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## Facebook as an Informal Teacher Professional Development Tool

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*Abstract: Synchronous and asynchronous communication provide a resource in terms of curriculum, planning and implementation of lessons as well as a source of kinship of like-minded teachers who find in each other sympathetic and empathetic sounding boards. Interviews with four administrators and 22 members of the Trinidadian teachers' Facebook site A Teacher's Voice (ATV) revealed that the site is used by its 4,895 members as an informal professional development tool and allows for the nourishing of teachers' personal development. According to these interviewees, ATV helps to develop teachers professionally through the provision of information on: (a) curriculum; (b) teaching methodologies; (c) instructional technology; (d) general teacher concerns (e) ethical concerns; and (f) topical issues globally and locally. ATV, according to the participants, also promotes personal development through: (a) mentoring; (b) social support and collaboration; (c) celebrations; (d) shared humor; and (e) prayer.*

### Introduction

The stereotypical perception of Facebook is that there is a prevalence of gossiping, social bullying, and privacy issues (Rutherford, 2013). Albeit, created for college students, Facebook has evolved to become not only a main staple in our daily technological diet but a valuable source of supply and demand of information and knowledge among the various Social Network Sites (SNS). The daily active users (DAUs) as of the third quarter of 2012 are listed in the Facebook report for September 23, 2013 as 728 million. A google search conducted on November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2013 with the keywords *teacher Facebook sites* revealed 227,000,000 links. Teachers are using Facebook as a means of generating interest in their classes, socializing with each other, collaborating and sharing pertinent information, and as a sounding board to give vent to their concerns and to receive advice. At the click of a mouse, teachers are communicating and receiving ideas on curriculum issues, improving their instructional delivery, design and methodology, dealing with classroom issues, discussing topical issues globally and regionally, disagreeing with each other, and improving their personal development.

Researchers are finding that Social Network Sites (SNS) are changing the nature and scope of teacher professional development and allows for networks that would have been impossible. For example, Holmes et al. (2013), in their global, national, and local Australian study of teachers' use of Twitter concluded that, "the collaborative and public nature of the Twitter medium allows for networks of participants to form naturally in response to common interests" (p. 63). Similarly, Facebook allows for such use and, unlike traditional teacher professional development, creates continuous connections which, depending on the social group, can be equal in participation, contribution and hierarchy.

Despite the significance of Facebook in fostering high levels of global knowledge sharing, there are limited studies on the use of Facebook as a teacher professional development

tool or as a creation of professional learning communities. Such paucity of research studies on the implementation of Facebook as a teacher professional development tool gave vent to this study. Congruently, Ranieri, Manca, and Fini (2012) underscored the dearth of empirical evidence and stated “to date little empirical research on professional use of social network sites has been conducted, particularly with reference to groups of teachers on Facebook” (p. 754). Earlier, Rutherford (2010) highlighted this deficit and indicated that, “The vast and uncharted waters of social network sites remains to be explored as scholars currently have a limited understanding of who is using these sites, and why they are using these sites” (p. 2). Therefore, the intent of this qualitative study, after open-ended unstructured interviews with four of its administrators and 22 of its members, was to determine ATV’s role and function in the overall fabric of Trinidadian and Tobagonian teachers’ professional and personal development.

### **Literature/Theory**

Created for socializing, the value of Facebook as a resource and sharing tool is gradually being acknowledged by educators such as those in Ontario (Rutherford, 2010). Similarly, Lampe, Vitak, Gray, and Ellison (2012) indicated that “research suggests that, increasingly, users are repurposing SNSs for purposes beyond the strictly social, including for networking and collaboration” (p.1). The synchronous nature of connecting via Facebook with other educators anytime, anywhere, anyplace and in an instant has changed the orthodox landscape of mainstream teacher professional development. Garland (2012) reported that “Facebook and Twitter might soon replace traditional professional development for teachers” (p. 1). In her study of the role of Facebook in providing informal opportunities for teacher professional development, Rutherford stated:

Prior research has noted that the traditional notions of in-service training should be replaced by opportunities for knowledge sharing where teachers have the opportunity to share what they know, discuss what they want to learn, and connect new concepts and strategies to their own unique contexts. (p. 12)

Rutherford (2010) suggested that “attempts to enhance these areas of teacher knowledge fall under the realm of professional development that is often considered the sum total of formal and informal learning pursued and experienced by the teacher” (p. 3). Marsick and Watkins (2001) indicated that the learner is responsible for his/her learning and even informal learning is intentional since the learner still needs to be motivated to learn. For this reason, the members of ATV are viewed as its learners and teachers subsequently, their input into how this site has affected them is crucial to the significance of this study.

### **Teacher Professional Development**

Traditional teacher professional development is based on expert power and hierarchical in nature where the expert was seen as the person responsible for sharing with fledgling teachers (Barab et al 2001). Contemporary Facebook teacher sites allow neophyte, current, future and potential teachers to voice their concerns and opinions and their knowledge and experiences are seen as just as valuable as the more seasoned educators. In fact, Bissessar (2013) found that teachers interviewed from North-West Trinidad stated that they were concerned that the “follow up and the purpose, and structure of staff development needed to be discussed and understood by all staff in order for those staff members to not see it as days off to relax and do nothing” (p.

126). The use of Facebook sites as a teacher professional development tool eliminates such real time issues and can lead to higher levels of efficiency where only the most vital information is exchanged and wherever possible follow up can be done via inbox or face-to-face collaboration.

Definitions of teacher professional development focus on three areas: (a) a deeper understanding of teacher/students' needs; (b) reflection towards making improvement; and (c) teacher improvement and growth. Charalambos (2004) viewed teacher professional development as "teaching toward understanding and helping students become independent learners requires that teachers themselves become thoughtful independent learners" (p. 3). However, Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) defined teacher development as "deepening teachers' understanding about the teaching/learning process and the students they teach" (p. 203). On the other hand, Glatthorn (1995) indicated that, "Teacher development is the professional growth a teacher achieves as a result of gaining increased experience and examining his or her teaching systematically" (p. 41). Teacher professional development is therefore critical to teachers' growth and student achievement.

The literature on effective teacher professional development, according to Rutherford (2010) is characterized in the following ways: (a) sustained on-going and intensive (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Borko, 2004; Wayne, Yoon, Zhu, Cronen, & Garet, 2008; Wei et al., 2009); (b) practical and directly related to local classroom practice and student learning (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Borko, 2004; Hirsh, 2004; Nord, 2004; Wei et al., 2009); (c) collaborative and involving the sharing of knowledge (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Borko, 2004; Hirsh, 2004; Nord, 2004; Warren-Little, 2006); and (d) participant driven and constructivist in nature (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Borko, 2004; Wayne et al., 2008).

#### *Sustained Ongoing and Intensive Professional Development*

In her studies on teacher professional development, Borko (2004) viewed the key elements as: "(a) the professional development program; (b) the teachers who are the learners of the system; (c) the facilitator, who guides teachers as they construct new knowledge and practice; and (d) the context in which the professional development occurs" (p. 7). In mapping the terrain of traditional teacher professional development, Borko posited three phases: (a) phase 1 dealt with researchers who studied the effects of professional development at a single site and an individual program; (b) phase 2 encompassed a single professional development program at more than one sites with more than one facilitator; and (c) phase 3 involved multiple sites and multiple programs. With the advent of technology, each member now becomes both learner and facilitator and the programs are as multiple and complex as each individual post. Each post can relate to diverse aspects of teacher development. The only constant is the site or in this case the teacher Facebook site.

#### *Practical and Related to Classroom Practice*

Wei et al. (2009) indicated that when all teachers participate fully in teacher professional development then all students benefit from this initiative. They stated, "Teachers are more likely to try classroom practices that have been modeled for them" (p. 10). They continued that the more hands on the training the more teachers are motivated to try these practices in their classrooms. In a similar vein, Borko (2004) echoed "Professional development programs that

include an explicit focus on subject matter can help teachers develop these powerful understandings. Experiences that engage teachers as learners in activities such as solving mathematical problems and conducting scientific experiments are particularly effective” (p. 10). Effective teacher professional development should encompass a high level of teacher engagement as indicated in two Science and Mathematics teaching projects where teachers were involved in intensive summer programs followed by sustained support during the school term. As a result, there was a higher level of teacher satisfaction and student engagement (Neale, Smith & Johnson, 1990).

### *Collaborative and Knowledge Sharing*

The *egg crate* model of instruction where each teacher is in his/her own classroom and spends all day there divided by partitions from other adults, according to Darling-Hammond et al. (1995) still persists and suggests that teacher collaboration is highly improbable in such instances. In this respect, teacher learning communities become pivotal to teacher collaboration and by extension increased student achievement. Little (2002) stated “that strong professional development communities are important contributors to instructional improvement and school reform” (Warren-Little, 2002, p. 936).

Moreover, studies of the Community of Teacher Learners and Quantitative Understanding: Amplifying Student Achievement and Reasoning (QUASAR) represent areas where teacher professional communities were successful. For example, the Community of Teacher Learners project (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001) engaged English and History teachers at an urban Seattle high school and university-based educators. During an 18-month period, these educators discussed teaching and learning and designed an interdisciplinary humanities curriculum. After completion of the project Grossman et al. suggested that professional learning communities engendered: (a) development of a group identity and norms for interaction; (b) formulation of a sense of communal responsibility for the regulation of norms and behavior; and (c) willingness of community members to assume responsibility for their colleagues’ growth and development.

### *Participant Driven and Constructive*

Quattlebaum (2014) stated that much of the available literature on teacher professional development is viewed in relation to student achievement. The QUASAR project was one such initiative where teachers were concerned about student achievement in Mathematics at a middle school “in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods by funding and studying six site-based professional development programs” (Borko, 2004, p. 11). Borko further concluded “that professional learning communities were central to fostering teacher change and student learning” (p. 11). In this example, the teacher professional development was participant driven. Similarly, Warren-Little (2006) stated that “systematic attention to children’s thinking and learning will pay off in improved classroom practice and student outcomes” (p. 8). Therefore, teacher professional development that is participant driven and constructive can yield higher returns as indicated by Darling-Hammond and Mc Laughlin (1995) where it needs to be grounded in reflection and experimentation. The aforementioned examples typify teachers’ attempts to alter their practices to suit their students.

Ultimately, Holmes et al. (2013) stated that the current literature on teacher professional development gives the teacher the internal and external locus of control and encapsulates collaboration and personal learning networks (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Maloney & Konza, 2011). Darling-Hammond and Mc Laughlin (1995) concluded that effective teacher professional development should:

- (a) engage teachers in practical tasks and provide opportunities to observe, assess and reflect on the new practices; (b) be participant driven and grounded in enquiry, reflection and experimentation; (c) be collaborative and involve the sharing of knowledge; (d) directly connect to the work of teachers and their students; (e) be sustained, on-going and intensive; (f) provide support through modelling, coaching and the collective solving of problems; and (g) be connected to other aspects of school change.(p. 2)

Teacher professional development continues to evolve as the click of the mouse opens up a world of information, global collaboration and sharing that defies space and time and is convenient and constant. The fundamental value of SNS as a professional developmental tool is self-directed, autonomous, and involves self-pacing (Richardson & Manacabelli, 2011; Forte, Humphrey, & Park, 2012).

### **Facebook and Teacher Professional Development**

Facebook is defined as “an online directory that connects people through social networks,” that can be used to “look up people around you, see how people know each other, and make groups and events with your friends,” (Facebook.com, 2006). A google search of Facebook and teacher professional development on February 11, 2014 yielded very few peer-reviewed articles. A further search of SNS and teacher professional development produced more studies conducted around 1998 and 2000 before the advent of Facebook. Such dearth of information on Facebook as a teacher professional development tool indicates the need for more studies to be conducted in the use of Facebook as a teacher professional development tool.

Facebook was originally designed for college students to stay in touch with friends, collaborate, and exchange ideas. Silverman (2007) conducted a study on college students’ use of Facebook as a social network tool and found that “online social networking allows students to capitalize on the connections they make online in terms of long-term career benefits, classes and socialization as a whole “(Silverman, 2007, p.125). Later, researchers became interested in Facebook as an instructional tool for students such as Dunlap and Lowenthal (2009). However, there is still not enough empirical evidence of the use of Facebook as a teacher professional development tool. Grosbeck (2009) espoused that SNS shows the promise of being used for teaching and learning, however no empirical evidence was given. Silverman (2007) stated that professors are using Facebook to check whether or not their students are telling the truth when they indicate that they are ill. Additionally, employers are using Facebook as a means of determining whether they should hire employees. The negative and positive impact of Facebook in making and breaking relationships are well-known. Its potency as a tool for professional collaboration has not been effectively studied.

### **Method**

In order to determine the value to ATV to Trinidadian and Tobagonian teachers a small-scale exploratory research approach couched in an interpretivist paradigm was used. The aim of

this paper was to determine members' and administrators' perception of ATV as a teacher professional development tool. The Trinidadian Facebook site *A Teacher's Voice* (ATV) where a teacher is a teacher and the logo reads: *We have different gifts according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying then prophesy in accordance with your faith. If your gift is serving then serve. If it is teaching then teach* (ATV's Facebook logo, February, 2014) was selected for this study because it is the only one in Trinidad and Tobago. Albeit, this quotation shows a leaning toward a particular religious thought, this is a non-secular site and welcomes differing views with which the administrators may not be in agreement, as stated by the administrators interviewed.

A sample of the 452 members of ATV was recorded on October 17, 2013 with 331 males and 121 females. Out of this group, 50% of members were studying at the University of West Indies, Trinidad, 10% at UTT, and 5% at Valsayn Teachers' College and Corinth Teachers' College. The remaining members were teachers employed with the Ministry of Education of Trinidad and Tobago and came from all geographical areas of Trinidad and Tobago. One teacher taught at a school in St. Lucia. This population of 4,895 members represents a significant number of the total teaching population in Trinidad and Tobago at the nursery, primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Additionally, there are 1,200 prospective members awaiting validation to join ATV.

Purposive sampling was used to interview four of the six members of the administrative team. They gave informed consent to be interviewed and their responses and quotes from ATV used in this study. Interviews with the two males and two females were conducted via telephone with one male administrator preferring to respond to interview questions via email. These interviews were conducted from February 1, to 11, 2014. Each interviewee was asked questions pertaining to ATV, its role and function and how he/she foresees it evolving in the future and what he/she believed to be its current role. Additionally, convenience sampling was used to send interview questions via inboxes to 40 members recommended by the ATV administrators or found on the site on February 10, 2014. By February 11, 2014, 22 persons had responded. All participants gave informed consent for their views and quotes from the ATV website to be used in this study with the knowledge that findings will be reported cumulatively.

A content analysis of the interviews was conducted. Marshall and Rossman (1989) suggested a five mode analytical procedure in content analysis which involved: (a) organizing the data; (b) generating the categories themes and patterns; (c) testing the emergent hypothesis against the data; (d) searching for alternative explanations; and (e) writing the report. When adhering to these five modes, the researcher found adequate content to validate the emerging themes of teacher professional development through: (a) curriculum; (b) teaching methodologies; (c) instructional technology; (d) general teacher concerns (e) ethical concerns; and (f) topical issues globally and locally. ATV, according to administrators and members, also promotes personal development through: (a) mentoring; (b) social support and collaboration; (c) celebrations; (d) shared humor; and (e) prayer

## Findings

Based on the codification process the aforementioned themes were found and cross-referenced. During the process of inquiry, the researcher checked the data for trustworthiness "credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability" (Lincoln & Guba 1985, p. 189). From the data garnered, there was the repetition of key descriptive words and phrases such as: "helpful," "collaborative" "gave the teacher a voice," "to vent," "curriculum," "sourcing of

scheme of work,” “lesson plans,” “sharing of ideas,” “policies and procedures on work-related issues,” “health issues via case studies,” “connecting with persons from remote parts of Trinidad,” “up-to-date tried and tested teaching strategies,” “invaluable sounding board,” and “excellent source of information on anything to do with teaching,” which when analyzed quantitatively proved to be 80% of words participants used during the interviews.

Initial coding based on content analysis indicated the preponderance of similar themes with information on: (a) curriculum; (b) teaching methodologies; (c) instructional technology; (d) general teacher concerns (e) ethical concerns; and (f) topical issues globally and locally. ATV, according to the participants, also promotes personal development through: (a) mentoring; (b) social support and collaboration for current, novitiate, retired, and potential educators; (c) celebrations; (d) shared humor; and (e) prayer.

### **Teacher Professional Development**

Based on the four aspects of teacher professional development found in the literature, it can be determined that issues in curriculum, teaching methodology, instructional technology, general teacher concerns, ethical concerns, and topical issues globally and locally can be related to sustained and ongoing intensive teacher professional development. It can also be practical and related to the classroom practice, it is collaborative with tacit and explicit knowledge sharing, and it is participant-driven and constructive. Discordant views are also part of the natural fabric of this site.

### ***Curriculum***

All four administrators and 22 members indicated that ATV was an invaluable source of information on curriculum issues especially those pertaining to Continuous Assessment Component (CAC). Administrator A stated that he saw the positive effects of ATV through the transmission of information:

From teachers who are willing to share on any topic which may affect teachers and citizens as a whole. Several teachers who were having difficulty with CAC implementation got sound advice from others who managed to complete piece of work correctly. (Personal communication, February 4, 2014)

Since this is a relatively new initiative by the Trinidad and Tobago Government, participants indicated that sometimes teachers needed clarification and further information and other teachers would respond to queries in seconds. As a result, ATV was effective in bridging the gap it takes for valuable information to be filtered through the normal communication channels.

Administrator A indicated that he felt that ATV had attained its objective because of:

Feedback from teachers who have been helped with resources available at a keystroke, advice on basically everything in the primary and secondary school, a space to vent (express frustration), a place to have relevant discussions about education and issues in Trinidad and Tobago and the world. (Personal communication, February 2, 2014)

Teachers also have questions pertaining to curriculum knowledge which are quickly answered. Member B stated, “I use ATV to exchange ideas and experiences on teaching and learning strategies, for advice on teachers’ rights and for sourcing schemes of work, lesson plans, ministerial circulars, memos” (Personal communication February 10, 2014). Along similar lines, Administrator A stated:

I see ATV's role as indispensable now since resources, advice and, information can be had, shared and distributed much quicker and easier. Discussions lead to resolutions and clarity on teacher issues. Before, it was a long wait to see a circular or get TRUTHFUL advice on important matters. Even union executives are able to share information readily, whereas the time frame for such would have been days or longer. (Personal communication, February 4, 2014)

Administrator A, concluded, "There are hundreds of uploaded files and documents found here that cannot be found elsewhere for teachers. Not even the Ministry of Education 's website has this amount of files" (personal communication February 4, 2014). Information on curriculum is important in increasing teachers' knowledge and understanding of how to impart that knowledge through methodology is pivotal to teachers' repertoire of effective instruction and students' success.

### *Teaching Methodology*

A perusal of ATV's Facebook page illustrates every possible issue, one of these is teaching methodology. Administrator C discussed the fact that one teacher shared the success she had in teaching instruction writing to her students by baking a cake in the classroom with a microwave oven. This generated some discussion and teachers liked the idea and decided that they would also try this. Such examples occur throughout the ATV pages and one can find almost any information one needs for teaching a particular topic at nursery, primary, and secondary levels.

Member B has been sharing innovative techniques he is using in the classroom to increase student engagement. Member F stated, "I chat with persons via inbox not face-to-face who can help me with my scheme of work. I'm new to Second Year so they give me ideas on lessons and how to make resources for use in my classroom" (personal communication February 10, 2014). Members G and R stated that they received help from others when they needed it very quickly. Member G stated:

A teacher's child was having difficulty with long division and I suggested a strategy I learnt from a Mathematics workshop. I suggested that she introduce it to her child and then once the concept was understood then she could move on to the original method. I also shared it with the ATV group. (Personal communication February 10, 2014)

Similarly, Member F stated, "I also chat with persons who give me ideas on lessons and how to make resources for use in my classroom" (personal communication February 10, 2014). In terms of help with teaching methodology, Member U stated:

Two examples that stand out are the first roll out of the CAC agriculture program for standard 3 when someone had issues with the grow box and the watering mechanism and so many of us rushed to provide our view as to the proper use of the item. Secondly, when our "Newton boys go green" initiative was launched and the video was posted the members were very supportive and thus encouraged me to push the project into new phases. (Personal communication February 10, 2014)

Teaching methodology sharing continues as this paper is written and more educators are searching for new methods of teaching and disseminating information. ATV members are not reticent to neither ask nor answer questions on teaching methodology, curriculum or any aspects of professional and personal development. The atmosphere in the newsroom is one of a high level of risk-taking with camaraderie and sharing of ideas, opinions, and continuous discussions (Administrators A and C).

### *Instructional Technology*

Teachers seek advice and are given solutions to their technical problems. Useful teaching links, youtube videos and other informative resources are shared with each other so that teachers are more tech-savvy. Member S indicated that she has shared numerous sites on the teaching of primary school Science and Mathematics and this was met with likes. Members continue to share tidbits on instructional technology use in the classroom.

### *General Teacher Concerns*

Members D and O both indicated that they used ATV as an invaluable resource not only for “teaching methodology, but for ideas on disciplinary practices for students as well as for case studies on inter-school relationships (student/student, student/teacher, teacher/teacher, teacher/administration)” (personal communication February 10, 2014). On the subject of general concerns, Member H shared:

I have also leaned on members to explain the more technical aspects of the profession e.g circular e.g when I had a serious issue with my VP and the register I was given some good advice on my rights as a teacher. Much invaluable information re: the union and its methods of operation and what one can expect as a member of TUTTA has been shared with me. (Personal communication February 10, 2014)

Administrator C indicated that neophyte teachers were also given advice such as taking out an annuity for retirement. Administrator B indicated that he had been having face-to-face meetings with members of ATV preparing them for issues pertaining to promotion, interviews for promotion, ethical concerns, and consultations on matters arising from union issues inter alia. He said his inbox is equally teeming with “scores of emails from members seeking advice or venting their frustrations at the system” (personal communication February 7, 2014).

### *Ethical Concerns*

Administrator B stated that there were many issues in terms of health and safety and the administration had to ask members to post these as case studies so that no name will be given and ethics will be upheld. Administrator B was most vocal on the issues of Health and Safety for teachers at all schools. Additionally, Administrator C mentioned a case study of serious concern at another school. Such issues were cause for more serious action by the powers that be. In this regard, Administrator B stated that ATV offered teachers an avenue to vent their frustrations. Administrators and members were unanimous in their opinions that ATV gave voice to the voiceless and in this case the teachers are the voiceless. As Administrator B stated:

I started this site as a means to voice my frustrations against administration. I never expected it to reach such an extent that we have such a large group and so many waiting to join. Teachers finally have a voice. (Personal communication February 7, 2014)

This voice that teachers now have is paving the way for their development both professionally and personally as they increase the individual and collective intellectual capital of their society through increased sharing of both tacit and explicit knowledge. Discordant voices are also welcomed and foment insightful and heated debates. As a result of such debates members become stronger and develop a bond as indicated by Administrator C.

### *Topical Issues Globally and Locally*

Administrator C indicated that local issues of bullying in schools and other prevalent cultural issues from crime, murder, entertainment and contemporary issues are shared by members as they discuss and find a forum to be heard. She also suggested that training in mediation, negotiation, and emotional intelligence is needed for both students and teachers to cope. Additionally, Administrator B stated that more symposiums, face-to-face discussions, and conferences will benefit the ATV membership. International issues are discussed as well and links are shared on topical issues worldwide so that teachers are kept abreast of world news and views. Teachers comment and are able to voice their views on the most current issues. As their voices are heard, more teachers hone their personal development through positive qualities.

## **Personal Development**

### **Mentoring**

Another recurring theme among administrators was that of mentoring. In this group, there are young inexperienced teachers as well as pre-service teachers waiting to be placed in the system. Member A opined:

What has stuck out for me from this group was the ATV encounter with (name omitted). He mentored and supported me through ATV with the knowledge of how to use Jolly Phonics Reading Program as I was placed in a first year class for the first time. With his guidance, I never lacked confidence and have seen all of my kids become successful at reading and reading beyond their level in a short space of time. (Personal Communication, February 10, 2014)

In this case, the person who was most helpful was an ATV administrator. Another ATV administrator who is a retired principal and one of the stalwarts of the site was lauded for her contribution as a mentor to beginning teachers. Administrator D also indicated that ATV is fortunate to have a wide “cross-section of educators who are able to readily give advice in real time” (personal communication February 1, 2014).

### **Social Support and Collaboration**

Administrator C is also complimented for her ability to help teachers in crisis who needed someone to speak to and need someone to be there for them. In such cases, Administrator B indicated that the other administrators and their ATV friends start a support network to aid this person through whatever issues he/she is experiencing. Administrator B stated that the stalwart administrator C functions like the “mother of the group” and she is able to capitalize on her experience, age, and wisdom and help persons in whatever capacity she can. Sometimes, administrator B concluded that, she has chats, telephone calls and inboxes with them. Administrator C echoed this sentiment, “the way people reach out to others with personal issues and problems gives individuals a sense of confidence and security and they are able to more positively express themselves” (personal communication, February 7, 2014). This is reiterated by Member J who stated:

I have made many a friend on ATV and in fact have grown very close to a few. It provides a much needed and welcome avenue for one to reach out to like-minded

individuals who can understand in a special way the rigors that are faced day to day.  
(Personal communication February 10, 2014)

Member L also posted a situation which was causing him some frustration. He discussed having just arrived in a new school environment and not knowing the school culture. He vented his irritations and after 18 comments, he posted, “you made my morning. Those words were needed this morning and the rest of the week. I will be reading that post very often. Thank you thank you” (ATV February 11, 2014). The most poignant aspect of online posts is their permanency. He was able to express how he felt and received rapid sympathy and empathy from members. This exemplifies what Administrator D stated, “ATV can help the psychological nature of the teacher, help with personal emotional issues and be a cradle for the teachers looking for support in their emotional and private lives, ATV can be that couch” (personal communication, February 1, 2014). Administrator C also observed that members with deficits in emotional intelligence such as coping mechanisms are able to hone their skills from feedback and commiseration with other members.

Members D and O stated that they found collaboration among members to be high and they were able to make crucial networks within the ATV environment. Member D stated:

Furthermore, ATV is also a good personal resource as people discuss finances, relationships, health, weight loss, belief systems, children and much more. Yes I've collaborated via inbox with quite a few members and have been able to collaborate, even exchanging materials and teaching aids. (Personal communication February 10, 2014)

Members F and Q also indicated that ATV is a source of inspiration when situations do not work out so well. Member Q stated:

I also use it as a way of communicating with other teachers who are often a source of inspiration on days when things don't go too well. I use it as a tool to vent frustrations and express my opinions about certain issues. (Personal communication February 10, 2014)

Collaboration and social support defying space, time, and geographic locations were mentioned by two members and an administrator. Administrator B stated:

ATV remains the only true innovation in education in Trinidad and Tobago far surpassing Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers' Association (TTUTA), Ministry of Education (MOE), and National Parent Teachers' Association (NPTA), and any other stakeholder has to offer combined. ATV allows a teacher in Icacos (South- West Trinidad) to communicate with another teacher in Toco (North-East, Trinidad) and receive immediate feedback. (Personal communication February 10, 2014)

Similarly, Member H stated that she was happy that she was able to communicate with members in remote areas in Trinidad. Member J highlighted the importance of ATV to him:

ATV has been a great resource not only in preparing lessons via the schemes and even the new curriculum which was first discussed there. The members also provide valuable help in my own planning and preparation either through inbox conversations, or open discussion where others may have the same concerns or point of view as myself. It provides an invaluable sounding board. (Personal communication February 10, 2014)

### **Celebrations**

Members are willing to celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, and any other achievements. Member B posted several pictures of his bulletin boards which were visually stimulating with very legible and complete information of lessons he was teaching. Such instances are many as

teachers find a place to celebrate themselves, their voices, their accomplishments, small or large, and most of all they find in each other kindred spirits and fellow sufferers.

ATV, according to Administrator C, also celebrated the male teacher. As she pointed out, there are not many male teachers in the system, as such, ATV provides a means through which other male teachers can communicate and share opinions and advice from a gender perspective. Administrator C also indicated that the women members tended to boost the egos of the male members by complimenting them. This resulted in males being more open, gregarious, and expressive. The males felt validated and empowered to share their opinions, she thought.

### **Shared Humor**

Administrator D stated that this was an ethnic group with shared cultures and experiences which made understanding easier and many times discussion would focus around childhood toys and celebrations *inter alia*. For example, Administrator C posted a picture asking members, “Who remembers having to do this?” Such simple posts, unites members collectively as a teaching body and also as a society. Members were willing to share jokes as a means of camaraderie and to show that laughter can be the best medicine. Graphics and pictures also attract the visual members as well as shared links, youtube videos and other methods of dissemination of information.

### **Prayer**

Prayers, quotes, and general greetings are shared daily. Member J stated, “apart from the professional and personal support and advice you can get from members and moderators the wider community generally speaking always stand ready to offer support, encouragement and even prayer” (personal communication February 10, 2014). Administrator C indicated that one member started the prayer circle and over time it moved from being only Christian prayers, to sharing Muslim prayers, and Hindu prayers as a means of encompassing all faiths. In fact, Administrator C added that they have atheists members as well. This underscores the cosmopolitan nature of the group as well as their acceptance of “homogeneity and differences” (personal communication Administrator D, February 1, 2014).

### **Discussion**

Rutherford (2010) stated that, “With the advent of web-based technologies, teachers can now engage in professional development that is participant driven, practical, collaborative, and available 24 hours a day from any Internet location” (p. 13). The fact that teachers shared information on curriculum, teaching methodology, instructional technology, ethical concerns, general concerns, and topical issues globally and locally suggests that they were concerned with professional development as defined in this paper. Borko (2004) defined four areas in which teachers display professional development. These four components were: (a) sustained and ongoing intensive professional development; (b) practical and related to classroom practice; (c) collaborative and knowledge sharing; and (d) participant-driven and constructive. Each aspect of the themes found both professionally and personally denote some form of continuous development and the strategies and advice given were practical and related to classroom practice.

There was individual and collective sharing of information and this was collaborative as stated in the social support and collaboration theme apart from face-to-face and inbox communications vis a vis curriculum and teaching methodology. ATV is participant-driven as evidenced in the responses given by both administrators and members who stated that they have finally been given a voice and feel that they are being heard. Those with dissident views are also being heard and allowed expression.

This research paper has shown that Trinidadian members on the ATV Facebook site were able to socialize, vent, give and receive advice, share a kinship that surpassed geography, ethnicity and any hierarchical structures. Participation in the ATV's Facebook site allowed teachers to receive practical advice on ethical and safety concerns, network, find new methods of implementing instructional delivery, and boost their morale as they celebrate their triumphs and defeats. The ATV's Facebook site has transcended the stereotypical notions of socialization to encompass professional and personal development in the form of shared, lived experiences that typify everyday classroom activity. Teachers contribute their prayers, thoughts and ideas to transform this site into a fruitful and open forum that offers teachers at all levels of the education sector in Trinidad opportunities to hone their skills and learn from their peers. Al-Jarf (2010) in his study of a teachers' online discussion forum in Saudi Arabia found that, "the forums help the teachers exchange knowledge, information and experiences. They learn from each other's posts, can upload materials, lesson plans, test questions, e-books, and software and learn from teaching tips offered" (p. 7).

This study has provided data on the use of Facebook as a tool for informal professional development. However, more studies need to be conducted on other Facebook sites offering teachers the opportunity to vent, grow, share, laugh, pray, and collaborate. Additionally, the need for evaluation of how teachers develop as a result of ideas generated from these sites is paramount to understanding the wider repercussions these sites may have.

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