

# Teachers' Involvement in Communities of Practice: An Implication with Regard to the Current Approach of Teachers' Professional Development in Malaysia

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## Abstract

Teachers' professional development is not only important for teachers, also for schools' development. This study aims to explore teachers' engagement in communities of practice in schools and their views on the most effective professional development approach that they had experienced. The participants were 16 teachers from five schools in two states in Malaysia. The data was generated through semi-structured interviews. The analysis was done using thematic analysis, using Nvivo as a tool. The findings indicate that although for these teachers, attending courses, training and seminars helped them to gain new knowledge and related skills, their involvement in informal learning communities was significantly more meaningful for their professional development. This paper discusses the implications of this finding on the implementation of professional development currently being practiced in the Malaysian education system.

**Keywords:** professional development, teachers, communities of practice, Malaysian schools

## 1. Introduction

Teachers play a vital role in educating a nation's children and shaping the pupils' morals, attitudes and behaviours. Therefore, it is important that teachers be prepared professionally so as to be able to effectively do their jobs. This can be achieved through the process of professional development (PD), which is centrally important in maintaining and enhancing the quality of teaching and learning in schools (Harris, 2002) and to the pursuit of improvements in teaching and learning (Hargreaves, 1994). Teachers' professional development refers to the 'professional growth of teachers through gaining increased experience and examining his or her teaching systematically' (Glatthorn, 1995, p. 41). Learning how to teach effectively and how to become an excellent teacher requires an ongoing, long-term process (Glatthorn, 1995; Ganser, 2000). Through the development process, teachers also embrace certain values, attitudes and commitments (Villegas-Reimers, 2003). Day (1999) and Ganser (2000) explain that professional development can be implemented through formal or informal approaches. The formal approach, according to Ganser (2000) can be seen in activities such as workshop attendance, professional meetings and mentoring, while the informal approach can be achieved through, for example, reading professional publications.

Effective professional development can be best implemented in a particular context where it is based in schools and linked to teachers' daily activities (Ancess, 2001; Ganser, 2000; McLaughlin & Zarrow, 2001). In this sense, schools are transformed into communities of learners and teachers are considered as learners in their professional communities (King & Newmann, 2000). Teachers' professional development also relates to a collaborative process which involves meaningful interactions among teachers and with administrators, parents and other community members (Clement & Vanderberghe, 2000; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Grace, 1999). Another important key for the success of teachers' professional development is how much its provision fits the real needs of teachers, and to what extent the activities are critically selected to ensure a positive result for teachers, schools and teachers' classroom practice (Hopkins & Harris, 2001).

### *1.1 Teachers' Professional Development in Malaysia*

Teachers' professional development in Malaysia can be pre-service or in-service (Malaysia Ministry of Education, 2008). Pre-service programmes are designed for student teachers for both primary and secondary schools. The programmes run across all public universities and all teacher education institutions. All student teachers are required to take a compulsory course in Technology in Teaching and Learning and a supplementary course related to computer-aided teaching, which aims to enhance their proficiency in utilising technology in their practice.

The second programme under the agenda of teachers' professional development is in-service courses or training. The main objectives behind this kind of PD are to enhance teachers' professional skills and competencies in their areas and to update them with current developments and new practices in the education sector. All teachers in Malaysia are involved in this professional development. Among the courses offered under the in-service programme are: short-term in-service training and development programmes for teachers teaching critical subjects such as science, mathematics and English, 14-week courses for professional development, long-term programmes such as special postgraduate programmes for teacher trainers at master's and PhD levels, and degrees for non-graduate teachers through the mode of distance learning (Jamil, Abdul Razak, Raju & Mohamed, 2011).

However, there are ongoing debates about the effectiveness of teachers' professional development, particularly in Malaysia. The reason for the perceived ineffectiveness of teachers' professional development in Malaysia is that in-service training is usually mandated, in that the courses are developed by 'experts' at the top – either at the Ministry of Education or at the State Education Department (Kader, 2008; Malakolunthu, 2007). Sometimes this training is not perceived by teachers as adding value or being productive, since it does not originate from the teachers' needs (Asariah, 2008; Lee, 2007) and the same content is taught to all participants (a 'one-size-fits-all' approach) without regard for their backgrounds, taking place in isolated settings away from real classroom situations (Leng, 2007). Kader (2008) adds that teachers' professional development in Malaysia takes a very top-down approach, in which the programmes are initiated by the Ministry rather than teachers or schools initiating their own professional development. A report by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2009) shows that teachers' professional development in Malaysia occurs at an individual level rather than collectively, such as sharing with teachers from other schools in other districts in Malaysia, and therefore there is a lack of professional collaboration among teachers, such as team teaching, compared to teachers in other countries (Waheed, Salami & Dahlan, 2011). Waheed et al. (2011) suggest that teachers' professional development should not be restricted to the individual level alone, but that it should be more flexible and open to interactions with teachers from other schools so that they have more opportunity to fulfil their needs.

### *1.2 Communities of Practice*

The literature has shown that successful professional development is related to collaborative work among teachers who work together reflectively and with the aim of improving their practice (Glatthorn, 1995; Harris & Jones, 2010; Lee, 2007; Stoll & Louis, 2007; Villegas-Reimers, 2003; Wenger, 2002). Palincsar (1998) describe teachers' networks as communities of practice that involve teachers coming together to improve their practice by joining in reflection groups. Through teachers' networks, which Stoll and Louis (2007) term as professional learning communities (PLCs), there is also an opportunity for professionals to learn new practices and to generate new knowledge (Harris & Jones, 2010). The concept of learning within communities is explained by Wenger (2002) as 'groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise by interacting on an ongoing basis' (p. 4).

The most important element in sharing through communities of practice (CoPs) is the assumption that the sharing activities involved will enable 'newcomers' (in the context of teachers' CPD, teachers who are new to the teaching context) to gain knowledge and skills from 'old-timers' (more experienced teachers) through their interactions. As a result of these interactions, newcomers start to develop their expertise and gradually shift their participation from peripheral to more central, becoming the core group. This process of learning is termed 'legitimate peripheral participation' by Lave and Wenger (1991):

Legitimate peripheral participation provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artifacts, and communities of knowledge and practice. It concerns the process by which newcomers become part of a community of practice. A person's intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of

learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a sociocultural practice. (p. 29)

Another vital role of CoPs is that members can generate and share their tacit knowledge; that is, knowledge that is embedded in a specific context (Nonaka, 1994), and since sharing tacit knowledge is something that requires active interaction between individuals, CoPs are a suitable platform for this kind of interaction to occur successfully (Wenger, McDermott & Synder, 2002). Three crucial dimensions of a community of practice are mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire (Wenger et al., 2002). Wenger (1998) claimed that a CoP is not just a group, team or network that consists of people with the same characteristics; it is a community in which mutual engagement among the members can be seen.

Mutual engagement is an essential dimension of any CoP and also implies a sense of belonging. In a CoP, members work together, see each other every day, talk with each other all the time, exchange information and opinions and directly influence each other's understanding as a matter of routine (Gray, 2004). Through their working, interaction and engagement, they develop shared ways of doing things. Wenger (1998) believes that in a CoP participants actually have different roles, and because they belong to a community where people help each other, it is more important to know 'how to give and receive help than to try to know everything yourself' (p. 75). Another dimension of a CoP is joint enterprise. Joint enterprise does not require agreement in any simple sense. In some communities, disagreement can be seen as a productive part of the enterprise. The enterprise is joint not in that everybody believes the same thing or agrees on everything, but in that it is 'communally negotiated' (Wenger, 1998, p. 77). Gray (2004) explains that in CoPs, members interact and learn together by engaging in joint activities and discussions, and through these activities they build relationships.

In a CoP, members invent their own ways of doing their jobs effectively and quickly solve their problems (Wenger, 1998). The final dimension of a CoP is a shared repertoire. The repertoire of a community of practice includes routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, actions and concepts that the community has produced or adopted in the course of its existence, and which have become part of its practice (Wenger, 1998). This is supported by Gray (2004) and Henderson (2007), in that through interaction among members of CoPs, these members develop a shared collection of stories, experiences, best practices and ways to solve problems, and these shared learning processes keep the members together.

In the context of schools, teachers may be involved in certain groups or communities from which they gain resources in terms of competencies and skills that help them to improve their practice. They spend time together, work as a team, share ways of doing things and solve problems together. They may even identify themselves with a communal identity. However, even though such CoPs grow naturally, it does not mean that CoPs cannot be encouraged or cultivated. In relation to this, Wenger (1998) stresses the importance of planning and the role of leaders, especially at the initial phase of the development process, to spur the community's growth. Thus, CoPs can occur either naturally or by design or mandate. However, the vital factor is the energy that the community itself generates.

Unlike the approach in which teachers' professional development is conducted through short-term courses or training in which knowledge is transmitted, the CoP approach focuses on teachers' professional development as a social and transformative process that 'engages teachers and prospective teachers in updating their knowledge base as well as contributing to the knowledge base by capturing and sharing their knowledge' (Palincsar, 1999, p. 273). From this viewpoint, knowledge is shared and socially constructed by individuals in the community. Therefore, the content shared is something that is very close to teachers' daily practice and depends on their real needs, rather than being pre-determined, as is the training currently being implemented in the Malaysian education system.

## **2. Objective**

The objective of this research is to explore the extent to which teachers in the schools studied were involved in informal communities of practice as an approach to their professional development. It also aims to seek their views on what made an effective PD for them.

## **3. Methodology**

The participants in this study were 16 teachers (15 females and one male) who teach various subjects (mathematics, biology, chemistry, English and science) at five different schools in Selangor. One of the schools is fully residential schools; another four are day schools. Their teaching experience of the participants ranged from four to 30 years. All the teachers were interviewed for a total of two hours each, using a prepared semi-structured interview protocol. Data was analysed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and

using Nvivo 8 as a tool. The questions related to this study were:

- 1) Is there any support group or community for teachers that you are involved in? What is it/are they? How are you involved in the group? (What do you do? What do others do? What topics are discussed?)
- 2) How important is the group to you? Why?
- 3) Are there any differences (or similarities) that you can see between a formal approach like attending training or courses and involvement in informal communities?
- 4) Which approach (formal or informal, individual learning or learning in community) would you prefer? Why?

#### 4. Findings

This section presents the results of the analysis based on the interview questions.

##### 4.1 The Communities That Teachers Are Currently Involved in

In the interviews, teachers were asked to explain the communities that they were currently involved in. In their answers, all teachers named more than one community and some mentioned up to five communities. Figure 1 depicts the findings.

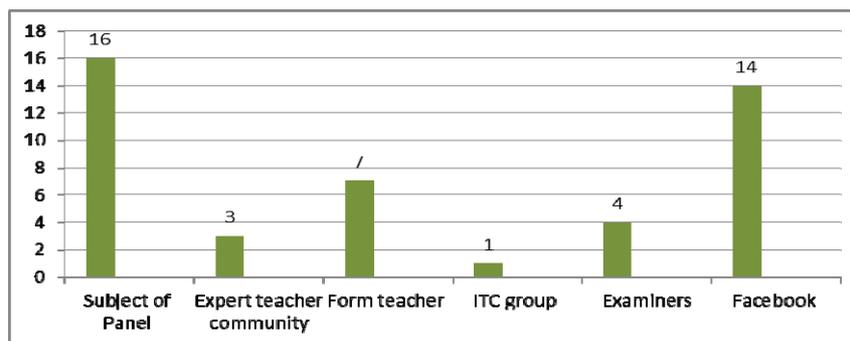


Figure 1. Communities that teachers were involved in, within and outside their schools

##### 4.1.1 Subject Panel

The first communities traced from the data were the teachers' subject panel communities. The teachers revealed that they learned best through discussions and sharing conversations with other teachers in their own schools. They described how they developed themselves personally and professionally through their interactions with colleagues, especially teachers who teach the same subject. A commonly-used term in the context of Malaysian schools to describe these communities is a 'subject panel' (SP), which refers to a group of teachers who teach the same subject in a school. For instance, teachers who teach English are automatically considered members of the English subject panel. One teacher stated:

The few of us who are English teachers are quite close ... we meet up a lot informally ... Sometimes over lunch and what not ... Sometimes as we talk, we get some ideas and then we work it out ... Sometimes we share them with some other people ... See whether we can work on them. But usually we restrict ourselves because we know how much time it will involve and not everyone is able to give up that amount of time. (Sarah-OTO)

The ultimate aim of these SPs is to get teachers to work and learn together as a team. In their formal meetings, teachers sit together and share their experiences or the problems they face, and try to decide on solutions. If they cannot solve their problems themselves, the Head of Panel will bring the matter to the senior assistant or the principal for further action (Sarah-OTO, Fariha-OTO). In the formal meeting, teachers also look at the printed results of the students (this is normally done after the examinations) and together they conduct a post-mortem. As part of this process they identify the students' weaknesses, and usually this will be followed by suggestions given by members on how to make improvements (Sarah-OTO, Masnida-OTO). For example:

We will look at the results together and compare them with the previous term's results. Usually, my Head of Panel will let us share our problems and she will give opinions to help. The Head will not always give comments. Sometimes other teachers will speak up. (Masnida-OTO)

Commitment from the members is crucial to ensuring mutual agreement among community members to

implement ideas or plans. How these communities work is not only seen in the area of planning for the improvement of the panel's members as a whole; teachers also support each other to better their practice as individual teachers. Many teachers described how they got support in terms of ideas or strategies for teaching from their colleagues, especially more experienced ones. New teachers seemed to benefit from discussions with their seniors whenever they were stuck on teaching certain topics with which they were not familiar; for example, Noni mentioned how she referred to her seniors who were also teaching science to get ideas on how to tackle certain topics in her class:

They knew better and had experience using the strategies in their own classes. I am lucky to have those experienced teachers who are always there to help me. (Noni-OTO)

From the evidence above, it can be concluded that teachers' membership of SPs is similar to a membership of a community of practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998). The three domains of CoPs – mutual engagement, shared repertoire and joint enterprise – can be identified in these SPs. The mutuality in the teachers' relationships can be seen in their stories about helping each other and exchanging ideas with one another. New teachers not only seek ideas or help; they also play their part in making the group's planning a success. They engage themselves in doing things with others, and together they work towards improvement and achievement, for themselves as individuals and for the group as a whole.

#### 4.1.2 Expert Teachers' Communities

In addition to the existence of SPs in teachers' workplaces, another community for teachers is Expert Teachers' (ETs) communities. The name sets out who the members of these communities are. One of the teachers shared his experience of being an ET in mathematics. Sham mentioned learning from the other ETs, which had helped him a lot in terms of teaching skills and strategies. He was appointed an ET in 2008, and from that point he was involved in weekly meetings with other ETs from the same state. In these meetings, they would usually sit together and share various issues they felt needed to be talked about in relation to teaching mathematics. Although Sham did not refer to it as a community (he used the word 'group' instead), he admitted that the support he had obtained from the other ETs helped him in terms of his practice as well as in developing his self-confidence.

Although during the first few meetings he 'preserved' himself from talking (Sham-OTO) due to feeling insecure, Shame gradually opened himself up to the discussions and slowly began to take part in the verbal interaction among the ETs. What he learned from the experience of being among other ETs was that knowledge and skills are meant to be shared, not to be kept to oneself alone.

Usually the meetings will be held on Thursdays in the District Office, and we discuss many things. We are also involved in many programmes for students, especially weak ones. From the meetings, we have learned about strategies to approach this group of pupils. The ETs have shared their experience a lot and I think this should be practised by all teachers. We need to share whatever knowledge we have. (Sham-OTO)

Even though it was called a 'meeting', Sham stressed that the discussions among the ETs normally took place in an informal setting where they could throw out ideas freely without having to wait for the approval of the chair (as is normally practised in formal meetings in schools). He also added that, along with sharing things related to mathematics teaching, the teachers also shared other stories.

Another teacher who was also an ET in chemistry shared her experiences. Ismi, who had been appointed an ET ten years before, spoke about the way in which she was involved in the activities of ETs at the state as well as at the national level. Being one of the 'senior' teachers in the group of ETs gave her the opportunity to share her experiences and expertise with others. She admitted to feeling lucky that she could meet up with many other ETs from all over the country, and that enhanced her experience in that she was able to give a series of talks to newly-appointed Expert Teachers. She explained that her position as an ET had expanded her ability to share her knowledge and experiences with others, and most of the sharing was done through sharing stories (Ismi-OTO). She said:

It is good to see others in the meetings. I think being an ET is not about you being an expert. That is a strongly inaccurate understanding. Expert teachers are not complete experts. We are also learning from each other. I learn from others too. We, as ETs, we have our own responsibilities to help students, to help other teachers too, and therefore we help our schools. The meeting is a good platform. We need to support each other. Different schools have different stories, so when we meet, we use the opportunity to share, to learn and to reflect. (Ismi-OTO)

#### 4.1.3 Malaysian ITCs' Online Community

The third community that was traced from the interviews was an online community for Information Technology Coordinators (ITCs) in all schools in Malaysia. They used Yahoo Groups as a platform for discussions. For each Malaysian school, there is a media/technology coordinator who is responsible for supporting teachers in the overall deployment of multimedia and other technologies. The technology coordinator is entrusted to guide and help train teachers in delivering effective technology-supported instruction (Anizah, 2010). Thus, the technology coordinator should be a teacher with skills in the integration of technology for the enhancement of information gathering, instruction, management processes and communication. Other responsibilities of the technology coordinator include assisting the principal in the management of software applications as well as keeping abreast of developments in education technology. Aside from pedagogical issues, the technology coordinator will also supervise the maintenance of all technical equipment and liaise with the school's technical support team for equipment repair, replacement and facility upgrading as and when necessary (Anizah, 2010).

One of the teachers shared his experience of this online community. As well as being involved in an ET community, he was a member of the online community for all ITCs. The members of the online community for ITCs were ITCs from all schools in Malaysia. An online platform was used for discussion among the ITCs and this, according to this teacher, involved a lot of problem solving of technical errors that had occurred in the schools. He admitted that the discussions in the ITC community had benefited him too.

#### 4.1.4 Facebook

In the interviews, the teachers often talked about Facebook. Out of 16 teachers, 14 teachers had a Facebook account. The frequency with which the teachers used Facebook varied. While a few of them claimed themselves to be 'moderate users' in terms of the frequency they visited the site, the majority admitted being active users. From the analysis, the four main topics teachers talked with their Facebook friends about were personal life (e.g. family, children, marriage), professional work (e.g. communicating with other teachers through Facebook to get help and support or to share information), entertainment (and jokes), and finally other topics (e.g. politics, breaking news, lifestyle and economics).

#### 4.1.5 Form Teachers

Seven teachers were form teachers. Even though the role of a form teacher is sometimes seen as an individual task, the teachers interviewed demonstrated that being a form teacher requires collaboration with other form teachers to make their work more effective and systematic. The teachers understood that they had the same responsibilities regarding their classes, for example to make sure the record of daily attendance is settled before third period every day, to make sure students pay their examination fees, to collect the test marks from each subject teacher and process them for students' progress reports on time, and so on. Three teachers explained how they learned from other form teachers about closing the monthly attendance record. Even though they found it somehow funny to see some form teachers sat together in the corner of the staff room completing the attendance register (Sherry-OTO), they also enjoyed it and felt that that kind of 'collaboration' was vital for them to be able to complete the register without any mistakes. Azie, for example, said:

Sometimes completing the attendance register is quite confusing, you know. I often make mistakes when I do it alone. What makes it worse is that we are not allowed to use liquid paper to make corrections. Everything must be neat. So if we do it in a group, together, we can avoid making mistakes, and it is easier and fun. (Azie-OTO)

Form teachers also had good bonds among themselves. They shared information and spread it quickly. Normally in a school there will be a form coordinator, for example the Form Five coordinator, whose job is to coordinate everything related to the form of which he or she is in charge.

#### 4.1.6 Examiners

Five teachers (Sarah, Hanna, Kathy, Aini and Ismi) who were official examiners for national examinations, such as the Lower Secondary Assessment (PMR) or the Malaysian Education Certificate (*Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* – SPM), had their own support group. The meetings would normally be held face-to-face. There would be an examiner-in-chief who would coordinate all their tasks. Newly-appointed examiners would learn from more experienced ones. Their quality of marking is improved during meetings in which the chief checks the accuracy of the marks given by all the examiners and together they coordinate. Hanna, for example, stated that her position as an examiner for the national examination papers helped her in her teaching (Hanna-OTO). She used her experience in marking the papers to help her students get maximum marks in tests and summative examinations in school. She knew what was required when students answered questions in examinations. Aini

felt that being an examiner gave her 'additional' skills that made her more confident to share her experiences with other teachers in her school. Those who were not official examiners often came to her to learn about the marking scheme. She even conducted in-house training to share her skills with other teachers, and that made her proud of herself because of the contribution she gave.

These findings show that teachers are currently involved in their own communities or groups, and some of them have more than one membership. It is also important to state that the teachers interviewed did not label or name their current memberships of groups or communities as CoPs. This was evident from the terms they used to describe their involvement in learning from other teachers who shared the same identity, needs and direction. The most cited community was SPs, as all teachers in all schools were members of their subject panels. However, looking at the existence of the elements of CoPs (Wenger, 1998) in these communities, the communities of which the teachers were members actually fit the characteristics of CoPs.

#### 4.2 Teachers' Views on an Effective Professional Development Approach

Figure 2 indicates the findings with regard to teachers' preferences for the approach of their professional development.

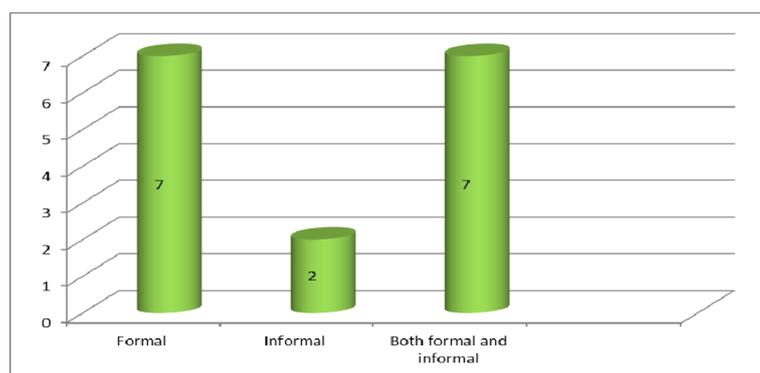


Figure 2. Teachers' preferences for the approaches of their professional development

As indicated in Figure 2, seven teachers preferred informal learning through communities or teams in their schools. Another two teachers preferred formal training, and seven teachers believed that the most effective approaches for their professional development included both formal (in-house and outside training) and informal learning from colleagues. The analysis shows that both forms of professional development (formal and informal) have an impact on teachers' professional development, but in different ways. The teachers valued formal training as a platform for them to learn new skills, which involved, for example, new theories or the use of technological innovations. However, informal learning through discussions and exchanging experiences and knowledge enabled teachers to implement these theories or carry out their tasks more efficiently. For example, one of the teachers stated:

For learning new skills, like computer skills ... I think we need formal training. But in terms of developing our teaching skills, sometimes it is worth learning from our seniors. Go and see them, or work with them and we can learn. And to me, learning in this kind of style has more of an effect. (Sham-OTO)

Learning from colleagues enabled the teachers to solve their problems quickly since they could ask their colleagues right away, for example:

Yes ... not just me, but we asked each other. Sometimes I have a problem with teaching summary, so I'll ask another teacher "How do you teach summary in your class?" and then she will explain. There was one very young teacher, she would call my mobile phone when she was in the classroom so I would help her out. That's how we learn from each other, from colleagues. It is spontaneous yet effective. You can just get your problems solved immediately. (Fariha-OTO)

Learning from each other, especially those who teach the same subject, was perceived as being useful to develop teachers to become more effective and skilled (Sarah-OTO, Aini-OTO). This suggests that informal learning, particularly in face-to-face situations, was something that the teachers valued. In informal learning, teachers deal with understanding and exchanging tacit knowledge (Sarah-OTO, Fariha-OTO, Kathy-OTO, Sham-OTO). In other words, their learning and practice occurs in phases. The initial phase involves their learning about certain

skills (normally obtained through formal training or courses), and the next phase involves their practice of these skills, as well as learning through doing and talking about issues. This happened within teachers' existing communities, some of them specifically mentioning their 'subject panel' or 'colleagues'.

However, there were also three teachers who simply did not believe in attending courses as a way of developing professionally (Fariha-OTO, Sarah-OTO, Nina-OTO). To these teachers, attending courses wasted their time, especially when the content of the courses was not practical with regard to their real teaching experience. For example:

To be frank, I don't really like attending courses, especially when I am forced to attend courses that I don't like, or don't need. It is just a waste of time, you know. To me, the most effective developmental process for teachers should be in an informal form. For example, we are members of the subject panel. English teachers are members of the English panel, Mathematics teachers are members of the mathematics panel, and so forth. I have learned a lot from this community, actually. Even though I am the Head of Panel right now, before I was appointed as a head, I actually learned a lot from the previous head. We even helped each other, no matter how senior or how new we were. It's about sharing tacit knowledge ... (Fariha-OTO)

Among those who mentioned informal learning, three of them highlighted the benefits of being in online learning communities. One of the teachers (Sarah-OTO) shared her experience in online communities by saying that she had learned many things from the members of the online community that she had joined a year before. Although teachers in that online community came from all over the world, she could still adapt their ideas to her own classes. In her own community at school, she gave some examples of how they worked as a team and always aimed to do their best for their students.

## 5. Discussion

The findings indicate that the teachers interviewed see their professional development as taking two forms: formal and informal. The findings also show that both approaches are likely to address different needs of the teachers. Formal training (in-house and outside training) seems to provide more new knowledge and skills, for example skills to use a new concept, software application or materials. Informal learning (either face-to-face or virtual, although the majority cited the former approach), on the other hand, helps teachers with the actual implementation of the skills they have acquired in formal training, and this involves discussion or questions and answers regarding practice as issues emerge through classroom planning, practice and evaluation. Although the main approach currently implemented in the Malaysian school system for teachers is in a formal form, e.g. training, courses or seminars, the findings from this study show how much teachers are actually involved in informal learning communities (Lee, 2007; Palinscar, 1999; Wenger, 1998) in their schools. Their involvement in the communities in their schools is primarily based on their similar needs (Zhang & Watts, 2008), i.e. the need to solve teaching problems and to gain more skills through exchanging ideas and practices with colleagues. The processes of negotiation, sharing and exchanging ideas, information and expertise all take place in these communities (Wenger, 1998).

The teachers referred to their relationships with colleagues as being like a 'family' to describe their closeness and how well they knew each other. The impact of this collegiality created their communal identity. They were not talking about their individual journeys; rather, they referred to 'their' journey. The teachers enjoyed being part of their communities as they gave them a sense of ownership and helped them avoid feeling alone in their schools. Wenger (1998) asserts that among the indicators of the presence of joint enterprise in CoPs are members having fun, doing well, feeling good, dealing with boredom and thinking about the future. The development of joint enterprise could be seen in this study when teachers said that they shared their goals as community goals and not as individual goals. When they achieved something, they celebrated together, and when they faced difficulties or issues, they faced them together as well. They also shared the norms of their practice. They agreed on certain things to make their work effective, e.g. they decided that everyone should submit their examination marks a week before the panel meeting so that the secretary of the SP could easily prepare the overall report for the principal.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study suggests that teachers value their involvement in CoPs in their schools as a significant source for them to improve on their teaching-related skills. It shows how important the informal approach as part of teachers' professional development is for them. Engagement in such informal learning with each other as happened in their current CoPs in their schools, for example their subject panel or form teachers' group, enabled the teachers to update their knowledge and to contribute to the general level of knowledge through sharing their

own experiences with others (Palinscar, 1999). Therefore, it is vital that the approach to teachers' professional development give more focus to informal learning among teachers which takes place in their own context (Ancess, 2001). Apart from teachers' attendance at formal learning events (courses, training or seminars), their participation in informal learning communities or CoPs should be taken as part of their annual achievement or counted towards their promotion, as this would be in line with the upgrading of the quality of teachers' professional development as stated in the Malaysia Education Report 2013-2025, which focuses on teachers receiving greater support from peers, senior teachers and principals (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012).

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