

Social support

Twitter is an important resource for finding a support network, and professional development, finds pre-school manager and EYT **Emma Davis**



The financial squeeze on settings over the past decade means continuing professional development (CPD) has often moved down the priority list. Add in the Covid-19 pandemic and it's clear we need to look at all methods of enhancing our professional development.

In light of the importance of CPD in improving outcomes for children, and the barriers to accessing opportunities, I chose CPD as the focus for my dissertation for my MA, which I completed over the first lockdown. In particular, my dissertation explored the potential for Twitter to be used as a tool to promote CPD. As a Twitter user myself, I recognised the impact it has had on my practice, but wanted to explore whether it was utilised more generally as a tool to generate knowledge and forge professional connections with others.

We all know that CPD is widely recognised as being vital. Now more than ever it's important for the workforce to feel equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to fulfil their role and influence the lives of children in their care. But CPD does not have to just refer to formal, certified courses. The supplementary guidance by Dr Julian Grenier to support the revised *Development Matters* emphasises that CPD is not just a one-off event. It is ongoing, related to the needs of the children and the context of the setting. CPD works best when linked to practice and when practitioners have the opportunity to reflect on what they have learned.

In the current situation, leaders are having to make significant decisions based on no prior knowledge or experience. Knowing the impact of decisions could be far-reaching is an uncomfortable feeling. Leaders need support from others to share anxieties and relieve



stress at a time when negativity and worry seem to be the overriding emotions, with so many people to please, rules to abide by, policies to update and endless risk assessments to adhere to.

This is a benefit of Twitter as a tool for CPD – communities of practice which share, engage, inspire and empower, as well as providing opportunities to reflect on practice and provision. As we negotiate our way out of the pandemic, opportunities to share experiences via Twitter will be a valuable form of support for educators in the early years and beyond.

Communities of practice

My survey was shared on Twitter during the first lockdown. The 164 respondents covered a broad cross-section of the early years workforce – teachers with QTS, nursery managers, apprentices, lecturers, childminders, consultants and head teachers.

Three-quarters (124) of respondents strongly agreed or

'Communities of practice' are being formed on online platforms such as Twitter

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agreed they found Twitter useful for engaging with others professionally. Many commented on the value of communicating across a wide international network, sharing ideas and informing pedagogical practice. They also liked being able to connect and share with like-minded people and the access to an array of early years voices, age groups and experiences. Respondents felt able to influence their current thinking, develop existing skills and knowledge and reflect on international perspectives of play and learning in the early years.

A review of the literature on communities of practice supports the idea that opportunities to interact professionally can lead to the generation of knowledge, sharing of ideas and reflection. Through these networks, communities of practice are being formed. Online platforms enable users to connect not just across the country, but across the world.

These networks, when sustained, can have far-reaching influences on practice. One respondent said, 'I ➤

ensure I follow a broad range of people from all aspects of education, not just EYFS... from varying cultural backgrounds, from all over the world and many different genders and sexualities in order to ensure I have diversity in my feed. Different people to challenge my ways of thinking and to gain first-hand experiences from. Particularly, BAME professionals have been absolutely wonderful in sharing ideas as to how we can try to prevent racism in schools and ensure we provide children with a diverse range of books and resources. A huge benefit to practice.'

The impact of this led the respondent to conduct an audit of her provision, which challenged her views and led her to identify a need to further her knowledge in this area.

Many respondents are seeking to find support and common ground from colleagues on Twitter, while it also rewards more inquisitive uses such as the ability to talk to experts directly. Key terms cited by respondents were 'professional dialogue', 'connecting with similar people', 'finding common beliefs in terms of education', 'gaining ideas and realising you're not alone', 'discussing school related topics with professional colleagues', 'dialogue with like-minded peers', 'sharing with like-minded people', 'you can often interact with experts and pick their brains directly', 'engaging in discussions', and 'ignites curiosity and professional discussion'.

My data suggests this professional dialogue is a daily occurrence for 38 per cent of respondents, while a quarter engage several times a week. Consultants, authors, inspectors, head teachers and lecturers were some of those mentioned as being professionals with which respondents had engaged.

The connections made on Twitter did not remain exclusively on the platform. Users have taken their friendships into the real world, which was especially valuable during lockdown when physical interaction was limited. Respondents talked about meeting as a group on Zoom, holding quiz nights, attending online events and meeting up in person once restrictions allowed.

These online communities of practice are not just valuable as a tool for CPD and generating knowledge, they are also a means of emotional support. One respondent

said, 'I have suffered with some mental health issues and found that the people on Twitter are absolutely amazing at reaching out if they sensed the tone of my tweets was different. They seemed to take more time to check in with me and listen than people in my "real life".'

Use of the platform

My survey also sought to explore how respondents were engaging with Twitter. My data suggested the most popular uses include accessing it for ideas and inspiration, engaging in dialogue with professionals and engaging in Twitter chats. It was valued by respondents for providing learning and opportunities and ways of improving pedagogy and practice. Examples of its uses also include keeping up to date with trends and legislation and finding inspiration for ideas to implement in the classroom. Respondents valued using it for staying abreast of education trends, and signposting to legislation, research, publications and policy changes. This was especially important over lockdown, with respondents talking of being the first in their setting to access newly updated guidance.

It appears that the pandemic also impacted how Twitter was used to access courses, blogs, webinars and podcasts. With many teachers and practitioners furloughed or experiencing a change to their usual working hours, there was more time to focus on professional development. One user comments that, 'During lockdown, many people have arranged free online CPD and "BrewEd" events, which allow us to have access to the expertise and knowledge of so many educators from around the globe and varying cultural backgrounds.'

Thus learning during lockdown was not an isolated process, it was a social approach, building on technological tools to support access to learning and information.

The downsides

Although Twitter is a positive space for many, concerns were raised that Twitter use can impact work/life balance – that there are so many ideas online that it can become an extension of work. Some talked about 'information overload' as the platform is flooded with ideas and links. This can also lead to users feeling pressurised to keep up with others and that their own practice is

lacking. One user commented that 'sometimes it can feel a bit overwhelming and make me feel like I'm not doing as good a job as others because my classroom doesn't look like that or I ask myself "why didn't I think of that?"". Respondents talked about the fear of being judged, with others disapproving of their ideas and practice.

Some respondents also raised a point about cliques forming which were difficult to infiltrate, leaving them feeling an outsider. There was a fear that these cliques could lead to bullying and trolling. Similarly, there was a suggestion that some users 'act like they're better than others', and 'people can be very opinionated, which is offputting if you lack confidence'. There was also mention of some users having 'very strong views which sometimes take a very unpleasant and unprofessional stance'. A reason for this was seen as the lack of a personal relationship respondents had within their network, meaning users felt they could reply aggressively or dismissively with no repercussions. Setting an account to private is a way to limit this, but it results in a decrease in interactions.

Some were concerned that what they shared could identify themselves or their school, and so preferred to remain anonymous. There was talk of wanting to keep one's personal life and professional life separate.

The character limit on Twitter was sometimes seen as a negative, with some fearing that context could be lost. There was a suggestion that tweets are a snapshot, as supporting detail is lost due to the character count. However, respondents commented that the overriding positives associated with engaging in Twitter outweigh the negatives.

Finally, it's important to stress that although my study suggests Twitter can indeed be used as an informal means of CPD, users need to be cautious of what they, and others, share. This was a point emphasised by several respondents, noting 'you have to be able to cherry pick the things that are useful', and the requirement to filter out poor practice.

Content on Twitter is not regulated and therefore users cannot be sure of its validity or quality. When using Twitter, question what you read and see, just as you would in the real world. ■

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