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Early Career Teacher Peer Support through Private Groups in Social Media

This paper describes the support that Australian early career teachers are accessing through private groups within social media. It presents findings from 22 interviews with teachers who indicated that Facebook was a source of support. Participants describe using private online groups for: (a) support during casual employment; (b) accessing collegial support from pre-existing connections, in particular those formed during initial teacher education; and (c) support to deal with challenging situations such as a hostile work environment. The paper suggests that further research needs to be conducted into how private media groups might support the needs of early career teachers.

Keywords: early career, teacher support, social media, Facebook, peer support, private groups, casual teacher, qualitative, thematic analysis

Introduction

Teachers are increasingly using social network sites (SNSs) to obtain support, especially during their early years in the profession where they need to manage significant challenges (Goodyear, Casey, & Kirk, 2014; Kelly & Antonio, 2016; Kennedy & Archambault, 2012; Rutherford, 2010). Connected technologies, typified by SNSs, have created a new space within which teachers can connect to one other and to knowledge (Goodyear, Carvalho, Beetham, & Sharpe, 2013). The use of technology for developing supportive communities warrants further study, as "an important area of practice, and one that needs to be developed and nurtured to yield its fullest potential" (Wenger, White, & Smith, 2009, p. xii). Through investigation of the informal use of private groups within SNSs, we can work towards informing initial teacher education and policy that make use of the potential of this technology (rather than focussing upon the risks) and that fits with the way that teachers are already using the technology. This paper thus looks towards the idea that the use of SNSs by teachers can be improved and potentially integrated into many facets of formal teacher education: from recruitment into teacher education programs; through support in those programs particularly during practical experience; and into support during the challenges of the early career stage and beyond (Kelly, Reushle, Chakrabarty, & Kinnane, 2014). It is about

contributing to the research base that informs the design of online communities of teachers and the learning that happens in and around them. Whilst there has been some study of the way in which teachers are obtaining support within public online forums, there is very little in the research literature about what is happening in private communities of support, other than in communities developed for the purposes of research (Kelly & Antonio, 2016). Further, whilst there is a growing body of research literature on the dangers and negative outcomes of SNSs in the professional lives of teachers (Russo, Squelch, & Varnham, 2010), there is significantly less about the positive advantages SNSs might bring to early career teachers particularly in terms of peer support and professional development. There is potential for greater understanding within school communities as to the value of SNSs for nurturing and supporting young teachers as one part of an ecosystem of support (Trust, Krutka, & Carpenter, 2016).

This paper addresses these gaps in the literature by presenting research from interviews (n=22) with a sampling of early career secondary school teachers in Australasia in 2016 who used Facebook as a source of support. It aims to understand both *who* is using private online social media groups, and *how* they are making use of online social media to obtain support. Teacher support is a term that has been used in the literature to refer to both structures for formal support that aim to provide assistance to teachers (such as mentorship, induction/orientation and professional development) as well as informal support through relationships with other teachers. This paper uses the word support to refer to the latter, which is defined as interpersonal relationships that can provide "affect, aid and affirmation" (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980, p.267) and constitutes a form of social support (Cobb, 1976; Kelly & Antonio, 2016).

The findings from the present study show that there are three key ways in which the teachers studied made use private SNS groups: (i) for support during casual teaching employment; (ii) for sharing resources and strategies with either a pre-service cohort or group from a school setting; and

(iii) to compensate for an unsupportive or hostile school environment. There is potential for the integration of SNSs into initial teacher education (ITE) to build upon and enhance these logical strengths of the technology.

Background

Characteristics of SNSs

SNSs are defined as "web-based services that allow individuals to: (i) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system; (ii) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection; and (iii) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 122). In practice, there are a few key commercial websites around which most activity in SNSs is centred, namely Facebook and Twitter. This study focusses upon the Facebook platform, the most popular SNS in Australia and in many English speaking nations (Junco, 2013). The unit of analysis within a SNS is typically a *group* of members (bounded sub-systems within the SNS), where a group is characterised predominantly by its size (the number of members) and its privacy status (publically accessible, private or some mix of the two) (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Kelly & Antonio, 2016).

A SNS can be conceived of as a *digital habitat* (Wenger et al., 2009) in which there is a "dynamic, mutually defining" (p. 37) relationship between the human inhabitants and the digital environment. Teachers interacting within SNSs have adapted their practices to the technology even as the technology has developed to accommodate them over the past decade. Wenger et al (2009) emphasise the importance of engagement, togetherness and identity in online communities. The rhythm of togetherness and separation is a part of the experience of all communities to some degree, but is particularly acute in an online community. Intermittent conversations are not sufficient to sustain a community – "it requires learning together with enough continuity and intensity of engagement that the definition of domain, the weaving of the community, and the development of the practice become shared resources" (Wenger et al., 2009, p. 56).

Support needs of ECTs

The significant challenges faced by early career teachers are well documented within the literature (Ballantyne, 2007; Buchanan et al., 2013; Dicke, Elling, Schmeck, & Leutner, 2015; Gavish & Friedman, 2010; Veenman, 1984). These challenges include maintaining relationships with a diverse range of people, including students, other staff members and parents and learning how to effectively manage a classroom (Veenman, 1984). Adding to these challenges is the realisation that idealistic hopes nurtured throughout pre-service study are difficult to enact within the reality of the classroom, a phenomenon captured by the terms *reality shock* and *praxis shock* (Dicke et al., 2015; Veenman, 1984). Further, many early career teachers experience *isolation* in the classroom (Hope, 1999) which can have a major impact for teachers that do not have the *relational agency* (Edwards, 2005) and *resilience* (Mansfield, Beltman, Price, & McConney, 2012) to draw upon the collegial support of their fellow teachers and recover from setback. Finally, there is significant evidence that organisational factors (such as provision or lack of formal support) and high workloads can have a strong impact upon early career teachers' plans to leave the profession (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). The Association of Teachers and Lecturers' (ATL) survey of early career teachers found that 70% of pre-service and newly qualified teachers thought about leaving, with 76% saying that this was because the workload was too high (ATL, 2015).

There is potential for collegial support to help overcome these challenges (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Johnson et al., 2015; Schuck, Aubusson, Buchanan, & Russell, 2012). It is in this context that the present study focuses upon the potential for SNSs to augment in-school support, providing an asynchronous, always-present form of support that is independent of the school context (Clarà, Kelly, Mauri, & Danaher, 2015). SNS use is already widespread amongst early career teachers (Kelly & Antonio, 2016) and many have grown up with these tools, with young Australians (below age 40) the most likely to use social networks (Nielsen, 2015).

For early career teachers, there is a need for connection with other teachers with whom they can share ideas, receive feedback on their teaching, and ask questions (Burke, Aubusson, Schuck,

Buchanan, & Prescott, 2015; Clarà, 2015). Almost half of the teachers in the study of Burke et al. (2015) reported isolation from more experienced teachers, and even those who were involved in co-planning activities with them sought deeper levels of collaboration, such as co-teaching and collaborative observation. Similarly, Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) highlight the isolation and individualism that is the norm in many schools, particularly large secondary schools. Teachers can be cut off from helpful feedback and many are reluctant to admit difficulties through fear that they may be perceived as incompetent. This has implications for the role of SNSs in providing support that can ensure a greater degree of anonymity or privacy for early career teachers. Kelly, Reushle, et al. (2014) reviewed a number of studies showing the value of online communities developed during pre-service years that continued to provide value after entering service showing studies that were "successful in maintaining links between peers across the transition from higher education into the years of service" (p. 70).

Challenges of casual employment

Early career teachers are often also casual teachers, an employment status that leads to additional challenges (Bamberry, 2011; Jenkins, Smith, & Maxwell, 2009). For example, casual teachers often struggle with behaviour management due to their inability to follow through with consequences, an effect of the transitory nature of their employment (Beltman, Mansfield, & Price, 2011). The employment insecurity for casual early career teachers can come to be internalised, compounding classroom-related challenges:

> As a casual you feel very insecure I suppose. The principal at M, probably eight months
> after I was there, he said: 'Well, what do you think? Do you like the school? Do you
> feel at home?' And I said: 'Well, I feel as comfortable as I think a casual can feel…
> knowing that I am as disposable as the next tissue that comes out of the box'. (Bamberry,
> 2011, p. 58)

Related to this lack of security are a range of other attendant factors, including minimal control of the number and scheduling of work hours – which has particular implications for mature aged early career teachers, who may have family responsibilities to juggle and support - having to teach subjects they might not be qualified to teach and being denied access to professional development opportunities (Bamberry, 2011). Quality induction programs and/or a mentoring program are often foregone by casual teachers, particularly if they begin part way through the year (Kelly, Reushel, Chakrabarty, & Kinnane, 2014). In fact, it has been suggested that "casual relief teachers, who work on the peripheries of schools, tend to be some of the most unsupported workers within the education sector" (Charteris, Jenkins, Jones, & Bannister-Tyrrell, 2015, p. 2). In making this argument, they point to the added difficulties that these teachers face in addressing the mandatory standards set by AITSL (2016)– in particular, the threat to their movement from graduate teacher to proficient teacher and ongoing registration. Not only are these teachers often "out of the loop" in terms of knowing about professional development opportunities, but they also are generally required to fund their own professional development and, if they are in a rural or remote school, may have to travel long distances to attend it (Charteris et al., 2015).

Frameworks for teacher support in SNSs

A number of existing studies provide insight into the way in which teachers support one another within SNSs. Kelly and Antonio (2016) develop a framework of the six ways in which teachers support one another in online environments. This framework is based upon the psychological notion of *social peer support* (House, 1981) and the roles of *co-operating teachers* (Clarke, Triggs, & Nielsen, 2014). Three of these six support roles appear to occur even in transitory relationships between teachers: responses to pragmatic requests for support (e.g. responding to a request for resources on a particular topic); socialisation into the profession (enculturating new teachers into social norms); and convening relationships (connecting teachers to other teachers). The remaining three support roles appear to require deeper relationships of trust between teachers (Clarà, Kelly, Mauri, & Danaher, 2015): reflection upon practice (support for a

teacher to move from confusion to clarity around one aspect of their teaching); feedback upon practice (helping teachers develop their own skills for critical self-reflection); and modelling of practice (allowing other teachers to see examples of one's own teaching practice).

A few studies have considered the way in which the design of online communities is able to impact their provision of different types of support. Herrington, Herrington, Kervin, and Ferry (2006) demonstrate the theory-led design of an online community to support teachers. Since this work, a number of other Australian platforms have followed this lead (Clarà et al., 2015). Even though the technology has changed with the passage of time, a common theme is the value that teachers are able to get from online collegial interactions. In their survey of the literature, (Kelly & Antonio, 2016) developed a list of 23 characteristics of successful online communities of teachers, Table 1.

Insert Table 1 here

Private groups of early career teachers

Private groups of early career teachers in SNSs have been the focus of a small number of research papers, largely in the higher education sector. Uusiautti and Määttä (2014) in their study of university students in Finland found that SNSs provide a number of pedagogical and psychological benefits for students. Pedagogically, they found that they provided new opportunities for both formal and informal learning from a wider variety of people than might be accessed in a face-to-face situation. Psychologically, they found that SNSs generated social capital, allowing members to feel a sense of belonging and enhanced self-esteem: "As the results showed, students considered social media as a way of enhancing the positive sense of togetherness and constructing communality that are based on the internet" (p. 300). Goodyear et al. (2014) emphasise that these online platforms are financially viable, readily accessible, and that their use does not take teachers away from their school environment. This is particularly important for teachers in rural and remote schools where the cost and loss of class time from travelling to external professional development can make it unviable.

Methods

The present study takes a qualitative approach to fill the gap in the literature that "much is still unknown – most pertinently the nature of private groups" (Kelly & Antonio, 2016, p. 148) to augment existing quantitative research into public groups. The methodology of semi-structured interviews with participants (n=22) "…allows us to consider each teacher's personal support networks, mentorship, and contexts as unique in how each person is sustained" (Clandinin et al., 2015, p. 13). These participants were a sub-set of a larger group of interview participants who had been self-selected through a survey (n=105) which was distributed primarily through Facebook and Twitter. All participants were secondary teachers in Australasia. A *snowball sampling* process was used where those who responded were asked to further distribute the survey to their contacts (Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). This lack of randomisation during subject selection is likely to have influenced results, presenting a limitation. However, it also had the advantage of extending the range of participants across most states of Australia and in parts of New Zealand, capturing some who might otherwise have been hard to contact.

The semi-structured interview questions were designed to encourage participants to reflect and talk about: i) their support needs and how they had been met in the school they were in; ii) challenges related to their casual employment (where applicable); and, iii) how they had been supported either by school or through social media. This approach allows for the topics that were of interest to participants to arise as a part of the research. As Holloway and Wheeler (2002) suggest, "The context of participants' lives or work affects their behaviour, and therefore researchers have to realise that the participants are grounded in their history and temporality" (p. 12).

The research was conducted in during 2016. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Southern Queensland Human Research Ethics Committee and all subjects provided informed consent.

Analysis

A *thematic analysis* was conducted to identify patterns and themes across the interviews that had been transcribed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Six phases of analysis occurred, following the process described by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarity with the data; generation of initial codes; search for themes; reviewing themes; definition and naming the themes, and, production of the report. Thematic analysis on interview data is a grounded theory approach (Glasser & Strauss, 1967) which allowed for the research to see what were the primary concerns of teachers that were using private groups within Facebook.

Familiarity with the data occurred through the researcher personally conducting and transcribing each of the interviews, affording a familiarity with the participants involved and their particular contexts. A reading and re-reading of the data assisted in identifying initial codes. The initial code relevant to this study was that of Facebook, based on the observation in the data that different types of social media were being used to support teacher learning and social connection. A review of the interviews that included a Facebook code (n=22) led to a second layer of coding, resulting in themes in which particular uses of Facebook were identified, defined and named. These themes and associated quantities were: casual teacher support (9); cohort (14); subject associations (2); and, unsupportive school (3). Some participants were coded into multiple categories. After a review of these themes, the subject association theme and the cohort theme were combined due to conceptual overlap. The unsupportive school theme only had 3 participants but was retained because of its distinctive contribution as this led to the definition of three themes that were used in the final analysis, Table 2.

Insert Table 2 here

Findings

Casual support: "Help me survive and get a job"

Many participants were casual teachers[1], often not by choice but by necessity, caught in a cycle of "bouncing between temporary jobs" (4/6/2016, James[2]). The nature of their employment meant that they did not necessarily know where they were likely to be working in coming days, weeks, or terms. For casual teachers, Facebook provided a valuable source of peer support that was often not available in the schools in which they taught. Many were not provided with a mentor in their school and many did not have the physical presence of a desk in a staff office. Often the private Facebook groups utilised were established when these casual teachers were pre-service teachers, formed as a means of sharing resources and ideas whilst on practical experience and of maintaining social bonds. The urgent demands of having to find a teaching position following graduation caused some of these groups to shift their focus. Some examples of this were:

> So, there is a Facebook page for [keeping up with my uni cohort], but that devolved
>
> quite quickly at the end of university into tell[ing] me how to get a job. (12/3/2016,
>
> Alex)

> Well we had a 4th year Education page in our final year. Everyone went on it to share
>
> resources or jobs they've heard of or things to keep in touch. So occasionally people

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[1] The issue of the current casualization of the teaching workforce in Australian schools has been well documented and it is increasingly evident that the most common way now for teachers to begin their teaching career is as a casual or fixed term teacher (NSW Government Education Department, 2016). Casualization can take at least one of two forms: as a casual relief teacher (CRT) or as a contract teacher (CT). As a workforce, casual relief teachers (CRTs) have been defined by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) from the state of Victoria, in Australia as "casual employees engaged by school councils … for periods of up to [and not exceeding] thirty consecutive working days for a range of reasons including: to replace a teacher absent on leave; to replace a teacher undertaking other duties or professional development; [and/or] to undertake a specific task or activity that requires a qualified teacher."

Contract teachers may be engaged for more than 30 days but for a fixed period of time. This can range from a term to a year, often in the context of replacing a teacher on leave (Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2016).

[2] All names are pseudonyms to protect privacy

post things on there but it's not a continuous form of communication but there are

contacts there if I need. (13/5/2016, Maree)

Those who had to travel to new locations to find employment found that the Facebook group provided a stable form of support, establishing a fixed point of connection whilst the early career teacher was away from family and university friends. An example of this was Jenny (20/6/2016) who moved from Melbourne to Sydney to find casual work. The group allowed her to hear of available jobs back in Victoria in a timely manner:

I did casual work in Sydney for about a year and a half. So, it was good having a

Facebook group like that- it'd be like, this school will take casual teachers. So, you go,

Ok, I'll put my resume in there.

There is evidence of collegiality and trust in the way these teachers looked out for one another. Lisa (29/6/2016) had a similar experience to Jenny in helping another friend to get a placement through alerting her on Facebook. She recalled, "And I just put a call out on one of these groups and someone answered it and she got the block and she's had some regular casual work at the school since then".

For Paul (20/6/2016), who had also moved away from home to take up a casual position at the same school as Jenny, Facebook was "a network" that provided a means to keep in touch about the latest jobs and "for everyone touching base about what's going on". Others whose cohort spread more extensively, found opportunities to hear about overseas positions on Facebook, such as for Phillipa (29/5/2016), whose friends knew about "opportunities in South Korea, for instance or Malaysia or China."

Casual teachers had to be flexible in moving between state, catholic and independent school sectors, each of which have their particular demands and ethos. Facebook provided a means of accessing this privileged information. As Phillipa reflected:

…or even independent schools - what's the go with applying to them because they have all other dot points for preferred but then you only put in a cover letter. Like what do you do to meet these dot points so you stand out? And we talk about how to go about it, without actually giving someone the work.

Facebook groups have also assisted with accreditation requirements of state education departments who use the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) standards. AITSL is a government funded body supporting the delivering of quality education in Australia. Graduate teachers are required to address a set of standards before they can achieve full registration as a teacher. This is a burdensome process for ongoing early career teachers, made even more difficult for casual teachers without a regular school from which to gather data. Kim (4/7/2016) joined a Facebook group whose members included teachers who were trying to complete the requirements, as well as some who had recently completed accreditation. At the time of this interview, there were 3,179 members from all over Australia in the group. When asked what value she gained from the group, Kim replied, "that's probably been a major support for me, just learning from what other people have done."

Although Facebook is not the only way casual teachers receive support and advice about jobs, it is certainly a significant way. For casual teachers, there appeared to be a heightened level of collegiality and interdependence amongst their peers on Facebook, in knowing that they were all in a similar and challenging situation together.

Cohort cohesion: "We're mates so let's support each other"

Those teachers who had done their ITE training together, found Facebook to be a valuable way of sharing resources and strategies. The cohort was often formed in the final year of their ITE training. Paul (20/6/2016), for example, found that the like-minded cohort of his peers from his visual arts course were still there for him in his first year of teaching, providing him with relevant resources: "Yes, it is good because it's your peers, I suppose, and they know where you're coming

from". Similarly, for Janine (18/8/2016), keeping regular contact through a private Facebook group with her small group of friends from her ITE cohort provided her with one of her strongest forms of support, given that she was in a school where other forms of support were minimal. She used the group up to three times a week, and more during holiday breaks. As she reflected, "They are definitely my go-to people."

For others, a subject-based group – often generated at a professional development event or on the advice of other teachers – became more significant than the ITE cohort. Tim (20/6/2016), for example, found himself suddenly thrown into a Year 12 subject early in Term 1, with few resources provided to him – and where he was the only teacher in his rural school teaching the subject. A professional development event led to him establish a private Facebook group directly related to his subject area, where he met many other graduate teachers teaching the same subject. He described this as an "incredible" source of support: "So, we made our own closed Facebook group just so we can ask each other - free from judgment - saying how do we teach this subject?" Tim got access to material directly related to his area of study, as well as a readily available and accessible source of advice. He showed evidence of having a strong level of connectedness with his colleagues in the private Facebook group, possibly enhanced by the fact that they were all teaching a Year 12 subject with its attendant high level stakes. When asked if the group had been helpful, he replied, "That's been incredible!" Shared goals and high stake interests would appear to have enhanced the Facebook experience for teachers such as Tim, in a way that might not have been so productive in a more open public Facebook group.

Other early career teachers found themselves invited to join private subject-specific Facebook groups early in their career. Eve (20/6/2016), for example, was delighted to join a psychology teachers' group that not only gave her access to valuable resources, but also allowed her to collaboratively evaluate practice exams with more experienced teachers:

A psychology teachers' group on Facebook and that's from people all over Victoria, some I've never even met before - I only got invited 2 years ago and I thought, what did I used to do before this? It's amazing.

Similarly, Jane (28/4/2016), who was part of a Teach for Australia[3] (TFA) Facebook group, relished the fact that she could work with more experienced teachers as well as her younger peers. There was a very strong cohort from her graduating year, but she also linked in with teachers from previous years of TFA. As she explained, "The most important and the most useful part of that whole six weeks of training was making relationships with other associates and being able to maintain them - having a network to tap into." The Facebook group gave her access to a much wider range of resources and advice than she might necessarily have found within her school community. She also found that the group was helpful for informing her about upcoming events where participants could meet face-to-face, further strengthening their online connection, collegiality and trust. This is an example of Facebook helping teachers to overcome the tyranny of distance and connect across a wide range of different school environments and contexts.

Situation support: "I'll share because I know I am anonymous"

For those teachers who found themselves in less supportive school environments the anonymity of Facebook was its most appealing feature. Claire's (18/4/2016) situation clearly illustrated this. Although her school had some groups she could connect with, the Facebook group gave her a level of privacy that she preferred, particularly when it came to sharing her struggles:

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[3] Teach for Australia is global network that recruits high achieving post-graduates and fast tracks them into teaching in high needs communities. Individuals commit themselves to working for Teach for Australia for 2 years.

On the social media groups, on Twitter, on Facebook, I feel less judged asking for help. And I also feel like I can ask more anonymously, even though you can never ever be anonymous on a social media website. But if I ask those questions at school, that's a completely different ball game. You can't be seen to be vulnerable at school or be struggling at school because that then brings into question your professional capabilities. So, that's why I actually prefer the social media groups.

The level of trust that Claire experienced in her private Facebook group was significant. Facebook serves as a non-judgmental and (sometimes) anonymous platform at a time when many teachers are on contracts and are concerned about maintaining an image of competency in their school. Similarly, Tess (14/4/2016), being the only Indonesian language teacher in her school, felt that she could find a supportive community online, rather than in her language faculty which had a competitive edge to it. Whilst she primarily connected with subject-related organisations face-to-face, these organisations had their corresponding Facebook outlets which helped her to overcome her sense of isolation: "It's definitely the networking - reduction of isolation. You end up a virtual staffroom, that's what I like to think of it."

These examples show the more sensitive role Facebook can play in the lives of early career teachers, helping to reduce their sense of isolation and ensuring they have a non-judgmental and potentially anonymous arena for outpouring their struggles and concerns. As Claire indicated, it becomes their "virtual staffroom", possibly a more congenial place than their school staffroom, if they have a regular one. In addition, Facebook can help to provide a link with the pre-service networks that the early career teacher has come from, offering an avenue for sharing resources and advice. This may well be filling a gap that higher education institutions are only gradually beginning to fill (Kelly, 2013).

Discussion

Limitations

The significance of these findings is limited by the small sample size, its focus upon Australasia, and the use of a snowball sampling strategy for recruiting participants. Without further study, we are uncertain as to how well these findings would generalize to the broader population of teachers. The findings do fit with anecdotal evidence; however, replication in further studies is required.

How teachers use private groups within SNSs

The results show that SNSs, particularly private Facebook groups, have a significant role to play for a range of different early career teachers. In particular, they are a valuable source of support for those who are in less than supportive schools and/or who are casual teachers. Social media also has a significant role to play for teachers in a variety of other situations, including those in isolated schools, those teaching either senior subjects or specialised subjects alone in their school and those who find it helpful to continue the collaborative support they found in their ITE training. The fact that these are private rather than public groups adds an element of security for these teachers. Also, as boyd & Ellison (2007) suggest, members of private sites are not necessarily looking to make new contacts, but rather to sustain the ones they have. As such, a private group on Facebook serves a practical purpose of allowing early career teachers to relate to a specific community of fellow teachers, without the distractions that a public group might have.

Casual teachers find in Facebook the collegiality and trust of a community that may elude them in schools due to the transitory nature of their employment. Many of these teachers do not have access to the normal facilities that would help them to build collegiality and feel connected in a school, such as having a mentor, having a desk in a staffroom or having a learning team to work with. Further, some were moving schools so frequently that they rarely got the chance to make significant, ongoing connections. Alongside family support, Facebook may have provided the one main constant in their rollercoaster ride of a teaching experience. For many, it also provided a

degree of anonymity for them to share their struggles. Casual teachers can be fearful of sharing their concerns in schools, knowing that they might not be asked back for the next appointment if they sound like they are not coping. These groups on Facebook are possibly more intense than others, because of the personal needs of members.

In the *digital habitat* of Facebook, casual teachers in this study sought help in finding resources for the diverse range of year levels and subjects that they were likely to be teaching the next day, some of which they might not necessarily be fully qualified to teach. Unlike those in ongoing positions, who generally have access to subject co-ordinators and course outlines, these teachers might be given very little to go by. Pragmatic support included early career teachers sharing opportunities for their peers for employment that they heard about. There is a degree of mutuality in this and evidence of the quality of the social capital that is generated.

For others who had year-long or ongoing positions in a more supportive school environment, Facebook was important in terms of collaboration and dialogue. It facilitated connection between teachers of the same subject, particularly for those involved with smaller cohort subjects and those who were in country or isolated areas. In these schools, it was common to be the only one teaching a particular Year 12 subject, such as high level mathematics and science and particular languages. The need for connection with other teachers of the same subject was great and private groups in Facebook facilitated this. This included sharing formal assessment tasks and resources and having a venue to ask questions about the study design. For time-poor teachers, unable to leave their classes to attend external professional development, a high functioning Facebook group can provide resources and access to innovative ideas that might otherwise be less accessible. Students of these teachers were the likely beneficiaries, as the teachers could access quality resources and strategies from a range of different schools represented in the network.

Early career teachers who drew on the connections they had made in their ITE courses often found a supportive and collaborative environment in Facebook to share ideas, resources, and stories. This was the case with teachers who had participated in the TFA program, who had shared goals

and interests and were involved in a community that had diversity and breadth in a well-connected network because of the significant size of the cohort and their common preparatory background. This meant, in practice, that participant requests for resources were often answered very quickly by several different teachers. In addition, as all participants in TFA were in disadvantaged schools there was a strong degree of collegiality and trust in each other, as they shared their common struggles and mentored each other. These were some of the most empowered teachers in the study because of the strength and congeniality of the Facebook community they were immersed in.

Other early career teachers who were not in the TFA program but had maintained a strong Facebook connection with their ITE cohort also found good support. Whilst some continued to find ongoing support from the official Facebook group set up by their institution, others preferred to set up a smaller private Facebook group with their friends. These teachers often accessed their Facebook group prolifically, possibly because they were connecting with close friends. In past decades, prior to the development of the internet, such friends might have only have been able to connect by phone, given the geographical spread of their appointments. However, with the tools available from SNSs the participants could form an ongoing support group for each other that either complemented other support groups they had at their school or became a substitute for what was lacking in their school. It became a place for support for ongoing reflective practice, perhaps more so than what might have eventuated in a larger, less personal public Facebook group.

There is potential for future work that considers private Facebook groups in the context of traditional teacher relationships within physical spaces, such as the school staffroom. Participants in the study made it clear that the medium-imposed restrictions (of not having face-to-face contact) did not inhibit deep and supportive connections forming between teachers within Facebook. The privacy in the groups studied (similar to the privacy of a traditional staffroom) is a common factor in these relationships developing. Further research may be able to establish whether there is a benefit to participants in the Facebook extension of the staffroom into the virtual world, in that it allows for teachers to overcome the tyranny of distance as suggested by Trust et al. (2016) and

provides another way for teachers to exercise their relational agency (Edwards, 2005). Teachers who may be isolated within their own school classroom (e.g. those in rural locations) may find in Facebook other teachers sharing a similar context and values with whom a connection can be developed (Clarà et al., 2015). A potential danger of this extension of the staffroom into private Facebook groups is that it is possible that the technology could create divisions within real-world staffrooms. Where a physical space is by nature inclusive, it is far easier in an online space to introduce barriers to cliques, e.g. a number of cliques within a staffroom, where each has its own private Facebook group for side-bar conversations. Such a scenario could serve to undermine the common sense of purpose felt in many staffrooms. Exclusion may also occur between the haves and the have-nots of the technology and know-how to use Facebook groups. However, this phenomenon was not observed within the present study where the Facebook groups were seen to augment existing support without having obvious impacts upon those not involved.

Implications for policy and initial teacher education

This study has provided further evidence for the role that SNSs such as Facebook can play in augmenting the current support provided to early career teachers in schools. Interviews with teachers across all three sectors (state, independent and catholic) have shown that while there may be varying levels of support in school situations, all participants were able to find something of value within the Facebook community (although it is recognised that this finding may be biased by the self-selected nature of participant selection). Despite this, anecdotally, Facebook is currently "blocked" (inaccessible to staff and students) in many schools. Given the social, emotional, and professional development needs that groups in SNSs appear to be able to meet, we question whether there might be benefits for teachers being able to access Facebook during school hours.

A further implication is the need for ITE institutions to integrate a more open and extensive discussion into formal units on how SNSs can assist students as they move into their professional lives. Whilst this discussion around professional learning networks for teachers has begun in many institutions it is not yet widespread (Trust et al., 2016). A recent research initiative *TeachConnect*

has begun developing a new SNS dedicated to teachers in Queensland, Australia (Clarà et al., 2015). This community, which is still in its early stages, includes membership and support from all universities in the state, the teacher registration and accreditation body (the Queensland College of Teachers), and many experienced teachers. TeachConnect provides an interesting case study as it has begun to show examples of how a private SNS for teachers can be embedded within higher education programs: (i) through integration in higher education curriculum content (discussions occurring within the site and resources on the site linked to lectures); (ii) with this integration spanning university boundaries (these discussions can spill over from one university into the broader community of teachers; and (iii) through the ability of teachers to export their contributions to the community (e.g. through uploading resources, asking questions and responding with valuable information) to be used as evidence for registration and promotions in a way that is supported by the teacher accreditation body. Whilst the TeachConnect approach is yet to be formally validated, it shows how SNSs may be 'tamed' for formal inclusion within higher education.

Conclusions

This paper has addressed a gap in the literature: that whilst much is known about the use of public groups within SNSs for support, there is a lack of understanding about how private SNS groups are being used by teachers (outside of researcher-established environments). The study has used thematic analysis to find evidence for three dominant ways in which teachers are using private SNS groups for support: firstly, as support for casual teachers to help with surviving in the job and with finding employment; secondly, in enhancing collegiality and a feeling of peer social support; and thirdly, through online-specific support through distance and anonymity. Whilst all three types of support have appeared in the literature previously in other contexts, it is valuable to know that this is what is occurring within private SNS groups. Hearing the teachers' voices about what is occurring in these groups provides a useful foundation for further understanding.

There are recognised limitations to the findings – that the use of SNSs by teachers will always be highly contextual; that the research is limited to Australasian teachers; and that the

sample used in the study with a qualitative method limits the generalizability of findings. Despite these limitations, the findings have potential to influence the shift that is currently occurring in initial teacher education, as teacher educators look to use connected platforms within formal education programs.

The ideas discussed here for how to leverage SNSs for the benefit of early career teachers can be summarised as: firstly to ensure that teachers are exposed to the benefits of private groups within SNSs during their initial teacher education; and secondly that there is benefit in governments and industry bodies in working with these platforms or establishing their own so that teachers can be guided in accessing the benefits of SNSs (rather than finding their own way there through word of mouth, as is currently the case). There is much potential for further exploration of the integration of SNSs into formal ITE and whilst some examples of how this might look have been briefly discussed, further research is needed.

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Table 1 Distilled characteristics of effective teacher communities

Acknowledging the politicised and situated character of teachers' work	Interdependence
Bridging participants' formal and informal learning and their personal and professional lives	Knowledge building and sharing
Capacity- and confidence building	Mentoring
Coherent and integrated organisation and structure	Nurturing agency
Collaboration	Participation
Collegiality and trust	Perspective transformation
Connectedness as a complex and contextualised phenomenon	Professional dispositions and values
Deep and growing understanding of what teachers do and what teaching is	Sense of developing identity, meaning, and purpose
Dialogue	Shared goals and interests
Empowerment of teachers as well as of their students	Sharing resources
Exploiting the educational affordances of particular ICTs	Support for ongoing reflective practice
Fulfilling members' individual and collective needs	

Table 2 Interview data coding (from thematic analysis), n=22

Code	Count	Description and example
Casual support	9	Those using Facebook to find support for their casual work, for example: *"I did casual work in Sydney for about a year and a half. So it was good having a Facebook group like that - it'd be like, this school will take casual teachers. So you go, Ok, I'll put my resume in there."*
Cohort cohesion	14	Those using Facebook to share resources and strategies with their cohort from either pre-service days or current days, for example: *"Yes, it is good because it's your peers, I suppose, and you know where you're coming from"*
Situation support	3	Those using Facebook to compensate for being in an unsupportive/hostile school environment, for example: *"You can't be seen to be vulnerable at school or be struggling at school because that then brings into question your professional capabilities. So that's why I actually prefer the social media groups."*