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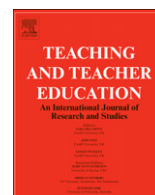
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## Let's lunch and learn: Professional knowledge sharing in teachers' lounges and other congregational spaces

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## ABSTRACT

Teachers' lounges are often thought as places that breed negativity. This two-year ethnography conducted in the United States explored teachers' interactions within teachers' lounges and congregational spaces. This article discusses that an important occurrence in these spaces, professional knowledge sharing, took place instead of perpetual negativity which is the common perception. I present suggestions for how teacher education programs can highlight the importance of congregational spaces, while providing a more complete account of them.

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"I was always taught, in college, how the teachers' lounge was a bad influence on you."

–Gwen Penny<sup>1</sup>, K-8 science teacher, Farmer School

### 1. Introduction

My junior year of college, I distinctly remember sitting in my English Education class with nineteen other students from my cohort. Shandra, the graduate teaching assistant, started off the class by stating the golden rules of teachers, "There are three things you need to know to survive in a school. Get to know the secretaries, get to know the janitors, and stay out of the teachers' lounge<sup>2</sup>." These were automatically set up as the golden rules of teaching.

Shandra and other teacher educators think that the teachers' lounge is a negative place because of gossip. Generally considered to be negative in nature, gossip can certainly refer to scandal or negative rumour. The conventional notion is that gossip occurs in the teachers' lounge, creating a negative work environment for

others. However, it can also be considered talk or discussion of a positive personal nature.

Moreover, practitioner publications over the years have warned about the dangers of interacting and "gossiping" in a teachers' lounge. A principal in a school in Louisiana published the results of a general survey he conducted among his staff. Thomas (1987) hypothesised that teachers experience "lounge fatigue" while interacting in the teachers' lounge. He defined lounge fatigue as:

[a] phenomenon [that] lowers teacher morale and instructional performance, encourages mental and physical fatigue and administrative apathy, develops poor self-concept, creates insensitivity for professional growth, lowers student achievement, and engenders poor school spirit. (p.114)

Lounge fatigue is certainly based off the assumption that the teachers' lounges are a continually negative space.

More recently, a theory has been developed to create an interpretive framework for the gossip that occurs in lounges. Practitioner publications have printed Keller's (1999, 2000) theory of lounge discussion with categories of interaction. Keller classifies these interactions as either teacher lounge caring (TLC) or teacher lounge toxins. TLC occurs when the interactions demonstrate improved teaching, compassion toward students or other areas of positive development. Teacher lounge toxins are found when the interactions consist of comments that promote degrading views of their pupils and fellow professionals, a general dislike for their occupation, and lack of concern for improving teaching performance.

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<sup>1</sup> All names and places are pseudonyms to protect the research participants' anonymity.

<sup>2</sup> Terms of "staffrooms," "faculty rooms," and "office" are often used internationally. For the purpose of this paper, "teachers' lounge" will be the term used, as it is how it is defined in the United States, which was the place of study.

The idea of the teachers' lounge as a negative space has perpetuated itself over the years and has been passed down teaching generations. The golden rule to stay out of the teachers' lounge, as with any myth, is stated without any context and understanding as to what really goes on in the teachers' lounge. Second, researchers who have entered this space have found powerful connections from the teachers' lounge to the classroom. Unfortunately, the research conducted in this area is almost non-existent in the United States. Also, it only looks at teachers' lounges and not other congregational spaces where teachers informally socially interact to understand these relationships better. Lastly, the lounge is being looked at as a place, and not as a space that can be an extension of the classroom.

There are many events that occurred in these teacher spaces during this research project. This article aims to look specifically at the professional knowledge sharing that occurred in this space. Specifically, the goal of this article is three-fold. First, this article challenges the myth that congregational spaces are negative, and discusses how teachers at Farmer School used these spaces for professional knowledge sharing. Second, through the explanation of professional knowledge sharing, the article discusses the importance of these spaces and relationships within them. Lastly, the article confirms and extends the findings of previous research conducted internationally about teachers' lounges, while also extending the research to other congregational spaces. Implications for how this information informs and supports teacher training and teacher education are discussed.

## 2. The undocumented history of teachers' lounges and international explorations of the space

Exactly when teachers' lounges became incorporated into school structure in the United States is undocumented. One could guess that somewhere between the evolution of the one-room school house during 1800s, the establishment of transitional schools in the 1840s, and the current school architectural designs that began in the 1940s (Graves & Pearson, 1993) that the teachers' lounge became part of school structure. The teachers' lounge has since become part of the physical planning of the great majority of public schools today.

In fact, some teachers' unions in the United States include in union contracts clauses requiring the presence of lounges in their members' schools, demonstrating the importance of this space. One large urban school district in the United States outlines in their teacher contract that, "Each school shall be provided with a clean and safe employee lounge" (Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, 2004), while another large urban school states that "A clean, attractive, and appropriately furnished room equipped with a telephone shall be provided as a faculty lounge where space is available. Such lounges shall be provided in all newly constructed school buildings" (Newark Teachers' Union, 2003). These contracts demonstrate the importance of these spaces, but only a small handful of researchers have explored through empirical means the interactions in these spaces and how they implicate the profession of teaching.

Presently, there is a dearth of scholarly research that examines teachers' lounges internationally. Most of the literature that exists was completed in Israel (Ben-Peretz & Schonmann, 2000; Ben-Peretz, Schonmann, & Kupermintz, 1999; Kainan, 1997, 2002), France (Dutercq, 1993), England (Biott & Easen, 1994; Hammersley, 1984; McGregor, 2003; Nias, Southworth, & Yeomans, 1989; Pollard, 1985, 1993; Woods, 1979, 1984), South Africa (Abrahams, 1997), and China (Paine, Fang, & Wilson, 2003), with minimal studies conducted in the United States (Hallett, 2005a, b; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001).

Some of the findings from this research have highlighted how the relationships from these spaces assist in teachers developing their professional skills. For example, Hammersley (1984) was the first to research the phenomenon of 'collective sense-making' and 'stock taking' that occurs among teachers in the lounge of a British school. Since the inception of Hammersley's concept, other researchers have discovered similar findings. Teachers have been documented using the space for collaboration on projects and issues within the classroom (Abrahams, 1997; Ben-Peretz & Schonmann, 2000; Biott & Easen, 1994; McGregor, 2003) and professional development (Ben-Peretz & Schonmann, 2000; Ben-Peretz et al., 1999; Paine et al., 2003) in Israel and South Africa. These researchers have documented that teachers use the space for professional knowledge sharing—an exchange of information to support the development within the profession. The article also supports the findings of these researchers, while also extending the work into the context of congregational spaces in the United States.

## 3. Methods

This article reports findings from a larger project that focused on informal social interactions within congregational spaces. The research was designed to look at teachers' lounges from the perspective of faculty members at one school in the United States. Although interactions occur differently among teachers at other schools, it is important to explore a micro perspective of one school because deep understanding of context-specific variables in one setting (e.g., physical dimensions, personal ideologies, school culture) can help illuminate those in another. Through the specific, we understand the more universal (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). These discoveries are made via the use of inductions, explorations, and theoretical insight (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Stebbins, 2001). According to Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, qualitative researchers deduct information from social observation in methods similar to the way scientists deduct information from the study of physical phenomena. Thus, this research was best suited for and designed as an ethnography.

The ethnography took place in an inner city K-8 school<sup>3</sup> called John E. Farmer during the 2005–2006 and 2006–2007 school years ( $N = 100$  teachers and staff members). Data was collected through observations and interviews.

Three-hundred twelve hours of observations were completed during the teachers' lunch hour. This was the most convenient and productive opportunity for teachers to informally interact, often times creating self-made congregational spaces in empty classrooms or the teachers' lounge. Specifically, three groups of teachers were observed: the kindergarten to second grade lunch group, the fourth grade lunch group, and the seventh and eighth grade lunch group (known as the Lunch Bunch in the school).

The observations were collected from my perspective as a participant observer. In February of 2005, I started tutoring at the school on Tuesday and Thursday mornings. In this role, I provided services to the school while becoming familiarized with and integral to its culture. I primarily tutored reading and writing for two-third grade classrooms, and a sixth/seventh grade Resource Room during the 2005–2006 school year. For three years, I tutored in one fourth grade classroom at Farmer School. While tutoring, my primary interactions were with students, with limited teacher interaction. A majority of the teachers did not know me when I started observing and interacting during their lunch times.

<sup>3</sup> A K-8 school is considered an elementary school in the United States. This is also equivalent to what is known as a primary school in other countries.

In addition to observations, one-on-one semi-structured interviews were also conducted with teachers ( $n = 16$ ) in order to gain their perspective of the occurrences and interactions that take place within these spaces. Interviews were conducted with thirteen teachers, one principal, and two student teachers, lasting 20–40 min each. All participants consented to audio-recorded interviews, which were then transcribed. Member cheques were performed, where each participant received a transcript of his or her interview, reviewed, and corrected the transcript to insure its accuracy.

For data analysis, constant comparative analysis was used to compare themes among the coded categories (Hewitt-Taylor, 2001) in order to find similar patterns presented in the data (Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg, & Coleman, 2000). Classical content analysis was used to count the number of times a code was used in the project (Kohlbacher, 2006; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2006). The data analysis techniques were guided by the use of Computer-Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) called MAXqda2.

#### 4. Congregational spaces used for professional knowledge sharing

Congregational spaces at Farmer were used for many different reasons. Sometimes the space was used for coping (Mawhinney, 2008a), while at other times the teachers used each other for humour and social support (Mawhinney, 2008b). One of the findings that emerged is that teachers used these spaces for professional knowledge sharing. Previous research in China (Paine et al., 2003), Israel (Ben-Peretz & Schonmann, 2000), and South Africa (Abrahams, 1997) all speak to how professional knowledge sharing occurs in these spaces. The findings provided at Farmer School confirm the findings here in the United States, while also extending the research base on professional knowledge sharing in congregational spaces. These findings also question previous views of teachers' lounges and other congregational spaces as a breeding ground for negativity (Keller, 1999, 2000; Thomas, 1987), and challenges how this idea of these spaces is used in teacher education programmes.

Often the teachers used their lunch time to have informal conversations about the profession. Professional knowledge sharing among teachers at Farmer provided a variety of information: it helped teachers informally learn and understand the practice of teaching, spontaneously collaborate and create projects, and collectively share information. Thus, all the professional knowledge sharing that occurred in these spaces either directly or indirectly filtered back into the classroom.

In the interviews, I asked the teachers how they benefit from the relationships they have established in their congregational spaces. Many of them discussed how they benefit professionally from their lunch conversations. Science teacher Gwen Penny talked about how she gains advice during lunch.

It opens me up and makes me more vulnerable to what they really think about me and their advice, taking their advice, the different way I handle things with the kids or in my life... Again, opens you up and trust other people. Also, opens you up to other people's ideas in how to teach a certain thing, you know, what they did and how to work it out (Taped Interview, October 30, 2006).

Erin Barrow, a seventh grade math teacher, found similar benefits to Gwen. Erin discussed how these relationships help her learn and understand the practice of teaching more.

I mean, eating with them, I learn things about practices that work and don't work... it kind of just brings you together when

you're, even if we are just talking about kids, just hearing other people's perspective on them and hearing how they viewed things just kind of bonds you because you're kind of getting to know that person and different aspects of their lives (Taped Interview, October 12, 2006).

The professional knowledge sharing that occurs in these congregational spaces also creates an added bonus for one teacher in how she feels about herself in connection with the profession. Elaine Redtree, a seventh grade English teacher, transferred to Farmer two years ago. She explained how she benefits from these relationships.

They are wonderful people to eat lunch with. First of all, we share ideas, what the 8<sup>th</sup> graders are doing, I talk to the 7<sup>th</sup> grade teachers at lunch time, and that's very rewarding 'cause I see that I'm not behind, or I'm right on target, or I may get a little upset, and they're upset because we had to rush the lesson because we are doing tests all week. It's really good... I'm listening to people when they are talking about prompts and what they're doing with the children in the classroom, and what kind of essays they're getting and what kind of book reports they are getting, so I'm thinking in the back of my mind, 'cause I'm listening, and I say, 'Oh I'm doing the right thing' or either I'm saying, 'I need to change that. I need to do this better. I need to get on the computer more.' It helps me with what I'm doing in my classroom. Some of the people I eat lunch with, they are leading teachers as well, especially last year, but [Linda] she gave me so much confidence in myself (Taped Interview, October 10, 2006).

Elaine has been teaching for thirty-one years, and she found that the relationships and professional knowledge sharing she received in her lunch group helped to build her confidence as a teacher. As a veteran teacher, Elaine benefited professionally from the congregational spaces, but novice teachers also received mentorship from the veteran teachers to assist in developing out their skills as a teacher.

##### 4.1. Novice teachers being mentored by veteran teachers: lessons in the "beehive"

While observing, I saw how these relationships fostered confidence and helped to mold some of the student teachers. Paine et al. (2003) coined the term "beehive activity" while doing their research in China. The beehive activity refers to how informal conversations help new teachers build knowledge from veteran teachers. The data in this section confirms Paine, Fang, and Wilson's findings in China, while also supporting these findings in the United States. During the first year of data collection, the fourth grade group had two student teachers. It was while observing them that I saw the "beehive activity" take place in their understanding and development into teachers.

In March, I was eating lunch with the fourth grade group. Six fourth grade students came into the congregational space. Immediately, student teacher Kate McMillian got up and led the students out into the hallway. This was an indication that the six students had lunch detention with Kate. Apparently, the students were demonstrating poor behaviour the day before in class while the main teacher, Shannon, was out sick. Students were often taken into the hallway to serve their lunch detentions because the teachers still want to keep the congregational space sacred to them. The door is left open so that the teachers can still keep an eye on the students while they are eating lunch.

After a few minutes, Kate walked back into the room looking flustered and stated, "I just gave them the stupidest assignment.



I told them to write 'I will not break the rules' 500 times." At first, we all just glanced at Kate. It is evident that this is not the best action for discipline. Veteran teacher Shanae Cash spoke up and stated, "You need to be careful with that. That can be considered corporal punishment."

Kate exclaimed, "Well, what am I supposed to do?"

Shanae explained, "Have them write two paragraphs. What they did wrong, why it was wrong, and what they can do to fix the behaviour." Immediately Kate went out to the hallway and changed the students' assignment based on Shanae's advice (Field notes, March 6, 2006).

In this interaction, Kate received mentorship from a veteran teacher and used the information to her benefit. The space and the relationships Kate built within the congregational space allowed her to develop her skills within the profession. I asked Kate about her experiences in the congregational space during an interview. Specifically, I asked Kate what she was learning from the lunch time interactions. She explained how the lunch conversations provided an opportunity for her to learn informally from veteran teachers.

Well, quite a few times I had lunch detention and it wasn't working. And I remember [Shanae] turned around and was like 'Why are you doing this to yourself? This is your break,' and they [the teachers] gave me some tips to do, to call the parents instead. I always felt bad calling the parents, but [Shanae] turned around and said that they [the students] need that. I don't know. It works a little better. And it gives me a little bit of time to get things together and eat lunch (Taped Interview, April 17, 2006).

I asked the same question of Joyce Hill, the other student teacher. She also mentioned the importance of learning from a veteran teacher during lunch time. Joyce stated, "Like [Shanae] is like a wealth of knowledge every time she speaks you learn something because she's had so many years of experience. You know, you just listen and learn" (Taped Interview, April 26, 2006).

As Joyce explained, she would use the lunch time as a place of learning and developing her understanding of the profession. As a student teacher in a special education classroom, Joyce attended her first individualised education plan (IEP) meeting for one of her students. During lunch, Joyce would seek direct advice from the veteran teachers. After the meeting, Joyce asked at lunch, "It was an IEP meeting and I didn't think I should say something because I am not the teacher, but she [the cooperating teacher] told me I should have said something. Do you think I should have? Is that really my place?"

Shannon replied, "Well, you are the teacher too and it's not a bad thing to give your opinion, so why not?" (Field notes, March 15, 2006). This statement also reaffirms to Joyce that she is a teacher in the making and to have more confidence in what she has to offer her students. Joyce was able to receive mentorship from the other veteran teachers within the congregational space. On the other hand, all teachers within these spaces used spontaneous collaboration that directly feed back into the classroom.

#### 4.2. *Spontaneous collaboration and collective sharing within congregational spaces*

Williams, Prestage, and Bedward (2001) documented that teachers reported valuing spontaneous collaboration. This findings section documents spontaneous collaboration occurring within congregational spaces and supports the work of Williams, Prestage, and Bedward. This section also reaffirms the findings of Ben-Peretz and Schonmann (2000) in Israel and Abrahams (1997) in South Africa that the interactions within congregational spaces are used for "interactive professionalism" (Ben-Peretz & Schonmann, 2000, p.6), and provide an opportunity for teachers to collaborate.

At Farmer, lunch time was a space to develop, discuss, or plan ideas among each other. The congregational spaces and the relationships within them provided an opportunity for spontaneous collaboration to occur. For example, here reading teacher Laura asked English teacher Linda about the topic of her book reports, since they often work on the projects together.

"What's your next book report? I don't know. I do the same for everyone."

Linda replied, "I'm not sure"

Suddenly science teacher Carla gets an idea that she stated excitedly, "How about Antarctica?" Carla was mentioning at the beginning of the lunch how she is starting a new unit on Antarctica with her eighth graders.

Linda replied just as excited, "Yeah we can do that. Let's talk about it!"

"That way they can each read a book about Antarctica," added Carla (Field notes, October 4, 2006).

At this point, Carla and Linda started to look at their calendars to find a date that best works for the collaborative project to be due. Linda and Carla spontaneously collaborated on a project through their informal lunch time conversation, and the result was an interdisciplinary unit. The exclusive adult time within the congregational spaces allowed this spontaneous collaboration to be facilitated.

Spontaneous collaboration also occurred among teachers in the younger grades. In May, I walked into the fourth grade group's lunch space. I walked over to Ann's bookcase, and I picked out a children's book that caught my eye. The book was about monkeys and the different sounds they make. Ann said to me, "I love that new book. It's fabulous!"

"Can I see it?" I asked as I started to open it. I started reading, and I laughed at the fun nature of the book. "I can see that this would be fun to read aloud."

Ann explained, "That's what we do with the little kids." Ann stood up and walked to her desk to get her reading glasses. She then came over to where I was standing, and we started reading the book together. Ann excitedly added, "I mean, look at those great action words! I can do some great things with this!" (Field notes, May 15, 2006). It was as if the ideas in her head for building a lesson around the book were starting to be created.

Two days later, a group of us went into Ann's classroom for lunch. She had a moving chalkboard in her classroom, and it is filled with action words. I asked, "Is that from the book?"

"Yeah! I love that book!"

Shannon and Cindy asked, "What book?" I went over to the shelf and got the book.

Ann added, "I love it! I had the book for years and I never read it. One day with the kids we pulled it off the shelf and said, 'What the heck' and I couldn't believe how good the book is!" (Field notes, May 15, 2006). Shannon and Cindy started to read the book together, and then more ideas formed among the three of them about lessons Ann could do with the book. It was decided that it would be a great idea for the students to write an ending to the story since there was not much of one in the book.

Seven days later, Shannon and I walked in for lunch. Ann excitedly ran over to a table and grabbed something, "See my monkeys!" She held up a foam cutout of a monkey with its tail in the air. "I looked all over for monkeys. I went to Michael's [craft store] and monkeys aren't in season and they didn't have any. I almost cried and went to AC Moore, and then I went online and I found my monkeys. I didn't have to go anywhere!" Ann then shows the template she purchased online to make the foam monkeys.

Cindy added, "[Ann], they're cute!"

"We are going to make them into books"

"With the stories they finished the books with?" I asked.

"No, they're up there," Ann said while pointing to a board where the colourful stories are on display (Field notes, May 22, 2006). She already took the collective idea and did the story completing project with the students. The foam monkeys were going to be other stories that the students create on their own. The power of professional knowledge sharing and spontaneous collaboration developed into a whole learning unit with the monkeys' story that germinated in the congregational space.

Collective sharing was also used for planning field trips among various classrooms. The upper grades plan a fieldtrip to an outdoor activities area named Briarwood every year. Linda was the main coordinator, but she used lunch time to discuss details with the other teachers. "The Briarwood trip this year is definitely going to be June 5<sup>th</sup>."

"Can I tell the kids?," asked Sandra.

"Yes."

"How much?"

Linda and Laura stated simultaneously, "\$15." Linda continued, "That's what it was last year, but he [Briarwood administrator] never brings it up to me. The Hershey Park trip is up in the air. I did give the paperwork to [Colleen] (school secretary)."

Maria added, "That's the problem."

"[Colleen's] usually good with that stuff, but she lost the paperwork." (Field notes, May 1, 2006). Linda then went to the chalkboard where there is a checklist of other potential field trips the students can do instead of Hershey Park. Linda's first three classes voted on their choices. "I had 11 kids today vote for the Camden Aquarium and Crystal Cave. But they overwhelmingly picked [roller] skating. Remember when we used to do that all the time? We went for a few years, and they loved it. They got upset when we couldn't go back because the place we went to closed."

Three weeks later, Linda brought the Briarwood trip up to the lunch group again. A decision needed to be made as to what teacher was going to stay at the school with some of the students. Linda announced to everyone, "I talked to Briarwood and everything is set. Otherwise we only have to have someone stay behind with the kids."

Erin added, "I'll stay behind." (Field notes, May 22, 2006).

Again, this illustrates how lunch time is also a time for work, sharing, and planning, and how this happens in the shared, sacred congregational space. The majority of the decisions about the Briarwood trip were done collectively over informal conversation at lunch.

These various examples demonstrate that professional knowledge sharing happens readily and in various ways. It is used for novice teachers to gain knowledge and develop out their skills, spontaneous collaboration, clarifying ideas and concepts, and collective planning. All of this information sharing made teaching better. It would not have happened without the time and space within the congregational spaces to allow it. Furthermore, these findings demonstrate the positive power that these relationships have on the growth, development, and sustainability within the profession. I do not deny that teachers' lounges and congregational spaces can be used for negativity and develop "teachers' lounge toxins" (Keller, 1999, 2000), but it is important for teacher education programmes to also point out the positivism and benefits that teachers can receive in these spaces.

## 5. Problematising the idea of negativity in congregational spaces

Congregational spaces, such as the teachers' lounge, have consistently been constructed as negative. For example, Walke (1994), a high school English teacher, avoided the teachers' lounge because he considered teachers' lounges to be "snake pits where poisonous gossip spreads" (p. 48). I will not refute that there are

spaces where this theory is true in that teachers come to complain. Additionally, teachers at Farmer are not the exception to this concept of negativity. However, this study illustrates that congregational spaces and informal interactions at Farmer continually provided professional knowledge sharing and development to positively affect the teachers' classrooms.

As with Walke (1994), his views and experiences of the teachers' lounge revolutionized over time. After five years of avoidance, he did venture into the lounge and became an active member of its group. He now considers the lounge to be where he continues his education on topics such as classroom management, grading and reducing teacher workload. He describes the lounge as a place without set agendas, where teachers can speak openly amongst themselves. In England, Hammersley (1984) was the first to research the phenomenon of shared professional knowledge occurring in the teachers' lounge. In Israel, Ben-Peretz and Schonmann have described lounge interactions as "interactive professionalism" (2000, p. 6), a process where teachers have opportunities to collaborate on projects and issues within the classroom. Abrahams' studies (1997) in South African concurred with these findings, demonstrating that collaboration could aid teachers by providing emotional as well as professional support. Thus, the professional knowledge sharing occurring at Farmer School in the United States was not necessarily a unique experience. Teachers internationally are using their limited time for interactions to work on strengthening their practice. The adult time and safety within the congregational spaces provided an opportunity for teachers to participate in professional knowledge sharing. Informal learning and mentorship within these spaces helped the teachers think about and effectively improve their practice, while spontaneous collaboration contributed direct ideas for the classroom. Professional knowledge sharing occurs in a variety of ways that benefits the teachers' practice, which ultimately benefits the students in the classroom.

The function of professional knowledge sharing within teacher congregational spaces is completely missed in current literature in the United States by researchers, although practitioners are talking about this phenomenon. These spaces and relationships continue the development of teachers conceptualizing the profession and developing as professionals. They use knowledge gained in these spaces to improve their classroom teaching. Spontaneous collaborations and sharing within these spaces brings ideas and projects back into the classroom. As Farmer teachers indicated, they talk more about the profession in their congregational spaces than in formally structured faculty meetings. This space, relationships, and adult time are essential for growth within the profession, and ultimately problematised the idea that only negativity reigns in congregational spaces.

My findings undermine the traditional, mythical conceptualisations of teachers' lounges and other congregational spaces as a place where disgruntled teachers complain. Much differently, the data suggests that teachers are providing ongoing professional development to colleagues. It is important to mention that these are spaces for professional communication of any merit. The concept of these spaces as breeding grounds for negativity have been perpetuated within teacher education programmes. For example, faulty or negative advice from mentor teachers can be passed down to novice teachers. If professional development of any kind is occurring in these spaces, then teacher preparation programmes must take this into consideration and be shaped accordingly in order to provide a discussion on the topic.

## 6. Implications for teacher education

At an alarming rate, graduates of teacher preparation programmes are not choosing to stay within the profession of teaching

on an international scale. One missing piece of the puzzle is the lack of attention to congregational spaces and teacher-to-teacher interactions received in higher education institutes. In the 1970s, Knoblock and Goldstein (1971) argued that the academic setting of college lectures are far removed culturally from the reality of today's schools. Unfortunately, not much has changed over three decades. Prospective teachers are leaving higher education institutes with only a partial and sometimes false understanding of the teacher profession. Specifically, higher education institutes and faculty have taken an active role in perpetuating the concept that teachers' lounges are breeding grounds for negativity. It is as if the value of teacher interactions has been cut off at the knees. This work clearly shows that teacher congregational spaces provide valuable support and knowledge to teachers.

Faculty members might benefit from incorporating the topic of teacher interactions into the curriculum and discourse of teacher education. This call to action is new in the United States, but it is not new in England. Nias et al. (1989) work argued that pre-service teachers' need instruction on how to deal with fellow staff members and that teaching is not just about dealing with students.

Professors need to open up this insider world to prospective teachers. Current teacher training does not prepare future teachers to interpret the culture of the educational communities they will be joining. Biott and Easen (1994) argue that pre-service and student teachers must learn to develop these relationships with colleagues in order to feel connected to the school context, which will ultimately make them feel like a worthy and contributing member of the school community. Without the addition and discussion of teacher-to-teacher relationships, prospective teachers risk becoming individualised and isolated within their profession (De Lima, 2003). Research has shown that isolation can cause teachers to lose interest in their work and the school itself, and that co-worker collaboration is the key to overcoming isolation (Court, 1999; Firestone & Pennell, 1993; Forsyth & Hoy, 1978; Rogers & Babinski, 2002; Williams et al., 2001; Zielinski & Hoy, 1983). While current practice focuses on providing more formal and structured opportunities for these interactions, my data suggests that informal, unstructured interactions in congregational spaces are critical to gaining collegial support and professional knowledge sharing.

The changes could be small in higher education. Professors can focus one lesson or one activity looking at informal teacher interactions. For example, observation courses can have pre-service or in-service teachers observe congregational spaces with their cooperating teacher for one day. This will provide students in teacher education programmes the opportunity to enter within these spaces, but it will also allow them to make connections with other teachers aside from their cooperating teachers. Further, the pre-service and in-service teachers can also have an activity of interviewing their cooperating teacher about their experiences and thoughts on congregational spaces. This activity can assist in continuing a dialogue about these spaces. Other teacher education courses can incorporate literature and research focusing on informal teacher interactions to create an ongoing discussion within the classroom. Agreed that these are all simple examples for inclusions to the college classroom, but activities as such can slowly start to de-emphasise the idea that teachers' lounges are only spaces for negativity. These activities create a way for discussion about these spaces to occur. Otherwise, teaching the "golden rules" ultimately silences any discussion from occurring as pertaining to these spaces.

Moreover, teacher education programmes specifically focus on teacher-to-student relationships. The data from Farmer shows the importance of teacher-to-teacher relationships within the school, but it can be argued that other relationships among teachers should be explored in teacher education programmes. Otherwise, it seems as if teaching is a very one-dimensional profession. A specific

example would be to have a course devoted to other relationships teachers develop while in the profession such as teacher-to-teacher, parent-to-teacher, and administrator-to-teacher relationships. The important idea is that informal relationships are discussed, theorised, and thought through in order for future teachers to grasp an understanding that teaching is more than just student-to-teacher relationships, and so they can proactively create these bonds while in the field.

## 7. Conclusion

This research explains how informal teacher interactions provide the necessary support needed for teachers in an isolating profession. Teachers use the time in congregational spaces to learn from each other with professional knowledge sharing. These interactions serve as moments of professional development, which benefit the teacher, his/her students, and the school. Recent reforms require more formalised professional development for teachers in order to insure their quality. On the other hand, teachers are gaining valuable spontaneous "professional development" when working among themselves.

Furthermore, the article has highlighted the importance of appreciating and valuing congregational spaces. It is my hope that this work will provide an impetus for higher education professors to recognise and value the importance of congregational spaces and informal teacher interactions and will assist in keeping teachers in the profession.

The limitation of this article is that it does not go further extensively to see if professional knowledge sharing connects back into the classroom. This research only highlights the teachers' perceptions of these interactions. This article could easily be a catalyst for future international research to be conducted to explore the connections to the classroom from teacher-to-teacher informal interactions.

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