facing in the world he would follow Twitter chats and watch the collaboration between colleagues unfold. Not until 4 months into his Twitter use did he begin to participate in the collaboration of two way communication.

RQ1: How do middle school educational leaders in Missouri use social media platforms as part of their professional learning network?

- Participating in Two- Way Communication
- Collaborating with others to grow professionally
 - *Lynne recounted her rationale to begin participating in the social media platforms as, “intrinsic. I was needing to grow because I feel that if I didn’t I would be stagnant in my position.”*

Of the 15 respondents using social media platforms eight described themselves as regular users of the social media platforms to communicate and collaborate with other colleagues.

The other nine respondents still use social media but in a form of one-way communication. They were still in the consuming and viewing stages of their professional networking. Social Media platforms offered an opportunity for collegial collaboration and growth. Lynne recounted her rationale for participating in the platform, “as intrinsic, she was needing to grow because she felt that if she didn’t she would be stagnant in her position. She utilized the platform Facebook to connect with other principals around the region to develop her skill set.

RQ2: How have the professional networks of Missouri middle school educational leaders been enhanced by the use of social media?

■ Access to Experts

- *David, from a rural district, explained "He went to Twitter to find experts. They always talk about who the smartest person in the room is. So now, this just expanded your room exponentially."*

The second research question of, how have the professional networks of Middle School Educational leaders been enhanced by the use of social media participants shared quite a few positive outcomes? The first initial outcome was the ability to have access to experts. David, from a rural district, explained, "He went to Twitter to find expert connections. It was significantly easier than in person...When you are in person the smartest person in the room is limited to those around you." When you are online using social media platforms connecting with experts all over the globe you increase *your* rate of finding a top expert exponentially. The ability to have direct access to experts or a community of experts is at your fingertips.

Geography does not become an obstacle when you are using social media platforms to connect to other professionals in the field. Evan, from a suburb of Kansas City, recounted when his district moved to the Next Generation Science Standards, he had to quickly become the expert in a field he did not have much experience in. He went to Twitter in order to find educators that we're already using and had applicable knowledge on how to incorporate the Next Generation standards into their curriculum. He was also able to glean some pitfalls of districts that had made errors in their rollout and execution to avoid those for his own building.

RQ2: How have the professional networks of Missouri middle school educational leaders been enhanced by the use of social media?

■ **Connecting Globally and Diverse Perspectives**

- *George explained, "I just feel it [social media] can help you to not feel alone in this great big world. Definitely different regions have different approaches towards different initiatives, but it helps to diversify you own thinking."*

During this research, the educators interviewed mentioned feeling isolated or in situations that other colleagues around them did not have familiarity with. Using social media platforms they were able to connect globally with educators and resources from all over the world. George explained, "I just feel it social media can help you to not feel alone in this great big world. Definitely different regions have different approaches towards different initiatives but it helps to diversify your own thinking." Getting to learn from other educational professionals or get input on situations helped the educators feel less isolated.

Participants were also able to connect with different cultures and ask for different perspectives from colleagues on situational awareness. Some even used their networking to establish collaborative experiences for their school community. Mark, from Eastern rural Missouri, used one of his connections to connect one of his social studies teachers with another High School class in Mexico City. Both classes were studying the US Mexican War and were able to have dynamic conversations on the same war but how it was perceived differently in their home nations.

RQ2: How have the professional networks of Missouri middle school educational leaders been enhanced by the use of social media?

- **Stepping Out of Isolation**

- *Emanuel recollected a time they were looking for help with their schools' Advisory class. He noted, "I live in a rural area, but with Twitter I have the possibility of getting a response from a suburban or urban school, even a more rural school like I am. It gives you opportunities for multiple connections."*

- **Transference of Ideas**

- *"You can take these ideas from real, collaborative and collegial conversations [on Twitter]", Robert described, "and take these ideas from others and mold them into what your own circumstance and needs."*

Further examining the enhancement of the professional networks of leaders by using social media, many of the rural educators reported that it helped them feel like they were not alone. Emmanuel recollected a time that he was looking for help for his school's advisory class he noted, "that he lived in a rural area but when he used Twitter he had the possibility of getting a response from a Suburban or Urban school or even a more rural school like his own. It gave him opportunities for multiple points of connection to help get ideas for his school community. The ability to have access to a broader school community that was not limited by geographic boundaries and that could have a similar population to his own was one of the reasons he turned to Twitter."

Expanding on the ability to use social media platforms to find information or Network in collaboration with other educators was a highly valued outcome for rural educators. Having an almost endless amount of resources available to you, one could find an idea or a situation that might be able to be replicated in your own school community. George, from a rural District outside of Kansas City, had gone to Twitter in search of a morale booster for his staff. "They had just undergone a loss in their faculty and his school was having a difficult time. He was able to go to Twitter and find resources and speak with other administrators who had gone through such a loss to better help his own School community."

Recommendations

- Broadening the current professional development opportunities that are available to educational leaders.

The recommendations from this study would look at having districts offer their leaders time to work on developing their professional learning networks. When there are difficult or unique situations districts look to their leaders for ideas and solutions. Offering them the opportunity, time and space via open platforms [social media] they are investing in their leader's ability to solve and connect, ultimately making them stronger school community leaders.

Implications for Practice

- Educational leaders need to have variety in how they connect for their professional learning networks.
- Importance in allowing educators time to develop their networks enhances the learning of the leader.
- Feeling connected to a variety of leaders and experts allows for a feeling of community and support at a time of high educator burnout.

For middle school educators, the implications from this study show the benefits of understanding educational leaders' needs. The ability to have a variety of professional networking opportunities through different platforms diversifies leader learning. The importance of allowing educators to develop their networks enhances their learning and development as a leader. In a time where educators are feeling isolated and burning out at an all-time high, giving them an opportunity to feel connected to other leaders going through similar situations and/or giving them the ability to discover experts that may assist them in their own school communities.

Conclusion

- Understanding the current use of social media as an authentic form of professional networking could open up a whole new portal for gathering and tailoring information for educational leaders.
- Social media provides collaborative communities specific to the educator's needs and desired outcomes for personal and professional growth.
- The research in this study offers an opportunity for leaders and districts to explore varying options in how they develop their leaders and their professional learning networks.

In conclusion, understanding the current use of social media as an authentic form of professional networking could open a new avenue for gathering and tailoring information for educational leaders. Social media provides collaborative communities specific to the needs of an educator for personal and professional growth. The research in this study offers opportunities for leaders and districts to explore professional learning options that develop their leaders and expand their professional learning networks.

Advice from Admin

- “Just go for it. I mean, you can learn a plethora of information and its free. You don’t have to pay for it out of the gate. This is free information and a forum to make connections and to grow yourself.”- Lynne
- “It is good to have people to talk to about things. Using social media provides you an opportunity for diverse connections. It is all about the balance between the two forms [in person and online].”- Jose

Before closing a little advice from some of the administrators in this study about venturing into social media. Lynne would tell you to, " just go for it. There is a plethora of information out there and it is free you don't have to pay for it out of the gate and you can use forms to make connections and to grow yourself." Some educators would also issue a warning. Remember, that using social media even on a professional level is open to the public. Do not put ideas or opinions on platforms that you would not want others to see. Lastly, was the advice from Jose. He describes that having people to talk to about issues via social media provided him an opportunity to make more diverse connections. However, for him it is all about the balance between the two forms of in-person and online networking. Finding the best balance for the optimal outcome is what we can all hope for in our own a professional learning journey.

SECTION FIVE:
CONTRIBUTION TO SCHOLARSHIP

Assessing the Use of Social Media by Middle School Leaders in Developing Their Professional Learnings Networks

Educational leaders are increasingly required to have knowledge over a wide range of topics as they relate to serving their school communities. They are seeking ways to engage with colleagues and other educational leaders by connecting in meaningful learning and collaboration. Online communities are offering networking opportunities to educational leaders by turning social media platforms into communities of learning and connecting. While education budget cuts can limit district training opportunities, geographic distance can also isolate educational leaders. With the constant need for professional networking that is easily accessible and fairly inexpensive, administrators are becoming more reliant on social media networks to help develop and expand their district's professional development offerings (Chen, 2017; Davis, 2017).

As many educational leaders access these online support networks, they are choosing to do so through social media platforms. These social media platforms offer educators the opportunity to connect not just with those close to them but also with those around the globe. Educators are trying to create and engage in opportunities that they can personalize and that implement professional learning. The “core-principles of [high-quality] professional learning transcend both face-to-face and online platforms” (Holmes, Signer & MacLeod, 2011, p.77). Social media provides for personal consumption and connection, allowing educational leaders to tailor their experience to their needs.

Statement of the Problem

Poorly designed, one size fits all professional learning opportunities can inhibit educators' growth in their profession and their ability to connect with other educators (Knight,

2011). Demonte (2013) from the Center for American Progress found through a multi-state study over professional development for educators that:

The complaints about professional development have been well documented and most often cite the following shortcomings:

- It is usually disconnected from the everyday practice of teaching.
- It is too generic and unrelated to the curriculum or to the specific instructional problems teachers face.
- It is infrequent and implemented as a one-shot event or led by an outside consultant who drops in to conduct a workshop and never returns to the school or district. (p. 4)

Professional learning for educators should involve them as partners in the decision-making process of their professional growth and networking plans rather than as passive bystanders to their own learning (Doddington, Kershner, & Pedder, 2013). Educators learn best when concepts emerge in a variety of ways, allowing them to be active participants in the learning and choice of new concepts. Providing opportunities for educational learners to connect and collaborate with others outside of their school environment offers them opportunities for learning and growth (French, 2015; Knight, 2013).

The ideal situation for professional networking among educational leaders would include direct communication and engagement that is content-specific and self-paced. However, for many districts, the struggle with these professional opportunities is with expense and time out of the building (Gulamhussein, 2013). The problem of achieving individual, specific professional networking is amplified for those who are in districts that are geographically isolated, such as rural settings. They often have smaller professional development budgets and

are physically further from professional learning opportunities in suburban and urban areas (Howley & Howley, 2005; Little, 1993).

Monetary and physical barriers have led educational leaders to think beyond the physical walls of their schools as they look for professional learning opportunities. Since 1995, “Technology has reorganized how we live, how we communicate, and how we learn. Learning needs and theories that describe learning principles and processes, should be reflective of underlying social environments” (Siemens, 2005, p.3). Online learning platforms, such as Blackboard, Canvas, etc., have been used for years in universities and are slowly being adopted into secondary education systems (Darling-Hammond, Jonnasen & Marra, 2012; Richardson, 2012).

Purpose

The purpose of this research was to determine if middle school educational leaders in Missouri were using social media platforms to grow their professional learning network and if tailoring their specific experiences using social media platforms offered them the collaborative form of professional networking they are seeking.

Literature Review

Knowledge does not come from one book, from one person, or from one source. Knowledge comes from the collective. In the field of educational leadership, the amount of knowledge available can often seem overwhelming in some areas and underwhelming in others. Finding ways to connect with the right type of knowledge can be problematic in itself (Kimmerle, et al., 2015). Therefore, many educational leaders have turned to a more informal system that puts them in control of their own learning. Professional Learning Networks (PLN’s)

are systems of informal learning (Davis, 2015). These PLN's create a system of connections and resources for a personalized learning experience, resulting in a network that is tailored to the learner (Trust, 2012).

The knowledge that educators seek allows them to grow and develop skill sets needed to develop in their craft (Gulamhusein, 2013). Educators learn best when drawing from their own personal experiences; they can anchor their learning in a context they are familiar with and can make those personal connections. Being dynamically engaged and participating in the learning of their choice deepens the learner's experience (Bottino & Robotti, 2007; Davis, 2015). This allows educators to be active participants in their own professional learning, choosing when and how they want to engage to increase their knowledge (Davis, 2015; Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Margolis, 2009).

Professional Learning Networks are focused on the individual and are meant to be personal. These are activities and venues, sought out by an individual, that are pertinent to their skills, knowledge, and expertise (Barrett, McCulloch & McIntosh, 2011; Davis, 2015). As educators take part in professional learning opportunities, those activities are the most beneficial when they can collaborate and build with other educators who work in similar educational settings. "The complexity of today's schools requires teacher collaboration and leadership" (Margolis, 2009, p.3).

Educational leaders can only benefit from professional opportunities that are available to them. District budgets, geographical barriers, and time constraints all contribute to the type and amount of professional learning that educators have access to. In the traditional professional model, educators often go to a given location or bring in an expert to participate in professional learning (Killion, 2013).

In the United States, 43% of school districts are considered rural (Berry, et al., 2011). For two of the three factors named above (district budgets and geographical barriers), many smaller districts are often underrepresented at professional development conferences. They often lack the funding to bring in content experts, limiting collaborative opportunities for smaller district leaders (Glover, et al., 2014).

As online platforms have expanded, educational leaders have been given access to a wealth of knowledge, as well as access to professionals from various areas of expertise. Just as teachers are incorporating technology into their lessons, districts are beginning to incorporate technology as a means of professional learning for their educators. The advent of online learning first brought about the ability to access information on demand. The World Wide Web provided a new way for people to gather and consume information.

Collaboration has evolved so that educational leaders theoretically do not need to meet face-to-face (Irving & Shirley, 2015). The evolution of the internet and access to the web have provided new platforms for educational leader collaboration. Perhaps the most commonly used are social media platforms (Lowe, 2016). These platforms allow users to share content, thoughts, pictures, videos, or websites through community forums (McDermott, 2011). These forums include Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google +, Instagram, and almost limitless online communities (Murphy, 2019; Trust, 2012).

Educators have begun utilizing social media as a means of professional networking, joining communities that offer an active learning environment and provide a connection to the knowledge they are seeking (Meel, 2009). This environment allows for meaningful collaboration with other experts in their field as well as access to both synchronous and asynchronous learning. Rather than trying to find local educational leaders with similar

circumstances, who may not be readily available, educators can use social media to gain instant access to experts in the field (Hardman, 2012).

Studies are emerging on the positive impact that social media is having on the ability to bring educators together and the benefits that spill over into educational communities (Murphy, 2019). The majority of these studies focus on educators, specifically teachers, who are choosing to use social media for engagement opportunities with other teachers. There is little written literature on how the middle-level educational leaders are using these resources to develop their Professional Learning Network (Glover, et al., 2014; Trust, 2012).

Professional Development vs. Professional Learning Networks

Professional development refers to the formal continuing education that a person needs in order to evolve, move forward, and stay current within their professional field. There are several fields that require professional development or continuing education credits in order to keep their licenses and certifications (Antley, 2020). Educational leadership is one of the fields that requires a significant amount of professional development to stay in step with educational learning trends, academic resources, and engaging school climate, just to name a few (Cook, 2015).

Professional development in education can appear to be the result of top-down decision-making. Bringing in a consultant is often a decision made by high-level administration and not by the collective educational community. The goal of effective professional development is structured professional learning that results in teaching outcomes that change the outcome of students learning in a positive direction (Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner, 2017). Often, these programs are directed toward an entire school audience instead of personalized based on the needs of the individual. These formalized professional development sessions can include

everything from the more traditional whole school learning modules, conference presentations, and one-day workshop sessions to book studies and educational site visits (Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner, 2017). For a professional learning series to be effective, they should meet three criteria (Diaz- Maggioli, 2004):

1. Directed toward specific aims relevant to the learners' needs.
2. Congruent with the learners' prior experiences and knowledge.
3. Focused on the learners' multi-sensory and multi-dimensional engagement.

These design elements of effective learning were echoed again in 2017 by the Learning Policy Institute in their review of effective teacher professional development (Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner, 2017). They identify professional learning needs to be content focused on the learners' needs, it should incorporate active learning from previous experiences, and it should support job-embedded collaboration and engagement.

In a study conducted by the Center of Public Education, researchers found that while 90% of educators reported participating in professional development, most of those also reported that it was totally useless (Darling-Hammond, Chung Wei, Andree & Richardson, 2009). When educators have no voice in the professional development that is intended to change the way they perform their craft, there is little motivation for them to be personally invested in that professional development (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004).

Educational leaders are evolving away from static learning methods and moving towards more dynamic development and collaborative learning opportunities found within professional learning networks. Opportunities to collaborate with like-minded educational professionals through professional learning networks can provide elevated critical thinking exchanges between participants. These exchanges can evoke change in the way educators practice and

view their professional systems and open up more dynamic learning opportunities. PLN's offer instant access to support, feedback, and educational expertise (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2009; Hunt, 2012). It is through the PLN, then, that educators have the opportunity to think critically about the profession and make the changes necessary to perfect their craft.

Evolving Forms of Professional Learning Networks

Professional Learning Networks were generally established as a system of interpersonal connections between professionals that would lend support to educators with similar backgrounds or credentials (Trust, 2012). Before the advent of the internet, the PLN for educational leaders would likely be face-to-face or via phone. This made it difficult to collaborate with professionals or to gather information quickly from a diverse range of educational leaders (Alford, et al., 2009). As the way educators have used the internet has evolved, PLN's have expanded to websites, social media sites, and a host of other options for educational leaders to come together and/or gain access to these open networking sites (Schuetz, 2013).

Educational leaders need to be knowledgeable over a variety of areas that impact the school community. Professional development alone cannot fill this need for knowledge in its entirety (Gulamhussein, 2013). "It is necessary to reposition professional development so that the collective effort of teachers, students, and administrators result in enhanced learning for all members of the teaching community" (Diaz- Maggioli, 2004, p.2).

With the constant need for professional development that is accessible and inexpensive, administrators are becoming more reliant on alternative forms of professional learning to help develop the educational repertoire of leaders. One of the more easily accessible and fairly inexpensive alternatives that administrators are looking to is social media networks (Ritter,

2013). These networks make it possible for leaders to develop and expand their connections and professional resources. Social media for professional learning allows users to tailor their learning experience to their needs. Learning through social media can come in the form of resources, feedback, connecting with other educational leaders, and much more (Trust, 2012).

When educational leaders participate in these open networks of learning, they can assume the role of either learner or leader. Leaders are seeking out not only the knowledge, but they are also adding to the collective of their personal learning network (National Research Council, 2000). Social media is at the center of this, allowing the participants to create a network where their learning is customizable and pertinent to their needs. Creating those networks requires an understanding of how social media works and how to find the right people to connect with (Nielsen, 2015; Trust, 2012).

Benefits of Social Media as a Personalized Learning Network

Social media provides a variety of open platforms for adult learners. A Pew Research Study in 2014 revealed that over two-thirds of the adult users of the internet had a social media presence. In an interview with administrators from across Ohio, education reporter Amy Hansen (2013) explored the purpose for administrators using social media for professional networking. One superintendent responded, “We have great discussions,” adding that social media offers a “24/7 free professional development” outlet (Hansen, 2013, p.1).

Opening limitless possibilities of professional networking to educators allows them to develop personalized plans that are specific to the content and needs of the individual. Research from the Center for Education (Gulamhussein, 2013) suggests that there is a “strong relationship between communal learning, collegiality, and collective action”(p.24). Administrators do not start out with the intent to make professional networking difficult. When factoring in time,

geographic limitations, and the availability of resources for developing face-to-face professional learning networks, educational leaders are turning to the options afforded them through social media (Schuetz, 2013). Professional learning should be authentic, and the content should address a real concern for the individual. As leaders seek knowledge and collaboration, they develop clear courses of action or promote ongoing thinking through two-way collaboration social platforms (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Knight, 2013).

Much of the learning that happens in traditional professional learning is declarative knowledge through books, lectures, and texts. When educators shift to authentic learning, the knowledge gained by the participant is through interacting. By applying knowledge gathered from these open-source social networks, educators are engaging in authentic learning forums. Social media allows educators to seek out information that leads to the fulfillment of their queries by gathering direct information from other educators using social media (Knight, 2013; Moskaliuk, Schwämmlein & Wodzicki, 2012).

According to a 2009 study conducted by the MMS Education Group, a research group that works with nonprofit and government entities, of 1400 educators who use social media, the top five reasons that educators gave for using social media for professional learning are to:

- Share information and resources
- Create Professional Learning Communities (PLC's)
- Connect with peers and colleagues
- Improve school-wide communications
- Create groups to collaborate on projects

The goal of most professional learning is to fulfill all of these objectives, and social media allows people the opportunity to seek out the connections that make that possible (Murphy, 2019).

Collaborative Communities

As organizations, districts provide educators the opportunity to meet with their educational peers in a collaborative effort to build their professional learning community. Based on the size of the district, there may not be a large professional learning network available to educational leaders within the organization (Beasley, 2011; Bolman & Deal, 2013). The learning that happens in social media platforms occurs because of the dialog and interactions of the users at their rate of choice; they can choose to participate in asynchronous and synchronous learning (Sawyer, 2014). PLN's are not stifled by geographic location or access to the same planning time. Educators have access to an unlimited number of experts in any given field (Ritter, 2013). Warlick (2015) wrote about the first time he realized there were no physical barriers between him and the people he was collaborating with:

For 40 minutes, it didn't matter that we were a quarter of a planet away from each other. It didn't matter that we spoke different native languages, that we grew up in different cultures, or that I was middle-aged. What mattered was that we had ideas, that we knew how to express them and that we had the technology and the skills to do it. (p. 16)

Technology can allow for groups to come together around common interests. Those groups have the capacity to direct social exchanges with a larger selection of individuals than those immediately accessible to the person seeking the exchange (Bruffee, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978).

Connecting with Experts

Where once only those who were lucky enough to attend conferences were able to meet field experts, social media provides that same opportunity to many through social networking (Fisher, 2013). In previous times, educators had to wait for a time when they could meet the expert they wished to collaborate with and plan out a time and location to meet (Killion, 2015). Nielsen (2015) explained the advantages of evolving from traditional professional learning:

Social media allows you to change the paradigm from “teacher” as expert to “group” as an expert. Rather than asking around between classes or sending and tracking emails to multiple people who “may” know answers, you can ask a global community via social media. This saves the asker time because there is a large audience and the traditional “askies” time because participants realize there is a whole community of knowledge out there. This reduces emails and increases access to good answers and connections. (para. 5)

Broadening the pool of experts that educational leaders have access to for collaboration benefits not only them but the school community as well. They reap those benefits in the instructional practices, lessons, and teacher development (Brunett & Marston, 2010; Schuetz, 2013).

Bridging Gaps by Connecting in High Need Areas

Rural schools tend to have fewer educational leaders, and those leaders are generally responsible for leading larger grade ranges, meaning it is less likely that they will be able to find good matches for in-person networking opportunities. They also have a higher tendency to have administrators in multiple grade ranges, i.e., K-12 buildings or upper and lower buildings. Several small towns are often put together as county schools that cover a large geographical area in order to have enough students to establish a school community. Rural districts face

additional pressure to meet like-minded leaders in their own school organizations (Miller, 2012).

“Nearly 740,000 rural school teachers, 23% of the nation's public school workforce and more than one-fifth of all public students attend rural schools. Small size and geographic remoteness, rural schools face challenges unfamiliar to urban and suburban schools” (Beasley, 2011, p.1). R² Ed (National Center for Research on Rural Education) researchers found that rural educators have less access to school/district highly qualified personnel for professional learning opportunities than their non-rural counterparts. Most of the professional learning rural districts offer is through workshop-style sessions conducted by outside state agencies (Tekniepe, 2015). Rural districts vastly differ across the state, but due to the geographic location of certain rural districts, they have a hard time drawing and keeping “highly qualified” leaders in their schools (Arnold, et al., 2005; Glover, et al., 2011).

Conceptual Framework

Learning for educational leaders has undergone a series of transformations. (Bransford & Darling-Hammond, 2005). The environment in which people engage with their school communities is far different today than the more archaic environments of the past. With the emergence of new educational practices, several aspects of how people learn and process knowledge are being reevaluated. The process of learning is a complex one and has undergone intense research dating back over a hundred years (Moskaliuk, Schwämmlein & Wodzicki, 2012).

Learning is not a static action (Trust, 2012). The ways people learn and gather information have evolved from the time when only the rich were educated and sent off to become specialists in their fields. Now anyone with an internet connection has access to

unlimited knowledge (Davis, 2015). The changes in education are not just based on who has access to information but also on how people process that information. Learning is complex. It would be nearly impossible to identify a single theory that encompasses all of the aspects of learning, including the evolution of learning from the “sit and get” of the past to the more active role of the learner today (Driscoll, 2000; Sheninger, 2019).

Traditional Learning Theory

The shift in learning has shown a move away from the learner passively enduring lessons or obtaining information from one-way communication resources to a more dynamic process (Sheninger, 2019; Skinner, 1984). The behaviorist theory in education promoted the idea that learners did best when they were allowed to proceed with their learning based on how quickly and easily they acquire knowledge (Fisher & Goodman, 1995; Skinner, 1984). Behaviorism added momentum to the shift in learning theories, resulting in a role reversal of the educator and the learner.

With the introduction of cognitive psychology, educators began to look at the different processes used by the learner to internalize their learning (Craig & Lockhart, 1972). “Cognitivists see learning as an internal process that involves memory, thinking, reflection, abstraction, motivation and metacognition” (Anderson, 2008, p.21). The ultimate goal is for the learner to process information through internalization, adding to the learner’s existing knowledge base (Ausubel, 1974; Cook & Yanow, 1993).

The constructivist theory sought to make learners an active participants in their own learning, constructing knowledge from their processes and experiences instead of just being given knowledge. This moves away from learning as a model of one-way communication to

that of discovery and collaboration (Cook & Yanow, 1993). In a series of articles, Ravenscroft et al., (2009) began to examine the potential of these burgeoning mediums beginning in 2009:

Through social media and more open technologies, we are creating new spaces and contexts that have the potential for dialectic and dialogic learning through new and developing digital literacies. These contexts can often be conceived as ‘democratic spaces’ that are either generated or populated by the users, whose relationships mediate learning as much as the processes and tools that are in play. These contexts are clearly creating new forms of intersubjective orientations where learning can happen, that are shaped through open participation, collaboration, multimodal language, the provisionality of representations and could potentially contribute, generally, to a more “democratic epistemology.” (p. 418)

As time has elapsed, these open spaces of learning from digital means begin to provide more opportunity for knowledge building in a collaborative group construct, i.e. professional learning networks (Davis, 2015). Users are not only learning by sharing their individual knowledge with members of their professional learning networks but are actively sharing mutual experiences with similar environments that add to the collective knowledge exchange in these open forums between academic leaders (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 2010; Chan, 2013).

Connectivism

“Behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructivism are the three broad learning theories most often utilized in the creation of instructional environments. These theories, however, were developed in a time when learning was not impacted by technology” (Siemen, 2005, p.1). A newer theory that builds on the changing rate of how learning happens is

connectivism. Connectivism is a theory based on the learning changes that have occurred as a result of the integration of technology into society (Siemens, 2005).

Connectivism presents a model of learning that acknowledges the tectonic shifts in society where learning is no longer an internal, individualistic activity. How people work and function is altered when new tools are utilized. The field of education has been slow to recognize both the impact of new learning tools and the environmental changes in what it means to learn. Connectivism provides insight into learning skills and tasks needed for learners to flourish in a digital era.” (Siemens, 2005, p.5)

As users of technology, people no longer learn in a closed system. Rather, users of technology gather information through an open network that requires different learning processes (Trust, 2012). The principles of connectivism as laid out by Siemens (2005) include:

- Learning and knowledge rest in diversity of opinions.
- Learning is a process of connecting specialized nodes or information sources.
- Learning may reside in non-human appliances.
- Capacity to know more is more critical than what is currently known.
- Nurturing and maintaining connections are needed to facilitate continual learning.
- Ability to see connections between fields, ideas, and concepts is a core skill.
- Currency (accurate, up-to-date knowledge) is the intent of all connectivist learning activities.
- Decision-making is itself a learning process. (p.42)

Choosing what to learn and the meaning of incoming information is seen through the lens of a shifting reality. While there is a right answer now, it may be wrong tomorrow due to

alterations in the information climate affecting the decision. Knowledge is effectively ever changing and growing in these climates (Goldie, 2016).

Rather, users of technology gather information through an open network that requires different learning processes. Information development was slow. The life of knowledge was measured in decades. Today, how knowledge develops has changed (Cronin, 2015). Knowledge is growing exponentially. In many fields, because of how rapidly information changes, knowledge is now measured in months and years. Since learning is happening in a networked environment, the ability to learn and unlearn at a more rapid rate is critical. Learners must be able to identify meaningful information from unimportant information at a faster rate (Anderson- Inman, 2008; Downes, 2012; Goldie, 2016).

Learning is no longer constricted by time or geographic location. Networked learning can happen at any time or any place through a variety of digital mediums (Cronin, 2015). “The significant use of electronic media in everyday life requires new considerations about learning, about communication, about being in the spaces of ubiquity” (Bocciolesi, 2013, p.3). Formal types of education no longer comprise the majority of our learning. The act of learning happens in many informal mediums: the act of collaborating with colleagues, the quick exchange between two educators over the internet, even researching a subject matter on a college database. Learning is layered through the exchange of knowledge from both small and large medium digital platforms (Goldie, 2016; Kop & Hill, 2008).

The opportunities for educators in rural areas to meet and collaborate among themselves are scarce. Using social media as a medium allows for collaboration and learning among educational peers, despite geographical locations. “Connectivism presents a model of learning that acknowledges the tectonic shifts in society where learning is no longer an internal,

individualistic activity. How people work and function is altered when new tools are utilized” (Siemens, 2005, p. 3). Meaningful professional learning happens all around the world. Through snapshots, blog posts, conferences, and much more, professional learning is accessible to educational leaders everywhere (Cress et al., 2015).

Learning is a social activity linked with the connections between individuals in either a passive or active action. Active learning can happen within professional learning networks between educators via social media networks as the learner can be actively involved in the participation and direction of their learning (Social Constructivism | GSI Teaching & Resource Center, 2021). The active learning of the participants in Professional Learning Networks is collaborative in nature, due to the exchange of information and ideas. As learners participate in their knowledge communities they are increasing their knowledge base exponentially over isolated learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

Research Questions

This study examined the data from interviews with educational leaders to the following research questions:

- 1) How do middle school educational leaders in Missouri use social media platforms as part of their professional learning network?
- 2) How have the professional networks of Missouri middle school educational leaders been enhanced by the use of social media?

Design of the Study

Determining the right research methodology sets the foundation for the research taking place and establishes how best to proceed with the research questions (Thattamparambil, 2020). The qualitative research approach was found to be beneficial for the collection of data and

personal narratives in examining the research questions (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Merriam, 2009). Utilizing in-depth personal interviews provided a deeper understanding of experiences from participants than would have been possible using quantitative collection techniques (Creswell & Clark, 2007; Ward, et al., 2013).

Qualitative means were utilized in the form of open-ended questions during one-on-one interviews that provided a deeper illustration of the use of social media by the educational leaders and how they used them to develop their professional learning networks (Dillman, et al., 2009; Turner, 2010). The researcher interviews were conducted via virtual platform (Google Meets) due to geographical and COVID-19 concerns at the time the study took place (Sullivan, 2019).

Within the data collection process, a constant comparative method was utilized, allowing for the comparison of commonalities amongst collected data as it used an inductive coding process (Given, 2008; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Interviews were the primary focus of the information collected during the study, as it is the most commonly used form of gathering data during a qualitative study (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). These interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes and employed a conversational style to gain the personal experiences and insights from each participant (Jamshed, 2014).

Participants

To determine how Missouri middle school educational leaders used social media as a professional networking tool, there needed to be a selection of participants that were reflective of urban/suburban as well as rural middle school leaders from a variety of school districts across different regions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These educational leaders all have served in an

administrative capacity in buildings with grades 6 through 8, either singly or in combination in Missouri, found relevance in the topics, and were willing to share their experiences. There were 16 participants who took part in the interview process. Demographic data for the participants are listed in the table below.

Table 1

Table of Participant Leader Descriptive Demographic

Participant	Region	Type District	Public or Private Institution	Years of Experience as an Administrator
Jesse	Central Missouri	Rural	Public	12
Sophia	Eastern Missouri	Rural	Public	6
Lynne	Suburb of Kansas City	Urbanized Area	Public	11
Chantel	Suburb of Kansas City	Urbanized Area	Public	18
David	Southwest Missouri	Rural	Public	11
Robert	Suburb of Kansas City	Urban Cluster	Public	15
Evan	Kansas City Proper	Urbanized Area	Public	15
Bailey	Eastern Missouri	Rural	Public	13
Craig	Suburb of Kansas City	Urbanized Area	Public	1
Jana	Suburb of Kansas City	Urbanized Cluster	Public	11
George	Eastern Missouri	Rural	Public	17
Jose	Suburb of Kansas City	Urbanized Cluster	Public	14
Mark	Eastern Missouri	Rural	Public	12
Emanuel	Ozark	Rural	Public	11
Nina	Suburb of St. Louis	Urbanized Cluster	Public	3
Patrick	St. Louis Proper	Urbanized Area	Private	2

Definition for Identifying Type of District in Study

Rural. Is defined by the US Census Bureau (2021) as, any population, territory or housing not in an urban setting. In the 2010 US Census 60 million people lived in rural areas in the United States. Populations under 2,500.

Urbanized Areas. Is defined by the US Census Bureau (2021) as having a population of 50,000 or more.

Urbanized Clusters. Is defined by the US Census Bureau (2021) as having a population at least 2,500 and no more than 50,000.

Findings

Research Question 1-

How do middle school educational leaders in Missouri use social media platforms as part of their professional learning network?

All of the participants but one had experience utilizing social media platforms as part of their professional learning network. Those who used social platforms felt encouraged by their districts to seek out connections and learn on these platforms. The participants, regardless of whether they represent urban or rural districts, all have a social media presence on at least one platform. All of the schools from which the leaders hail have their own social media account, and all have a Facebook page. Three participants' individual schools do not have a Twitter account, and the rest have both. David, from southwest Missouri, indicated that the upper elementary in his district has a Tik Tok page.

Also, all but one of the districts, the district in rural central Missouri, provided some form of professional development for their staff on harnessing the power of social media for learning and connecting. Patrick, from urban St. Louis, was part of a professional development session their first year in the district. "We were strongly encouraged to partake in Twitter Chats. They showed us different chats we could join in, related to our content. Even if it was to watch and learn as we figured it out. They wanted us to put our toes in the water." Jose, from an urban district outside of Kansas City with 14 years of administration experience, defined his district stance on administrators using social media as, "we're encouraged to use social media pretty much anytime." However, none of the districts represented by the participants designated time

for administrative leaders to participate in social media platforms, whether that be for networking or earning professional development credit.

The participants who used the social media platforms were largely influenced by the exposure they had to other colleagues, instructional coaches, and prominent staff in the district (i.e. Assistant Superintendents, Directors, Superintendents, etc.). Sophia, from rural eastern Missouri, increased her professional use of social media as her superior was a huge proponent of Twitter. “She opened my eyes to all of the resources and connections that you could make through Twitter. I would say she really pushed me to use it a lot more.” Nina, who was from a public school in a St. Louis suburb, recounted, “When I was a content leader, we had a technology content leader who met once a month and we essentially had technology PD. So that was one of the things that we talked about, Twitter, specifically in that connection and how it is a wealth of information.”

Many participants recalled using these platforms in the beginning of their professional networking as merely consumers of information or voyeurs of the professional exchanges of ideas. One participant described their first interactions on the social media platform of Twitter, “I think the first goal is to consume and creep a little bit... it wasn’t really a two-way street. I was just consuming and I was not necessarily sharing anything, just getting ideas what other people were doing.” Some participants have remained at this base level of interaction on social media. Jesse, from central Missouri, describes her use, “when it comes to school, I tweet everything: sports, students highlights, what is happening in the classroom. But, when it comes to my own learning, I dabble. I’m mostly a voyeur of Twitter. If I have a minute I might pop on and read something [on Twitter].”

About half of the participants had ventured beyond the basic function of only consuming information off of the platforms. These participants reported participating in two-way communication in Twitter chats and Facebook groups. One leader recounted their rationale for participating in the social media platforms as, “intrinsic. I was needing to grow because I feel that if I didn’t I would be stagnant in my position.” Participating in making active connections with other educational professionals and experts helped them feel their professional learning opportunities were vaster than the immediate landscape in front of them. These connections consisted of giving advice, posing questions, and highlighting activities in their school communities to forums on the platforms for advice or feedback.

Participants across all regions, geographic locations, and experience levels mentioned that social media platforms gave them quick access to experts in multiple fields. With the quickly changing dynamics of education, participants appreciated the ability to search social media to find someone who had experienced or had knowledge of new trends or problems they were facing. Evan gave the example of when his district shifted to Next Generation Science Standards. As the administrator for their building, he had to build their knowledge base quickly to help their teachers in the shift. “I jumped on Twitter and started following all of these individuals that were experts in Next Generation Standards,” reported Evan. “I had to gain understanding for my staff and quick; it helped me with that and to connect with different professionals in the area as well, making that transition.” Bailey, a participant from a rural district conveyed that despite her geographic isolation, they could still connect with top experts in her field in a more direct manner than any other option of contact.

Many of the interviewees expressed that having availability to an infinite number of resources, experts, and other educational leaders made the use of social media platforms a

symbiotic experience. They described that the effort they put in was what they would get back. David explained the benefit he saw by participating in Twitter chats as, “you can pick the time and place you interact at, if you are posting something it’s easy to get lots of ideas quickly.”

Bailey reflected that, “I do utilize it [Twitter], but I do not leverage it to its maximum capacity. I would like to though.” There might be times that they utilized it more than others, depending on time constraints and what information they were seeking. One participant, Jesse, elaborated on her use, “I used to be on Twitter and Facebook all of the time. With the chaos of the last two years, I feel like it’s one more thing. I feel like it just reminds me of all the things we are not doing at our school.” However, Mark described a different experience,

Over the last few years we are experiencing things we have never encountered before.

There is a definite advantage to having a larger audience to reach out to, which I think is really important. It gives me the opportunity to find someone who is going through a similar event as me and my school community.

Research Question 2-

How have the professional networks of Missouri middle school educational leaders been enhanced by the use of social media?

Participant responses indicated four areas of enhancement to their professional networking by engaging in social media platforms. The first was the ability to connect with experts in their field. Leaders commented on the unique opportunity to directly contact an expert or pose a question to a field of experts. No other outlet or forum gave them this opportunity. David, a leader from a rural district, related about finding expert connections that “they always talk about who the smartest person in the room is. So now, [using Twitter] just expanded your room exponentially.”

Participants across all regions, geographic locations, and experience levels mentioned that social media platforms gave them quick access to experts in multiple fields. With the quickly changing dynamics of education, participants appreciated the ability to search social media to find someone who had experienced or had knowledge of new trends or problems they were facing. Evan gave the example of when his district shifted to Next Generation Science Standards. As the administrator for their building, he had to build his knowledge base quickly to help his teachers in the shift. “I jumped on Twitter and started following all of these individuals that were experts in Next Generation Standards,” reported Evan. “I had to gain understanding for my staff and quick; it helped me with that and to connect with different professionals in the area as well, making that transition.”

A secondary enhancement to educators was that they saw the opportunity to connect globally and have access to more diverse perspectives. Across participants who used either Twitter or Facebook or both, there resonated a theme of social media platforms opening up views and the ability to bring in diversity, despite location or subject matter. When given the opportunity to link with multiple cultures and even countries, it broadened their potential for resources and connections. George explained that “I just feel it [social media] can help you to not feel alone in this great big world. Definitely different regions have different approaches towards different initiatives, but it helps to diversify your own thinking.”

Mark was able to connect one of his classroom teachers through a connection they had from Twitter. His teacher was studying the US Mexico War and he helped to coordinate the streaming of a classroom in Mexico with his teacher’s classroom here in Missouri. Students were able to see the different perspectives from opposite sides of history. Craig is heavily involved in the Latinx Education Collaborative and gave credit to social media for getting out

messages and connecting individuals, noting that “with it [social media] I don’t know if they would have ever heard about our collaborative here in the city... we connected with folks all over the country.”

For the rural educational leaders and the leader in a private school, there was a strong view that the utilization of social media enhanced their professional networking by introducing them to similar leaders across the United States and the globe. The sentiment of working in a vacuum or silo was echoed in several of the rural educators’ interviews. Emmanuel recalled a time where he was looking for help with their school’s Advisory class. “I live in a rural area, but with Twitter I have the possibility of getting a response from a suburban or urban school, even a more rural school like I am. It gives you opportunities for multiple connections.”

Nearly all participants from all regions and school district classifications mentioned in some fashion the ability that education has to make you feel isolated as a leader. Emmanuel from a rural district expressed his experience with social media as,

The ability to connect with educators almost globally...literally there are some [educators] from other countries and across the United States that have similar positions to me or what I aspire to be. I can get that. Whereas even if I went to a regional or state conference or even national I may not have the opportunity to connect with those people in person. I’ve been to the National Principals Conference, but you don’t sit around with a lot of people. Honestly, you go to sessions and you might have breakouts, but on Twitter, you can have a conversation with individuals from all across the United States at any time.

Patrick noted that being a leader in a private school left him with the feeling of being alone. He felt there was always an assumption that educational leaders all came from public schools.

When they took part in chats on Twitter, “in those chats public educators think everyone is from public schools... they realize that private and public schools have experiences in common and can be experiencing the same thing.”

For participants, the last enhancement they noted was the unintentional benefit they saw to their school communities. Leaders found that viewing ideas and successes highlighted by their connections on these platforms led them to try similar actions in their own school communities. Nina was looking for ideas on peer observations, as she recalled,

I was looking for ideas on how other schools were doing peer observations. I hopped on Twitter and came across an article for how one school put out symbols on their doors. If a teacher had the symbol on their door that day, they were inviting their colleagues to come in and observe. It took the stress away from teachers having to ask and set up schedules for their peer observations. We actually tweeted back to the person we originally saw put it up on Twitter and now we share ideas back and forth all the time!

They reported finding success with the transference of ideas from social platforms to their own schools. “You can take these ideas from real, collaborative and collegial conversations [on Twitter]”, Robert described, “and take these ideas from others and mold them into what your own circumstance and needs.

Twelve of the fifteen educational leaders who used social media for professional purposes also found ideas from their platforms that they were able to replicate to fit their own school communities. George recalled a time when his staff was really struggling with morale. His school community had just suffered a loss and he were looking for ways to boost morale and bring people together. He had gone onto Twitter and had seen a video that another

administrator they followed had posted about staff morale. He adapted the activity for his staff, and it was a great success.

Interviewee Areas of Concern

Missing the Personal Touch

Participants found that while social media allowed for a broader reach and ability to make more connections, there was mention of the loss of intimacy and potential of the audience not having regional knowledge when they are utilizing online interactions. Jose spoke of the drawback regarding audience, “the audience may be bigger than you really want it to be... not everybody’s experience is the experience that you’re looking for.”

All participants but one used social media for professional reasons. Chantel did not use social media at all to connect with other professionals. She stated that, “education is a series of human interactions. Using a social media platform to connect with others cheapens the human element that I feel is so vital to education.”

Surface Level Interactions

About half of the participants surmised that the interactions they did have with other professionals felt very surface level. Many of the exchanges between leaders on social platforms were asynchronous, which left some with no direction as they did not get an answer to questions they posed or had to wait long intervals before they had someone respond. Jana described her experiences on Twitter, “as a snapshot. You don’t have the depth or the degree of the conversation that you otherwise would have had in person. You don’t get tone or facial gestures, you can miss too many parts to the overall picture.”

Chance of Misrepresentation

One of the most common disadvantages of using social media participants expressed concern with was the chance of something they had put out on social media being misconstrued. Craig warned, “I would just say be mindful of what you put out there, because some people didn’t and they learned the hard way.” They were worried about an answer to a question being taken out of context or an old comment to be misrepresented. Some were hesitant to post their success stories for fear of being seen as showing off. Jesse conveyed her hesitancy, “You are not sure what administrators or district leaders are also out there. Also, if someone is going to judge you based on a question or answer you posed without the full context of the situation.”

Implications for Practice

For middle school educators the implications of this study highlight the benefits of understanding educational leader’s needs (Kauffeld, Kortsch, & Richter, 2021). The ability to have a variety of professional networking opportunities through different platforms diversifies leader learning. In education the evidence of learner choice to support curriculum and enhance student learning is supported by district academic implementations. This is found to be no different for adult learners (Davis, 2015). The importance of allowing educators to develop their networks enhances their learning and development as a leader (Goldie, 2016). In a time where educators are feeling isolated and burning out at an all-time high, giving them an opportunity to feel connected to other leaders going through similar situations and/or giving them the ability to discover experts that may assist them in their own school communities.

Conclusion

This study helped to highlight how middle school leaders in Missouri are using social media to connect with other educators and how it has enhanced their professional learning networks. The data collected by the researcher allowed for coding to develop themes that aided

in answering the research questions. The research in this study offers an opportunity for leaders and districts to explore varying options in how they develop their leaders and their professional learning networks.

The recommendations from this study would look at having districts offer their leaders time to work on developing their professional learning networks. When there are difficult or unique situations districts look to their leaders for ideas and solutions. Offering them the opportunity, time and space via open platforms [social media] they are investing in their leader's ability to solve and connect, ultimately making them stronger school community leaders.

While disadvantages were found within the study for leaders, the benefits to not only education leaders but their school communities were considerable. Education is consistently progressing, how educators connect with one another is also an evolving process. This study provides an opportunity to demonstrate how a variety of leaders use social platforms to make connections and interact with other educational leaders.

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SECTION SIX:
SCHOLARLY REFLECTION

Scholarly Practitioner Reflection

From the beginning of the decision to take part in this doctoral program to the culminating dissertation study, the journey itself has been filled with encounters that have pulled, stretched, and pushed the boundaries of who I am as a leader, practitioner, colleague, and scholar. Each of the experiences within the program added to the growth and discovery I found in myself. Classes, late night group conference, Zoom call, research methods discussion, and the amazing people created the experiences in this program that made this journey one of such growth and change.

Change as an Educational Leader

As educational leaders, we are asked to help guide those around us, helping them grow as educators and supporting them in being the best version of themselves and having the most impact on students. The dissertation process has influenced my practices as an educational leader and the direction that I see myself heading in the future. The research topic led me back to engaging and researching areas of growth and connections that we need to be better practitioners.

At a time when the moving parts of education are being looked at piece by piece, from curriculum to technology platforms, I welcomed the challenge to “dig in.” The dissertation process taught me how to be thoughtful in my research, keep a discerning eye on credibility, and look at the applicability of the information on addressing specific areas in my school community. The influence the program had on me helped me to look at resources in a more thoughtful manner and taught me to not take initial information at a superficial level and then apply it broadly.

This knowledge helped me with the most recent research my school district has done for supporting our school community. We were granted ESSR funding, part of the Education Stabilization Federal Funding Grants, which required us to research and pitch ideas to our district to create programming for our students to address learning gaps. From the dissertation process and the research skills I was honing during the doctoral coursework, I was able to move confidently into examining platforms with a critical eye, making recommendations for our school community with confidence.

Wading through the initial sea of information to find the right pieces that would fit our teachers and students best was daunting. One of the biggest transformations I had as an educational leader in the interview process with other educational leaders was learning to listen. There are many things I feel secure in when I think of myself as a leader, but listening to the end is one thing I need to work on. This process has enhanced my ability to understand the importance of listening to the needs of my teachers and students. During the interviews, I often found myself forming solutions to problems or thinking about the next topic before a conversation was even completed. This process has made me aware of the need to wait until the speaker has finished. During my interviews, some of the best data was given towards the end of the sessions. These ending poignant messages may have been overlooked if the characteristics of quality research had not been stressed throughout the program.

The impact the coursework had on me has carried over into the work that I do for my school community. Researching for specific connections and theories has led, in part, to the success of the programming we have put together for our struggling students. Listening to what our teachers were saying, along with their feedback, shaped the platforms we used. The formal education I received in this program carried over into my everyday life as a leader. That

education allowed me to improve the opportunities for my school community as well as improve in my ability to be an educational leader.

Change as a Scholar

As a scholar, I saw a tremendous influence that the dissertation process had on my ability to write in a scholarly fashion. Presenting and talking to groups about research or professional development was never an issue. My writing for academic purposes has always been much harder than the conversational tones of most of my previous work. This dissertation process taught me the structure for the presentation of materials and findings so that it does not get lost in colloquial wording.

In conjunction with the enhancement of my academic writing is the connection this process has brought to my ability to analyze material and apply it in a more thoughtful manner. In academic writing, linking materials, theories, concepts, etc. must be clear to avoid losing the reader. In the midst of large quantities of research, I had to sharpen my ability to sift through and not only find pertinent information but to then adequately analyze its influence on my study. This was particularly helpful during the coding portion of my dissertation, which is what allowed me to lift emerging themes from interviews and connect them with the comments of other interviewees.

The enhancement of my academic writing ability has increased through this entire doctoral process, which led to an opportunity for me to represent my middle school administration team on our district Trauma Informed Team. We were tasked with creating materials to push out to our district administration team and teachers on Trauma Informed Care. The skills that were bolstered by my dissertation process led me to be confident in the research that we conducted, which we used to connect to outside support systems and create professional

development units for our colleagues. As a scholar, it is important to create meaningful professional development that colleagues see as impactful and academic.

As a result of this dissertation process, I now have an enhanced belief in myself and the certainty that I will continue to grow, even after this part of my journey is complete. As an educator, I will continue to stretch my limits and continue my work with colleagues to enhance my school community. I have developed as a leader and a scholar, and what I have learned through the dissertation process and the doctoral program will have a ripple effect as I continue my educational journey.

APPENDIX A

Informed Consent

1. Letter of Informed Consent - Educator Participant

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Project Title: *Assessing the Use of Social Media by Missouri Middle School Education Leaders to Develop Their Professional Learning Network*

Principal Investigator/Researcher: *Melanie Hutchinson*

IRB Reference Number: 2062824MU

You are being invited to take part in a research project. You must be 18 years of age or older. Your participation is voluntary, and you may stop being in this study at any time. The purpose of this research project is to *assess the use of social media by Missouri middle school education leaders to develop their professional learning network*. You are being asked to be part of a one-one interview via Google Meets to discuss your experiences with the subject matter of the project. Your participation should last up to one hour. The information you provide will be kept confidential and only the research team will have access to the interview material.

If you have questions about this study, you can contact the University of Missouri

researcher at 816-308-3650 by phone or by email at: mrg689@mail.missouri.edu

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the University of Missouri Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 573-882-3181 or muresearchirb@missouri.edu. The IRB is a group of people who review research studies to make sure the rights and welfare of participants are protected. If you want to talk privately about any concerns or issues related to your participation, you may contact the Research Participant Advocacy at 888-280-5002 (a free call) or email muresearchrpa@missouri.edu.

You can ask the researcher to provide you with a copy of this consent for your records, or you can save a copy of this consent if it has already been provided to you. We appreciate your consideration to participate in this study.

I have read the material above, and any questions that I have posed have been answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Title/Position: _____

Present School District _____

Contact Information:

Phone _____ (circle one) WORK HOME CELL

Best time for contact: _____

E-mail: _____

APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol: Middle School Educational Leader

Interview Protocol: Administrator
Date:

Name of participant:
Start Time:

Introduction: Good morning. Thank you for taking the time to answer my questions focusing on your experiences with social media as an educational leader. The purpose of today's discussion is to get information from you about how as a middle school educational leader you use Social Media to impact your professional learning network. My name is Melanie Hutchinson, and I will be conducting the interview. In order to ensure accuracy, I will be recording our interview session using Google Meets.

Remember, there are no right or wrong answers. If you want to follow-up on a question or give an example, feel free to do so. I want this to be more of a conversation between professionals.

Our session will last about one hour if at any time you wish to take a break, please let me know. Let's begin by finding out more about each other.

Questions	Information
<p>Introduction.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Please tell me your name, current position and district. ● How long have you worked in education? (number of years in the classroom and number as an administrator) ● How long have you worked in your current position? ● What grades does your building serve? ● How many students does your building have? 	Participant Information
<p>1.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Please describe how you began to use social media to develop your Professional Learning Network. 	Transition Question
<p>2.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Was there someone who influenced you to use social media to connect with other educational leaders, how did they get you interested? 	Q1
<p>3.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What were your top one or two goals/purpose of joining social media to grow your professional network? ● Do you feel that those goals were met? Why or why not? 	Q1
<p>4.</p>	Q1

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Is there a social media network that you feel best fits what you need in order to grow your PLN? ● What attracted you to that platform? ○ If no, what were you looking for that you did not find. 	
<p>5. What time of day (or specific day) do you usually take part in social media for professional reasons? Does your district have restrictions on leaders using social media during the school day?</p>	Q1, Q2
<p>6. Does your district allow you to earn professional learning credits from interacting via social media with your PLN?</p>	Q1, Q2
<p>7.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Give an example of a time when an educational leader (someone) shared an idea on social media that enhanced your professional practice. How did you use that idea in your own educational community? 	Q1, Q2
<p>8.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What do you feel you gain as a contributor to these social media networks? 	Q2
<p>9.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do you feel that other educational leaders benefit from your connections in these social media platforms? Why or why not? 	Q2
<p>10.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What do you feel are the advantages of using social media to grow your PLN instead of face-to-face? 	Q1, Q2

<p>11.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you feel are the disadvantages of using social media for professional networking and learning as opposed to face-to-face interactions? 	Q2
<p>12.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does using social media for professional learning differ from networking in person? 	Q1, Q2
<p>Conclusion.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What would you like to add to the discussion that you feel is important, I did not ask? 	

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VITA

Melanie Hutchinson started her academic education in the Public Relations field working for an online publication in Brisbane, Australia. She returned to the United States to pursue Master's work in Mass Communication and to teach Public Speaking at the collegiate level. She moved to work at the post-secondary level to work with adult learners and pursue an additional Master's in Curriculum and Instruction. Upon completion of her coursework, she moved into public education as a middle school science and reading teacher. She was a teacher for six years, then worked as an Instructional Technology Coach for the next three years. She has served the last seven years as an Assistant Principal in the suburbs of Kansas City, Missouri. Her experiences in adult education and the possibilities that technology hold for connecting individuals have driven her work in education.