

# OPPORTUNITIES LOST: RESISTANCE TO COLLABORATION IN THE NEW ZEALAND K-12 TEACHING COMMUNITY

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## **Abstract**

*In the light of recent NZ government initiatives designed to increase occupational networking amongst K-12 teachers, this paper examines the potential of the Internet to meet this objective. The paper then investigates why teachers might ignore or avoid opportunities to form and benefit from weak ties online, despite claiming to regard such networking as professionally valuable. Finally, recommendations are made regarding the type of incentives and initiatives likely to encourage electronic weak tie formation within K-12 environments.*

## **Keywords**

*online collaboration, weak tie networks, educational community*

## **Introduction**

Weak interpersonal ties are those connecting individuals who do not share relationships with a common set of people (Granovetter 1973). The value of weak ties is that they provide an individual with information that is not shared within his/her regular social or professional circle, and in this way they broaden his/her knowledge base, foster community (Adelman, Parks & Albrecht, 1987; Walther & Boyd, 2000), and introduce different perspectives and new opportunities (Haythornthwaite 2001; Harasim, Hiltz, Teles & Turoff, 1995). In so doing, weak ties prevent members of regular professional, social or organizational groups from becoming insular and limiting themselves to resources circulating only within the network to which they belong (Pickering & King, 1999; Garton, Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 1997; Burt, 1992).

It has been noted (Pickering & King 1999; Haythornthwaite 2001, Hiltz & Turoff 1993; Garton et al., 1997) that weak ties are particularly prevalent in 'occupational communities' (Van Maanen & Marley, 1984) that is, communities that engage in professional work the norms of which transcend the norms of the organization that employs them. The academic community is unfailingly cited as an example of such a community; however, while this may be true of educators in the tertiary sector, the occurrence of weak tie formation in the K-12 sector is open to question. There has also been little research into why educators might resist or avoid forming weak ties, given increased opportunities to do so online.

Consequently, this paper examines, firstly, the perceived importance of weak ties in the school teaching sector; secondly, the extent to which teachers avail themselves of weak ties online; and finally, the reasons behind online opportunities being either welcomed, ignored or resisted.

## **Method**

Information for this study was gathered both quantitatively and qualitatively, by means of:

- a questionnaire distributed to six schools located in the Greater Auckland region of New Zealand: two rural, four suburban. The student populations of the schools range from 50 to 1500, while teaching staff at each school number between three and 94). The questionnaire

identified (1) whether and how frequently teaching staff use weak ties in the pursuit of their teaching/ professional responsibilities and development, and (2) whether and to what extent the internet was used to activate or maintain weak ties.

- follow-up interviews with 18 teachers, during which they were invited to discuss their perception of themselves as members of a wider occupational community and, where this perception exists, to discuss the means by which their sense of community is communicated and reinforced.
  - individual interviews with the school principals, to elicit their opinions regarding the importance of teachers networking outside the school's immediate community, and the extent to which deliberate provision is made (both on and off-line) for this networking to occur.
  - analysis of 26 national 'teaching community' websites and 4 government education websites.
- All the schools provide staff with unrestricted access to computers (with Internet access), free email accounts and unlimited access to the Web.

## Results and Discussion

### ***Perceived Importance of Weak Ties in the K-12 Sector***

#### **The Government Perspective**

In 1998 the New Zealand government established "Te Kete Ipurangi", an educational web portal with the following goals specifically reflecting the value attached by the government to weak tie formation between school teachers in New Zealand:

- furthering a global online education community,
- delivering a clear path to quality online information, services and resources to meet a diverse range of school needs, and
- establishing a community of learners, who are sharing information.

Apart from providing reports on current topics in education and links to teaching resources, the site includes a discussion forum and a message board, and offers opportunities for subscribing to on-line newsletters and distribution lists. These features show an active commitment to weak tie formation within the K-12 teaching community.

In addition, a government-funded 'ICT Professional Development in Schools' campaign was launched in 1998, encouraging schools to combine resources in order to promote the incorporation of Information Technology into curriculum development. This 'cluster schools' campaign, although primarily aimed at efficiency and cost-effectiveness, also supports the concept of teaching staff creating and maintaining networks outside their immediate school confines.

#### **The School Perspective**

Overwhelmingly, the Principals and teaching staff subscribed, both in interviews and in informal conversations, to the view that teachers were part of a larger occupational community, and that they would be advantaged by increased exposure to a variety of perspectives through networking with colleagues. However, a disparity emerged in that - despite the effort and resources being invested by government into creating a framework for online weak tie formation - survey results also revealed that the majority (92%) of teacher respondents believed their information needs to be sufficiently met within their close professional circle (frequently a department within a school, or else within the school itself). Reasons for this disparity are suggested later in this paper.

### ***How Necessary is the Internet for Communication Between Weak Ties?***

Both questionnaires and interviews identified the Internet as the most practical medium for weak tie communication. While the telephone rated highly, email had the perceived advantage of being asynchronous, and of making it easier to contact virtual strangers. Distribution lists were also more popular amongst respondents than discussion groups, requiring no additional effort to access.

Off-line channels for forming weak ties were identified as conferences, Teachers' Association meetings, as well as - in the case of 'cluster' schools - combined instruction sessions in the use of information technology in the curriculum. For the majority of teachers, in other words, opportunities for forming weak ties off-line are relatively infrequent.

### ***Extent to which Opportunities for Forming Electronic Weak Ties are being Taken Up***

In contrast to the paucity of off-line opportunities for weak tie networking, NZ schools are well provided with means for allowing this type of communication to occur electronically. Over the past four years schools have dramatically increased in ICT awareness, to the point where – due partly to government subsidization of network cabling and infrastructure - it is standard for schools to have Internet connectivity and to provide access to computers for both staff and students.

Nevertheless, only 6.25% of teaching staff consulted in this study actually used these resources to form ties with members of an ‘education community’, be it for information or to discuss issues of mutual concern. (The 6.25% was composed mainly of staff actively engaged in research or distance study, and staff teaching in Careers or in Information Technology departments.)

### ***Accounting for the Disparity: Factors Leading to these Online Opportunities being Ignored or Resisted.***

Overall, interviewees welcomed opportunities for Internet-based networking, despite evidence suggesting that few are actually taking advantage of this. Reasons suggested by teachers themselves as to why these opportunities are not taken up, were:

- Limitations of time;
- Computer use not an integral part of daily routine;
- The perception that ‘we do things differently’, with teachers encouraged to find solutions within their immediate school culture, often as a matter of pride. This perception also emerged regarding the relevance of networking in international forums.
- The perception that ‘surfing the net’ is an activity engaged in by pupils rather than by teachers whose time for frivolous recreation is limited.

Additional reasons suggested by this study are:

- Although involvement in research or professional development emerged as a predictor of weak tie formation amongst the teachers surveyed, few teachers questioned (4%) were actively engaged in research or further study, and there are few incentives for them to do so.
- In the case of ‘cluster’ schools, activities to date have centred on up-skilling teachers in basic use of the Internet and other available information technology, and it is possible that they are not yet confident enough to incorporate the new networking opportunities into their professional routines.
- Few models for participating in weak tie networks seem available; for example, even the online versions of the NZ Education Gazette and the site for the New Zealand Teachers’ Association have no areas for sharing or debating ideas. Even where there is a perceived need for national curriculum based ‘resource sharing’ amongst NZ educational communities, this largely takes the form of links to sites where information can be found, with little or no opportunity provided for weak tie ‘visitors’ to discuss or share ideas regarding the information being accessed.

Thus, despite a generally-stated need by K-12 teachers and principals, and despite many millions of government dollars being invested in their success, current measures are not yet succeeding in encouraging weak ties amongst those at the chalk face in the K-12 sector.

### ***What would it Require?***

If current measures are insufficient, what further steps could Government, as well as schools themselves, be taking to encourage electronic networking amongst teachers?

- If the aim to encourage ‘a global community’ of teachers sharing ideas and resources is a serious one, then education of teachers in the uses of the Internet and provision of necessary hard and software are essential but insufficient means to that end. However, since virtual cross-pollination of ideas can prove disruptive of tradition and routine, there is a tendency for educators to pay lip service to the concept, while blocking practical expressions of it. Similarly, while schools still compete at almost every level academically and in the sporting arena, a culture of genuine sharing is a difficult one to establish.
- A further challenge lies in up-skilling teachers who will then be encouraged to *use* those skills – in other words, both school management and teaching staff need to be prepared to make - or

rather *require* - changes to the status quo. This commitment could be practically demonstrated by School Boards requiring the inclusion of ICT components in teaching schemes.

- Furthermore, the principle of ‘clustering’ schools, at present a fairly superficial economic process of sharing training events and educational resources, should be extended to sharing risks and research in the form of, for example, pilot studies in virtual team teaching.
- Viable channels and rewards are essential as encouragement for schools forming international virtual partnerships with K12 providers – not merely as an social studies exercise for pupils, but specifically to promote *and try out* fresh approaches to common pedagogical issues, as well as joint research and professional development of teaching staff. Both government and school boards of trustees would need to recognize and provide resources (including time allocations) for the professional development of staff engaging in joint study ventures and research with teachers and educators in other countries.
- Lastly, although models of effective networking do not as yet exist in the NZ schools’ context, the existing online infrastructure could be easily developed to allow for this. Government sites such as the Education Gazette, as well as those of responsible bodies such as the Teachers’ Association, could model meaningful use of discussion forums and offer a support and advice service to schools wishing to initiate discussion forums of their own.

In short, the need is to encourage a mind-set, in both school management and teaching staff, that not only acknowledges the value of expertise and ideas that reside outside strong-tie networks, but also practically creates channels and opportunities for initiating and being changed by them. Until both these criteria are met, money thrown at creating virtual opportunities for weak tie networking will continue to fall on fallow ground.

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