

# **Exchanging knowledge and building communities via international networking**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper is linked to a doctoral study focusing on the impact of international networking and knowledge exchange on the professional identity of teachers. It explores the experience of teachers from the Balkans working with colleagues in the UK. In this paper I first outline a conceptual framework which illuminates some of the challenges and rewards of constructing a professional identity within a professional community that crosses national boundaries. The paper explores the proposition that these teachers may not primarily be interested in transferring practice but may have a broader democratic agenda reflecting a self-perception as skilled professionals and societal leaders and also that they may have valid reasons for participation in terms of their own professional growth. The data for this paper was drawn from interviews with three education professionals from the Balkan nations (specifically from Macedonia) who have been involved in working on and developing teacher leadership programmes in their own settings in connection with larger international programmes. The discussion of data includes an exploration of a series of interrelated themes derived from the concept framework. Also discussed are issues and challenges related to the exchanging of knowledge between teachers working in different cultural contexts.

*KEYWORDS: democracy, teacher, leadership, professionalism, networks*

## **Introduction**

At the ECER conference in 2014 in Porto I presented a paper titled ‘The impact on teacher identity of international connections’. In this paper I outlined a conceptual framework to aid me in my examination of how a teacher’s identity may be constructed within a professional community, especially one that crosses national boundaries. In that paper I also discussed the data from three interviews with British teachers who had worked on projects with colleagues from other nations. These colleagues were all primarily involved in international work via the International Teacher Leadership initiative (Frost, 2011) connected to the HertsCam programme in the UK.

This paper builds on the 2014 paper. In the first part of this paper I look at the potential rewards and challenges faced by teachers from differing nations when building a shared identity and recognising a common community of practice. I outline three themes that are explored later in the second part of the paper:

- a professional theme: the process of exchanging practice
- a political theme: sharing democratic values
- a personal theme: building a community with like-minded individuals

In the second part I discuss three interviews with professionals working in education in the Balkan nations, specifically Macedonia, who have all been involved in international networking with teachers from the UK.

## **A conceptual framework**

In the paper that I presented last year I concluded by stating that for teachers who seek and build professional communities that exist beyond the boundaries of their own workplace the process is a deeply rewarding experience. For these teachers the multitude of communities they belong to enabled them to build fluid professional identities and to build self-efficacy. I also concluded that among all my interviewees there was considerable interest in talking to teachers from other nations about teaching but this was expressed in a more nuanced way than having an expectation that practice could be easily transferred. However, I did also note that as this community becomes broader the way this community defines itself becomes narrower. These teachers from the UK who perceived themselves as belonging to this global community of outward looking and innovative teachers tended to define themselves as having distinct values in comparison to those that they work locally with but who do not engage with others outside their own workplace (Underwood, 2014). Below I present three further concepts that build on this conclusion and use them to develop my discussion of the interview data.

## **Sharing practice**

There is considerable debate among academic researchers over whether a search for transferable practice from the West among non-Western nations is a positive or even an achievable goal. A discourse has emerged expressed by a range of writers which questions whether Western teaching styles, which tend to emphasise critical thinking are necessarily appropriate for non-Western cultures and even whether they are part of a broader post-colonial agenda. According to this discourse Western teaching methods are often impractical and inappropriate for developing nations, where the political culture is different and where simple issues such as class size and lack of resources present specific challenges (Bajaj, 2010; Osei, 2010).

This discourse however is not entirely dominant, there is also an argument that teachers and researchers from nations outside the West tend to seek transferable practice avidly but that they also do so in sophisticated ways appropriate for their context. If this is a professional ambition of teachers and others working in education that helps in developing their own classrooms, perhaps this should be welcomed rather than criticised (Chiriac et al., 2014).

### **Democratic debate**

As discussed above, there is an established history of non-Western nations seeking to import practice from the West. There is also a long history in Western nations of the process of linking with and learning from the education systems of other nations being connected to highly idealistic goals regarding the building of a better society rather than improving classroom practice directly. Further exploration of the context, origin and nature of these idealistic rather than pragmatic goals of learning from other nations is provided by Fujikane (2003) in an historical account of changes in the language of comparative studies. He writes about how the following terms dominated discourse over successive decades within Europe, the US and the wealthier nations of the Far East: 'international understanding' in the 1950s, 'development education' with its implications of supporting poorer nations in the 1960s and 70s, and 'multi-cultural education' and 'peace education' up until today. He describes how all of these have an emphasis on societal change rather than on classroom practice alone, although changing classroom practice may be a broader goal.

In contrast to this though and to some extent in opposition to these highly idealistic goals, within the West there has also been a long-running concern that international exchange or comparison, whether conducted by academics or teachers, seems ungrounded in the reality of the classroom. Brickman in 1954 at the first annual conference on Comparative Education wrote about the 'widespread feeling that the comparative study of foreign systems of education is decorative...of little value to the teacher' (as cited in Brickman, 1977). These concerns have been echoed more recently by others, including Chabbott and Elliott (2003), Baker and LeTendre (2005) and Steiner-Khamsi (2011). They specifically see much government support for the process of comparison as policy makers seeking around the world for justification for solutions that they already have in mind, especially in the context of political responses to large-scale studies such as TIMSS and PISA.

## **Commonalities between teachers**

In the paragraphs above I have outlined two rival but interweaving discourses regarding the process of international networking with fellow professionals. However, there is a smaller but I think equally significant body of literature that focuses on the personal experiences of professionals and how the relationships that are built by international networking may be motivating and rewarding enough to be regarded as a valid reason for such projects, regardless of greater goals. The common discourse here suggests that teachers will often find a high degree of commonality in the practice, experience and definitions of professional identity among colleagues from other nations. According to this discourse it is possible that one reason why relatively little practice is transferred between nations is simply that the exchange between the Far East, Finland, UK, or indeed any other country, is of no more value than that between neighbouring schools in the same country or indeed between adjacent classrooms in the same school (Manzon, 2007; Mason, 2007). The writers who have contributed to this discourse also commonly stress that it is important not to assume that a school is representative of a nation or a nation representative of a region, (Bray, 2007). Instead they tend to focus on individual teachers emphasising that colleagues that one may find oneself attuned to may come from another nation or one's own locality. This could potentially become a reductionist perspective in which the lack of lessons to be learnt from national models could be taken to mean that facilitating networking between teachers is meaningless. However, in this paper I argue that it could be that any way that teachers have of exploring and expanding the community that they belong to is potentially positive in terms of building self-efficacy and as a corollary such concrete goals of achieving better teacher retention or more successful schools.

## **Themes emerging from these interviews**

In the concept framework above I identified a series of common themes that have shaped the discourse around international networking and partnership in recent decades. They are not exhaustive and my doctoral study explores further themes as well as exploring these in greater depth. However, they are sufficient for the purposes of this paper and I use them to structure the discussion below. In short the three areas of current debate presented are as follows:

- debates around sharing practice including a discourse that problematizes this and another that embraces it. Both of these can also be seen to be part of a broader neo-colonialist debate about the influence of Western ideas on other nations.
- debates around the role that international networking between teachers can play in terms of enabling democratic debate and also the potential limits of such lofty goals.
- debates around the personal rewards for teachers of engaging with professionals from other nations and also around whether such a process is of enough significance to justify networking processes in its own right.

The data that informs the discussion below was gained from three interviews with education professionals who had worked in schools in the Balkans. It should be noted that their professional experience is varied and therefore inhibits the ability to generalise. However, that is not the purpose of this paper, which has been written to generate discussion and is embedded within a larger research process, namely the writing of my doctoral thesis. A brief description of the professional role of each is as follows; names have been changed.

*Jana* is an education professional working in a senior position in an NGO, she has worked in schools and has taught at secondary level. She has also lived and studied in both the USA and the UK. She has been involved in international networking through a variety of projects including those connected to the International Teacher Leadership initiative.

*Anna* is an experienced primary teacher working in Macedonia, who has also been involved in international networking through a variety of projects including those connected to the International Teacher Leadership initiative.

*Simona* is an experienced secondary teacher who taught in Macedonia but now teaches in an English state secondary school in North London. She has been engaged in international networking primarily through the British Council rather than the International Teacher Leadership initiative.

### **Sharing practice**

As regards the challenges and benefits of attempting to share practice, the debates identified in the academic discourse and presented above were very much reflected in the responses that the interviewees gave. There is certainly a perception that there are models of excellence within the UK education system. However, this was perceived by all three interviewees in a nuanced way. The only aspect of practice in the UK that was universally seen as distinct, positive and transferable was the methodology that shapes the teacher leadership project. This was unexpectedly most clearly affirmed by the two interviewees who had been involved in this project. However, similar comments were made by Simona. In this context it is worth noting that the teacher leadership project although highly developed and with a distinct ethos, is part of a wider academic discourse that has seen practitioner and action research increasingly becoming part of the mainstream, even as regards this though it was recognised that developing such a culture in nations where it is not yet embedded takes time.

Anna spoke of her engagement with this project but very much like the English teachers interviewed for the paper that I wrote for the ECER in 2014 (Underwood, 2014) she felt that her involvement made her distinct and part of a smaller community of innovative teachers. Again therefore a similar challenge was thrown up, as by defining herself as part of a wider community of innovative teachers she simultaneously created alternative boundaries that excluded other teachers. These boundaries were defined by her perception of their approach to practice. This was a viewpoint also supported by comments made by Jana.

Regarding in particular the sharing of classroom practice there was again a nuanced response. Both Anna and Simona had considerable confidence in their abilities as teachers and therefore whilst interested in the practice of UK colleagues did not expect there to be significant changes to their practice that would be brought on by a dialogue with teachers working in English schools. This is not to say that they rejected dialogue indeed they embraced it. However, they saw it primarily as a positive reflective process. Simona's perception was that, although there was some very good practice in the school that she worked at in London, there was also some of what she perceived to be weak practice including copying and rote learning; she had also seen excellent practice in Macedonia. She also commented on her experience of the current political discourse in the UK, of embracing teaching ideas that come from China and Singapore, whilst her former colleagues informed her of a political discourse in Macedonia, whereby teachers were being directed to look for ideas from the UK. This illustrates the complex nature of the search for good practice in education in a partially globalised world, where in Macedonia Simona felt Western methods were highly idealised but, as a teacher in England, she found that Far Eastern ones were. I use the term partially as it can be argued that we idealise other systems and portray them in deeply simplistic ways partly to justify changes we already have in mind.

### **Democratic debate**

Whilst there was a large degree of commonality as regards the discussion above, in terms of this second theme differences were more wide ranging. Simona certainly saw all education exchange being about sharing in a democratic dialogue just as much as it was related to the process of teaching. Anna and Jana also saw a remit in building social cohesion but they saw this as being more closely linked to teaching with both being an aspect of a common process. In Anna's case this was seen as linked to the entire process of classroom interaction, of building respectful and discursive relationships with children together and of teaching strategies that enabled the children's voice. This may reflect the fact that Anna teaches at the primary age range, where any political debate or discussion is more likely to be expressed in terms of being kind and caring citizens within a community rather than as big 'P' political discussion. However, it could equally reflect the different organisations both had worked with and the subtly different visions that these have. The ITL approach embeds political discourse more deeply within the teaching process, as is reflected by the central concept of the teacher as leader of change.

Although Simona was enthusiastic about the link between education and civil society she was also wary of Westernisation and of what could be defined as a neo-colonialist discourse. She felt that while she had shown sensitivity when working with teachers from other nations, there was a risk that a set of supposedly 'British values' could be portrayed as a moral absolute, with the vehicle of an overly idealised education system used to promulgate this. Therefore it seems that teachers, as with policy makers, see the political process of building civil society as being intertwined with the process of teaching. However, fears of an unequal relationship

are not limited to academic discussion and this area of international teacher relationships needs to be approached with sensitivity.

### **Personal engagement**

All the interviewees viewed their experiences with international networking as positive. Simona felt that she had built life-long friendships that had helped her to build resilience and remain in the teaching profession. They had affirmed her perception of her own professional status and thereby her sense of self-efficacy as a teacher. Meanwhile, Anna had not built long-term personal relationships in the same way but had found short conferences when she had the chance to meet other teachers deeply affirming and rewarding. She used strong and extremely positive language in describing these events. This was not surprising and fits consistently with other writing in this area. Jana was someone who had taught but whose main professional role now lay in facilitation. This gave her a distinct perspective. She saw the value of international working but she also saw the value of more localised processes, reflecting ideas presented earlier that there may be as much to learn from teachers in neighbouring schools as there is by crossing national boundaries. They all acknowledged that the process of working with teachers from other nations is positive in that this other audience of people outside those from familiar professional contacts can be significant in developing self-efficacy and a perception of belonging to a larger and valued professional community.

### **Conclusions**

In the title of this paper I presented two potential goals that may be achieved by facilitating networking and dialogue between teachers from different nations, these are 'exchanging knowledge' and 'building communities'. I then presented a concept framework that linked these together under three themes of: sharing practice, democratic debate and personal engagement. In terms of the first of these 'sharing practice' it seems that via international networking, knowledge is exchanged in terms of know-how. Teachers are interested in learning from the practice of others and are open to interesting ideas for lessons. However, those teachers who take part in such programmes also tend to be a self-defining group of innovative teachers with high self-efficacy, therefore their confidence in their own practice is high and their belief in their skills as teachers and lesson designers also noticeably strong. So although they are interested in practice, for them the greater goal is a reflective goal. This then links to the second of the three themes that I have presented: democratic debate. All saw the significance of international networking, and local networking, in terms of building a perception of belonging to a global professional community from which they would take pride and which they could use to build a professional identity that they wished to adopt in defining themselves. This finally links to the third theme of the importance of the relationships that are built by such processes.

In short it seems that for teachers in dialogue with teachers from other nations, the learning of know-how is important. However, by sharing practice with others who they do not commonly work with teachers also develop know-why, this is perhaps more significant in sustaining them throughout their career.

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