Conceptualising professional communities among teachers

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to suggest a conceptual framework for understanding professional communities of teachers, specifically those communities that extend beyond workplace, and in some cases national, boundaries. The nature of the paper is a theory-building paper informed by a review of literature in this field. The literature that informed this paper is of two types: firstly, case study reports written by practitioners engaged in professional communities; secondly, academic papers that explore the nature of such communities. The use of the first of these genres means that the framework presented emerges from the experiences of teachers and other practitioners, rather than being imposed upon them. This article presents a conceptualisation of five aspects of professional communities. These are as follows: the ways in which teachers' self-efficacy may be shaped by their perceptions of membership of a professional community; the boundaries of such communities; the challenges posed by recognising community membership, and also by individuality; and in the final section, the potential for knowledge-sharing within such communities. Its contribution to the wider academic debate is its potential to inform empirical research on communities that is currently taking place, by means of a wide range of projects, in universities across Europe and beyond.

KEYWORDS:
professional communities, teachers, knowledge sharing within communities, teachers' professional identity.

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Introduction

Research into professional communities of teachers has grown tremendously over the past two decades. Results of literature reviews and meta-analysis in this field indicate that these studies have focused on a wide variety of constructs, definitions and dimensions of professional communities (Stoll et al., 2006; Vangrieken et al., 2017). Although researchers have attempted to provide theoretically interesting ideas for investigated areas, these attempts have mostly been focused on specific aspects or types of professional communities. Therefore, there is a need to develop broader and more coherent theoretical and conceptual frameworks (Sleegers et. al., 2013; Vangrieken et al., 2017) that can be generally understood or applied to the range of empirical research on communities that is currently taking place in universities across Europe and beyond. This article presents a starting point for addressing this call by proposing a conceptual framework for the evaluation and understanding of professional communities of teachers. This is specifically with reference to those communities that extend beyond workplace, and in some cases, national boundaries.

There are a range of over-lapping definitions of what a professional community is that inform the development of the framework that is presented in this paper. Wenger's theoretical model of 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015) is discussed several times in this article, with regard to whether it is a meaningful and appropriate model with which to understand the communities that teachers specifically belong to. This is because this communities of practice model, which encompasses professional communities as well as other forms of community, has significantly influenced almost all subsequent model building in this area since 1998 (Heng, 2015).

At the heart of the communities of practice model lie several important conceptual themes. These include the following: the importance of sharing practice in order to enable recognition of community membership; the process of moving via legitimate peripheral participation to a central role through the affirmation of others, and the possibility that professional communities are not primarily defined by workplace boundaries (Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Traynor & Wenger-Traynor, 2015). However, although these are significant concepts referred to later in this article, the conceptual boundaries of this article were not drawn around the specific model of communities of practice alone. Instead, this was used in conjunction with other perspectives to inform the development of a broader framework.

This paper is a part of broader collaborative research effort into teachers engaging in international initiatives and the building of knowledge and identity. This initiative has been developed by researchers from the University of Northampton and the University of Bialystok. The aim of this initiative is twofold. Firstly, to analyse and synthesise literature

on the nature of professional communities of teachers and case study reports written by practitioners engaged in such communities, and from this, to develop a suggested conceptual framework for the evaluation and understanding of professional communities of teachers. Secondly, to use this conceptual framework to explore how teachers from different countries who have engaged in various international initiatives construct knowledge and shape their identities within such communities. This paper refers to the first aim of this project by proposing an initial conceptual framework that may be helpful when analysing, interpreting and understanding professional communities of teachers.

This article is based on a structured and extensive review of literature. This included exploring writing within the following two genres related to professional communities: reports that emerged from projects which have attempted to facilitate community building among teachers from different countries, and formally published academic research in the area of professional communities. The literature that informs this article was selected using the following approach: the first type of literature that was read was case study reports written within the last 5 years within the context of 'the International Teacher Leadership Initiative'. This initial starting point was chosen for three reasons that can be paraphrased as follows: longevity, credibility and accessibility (Frost, 2015). The International Teacher Leadership initiative is a long-standing initiative, which connects teachers from England and other countries in international communities. It was founded in 2011 by academics at the University of Cambridge and teachers. It now functions as an entirely independent entity. Its reports and related publications are largely open-access.

From this initial reading, references were trailed back to create a large interlinked body of literature that was reviewed. This process involved finding further writing, written by authors involved in the International Teacher Leadership initiative; reading other authors that they referenced and following key terms such as: non-positional leadership, communities of practice, and professional learning communities, in order to identify writers who chose to define their research and theory-building with this common language.

The conceptualisation presented here is innovative and comes from a progressive analysis of the literature, as mentioned earlier. However, it emerged at an early stage of the process and from the reading of case study reports written by practitioners, who were involved in creating communities of teachers. This is because these were the first writings that were read in preparing this article. One strength of this conceptualisation is that it involves building a framework based on the writings of practitioners rather than imposing one upon them. Academic literature in this field was then used to develop and refine this framework further, without altering its overall shape.

In the following sections, a conceptualisation of five aspects of professional communities is presented. These are as follows: the ways in which teachers' self-efficacy

may be shaped by the perception of membership of a professional community; the boundaries of such communities; the challenges posed by recognising community membership, and also by individuality; and in the final section, the potential for knowledge-sharing within such communities. The article ends by concluding regarding the potentials and limitations of the suggested framework and by suggesting directions for further work on its development. This article therefore is divided into five sections. This division provides the outline for a framework that could potentially be used as an analytical tool for the evaluation and understanding of professional communities. In sections one, three and five, a typology is presented. The five sections are as follows:

- self-efficacy within a professional community
- conceptualising community boundaries
- conceptualising community membership
- conceptualising individuality
- knowledge sharing within communities.

Self-efficacy within a professional community

Self-efficacy within a professional context can be defined as positive self-perception as built under the influence of the specific environment that we work within (Veelen et al., 2017). According to this definition, professional identity is socially constructed and must exist within a social context, usually a workplace (Pillen et al., 2013). All the writing referred to in the preparation of this article positioned professional self-efficacy in this way, without contesting this. This makes it distinct from self-efficacy as it is built in other contexts, as in these contexts it can potentially be self-constructed in isolation (Chalari, 2017). This aspect of our professional identity is also built progressively over time (Wenger, 1998; Teleshaliyev, 2014). We define ourselves as skilled professionals both in terms of a socially created identity within the present moment in time, and also in terms of a socially built identity, the narrative of which interacts with others in demonstrable and tangible ways over a period of time (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). These are specifically the length of our professional career as a whole and the time we have been in a single workplace, but may include a longer timespan than this.

The significance of both social interaction and personal history in building self-efficacy in a professional context are present in the 'communities of practice' model. However, they did not originate with this model; indeed, Wenger himself has explicitly described how other theoretical and practice-based approaches influenced him in this regard (Eckert & Wenger, 2005), illustrating how different models of professional communities are simultaneously contested and over-lapping. If the social and personal-historical nature of this aspect of professional identity is accepted and, as discussed

earlier, in a professional context at least it broadly is, by a wide range of writers, then a corollary of this is that the behaviour of others within a social context can challenge or strengthen our identity and our self-efficacy (Reicher, 2004; Chalari, 2017). A negative response could be that teachers may retreat into rejection of the community that they are working within if it does not affirm them (Leeferink et al., 2015), whilst an alternative positive response could be to find this community to be affirming and to find that membership of this community enables them to assert and define themselves in positive ways (Stanley, 2012).

Self-efficacy, as defined earlier as a positive self-perception built within a specific environment, also changes over time, and is in a constant process of restructuring (Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013). It is heavily dependent on the nature of the social interactions which take place within the context of the professional community that one is working within (Rots et al., 2012). If this context changes, then the level of self-efficacy we feel, and therefore our professional identity, can change too (Slay & Smith, 2011). In relation to this, whether a teacher's professional values and beliefs are compatible with the community that they are functioning within also plays a key role in the formation of self-efficacy (Tseng & Kuo, 2014).

Within the widely used community of practice model, the newer members move via legitimate peripheral participation (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015) towards a more central role. This is achieved through an accumulation of affirming social interactions that combine to provide them with externally recognised authority and self-efficacy (Frost, 2014). Once, within this more central role, they find themselves in a position of comfort, status and confidence (Kubiak et al., 2015). They reach a steady state, where their primary role is in defining knowledge within that community and in developing others (Hart et al., 2013).

There is an assumption in some research, that teachers simply find themselves working within a less conducive or more conducive community (Fullan, 2016). This is based on the nature of the community that exists within their workplace. We use the phrase 'find themselves within' since although teachers do exercise a degree of agency and choice when finding work, for pragmatic reasons, the exact school that a teacher is working in is usually to a large extent also decided by a range of factors other than a prior perception of the nature of this community (Findlay, 2006). Thereby, to follow this through, whether a teacher is working in a more or less conducive community which builds their self-efficacy would be partly or largely a matter of chance. However, this seems to be an incomplete model for describing the professional journey of teachers.

It is also possible that from a position of integration within the heart of a localised community, teachers then seek further challenges and begin to participate in related but alternative communities which they identify with in more exploratory ways

(Chririac et al., 2014; Underwood, 2016). These include ways that may present more potential risks. However, if they already belong to a supportive community, these risks could perhaps be less problematic than someone moving into an initial community from a position of being a peripheral participant; this is because they have the security of belonging to this initial community.

Conversely, if their main workplace community is less conducive and does not affirm them, then alternative communities outside the workplace may provide this affirmation that they otherwise lack (Joshevska, 2016). One final aspect of this framework of influences upon self-efficacy is the continuing and parallel significance of past communities (Underwood, 2017). These are communities that people were active in and which held particular significance at some point in the past and which, although the individual no longer places in a position of current significance, still helps them to build resilience and retain self-efficacy.

Four concepts that may therefore present one aspect of a useful framework for understanding professional communities are as follows: (1) the presence or otherwise of affirming professional conversations and interactions within a community; (2) the role of accumulated affirmation over time and the impact of this on moving from 'legitimate peripheral participation' towards a more central position; (3) the possibility that teachers join and create communities in exploratory and proactive ways whereby they deliberately seek and create conducive communities outside the workplace. This may be either in rejection of a workplace that does not affirm them or as an extension of a workplace where they have achieved a central position; (4) the possible continuing relevance of communities from the teachers' professional past.

Conceptualising community boundaries

Engagement with communities that extend beyond the workplace may possibly be a way that teachers find to square the circle of building a professional community when they may usually work within structures that can promote isolation and competition (Schlichte et al., 2005). The fact that such relationships are built away and aside from the conventional structure of the institutions teachers work in may be the strength of such communities. Therefore, in this section, we discuss whether professional communities may be defined by boundaries other than the immediate workplace and also the challenges that may be posed when defining the boundaries of a community in alternative ways.

Boundary creation is vital if a professional community is to be perceived at all (Hart et al., 2013). Without the identification of boundaries that define membership, a community cannot exist, since for there to be a community there must by definition

also be those who sit outside it (Stoll & Louis, 2007). However, whilst this statement is widely agreed upon, there are large areas of contestation within literature which explores community boundaries. In the community of practice model, the importance of flexibility and permeability is stressed (Wenger-Traynor & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Teacher leadership models, on the other hand, often stress the importance of allowing space in which concepts of membership and therefore of boundaries can emerge from the ground up (Frost, 2014; Hill, 2014). Both these theoretical models present a significant challenge to people and organisations who desire, for entirely valid reasons, to create and manage professional communities among teachers. According to these non-positional models, a formally created and titled 'community of practice' or 'professional learning community' could potentially sit irrelevantly outside the workings of the actual community that emerges.

It has been suggested by a range of writers that this problem of contrived collegiality could potentially be addressed by developing approaches that involve positional leaders creating space in which valued communities can emerge and non-positional leadership can be facilitated (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015; Avidov-Unger, 2016). However, this could still be challenging if the communities that emerge sit within an already tightly and formally structured entity, such as a workplace (Hoyle & Wallace, 2009). This insight into the nature of professional communities is not unique to the communities of practice model. It is also present within explorations into the risks of contrived collegiality (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009) and within the significance of non-positionality in Frost's (2015) definition of teacher leadership. Both these critiques see enforced collegiality as potentially increasing stress and negatively impacting on teachers' self-efficacy.

One significant aspect of communities of practice models is that they suggest that the boundaries of a community may be broader than those of a formally created community such as a single employer (Chigona, 2013). A community of practice is often instead portrayed as consisting of a community of people that share practice and mutual recognition of each other as members (Cashman et al., 2015), whilst practice in this context consists of a repertoire of knowledge, skills and meanings that are both personally owned and co-created (Hart et al., 2013). Thus, in the creation of practice, a community is built and community and practice are also continually re-enforced. This thereby creates an ongoing relationship between practice, community and identity (Harden & Loving, 2015). The boundaries of a community of practice therefore may be defined by shared knowledge of practice and recognition of such, rather than by proximity within a workplace, although the process of recognition still involves interaction of some kind (Joshevska & Kirandziska, 2017).

A further contested area that relates to the discussion earlier is the degree of self-efficacy that membership of a professional community may potentially help confer

(Gleeson & Tait, 2012). This has been discussed earlier in terms of building self-efficacy. However, it is also relevant to boundary creation as the value that different communities are perceived to have can change how people choose to shape their role in them (Dogan et al., 2016). It is often assumed that perceived membership of a professional community would be a positive experience for community members, and that working in isolation does not provide the audience of peers that is needed to affirm oneself as having professional knowledge (Stoll & Louis, 2007).

This would fit with definitions of a community of practice that see the opportunity to engage in performance of one's professional skills before knowledgeable peers as vital in terms of acquiring an identity as a member of a professional community (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). However, it may also be that enforced collegiality could potentially damage an individual's self-efficacy, if that person has difficulty engaging with the values of that group or does not feel that their knowledge and expertise as a professional are being recognised (Orr, 2012).

If both the statements in the paragraphs above are true, that community membership can increase teachers' self-efficacy but that some workplace communities are far from conducive environments for this to happen, it may be that working together collegially within a loose structure, away from the normal structures of a school, may enhance teachers' collective efficacy without containing the same potential threats to teachers' individual self-efficacy (Skaalvik, & Skaalvik, 2007). It may also be that the element of choice and control regarding the depth of commitment to a more broadly defined community, such as a perceived international community of teachers, is a positive element in comparison to a workplace community, which by necessity one has to visit every day (Chigona, 2013).

Such relationships may enable the teacher who has chosen for valid ethical and professional reasons to tread a more individualistic path within an institution to build collegiality within another aspect of their professional life. It may equally enable those teachers who do not define themselves in individualistic ways, but for whom the structures they work within promote isolation, to perceive themselves as part of a community that they value and that they perceive to value them (Wallace & Hoyle, 2012).

If any professional community is to be understood, then the nature of the boundaries drawn by community members need to be understood too. Some boundaries may be universally acknowledged by those on both sides of the boundary, such as membership or non-membership of a workplace. However, others may be based on approaches to practice, perceptions of good teaching, or pedagogical values (Ramahi, 2015). These three possibilities: proximity, values and practices; may provide an initial deductive framework with which to understand a professional community. Further to this, in order to understand a community, it may also be worth exploring, in terms of

any individual networking project, who is creating these boundaries and whether they are emerging as the community develops, or have been designed into the structure of the community. This could also include the potential that both are the case and that this is harmonious or that there is tension between these differing boundary definitions.

Conceptualising community membership

One important aspect to understand when exploring the nature of any professional community is the significance, if any, that is placed upon membership of this community and the different ways in which this significance is defined. It may be the case that communities that are not bounded by the workplace are ones that teachers value and recognise. If this is the case, it may even be that the lack of structure and proximity may be of benefit in terms of sustaining such a community. However, a community defined along such lines may also face challenges in terms of developing and sustaining its existence in the face of a widely dispersed membership.

Different types of professional community have different forms of membership, from very tightly defined groups working closely together, such as teachers developing lessons together in the Japanese system of lesson study (Saito & Atencio, 2015), to much more loosely bonded groups such as a perceived international community of teachers, perhaps linked in a given teacher's perception by a project or other extrinsic motivator (Huang, 2010). Each of these differing membership structures potentially presents different challenges in terms of recognising membership.

One issue faced by the more tightly knit form of community is that there may be tension between the building of community and the valuing of individualism (Takayama, 2010). Some good teachers define themselves in individual terms (Pedder & Opfer, 2013) and they may reject or place less significance on communities that put pressure on them to be collegial within predefined structures (Frost, 2014). On the other hand, the potential membership of an international community of teachers, linked by some large-scale projects, may be so large and amorphous that it cannot perhaps be perceived as a community at all. One challenge for any form of community building, that is beyond the workplace, therefore, lies in defining and acknowledging its role and relevance in teachers' professional lives.

Teachers are also members of some communities in a factual rather than an emotionally engaged way. These factual memberships are acknowledged by them but are not interpreted into their identity. As an analogy, research into the relevance of union membership for teachers, in several nations, where union membership is nearly universal, (Popiel, 2013) indicates that there are teachers who identify as political

activists and for whom such membership is an active form of self-identification. How-ever, there are many others for whom it can be defined as a known fact, but one that has no impact on their self-perception (Popiel, 2013).

If this were to be the case with teachers working together across national bound-aries, the nature of the problem in sustaining such a community, unlike with smaller more narrowly defined groups, would not lie in creating or managing it but rather in creating opportunities for recognising its existence and affirming its significance (Ramahi, 2015). However, it may equally be the case that only a relatively small number of teachers would wish to define themselves in this way. For others belonging to such larger, more loosely structured communities may simply have little relevance for them, if they acknowledge their membership at all (Pedder & Opfer, 2013). Therefore, an outward looking or even internationally orientated community of teachers may be self-sustaining but have difficulty growing and have little impact outside the teachers' own classrooms (Huang, 2010). However, the recognition of such membership may also be a positive moment in teachers' own personal and professional narratives.

Early seminal research into professional communities generally asserts that there are two primary forms of social links. These can be defined as 'strong ties' where infor-mation and ideas flow and circulate freely but very little that is transferred is new, and 'weak ties' where a considerable amount of information is new but it flows less freely (Granovetter, 1983). Although the nature of communities has changed radically in the last four decades because of technological changes, these basic principles are sup-ported in more recent articles, written across a period of time that reflects growth in the use of the internet (Castells, 2009; Matthews et al., 2015). However, there have also been changes to theoretical models that have accompanied the development of the internet. Older research tended to place a great deal of emphasis on exact geographi-cal distance (Homans, 1961), stressing that the geographical location of our personal ties influences the role these people have (Granovetter, 1983). Changes in technology mean that this has been increasingly challenged by several writers, who have argued that it is the perceived environment that matters most (Castells, 2009; Matthews et al., 2015).

People now seek and build relationships with those people both professionally and personally who they feel most attuned to being or working with, regardless of geographical distance (Kelly & Antonio, 2016). In the current era of internet communi-cation, finding colleagues we enjoy working with and communities we wish to identify with may often involve working beyond national boundaries (Matthews et al., 2015). Those factors that draw us towards particular individuals or communities may account for the positive motivation to seek alternative colleagues to engage with and com-munities to be part of. However, there may also be reasons why a teacher is not feel-ing affirmed within their own workplace community, which then leads them to seek

alternative affirming communities. This is potentially distinct from identifying oneself as a member of a professional community. It may be that rather than perceiving themselves as part of a professional community that some teachers simply find individual colleagues, across the world, who they particularly enjoy working with.

A possible typology of community membership that could be used to understand differing professional communities could be: (1) factually acknowledged but professionally insignificant communities; (2) communities of which membership provides affirmation; (3) communities the membership of which enables the development of practice; (4) tightly bounded and pre-structured communities, membership of which is not optional but dependent on other factors, such as a workplace; (5) more loosely bounded communities that exist outside the workplace, membership of which may create space for flexibility and creativity. These may of course overlap and interact. However, this may be a useful typology with which to understand the way teachers perceive any given professional community.

Conceptualising individuality

For a prolonged period spanning more than two decades, in England, emphasis has been placed upon teachers to work collegially and to build professional communities (Hargreaves, 1991; Hargreaves et al., 2014). This has been linked directly to enabling school improvement. It has come from a wide range of sources including in England the highly influential National College for Teaching and Leadership (Glatter, 2014) and it has been reflected in model building that emphasises that professional communities, should ideally be professional learning communities (Harris & Muijs, 2005; Hord & Sommers, 2008). Positives commonly associated with learning collegially include that it has the potential to take teaching beyond the need for dependence on outside experts, whilst ensuring that it becomes more than a personal and idiosyncratic process (Datnow, 2011; Hill, 2014).

Many educational cultures in other countries also emphasise the positive aspects of processes that break down teacher isolation. This has often been over an even longer time span (Winch et al., 2015). One clear example from outside England is the process of lesson study in Japan, whereby teachers observe the same lesson repeatedly as taught by each other, continually honing and refining it. However, there is evidence that when this has been enforced as a practice it can on occasion be unpopular and even create stress (Yorimitsu et al., 2014).

Even if perceived as a positive, this idealisation of collegial working described earlier is not consistently enabled by the reality of teachers' working lives. In terms of sharing knowledge by observing, this is for most teachers a relatively rare experience.

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

There is considerable evidence to suggest that those teachers who embrace collegiality most strongly are often most resilient (Baker-Doyle, 2012). However, the limits placed upon membership and engagement with a professional community need to be understood in a nuanced way. It may be that community membership is rejected and an isolated approach is taken if a community does not affirm or does not conform to a teacher's values or practices. It may also be that teachers find and protect space within which to express individuality.

Teachers, for example, may find it helpful to share stories about the process of teaching but then wish to further develop this practice in isolation, which then might move a collective experience into an individual one (Lingard, 2009; Biesta, 2012). It may well be the case that teachers want to establish themselves as individuals within their own space of the classroom, to have a self-perception of efficacy and also want to build positive collegial relationships. Rather than rejecting members who exercise distance from a community at any given moment, as negative individuals, it is important to understand their reasons for this and where they position themselves in terms of finding a balance between community membership and individualism.

Knowledge sharing within communities

As has been discussed in the previous sections: although it is possible that a degree of fluidity and a lack of proximity may enable the effective development of a certain type of professional community, developing and sustaining professional communities over distance presents other specific challenges. One key aspect of the community of practice model is that of shared engagement in common tasks through which meaning is built and defined and the community itself is created. Practice in this sense is not an abstract concept but refers to concrete ways of doing things that are created and negotiated by the members of the community in relationship with each other over

a long period of time (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Hargreaves developed very similar ideas, although using different language, in his seminal article on a 'knowledge creating school' (1999).

In terms of the existence of any community of teachers that exists beyond the workplace, there may be mutual engagement in practice, which would imply learning or developing teaching strategies. However, it may be that, as well as inevitably infrequent contact, this degree of commonality is not present. It may be that the wider conditions in which teaching takes place such as: the policies imposed by government, and practical issues such as class size and the layout of the school mean that there is relatively little potential for engagement in the detail of classroom strategies (Manzon, 2014). This presents a series of challenges in terms of developing or recognising a professional community, as the creation of shared meaning may not be possible. This shared meaning may best be built within a context of geographical proximity or even in a single workplace rather than across distance.

In relation to this, people usually belong to more than one professional community at any given time, including both locally based communities and more disparate ones (Nishino, 2012), not all of which have the same value or purpose in a teachers' professional life. As has been discussed in earlier sections, the local community may well be the one that teachers identify with most strongly, and the one where practice and meaning are most deeply shared (Kinman et al., 2011). However, the professional gains in terms of improvement in practice or affirmation may also be potentially limiting and narrow.

On the other hand, engagement with a more flexibly defined community may potentially break the inherent limitations of the local (Lee, 2011). Affirmation and imagination may play a greater role and it may be these, rather than practice, that can be sustained and developed in this context. Envisaging a larger community with a broader vision may potentially empower teachers to perceive themselves as part of a community that exists beyond those that they are directly involved with on a day to day basis and to place more value on themselves and their professional roles (Joshevska, 2016).

If, for example, an international community of teachers is perceived as a community of empowerment or affirmation rather than of practice, then the relatively infrequent contact or, the often commented on failure to directly transfer practice, become less significant issues. To this extent, it is also possible that exactly who we build a relationship with also becomes less important. The particular teachers from other countries may be more significant as representatives of a broader community, enabling teachers to envision their own place and value, rather than as specific individuals with specific practice to share or meanings to co-create (Paik et al., 2015). These 'boundary encounters' (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015) between those

distinct enough in their professional context to challenge our personal meanings but related enough in their professional role to make this challenge comprehensible can perhaps have an impact on defining our own professional identities. However, this may not necessarily lead to the building of a community of practice (Paik et al., 2015).

An exploration into one extended community of teachers that crossed national boundaries, conducted between 2010 and 2017, built a typology of four types of knowledge that may be shared within a professional community (Underwood, 2017). These were as follows: (1) knowledge of strategies, which refers to sharing specific and concrete classroom actions such as lesson plans or activities; (2) knowledge of practice, which refers to approaches to planning and designing lessons rather than specific classroom activities; (3) knowledge of purpose, which refers to pedagogical, ethical or cultural values that underpin the process of lesson design; (4) knowledge that affirms, which is knowing that one is a skilled professional, a type of knowledge that is gained from interaction with an audience of fellow professionals. This typology could enable an understanding of the types of knowledge shared by professional communities of teachers and the value that teachers place on these.

Conclusion

It seems that the importance of building one's professional identity through social interaction with peers engaged in the same profession is present across a range of research into the nature of the professional communities that teachers and other professionals build, and it is a particularly strong theme in models of communities of practice. However, the nature of teaching as a profession problematises this. The structure of schools promotes isolation, whilst teaching knowledge is often personal and idiographic (Michalak, 2007). The risks of contrived collegiality and the importance of enabling teachers to have agency in the formation of communities, in order to counteract this, has been identified in research over a 25 year period (Hargreaves, 1991; Frost, 2015). It therefore may be that the school as a workplace is not one that can be expected to necessarily have a particular primacy for teachers.

It may instead be the case that teachers seek out communities that empower them and which build their self-efficacy. The boundaries that may be built in order to define such communities of teachers may be distinct from the tangible barriers of the workplace community, as might the definitions of membership. It is also possible that these communities may primarily be communities of affirmation rather than of practice, or if they are communities of practice, that the knowledge shared may not be mechanistic and may be present in ways that enable teachers to interpret and utilise it more fluidly.

The framework presented here is based on a synthesis of existing literature in this field and case studies written by practitioners involved in professional communities. Using this approach, alternative models could potentially have been created. However, the five themes that this article presents could provide a useful framework for the design of research questions with which to explore projects that involve the creation of professional communities. The typologies presented in sections one, three and five could similarly provide an initial deductive framework. Further work could be focused on the operationalisation of this conceptual framework and its application to empirical research into professional communities of teachers. This would help to address the potential limitations of the framework.

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