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Professional communities of teacher educators: the characteristics that promote their success

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ABSTRACT

This study examined Communities of Practice (CoPs) composed of senior teacher educators. Our goals were: (1) to identify factors that contribute to or hinder the success of CoPs, (2) to consider the characteristics that help CoP coordinators be effective leaders. The research used qualitative data-collection and analysis. It targeted inter-organizational CoPs supported by the MOFET institute in Israel, interviewing 23 participants and 12 coordinators of 13 different CoPs. Factors perceived as contributing to a community's successful functioning were: choosing a topic relevant to community members, engaging in activities that contribute to participants' professional development and establishing positive interpersonal relationships between community members. Hindering factors were essentially the absence of the aforementioned characteristics and technical difficulties. Participants claimed that community coordinators needed to balance their own leadership with participants' initiatives, while addressing the community's needs. The findings suggest that inter-institutional CoPs can serve as a framework for educational leaders' professional development and may inform their planning.

Introduction

High-quality teacher education is essential to ensure high-quality teaching (European Commission, 2013). In recent years, there has been a growing body of research concerning teacher educators: the roles they fulfill and their professional development needs (Czerniawski, Guberman, & MacPhail, 2017; Lunenberg, Dengerink, & Korthagen, 2014). However, teacher educators' professional development is still an under-researched area (Knight et al., 2014). Within this area, the professional development of teacher educators in educational leadership positions has attracted even less attention, despite their influential roles (Smith, 2017) and despite the fact that imminent reforms in education and teacher education may require changes in teacher educators' professional development (Avidov-Ungar, 2018; Cochran-Smith, 2003; Fullan, 2007).

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The current study deals with Communities of Practice (CoPs) employed as a means for the professional development of teacher educators who hold educational leadership roles in academic teacher-education colleges.

The study was conducted at the MOFET Institute in Israel. MOFET is a non-profit organization established by the Ministry of Education in order to provide professional development opportunities to teacher educators. In addition to its academic programs, MOFET provides support to think tanks and CoPs (Golan & Reichenberg, 2015; Reichenberg, Kleeman, & Sagee, 2013). These CoPs consist of faculty members who hold equivalent educational leadership positions within their respective teacher-education colleges. Thus, there are CoPs for heads of age-related teaching programmes (such as early childhood education), discipline-based CoPs (teaching English, sciences, etc.) and CoPs for other educational leaders (such as school of education deans). This study explores participants' perceptions concerning factors that promote CoPs' success.

Through a review of the relevant literature, we first describe teacher educators' roles and professional development needs, and then explain how CoPs serve as a means to address those needs. This is followed by a discussion of the special case of inter-institutional CoPs as a means for educational leaders' professional development. Finally, we turn to MOFET's inter-institutional CoPs for teacher educators in leadership positions.

Literature review

The complex role of teacher educators

Teacher educators fulfill various roles, each of which requires professional learning. They also need to update themselves on recent developments in society and on new educational policies and methods. Teaching adults in higher education institutes may require different teaching and assessment methods than those used in schools. Second order teaching (i.e. teaching how to teach) involves the conceptualization of implicit knowledge of teaching and its presentation in an explicit manner (Lunenberg et al., 2014; Murray & Male, 2005; Swennen, Jones, & Volman, 2010). Teacher educators must be familiar with research in their field and are often required to conduct research and publish their studies in peer-reviewed journals (Lunenberg et al., 2014; Murray, 2010; Swennen et al., 2010; Tack & Vanderlinde, 2014). In addition to these many roles, as part of their professional development teacher educators' need to clarify and critically examine their educational vision and values, and consider how they should be expressed in their teaching practices (Loughran, 2014; Vanassche et al., 2015). As educators of the future generation of teachers, teacher educators need to collaborate to form high-quality programs (Kelchtermans, Smith, & Vanderlinde, 2018).

Teacher educators' professional development needs

In many academic institutes, teacher educators must contend with unsystematic professional development. There are numerous gaps between the actual roles that teacher educators fulfill and the training they receive, which is often inadequate (Goodwin et al., 2014). Hence, teacher educators need to take care of their own professional development (Patton & Parker, 2017). In a special issue of the *Journal of Teacher Education*, dedicated to

teacher educators' professional development and practices, Knight et al. (2014) noted that a great deal of knowledge was still needed in order to understand how best to prepare and encourage the professional development of teacher educators.

A recent article by Van der Klink, Kools, Avissar, White, and Sakata (2017) investigating the views of veteran teacher educators from various countries, found that teacher educators' concerns varied over the course of their careers. During their induction, they tended to focus on survival. Later on, they were concerned with their own professional identity and development, as well as the quality of teacher education they provided and their students' learning. Experienced teacher educators were the target of a comprehensive survey conducted by Czerniawski et al. (2017). This survey involved over a thousand experienced teacher educators from seven countries. It found that teacher educators' professional development needs to be revolved around two main areas of concern: research and pedagogy. Learning with peers and from them was the preferred mode of learning.

Communities of Practice (CoPs) are learning groups that enable participants to learn from each other and expand their knowledge together. In the following section, we present a theoretical conceptualization of CoPs, based upon Wenger's theory (Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner, Fenton-O'Creevy, Hutchison, Kubiak, & Wenger-Trayner, 2015) and then outline the contribution of CoPs to teacher educators' professional development.

Communities of practice (CoPs)

A Community of Practice (CoP) consists of professionals who meet regularly, and together examine their professional knowledge and practices, in an attempt to improve them (Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). There are several characteristics of CoPs which distinguish them from other types of professional meetings. Members of CoPs have a shared domain of interest, and a common vision that ignites their imagination and guides their actions towards its fulfillment. Participants are professionals who enjoy professional autonomy. They join the community out of their commitment to its vision and view themselves as accountable for its actions and success. Participants engage in open, reflective and critical discourse through which the meaning of their practice is negotiated and clarified. They focus upon learning through an active process in which they review their current practices critically, suggest new ideas and try them out. This is in sharp contrast with other forms of professional development in which participants learn and are expected to apply 'best practices' produced elsewhere. CoPs meet frequently and regularly over prolonged periods. Over time, mutual consultation and support build trusting relationships that enable participants to share their concerns with each other and give them the confidence to expose their practices to critical scrutiny. Communications and collaboration between participants are continuous, taking place during as well as between formal meetings. As a result, CoPs produce a unique repertoire of resources and products, such as conceptualizations, vocabulary, documents and practices. Finally, CoPs have clear (yet dynamic) borders, distinguishing between those who are part of the community and those who are not (Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015).

Communities of practice (CoPs) as a framework for teacher educators' professional development

During the last two decades, CoPs have become a preferred model for professional development in education (Sjoer & Meirink, 2016; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006; Westheimer, 2008), following the failure of earlier attempts to improve schools through external interventions, and the growing understanding that educators are professionals who can contribute from their experience to their own and their colleagues' professional development and need to be engaged in lifelong learning (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008).

In educational contexts, including teacher education, CoPs assume diverse forms. Some communities operate online, and others meet face to face; some are very small, with a handful of participants, whereas others are large; some operate within a single academic institute, while others are inter-organizational; some are informal whereas others are established and supported by an organizing institute. The subject matter of the shared domains are also diverse, and include students' learning, research and scholarly writing, or enhancing social activism (Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). More specific types of CoPs include Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) that focus upon improving students' learning. PLC participants plan their teaching activities together, observe each other's lessons, and analyze evidence of students' learning (Margolin, 2011; Stoll et al., 2006;). Communities of Enquiry are another type of CoPs in which educators conduct collaborative practice-based research (Willemse, Boei1, & Pillen, 2016).

The contribution of CoPs to teacher educators' professional development is manifold. Participation in CoPs removes barriers isolating teacher educators and provides social and emotional support, enhancing participants' feelings of self-confidence (Brody & Hadar, 2017; Margolin, 2011; Patton & Parker, 2017). Brody and Hadar (2017) reported that college-based teacher educators' participation in a CoP resulted in transformed teaching methods and raised teacher educators' awareness of their students' learning. Margolin (2011) described how a CoP transformed teaching practices at the institutional level – in addition to its effects upon individual teacher educators. Barak, Gidron, and Turniansky (2011) found that feelings of mutual trust, engendered by the CoP, encouraged teacher educators to take risks and explore new ways of teaching, thus positioning themselves as novices. Together, they conceptualized the knowledge they acquired, and shared it with the professional community. Beginning teacher educators who work in research-demanding environments find that CoPs support their research and scholarly writing (Shteiman, Gidron, & Eilon, 2013; Vanassche et al., 2015; Willemse et al., 2016).

CoPs of educators in leadership positions

CoPs of educators in leadership positions include CoPs of school leaders (for example, Dickson & Mitchell, 2014; Psencik & Brown, 2018), superintendents (Dickson & Mitchell, 2014) and heterogeneous groups where policymakers, administrators, school staff, public organizations and communities' representatives collaborate (Cashman, Cuniff Linehan, Rosser, Wenger-Trayner, & Wenger-Trayner, 2015; MacIver & Groginsky, 2011). Research found that CoPs reduce educational leaders' sense of isolation, and encourage mutual support and learning instead of rivalry and competition (Psencik & Brown, 2018).

Furthermore, educational leaders' CoPs help them provide better support to teachers and students' learning (Dickson & Mitchell, 2014; Psencik & Brown, 2018). Heterogeneous, inter-institutional CoPs of educational leaders are particularly effective in helping leaders to achieve coordinated, wide-range effects such as reducing high school dropout rate (MacIver & Groginsky, 2011) or improving coordination between service providers to students with special needs (Cashman et al., 2015) at the state and national levels.

Little is known, however, about educational leaders' perceptions of the CoPs in which they participate: What factors do they see as contributing to their success? How do they perceive their coordinators? The current study focuses on which characteristics that influencing the CoP's functioning, and on the characteristics that help coordinators lead their communities. These questions were studied in the context of MOFET's inter-institutional CoPs for teacher educators in leadership positions.

The context of the study

Traditionally, Israeli teacher education colleges educated teachers to work in the education system up to junior-high schools, and universities for senior-high schools. The colleges of education operated (and many of them still do) under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, whereas the universities work under the auspices of the Council for Higher Education. In 1983, The Israeli Ministry of Education established the MOFET Institute to provide professional development to teacher educators from all of the country's teacher education colleges. CoPs for teacher educators with similar educational leadership positions were initiated to enhance personal as well as collective professional development.

The activities of each CoP are neither dictated nor predetermined. They may include discussion of professional issues, keeping abreast of contemporary professional literature and the policies of the Ministry of Education, coordinating activities addressing current challenges, writing and publishing of position papers, joint research, etc. Participation in CoPs is voluntary. Participants may join out of personal interest or occasionally on the recommendation of their college president. Some CoPs include representatives from universities, the Ministry of Education and other stakeholders in addition to teacher educators. CoPs convene on a monthly basis during the academic year (i.e. there are 6–10 meetings each year), yet participants communicate with each other and work together informally in a continuous manner.

Each CoP has a coordinator who leads the community for a period of 3 to 5 years. Coordinators may be selected by other participants, the previous coordinator, or MOFET's director of peer learning activities. Coordinators are the only participants remunerated for their participation (with the equivalent of payment for two teaching hours). Coordinators face substantial challenges: they need to form a relevant framework for the participants, nurture trusting relationships between them, and avoid competitiveness (this is a challenge not so much because of participants' personalities, but because they represent the often-conflicting interests of their work-places). They must find a way to lead their community without the benefit of a formally recognized authority and encourage participants to continue their activities despite their workload and the absence of remuneration.

Over the last decade, the number of CoPs hosted by MOFET has increased, as has the number of participants in each community. Nevertheless, they have been the subject of very

few studies. One study (Welicker-Pollak, Goldenberg, & Klibanski, 2007) found that participants reported that the CoPs contributed to their professional development as teacher educators. More than half of the participants reported that they routinely shared information and topics discussed at community meetings with non-member colleagues. Overall, participants evaluated the CoPs' contribution to their professional development as medium-high. However, this study also found that approximately one-half of the interviewed participants reported that they did not attend community meetings on a regular basis, because they did not view them as contributing to their practical work at their teacher-education college. Some CoPs were thriving, whereas others were relatively inactive and eventually dissolved. The fact that the research literature, in general, emphasizes the potential contribution of CoPs, together with the recent proliferation of CoPs, raises the question of how CoPs' activities can be structured to maximize their potential benefits. More specifically, the current study addresses the following questions: (1) Which characteristics do participants perceive as contributing to or hindering their CoP's successful functioning? (2) In their opinion, which characteristics help coordinators lead their communities?

These are interesting questions given the influential positions of the CoPs' participants on the one hand, and the paucity of studies that target CoPs for senior teacher educators, on the other hand.

Methods

A qualitative research framework guided the collection and analysis of data. We used qualitative methodology as it brings forward participants' views and enables the identification of potential influencing factors that either contributed to or harmed the communities (Marshall & Rossman, 2019). The data were analyzed in accordance with the four stages of analysis proposed by Marshall and Rossman (2019): organization of the data; eliciting categories; organization of categories into primary and secondary categories; counting and examining the findings in order to find explanations. The encoding process relied on the principals of comparative analysis described by Glaser and Strauss (2017). This analysis involved the comparison of all coded elements within and between categories and sub-categories. Finally, the categories produced from all the research interviews were compared to identify main themes relating to the identification of characteristics encouraging or hindering the success of the CoPs, and actions and characteristics that help the group coordinator to lead the community.

Participants

CoPs Table 1 presents the 13 CoPs that this study targeted. They represent the variety of CoPs that operate at MOFET: heads of preparation/programs for different school levels (such as elementary schools), heads of discipline-based programmes (such as special education and mathematics) and heads of other units at the colleges of education (for example, support centres for students with learning disabilities). Ten of the CoPs had a single coordinator and three had two collaborating coordinators. Six of the CoPs were attended by other senior position holders from various institutions (colleges, universities, Ministry of Education and NGOs), in addition to teacher educators. The CoPs

Table 1. List of CoPs and interviewees.

CoP	Number of participants	Number of coordinators	Participants from other institutions	Years of activity	70% of persistent participants	Interviewees		
						Participants	Coordinators	Overall
Elementary schools	8	2	No	26	5	2	1	3
English	11	1	Yes	16	5	2	1	3
Natural sciences	8	1	No	20	4	1	1	2
Mathematics	8	1	No	16	5	2		2
Psychology	6	1	No	8	6		1	1
Special education	11	1	No	24	9	2	1	3
Support centers for students with learning disabilities	20	1	Yes	5	15	2	1	3
Internship programs for beginning teachers	50	2	Yes	18	44	2	1	3
Professional development for in-service teachers	12	1	No	8	8	2	1	3
In-service teachers' promotion	20	1	Yes	5	16	2	1	3
Pre-service programs for outstanding students	23	2	Yes	14	22	2	1	3
ICT	18	1	No	10	7	2	1	3
Libraries	17	1	Yes	21	8	2	1	3
Overall						23	12	35

had been active for a period ranging from 5 to 26 years (median, 16 years). The number of participants in each CoP ranged from 6 to 50 (median, 12). To assess attendance, we calculated the rate of perseverant participants, i.e. those who attended 70% or more of the meetings. The rate of perseverant/OR regular participants ranged between 39% and 100% (median, 67%).

Interviewees Thirty-five interviewees participated in the study: 23 were CoP participants and 12 were CoP coordinators. All interviewees – with the exception of two – were women. Their ages ranged between 40 and 72 years old (median, 56 years of age). We interviewed the coordinators of most of the selected CoPs, and 1–2 participants in each, selected at random from the participants' list.

Researchers R.S., who is the MOFET Institute's director of peer learning, initiated the current study. She felt she needed feedback in order to improve her support for the CoPs. O.A. and O.D. conducted the interviews. They were active coordinators of CoPs at the time. This positioned them very close to the interviewees, as persons who were familiar with MOFET's CoPs. Nevertheless, they were not friends of the interviewees, and had only scant acquaintance with some of them. A.G. was a coordinator of a CoP

many years before the study. That CoP dissolved a few years after she stepped down. This positioned the first three authors (O.A, A.G and O.D) as colleagues of the CoP coordinators that were interviewed, with no relationships of authority with any of the interviewees. The fourth author had no relationships of authority with CoP participants, since MOFET only provides logistic support to CoPs. However, CoP coordinators are appointed and remunerated by MOFET. To minimize the effect this may have had upon the interviews, R.S., the Institute's director, did not participate in the interviews.

Instruments

The research instrument was a semi-structured interview. The interviews were conducted in Hebrew, the native tongue of all the participants. All interviewees were asked about their experiences in the CoP, their evaluation of the CoP's contribution to their professional development, difficulties experienced and factors that contributed to or hindered the successful functioning of the CoP. In addition, participants were asked about desirable and undesirable behaviors and traits of CoP coordinators, whereas CoP coordinators were asked about the main difficulties encountered in leading and administering a CoP. The interviews were piloted with three participants and one coordinator. Following the pilot, the interview protocol was shortened, and the order of questions changed.

Procedure

R. S. (the fourth author) issued a letter to all interviewees asking for their help in the study that aimed to learn from their experience with MOFET's CoPs. After a few days, an author (either O.A. or O.D.) contacted the potential interviewees and asked them to participate in the study, and they all agreed.

Interviews were conducted over the phone and lasted approximately 50 min. They were recorded and transcribed. The recordings were then deleted and only the printed interview files were stored. There are advantages and disadvantages to interviews conducted by telephone. The telephone was used because the participants live all over Israel. In addition, the relative anonymity of telephone interviews can reduce the interviewer's effect on the interviewee and support sincere disclosure (Carr & Wotrh, 2001). In our case, we hoped that the fact that the interviews were conducted by telephone interviews and our emphasis on our need for authentic answers would reduce interviewees' tendency to provide 'desirable' answers. Nonetheless, social desirability could still play a significant role, influencing interviewees' responses. It is also noted that we could not relate to interviewees' gestures and facial expressions, and had to rely only on verbal and intonation cues (Carr & Wotrh, 2001; Opdenakker, 2006).

Data analysis

Data analysis included the four stages suggested by Marshall and Rossman (2019):

(a) Organization of the data: reading the transcribed text and identifying content units. A unit of analysis should be an excerpt from the text that has a meaning of its own and contains a single idea or piece of information. We divided the responses into

comments, each containing one characteristic of the community or the coordinator. For example, 'we are a very relevant community'.

(b) Eliciting categories: Clustering comments into content categories. Positive comments relating to factors contributing to the CoP's success were separated from negative comments. Thus, for example, we clustered together, under the category of 'pleasant atmosphere', the comments 'there's a good relationship between people' and 'meeting people is a positive social experience'. The comment 'there's something unpleasant in the group' was clustered as a negative comment relating to the atmosphere and was considered a hindering factor.

(c) Organization of categories: hierarchical organization of categories into primary and secondary categories. Primary categories were, for example, 'professional development', and 'interpersonal relations'. Secondary categories were distinct aspects of the primary categories. For example, the category 'professional development' included, inter alia, the two secondary categories: 'receiving practical tools' and 'peer learning'. Two researchers assigned comments to content categories, and the agreement between them was checked. Disputed cases were discussed by all authors until the consensual agreement was achieved.

(d) Counting and examining the findings in order to find explanations. Comments in each category were counted, distinguishing between factors described as contributing to the explanation of the CoP's success and those hindering it. Within each interview, comments relating to secondary categories were counted as *types* and not as *tokens*, so that comments relating to the same secondary category throughout the same interview were only counted once.

At the outset, we thought there would be differences between participants' and coordinators' answers. However, during the analysis, no differences were found, and therefore the answers of both groups are presented together. The findings are set out in two parts. The first represents interviewees' answers concerning factors that influence CoPs' success, while the second part deals with coordinators' characteristics. The citations presented in the Findings section were translated from Hebrew, the original language into English in order to incorporate them within this article.

Findings

A. characteristics that influence CoPs' success

The first research question was: Which characteristics, in the respondents' opinion, contributed to or hindered CoPs' success? The comments received in response to this question related to six primary categories: CoPs' contribution to participants' professional development, the topics they addressed, their work habits, interpersonal relationships within CoPs, practical factors and the coordinators. Findings relating to the first five categories are presented in Table 2, while the community coordinator is dealt with in the next sub-chapter.

Table 2. Factors affecting CoPs' success.

Primary categories	Secondary categories	Positive comments	Negative comments	Number of comments	Number of respondents
Professional Development		**170**	**26**	**196**	**34**
Personal Level	New knowledge	34	3	37	34
	Theoretical discussions, lectures and workshops	24	1	25	24
	Practical tools	14	4	18	15
	Learning about the role	8	1	9	9
	Updates on policy and administration	7		7	7
	Academic skills	4		4	4
	Visits	2		2	2
Group Level	Peer learning	33	5	38	33
	Consultation and problem-solving	26	2	28	26
The Public Domain	Influence	18	10	28	20
Topics		**75**	**51**	**126**	**33**
	Relevant topics	18	14	32	23
	Personal interest	23	16	39	26
	Coordinating expectations	14	9	23	19
	Addressing professional needs	12	5	17	13
	Common goals	8	3	11	9
	Vague objectives[1]		4	4	4
Work Practices		**62**	**43**	**105**	**34**
	Attendance[2]	14	18	32	24
	Commitment	3	4	7	7
	Team work	9	1	10	9
	Active involvement	23	9	32	24
	Continued work	11	1	12	12
	Goal orientation and thoroughness	2	10	12	11
Interpersonal Relations		**74**	**21**	**95**	**32**
	Pleasant atmosphere	16	11	27	18
	Social cohesion	8	5	13	11
	Openness	10	2	12	11
	Support	19	1	20	19
	Networking	21	2	23	23
Practical Factors		**5**	**40**	**45**	**25**
	Commute[1]		16	16	16
	Lack of time[1]		12	12	12
	Coordinating dates[1]		10	10	10
	Physical conditions	5	2	7	6
Additional Characteristics		**15**	**3**	18	**15**
	Personal enjoyment	10	1	11	10
	Prestige	3	2	5	5
	Ab breaking from the routine	2		2	2
Overall		401	184	585	

Table 2 presents respondents' comments relating to factors affecting CoPs' success according to primary and secondary categories. 'Positive comments' are those that mention the respective category as contributing to the CoP's success. 'Negative comments' are those that refer to the lack of the respective category as hindering success. [1] Respondents view this category as a hindering factor. [2] Five respondents claimed that too many participants hindered their CoP's success.

Professional development

CoPs' contribution to participants' professional development was the most prevalent category. It was identified at three levels: personal, group and public. At the personal level, 34 interviewees said they acquired new, emphasizing and innovative knowledge

through the community's discussions, lectures, workshops and visits to educational institutes.

> [It's] a good platform, where you can hear about whatever is going on; especially innovations, updates on what is happening here and in the world. A platform where you can get to know new databases and diverse work methods. The formal framework is good for me, but I also learn a lot in the breaks. I learn and there are interesting items.

Three respondents felt that lack of innovation harmed their community and one respondent thought her CoP had an excessive number of lectures.

Acquisition of *practical tools* was noted as a contributing factor by 14 respondents. Four respondents said that their motivation to participate diminished when it was lacking:

> I need more things relating to my daily work. When it's not practical enough then you ask yourself whether and to what extent it is worth investing time to come.

Eight respondents described the CoP as a place where they could *learn about their role* in the college, especially during their induction period:

> [The CoP was] a meaningful encounter for my role. It contributed a lot, helping me to see how I need to see the definition of my role. What I need to do, what I need to aspire to do, what I can use from discussions in the community.

One respondent, who was a veteran member of a CoP, commented that due to high turnover, it was constantly necessary to explain their role to new participants. This was tiring and harmful to the work of the more experienced members.

In addition to helping each participant develops their individual capacities, CoPs facilitate knowledge mobilization through peer learning, resulting in better practices for the whole group (Wenger, 1998). Peer learning was mentioned by 33 respondents.

> I expect the community to be a professional community that learns together, and is exposed to new knowledge in the field, sharing the knowledge accumulated in each of the support centres [for students with disabilities], a community that develops professionally and supports its members. Without the community, there is no platform for professionals to meet and develop in this field together with their colleagues. The platform provided here allows us to present what is being done in each place and to learn from colleagues. People ask questions, everyone answers from their own experience and from that everyone actually learns the most.

CoPs are sites for *consultation and problem-solving*, a characteristic referred to by 26 respondents. Together, group members are better able to recruit help and address shared concerns.

> [The community] is a place to discuss difficulties. In the first meeting of this year, I introduced a new learning system, a new Moodle [a learning management system], and many lecturers and colleges experienced all sorts of problems. We invited the Institute communications staff and told them about the problems that had been voiced and they answered all the technical difficulties and organised collaborative modes of work between us, for example, regular updates on changes. Then there was a discussion in the community on the assimilation of the new Moodle, and that in my opinion was most successful because it allowed us to develop from our acute and very real problems.

The fact that in most cases members of the CoPs do not have colleagues in their own colleges who hold the same positions, increases the importance of the communities as a place for consultation:

> There is no alternative for the community, without it people would not be able to manage. Often in the college you are alone – sometimes even outside the organisational structure. A situation is created where sharing and support are needed.

Five respondents complained there were insufficient opportunities to learn from peers in their CoPs, and two participants complained that their peers did not help them.

When CoPs are sites where professionals in leadership positions collaborate, they have the potential to transform the practices of the whole organization rather than just those of CoP members. Inter-institutional CoPs may transform the public domain, as coordinated changes occur in several institutions simultaneously (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015). This characteristic was mentioned by 18 respondents: 'The CoP should have an influence on the field and not only on the colleges'. Representatives of the Ministry of Education participate in some of the CoPs, enabling two-directional flow of information and possible influence on the consolidation of government policies:

> The fact that the Department Manager is the coordinator of the community is what makes the community relevant for people … the community is not only a meeting of peers. It is a group that influences Ministry of Education policies. Ideas become policies … [the community] enables mediation of the gap between policy-making and what happens in the field.

Inability to influence the external reality was noted by 10 respondents as a factor that hindered CoPs' success: 'I came willingly, out of some sort of personal motivation… but despite my assumption that I could have an influence from inside, I have not succeeded'.

The following sections refer to specific factors that influence CoPs' contributions to participants' professional development. These are the topics CoPs address, their work habits, interpersonal relationships and practical factors.

Topics addressed in the cops

CoP participants expect the community to address topics they deem interesting (23) relevant to their work (18) or to address their professional needs (12). They complain when they find them uninteresting (16), irrelevant (14), unhelpful (5) or vague (4). It is also vital to *coordinate participants' expectations* and attain their agreement on suitable topics (14). Nine participants complained that this was not done in their CoP.

> Each one came from a different place. Heterogeneity can be good, but you have to agree on what you are doing: [The coordinators worked] *top-down* and not *bottom-up* while constructing the programme. They should have asked us which subjects we wanted to discuss. They should have talked to us. Each one had a different goal. They should have conversed, and then decided upon the topics, and let each participant decide whether they found them appropriate.

Acting or even fighting together to achieve *Common goals* is a specific case of a relevant topic on which CoP participants agree. Common goals contribute to CoPs (8), whereas their absence is harmful (3): 'There was some sort of main topic in that period and that

led us to understand that we had a common fight. Everything was burning. It was all very active and bubbling'. ***Work practices within the community***

After topics are agreed upon, CoPs need to be committed and develop effective work practices in order to achieve their goals. These are realized through attendance, continued active involvement, collaboration and thoroughness.

Attendance. Fourteen respondents said their CoP attracted many participants, from diverse institutes, and 13 respondents viewed weak attendance as detrimental.

> For some reason people didn't come. People don't arrive and that ends the story… That's something that I didn't know how to solve. A few years ago, they used to come and today it's each to their own. Whoever did come was happy and I really waited for community meetings. I'm really sorry that it closed. I know that other people also feel that way.

Although attendance is vital, five respondents said their CoP had too many participants, and that prevented intimacy, impeded discussions and obstructed the community's management.

Obviously, mere attendance is not enough. Twenty-three respondents related to the beneficial effects of participants' *active involvement*, manifested when members suggested innovations and topics for discussion and undertook tasks contributing to the CoP's work. Nine respondents noted that passive participation harmed the community.

Another characteristic beneficial work habit mentioned by 11 respondents was *Continued working relationships* between CoP meetings. These included informal consultations among members, performing tasks for the community, etc. One participant complained that members did not interact with each other outside the CoP meetings.

> These are excellent people. They work hard and don't come because they have to. We also meet in groups outside the community meetings in order to deal with matters that demand extra time. Even though it is difficult – people come. We thought we would meet online in order to deal with the enormous amount of work that has to be done.

Collaboration in action was also important. Nine respondents made positive remarks concerning *teamwork* and one respondent noted lack of team work as a negative factor.

Finally, work needs to be focused and goal oriented. Ten respondents noted that lack of *focus* harmed the community as did the feeling that subjects were not thoroughly discussed: 'They pressed many things into each day and in the end, nothing was completed. We felt unsatisfied'. One respondent mentioned *exhaustive discussion* as a positive attribute contributing to the CoP's success.

Interpersonal relations

A pleasant atmosphere (16) and openness among participants (11) contribute to CoPs whereas rivalry (11) and participants who shut themselves off (5) harm them. Eight participants felt their CoP was a *cohesive group*. This was a feeling that the group unites members with each other and becomes part of their identity. Five respondents complained that such feelings were lacking in their CoPs.

The feeling that they are not alone and that others experience the same difficulties help participants to cope emotionally with their professional difficulties. In some cases, the group can also give participants a sense of confidence that they are acting properly

from a professional viewpoint, despite the difficulties they encounter. Nineteen respondents related to this aspect of *support* as a characteristic that contributes to their CoP, and one respondent complained that it was lacking.

> In the past, it contributed to me because I was new. I did not really know what to do. It helped me to learn from others and to receive strength from others. Often, in the college, you are alone with your agenda and face resistance, and the CoP gives you strength and moral endorsement showing that there are similar things in other places. It strengthened and helped me.

Finally, a successful community is a place that offers *networking opportunities* (21 respondents). Two respondents complained about senior colleagues who did not come to their community.

> Personal relations are often more important than formal relations, you succeed in getting to know the most active and prominent people. It makes communication more effective. You enjoy first hand acquaintance with key figures.

Practical factors

In the main, practical factors that were mentioned, were difficulties that interfere with CoPs' activities: Sixteen respondents complained about *commute* respondents complained about *lack of time*, and 10 respondents talked about the difficulty involved in *coordinating dates* for meetings. Seven respondents related to the *physical conditions* of the meeting, five thought they were helpful while two thought they had negative influence.

> The conditions of the meeting did not encourage discussion, or participation. A large hall with many large round tables. It was more of a lecture than a discussion. We all sat facing a screen. Some of us could not hear. It was a classroom, very large but a classroom.

Additional characteristics

Three additional characteristics that were noted as encouraging participation were: (a) *Personal enjoyment*. Ten respondents noted this and one respondent complained about lack of enjoyment. (b) *Prestige*. Three respondents thought that the fact that the CoP was exclusively for participants in leadership positions indicated that it was prestigious and therefore constituted a motivating factor, whereas two participants complained that the community was not sufficiently prestigious. (c) Two respondents enjoyed participation in the community because it was a *break from routine*.

B. the coordinator

Participants' answers concerning CoPs' coordinators are presented under four headers: leadership, personality traits, professional knowledge and experience and motivation for the role.

Leadership

Leadership has social and task orientation aspects. Forty-three comments from 23 interviewees related to the issue of leadership. Of these, 31 related to *social aspects*:

listening to participants and responding to their needs, good personal connections with participants and forming cohesion (bonding, trust and cooperation between participants) and motivation in the group. The other 12 comments related to *task orientation*: planning, directing, and supporting participants' initiatives and contributions:

> She should be attentive to what is happening under the surface, try to lead according to people's agenda and also present her own contents – she should combine the two. She should see a more comprehensive picture. Meanwhile I feel that she meets expectations.

Personality traits

Personality traits of the coordinator were mentioned by 18 respondents: 23 comments related to interpersonal skills – a person who it is pleasant to talk to and consult, a person who creates a good atmosphere and is empathic, containing and tolerant, but also assertive and charismatic; while 15 comments related to the coordinator's intrapersonal qualities – intelligent, creative, with self-awareness, organized, determined, resourceful and flexible.

Professional knowledge and experience

Twenty-six comments from 24 interviewees noted this category: Twenty-two comments described the coordinator as a person with broad up-to-date academic knowledge, and rich professional experience. Four participants said the coordinator should be a well-known figure with widespread connections.

Motivation

Nine interviewees noted that coordinators should be highly motivated to fulfill their role and devote time to it. One of the coordinators described her efforts to make her CoP a success:

> It is always difficult to think how to justify the effort that people have to invest to arrive at the community, how to create interest and enthusiasm, relevance and innovation and make it worthwhile. I don't always manage to listen to them all. There are also organisational difficulties because we are many people. It demands a lot of work and energy. The Institute tries to help me a lot with the organisation. I have also requested help from others.

Discussion

Summary

The findings show that professional development is the most important characteristic of successful CoPs. At the personal level, this involves acquisition of new theoretical and practical knowledge; at the group level, peer learning and assistance in problem-solving result in new and shared knowledge. Some CoPs are able to influence the public domain; from shaping specific programmes in individual colleges to national policies. Successful CoPs deal with subjects relevant for their participants, coordinating their

expectations, responding to their needs and supporting their initiatives. Participants are active: They attend meetings regularly, contribute to the group and maintain continued work relations with their colleagues. In successful CoPs, interpersonal relations are pleasant, the group is cohesive and participants feel that they receive professional and emotional support, in addition to networking opportunities.

Desirable characteristics of community coordinators include leading tasks and social leadership: planning, directing and monitoring the group's work, forming warm personal relations with participants and supporting them, and consolidating a pleasant and cohesive group that encourages openness and sincerity. Coordinators need to be knowledgeable, well connected and experienced, with strong motivation for the role. Lack of these characteristics as well as practical difficulties, hinder success. Contrary to our initial expectations, participants and coordinators' views were similar to each other, thus, in a way, validating the results. CoPs' characteristics will be dealt with in detail below.

Discussion of the findings in relation to previous research

Choosing a topic of relevance may seem to be a self-evident contributing factor, as it is an inherent component of CoPs: 'communities of practice are groups of people who share concerns or a passion for something they do' (Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 1). However, the first stage in a CoP's development consists of identifying the group's needs and selecting a leader (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). The CoPs in our study were established as a matter of routine and not in response to a pressing need. Therefore, despite the fact that community members 'shared concerns and a passion for their work' and held similar positions, these commonalities were not always sufficient to ensure that the topics were relevant to all. Prominent factors hindering CoPs' success included disagreement among community members regarding the group's topics and goals.

Professional development was the most frequently mentioned characteristic of successful CoPs and can appear in diverse forms: learning about participants' roles, acquisition of practical tools and theoretical knowledge, sharing ideas, deliberations, consultation and problem-solving, as well as emotional, social and professional support when confronting job-related difficulties. All of these factors were mentioned in previous studies that focused on CoPs for teacher educators (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2004; Hadar & Brody, 2010; Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2016). These characteristics are particularly relevant to teacher educators, since they usually have to learn about their roles and acquire the skills they need, by themselves, in an informal manner (Goodwin et al., 2014; Kelchtermans et al., 2018). Teacher educators who hold leadership positions need CoPs even more, because they do not have colleagues in similar positions and roles within their colleges.

Some participants in the current study mentioned the influence of their participation in a CoP upon their respective colleges. This finding is interesting, given the fact that most of the participants were the sole representatives from their college within their CoPs. In contrast, organizational-level influence was achieved in other studies only through the participation of a critical mass of teacher educators (Margolin, 2011). The influential position participants had within their respective organizations

may have helped them achieve these effects (Czerniawski et al., 2018; Feiman-Nemser & Ben-Peretz, 2017; Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015). CoP participants reported that their CoPs enabled them to coordinate their respective colleges' policies. Furthermore, influence upon educational policies on a national level was also reported. Thus, the MOFET CoPs allowed teacher educators to perform their 'brokering' role (Dengerink, Lunenberg, & Koole, 2015). These achievements are probably due to the inter-institutional composition of the CoPs (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015), as well as the inclusion of policymakers. Direct and open dialogue between policy-makers, researchers and practitioners manifests democratic values and addresses a long-recognized need. Several researchers who noticed this need also pointed up the fact that an operative framework for such interactions was lacking (Edwards, Sebba, & Rickinson, 2007; Ginsburg & Gorostiaga, 2003). It seems that CoPs can provide a feasible response for this need.

Good interpersonal relations characterize successful CoPs, while an unsafe atmosphere, manifested in judgmental or defensive attitudes, competition, hostility or lack of acceptance, is harmful (Brody & Hadar, 2017; Hadar & Brody, 2012; Hord & Tobia, 2012). In the current study, interviewees described their colleagues as a source of emotional and professional support, despite the competition that existed between their colleges, and the senior positions they had attained.

Harris and Jones (2010) emphasized the importance of a sense of a common goal, active involvement by participants in decision-making, collaborative work, and a sense of responsibility regarding outcomes. Maloney and Konza (2011) showed that lack of commitment to the common goals and weak attendance harmed the work of a CoP of teachers that they led. In the present study too, respondents noted the importance of commitment to common goals, regular attendance and active participation, i.e. suggesting subjects for discussion, undertaking roles within the CoP, maintaining continued communication and work relations with colleagues over time, and introducing initiatives to the group.

Hadar & Brody (2012) noted that in the CoP that they were investigating, commitment to joint work and professional development were not stable over the entire period of the study. Wenger et al. (2002) claimed that CoPs have their own work rhythms: when the pace is too rushed, community members feel exhausted and tend to abandon them, whereas when the pace is too slow, CoPs function poorly and lack vitality. Hence, it appears that determining the proper work pace for CoPs should be a focus of future studies.

As good leaders, CoP coordinators need to be able to direct the group towards its goals, while remaining attentive to individual members' needs, sharing leadership with them and supporting their initiatives. The ability to relegate responsibilities to community members and avoid *over directing* was one of the lessons learned by supervisors who participated in a CoP, and at the same time led their own CoPs, consisting of schoolmasters that worked under their supervision (Dickson & Mitchell, 2014). In their opinion, distributed and shared leadership is one of the main characteristics that distinguish *genuine* professional communities from other forms of professional meetings.

In the current study, participants said the coordinators should have good interpersonal skills: they need to be easy to converse with, tolerant, open, empathetic and containing. Hord and Tobia (2012) found similar findings. In terms of personal traits, our interviewees believed coordinators should be intelligent, creative, innovative,

flexible yet determined. They felt that as CoP leaders, coordinators should be acknowledged specialists with strong professional knowledge, rich experience, and widespread professional connections; they should be committed to the community's success devoting time and effort for that purpose. These findings are consistent with previous findings on the characteristics of educational leaders (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2015).

CoPs have to cope with many challenges: finding relevant subjects, encouraging commitment and active participation, overcoming participants' competitiveness and apprehensions, as well as technical difficulties. According to the professional literature, CoPs are not always the site preferred by teacher educators for their professional development framework. Ben-Peretz, Kleeman, Reichenberg, and Shimoni (2010) found that in Israel, teacher educators who were established in their careers were mostly interested in academic research and publication as a means to advance to higher-ranking administrative positions. A study conducted in Holland found that veteran teacher educators working in higher education institutions were interested in individual learning as a framework for professional development (Dengerink et al., 2015). Margolin (2011) reported that teacher educators who had participated voluntarily in a CoP that had succeeded in changing their college's teaching methods claimed that had they known in advance the amount of effort they would have to invest in the CoP, they would not have joined. Nevertheless, CoPs' beneficial potential seems to outweigh their disadvantages, a conclusion that many teacher educators now share (Czerniawski et al., 2017; Patton & Parker, 2017).

Conclusions

The present study suggests that teacher educators in educational leadership roles find CoPs to be beneficial frameworks for professional development. CoPs can provide them with social and emotional support and enhance their individual professional development as well as that of their colleges. Inter-institutional CoPs can, therefore, be viewed as a much-needed form of long term and sustainable professional development that is performed in collaboration with colleagues. CoPs' activities are closely linked to participants' practices and meet their specific needs (Tack, Valcke, Rots, Struyven, & Vanderlinde, 2018). Furthermore, they can afford open dialogue between policymakers, educators and academics, and support better policymaking by promoting and critically reviewing new initiatives, thus eliminating unintended consequences.

The conclusions above are based on a relatively small sample of participants and communities, all supported by one institute in Israel. The chosen methodology was able to reveal the relative importance attributed to communities, and to their coordinators' characteristics, but it eliminates each CoP's unique story.

It is therefore important to gather information from additional inter-organizational communities in other places, in which educational leaders participate. It is also important to conduct longitudinal studies that look into the processes of learning, coordination and change that happen within single communities: How do participants overcome the built-in tensions between the organizations they represent and form open and trusting relationships? How do they manage power differences between participants? How do information and influence attempts 'flow' from participants' respective institutions into CoPs and vice versa? Findings from such

studies can inform the planning of professional development frameworks for educational leaders.

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