PAKISTANI TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EXPERIENCES: COMPARING FACE-TO-FACE VERSUS ONLINE LEARNING

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Abstract: This qualitative in-depth interview study investigated the experiences of Pakistani English teachers in an online community, English Companion Ning (ECN). The main purpose of the study was to investigate what ECN meant to these Pakistani teachers and how they found their professional learning experiences different in ECN from face-to-face professional development programs in Pakistan. Data were gathered from six teachers through in-depth interviews, guided tours, field notes, memos, and ECN logs. Using the grounded theory approach, this study analyzed and interpreted the data through initial, focused, and axial coding. Data analysis revealed that being free from budget, temporal, and geographical constraints, the ECN provided numerous opportunities to the Pakistani teachers for a sustained and long-term professional learning in a collaborative setting.

Keywords: online community, online professional learning, face-to-face professional development, Pakistani English teachers

Research has demonstrated that most traditional professional development programs are short, brief, episodic, and involve a transmission model of instruction (Clement & Vanderberghe, 2000; Dede, 2006; Lock, 2006; Murray, 2014; Staudt, Clair, & Martinez, 2013). Literature shows that these traditional programs provide teachers with few opportunities to select the content of the professional development sessions and barely fulfill teachers' real classroom needs (Guskey, 2002). As a result, these traditional "sit-and-get" professional devel-

opment programs hardly change or improve teachers' pedagogical practices (Riding, 2001).

As opposed to the traditional professional development programs, teachers are in need of a continuous, interactive, collaborative, and long-term professional learning, which can help them practically in their pedagogical practices (Riding, 2001). Such professional learning should be based on the idea of learning from and with each other through mutual help, support, mentoring, and peer coaching (Darling-Hammond, 2003). Fortunately, the Internet has resolved this issue now as it allows teachers to connect, collaborate, share, and interact with each other in formal and informal online learning (Kerrey & Iskason, 2000). In this respect, online spaces for teachers can be termed as new avenues to address the problems of traditional teacher professional development programs (Barab, Kling, & Gray, 2004; Sari, 2012). Moreover, these online spaces can serve as places for continuous and long-term support for teachers as they can interact and collaborate with each other irrespective of temporal or geographical constraints (Lock, 2006; Sari, 2012).

Bingham and Connor (2010) view that "most of what we learn at work and elsewhere comes from engaging in networks where people co-create, collaborate, and share knowledge" (p. 8). This article sheds light on the experiences of university teachers in Pakistan who participated in an online community for English teachers, English Companion Ning (ECN), to enhance their professional knowledge and learning. My aim to conduct research in this area in Pakistan was because unlike other countries such as USA, Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia, Korea, where teachers are already benefitting from online spaces for their professional learning (Hew & Hara, 2007; Hutchison & Colwell, 2012; Sari, 2012; Seo & Han, 2013; Yang, 2009), scarce research is available on this topic in Pakistan. Therefore, this research was conducted in Pakistan so that Pakistani teachers could understand and get awareness about the use of online spaces for improving their professional learning. This study explores how the Pakistani teachers found their learning in the ECN different in comparison to face-to-face professional development programs in Pakistan and what the ECN meant to these teachers. Thus, the research questions this study addresses are: What did ECN mean to the Pakistani teachers? How was the Pakistani teachers' learning in the ECN different from the traditional professional development programs in Pakistan?

I begin this study by discussing the situation of traditional professional development programs in Pakistan. After detailing this study's methodology, I

present the findings by describing how the participants in this study found their professional learning in the ECN different from the Pakistani teaching culture and the face-to-face professional learning programs they experienced in Pakistan. Then, after presenting some of the limitations that these teachers faced in the ECN, I conclude the study by suggesting some implications for teachers, teacher educators, professional learning curriculum designers, and higher education not only in Pakistan but also in other contexts where online teacher professional learning is not yet practiced.

While writing about the traditional face-to-face professional development programs for teachers in the U.S., Murray (2014) contended that teachers are often "passive recipients of information in traditional professional learning" with few opportunities to engage in an interactive or reflective dialogue with other colleagues (p. 2). Similarly, Darling-Hammond (2006) posits that the professional development programs in the United States consider teaching as "the lone teacher gaining a basket of knowledge for teaching that is complete and self-contained at the end of teacher education" (p. 109). These researchers argued that school administrators select the topics for the traditional professional learning programs, which is why they rarely connect to specific teacher and student needs and classroom practices.

In a similar vein, the traditional professional development opportunities for teachers in Pakistan rarely contribute to their professional learning. Siddiqui (2007) viewed the teacher education programs in Pakistan as follows:

> In a typical teacher education course, the participants are given a handful of recipes for good teaching. Various lists pertaining to the characteristics of a good teacher are shared with the participants with the assumption that knowing the characteristics of good teaching will automatically turn the participants into good teachers. In this model the teacher is not viewed as a generator of knowledge but just as a user of knowledge (p. 50).

Siddiqui's statement suggests that the traditional professional development programs in Pakistan do not inculcate reflective practice or critical thinking among teachers; rather, the transmission mode of instruction in these workshops turns the teachers into merely passive consumers of knowledge and information. Hussain (2009), in her research on professional development programs in Pakistan, supported Siddiqui's perception of the poor quality of these programs in Pakistan. She emphasized that professional development should be

a long-term and ongoing practice that could help teachers in their actual practices in classrooms. This current study answers Hussain's call for the need of a continuous professional learning platform for teachers in Pakistan, and contributes to the existing literature by introducing learning through online communities such as the ECN as a new source of professional learning for teachers. This study recommends that learning through online communities should be incorporated as an additional method in the professional learning system of teachers in Pakistan and other contexts where online professional learning is not being practiced yet.

METHOD

In order to establish an in-depth understanding of how the Pakistani teachers' learning in the ECN was different from the traditional professional development programs in Pakistan and what ECN meant to these teachers, a qualitative research methodology which is "pragmatic, interpretive, and grounded in the lived experiences of people" (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 2) was employed. For a specific strategy in qualitative research, an in-depth interview strategy was used to allow me to focus on the "individual lived experiences" of the Pakistani teachers in the ECN and also to enable me to "capture the deep meaning of experience in the participants' own words" (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 93).

The online community, English Companion Ning, which can be accessed through http://englishcompanion.ning.com, served as a setting for this study. This online community is global in nature as English teachers from any part of the world can apply for its membership, which is free of cost. ECN encourages teachers all over the world to share their teaching resources and materials in a friendly, supportive, and informal way (Khan, 2014). The physical research site for this study was Sana University[1] in Pakistan. In my participants' view, this university organizes professional learning workshops for its teachers at least once every two years. The teachers in Sana University are allowed to attend the workshops on a nomination basis from the higher authorities of the university, which means not every teacher gets a chance to attend these face-to-face professional learning workshops.

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[1] Names of the institution and participants are pseudonyms.

Six English teachers (Afreen, Ruby, Maha, Rani, Aiza, and Noor) from Sana University participated in this study. These participants were selected using purposeful sampling. The selection criteria was that these participants should be familiar with the ECN website by having an account on the ECN for at least one month and that they should be visiting the website at least once a week to read the posts or to comment and participate in discussions. Further, these six teachers were also purposefully sampled in the categories of new, mid-career, and veteran teachers with 0-5, 5-10, and 10 or more years of teaching experience respectively.

Data collection sources for this study included in-depth interviews, guided tours, field notes, memos, and ECN logs. A total of three in-depth interviews were conducted per participant during the total duration of the study (three months). Also, each participant was required to give a guided tour of the ECN website once a week during which they walked me through whatever they had experienced in the ECN during the week. The participants used both English and Urdu (their native language) during interviews and guided tours. Moreover, in order to capture their online participation in the ECN, their discussion threads and/or other practices were downloaded by visiting their pages on the ECN website and all the data were saved on Microsoft Word. Finally, employing grounded theory as an analytic framework, the data were analyzed using three phases of coding: initial, focused, and axial coding. This analysis procedure helped generate several focused and axial codes, which will be discussed in the next section as findings of this study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the research findings regarding the different ways in which the Pakistani teachers viewed the importance of the ECN for their professional learning.

Welcoming Attitude of the ECN Members

Quality professional learning prompts teachers to share what they want and provides opportunities for "ongoing support from peers and critical friends" (Hismanoglu, 2010, p. 991). The two participants, Ruby and Noor, shared that one of the biggest motivations to participate and share more on the ECN was the huge support, encouragement, and acknowledgement they re-

ceived from other ECN members for sharing their ideas and teaching materials. For instance, one of the ECN members, Dave, shared an e-book that he himself wrote regarding giving feedback to the students. According to Ruby, she "slightly disagreed with some of [Dave's] ideas in his book like commenting on students' work with red ink and doing peer editing in the class" (Guided tour, Ruby, June 4, 2015). Dave welcomed her ideas saying, "[Ruby], your point about not drowning the papers in red ink is an important one" (ECN post, May 28, 2015). Ruby liked Dave's approach of "welcoming" ideas and "taking comments positively" as she expressed, "He could ask 'who are you to say this?'" (Guided tour, Ruby, June 4, 2015). Likewise, Ruby commented on the blog of another ECN member, Diya, about "Six ways to improve students' preparation for college" (ECN post, May 3, 2015). Ruby shared her point of view with Diya by saying that, "Among every other reason, I think the most important factor is of independence. In schools kids are restricted to many things they have to follow certain rules while in college they are (most of the time) free to do anything…" (ECN post, May 27, 2015). To this, Diya responded, "You are right. I agree with you [Ruby]…" (ECN post, May 28, 2015). While discussing such welcoming attitude of the ECN members in an interview, Ruby said: "Comments like 'I agree with you [Ruby]' really motivated me to share more of my ideas with the ECN members" (Interview 2, Ruby, June 16, 2015).

The above examples suggest that Dave welcomed Ruby's disagreement with his point of view and did not criticize or discourage her for expressing her point of view. Similarly, Diya welcomed Ruby's point of view by agreeing with her statement. Ruby further shared that it was not only from Dave and Ruby but she experienced such positive attitude from other ECN members as well:

> No attitudinal problem is there. I mean if I'm disagreeing with somebody, nobody would mind it. Rather the attitude is really welcoming. *Hamaray culture main aisa nahi hota*[2] [It's lacking in our culture]. If you want to give help, other people think that you consider yourself an expert (Interview 2, Ruby, June 16, 2015).

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[2] Italics are used for utterances in Urdu, and text in brackets is the translation to English.

Ruby particularly mentioned in her guided tours and the second interview that such acknowledgement and encouragement was lacking in Pakistan's teaching culture. She expressed in our guided tour that teachers in Pakistan were usually reluctant to share their work or ideas with others because they fear that their sharing could be taken the wrong way; "either teachers would make fun of other teachers for their lack of competence or snub them for showing off knowledge or expertise" (Guided tour, Ruby, May 28, 2015). On the ECN, however, Ruby could express her opinions freely without fear of criticism from any ECN member. Such welcoming attitude and freedom of expression for sharing one's ideas can play a crucial role in enhancing teacher's professional learning (Khan & Lammers, 2014).

Interaction with an International Community of Teachers

Interaction through digital tools can expose teachers to multiple instructional approaches and help them in developing "new and better ways of teaching their students" (Murray, 2014, p. 187). Interacting with a community of international teachers was one of the strongest reasons that motivated Aiza to participate in the ECN, as mentioned in Aiza's ECN log: "The idea of mutual collaboration with international teachers inspired me to explore and use this site [ECN]" (ECN log, Aiza, April 10, 2015). Similarly, for Noor, "exposure to a diversity of views, cultures, and teaching approaches" through the ECN was something she never experienced in the face-to-face professional learning programs in Pakistan (Guided tour, Noor, April 17, 2015). Noor expressed that ECN exposed her to a variety of teaching techniques and strategies used in different contexts, something that she would not have become familiar with otherwise. She wrote in her ECN log:

> The most exciting fact is that this website has thousands of members from all over the world…We are connected with international teachers and can have insight in their professional lives…It's a good idea for teachers to explore this site and see how other teachers in the world are teaching their students (ECN log, Noor, April 16, 2015).

Further, such diversity of perspectives, experiences, and ideas helped these Pakistani teachers in expanding and improving their knowledge and perspectives about the field of teaching. For instance, Afreen expressed how ECN in-

troduced her to some new terminologies. She was unfamiliar with the term "flipped classroom" earlier, but she came to know about this approach to teaching when she interacted with international scholars on the ECN. She decided to introduce this new approach to her students and colleagues and implement it after weighing its practical applicability and pros and cons in the Pakistani educational context (Memo, May 30, 2015). Data analysis revealed that because these teachers had scarce opportunities to interact with international teachers in face-to-face professional learning workshops, connecting with an international community of teachers through the ECN was a great opportunity of learning for them.

ECN as an Equal Platform for All

Teachers' professional learning is effective when the learners are offered an equitable, unbiased, and respectful environment (Sari, 2012). The Pakistani teachers in this study found the ECN to be an equal platform for sharing their ideas and perspectives on different topics and "for making connections without regard to race, creed, gender, or geography" (Wellman & Gulia, 1999, p. 168). These teachers did not face bias or prejudice of any kind for being from a different country and culture. Maha expressed that she was reluctant to post on the ECN website in the beginning as she thought that being from a developing country like Pakistan, ECN members might not respond to her query, comments, or discussion posts. She wondered, "Does this site discriminate people on any basis? I mean I am from Pakistan and people might not want to interact with me because Pakistanis are not recognized at international level" (Guided tour, Maha, April 16, 2015). However, when Maha's colleagues shared with her that they were posting on the site and getting responses, she got encouraged and started posting. After a couple of weeks, Maha shared, "The beauty of this site is that people from any part of the world can share their points of view on the ECN" (Guided tour, Maha, April 29, 2015). Similarly, when Ruby was asked about what appealed to her the most in the ECN, she replied, "Interaction with people whom I have never seen and never met and we are talking about our problems irrespective of color, caste, or country" (Interview 2, Ruby, June 16, 2015). Ruby further expressed that ECN members never gave her a tough time and never discriminated against her even after knowing her country of origin.

One of the strategies for implementing successful professional learning in online communities is that there should be ongoing regard and respect for the teachers (Hew & Hara, 2007; Sari, 2012). Maha and Ruby felt respected in the ECN without any feeling of discrimination or bias for being Muslims, women, or Pakistanis. On the other hand, while sharing the experience of a traditional face-to-face workshop in Pakistan, Noor said, "He [the presenter] didn't ask any questions and didn't allow participants to ask any. I have a tendency to ask questions but he was kind of annoyed saying it's a kind of interference and that I'm too talkative" (Interview 1, Noor, April 6, 2015). Noor expressed that she could not determine the exact reason for such behavior of the presenter. According to Noor, either the presenter was thinking of himself as an 'expert' and did not want anyone to question his 'expertise,' or he snubbed Noor because of her being 'female,' as she said, "males here like to dominate in every respect." Lockheed and Verspoor (1991) argued that this type of snubbing and lack of recognition could demotivate teachers in their career. Noor felt disrespected in that workshop and therefore termed it a "bad experience" in her professional learning (Interview 1, Noor, April 6, 2015). Contrary to the prevalent gender-biased interactions in the Pakistani teaching culture, these teachers could interact with men and women in the ECN from different parts of the world without facing any gender discrimination.

In addition, the Pakistani teachers considered the ECN to be an equal platform because all of them had access to the site on an equal basis. All of these teachers, "irrespective of teaching rank or experience," had an equal chance to ask questions or participate in the ECN discussions (Interview 3, Ruby, June 16, 2015). All of the participants expressed that they experienced inequity during nominations to attend traditional face-to-face professional learning workshops in Pakistan. Some of these teachers were not selected for professional learning sessions because "they had less years of teaching experience than others or at times because they were not among the principal's favorite teachers" (Memo, April 11, 2015). For instance, Afreen stated, "It all depends on the principal for nomination. It's not at all equal" (Interview 1, Afreen, April 8, 2015). Likewise, Maha reported:

> You are just nominated for workshops. Some are nominated and some are not…only selective people can go. One teacher asked me *mujhe ye nahi pata k nominations kis tarah hoti hain, ye jo ilme nafay hai ye hamaisha aik ya do bandon per kyon nazil hota hai?* [laughs] [I don't understand how one gets nominated

for these workshops? Why is this valuable knowledge revealed to only one or two persons?] (Interview 1, Maha, April 11, 2015).

This unequal access to professional learning programs in Pakistan created a feeling of disrespectfulness and frustration among teachers. On the other hand, data analysis revealed that when all the teachers could access the ECN on an equal basis, they felt encouraged and valued to share their knowledge with other ECN members.

Access to a Variety of Teaching Resources

Another theme from the data analysis pointed out that the ECN provided the Pakistani teachers a plethora of teaching resources and materials free of cost. The Pakistani teachers found the ECN resources and materials relevant to their area of expertise and interest and therefore helped improve their knowledge and learning. Research has shown that professional learning is meaningful when it addresses "teachers' knowledge of the subjects they teach or instructional strategies within particular subject areas" (Murray, 2014, p. 13). The participants in this study were from these three diverse backgrounds: Linguistics, English Literature, and English Language Teaching (ELT) and each of them found what they were looking for on the ECN. In this regard, Afreen mentioned in her log, "It's [the ECN] not for one person from a particular area. It's for everyone related to the English teaching field" (ECN log, Afreen, April 17, 2015). Likewise, Aiza mentioned in her guided tour, "I never found any site with diversity of topics and ideas as ECN. *Jis topic pe bhi chaho apko mil jata hai* [You can get material on any topic you want]" (Guided tour, Aiza, June 5, 2015).

Afreen and Aiza's comments above explain that the ECN fulfilled the needs of all of these teachers irrespective of what specific area of English teaching they belonged to. According to Murray (2014), such professional learning that addresses the needs of teachers has a positive impact on teacher instruction and student learning. On the other hand, the Pakistani teachers called most of the traditional professional development a waste of time because it was irrelevant to what they were teaching in classes and hence did not cater to their individual professional needs. For instance, Aiza talked about the difference between the traditional professional development in Pakistan and her learning in the ECN:

> The workshops I attended here [in Pakistan] were about a specific topic like les-
> son planning and it was not related to what I was teaching… But on ECN we can
> go to any area that we want. When there are so many people so diversity of ideas
> come! (Interview 3, Aiza, June 13, 2015).

Apart from getting a variety of topics, ideas and resources, the participants considered it a wonderful opportunity that these resources and materials were free of cost. The first question that almost all of my participants asked was, 'Do we need to pay some fee for downloading materials from the ECN?' Ruby expressed:

> It's very catching and motivating that it's [ECN] not paid. I mean we can't access
> some websites here [Pakistan] due to cost but here [ECN] everything is free of
> cost. If it was paid then nobody was going to pay in dollars (Interview 2, Ruby,
> June 16, 2015).

Being a teacher and student in Pakistan, I agree with Ruby's statement that most of websites in Pakistan are inaccessible because they are fee-based. That is why it was a motivating factor for all the participants that the ECN membership was free, so they could enjoy a variety of lesson plans, activities, e-books, videos, and ideas free of cost (Field notes, June 11, 2015).

Long-term and Anywhere, Anytime Learning

Quality professional learning puts emphasis on a long-term and ongoing learning process for teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Data analysis revealed that the Pakistani teachers' professional learning in the ECN was ongoing and continuous as they could participate in this community from any place and at any time feasible for them. The participants expressed that they had not attended more than four to five professional development workshops on average during their entire teaching career in Pakistan. For instance, Aiza, whose teaching experience was almost eight years, stated:

> Yes, I have attended a couple of workshops…umm…I attended a workshop about
> lesson planning I guess *per mujhe yad nahi kab aur kya tha uss main kyon k kafi*
> *purani baat hai ye* (laughs) [but I don't remember when it was and what it was

about exactly because it's been a long time since I attended that!] (Interview 1, Aiza, April 10, 2015).

The above statement illustrates that Aiza was unable to recall the workshop in Pakistan because first, professional development sessions rarely happen in Pakistan. Second, the workshop was not meaningful and productive so it did not contribute much to Aiza's professional learning and that is why she could not recall what she had learned from those professional development sessions. Likewise, Noor, who had taught for about 12 years expressed, "If I recall, there are not many. Might be 4-5 in total" (Interview 1, Noor, April 6, 2015). Also, the participants shared that those workshops lasted for two to five days on average, which did not provide them "enough time to have discussions or reflect on the workshop results" (Memo, June 20, 2015). On the other hand, for teachers like Maha, the ECN was a constant source of learning, which she could use at any time when in need. Maha mentioned in her ECN log, "It's a kind of permanent source of learning. My membership here is lifetime ☺" (ECN log, Maha, June 16, 2015).

Further, the anywhere and anytime presence of the ECN was another appealing feature for the Pakistani teachers as it was opposed to what was happening in traditional professional development sessions in Pakistan. Ruby said, "*Yahan kisi bhi time pe kuch bhi pooch sakte ho* [You can ask anything anytime here]. It's approachable everywhere no matter you are in home or office" (Interview 2, Ruby, June 16, 2015). As a counter example, Rani threw light on her experience of a traditional professional learning program she attended in Pakistan: "The workshop was in a remote area. It was really hot those days. The residence and accommodation facilities were not there. I didn't get paid for that. I had to arrange everything myself even my meals" (Interview 1, Rani, April 6, 2015). Due to such spatial constraints, Rani's experience of that traditional workshop was the "worst one," and she did not find that professional learning session "productive" for her.

Quality professional learning must provide teachers with "ongoing opportunities for learning throughout the career" (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 226). The teachers found their learning in the ECN a "part of the daily work of teachers" (Murray, 2014, p. 14) as opposed to the episodic and fragmented professional development programs these teachers had in Pakistan. Without any restriction of time or geographical boundaries, the participants in this study accessed the ECN both from their homes and work place.

Limitations of the ECN

Apart from the benefits, data analysis also exhibited that the Pakistani teachers faced some limitations in the ECN. For example, Noor and Afreen noticed that certain discussion posts and groups were not frequently updated. Afreen, whose major was linguistics, stated, "The discussion post on 'L2—Interlanguage' was relevant to my field. I commented on it and was waiting for some more ideas on this topic but then I realized that it had not been updated since February 2010" (Guided tour, Afreen, June 5, 2015). According to these teachers, they could have benefitted more from the ECN if the posts were updated regularly. Another limitation that Rani found was that she saw fewer groups and discussions on English literature as compared to other fields such as linguistics and English Language Teaching (ELT). Rani narrated in her ECN log, "Whenever I visit this site, it doesn't seem to offer a very generous discussion on literature courses. But for language teaching there are so many groups offering ideas" (ECN log, Rani, June 5, 2015).

In addition, teachers like Ruby and Maha had some minor issues in understanding some American context discussions and terms on the ECN. For instance, Ruby said, "I did not understand when teachers were discussing 'Common Core Standards,' or 'Baltimore protest,' or 'Dumbing down girls in Los Angeles,' because I never heard of these terms and discussions before" (Interview 2, Ruby, June 16, 2015). Similarly, when Maha was in search for the examples of informal language in academic writing, an ECN member referred her to another website containing American clichés. Maha stated, "I opened that clichés website but I think it's not applicable to our context because they were American clichés and our students are not familiar with them" (Guided tour, Maha, May 20, 2015). Further, Afreen and Aiza faced slight problems while navigating the site and locating some specific threads because of the large number of groups and discussion forums on the ECN website.

These teachers were of the opinion that the ECN could be a better learning platform for them if those limitations did not exist. However, according to them, their learning in the ECN was not hindered due to these limitations. The participants experienced some of these limitations, such as navigating the site and updating certain discussions, due to the fact that they were using the ECN for the first time and hence did not know about its features to make the most effective use of the site. Most of their problems were resolved when I explained the specific features of the ECN to them. Also, when the Pakistani teachers had

started using the ECN more and differently with the passage of time, most of these limitations were overcome.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored different factors that revealed what ECN meant to the Pakistani university teachers and how they found their professional learning in the ECN different from the face-to-face professional development programs in Pakistan. This research answers the call for future studies on teachers' use of social networking sites for teachers' professional learning in higher education (Davis, 2012; Munoz & Towner, 2009). This study adds to the current research by demonstrating that university teachers can improve their professional learning by participating in online communities like the ECN.

Unlike in a traditional professional development program, the Pakistani teachers were able to access a diversity of teaching resources and ideas related to their area of expertise and interest in the ECN. They were also able to enjoy a variety of perspectives and ideas by interacting with an international community of teachers addressing their professional needs and concerns in a collaborative environment. In contrast, the Pakistani teachers did not find the professional development programs in Pakistan much productive or effective because those sessions covered a specific topic or area, of which these teachers found irrelevant to their area of expertise and/or pedagogical practices.

In addition, the Pakistani teachers found their learning useful in the ECN because they could access all the teaching materials and resources free of cost. The Pakistani professional development programs had spatial limitations and costs associated with them. The participants had to pay for the conference registration, travel fees, and lodging for attending those sessions. The ECN was a blessing for these Pakistani teachers, as it did not cost them anything to download materials or activities to be used in their classes. Also, the ECN was a free source for seeking advice and guidance from experts and scholars living in different parts of the world.

Further, the participants in this study found the environment in the ECN quite collegial and respectful towards them. They did not experience discriminatory behavior by any ECN member for being from a different religion, language, culture, and country. Maha's apprehension of discrimination in the ECN disappeared after she received responses on her discussion posts. Likewise, teachers in the ECN did not criticize Ruby's ideas and opinions and did not

take them "as an assault on their current teaching strategies" (Murray, 2014, p. 203). Rather, the support and welcoming behavior of the ECN members encouraged Ruby to participate more enthusiastically in the ECN community. Contrary to Noor's feeling of being disrespected and becoming frustrated in the professional development workshop she attended in Pakistan, the encouraging remarks from the ECN members enhanced Ruby and Noor's confidence, and they decided to contribute more to this community in return.

More importantly, the Pakistani teachers' learning in the ECN was ongoing and sustained as they could participate in it any time and from any place in the world unlike the episodic and fragmented professional development programs these teachers had in Pakistan.

Despite facing some limitations in the ECN, these limitations did not stop the Pakistani teachers from feeling that the ECN was a better professional learning platform than the face-to-face professional development programs in Pakistan. The limitations regarding navigating the site and lack of update on certain discussion threads were gradually resolved by the participants' learning more about the features of ECN and gaining more experience of participating in the discussions.

To conclude, this study has implications for teachers and teacher educators globally in which they should join and learn from various online spaces and social networking sites to enhance their professional learning. More importantly, teacher educators should create awareness among prospective teachers by presenting professional online communities and social networking sites as models for continuous and long-term professional learning. For this purpose, the educators must "get away from the mentality that technology is but a poor substitution of the face-to-face interaction" (Charalambos, Michalinos, & Chamberlain, 2004, p. 141). Teacher educators can use the data from this study while preparing prospective teachers for utilizing online spaces for their professional learning. Moreover, this study implies that professional learning curriculum designers in Pakistan and other countries where online professional learning is not a practice yet, should broaden their vision and consider making professional online communities and social network sites a part of teachers' professional learning programs. Last but not the least, the higher education institutions should facilitate in connecting teachers with current professional online spaces like the ECN. In order to learn from teaching methods, strategies, and experiences of teachers in different contexts, higher education institutions should en-

courage teachers' interaction and collaboration within an international community of teachers.

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