THE EDGE OF CONSTRUCTING OURSELVES:

An Appreciative Investigation of the experiences of School Leaders in an Online Community of Practice.

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

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ABSTRACT

Being a leader of a school is one of the most important roles in our society because of the direct influence such people have on the lives of students. However, the nature of the role is increasingly complex and demanding.

School leaders must understand the global and local context within which they function to determine the most appropriate responses for their schools. Gamage, Adams, and McCormack (2009) note that student success relies upon leaders being able to adjust leadership practices in response to changing context. Whilst contextual understanding is essential, they must also sustain professional networks. Hargreaves and Fink remind school leaders that no one person will be able to provide the answers to the questions that challenge schools and that '…the future of leadership must be embedded in the hearts and minds of the many and not rest on the shoulders of a heroic few' (Hargreaves, 2003, p.699). We know that building capacity for continuous improvement requires collaborative activity to be sustained both within and between schools. Professionally-focused inquiry provides a powerful medium for individual and organisational learning, and capacity building amongst whole 'communities of leaders' (Barth, 1988) and across and between schools as learning communities.

The exponential growth in technology is changing the nature of socialisation, and how and when we connect, while also 'augmenting the role of non-formal learning' (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, 2010, p. 24). The US National Education Technology Plan identifies the changes and demand for online collaboration (U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Technology, 2010) stating that educators and education systems should 'leverage social networking technologies and platforms to create communities of practice that provide career-long personal learning opportunities for educators within and across schools, preservice preparation and in-service education institutions, and professional organisations' (p. xviii).

This kind of change requires whole system reform, including consideration for change management through identifying intrinsic motivation, instructional improvement, teamwork and a focus on cohesion (Fullan M. , 2013). Fullan uses the term ‘cohesion’ to describe a systemic solution focus and further suggests that capacity building, group work and deep pedagogy may be accelerated by technology.

Online communities of practice for educational leaders have the potential to provide authentic contexts to nourish professional identity and support longitudinal professional growth. However, little research has been conducted into Australian school leaders’ experiences, challenges and the conditions within which they contribute their voice and shared practice in an online community.

The objective of this investigation was to explore the positive experiences of leaders in primary Australian school settings within such an intentional online community. The research was conducted within the paradigm of qualitative analysis with intentional sampling of seven school leaders and their experiences within a profession-specific online community of practice (CoP).

A constructionist, social and situational learning position appropriate to an appreciative approach was adopted for this investigation. Narratives were collected by means of semi-structured interviews and emergent themes were identified through content analysis. The results of this investigation show promising evidence that online CoPs are a valuable source of informal professional progression, identity shaping and new leadership opportunities through personal and professional connections. These online spaces are the digital symbols of the active and legitimate peripheral engagement of the community members. School leaders who have access to situated, flexible, contextually appropriate spaces for identity and knowledge construction experience many professional and personal benefits, which both sustain and inspire their growth and professional practices.

This research will contribute to the design of professional learning spaces for school leadership and possibly address some questions raised in the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership's Australian Charter for the Professional Learning of Teachers and School Leaders (AITSL, 2012) including;

How can social media support learning?

How can professional community and collaboration enhance professional learning?

Keywords: Communities of practice, online communities of practice, school leader, professional development, social learning, innovation, school improvement, knowledge construction, constructivism.

DECLARATION

I certify that this work does not incorporate, without acknowledgement, any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it does not contain material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Mark Sparvell

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

For organisations … learning is an issue of sustaining the interconnected communities of practice through which an organisation knows what it knows and thus becomes effective and valuable as an organisation

(Lave & Wenger, 1998, p. 8)

Many school leaders benefit from professional network experiences, in which social engagement and situated professional capacity building create powerful experiences of 'being' legitimate participants within a socialised professional situation. Many of us have had opportunities within these trusting relationships to reflect upon leading and leadership, to be both a learner and, at times, a mentor or coach, and to create new understandings around shared challenges. The focus of this investigation is to explore how online professional communities of practice can help shape the professional identity and the build capacity of school leaders.

The design of professional learning for school leaders is often premised on the assumption that learning is a structured, individual and linear process that is removed from lived experiences and the context of school leadership. Lave and Wenger (Wenger E. , 1998) challenge this view:

'…what if we adopted a different perspective, one that placed learning in the context of our lived experience of participation in the world? What if we assumed that learning is as much a part of our human nature as eating or sleeping?'

In this thesis the lived experiences of practicing school leaders are explored in an online community of practice. The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the context of the investigation. This chapter begins with an examination of the background of educational leadership. Following this, the rationale

for conducting this research (Section 1.1), the purpose and aims of the investigation (Section 1.3), the significance and innovation of the study (Section1.4) and, finally, the research design are presented (Section 1.5).

Background to the investigation

This study comprises an investigation of the underexplored area of the experiences of practising school leaders within online CoPs.

Significant changes have impacted education in the past decade, including a global economic transformation, a shift of focus from industrial to knowledge-based economies, a strong focus on measuring learning outcomes, the rapid development and ubiquity of digital technologies, and the expansion of research into the nature of learning (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, 2010). These shifts have resulted in a public and political focus on quality leaders and leading. The Wallace Foundation (2009) notes that school leadership was '…hardly a hot issue ten years ago'. Yet now it is broadly recognised that school improvement cannot succeed without effective school leadership and that school leaders need support and quality professional engagement. Online platforms are already successfully levered to support professional learning communities to scale and deliver new approaches (Blitz, 2013). In such a dynamic environment, it is impossible to identify an accurate number of CoPs, but it is estimated that upwards of one million large, small, formal and informal online communities exist for teachers.

Online communities are frequently used by the latter for professional support, guidance and inspiration. These groups may be intentionally designed and formally managed or may be more ad-hoc. Groups might be organised around topic areas such as literacy instruction and offer teachers opportunities to develop both personally and professionally. Online communities have the potential to be a source and resource of continuous professional development for teachers because they can deliver authentic and personalised opportunities for learning (Duncan-Howell, 2010).

In recent years social networking spaces, including public environments such as LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter, have suggested potential benefits for school leaders. In the report School Principals and Social Networking in Education (edWeb.net, 1.1, 2010), the authors suggest that 'most school leaders believe that social networking sites have value to create professional learning communities'.

Promising research carried out into leadership building in the New Zealand early childhood education sector has also suggested that leadership development can be cultivated virtually using online reflective journals, forum discussions, chats and emails (Thornton, 2009).

The Principals Australia Institute (PAI), a non-profit organisation, which was established in 1993 by the peak school leader associations in Australia, developed a private social network (Palnet) to provide a leadership community and promote greater online engagement with school leaders through a collaborative space designed to improve and inform practice. The acronym Palnet stands for Principal and Aspiring Leader Network and was hosted at www.palnet.edu.au. The collaboration and collegiality offered by PALNET were vital components of professional growth within the context of ongoing reflective practice and collective intelligence and capacity building. (Principals Australia Institute, 2012)

I was employed by the PAI, for which I led the design, delivery, project management of the environment, working with Education Services Australia (ESA) on technical architecture, as well as the engagement with the profession and the coordination of advisory and governance. This project was a key deliverable of the leading ICT in the Learning in Technology-Enabled Schools Project funded through the Digital Education Revolution by the Australian government under the ICT Innovation Fund. Palnet was formally launched on February 14th, 2012 and was retired in January 2017.

Whilst leading this online environment as it grew, the team managing Palnet noted variances in the frequency, type and depth of participation and contributions by members. An emergence of different

kinds of leadership was evidenced and anecdotal stories surfaced about users' experiences as leaders online. Identified leaders of discussion groups recounted how personal and professional circumstances affected engagement and that the relationships between the 'community orchestrators', coordinating teams and participant positively affected the online encounters. Those and I closely engaged in the management and leadership of the Palnet Community felt we had observed moments in which the network was 'sparking' into a community of practice as individuals and groups engaged in the construction of ideas and the shaping of information into knowledge.

Wenger (1998) comment that communities of practice are such an integral part of our daily lives, so informal and pervasive that they rarely come into explicit focus. I became curious what would be discovered to take an explicit focus on this community.

Problem Statement

I was curious to explore to what degree might an intentional professional online community contribute to professional knowing, professional doing and professional being? Could both passive and active participation provide pro-social benefits and protective factors required to sustain leadership in complex contexts? These questions are of interest to me professionally as they provide insights into building and sustaining leadership capacity, they reflect a gap in existing research so could make a positive contribution and, finally, they potentially can support the innovative work of others within professional learning and identity spaces.

The self I bring to this study

I approach this study within its interdependent storylines of socialised learning, knowledge construction, professional identity and longitudinal professional growth. My own professional journey is deeply grounded in the lived experiences of educational leadership in various roles and in

a variety of contexts, from schools and districts to national and international organisations, with a constant use of digital technology to explore, extend and amplify identity, share experience and co-construct knowledge. My professional journey is also my personal journey; there is no 'life- work' balance; there is just life. I lead from a position of who I am.

Digital technology has emerged as an enabling tool in my drive to create conditions in which learners can collaborate, explore identity and construct new understandings that have personal significance for them. From the earliest age, I remember drawing with my twin brother on continuous 'tractor feed' computer paper in our suburban 1970s lounge. Our father had taken up a position at International Computers Limited (ICL) and would bring home boxes of empty paper, full of possibilities.

I remember the first computer arriving at our house, a green screened 'beast' that dominated an entire room. This device occupied many hours after we programmed (in basic coding language) it to play what would be considered rudimentary games (tic-tac-toe) by today's standards. This pattern of just-in-time co-learning to create knowledge artefacts with disruptive technologies has been a theme throughout my life.

At 17 I left school to join a bank and within weeks my typewriter had been replaced by the first ever banking terminal PC, along with the opportunity to be a lead learner. I left the bank after three years and re-emerged as a teacher at a regional primary school. The deputy school leader managed a network of Commodore 64 computers and was pleased to recruit someone who seemed confident with programming basics. As a beginning professional, I felt my leadership and leading was legitimised. Throughout my career I have held continuous formal and informal leadership roles, including responsibility for whole-school improvement activities. Technology and leadership remained intertwined and interdependent as I continued to explore emerging, disruptive digital tools to connect, collaborate and construct identity and knowledge through situated learning experiences. I had the opportunity to develop and lead online communities of practice using offline and online tools and as the environments shifted from networks to the cloud, from computers to mobile so too

has the scale and reach of my work. From creating visual narratives using pencils on computer paper with my twin brother to leading online collaborations globally, I have always been drawn to working with others in creating knowledge and identity in the spaces 'in-between'.

This study has enabled me to 'look back' and to understand for the first time the experiences that shaped my sense of self and to better explain my interest in this particular space. I continue to both live and explore new leadership paradigms as they are constructed and, at times, deconstructed on the edges of the analogue and digital landscape. As a researcher my aim was to listen with intent to the personal and situated experiences of the participants at a moment in time and reflect upon their aggregated stories for insights regarding what contributes to online communities flourishing.

Purpose and Aims

The specific aim of this research was to investigate the online experiences of current school leaders of Australian Schools within an online community to explore whether such engagement could provide an authentic context to nourish professional identity and support longitudinal professional growth. I seek to contribute evidenced-based insights/ guidelines for those developing online communities for education leadership audiences.

For this research, I defined a school leader as an individual who identified as a person who held or had recently held a formal position responsible for whole school improvement and management. The aims of this study were to gain insight into:

- The characteristic behaviours of active members within the online community.
- The impact of professional online environments in terms of building professional capacity

through situated and socialised engagement.

- The contextual factors that influenced the positive engagement.

Significance

Social media use in Australia is significant, with 10 million registered Facebook users in Australia and 2.1 million LinkedIn accounts (Wirth Consulting, 2012). A survey of Australian school leaders in 2011 (School leaders Australia Institute, 2011) indicated that 20% used Facebook and 32% accessed 'other' online networks at least weekly. Approximately 50% of the participants indicated that online collaboration and online courses were the 'preferred professional development online', yet little is known about the professional experiences of these leaders in these online spaces and how these experiences support professional growth. At the time of commencing this research almost 3,000 educators were members of the Palnet online community, with approximately 60% identifying as school leaders (school leaders, deputies, assistant school leaders).

The significance of this study lies in the fact that it addresses two important areas facing leadership in an Australian education context. The first is related to understanding the challenges experienced by leaders as a result of external and internal pressures that appear to drive a heightened need for new, more collaborative approach to education reform. Fullan (Fullan M. , Stratosphere, 2013) has suggested that, in the current education landscape, 'Leaders must foster in others the capacity to focus, to innovate, to empathise, to learn, to collaborate, to relish transparency … to develop leadership in themselves and others.'

The second area of significance lies in understanding different modes to support ongoing leadership formation. Giles, Bell, Halsey and Palmer (2012) argue that professional learning is always holistic in that a leader's knowledge, understanding, skills and dispositions are directly related to his or her way of being 'in practice'. The way this *holistic* and ongoing professional learning and leadership formation is supported by communities of practice within online spaces is at the heart of this study.

The insights derived from this study may inform the design of future online communities of practice for school leaders and offer understandings of their significance as situated environments for informal yet legitimised professional development. This research may also be of significance for researchers exploring the relational and contextual nature of leadership, where distributed communities of practice are required to achieve scale and impact through reach. The results of this research might also help to address questions raised by the national school leadership institute in Australia, (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2012) including:

- How can social media support learning?
- How can professional community and collaboration enhance professional learning?

Thesis Structure

This thesis is presented in six chapters:

Chapter 1, 'Introduction', sets the scene for this dissertation in relation to the motivation for this study and the self I bring to the research. I outlined the professional and personal motivation that positioned me within the research. I clarified my bias as a school leader in Australia who has worked extensively in the development and leadership of online communities of professional practice. The purpose and aims of the research, as well as its significance and the methodology that was utilized, are also outlined.

Chapter 2, 'Literature Review', comprises a review of the literature related to the research question: *"How do school leaders experience a professional community of practice?"*In particular the relevant literature on the interrelated areas of concern in this study is reviewed. These topics are: (a) challenges in the Australian educational context; (b) communities of practice in digital and non-digital modes; and (c) leadership formation.

In Chapter 3, “Methodology”, I describe the research methodology used in the study. The research was conducted within the paradigm of qualitative analysis because I intentionally sought to privilege the lived experiences of the participants, through the stories collected. Detailed information is provided on the narrative design and the intentionally appreciative semi-structured interview structure. The intent of the chapter is to invite scrutiny of the research process.

In Chapter 4, “Findings”, the finding from the transcript analysis derived from re-storying and coding are presented. The emergent themes found in the data are identified and participants’ narratives are cited to illustrate the theme.

Chapter 5, “Discussion of the findings”, is a comparative analysis of the emergent themes discussed in Chapter 4 in relation to the current research and the aims of the study.

In Chapter 6, “Conclusions”, a theory is proposed that was generated from the analysis of the data and the literature. The implications are discussed and areas for further research are identified.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter some of the relevant literature related to school leadership is examined, particularly that which explores the challenges and opportunities for leadership formation within the Australian education settings. This includes the drivers of change, the nature of learning, the call to action for a collaborative approach to leadership and the role that professional online communities might play in supporting leadership formation.

For this exploratory investigation, I exercised caution in terms of 'over reviewing' and 'over positioning' the literature in order to allow the participants' experiences to 'shape' the themes (Cresswell, 2012, p. 205). The literature review was tailored around the areas that leaders in an online community raised in discussions. These included the pressures on leaders, the significance of professional growth and their experiences with online environments. I initiated a broad review of the literature using combinations of key terms generally used to describe the key ideas (Cresswell, 2012, p. 82), including the following: leadership, education, school administrators, online, communities of practice, social media and professional learning.

To gather my sources, I explored online resources, including the Flinders Online Library, other university databases and sources considered credible (Metzger, 2007). I examined relevant content in peer reviewed journals, articles, conference papers and books. Not all the material in my initial collection was relevant, so I used the guideline questions (Creswell, 2012, p. 92) to help me maintain focus.

This chapter will begin with a clarification of the current context of 'being' a school leader in Australia with a focus on global trends in education. The concept of socially constructed learning will then be discussed. This will be followed by an examination of the role of professional communities of practice in relation to knowledge and identity.

Pressure on leaders to transform education

The longitudinal professional growth of school leaders is critical because they directly influence the work of teachers, providing them with inspiration, direction, capabilities and working environment to ensure that students can achieve their full potential (Gurr, 2006). The OECD (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, 2010) posits that leadership is critical because of its strong determinant of education direction and outcomes at both school and system levels. The work of school leaders is recognised as being complex (Leithwood, 2004) and their lived experiences detail organisational and operational responsibilities, along with cultural leadership, curriculum leadership and social/ community leadership responsibilities.

School leaders are under pressure within and beyond their school gates. Global interest in the political, economic and social outputs of education systems are at an all time high. OECD (2010, p.9) notes that 'global drivers are pushing all countries to give priority to generating high levels of knowledge and skills, with attention increasingly [being paid] to more demanding forms of '21st century competencies'. Interest in the nature of learning is being driven by a profound shift from industrial- to knowledge-based economies. Peter Drucker (1992) notes that the workplace has changed and an increasing distinction between the manual worker and the 'knowledge worker' is evident. Drucker suggests that the knowledge worker creates ideas, information and knowledge that add value to enterprises. The OECD (1996) has recognised that knowledge and technology have become drivers of productivity and economic growth in modern economies. Education has responded with the introduction of pedagogical approaches, curriculum alignment and leadership practices intended to develop learners with adaptive capabilities. In the Australian context, this emphasis is framed in the Melbourne Declaration, a statement of intent for all Australian education systems. The Declaration states, 'Rapid and continuing advances in information and communication technologies (ICT) are changing the ways people share, use, develop and process information and technology' (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (Australia), 2009, p. 5) .

School leaders are required to create both learning spaces, physical and virtual, and build educator capacity to design learning that promotes the development of skills and predispositions for the 21st century workforce (Langworthy, 2011). In its concluding orientations, the OECD comments that 'learning leadership places creating the conditions for 21st century learning and teaching at the core of leadership practice' (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, 2015, p.14).

Many nations, Australia included, have redesigned their curricula to emphasise 21st century skills (cognitive and non-cognitive capabilities). They have repositioned pedagogical approaches to promote personalised learning and the use of technologies in order to move beyond the substitution of digital for traditional modes and towards redefining learning in profound ways in order to drive deep learning. (Fullan M. , 2013). The school leader, as the instructional and transformational director, is clearly charged with the implementation of this reform agenda. The assessment of students through Australian national standardised tests in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 across Australia are scrutinised online (www.myschool.edu.au) and in the media. International results such as PISA keep educational achievement and the role of leaders and teachers in the community, media and political spotlight (Gorur, 2015)

Schools are connected to wider communities and homes are an important place for children to access computers and the internet. In 2008-09, home internet access continued to be significantly higher for households with children (aged less than 15 years) than households without children. Nine out of 10 households (91%) with children had access to home computers, much higher than households without children (73%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). It could be suggested in some contexts that the students arrive at school from technology-rich, connected environments and experience an extremely different reality while in formal schooling. School leaders are challenged to provide access to online services and to lever the connectivity that students and their educators experience 24/7 with mobile devices.

These are challenging agendas for school leaders, but possibly even more challenging for education systems such as that found in Australia, in which shortages in the application pool for school leadership have been identified. With an average age in the mid-fifties for school leaders OECD (2015), natural attrition clearly plays a role; however, these shortages are not simply about age, but also reflect social and generational changes, demographic context and teacher reluctance to consider school leadership (Barty, 2005). Modern workplaces, including schools, now have up to four generations of workers. Conflict created by generational work-value differences must therefore be addressed by the leadership: '… actions need to be taken by workplace leaders to address the impact that work-value differences have upon the effectiveness and efficiency of job performance' (Hillman, 2014, p. 240).

These factors might contribute further to stress being placed on leaders. In exploring the psychological health of Australian school leaders, a significant stressor in the Australian context was the increased emphasis by government on accountability for uniform curriculum delivery, along with the devolution of administrative tasks from central to local control. The work practices imposed by these changes further increase work volume and public accountability through external reporting deadlines. It is estimated that when approximately 70% of Australia's 10,000 school leaders reach retirement age in the next five years, they will be replaced with much younger individuals whose inexperience will potentially create a higher risk of adverse health outcomes resulting from the stressors of the job (Riley, 2014).

Australian school leaders, like education leaders across the globe, experience multiple pressures to reform. They must respond to workplace requirements, attend to reforming curricula to develop 21st century skills, improve teaching and teacher standards, implement policy and measure impact. If we consider that current school leaders need more than training to navigate the challenges and lever the opportunities presented, then we must revisit how we understand leadership learning, behaviour and 'being' within educational settings.

School Leadership and Socially-Constructed Learning

Developing leadership for 21st century schools requires the recognition that professional learning is fundamentally social in nature and that the essence of leadership is its practice. High impact leadership develops, grows and is sustained through participation in professional learning communities and networks (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, 2015). It is potentially through these socialised environments that Australian school leaders will be able to mobilise, lever and create professional knowledge, and reconstruct their professional identities to navigate the challenges presented.

The concept of learning underwent significant developments throughout the 20th century (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, 2010). The dominant contemporary constructivist view has been modified to highlight the role of the *situation* within which cognition and learning take place. Shotter (1997) draws from the work of Vygotsky to examine the role of 'inner lives' and how their interaction with context influences behaviour and sense of being. The 'socio-constructivist' understanding of learning is differentiated as involving 'participation' or 'social negotiation'.

Our experience of knowing is individual, while knowledge is not (Wenger M. 2002). Collective knowledge is important and is constantly 'in motion'. Managing knowledge is complex and, unlike an object that can be stored, owned or transferred, such as a document, knowledge may reside in the skills, understandings and relationships between people, as well as in the actions that reflect this knowledge. The professional knowledge of school leaders is not an object that can simply be passed on. The act of knowing, developed and expressed within professional practice through its processes and language, can be evidenced and shared when knowledge is created in socialised and situated collectives. This research is premised on the assumption that, in certain conditions, online spaces might provide both a platform and archive for knowledge and knowledge construction.

In *Co-constructing a Relational Approach to Educational Leadership and Management* (Giles D. B., 2012, p. 13), the author notes that the professional learning of leaders is a continuous process involving the accumulation of a set of experiences that 'afford opportunities for reflective and contemplative consideration'. Understanding the nature of knowing and knowledge, and the processes through which data is translated into information, is shaped into knowledge and contributes to wisdom is critical for school leaders, who are indeed situated in a working context in which the success of social learning and knowledge management are interdependent. Knowing how leaders learn to lever knowledge, create knowledge and knowledge artefacts, and ultimately mobilise knowledge (Jashapara, 2011, p. 13) is critical to leading improvement. Jashapara notes that while 'explicit knowledge is relatively easy to codify, store and retrieve as knowledge objects … competitive advantage may be closely related to exploiting the cognitive and social aspects of tacit knowledge. Leaders need support to help them explore and lever knowledge; tacit know-how and explicit know- what.

The way in which school leaders create knowledge sharing cultures within and beyond schools may provide a solution. An approach to creating the conditions for this tacit knowledge economy to flourish is through 'communities of practice' (Brown J. S., 1991) (Trotter, 2006). It should be noted that adult learners, in this case the online community of practice examined in this research, may not learn in the same way as young people. In a K-12 setting focused predominantly on the learning of young people of between five and 18 years of age, it may be easy to overlook the guidelines, assumptions and theory around adult learning and the impact of this on formal and informal professional learning both in online and 'real world' contexts. Knowles (1973) refers to adult learners as a '*neglected species',* reasoning that many theories of learning having been developed from studies involving animals or children. Trotter (2006) emphasises awareness of several recent theories of adult development, including 'Age and Stage', Cognitive Development and Functional Theory. Andragogy can be defined as 'a set of core adult learning principles that school leaders, as lead learners, apply to all adult learning situations' (Hartree, Malcolm Knowles' Theory of Andragogy: A Critique, 1984). Knowles discusses assumptions about adult learning that differentiates it from that of young people. These include (a) the need to know; (b) the learner's self-concept; (c) the role of the learner's experiences; (d) readiness to learn; orientation to learning; and, (f) motivation.

Importantly, a feature of adult learning is that it is largely situated within the workplace and therefore seen as more authentic. The professional learning needs of school leaders may be partially situated within their own schools but the opportunity to construct professional identity may exist within communities of school leaders and possibly online communities of professional practice.

Communities of Practice, Knowledge and Identity

The concept of communities of practice (CoP) grew from the work around situated learning. Brown, Collins and Duguid argue that knowledge is situated, being in part a product of the activity, context and culture in which it is developed and used. Learning is situated within a social activity and Wenger (1998) emphasises social participation as a process of learning and knowing. Situated learning is seen to have four components: learning meaning, learning practice, learning identity and learning community. The community of practice could be seen to have a shared domain of interest, a community drawn together by shared interests within the common domain and a commitment by practitioners to collectively grow collective knowledge. Stoll and Louis (Stoll, 2007, p. 3) describe such 'communities' as having a focus beyond the individual to include (1) professional learning; (2) operating within the context of a cohesive group; (3) a focus on collective knowledge, and (4) existing within an ethic of interpersonal caring that permeates the life of the participant.

Many school leaders think that online communities are valuable platforms for sharing professional knowledge and that they stimulate greater professional communication and collaboration (edWeb.net, 2010). Jashapara (2011) notes that a major interest in communities of practice is that they can provide more significant benefits to organisations than merely more formalised forms of activity. These communities can provide individuals with a sense of identity, confidence and trust through meeting like-minded individuals who share similar challenges and perspectives. Online communities of practice can enable the growth of a collective identity by extending connections, reflections and online discourse with people who might never normally come together (Gray, 2004).

The Idea Lab, based in the UK, was engaged by The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) to undertake a global scan of trends in professional learning and consider the implications for their education system. The resulting report noted that social media and other online platforms were providing new (remote) environments for professional learning. They found that communities of educators were finding each other online in spaces in which they could learn and develop their practice together. Although such spaces are largely unregulated, they were not entirely without structure and some were actively facilitated (The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) , 2014).

A CoP is more complex than simply connecting school leaders to an online space and the opportunities may be far greater. Beyond accessing information, they can engage in 'being' within a community and explore 'becoming' or identity through situated learning and socially supported referencing and review. It is useful to consider the learning dimensions proposed by Wenger (1998) as functions or activities within a CoP:

- Learning as doing (practice)
- Learning as becoming (identity)
- Learning as experience (meaning)
- Learning as belonging (community)

Summary

In this chapter the need for school leaders to contribute to communities of practice was considered. The importance of the longitudinal professional growth against a backdrop of significant local and international change was explored. The importance of socially-situated learning and the differences between pedagogy and andragogy were highlighted. Consideration was given to the roles that online environments can potentially play in providing a space in which both learning and identity can be shaped.

The next chapter comprises a description of the research methodology used for this study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this chapter is to review and justify the chosen research method and the methodological decisions made during this study. The nature of the research design and methods in relation to investigation are detailed first. Next, the context of the research is explained and details about the participants are provided. The procedures for data collection and analysis are explained afterwards. The chapter concludes with a discussion about the validity, trustworthiness and ethical considerations relevant to this study.

The Nature of the Research

The insights from the literature review (Chapter 2) guided the research design and methodology. As the title of this paper, 'The edge of constructing ourselves', indicates, I believe that online professional learning spaces potentially provide more than knowledge sharing platforms. I also suggest that the development of professional identity and a community of practice may be connected and possibly interdependent.

Online communities are dynamic constructs and bring together audiences whose diverse experiences may influence and be influenced by their experiences within an online space. Engagement and contribution, and the value to the self and the community cannot be easily understood by means of quantitative sources such as transactions or 'visits' or 'number of downloads'. Insight might be achieved, however, through a process of 'seeking to understand' the impact of many elements on particular individuals at particular points and places in time.

This research is situated within a constructionist paradigm, in terms of which learning is viewed as a relational process in which knowledge is socially constructed (Gergen, 2015). In attempting to make sense of the social world, social constructionists view knowledge as constructed as opposed to created (Andrews, 2012). A social constructionist paradigm is that reality exists through an individual's social experiences of a perceived world. In this study, a social and situated constructionist paradigm provided me with a frame of reference through which to interpret the experiences and perceptions of the participants within their personal, professional context.

The constructivist approach informed two aspects of my approach; how I situated myself in relation to the study and the methodology I employed. As a researcher who has been deeply situated within the profession of the participants and who has collaboratively led the development of a number of online communities of practice, I recognise and disclose my interest and my bias and positively position myself within the study rather than separating myself from it. According to Hosking (2010) , reflexive social inquiry does not require a separation between subject and object or the knower and known; thus, as researcher, there is no view or position I can take that is free from the social position accorded to me by my role as leader, particularly as a leader of an online community. May and Perry (May, 2013) state that we should view our participation as a good 'starting point and learn from mediating between different cultures of inquiry'. Through the research, I have been introduced by the works of Hosking and Pluut, (2010) who explore research identities, particularly with respect to who is researched and reported to. I agree with their position, the researcher both impacts and is impacted by their engagement.

'Our relational constructionist premises invite a view of research processes as ongoing processes of (re)constructing self (perhaps as a researcher), other (perhaps as the researched) and relationships' Hosking, (2010, p. 62.)

The theoretical foundations of the constructionist paradigm helped to identify the methodological approach employed in this study. I felt that constructionist dialogues detailed by Gergen (2015, p. 32) and framed as invitations to a way of understanding constituted a positive approach. I felt that the idea that that as we begin speaking together we have the potential and permission to create new and

more promising ways of being, would add value to myself as researcher, the participants and the process.

As the approach used in this research was qualitative (Cresswell, 2012), the literature review played a less significant role as I sought to illuminate themes as they emerged from the experiences shared by the participants in the primary research process. A qualitative methodology was considered more appropriate given the 'discovery' nature of the study, in which social and situational learning was occurring in varied contexts.

As researcher, I approached the research question with an open mind, guided by themes from the literature review, influenced by my personal experiences. This approach fitted with that of grounded theory. I had a sense that the solution to the investigation was within the participants' experiences and that these experiences would also provide a starting point for the research questions.

Research Design

Grounded theory designs (Cresswell, 2012, p. 21) are systematic, qualitative procedures that researchers use to generate a general explanation or *grounded theory* based on a number of individuals who have all experienced a particular interaction or process. The procedures for developing the theory include collecting qualitative data through interviews, analysing their stories, identifying themes and developing a model that communicates the theory (Mills, 2016). The approach I adopted relied on semi-structured interviews and observations during those interviews so as not to restrict the views of participants.

For this study, for the interviews I employed an intentional appreciative approach. Appreciative inquiry is described as a theory of organising and a method for changing social systems (Bushe G., 2005) It is considered one of the more significant innovations in action research. Appreciative inquiry

‘refers to both a search for knowledge and a theory of intentional collective actions, which are designed to help evolve the normative vision and will of a group, organisation, or society as a whole’ (Cooperrider, 1987). This approach is underpinned by the presumption that there are many positive stories from leaders in the field to be uncovered and positive ‘next-steps’ and ‘lessons learnt’ to be shared. I was motivated to design my data collection using semi-structured interviews viewed through an appreciative lens by experiences detailed by Gervase (1995), who noted, ‘The hallmark of successful appreciative interviews seems to be that the interviewee has at least one new insight into what made it a peak experience’. Gervase provides useful advice for the researcher with respect to suspending one's own assumptions and not being content with superficial explanations given by others; to question the obvious and to do this in a conversational, self-disclosing kind of way.

In shaping the approach for this research, I created conversation scaffolds, including prompts, to invite narratives from the participants about their experiences. I made notes during the semi-structured interviews, capturing verbal and non-verbal cues. I spent time after each interview reflecting and recording, and again with the transcript, and finally with the transcript and the recording. I organised the de-identified data (journaling, recordings, transcripts) from the participants and read the complete collection to explore emergent themes before ‘diving in’ to individual collections of participant data to gain insights, consolidate, confirm or highlight new themes for consideration. This process of moving from the collective voice to the individual voice helped me to better understand and identify where connections between individuals and between like groups had impacts on individual experiences against a broader community backdrop. I think I was ‘seeing’ the micro-political landscape within a community through this experience, which is an area of potential future inquiry.

The Research Questions

The specific research questions that guided the data-gathering and analysis processes were:

- What is the nature of school leaders' experiences as active members of an online community of professional practice?
- How might engagement within an online community of practice contribute to the ongoing professional growth of leaders and their leadership?
- What are some of the contextual factors that influence leaders' positive engagement in such communities?

Semi-structured interview questions were formed with subsequent probes to elicit more information. Before conducting the interviews with the participants, I conducted a trial interview to help refine the questions and scene setting for the participants. I provided scripts to a colleague and was interviewed via video-conferencing. This experience provided me with insight into pacing, prompting and the importance of the interviewer pausing long enough (but not too long) to allow for a considered response. I discovered redundancies in some questions and this led to a second 'fishbowl' trail, in which I had the same colleague interview another colleague while I observed as a silent 3rd party. This allowed me to understand the semi-structured part of the interview because I could see and hear when the conversation 'lit up', when the participants enthusiastically moved in a different direction from the potential narrow confines that a Q&A or survey might provide. I could also observe how the process gave 'life' to the experiences of the participants as they connected personal stories and insights to the experiences within the community.

Research Context

In Australia there are over 9,404 schools across government and non-governmental systems. Most of school leaders in Australia are female (56%) and the average age of all leaders is 51.3 years. Most leaders have been in their current setting for five years and in leadership roles for 12 years, following 12 years of teaching (Riley, P., 2011). To a large degree, the work of leader is influenced centrally by the federal government. AITSL (the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership) was established in 2011 to provide national leadership for the Australian, State and Territory Governments in promoting excellence in the profession of teaching and school leadership. The AITSL Professional Standard for School leaders describes the work of the school leader in context.

School quality has had a heightened significance in the political and social agenda in Australia for a decade. Curriculum reform and the role of leaders and teachers have been items of continued focus and scrutiny, fuelled by national data points (myschool.edu) collected by means of Naplan testing, with interest amplified by PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and fuelled by an economic drive to produce a workforce with contemporary skills sets for the knowledge economy (Thomson, 2011). The implementation of the Australian Curriculum is the responsibility of each state and territory and, as a result, there are variances with respect to approaches and timelines. The completed content was published October 2014.

Systems have responded to their changing contexts by devolving action to school leaders. The school leader experiences many pressures beyond instructional leadership. Managing the recruitment, induction and ongoing development of the staff is a major function of leadership. Teacher recruitment in Australia is highly varied; each school system directs its own recruitment, hiring and induction efforts. Recruitment of and retaining highly qualified teachers is a major focus of the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). This follows a 2004 Ministerial Council of Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) report, which

indicated that it was likely that Australia would face severe teacher shortages (Centre on International Education Benchmarking, 2016) (Associate Professor Philip Riley,, 2011).

The role of school leaders in many established economies is rapidly changing (Hopkins, Nusche, & Pont, 2008). This has increased the stress levels of an already highly stressed population., it should be noted that school leaders experience nearly five times the incidence of threats of violence and six times the incidence of actual violence at work than other population groups measured on the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (COPSOQ-II; Pejtersen et al., 2010. Government school leaders working in smaller regional towns and rural locations appear to have a greater likelihood of experiencing workplace stress (Associate Professor Philip Riley,, 2011). The report by Monash includes a number of recommendations, including mental health support for school leaders through engaging in professional support networks to 'discuss the day-to-day functioning of his or her school with a sympathetic, experienced colleague' (Associate Professor Philip Riley,, 2011, p. 8). This under-examined role of 'care and leadership' was interestingly not evident in my literature review, nor was it highlighted significantly by the participants and may provide interesting further inquiry.

Engagement with communities of shared practice for leaders may be beneficial for the development of professional knowledge, professional practice and professional and personal identity. Connectedness to professional community may be a protective factor that supports the retention and satisfaction of the school leader against a complex and demanding backdrop. Such communities may also provide environments that support the induction of new leaders.

The Participants

One online community was sampled for this research, which was orchestrated from the national office of Principals Australia Institute in Adelaide, South Australia. Seven leaders from regional or rural primary school settings participated. The subjects of the study were all members of the Palnet Community and their conversations, invited through semi-structured interviews, were facilitated, recorded and transcribed using a video-conferencing platform. I disclose that I was employed by the said organisation and had shared responsibility for the design and execution of the online platform and associated programmatic elements.

Given the broad goals of the research, that is, to understand the experiences of school leaders in a specific professional online community of practice, an online community was identified and seven active Australian school leaders were invited to participate to represent the school leader population. I engaged in a purposive sampling strategy, notably typical case sampling. Purposeful sampling is also known as judgmental, selective or subjective and is a type of non-probability sampling. For my investigation, the leader selection was based on my judgment as a researcher situated both within the profession and the community context of the participants. The goal of purposive sampling is not to randomly select participants from a population to create a sample but to focus on a particular characteristic of a population that is of interest and will help to answer the research question. I intentionally investigated the 'good story' to help explore the questions under study (Crabtree, 1999), whilst recognising that this approach means that there is a potential limitation with respect to validity because the method is not free from bias.

The school leaders came from at least three different states and represented K-12 settings, and both public and non-public education sectors. The age (average 52 years) and experience profile was considered 'typical' for Australian school leaders.

I used a purposeful qualitative sampling approach (Cresswell, 2012, p. 206) for selecting participants in order to identify people who could best help me to understand the experience being explored. I identified participants who were regular contributors, that is, they logged into the site three to four times per week, who were actively engaged with others within a particular online community through

journal replies, likes and posing follow-up questions, contributed new content in the form of conversational threads, websites, resources or images, and who I considered, on a balance of engagement, would provide data that was information rich or enlightening. This data was gathered through analysis of forums and the Palnet platform's own reporting tools for active users. On the basis of the data and criteria, a staff member at Principals Australia Institute who provided online administrative support for Palnet selected a number of potential participants. Administrative officers from Principals Australia Institute coordinated letters of invitation, introductions to the researcher and information sheets about the confidentiality protocols and the opportunity to 'opt out'. From the selection process, seven current school leaders, two females and five males, participated in this research. Further description of the participants is provided in the next chapter.

Data Collection

The approach I adopted was consistent with a social constructionist epistemological approach. The investigation was underpinned by the view that knowledge is jointly constructed, as opposed to being accumulated solely by individuals. A major focus of constructionism is the exploration of individuals and groups as they construct their perceived social reality. This social constructionist approach is particularly relevant in the context of this research because the 'social reality' of the online community is a reality only for the participants. Thus, it is, in a sense, a constructed reality. The data gathering was conducted using qualitative methods of semi-structured interviews and observations. This method was chosen to gain an understanding of individual's experiences within their context. This approach provides an opportunity for holistic understandings and facilitates the possibility of unexpected insights and experiences being illuminated through conversation.

The methods for gathering the data were chosen with the aim of:

- Collecting rich data that can be analysed for emergent theories from the experiences of the participants.
- Ensuing rigor through probing questions, summarising and checking understanding to and ensure the data captured was trustworthy.
- Promoting ethical values by ensuring participants received information about their

engagement and reducing perception of coercion through the support of assistants who were independent to myself and the research.

Data gathering methods were primarily semi-structured interviews and included informal observations during the interview. I also analysed the recordings and transcripts, and reviewed artefacts e.g. postings, from the online community.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are designed to have several interview questions prepared beforehand that are designed to be open. Probing questions cannot always be planned but may need to be improvised in order to uncover the experiences which will contribute to the data for analysis (Wengraf, 2001). School leaders have all been teachers and biographic-narratives or storytelling of their lived experiences is an appropriate approach for this group. The interviews were conducted and recorded, with permission, using a video conferencing platform. They were structured to be conversational and the time allowed for pre-interview dialogue to set a relaxed and informal tone. Allowing sufficient 'wait time' was important to show the participants recollections were valued and provided space for further commentary or thoughts without interruption.

A series of pre-prepared questions (see Appendix B) were used to open the conversation and help to guide the dialogue to explore the key research questions. Subsequent probe questions were pre-prepared but not necessarily used; it was important to follow the shared experiences of the participants and thoughtfully use these as opportunities to explore further. The participants were reminded that they could pause, stop or withdraw from the interview and/or the research at any point they wished.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted between February and March 2016. Arrangements for date and time were guided by participant availability and convenience. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes to one hour.

The recordings of the interviews, which lasted between 45 minutes and one hour, were used for post interview analysis and verbatim transcription. All personal identifying information was removed from

the recordings and transcripts. A naming convention was applied.

Data Analysis

I approached the data analysis an a manner appropriate to a grounded theory research design. In seeking to understand the experiences of leaders in online professional communities, I felt accurate descriptions of what was 'going on' provided by means of click-through data, downloads, uploads and time-on-page, whilst useful, tended to 'run a poor second' to 'socially structured fictions' (Glasser, 2001, p. 146). My review of the existing research enabled me to develop a context for contemporary school leadership in Australian schools within which to situate the experience of leaders within online spaces. The literature suggested possibilities and directions for inquiry but did not directly shape the ideas; rather the emerging themes were developed into theories and directed me to new sources of validating material.

Analysing qualitative data requires an understanding of how to make sense of recorded texts in order to form answers to the research questions. There are a number of steps for analysing and interpreting qualitative data (Cresswell, 2012, p. 236): preparing and organising the data, exploring and coding the database, describing findings and forming themes, representing and reporting findings, interpreting the meaning of the findings, and validating the accuracy of the findings.

After the interviews were conducted, transcripts were prepared from the recording and forwarded to the participants for review. Once the transcripts had been reviewed, I re-watched the interview recordings and simultaneously read through the transcripts. I referred to the notes I had taken when initially viewing the interviews. I reviewed the contextual information provided by the participants to develop a sense of their leadership formation, their drivers, passions, success stories and pain-points.

I read and reread the transcripts a number of times to help me to identify emergent themes. My

challenge was not to ‘look for’ answers to the research questions but to remain open to experiences situated in context, time and place that were shared by participants. I found myself carefully reviewing words within sentences, reviewing the live recording of that moment to observe any additional data, such as intonation, gesture, expression. This helped me to develop of sense of how the participants ‘felt’ about what they were saying.

The Self and the Self Interview

As researcher, I recognise my personal bias and take measures taken to address these and ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the research. Reflexivity is an attitude of intentionally attending to the context of knowledge construction, in this case, myself as a researcher who is deeply connected to the professional context and experiences of those I am researching.

> ‘A researcher's background and position will affect what they choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged most adequate for this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and communication of conclusions’
> (Malterud, 2001, p. 484)

My perspectives as a school leader in Australian schools, as an early adopter and user of technology for collaboration and a recognised leader in educational technologies shapes this research in conscious and unconscious ways. A reflexive private journal was kept throughout this long research process helped me as I wrestled with methodological justifications, approaches and, importantly, how my own thinking was changing as the literature review and research tangents opened up new ways to think about and approach the investigation. I found that journaling my preconceptions and challenging my assumptions explicitly were useful ways to keep potential biases in my conscious mind as I approached the research, so that I sought to understand rather than to validate.

To ‘pressure test’ my approach, I planned a self-interview to experience what was planned for the participants. Shaping the semi-structured interview questions using an intentionally appreciative lens to seek to understand the positive experiences of the participants was extremely difficult and required much reflection and many rewrites. I conducted a self-interview as part of the preparation for conducting this research and organised a colleague to interview me via video conferencing so that I could fully experience the environment that the participants would be engaging with. As a result of experiencing the interview, analysing the transcripts and viewing the recordings, I made a number of important changes to the phrasing of ‘leads’ to create an experience that was conversational yet had clarity of purpose. I included some new prompts to use to seek further examples or clarity around some of the possible responses.

This was an extremely illuminating process. When we ‘think out-loud’ even for an audience of ourselves, reviewing a digital artefact in the form of a recording can be surprisingly informative. Behaviours invisible to us in the ‘present’ are revealed in the recording.

Trustworthiness of the study

A basic question when considering trustworthiness, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985, p.20), is simply: ‘How can an inquirer persuade his or her audience that the research findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to?’ A public research artefact such as this must be trustworthy. Trustworthiness may be divided into credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability (Sandelowski, 1993).

‘Credibility depends less on the sample size than on the richness of the information gathered’ (Hoepfl, 1997). This research is both credible and dependable due to the extended engagement with the participants, including member checks in which they were asked to validate what had been ‘heard’. As a researcher, trust was built by clarifying intent, process, confidentiality measures and ensuring anonymity and re-enforcing the ‘opt-out’ clause.

The dependability of this research has been demonstrated through the rigorous process undertaken over time and the production of this product (this document). The approaches and artefact have been shaped by both formal and informal 'inquiry audits' between myself and my supervisors at Flinders, helping to ensure my thinking, doing and being through review, feedback on methodology and findings, and guiding me towards approaches and results that are trustworthy.

As researcher I cannot specify the transferability of the findings. I can provide information about process, contexts and findings to enable others to make their own determination whether the findings are transferable or may be extrapolated to a new context. Lincoln and Guba (1985) speak of 'confirmability' as the degree to which the researcher can demonstrate neutrality by providing an audit trail, including: 1) raw data; 2) analysis notes; 3) reconstruction and synthesis products; 4) process notes; 5) personal notes; and 6) preliminary developmental information (pp. 320-321). I indeed have the necessary documentation to establish confirmability.

Ethical Considerations

Flinders University has published ethical guidelines for social and behavioural research that are consistent with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. I was aware that any research involving individuals or groups of people required an awareness of ethical issues throughout the research process, particularly during data collection and when sharing findings (Cresswell, 2012).

Ethics Procedure

Permission was sought to proceed with fieldwork through an application for ethical approval for social or behavioural research involving human subjects from the Social and Behavioural Research and Ethics Committee, Flinders University, after conducting a risk assessment to confirm low or negligible risk.

Informed Consent

Potential participants were provided with an information sheet separate from the consent form, detailing the nature, purpose and scope of the research. I ensured that confidentiality and privacy concerns were addressed, including strategies to ensure anonymity before, during and after the research. The information sheet provided a clear opportunity to decline participation or withdraw from participation at any stage without the need for justification.

Confidentiality and Privacy

The participants' private information was protected by the use of codes to represent individuals during the gathering, processing of interview notes, transcripts and recordings, including storage. The codes were kept separate from the raw (original) data sources.

As the interviews were intentionally semi-structured and intended to illuminate emergent themes, it was important to check with the participants after the interviews. They were provided with copies of their own transcripts to note errors, omissions or amendments.

Limitations

The study was limited to a cohort of seven Australian school leaders who engaged within one online community. This limited sample set was expected to provide glimpses of potential for further investigation but is not representative of the broader profession's perspective. These participants were known to me through their mandatory engagement within a specific online community of practice, which formed part of their own master's level studies. I have noted the structural processes and personal strategies to reduce bias and potential impact these relationships may have had. I note here that these existing relationships could potentially influence the engagement and responses from participants, even with the extensive data gathering and checking protocols.

The participants were all situated at the period of the research in positions of school leadership in settings identified as remote or rural and accordingly are not representative of the general population, which is are largely urbanised. It could be argued that the participants' experiences of isolation drives a different engagement in online communities than for those in urbanised settings. This may be promising future research material. The research was conducted in a short timeframe and accordingly represents a 'point in time' period. Future research could explore how experiences within online communities 'maps' across an extended period of time and correlates with the rhythm of school life.

Summary

In this chapter the research methodology and social constructionist theoretical underpinning of the study were described. The contextual details of the research, the procedures of participant selection, data collection and analysis have been detailed. The data collection methods were explained and justified, including a self-interview and considerations related to the trustworthiness of the study and ethics, including confidentiality and privacy.

The next two chapters comprise the analysis of the data and a consideration of the findings.

FINDINGS

The research was an exploration of the lived experiences of a sample of school leaders in an online community of professional practice. The first part of this chapter is a presentation of the participants' contexts and the second part constitutes an attempt to combine the shared experiences and illuminate the emergent themes. Extracts from the interview transcripts are presented to support these stories and are denoted with quotation marks.

Participant Profiles

In this subsection the individual contexts of the participants are described, with an emphasis on their motivation, challenges and influences. The participants are referred to by code – P1, P2 and so on – in order to protect their identities and preserve confidentiality.

Participant 1 (P1):
P1 has been registered as a teacher for 13 years with long-term whole school leadership positions as a curriculum coordinator and short-term acting roles as a school leader. P1 holds a Bachelor of Early Childhood Education and is currently reading for a master's degree.

This leader works with teachers across nine settings on leading pedagogical change. P1 believes his practice and beliefs about leadership have been shaped through authentic engagement with more experienced leaders, through being placed in positions which required leadership from him (or her). P1 notes the importance of a learning community to support his (or her) developing leadership.

P1 views system level compliance and accountability, the drive for learner achievement, and demands from families and the education department to do 'more with less' as contributing to the pressures school leaders must navigate.

P1 believes that professional connections with other leaders 'keep you from going insane'. They often provide the only supportive feedback and timeous learning a leader needs to improve while 'doing the job'.

Participant 2 (P2):

P2 has been registered as a teacher for 25 years and has spent at least 16 of those in formal leadership positions. She currently works in a senior leadership role at a system level. P2 is driven to scale influence to ultimately improve learning outcomes and sees relationship building between stakeholders as a critical role for leaders. P2 notes the challenge for leadership to create 'space' and 'time' to focus on improvement with respect to 'important things'. P2 values professional connections with other leaders as a way to collectively 'sense-make' through the collective wisdom.

Participant 3 (P3):

P3 has been registered as a teacher for 18 years and has been in roles he identifies as having leadership responsibility for 11.

P3 is currently an early childhood leader in a regional context. P3's leadership models have been shaped by others through mentoring, further study and workplace leadership roles, and through engagement with professional associations.

P3 believes the most important leadership function is to build culture across the school and within the immediate community. Challenges identified by P3 include the ability to recruit and retain effective leadership in regional settings.

P3 notes that the 'collective wisdom of other leaders is valuable in helping to make sense of a rapidly changing world and within the constraints of competing demands.'

Participant 4 (P4)

P4 has been registered as a teacher for 22 years and has had 17 roles that she identifies as having a leadership function. P4 is currently a school leader of a rural school.

P4 says she is 'student driven', placing their wellbeing at the centre of his (or her) decision making, and sees the role of school leader as follows: 'To inspire, lead others to improve the lives of the students we are responsible for.' P4 identifies time and financial resourcing to achieve all that is

asked of leadership as factors that create pressure.

P4 believes that learning from other leaders with similar interests or contexts in both formal and informal settings cannot be underestimated due to its impact on learning and wellbeing.

Participant 5 (P5)

P5 has been a registered teacher for 11 years, has spent six years in school-based leadership positions and is currently a deputy principal.

P5 attributes his leadership formation to influential mentors, opportunities for professional development, particularly around leadership in educational contexts, and situation-based opportunities to 'act-up'. P5 also noted the influence of local leadership associations for formal networking and informal sharing.

P5 believes that 'shaping school culture' is a primary function of the leader and this is achieved through setting an example through active engagement in all facets of leadership, including the instructional, operational and relational aspects. P5 identifies attracting and retaining quality staff as a challenge and also the preparation of new teachers for working in the particular context of the school.

Participant 6:

P6 has been continuously registered as a teacher for 30 years within the state education system. After starting to explore acting school leadership roles, P6 secured a school leader position 12 years ago and remains in this role. P6 is driven by a deep commitment to the communities served and identifies 'good' role models as a factor in the development of a leader. P6 believes the school leader plays an important role in direction setting, and providing hope and a sense of security for the whole school community. P6 recognises balancing system and community needs as a challenge for the leader and asserts that professional connections are important for mentoring and reducing the impact of isolation.

Participant 7

P7, a school leader, has been registered continuously as a teacher for 30 years and has been in successive leadership roles for 27 years. P7 notes that learning from ‘great school leaders’ has provided him with the skills and knowledge to support his staff to create flourishing learning environments. P7 identifies system accountability measures tied to data as a challenge for leadership, because it was seen to take away the focus and time needed for cultural leadership. P7 is passionate about holistic education and experiences tension with the system’s focus on standardised testing. P7 values a professional connection with peers for personal and professional support.

Emergent Themes

Presented in this section are the emergent themes from the data related to the research question. The first theme relates to the critical role of relationships and the second to balancing purpose and pressure. The third theme I have described is contextual responsiveness to community structures, while the fourth theme is opportunities to lead and learn. Finally insights from successful experiences are explored. Whilst I have separated the themes to illuminate their significance, I recognise that the lived experiences of the school leaders as narrated highlighted a great deal of interdependence between these themes.

Professional Relationships

Engagement with other school leaders is valuable to the participants for the benefits it provides, including; opportunities for mentoring, formal and informal professional learning and a context within which to shape practice collaboratively. The leaders commented on pain-points experienced within existing structures that support professional ‘knowing and being’ and how experiences in on-line communities of professional practice could address some of the context-specific challenges.

P1 noted, ‘Working with other leaders and being mentored and learning from them has been the greatest influence on me by far.’ P5 referred to the positive impact of influential leader-mentors and engagement with other leaders through association network events, which also provided valuable

informal conversations. P3 reinforced both formal professional learning (training, post-graduate studies and certified training) and informal learning 'on the job' through work on committees.

P2 noted that 'commitment to cultivating relationships' was a major motivation for them to engage in a community, providing it had a shared purpose to question and explore leadership. When asked to describe why he (or she) engaged, P4 said, 'You had like-minded people interested in learning about each other.'

P3 found that time invested in understanding context and roles created a professional regard, which supported engagement: 'There was lots of respect for each other around the roles and the complexity of what people do and the range of conditions, so that, even though we worked in very different contexts, we all had similar beliefs.'

Socially Embedded Professional Learning

Many participants commented on the importance of social learning for leaders within trusted spaces. P3, who self-identified as being cautious with engagement in online spaces, commented that credible and trusted spaces in which one could share with colleagues facilitated openness to collaboration. 'What we experienced in the online environment gave credibility to our work and the shared work. This was an opportunity to test learning relationships. I was probably one of the reluctant ones going in and it certainly … it definitely helped!'

P6 was direct when asked how his experience differed from other online networks he (or she) engaged with, commenting, 'This experience developed more social as well as professional relationships.' This enabled the participants to 'grow-knowing'. P3 commented that the 'collective wisdom' was unlocked.

Professional regard and friendships were often cited as drivers for sustained engagement in professional communities in the 'real world' and online spaces. When asked about his (or her) enthusiasm for the experience, P4 said, 'You had a like-minded group interested in learning with and about each other.' P1 noted that many of her (or his) colleagues had become her (or his) friends and provided both support and opportunities to learn.

This theme of ‘connection’ to peers continuously permeated the interviews. P3 commented, ‘The collective wisdom of other leaders is so valuable in helping to make sense of a rapidly changing world and the range of competing demands.’

Most leaders talked about the value of being understood as a professional within a specific context. P4 noted that you cannot ‘underestimate learning from others with similar interests or contexts in formal and informal ways.’ Similarly, P5 commented that ‘networking and lifelong professional learning shapes and influences in both formal and informal situations’.

Distance and Time- Barriers to Collaboration

A sub-theme that emerged under the general role of relationships was around how time and access can both enable and, at times, present significant barriers to professional engagement. The participants all noted the value they found in both face-to-face and online activities that illuminated the work of the various leaders within their specific personal and professional contexts. Yet many of them commented about the challenges of distance, time and competing commitments.

The school leaders interviewed were engaged with committees, professional association activities, system-initiated events and locally facilitated professional learning communities. The majority of these engagements occurred face to face, via email or over the phone, with very few leveraging online established forums or synchronous online modes such as Skype. Participants all mentioned challenges in terms of maintaining face-to-face professional distance relationships due to balancing complex roles and time. P7 noted, ‘We’d lose an hour going there (to a meeting) and an hour coming back.’ P6 added, ‘ I find trying to engage in professional learning quite hard because I feel so isolated where I am and I have only four hours leadership administrative time a fortnight.’

Participants described the nature of professional engagements as more organisational and operational. Most described a limited social media experience, preferring to use email and the telephone, with

some using Twitter to follow ‘thought leaders’ but rarely sharing or questioning.

For most of the participants, this engagement in the online community was their first experience in a professional space, which was intentionally collaborative. Most of them expressed surprise at the opportunities and engagement. P2 summarised, ‘I expected the experience to be more individual….I didn’t expect the interaction….I had to adapt and change.’

Benefits of sharing place and space

One participant described how the existing PLCs he (or she) she engaged with were structured and targeted around an external agenda and timeline. P7 noted that time was also used for mandated training. The participants described a deeper engagement in the online community. In the online community of professional practice related to this study, they noted that they were ‘developing more social as well as professional relationships’. Participant 4 commented that the success of a group required not only people to be ‘like-minded’ but also interested in ‘learning about each other’.

Whilst reliable internet access presented a significant access issues for P6 and P7, most of the participants found asynchronous (off line) and synchronous (live online) engagement beneficial to support their complex and dynamic schedules while still meeting their desire to connect and collaborate. P6 commented that the experience allowed a movement ‘back and forth’ within conversations, which facilitated use like a ‘tutorial’. P7 enjoyed opportunities to visit the journals of other leaders in the community: ‘I loved going to other people’s profiles and appreciating where they came from.’ P3 highlighted the ‘flexibility with time’ that the environment provided. P2 commented that the value of both ‘live sessions’ and those which happened at other times supported different learning styles and facilitated deeper conversation by allowing for time to reflect. P1 noted a similar benefit, stating that the multiple modes of communication ‘made me aware of what I was saying’. P1 also noted the value of being able to look back upon conversations and follow ‘thinking’ and even reviewing and adding to their own and others’ previous comments in order to build new knowledge.

The participants highlighted the importance of understanding place, space and people and described how this impacted the development of professional identity, both individually and as a group.

Structured activities required that the participants share maps, videos and contextual details of their schools and communities, and the unique features of the place and space.

‘It’s been good to have a view into other people’s thinking.’ *P6*

‘I loved going into other people’s profiles, just appreciating where they come from.’ P7

‘I felt we developed digital and social capital through the engagement.’ *P2*

Many noted the unscripted sharing and insights into other participants’ professional and personal lives through commentary, picture sharing, videos and the public profiles and journals.

‘….it helped me understand them as a person (sic)’.P5

Participant 3 referred to others demonstrating a ‘willingness to be vulnerable’ as a result of having a better understanding of the context within which others were leading.

At the time of the interviews, over half the participants have continued to engage with one another ‘outside’ of the environment and believe they have built both networks and friendships that will be sustained over time. P6 commented that ‘engagement online has reduced isolation’.

Balancing Purpose, Pressure and Support

All the participants attributed their positive engagement to a combination of purpose and pressure provided from ‘inside’ the community and ‘outside’. The participants commented on the importance of a clearly understood and articulated purpose for coming together and using their new knowledge and skills. P1 noted that a common purpose was ‘absolutely’ essential. Participant 4 provided a useful summary of what most of the participants viewed as the purpose of engagement. Participant 4 valued;

- the opportunity to expand his (or her) professional network,
- to learn from context and to improve leadership through engagement with other leaders.

Participant 3 commented that what he (or she) had learnt within the online community could be applied directly in his (or her) role as a school leader, and that this provided purpose and motivation to engage.

Other participants recognised that the synchronous and asynchronous experiences were fundamentally important to building their own understanding and skills within the context of learning and engaging online. P4 commented that the experience had ‘opened up opportunities in my schools using online tools… that’s the impact this experience has had (sic)!’

Pressure was experienced due to required engagement in certain aspects of the community. The participants recognized this ‘external’ pressure and their own ‘internal’ pressure to engage. External pressure was provided through expectations of completion of specific activities within the online community in the early stages to quickly introduce many tools that were to be used later on for collaboration and communication. Participant 1 considered their positive experience commenting that ‘…pressure helped to “get the ball rolling"” and once I started to use it, I found it useful’.

Participant 3 noted that, without pressure, it was easy to fall back into 'old ways' of approaching things. Structured dialogue and scenarios to which one could react provided insights into the 'sorts of professional conversations we could have'. Participant 2 agreed that a balance between 'structure and openness' was required within a professional online community because 'learning conversation prompts' were provided through questions and requests for reactions to specific posted materials. Participant 3 made a point about the critical role of 'thought leaders' in 'moving people from comfortable spaces through questioning and inquiry'.

Intrinsic drivers were another pressure identified by the participants. When considering the reasons for active engagement in an online community of professional practice, most of the participants expressed their personal professional practice as 'being' a driver to engage and an intrinsic source of pressure to commit to active engagement.

Participant 1 noted that commitment from all the participants was critical to building shared knowledge and relationships online. He explained that it was important to have people within such spaces 'showing' and 'leading' through engagement and for those less familiar to follow. Participant 7 said that rapid responses, questions and sharing from participants motivated and, at times, created pressure for them to respond accordingly. This was viewed as a positive 'professional pressure'. Participant 3 talked about the delicate balance between pressure and support from within the community as he witnessed people 'graciously pushing each other… challenging'.

The online environment examined in this study was hosted and managed by a recognised national professional association and this was seen to provide a certain level of indirect pressure to engage professionally, in part due to its perceived status as a 'professional space'. Participant 2 noted that she felt that the space, its resources and engagement were 'credible' and 'professionally oriented' particularly because it was 'owned' by a not-for-profit. Participant 1 commented that the professional standing of the environment 'made me aware of what, how, and when I was engaging'. Participant 1 saw this as a positive factor in creating a highly credible professional tone and this was 'absolutely part of the purpose for coming into such a space', that is, feeling confident in the professional language, conduct and purpose of the space.

The availability and visibility of moderators, support staff and formal administrators added a degree of both pressure and support for the participants and all of them referred to these in their reflections. Participant 7 talked about the value of a 'visible person' to be able to connect with and receive responses from, from both a technical and professional perspective. Participant 4 echoed these sentiments and referred to professional spaces requiring both 'administrative' and 'instructional' leaders to ensure that the learning progressed and was unimpeded by technical considerations. In reflecting on this experience, Participant 4 felt 'definitely well supported'. All the participants noted that the responsiveness of 'real people' both inside and beyond the environment made them feel supported and encouraged their engagement.

Participant 2 highlighted how the flexible environment legitimised peripheral participation by providing a 'cultural and technical environment' in which individuals could be passive, treating the space like a network to retrieve and share, and to which they could 'belong' as part of a community, or in which they could move on to becoming a collective and belong to a team with clear purpose and high involvement (Lave & Wenger, 1998). Other participants shared that they had created 'spin-off' collectives both within the online environment via closed groups or through other communication platforms.

The online platform was built upon an open source portfolio platform customised to provide specific tools and functions that school leaders had identified as important to them via a survey conducted by the coordinating association. Tools that were 'generic' and not viewed as valuable or seen as distracting by the school leadership advisory group were 'turned off'. The moderators within the community were drawn from the profession, resulting in an environment that was intentionally 'built for school leadership, by school leadership'.

Participants described their roles as complex and cited managing multiple demands from within and beyond their school, administrative and, at times, teaching workloads as having a significant impact upon their time.

They all noted the following features as being respectful for the time and complex roles:

Organised content

The participants found that organised topics enabled them to both focus attention and review the development of ideas. P6 had been unable to engage in the community due to injury and, upon returning, was able to engage quickly: ‘I was injured but was able to quickly follow the organised threads to get myself up to speed and contribute again.’

Participant 1 also commented on the value of being able to ‘look back on organised conversations, follow thinking and access dialogue at a time that suits you’.

Control

The environment provided the participants with control of notifications. They commented that this was valuable and indicated recognition of their busy working lives. The school leaders still use email more than any other tool and the emailed ‘digest’ provided them with a summary of community activity either daily or weekly. The mobile version of the environment or text notifications was not commented upon.

The participants were able to choose how much personal and professional data to share and with whom. This was mentioned by two participants as being valuable for building trust.

Privacy

The school leaders all highlighted privacy, the stability of the technical platform and lack of advertising as positive factors resulting in their engagement.

Participant 5 felt the combination of the ‘perceived protection’ of Principals Australia Institute, the online ‘visibility’ of a trusted administrator, the status of partner Flinders University resulted in them ‘feeling safe’ to engage within the space.

Other participants noted that they felt secure with the platform and the lack of technical issues resulted in them feeling they could invest their time in the online community and build content.

All the participants felt that their positive engagement within the online community supported professional learning by providing access to the thoughts, processes and products developed or co-developed by others. A second valuable leadership learning experience was provided through the self-reflection that a visible learning environment such as Palnet provided. Many of them reflected upon the leadership they had seen emerging within the community of practice. Participant 5 felt strongly that the experience 'supported professional learning'.

Self-Awareness

Participant 5 noted that 'the experience moved me forward through my interactions with others'. Engagement with other leaders from dramatically different contexts provided an opportunity for self-reflection and created greater self-awareness.

Opportunities to lead

Participant 6 observed that particular individuals took on leading roles and inspired others to stay connected. Participant 6 asserted that '*you need that!'*

Participant 3 found that thinking about and understanding contemporary leadership challenges were extended through opportunities to 'clarify thinking through dialogue over time'. This ability to review, reflect and revisit conversations over time was constantly referred to by the leaders as valuable in shaping or rebuilding ideas and positions. Participant 4 noted that the experience 'helped clarify my own thinking'.

Opportunity to learn from leaders

Participant 2 commented that, coming into a leadership-focused community, he (or she) 'did not know what I didn't know' and explained that the interaction and opportunity to 'unpack and dissect*'* the thinking of other leaders was a powerful learning curve.

P2 felt there were examples over time of individual learning shifting to building new understandings together. He (or she) did not feel that the same deep 'learning about being' happened within a MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) they participated in.

Participant 2 also felt strongly that the exchange of ideas and immediate review by colleague-leaders 'opened up more collaborative thinking and ways of working'.

P3 commented on a range of leadership behaviours he (or she) experienced that helped shape 'collective wisdom', highlighting organising leadership assets through to shaping questions to build understanding. He (or she) noted, 'There was leadership in stretching our intellectual thinking through responding and reacting to others.'

The different styles of leading learning were highlighted by P6, who explained that particular individuals took on cultural leadership roles by 'inspiring others to stay connected'. Whilst some provided very role specific support, this was likened to instructional leadership: *'It has been useful accessing the collective wisdom of experienced leaders,'* This 'collective voice' was also important to P7, particularly the diversity that made the collective. He commented that it was not 'getting seven responses the same, but seven responses that were nuanced by context… that helped'.

Finally, P7 believed that, as a leader in this engagement 'not only did it shift me on the online platform to learn and grow; it moved me forwards in my interactions at a professional level with peers'.

Summary

In seeking to explore the lived positive experiences of school leaders within a specific online community of professional practice, four major insights were consistently raised, namely the need for leaders to connect in a socialized, safe space with other leaders, to experience a balance between pressure and support with an authentic purpose, to explore leading and learning in an environment in which the nature of the school leadership audience was recognised, and to have the opportunity to practise different forms of leading and learning.

In the following chapter aspects of these themes are further explored and discussed in more detail with reference to the existing literature.

DISCUSSION

In Chapter 1, I noted that the purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of school leadership within a specific online community of professional practice. To this end, semi-structured interviews were conducted to determine whether such environments could realise the potential to provide authentic contexts to nourish professional identity and support longitudinal professional growth. In this chapter the focus is on providing insights by drawing on the themes identified in Chapter 4: the need for leaders to engage with other leaders, the importance of balancing purpose, pressure and support, the need for contextual responsiveness and opportunities for leadership learning. In the following section, the findings are explored in relation to the existing literature and particular areas of agreement and dissonance are discussed.

The need for leaders to engage with other leaders

The first theme is that school leaders who have a primary function of whole school leadership view engagement with professional peers as critical for nurturing their professional self and extending professional practice against a backdrop of increasing demands and tension.

The data highlighted the pressure that current school leaders feel to perform while they transform themselves and their institutions.

The pressures noted by the participants were reflected in Australian research and highlighted in global studies of leadership work (MacBeath, 2009, Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, 2010), which detailed increasing pressure to do more in less time, to be responsive to a greater range of demands from external sources and to meet a greater range of targets. Broad pressures from changing economic drivers (Drucker, 1992), whilst not directly referenced by the leaders, were felt through

new curriculum policies, which leaders were expected to implement, including a work-ready skills focus and technology use (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs , 2009, Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011). Many of the leaders talked about professional pressures between fulfilling what they saw as a primary function of school leadership whilst ensuring that mandatory and compliancy system requirements were met. An often cited example was national testing (Klenowski, 2010). The pressures on existing leaders may be amplified as they are statistically both an aging cohort (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011) working with multiple generations within their schools (Weldon, 2016) and experiencing greater stress than other occupations (Riley, 2014). Networks, communities of practice and other formal and informal engagements were important to all the leaders interviewed.

Online engagement for professional growth and support was generally very low, yet all expressed extremely positive experiences within the online community of practice examined in this study. The general reaction from the participants was that the benefits of engagement in an online community of practice were a 'pleasant surprise' to them. The data indicated a tension between their moral drivers to create environments that nurtured and supported all learners to achieve their personal best with system level compliance and accountability measures. Most expressed pressure around time management, reducing their time to be effective cultural leaders, and all the participants highlighted connections with peers around a common purpose as a protective professional factor.

The participants highlighted complex and interdependent roles referenced by (Leithwood, 2004), curriculum reform agendas (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, 2015) and system accountability measures as sources of professional tension as leaders balanced administrative tasks with broader organisational leadership roles.

These contemporary pressures raised in the literature are supported by the findings of this study. For instance, P7 is passionate about holistic education and experiences tension as a result of the system focus on standardised testing and reporting.

P3 stated that the collective wisdom of other leaders was valuable in helping to make sense of a rapidly changing job and, in online spaces, allowed the collective to be situated within their practice and therefore allowed them to better manage competing demands for time and attention.

The participants consistently expressed a strong need to connect with peers around common purposes, yet found such face-to-face engagements extremely difficult due to issues such as distance, time, competing demands, impact on family and also a lack of staff to cover absence during the day. When they did connect with peers through face-to-face networking, informal and formal meetings, association meetings, etc, they all found the engagements personally and professionally rewarding. While almost all had very little engagement with professional online communities before their engagement with Palnet, all expressed that the engagement supported their need to be connected to their professional peers. It seems clear that opportunities to 'come together' as a community of practice is important for leaders who may otherwise be isolated or experience limited connection with their professional counterparts.

Importance of balancing purpose, pressure and support

The second theme is that of the online environment which, by design, may actively support conditions for the community to flourish. The data revealed that this notion was not only present but consistently upheld by the participants as critical for the success of an online community of practice.

When exploring the lived experiences of leaders within the online community, all the participants reflected on the importance of situating learning in a working context (Jashapara, 2011) and having opportunities to have experiences which 'afford opportunities for reflective and contemplative consideration' (Giles D. B., 2012). These were seen to provide authentic purpose for their professional being.

Not surprisingly the participants highlighted a range of support structures that facilitated a positive engagement in the community of practice. The participants identified support of a technical and administrative nature as critical in the early phases and what could be described as instructional support via the facilitator/ moderator as valuable in shaping and directing conversation and encouraging engagement.

Perhaps, surprisingly, all the participants recognised the importance of 'pressure' in the early stages of 'forming' as critical to their successful engagement. All the participants noted that 'pressure' to perform and engage in very specific structured activities in the early stages introduced them to features, functions and 'ways of being' that they may not have been exposed to otherwise. They mentioned structured tasks to learn about uploading video, audio, text files and requests for specific types of responses to build conversation or seek clarity. A rubric produced to provide suggested progression of depth of engagement was mentioned by three participants as supporting them as they sought to engage in deeper professional dialogue.

This need for external pressure and its positive impact was framed by a couple of participants. P2 noted that 'leaders are used to complying and are also very busy … if there is a clear request and expectation to comply, we will comply and make time'. P7 commented that 'The pressure to engage earlier on meant that we could better understand the potential for the environment to support our learning … if we had been left to work it out for ourselves, we would have probably gone back to old ways of engaging.'

Significance of context in platform design and function

Another emerging theme in this study, in coming to understand the lived experiences of school leadership in an online community of practice, is the interesting 'profession specific' design of online spaces which allows for full and active participation. This is significant because these spaces may support learning and knowing within four components; learning meaning, learning practice, learning

identity and learning community (Wenger, 1998). The findings of the study show that the participants had a full appreciation of their professional challenges, from system level to classroom. They agreed that management of time with competing priorities was a constant tension and that engagement with peers supported them personally and professionally. All the participants were hesitant about 'open' online spaces such as Twitter and Facebook for professional engagement. All the participants, apart from one, used these only for personal engagements with some informal professional content harvesting on demand. They all highlighted the importance of the online community being hosted by an independent professional not-for-profit as a factor that engendered trust. Moreover, they all commented on the controls provided for privacy and the human moderation as fundamental in ensuring their open exchange. The participants experiences supported comments by Gray, (2004) that the tools and activities were seen to enable the growth of a collective identity by extending connections, reflections and online discourse with people who might never normally come together.

It seemed that the leaders' positive experiences were supported in environments that provided privacy, open and closed digital workspaces, control over sharing, tools that the professional found useful for reflection and collaboration. All the participants found 'live' moderation important and 'put them at ease'.

Opportunities to explore leadership

The final essential theme to be discussed is that of exploring leadership and leading. It is not surprising that this theme should emerge in exploring the lived experiences of school leaders in online communities of practice, because leaders lead with 'who they are'. What is surprising is the apparent limited research into the phenomena of school leadership formation within online communities of practice. Most studies explore communities of practice within analogue paradigms which, while they share fundamental aspects with communities augmented by digital platforms, omit knowledge creation, collaboration and professional knowing, being and doing that may be experienced in such environments. The data showed that the participants understood their context well, recognised the unique challenges their context presented, yet, at the same time, found that engagement with leaders

from differing contexts was professionally invigorating and provided them with a perspective that encouraged their own self-reflection. Participants in online platforms are asked to imagine the context within which other contributions are situated, or bring their own knowledge and experience into play in order to interpret, understand and/or respond. Catherine Edwards (Edwards, 2002) explores a claim that the knowledge constructed in online environments will be useful to learners as professional practitioners and/or enable them to develop the kinds of critical thinking that will enhance their professional practice. She cites Little (2002, p.11): 'When we seek to transfer knowledge to another context we must understand the context within which it was created, in order to reinterpret its meaning and decontextualize it for a new context.'

The participants provided examples of online platforms that 'did not' serve their needs well and they all highlighted the positive benefits of a platform that was independent, intentionally focused on leadership and on providing the tools and functions leaders valued.

The findings of the study also indicate that the participants' leadership is not theoretical, but practical; they constantly make decisions and take actions that are influenced by contextual intelligence, wisdom of experience and knowledge of the systems within which they operate. Because all decisions in school have a moral underpinning, leaders possibly feel a greater emotional turmoil than perhaps other professions; thus, they value opportunities to 'think out loud in the spaces in-between' with other leaders in order to reference thinking and approaches to ensure that they balance the expectations of their role without compromising their moral drivers.

Summary

This chapter comprised a discussion of the research findings in relation to the literature review. While the four emerging themes were described in Chapter 4, in this chapter the themes that reflect the positive lived experiences of school leaders within an online community of professional practice was analysed. Evidence and research insights provided by the literature reviewed and summarised in Chapter 2 informed the discussion of the findings.

The next and final chapter concludes the research with a summary of the key findings of the present study, noting its contribution to our emerging understanding of the role online communities of professional practice may play in shaping leadership identity and practice, discussing the limitations and identifying potential areas for further research.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter begins with a summary of the findings, followed by an appraisal of the contributions this study makes to the understanding of leadership formation and experiences within online communities of practice by addressing the research questions:

- What is the nature of school leaders' experiences as active members of an online community of professional practice?
- How might engagement within an online community of professional practice contribute to the ongoing professional growth of leaders and their leadership?
- What are some of contextual factors that influence leaders' positive engagement in such communities?

Finally, the limitations of the research are addressed and promising areas for future research efforts are recommended.

Summary of the Findings

This investigation took the form of a constructionist exploration, with seven participants. This process situated the experiences of leading and learning in online spaces within the complex functions of contemporary school leadership. The pressure experienced by school leaders to transform education was illuminated in the literature review and became evident during the study, described as a heightened sense of 'exposure to scrutiny' (P2), a challenge to balance demands, driving a desire to connect with professional colleagues in ways that were private from their immediate context, yet which directly supported them in the fulfilment of their roles.

Themes emerged from the data which illuminated and helped to describe the conditions within which a positive professional online learning community could contribute positively to building and

sustaining the profession of school leadership:

The leaders valued the socialised learning context, identified in the literature and lived by participants. The technical platform was supportive, and the intentional learning design of the experience promoted knowledge construction in context. The leaders felt that trusting relationships, which they identified as essential for professional engagement, were facilitated when they understood how the other leaders were situated in place and space. Structured socialisation, expert facilitation and expectations of engagement provided external motivation. Internal motivation to engage in professional thinking, 'doing' and 'being' supported positive engagement. Opportunities to explore leadership within a professional environment were a positive outcome of the participants' experience, particularly in terms of self-reflection and shared dialogue. Situated leadership emerged within the environment as the participants engaged in both formal and informal learning, which by design required multiple perspectives and collaboration.

The evidence from this study supports the idea that online communities of professional practice for school leaders positively influence professional learning, professional practice and professional identity. The literature highlighted the various elements required, beyond a technical solution for an online community of practice to flourish, and the participants lived experiences validated and extended this.

Contributions of the Research

One contribution of this study is that it adds to a limited research base by examining the conditions which support leadership practice, knowledge growth and professional 'being' within online communities. Earlier research into professional engagement in online communities of practice has been largely focused on teachers' engagement (Cavanaugh, 2014) and online learning through digital coursework (King, 2002), with limited exploration of the potential benefits and experiences of educational leadership. Promising papers e.g. Sullivan (2008) explore the potential of online environments within higher education settings and, indeed, validated some of the findings.

'The added online dimension to the group interaction helped members see more aspects of their own

and each other's personal and social personalities and thus enabled more learning about leadership qualities' (Sullivan, 2008, p. 447).

The participants, regardless of context, experienced similar drivers to 'do good' and similar pressures to 'perform while they transform'. They all felt that the engagement with their professional community was a significant protective and supportive factor.

Whilst the construction of knowledge in 'place and space' is referenced as an output or a process of traditional professional learning communities (Lave & Wenger, 1998), situating constructionism and building knowledge structures (Papert, 1991) within the context of online environments with school leaders, has not been examined to a significant degree in research.

Implications for Research

The study I have presented here may provide a basis for researchers in Australia and beyond to deepen and extend the understanding of the potential of online communities to support leadership knowing, doing and being through situated, relational and intentionally social approaches, both within the education industry and across other industries.

A second practical contribution of this study is that it might support the design and execution of leadership programmes supported by online environments. It could enhance the development of current and aspiring school leaders by providing alternative approaches to educational leadership programmes. In examining alternative pedagogy in educational leadership programs, Giles and Morrison (2010) comment that 'strategic planning, capacity building, leadership development and other leadership responsibilities are objectified toward linear, albeit conceptual, understandings

devoid of the problematics, contextual and experiential nature of leadership.' Giles and Morrison consider Gadamer's position that, as human beings, our way of being is to 'live questions' rather than answer them, as they explore the phenomenon of leadership. The experiences of leaders in this study were positive when they were engaged in relevant, authentic discussions situated in their practice of educational leadership.

This study highlights, for professional platform designers, the importance of thoughtful holistic design that is responsive to the contextual pressures and requirements of the participants. Designers of the learning, technical, social and administrative functions of the totality of the leadership experience within an online platform should invest time in seeking to understand and then intentionally design interdependent elements with this intelligence in mind. For a school leaders, recognising the pressures of time, multiple demands, mobility, generally minimal use of online platforms for professional purposes needs to be balanced with their desire to understand and engage at a social and professional level within a trust-based, secure and stable space when, where and how they choose.

Thirdly, beyond 'setting the stage', this study provides evidence that could be used to help 'give life' to online spaces and move networks to communities and support communities to become collectives. There are clear suggestions regarding how a guided environment might legitimise peripheral participation and guide engagement from passive to active. From the formal roles of thought leaders and moderators to online administrators, through to online concierges and more informal, fluid situational leadership roles, shaped by the participants themselves, all have a fundamental part to play in creating a flourishing community.

This study has implications for the practice of school leaders and would support a position that engagement in such communities is worth seeking and investing time into both at a personal and professional level. This research has highlighted activities such as knowledge construction in online environments. This indicates that the act of engaging in online spaces to build knowledge in socialised settings positively influences leaders' understanding of the potential of such tools, spaces and

approaches for their colleagues, staff and students. Many school leaders commented that curriculum reform agendas placed pressure on them to 'perform while they transform' and engagement in what could be termed 'digital transformation', that is, leveraging digital tools to drive whole school efficiency. This is a globally-recognised pressure on all education systems. This places engagement in intentional online spaces as 'their practice' and therefore situates new learning in possibly its most potent place.

Finally, at a personal level, this study has contributed profoundly to my understanding of research, researching and the challenges of being situated within a research topic. In section 1.3, I explored the self I bought to this study and across the lengthy process I have developed an understanding on my own bias, shaped by experience, and explored ways to lever this as an asset and also to reduce its potential limiting effect to ensure trustworthiness and rigour. I have had the opportunity to explore and understand the constant construction, formation and demonstration of leadership as both a function and an output of individuals in formalised educational leadership roles. My understanding of leadership as a phenomenon, beyond being a function, has undergone a major shift in the course of this research. One shift I have made immediately in face-to-face and online professional engagement as a result of this research is to structure informal moments in order to share information about context and personal experiences, to lay the foundations for the trusted relationships that were so important for participants in the study.

Educational leadership is extremely personal, powerfully relational and driven from a deeply held moral position that provides the necessary drive, passion and tenacity to persevere. This sense of purpose also creates tensions when external pressures create conflicts, particularly around time, direction and balancing priorities. Leaders need other leaders to help them shape new ways of thinking and approaching the shared challenges they face, and online communities might provide positive alternatives or augmentation to traditional engagements.

This research has demonstrated that school leaders lead with who they 'are' and that their development of identity is supported in environments in which they feel trusted, supported and understood. Constructing meaning through the exploration of multiple viewpoints, supported by text-based and video-facilitated (synchronous and asynchronous) interviews has helped me to shape a new understanding of leadership and leading in diverse contexts. I came into the research unsure about what the lived experiences of the leaders in an online professional community would be. I was concerned about the relevance of the literature review and incredibly worried about what, if any, themes would emerge. I have learnt to trust that research approaches, grounded in theory and crafted within a trusting environment, will elicit insights that are unexpected and rewarding.

Leaders value the opportunity to learn through professional action, particularly when they are invited to participate with other leaders to connect personal experience with theory in ways that support their practical work situated in professional practice.

Strengths and Limitations of the Research

In highlighting the strengths and limitations of this research, I shall begin by reconsidering the intent and design of this study. The intent was to explore the lived experiences of current school leaders within a specific online community of professional practice. The research was designed to gain qualitative insights to develop understanding rather than quantitative data to measure, predict and confirm an established hypothesis. To achieve this, a qualitative research approach was used to invite the lived experiences of the participants identified for the study to gain a deeper understanding and new perspectives around leadership doing, knowing and being within this context.

One of the strengths of this study was that it was successful in gaining an understanding about the subjective experiences of leaders from diverse settings within a connected space. The stories gathered through semi-structured interviews revealed a number of emergent themes. The study has offered key ideas and approaches that may influence current and future professional learning experiences which lever online spaces.

Another strength is that this study is one of few to explore the nature of K-12 leadership learning and being within intentional professional communities of practice facilitated by online platforms. The significance of this study lies in its ability to illuminate a potential solution for Australian school leaders who are facing unprecedented external and internal pressures. The literature review and participants' experiences suggest promising applications for online environments to enhance and extend leadership thinking, doing and being.

A limitation of this study is that the research was confined to Australian school settings in predominantly regional and rural settings. Whilst multiple states, age range, experience levels and years of leadership was represented, I believe further research could include many more elements that are characteristic of a school leader, such as global and K12, urban and rural. Secondly, sample size is a potential limitation. In evaluating the impact of the limitation it should be noted that that this study did not intend to identify correlations or make statistically valid generalisations to generate theory. I believe a larger sample would be beneficial in providing greater depth and diversity of experiences to draw from.

A final limitation is the focus on a single online community of practice within one sector (education) and one population (leaders). Generalisation was not a primary concern for my research, although I believe further research across business sectors, audiences and platforms might provide fascinating insights. Further investigation utilising different methodologies and larger and more diverse samples would be of great value in obtaining a fuller and more representative picture of the phenomenon of interest.

Summary

‘The role of the principal of a school in the 21st century is one of the most exciting and significant undertaken by any person in our society. Principals “help shape the future”’ (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011).

We know that highly effective leaders are knowledgeable about and engage in research and are constantly reflecting on their own leadership and impact. We know that leadership is both influenced by and influences the context within which their work is situated. We know that engagement in formal and informal social and situated learning with communities of leaders is viewed as fundamental for sustaining and growing leadership. My research has shown that, when thoughtfully implemented, online communities can provide new places, spaces and times for leaders to explore new ways of doing, knowing and being leaders. The leader in an online community of practice of leaders can construct and re-construct what it means to be a leader and a learner as they ‘live within the problems’ and explore shared solutions and opportunities with their colleagues

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: INTRODUCTION LETTERS

Dear (insert participant name)

I am writing to you on behalf of Mr Mark Sparvell.

Mark is currently completing his Masters at the School of Education at Flinders University.

He is undertaking research leading to the production of a thesis or other publications on the subject of "An appreciative investigation of school leaders in Palnet online community of practice."

Mark would be grateful if you would volunteer to assist in this investigation, by consenting to be interviewed for approximately one hour (with a possibly follow up interview to check with you the accuracy of the material).

Be assured that any information provided will be treated in the strictest confidence and none of the participants will be individually identifiable in the resulting thesis, report or other publications.

You are, of course, free to choose not to participate, to discontinue participation at any time or to decline to answer particular questions.

Any enquiries you may have concerning this project should be directed to me at the address given above or by telephone on 08 83942145 or by email (leonie.stamatelopoulos@pai.edu.au).

If you agree to participate, please read the enclosed information, complete the consent form and return to me at your earliest convenience. If you prefer not to participate you are required to do nothing further and we thank you for your engagement within the palnet community.

Yours sincerely,

Leonie Stamatelopoulos

Executive Assistant

School leaders Australia Institute

205 Greenhill Road

Eastwood, South Australia, 5063

This research project has been approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (Project No. 6516).

For more information regarding ethical approval of the project the Executive Officer of the Committee can be contacted by telephone on 8201 3116, by fax on 8201 2035 or by email human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au.

School of Education

Room 5.56, Education Building

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Adelaide SA 5001

Tel: 08 8201 2266

Michael.bell@flinders.edu.au

LETTER OF INTRODUCTION

Dear (insert name of participant)

This letter is to introduce Mr Mark Sparvell who is a Masters student in the Department of Education at Flinders University. He will produce his student card, which carries a photograph, as proof of identity. Mark is also an Associate Director, Professional Learning at School leaders Australia Institute.

He is undertaking research leading to the production of a thesis or other publications on the subject of "The experiences of school leaders in Palnet online community of practice."

He would be most grateful if you would volunteer to assist in this project, by granting an interview which covers certain aspects of this topic. No more than one hour on up to two occasions would be required.

Be assured that any information provided will be treated in the strictest confidence and none of the participants will be individually identifiable in the resulting thesis, report or other publications. You are, of course, entirely free to discontinue your participation at any time or to decline to answer particular questions.

Since he intends to make a screen recording of the Skype interview, he will seek your consent, on the attached form, to record the interview, to use the recording or a transcription in preparing the thesis, report or other publications, on condition that your name or identity is not revealed, and to make the recording available to other researchers on the same conditions. It may be necessary to make the recording available to secretarial assistants for transcription, in which case you may be assured that such persons will be advised of the requirement that your name or identity not be revealed and that the confidentiality of the material is respected and maintained.

Any enquiries you may have concerning this project should be directed to me at the address given above or by telephone on 8201 2266, by fax or by email Michael.bell@flinders.edu.au Thank you for your attention and assistance.

Yours sincerely

Dr Michael Bell

This research project has been approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (Project Number 9615). For more information regarding ethical approval of the project the Executive Officer of the Committee can be contacted by telephone on 8201 3116, by fax on 8201 2035 or by email human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au..

APPENDIX B: SEMI STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

My intent is to provide participants with an invitation to engage in conversation around the enabling factors related to their positive experiences within Palnet. I refer back to the previously stated research questions:

1. What is the nature of school leaders' experiences as active members of the Palnet community of practice?

2. How can engagement with an online community of practice contribute to the ongoing professional growth of leaders?

3. What are some contextual factors that influence leaders' positive engagement in Palnet as an online community of practice?

Proposed conversation invitations

As an opener

This conversation will be focused on your experiences within a particular online environment PALNET.

To begin with I am interested in your personal and professional uses of and thoughts around social media. Things like: What do you use, why, when…. And what is the nature of your experiences and relationships with online social media?

A harder one then…. People use the term ‘Network’ and ‘Professional Learning Community’….as I’m not an educator, how would you help me understand the difference?

Think back on your experiences within Palnet. I’m going to get you to help me understand the conditions in which a school leader could be fully engaged in professional growth within an online community.

Possible prompt: Thinking about people and their roles, how did they help (knowledge skills, qualities, accessibility, credibility)?

Possible prompt: You came together twice for face-to-face events. Can you reflect on how this supported the online activities (relationship building, clarifying, understanding, social)?

Possible prompt: What about the online environment; how supportive was it (permanent record, mobility, access)?

Possible prompts: You had formal activities such as responses to reading and there was informal engagement through the forums too. Can you reflect upon the importance of these as part of professional learning (express ‘full selves’, explain professional topics within contexts)?

Why do you think there is merit in online spaces to support communities of professional practice, especially for leaders (reduce isolation to profession, support, empowering, chance to think out loud, lead in a different space)?

What would be your advice to someone who decides to build an online community for professionals?

2. I’m interested to hear your views about how engagement with Palnet has supported your professional learning.

Possible prompt: Why is a community important for professional learning?

Possible prompt: People often engage in different levels, from ‘lurking, providing minimal response through to very active constructing and questioning. Talk me through the kinds of ways you engaged and what caused changes.

Thinking particularly of the online experiences, how have they supported your learning (sense of understanding of challenges and opportunities in online spaces, frustration, persistence, realisation)?

I am interested for you to reflect on the opportunity for leadership development within these kinds of environments. How might they allow for leadership to flourish, maybe unexpectedly (different ages/ career stages/ contexts)?

It was an experiment to place the academic learning in the FLO (Flinders Learning Online) and the professional engagement within the Palnet space. Just talk me through what benefits you think there are when a diverse community connected only by their shared profession works in such a way.

3. What has enabled your positive engagement with the Palnet online community?

Note: prompts ‘internal’, ‘external’, ‘drivers’, relationship’, ‘support’, ‘purpose’, ‘value’

Possible prompt: I’m interested in the professional learning communities/ networks you may be involved in either online or in real life and how this RELS/ Palnet experience is similar/ different.

Possible prompts: How were you ‘set up for success’ for this experience through your personal and professional experiences?

4. **I’m very interested to know whether there was a shift from learning individually to building new understandings together at any time in your experience. This may have happened through group forum discussions, face to face, when reviewing the work of others etc.**

Possible prompts: How did this arise? What was this experience like? Have you had a similar experience previously or since?

Possible prompt: When do you experience this in real life and what are the conditions?

Interview completion: Review the three intents at the start and allow for any further commentary if the participants feel this is required.

Thank you for the time you have provided today. Do you have any questions or further commentary for me before we conclude the interview?

APPENDIX C: SELF INTERVIEW

1. Thinking about your experiences within Palnet, could you describe for me the times when you felt fully engaged in professional growth?

I'm thinking back to a group I created, Leaders Leading ICT. I remember creating the group and populating it with some resources to start to explore what the current issues were for leaders. I then invited one of the thought leaders. These were a group of leaders from the states and territories who had been identified as having an interest in the early group topics, such as Australian Curriculum, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education, Rural and Remote Education and so on. I invited Max to share the group orchestration with me. So Max and I had this interest in ICT issues around change management for leaders as instructional leaders and, through the Palnet forum, our thinking out loud acted as a catalyst for others and quickly the conversation thread grew. I remember sharing this with face-to-face groups I was working with and saw how the different perspectives around BYOD or mobile use was being explored and shaped. Colleagues from other states and sectors would contribute research/ initiatives which, at that point, were largely kept 'within' and through the Palnet forum. The thinking and the resources were shared, commented on and contributed to the professions knowledge base.

I not only received and contributed professional thinking around the topic of ICT. I was actually involved in working in the very space that was being explored for education, that is, using online spaces to bring together people to socialise learning, to create new ideas, to network and to deprivatise conversations so that the learning could becomes public.

Possible prompt: What did you do to explore dimensions of educational leadership that were important to you?

I joined groups that were built around topics I was interested in or groups for which I knew the group orchestrators. This was tricky, though, and it became apparent that many conversations were connected across groups by broader themes. Discussions about rural and remote crossed into curriculum, crossed into change and crossed into leading ICT. I subscribed to the groups of interest and received a useful summary each day of discussions within groups. I was then able to choose to invest my response time in those areas in which there was the most activity and buzz.

2.I'm interested to hear your views about how engagement with Palnet has supported your professional learning.

Palnet provided me with the professional learning I needed at the time. What I liked was that I had access to professional voices and experiences beyond my state, my system and context. Through palnet I engaged with Ches and through him, the Australian Special Education Principals Association. This happened with XXXX from XXXX again, with colleagues to whom I was introduced through their professional thinking before being aware of their position or sector. Importantly, I was able to develop a broader understanding of the shared challenges for education in Australia, and access some engaging and useful people and their assets. Professional relationships with Palnet members have continued outside of the online space because I have met with and worked alongside Palnet members in other professional contexts. The 'composing' of a 'thought' in an online space and one that is clearly a 'professional space' has actually provided a chance for me to reflect upon the purpose of posting. Am I seeking moderation of an idea? Am I seeking advice? Am I sharing? Am I asking for a resource? Am I simply stating without seeking a reaction?

I have used the archived conversations, the recorded webinars and the Palnet resource library to retrieve materials for professional development activities, such as for running a session on blogging, I was able to access commentary and recorded the Palnet webinar featuring Eric Sheninger.

Possible prompt: Did you ever feel you were taking on different roles? Can you explore how that experience supported your learning?

Sure, in some situations when you are wanting to initiate a discussion, you need to take a very active role. I would research, locate some stimulus material such as a YouTube clip and maybe shape a question/ provocation. I would then reach out to colleagues to invite contribution. The cool thing is when you see others taking on this model, they've seen how to seed a professional conversation and when it happens, I am able to take on a role of participant in professional discourse. This happened most recently when a pre-service teacher posted a clip to do with 'What would you do if money was no object' and invited viewing and reaction…awesome to watch. This has supported my learning, particularly around learning design for online spaces, and has really challenged my thinking regarding how professional learning is designed and delivered. Words such as 'contributory' have replaced 'participatory' and because of my exploration of these kinds of environments, I now use other online spaces such as Answergarden, TodaysMeet and Pollanywhere and also webinars, all because this

experience has really illustrated the importance of connecting conversations, creating artefacts from conversation and providing an extended learning experience beyond a staff meeting or conference in physical time and space.

3.What has enabled your positive engagement with the Palnet online community?

For me, personally knowing some of the members from previous work certainly helped because I felt I was having a professional conversation with a trusted colleague. It just happened to be online. Receiving a response to my postings certainly motivated me - as simple as a 'like', a brief comment and even a challenging question. I enjoyed watching a conversation I had seeded grow. I think realising that activity ebbs and flows and conversations didn't need to reach any kind of conclusion allowed me to 'let go' and enjoy the conversation, the debate and contributory experience without an 'outcome' hangup.

I think the environment itself helped in some ways with topics being created. I think the professional context helped, that is, knowing everyone was involved in education. I liked the fact that there were no ads, no one selling whiteboards! My own association chat lines are useful but this gave mea space for big idea thinking across the profession, which was really valuable. In a role that took me away from my professional colleagues, I valued Palnet for keeping my finger on the pulse about what the profession was grappling to sense make about.

Note: prompts 'internal', 'external', 'drivers', relationship', 'support', 'purpose', 'value'

4.Can you tell me if you have ever felt yourself in a process of professional knowledge construction.

I feel I've answered this

APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

(by interview)

The Edge of Constructing Ourselves: An appreciative investigation into the experiences of school leaders in Palnet online community of practice. (9615)

I ….....

being over the age of 18 years, hereby consent to participate, as requested on the phone/ Skype interview, in the research project on professional experiences within the Palnet online community.

I have read the information provided.

Details of procedures and any risks have been explained to my satisfaction.

I agree to audio recording of my information and participation.

I am aware that I should retain a copy of the Information Sheet and Consent Form for future reference.

I understand that:

I may not directly benefit from taking part in this research.

I am free to withdraw from the project at any time and am free to decline to answer particular questions.

While the information gained in this study will be published as explained, I will not be identified, and individual information will remain confidential.

Whether I participate or not, or withdraw after participating, will have no effect on any treatment or service that is being provided to me.

Whether I participate or not, or withdraw after participating, will have no effect on my progress in

my course of study, or results gained.

I may ask that the recording/observation be stopped at any time, and that I may withdraw at any time from the session or the research without disadvantage.

I agree/do not agree* to the transcript being made available to other researchers who are not members of this research team, but who are judged by the research team to be doing related research, on condition that my identity is not revealed. * *delete as appropriate*

Participant's signature……Date……...

Mark Sparvell

School of Education

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CRICOS Provider No. 00114A

CRICOS Provider No. 00114A

APPENDIX E: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Title: The Edge of Constructing Ourselves

Project Number: 6516

Researcher:

Mr. Mark Sparvell

School of Education

Flinders University

Ph: 08 8201 2266

Mark.sparvell@flinders.edu.au

Supervisor:

Dr. Michael Bell

School of Education

Flinders University

Ph: 08 8201 2266

Michael.bell@flinders.edu.au

Description of the study:

This study is part of the project titled 'The Edge of Constructing Ourselves'. This project will investigate the experiences of school leaders who have been engaged with the online community of professional practice, Palnet. This project is supported by Flinders University Education department.

Purpose of the study:

The aim of this project is to find out whether the participants' Palnet participation contributes to the development of professional capacity and can provide insights into professional engagement in online communities

What will I be asked to do?

You are invited to attend a one-on-one interview (via phone or Skype) with me. I will ask you a few semi-structured interview questions about your experiences within the Palnet community. The interview will take about 45 minutes. The interview will be recorded to help me to examine the results. Once recorded, the interview will be transcribed (typed-up) and stored in a computer file, and destroyed once the results have been finalised. This is voluntary.

What benefit will I gain from being involved in this study?

I hope the 'telling of your story' will be a beneficial exercise for you personally. The sharing of your experiences will improve the planning and delivery of future online professional communities by the Institute. The intention is to share the research findings within the Palnet community and through the author with various educational journals and publications.

Will I be identifiable by being involved in this study?

We do not need your name and you will be anonymous. Once the interview has been typed-up and saved as a file, the voice file will eventually be destroyed (a year from publication of the research). Any identifying information will be removed and the typed-up file stored on a password-protected computer that only the researcher will have access to. Your comments will not be linked directly to you.

Are there any risks or discomforts if I am involved?

It is possible that other group members might be able to identify your contributions even though they will not be directly attributed to you. The Palnet community has a membership of over 3,500 presently and the identification of the small number of individuals required would make identification very unlikely.

How do I agree to participate?

Participation is voluntary. You may answer 'no comment' or refuse to answer any questions and you are free to withdraw from the interview at any time without effect or consequences. A consent form accompanies this information sheet. If you agree to participate please read and sign the form and send it back to Leonie at Principal Australia Institute (leonie.stamatelopoulos@pai.edu.au) 205 Greenhill Road, Eastwood SA 5063

How will I receive feedback?

The outcomes of the project will be summarised and provided directly to you.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and we hope that you will accept our invitation to be involved.

*This research project has been approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (*6516). *For more information regarding ethical approval of the project, the executive officer of the committee can be contacted by telephone on 8201 3116, by fax on 8201 2035 or by email at human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au*

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