



Research Article

“Who Is That Teacher I See, Staring Straight Back At Me?”: Teachers’ Reflections on Their Engagement in Communities of Practice and Learning Spaces During the Pandemic

“من هو ذاك المعلم الذي أراه محدقاً في وجهي مباشرة؟”
تأملات المعلمين حول مشاركتهم في مجتمعات الممارسة
و مجتمعات التعلم أثناء الجائحة

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Abstract

When COVID-19 hits the world, education as a sphere of learning breaks through doorways to explore opportunities for how teachers engage in professional development communities. Exploring Parker Palmer’s *The Courage To Teach*, and the notion of undivided life, teachers’ reflective practices mirror the utmost goal of emergency remote teaching and their professional development, specifically in the Gulf region. To support this pedagogical approach highlighting the undivided life, teachers reflect through communities of practice (CoP) on how their engagement can help bridge the gap in enhancing the education system, professional development, and teaching in higher education. This paper investigates the practicality and usefulness of Palmer’s context of undivided life in uncovering teachers’ lives through understanding their “own” engagement in different CoP. Ultimately, the investigation espouses relevant findings relating to how teachers adapt to the changing needs of professional learning communities to cope with the demands of time through reflecting on their professional identities, collaborative practices, and the importance of community belongingness. The stories documented in this paper through the in-depth interview (IDI) hope to provide meaningful perspectives on guided principles of CoP as teachers engage, collaborate, and reflect on the divided–undivided lives during the pandemic. Perspectives and views that have impact on positive education are also considered in this study to support teachers in building deeper understanding of their own construct of resilience. Thus, adding more foci in transforming positive psychology in developing teachers’ professional development during the pandemic.

المخلص

عندما اجتاحت جائحة كوفيد 19 العالم , اخترق التعليم كـمجـال للتعلم مداخل عدة لاستكشاف الفرص حول كيفية مشاركة المعلمين في مجتمعات التطوير المهني . أثناء استكشاف (الشجاعة للتعليم) ل باركر بالمر Palmer Parker و فكرة الحياة الكاملة , تعكس ممارسات المعلمين الهدف الأسمى للتدريس الطارئ عن بُعد و تطورهم المهني , و تحديداً في منطقة الخليج . و لدعم هذا النهج التربوي الذي يسلب الضوء على الحياة المتكاملة (غير المنقسمة) , فإن المعلمين يفكرون من خلال مجتمعات الممارسة (أو CoP) حول إمكانية مشاركتهم في المساعدة في سد الفجوة لتعزيز نظام التعليم و التطوير المهني و التدريس في التعليم العالي . تبحث هذه الورقة في التطبيق العملي و الفائدة

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المرتبة من مفهوم بالمرعن الحياة الكاملة (الغير منقسمة) في كشف حياة المعلمين من خلال فهم مشاركتهم (الذاتية) ضمن مجتمعات ممارسة CoP مختلفة . يتبنى البحث في نهاية المطاف النتائج ذات الصلة المتعلقة بكيفية تكيف المعلمين مع الاحتياجات المتغيرة لمجتمعات التعلم المهنية ليتأقلموا مع متطلبات الوقت من خلال عكس هوياتهم المهنية و ممارساتهم التعاونية و أهمية الانتماء المجتمعي . تأمل القصص الموثقة في هذه الورقة من خلال المقابلة المتعمقة (IDI) إلى تقديم منظور ذا مغزى للمبادئ الموجهة لمجتمعات الممارسة , حيث يشارك المعلمون و يتعاونون و يفكرون في الحياة المنقسمة و غير المنقسمة (الكلية) أثناء الجائحة. كما و قد أخذت وجهات النظر و الآراء التي لها تأثير على التعليم الإيجابي في عين الاعتبار أيضاً ضمن هذه الدراسة لدعم المعلمين في بناء فهم أعمق لبنية المرونة الخاصة بهم . و بهذه الطريقة تم إضافة المزيد من المحاور في تحويل علم النفس الإيجابي نحو تحسين تطور المعلمين المهني خلال فترة الجائحة.

Keywords: *Professional development, Communities of practice, Reflective practice, Lived experiences, Remote emergency teaching*

الكلمات المفتاحية: التطوير المهني , مجتمعات الممارسة , الممارسة العاكسة , الخبرات الحية , التدريس الطارئ عن بعد.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Reflecting on my role as a teacher during the pandemic made me understand that though face-to-face interaction was my preference, embracing remote teaching is one way of diversifying my profession. Classroom management and interactions in teaching and learning have changed. My attitude toward teaching took a massive leap of transformation as I unraveled the changes that can nurture my professional development, especially since educational communities are no longer conducted in the direction where all teachers and educators meet, greet, exchange, and challenge ideas. This paper was inspired by my pandemic reflection on our practice as teachers, and hopefully, it will provide valuable insights into our personal and professional development.

Dawne Irving, one of my mentors during my postgraduate studies in the United Kingdom, shared the paper she wrote with her colleagues, “The Courage to SoTL.” The article was written with a focus on collaborative autoethnography that dealt with reflecting on their lived experiences with the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). Using Palmer’s *The Courage to Teach* (2007), they could reflect deeply on their identities as part of the academic community. They further shared that relationships are essential in community building through their collaborative ethnographic process.

One exciting type of community explained is the community of congruence, which highlighted the shared values of teachers that made a huge difference in the students' lives (Godbold et al., 2021).

This paper has sprouted from the scholarship of Teaching (SoTL) article, where teachers' identities and understanding of their own "selves" in the different communities of congruence are highlighted (Godbold et al., 2021). The inspiration to write this paper has grown from this perspective. Teachers these days are facing difficulties and challenges not only in their teaching but also in their professional development. The pandemic has changed many aspects of education and affected societies in so many ways. One significant consequence is teachers' engagement in different activities deemed beneficial for their professional development. Barbour and Harrison (2016) recognized the need for teachers' professional development, although online instructions are already popular. Due to the pandemic, teachers need training to sustain teaching and learning.

Why the needed reflection? Teachers nowadays are in a dilemma that paints a picture of uncertainty and ambiguity, as posited by Jen et al. (2022). The latter claimed that "teachers experienced a challenging and stressful year, as pressure from their work added to the pressures of the pandemic" (para. 1). With their teaching affected by the pandemic, this is also true for their professional development where they struggle in sharing good practices in a community where learning is the focus of progress.

The concept of professional development is tied to the notion of communities of practice (CoP). Some used the terms professional learning communities and communities of congruence in other contexts. The terminologies may be different, but the goals of the conceptions and practice are the same. This is to say, to develop and enhance teachers' professional lives. As regards the role of professional development, Reed (2008) with the integrated concepts of Dewey (1933), Schon (2017), Fowler and Robbins (2006), Brownlee and Berthelsen (2006), Buchanan et al. (2006), Manning-Morton, (2006), Moon (1999), and Bolton (2010) posited that it is geared toward understanding the criticality of our reflections as teachers. In addition, this understanding involves exploring ourselves, our practices, and the works of scholars and peers. Personal characteristics of teachers are also part of this criticality. We are advised to reflect critically understanding and of our personal and professional development. Moreover, reflection as a form of critical thinking is an essential core of professional development. Other concepts of reflections contributed to the sphere where teachers explore and understand their personal learning. Personal reflections could facilitate a clear understanding of our experiences which can help us develop an understanding and improve our professional practice.

Like Godbold et al. (2021), professional development also put together the foundational practices and principles put forward by Palmer (2007). The principle of discovering the essence of living an undivided life where our personal and professional identities are both critical in understanding ourselves and our identities to establish diversity, connectedness, and belongingness to a broader community of congruence (Godbold et al., 2021; Palmer, 2007). Specifically, the concepts used in this research are vital in understanding why reflecting on our lived experiences can help teachers augment the gap between teaching–learning and highlighting good practices in engaging the different learning communities.

This paper investigates the practicality and usefulness of Palmer’s context of undivided life in uncovering teachers’ context and reflections through understanding their “own” engagement in different CoP. Ultimately, this investigation espouses relevant findings relating to how teachers adapt to the changing needs of professional learning communities to cope with the demands of time by reflecting on their identities, collaborative practices, and the importance of the community. The stories documented in this paper through in-depth interviews (IDI) hope to provide meaningful perspectives on guided principles of CoP as teachers engage, collaborate, and reflect on the divided–undivided lives during the pandemic.

Reflective practices and meaningful interactions of teachers are also presented to provide opportunities for educators and other professionals to reflect on the availability and accessibility of learning spaces that help promote professional development, resilience, and positive education.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Communities of practice (CoP) and the pandemic

According to Ghamrawi (2022), CoP is not a new concept or strategy in the academe. However, it has taken a new form during the pandemic, becoming virtual instead of face-to-face. Lave and Wenger (1991) explained that CoPs are learning environments with individuals sharing expertise and good practice. This idea is also supported by Abatayo (2018), who stated that individuals when engaged in different learning communities, took charge of their roles and identities. Collaborating with others is beneficial in forging a mutual interest in good practice. Furthermore, a community of good practices is where people share the same values and good practices to achieve a common goal of an endeavor (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002). A fascinating study by Anderson (2021) provided essential notions about teachers’ sense-making regarding

the functions and realities of teachers' professional development. Teachers' sense-making is characterized by their exposure and engagement with nationalized and internationalized professional development contexts. Thus, in the current situation, when the pandemic became part of educators' discourse, teachers developed their own identities or sense-making in a professional development context through their new experiences and information. Internationally cited and internationally situated, as shared by scholars, also shared essential elements that help shape the discussions of this paper since this work delved into different contexts of teachers' professional development, particularly their engagement during the pandemic (Anderson, 2021; Tan, 2019).

Dube and Jacob (2005) comprehensively discussed important notions of CoP and virtual CoP. Some realities of these communities were explained to ensure a good understanding of the sense of belonging and trust because virtual communities require specific tools to establish a shared experience. That is why a critical understanding of the challenges should be dealt with the utmost attention and treatment. As teachers struggle in professional development, the challenges also become prevalent and need careful attention. The CoP, in this sense, involved readiness, training, and development of new skills (Ardichvili et al., 2003; Wenger et al., 2002). The skills pre-pandemic could be different during the current time, where teachers engaged in professional activities with other goals and structures.

However, during the pandemic, CoP has been revitalized to respond to the pandemic challenges that teachers need to battle (Bolisani et al., 2020). Accordingly, professional development communities transformed rapidly, particularly during the pandemic. CoP became so popular that these learning spaces for teachers took all sorts of initiative in exploring different forms, channels, and structures, thus offering teachers the right balance between personal and professional duties (Howard, 2021; Teräs, 2016; Vu et al., 2014). While CoP shows less effectiveness at first in design and facilitation, as Teras (2016) shares, there were also opportunities for teachers to share professional discourse and increased reflective practice when engaged in online communities (Signer, 2008). From different perspectives, regardless of the structures and formalities of these professional learning communities, it is evident that teachers enhance their own learning both in formal and informal settings. In addition, these spaces provide beneficial sources of their professional growth (Lantz-Andersson et al., 2018). Furthermore, Lave and Wenger (1991) stress the importance of sharing the participants' understandings of their own activities and engagements in different learning spaces, and how these can affect their own lives and their own communities. Teachers' engagements are vital in forming purposeful directions for their professional growth. For König et al. (2020), teachers

faced numerous challenges regarding their efficacy as knowledge providers and using technologies to improve teaching and learning during the pandemic. This situation revealed how important engaging teachers in different learning spaces is because they need to be trained in technological know-how and online teaching pedagogies. Teachers can only adapt to the challenges if they are provided with professional development activities where they can interact with each other.

Understanding teachers' professional development, especially during the pandemic, provides beautiful reflections of their personal and professional identities where their conceptions of living an undivided life share a story of hope, building and connecting to communities where shared practices are the principles of professional growth.

3. Methodology

This study used a qualitative method, specifically, IDI, to explore teachers' own reflections concerning their involvement in professional development activities during the pandemic. To support and enhance the interview method, Palmer's *The Courage to Teach* (2007) is also integrated to determine a deep understanding of teachers' reflections through their engagement in the communities of congruence that establishes connectedness, diversity of knowledge and skills, experience, and commitment to their teaching practice. A purposive sampling method fits the context of the interview process since the researcher worked with teachers from different countries in the Gulf. The interviews were conducted between November 2021 and March 2022.

3.1. In-depth Interview (IDI)

Following Roller and Lavrakas (2020), Brinkman and Kvale (2015), and Denzin (2001), an IDI process is adapted to ensure relevant information and reflections are achieved in which personal information that is used to convey a story or event is made public by the interviewee. By this, rich and credible interview outcomes can help the researchers and readers understand the totality of the context and teachers' lived experiences.

The IDI method, as suggested by Roller and Lavrakas (2015; 2020), used a four-stage funnel approach: introductions, general information related to the topic, awareness and attitudes which are related to issues or events, and attitudes that are specific to the targeted and constructive suggestions for improvement. The study participants were briefed clearly on the purposes and structure of the interview to ensure relevant information was shared to help shape the study's outcome. Introductions serve as the

starting point of the interview, where questions related to the “self” of the participant. It is also an effective way to introduce the topic, where the interviewee is allowed to ask questions regarding the conduct of the interview. Preliminary questions can be inquiries and clarifications about the interview, confidentiality issues, and tools used in questioning. After the introductions, general information related to the topic was then conducted, which helped the interviewee understand the context and the background of the study conducted. Then, providing a comfortable interview perspective is conducted to ensure that the interviewee understands the study’s primary objective. Roller (2020) calls this a “home in” to make the interviewee aware of the interview’s definitive objective. In addition, at this stage, interviewees can share their attitudes or behavior regarding the topic or main issues being revealed to them. Lastly, with the aid or support of the background and context delivered in stages 1–3, the culmination of the interview, as reflected in the funnel, is when the interviewer digs deeper into the context of the interview and discussions. This last interview stage expects a relevant and meaningful sharing of ideas and information.

3.2. Instrument

Since the IDI is a qualitative technique, this study involved a comprehensive interview with a small group of respondents who are the selected teachers in the Gulf region. To ensure uniformity and consistency in the conduct of the interview, an interview protocol or guide was put in place to lead the researcher in exploring the respondents’ perspectives on a particular situation or idea. The following interview protocols, as suggested by Boyce and Neale (2006), are used in generating reflections on the teacher’s professional development engagement during the pandemic:

1. Open-ended question: What can you say about teachers’ professional development during the pandemic?
2. Factual question: Were you able to attend professional development activities during the pandemic? In what way do you get engaged in different professional learning communities?
3. Probe: How many times have you participated in different learning communities during the pandemic? Can you provide some examples and experiences? Please elaborate on the nature of your participation. How did your participation help sustain your own professional development?
4. Closing point: Reflect on your professional development during the pandemic. What are the challenges you encountered during this difficult time? Would you like to

Table 1

Profile of the interviewees and the nature of their professional development activities.

Interviewee /Nationality	Teaching assignment/Country of residence	Number of professional development activities attended from 2020–2021	Participation
T1 Philippines	Bahrain	16	Attendee/Speaker
T2 Ukraine	Oman	18	Attendee
T3 Canada	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	13	Attendee
T4 Tunisia	Qatar	21	Attendee/Speaker
T5 India	United Arab Emirates	24	Attendee

share feedback and suggestions on how teachers can maintain and nurture their own professional development during these challenging times?

Using the suggested interview guidelines and protocols, teacher participants were requested to attend online interviews at their most convenient time. Online messaging applications such as Zoom, Facebook Messenger, and Microsoft Teams were utilized to gather the needed data or information for this research.

3.3. Participants

This study's interviewees are teachers teaching in the Gulf region. To provide the supplementary context of their participation, they are chosen because these teachers are actively engaged in developing their professional skills as teachers. The table outlines the interviewees' nationality, teaching assignment or country of residence, their involvement and participation in professional development activities, and the nature of their participation. The purpose of laying such categories in the table is to see a clear picture of the participants involved in their professional life during the pandemic.

Note: T stands for "teacher" who participated in the interview, and no names are reflected in the table for confidentiality purposes.

The study was conducted during the pandemic, and the interview was organized online. To ensure proper interview protocols are strictly followed, I made use of the available technologies, which are also available to the end of the participants. I used Facebook Messenger, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and WhatsApp applications during the interview process. Since the participants are situated in other Gulf countries, using the mentioned technology applications is useful and economical. Five participants agreed

to the invitation to be interviewed regarding their own understanding and reflections on their engagement in different CoP during the pandemic.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1. Teachers' participation in CoP and learning spaces during the pandemic

All five teachers shared the same stories about their participation in professional development activities and other CoP. Although the pandemic connotes a negative meaning toward professional development, teachers appreciate what the pandemic has brought to the educational landscape. Before the pandemic, teachers could only attend conferences and seminars at least once or sometimes twice a year. This is because of the long distances for travel and expensive registration fees. But COVID has provided all teachers in the Gulf and throughout the world opportunities to attend professional development activities online and without fees through Zoom and other technologies available for the training. One teacher (T2) mentioned that it was challenging to get engaged in professional development before the pandemic. He added:

Before COVID-19, I can only attend one or two conferences a year. It was challenging due to expensive registration fees, and the distance of the host institution. Because we are "expats" in the Gulf, we struggle sometimes in securing approval for our own professional development. But now, conferences and other workshops are conducted online. Such a huge opportunity for us teachers to get engaged with other academics and professionals around the world. COVID, in communities of practice context, is not bad at all. Just one click and you are connected to the academic world.

Another teacher (T3) shared his professional development during COVID. He thought of improving his own identity as a teacher trainer by getting involved in CoP. The only problem he faced was the bulk of work and teaching loads given per semester. He added that he could not attend workshops and get involved in professional development because of his work schedule. He shared:

With the online communities becoming so popular due to COVID, I was able to enhance my own professional development by attending conferences and training online. It somehow gave me the opportunity to explore my other "self" as to how I can sustain my personal self and professional development. Two different identities in a very challenging world.

4.2. Creating a learning community with technology

According to four teachers (T2, T3, T4, and T5), CoP are essential in creating and sharing knowledge and skills, as posited by Wenger et al. (2022). They all agree that learning spaces allowed them to understand each other's experiences and backgrounds and engage in CoP, especially when activities are conducted using technologies. They understood how to overcome their struggles by continuing professional development, developing ways to solve their problems in online teaching and learning, and providing feedback to their peers by showing support and encouragement to renew enthusiasm for education. To highlight their views:

The pandemic has brought many positive effects on our own professional development. We attended online events with the other participants from different parts of the world and eventually we were able to share our own views about teaching during the pandemic. In fact, we shared our personal solutions to the many problems of teaching, learning, and getting involved in learning spaces. Technology these days made all these interactions possible.

The interview results on the learning community with technology have the same structures and dimensions as that of Collins and Bielaczyc (1997). Although the term "learning communities with technologies" is not a new-found agenda in education, it still provides newer concepts and perspectives during the pandemic. The table below summarizes the dimensions that sprouted from the interviews conducted.

4.2.1. Dimension 1: Community goals

The teachers interviewed explained that the community where they are now (online community) helped them establish a friendlier space where they can freely share their individual goals, learning, and expertise. Through online interactions, they could share and build knowledge that enhanced their peers' professional development.

4.2.2. Dimension 2: Teachers' role and power relationship

In the context of power relationships, teachers claimed that during the pandemic, not only students were able to shift roles, but also true to them as participants in educational activities. As they went through the online professional development, they, too, learned how to organize activities and conduct practical and exciting sessions among colleagues and peers.

Table 2

Dimensions of learning community with technology.

Emerging theme	Subthemes	Interview excerpts
Community goals	Friendly environment Free space for conversation	<i>"I feel good and comfortable during the engagement because of the free learning space that emerged during the pandemic. Online training has a friendly atmosphere." (T4) "Although the pandemic brought several challenges, I think online learning spaces are safe communities for knowledge building and sharing." (T3) "Online spaces are interesting too. In fact, established friendships are also shown even after the workshops." (T5)</i>
Teachers' role and power relationship	Role in knowledge building and professional development	<i>"I used to attend face-to-face conferences and workshops. Now, I have learned and developed skills in leading colleagues and friends in conducting professional development." (T1) "During the pandemic, I played a different role that helped me understand the role of different relationships in online spaces. Respect is shared in this online community." (T4)</i>
Centrality and identity	Realization of goal as a participant in learning communities	<i>"Professional identity in online professional development has changed. I must say that participants become so engaged even if the sessions are conducted with different online mechanisms." (T1) "I think that the pandemic has also provided teachers with the opportunities in discovering their own self-worth and value as participants in learning spaces." (T3) "Oh, I think, ahm, it is important to know our strengths as teachers, especially this time. It is important in the sense that we should consider ourselves as core movers or participants even if the professional development sessions are conducted online." (T5) "I totally agree, yes. Between the pandemic and teachers, still, we are central and important in the development of our own professional lives. Online teaching, seminars, and conferences are just tools for our own development." (T2)</i>
Output and products	Knowledge production Self-improvement Professional development	<i>"With these online professional development events, the knowledge yesterday becomes a bridge of the knowledge today." (T2) "Despite the challenges, I believe that the pandemic had also helped shape my very own professional development." (T3) "The way I look at the current situation, the real thing now is my own learning, the best result of the pandemic." (T1) "What can I say about the training during the pandemic? I think, I developed myself professionally better compared before where educational gatherings were done face to face." (T4)</i>

4.2.3. Dimension 3: Centrality and identity

More critical in getting engaged in professional development is when teachers become the "center" of knowledge sharing. The importance given to them as participants and facilitators made their online presence relevant in achieving a common goal in professional development: professional identity.

4.2.4. Dimension 4: Output and products

Engagement in professional activities and different learning spaces also served as a knowledge bank for teachers worldwide. Teachers' participation, be it a listener or presenters, contributed to knowledge production, which helped bridge the gap between knowledge before and the knowledge today.

4.3. Critical friendship

Teachers also forged friendships through technology as part of learning spaces and CoP. Day (1999) calls these practical partnerships cemented through common tasks and interests. Providing support to peers and collaborators online is the highlight of this relationship. Of which a critical friend is seen to have knowledge, skills, and experience as relevant elements of the relationship. The views of these two teachers (T4 and T5) are summarized as:

Engaging in the different communities of practice doesn't only mean attending and participating in webinars, talks, and workshops. Engagement in this context also helped us, teachers, during the pandemic as partners or collaborators, especially in research. Unlike before when it was very difficult to establish collaboration and start academic linkages, with technologies these days, we were able to provide support and feedback to our very own work. Going live and discussing issues related to research is just a click away. Feedback sessions are deemed very important in this community. In addition, central to these collaborations and connections is the use of technologies such as email, video conferencing, google meet, Ms Teams, and other chatrooms.

As highlighted by the teachers, critical friendship built during the pandemic has helped them enhance collaboration through online sessions. Discussions made online also helped them generate ideas on how to improve their research agenda.

4.4. Virtual communities of practice (VCoP)

Traditionally, practice communities are seen as a one-dimensional construct that is defined as the sole spot for teacher development. A few studies and contexts show that CoPs are still the same in terms of goals and purposes but different in structures and forms. Dubé et al. (2005) comprehensively explained the impact of the structuring characteristics of VCoP by outlining different features. The study revealed that although the structures of these VCoP are important, considerations to a more contextualized perception of teachers in terms of their beliefs and values should be given the utmost

priority. In three cases (T2, T3, and T4), teachers shared their beliefs and personal understanding of the different structures of VCoP:

While it is true that virtually we are fully engaged in sharing our expertise, educational management should also consider the different structures of these communities. Technologies and other mechanisms which are beneficial these days have different forms and applications. Our beliefs and goals could be different from the others, but the way these communities support our professional development must be structured in a way that can provide the much-needed activities to enhance our roles as teachers during the pandemic. One structure of CoP or VCoP may not work for all participating teachers. The provisions to structure learning communities for teachers should be clear and practical. Engagements in these professional developments need critical support from administrations, department heads, and school leaders to promote and nurture the essence of teacher development.

Like the work of Godbold et al. (2021), the congruence communities mentioned by Palmer (2007) are also evidenced during the pandemic. Individuals gather to share values and good practices with a heart to make a change in students' and other peoples' lives. The only difference is that teachers these days get to know and meet virtually due to restrictions triggered by COVID. Teachers believed that the opportunities were still tremendous and invaluable through heartfelt discussions and sharing of their struggles and experiences. They also underscored that the pandemic could not break them from continuing their engagement in different communities of congruence because they have a moral duty to support and improve students' lives. One teacher asked, "How can we help students improve their lives and enrich their experience despite the COVID situation?" Their own reflections showed encouragement and confidence in dealing with their professional development despite the limitations and time. Through online interactions in different learning spaces, teachers established an understanding of the depth of their engagement, thus, helping them value their sense of belonging and pride.

4.5. Professional identity

Who am I? What kind of practitioner am I? These questions by Campbell et al. (2004) are used to extract important values of teachers' reflections on their professional development. Understanding the assertion of Maclure (2001), teachers can explore their professional identities through self-reflection and research into the history of their own engagement. In this study, teachers (T1, T2, T3, T4, and T5) answered the question posed by Whitty (1999) whether the profession is ready and willing to face the challenge?

In addition, they seriously shared their personalities and attributes, as similarly explained by Hargreaves (1992). The values of professional identity are revealed below :

Professionalism in the conduct of and engagement in our own professional development during the pandemic has shown that a good understanding of professionalism and professionalism helped us maintain our identities as professionals, teachers, educators, and practitioners who need to survive and face up to the challenges and current struggles during the pandemic. The way we teach is totally different now. The way we participated and engaged in the CoP become very sophisticated. In some respects, we feared the “unknown.” Our aspirations and morale as teachers are tested. The route to effective professional development, though shady, has provided us with the motivation to get moving, and keep moving. We need to train ourselves to provide inspiration to teachers who felt disheartened in academic engagement (T5). The pandemic has become a huge part of our professional development. Its intrusion in education has helped us, teachers, to continue in believing that all these will pass and that tomorrow has remarkable offerings for our own development (T1). Our “sense of self” is still intact, and this helped us propel to higher levels of engagement. Virtual communities or different professional learning communities are there to support us. Structures could be different and challenging, but the core of our identities is solid and unruffled (T3). The emotional challenges we experienced are the realities of being teachers. We live an undivided life that captures the fundamental nature of our existence. We lived a life in a challenging environment, but we explored life with the power to survive. Our professional development is a testimony that no matter what life has to offer, we are teachers living an undivided life pursuing a goal of reshaping a community that brings us all together through self-reflection, professionalism, and good professional development landscape amalgamation.

The study also revealed concurring ideas highlighted by Seligman et al. (2009) and Burke and Arslan (2020) on the aspects of positive psychology where teachers shared positive emotion through engagement and the pursuit of pleasure in connecting to different CoP. In addition, in the context of distance learning and online education during COVID, teachers shared that resilience and flexibility in performing tasks outside the physical classroom had helped them achieve meaning-making and construction of their image in terms of negotiation and adaptation. Further, social engagement in education indicated that the values and common ties of teachers during the global crisis promoted meaningful mechanisms which are keys to understanding that resilience offers opportunities in professional development, self-reflection, and effective education. Although teachers experienced different stages of adversities during COVID, they still managed

to infuse enthusiasm and dynamism in achieving their purposes both professional and academic outcomes.

5. Final thoughts

This section briefly discusses some insights extracted from the teachers interviewed in this study. IDI and other important ideas during the discussions revealed their different identities significantly impacting who they are as teachers during the pandemic. Moreover, their own reflections and understanding of how they can support and maintain their professional development despite the pandemic are also integrated into the discussions.

5.1. Communities of practice: R-E-F-L-E-C-T-I-O-N-S

Responsive. One crucial element that emerged during the interview was the need to be responsive to the challenge during the pandemic. The interviewees shared that if we are active and responsive to the call of time, we can also explore possible ways to bridge the gap between teaching and learning, particularly during this challenging time – the pandemic. To respond to education needs, we must extend our hands to students and the communities where we belong. To be responsive in professional development activities is considered powerful in terms of achieving academic vigor and upscaling teaching skills.

Engagement. When they engage in different CoP, teachers can genuinely help them become aware of the new trends in teaching and learning. In the case of emergency remote teaching, teachers are exposed to the challenges of using new technologies deemed beneficial in education. In fact, those who are not technology-savvy considered the pandemic an eye-opener making them aware of the available technologies which can be used in effective teaching and learning. The pandemic was a wake-up call to all teachers in terms of its effective use in the classroom. While some have expertise in technology use, sadly, it was a steep learning curve for others. Therefore, engaging means seizing the moment where we, as teachers, can learn from the struggles of teaching–learning during the pandemic.

Feedback. It is always a good practice to share meaningful experiences in the academic community, and feedback helps teachers understand the varying roles and responsibilities in teaching and learning. The pandemic has brought wonderful opportunities for teachers to reflect on what they can do in the classroom and what they have

become during the pandemic. Feedback in other contexts is to discover and re-learn the past, preparing teachers for the future.

Lead. Leading colleagues and peers in supporting others through professional development can also help develop a sense of identity or belonging. Leading is believing that the path to ideal professional development is not hazy because the power of one can help build the strength of others.

Enthusiasm. All respondents in this study firmly believed that enthusiasm is also a key to professional development. Because the pandemic has affected all aspects of human life, the eagerness to continue to learn through engagement in different professional events can impact teachers' lives. The courage to look forward to a positive outcome in professional development is seen to be vital in education.

Contribute. Always believe in the power of contribution, cooperation, and collaboration. Sharing of knowledge is when we, as teachers, cooperate with our colleagues and peers to highlight the power of collaboration in education. Contribution to sustain education, cooperation to support transformation, and collaboration to establish effective internationalization.

Teamwork. Shared responsibility can help teachers achieve goals and purposes in the teaching profession. In fact, individual ownership of different roles and responsibilities defines teamwork, which is vital to teachers' personal and professional development.

Initiate. To initiate activities is to hone skills and discover new knowledge, which can also help teachers enhance their professional development. Initiating educational events intended for colleagues and peers, especially during the pandemic, can genuinely improve teachers' understanding of their own identities as facilitators of learning.

Organize. When initiating activities, we should also be able to organize things correctly. Having the right initiative is not enough without good organizational skills. It was highlighted that during the pandemic, there were initiatives for teachers' professional development; unfortunately, how to organize them posed a big problem in academic institutions. Some learning communities do not allow face-to-face sessions; hence, online seminars and training are conducted. With this prevailing situation, initiatives should be organized and planned carefully to provide teachers with the proper forum and spaces where they engage in good practice.

New normal. The words COVID and pandemic are the new normal. In the teaching profession, teachers are exposed to certain aspects of teaching which are challenging to them because of the sudden shift in teaching due to the pandemic. The landscape of their professional development has also changed in a way that they need to invest more

time in digital proficiency, virtual engagements, and virtual exchange of their knowledge and experiences. The new normal has transformed professional development and learning communities into hubs where teachers can enhance their professional expertise and identities by sharing knowledge that, as teachers, we did not essentially live an undivided life. We all share the losses and the gains of professional development.

Service. Sharing our knowledge and expertise in different learning communities and spaces is a form of service to education. Teaching today is demanding; hence, adapting new forms of community engagement is expected to meet the high standards of teacher development. The rapid change that the pandemic has brought served as a form of modernizing professional development and teaching. This becomes an educated profile where teachers of today engage in different professional communities to determine the goals of their involvement, document their development, and evaluate their efforts as they cross the barriers of their professional life.

6. Conclusion

This paper explored and explained teachers' reflections on their engagement in different CoP during the pandemic. The stories documented in this study revealed astonishing reflections from the teachers who were involved, collaborated, and shared their own tales of engagement in different professional learning spaces. When the pandemic changed the landscape of teacher development, their professional and personal identities projected an image of resilience and perseverance that helped them rise to the challenge of professional growth. Despite the many struggles, teachers still lived an "undivided life" where they shared the same experience of pain, joy, failures, and successes in their own professional development. Interestingly, centrality and their identity took center stage during the pandemic because they feel the abundance of space and time where their stories and knowledge are shared. The reflections collected in this study are not conclusive and not representative of the greater context of all teachers in the Gulf, yet their stories share visions of a life with a forward-looking identity that aims for critical friendship, operative virtual collaborations, and imperative communities of congruence. With the infusion of technologies brought by the demands of COVID, professional learning communities and spaces became sophisticated, and these tools eventually provided opportunities for teachers to delve into different venues for professional growth.

Understanding the lived experiences of the teachers involved in the conduct of this study, the following recommendations are offered:

1. Academic institutions should continue to provide meaningful professional development opportunities for teachers despite the many challenges encountered during the pandemic.
2. Teacher-mentors should provide assistance to colleagues and peers to enhance their professional development.
3. Workshops and training should be designed according to the needs of teachers to support their professional development.
4. Collaboration and cooperation among teachers regionally and internationally should be established to nurture the different CoP.
5. Mentoring programs are highly encouraged to support teachers build a community committed to supporting effective teaching and learning, reflective teaching, problem-solving and operative communities of good practice.

Finally, here is a restatement of some lines of the song “Reflection” originally written by David Zippel in 1998 and performed by Lea Salonga in 1998. Restatements are derived from the reflections of the teachers who are instrumental in the completion of this work:

*Look at me, who do you think you see?
You know my face, but you will never know me.
I teach online everyday, for me to see the aching world
But you do not see the virtual world I see.
Who is that teacher I see? Staring straight back at me?
When will my reflection show, who am I inside?
Teaching with a sense of pride, doing things to survive.
Engaging in learning spaces, collaborating for a roaring success.
Undivided lives no more, for teachers hope for more,
Through thick and thin they join learning spaces to soar.
Professional development and the pandemic
Made teachers realistic and enthusiastic
When will our reflections show, who are we inside?
Teachers who transform to make communities of learning reformed
We are the teachers of tomorrow, the light to wipe out the sorrow
Hello, COVID! We are ready for the bid!*

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Competing Interest

The author has no competing interest to declare.

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7. Appendix

Sample questions asked during the interview

1. Open ended questions
 2. Please describe your role or position in the academic institution you are connected.
 3. What is your understanding of professional learning communities?
 4. What are your thoughts about teachers' professional development?
 5. Please share your thoughts about teachers' professional development during the pandemic.
 6. What types of professional learning communities you are involved for the past three years?
 7. What specific workshop/training that you have attended to enhance your professional development?
 8. What professional development workshops or training you have attended for the last two years?
1. Factual questions
 2. Do you have any responsibilities in terms of conducting professional development activities in your college/university?
 3. Were you able to conduct workshop/training as part of your professional development? Please describe and explain.
 4. Were you able to provide feedback in terms of types, structures, themes, or topics in professional development activities?
 5. Were you given the opportunities to get involved in professional development activities?
 6. Do academic support from your teaching–learning environment provided training and workshops to enhance your professional development?
1. Probing questions
 2. How did you manage to get involved in different professional learning communities?

3. How did the workshops/training help in your personal and professional development?
 4. Do you think the workshops you have attended enhanced your professional development?
 5. How did the different learning communities affect your role as a teacher/mentor in the teaching–learning environment?
 6. What do you think are the benefits of engaging in different professional learning communities?
 7. What do you think are the struggles experienced by teachers in their own professional development during the pandemic?
 8. In your own opinion, how did the pandemic affect teachers' lives?
1. Closing point
 2. Reflect on your participation in different professional development activities for the past two years. Are the communities of practice helpful/beneficial to you as a teacher?
 3. How did your participation help/enhance yourself as a teacher or mentor?
 4. Do you think the workshops/training are relevant in the enhancement of your professional development?
 5. Can you share a story or experience where your professional development is challenged?
 6. Do you think teachers lived a divided/undivided lives during the pandemic?
 7. What have you learned from your participation in professional learning communities?