Piloting the Power of the Post: The Impact of Parents' Social Media Use on Canadian Urban Middle Level Principals

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Abstract: This study examines principals' perceptions of how their work is impacted by parents through their social media use. This research was borne of a pilot research project conducted as a first step toward doctoral candidacy. Although conducted on a smaller scale with limitations in both size and scope, the data and interpretations derived from the completion of this pilot provide solid insights into this phenomenon and establish a baseline for further research. The data was collected from an online survey and semi-structured interviews with five Canadian urban middle level principals. The data was analysed using the "Sort, Sift, Think, and Shift" method of qualitative data analysis honed by Maietta et al. (2021). The research emphasizes the concerns of school principals regarding parents' behaviour on social media platforms and their perceptions of how this behaviour affects their schedule, decision-making process, and overall role as principals. This paper focuses on how principals feel overall while also illustrating the value of conducting a pilot in doctoral research.

Keywords: social media, parents, principals, pilot, professional identity, qualitative methods, data analysis, visual coding

Introduction

Do you worry about becoming the next casualty in the Facebook comments as you begin your workday? School principals are acutely aware of this concern. According to one report from New South Wales, over 90% of principals reported that the worsening behaviour of parents on social media is increasing their stress and workloads (Rose, 2022). The purpose of this study is to understand how the use of social media is impacting principals and their roles in the school, particularly by parents in their school community. The role of school principal has consistently posed challenges due to its multifaceted nature, which demands adeptness in educational leadership, student development, faculty and facility management, and community engagement. However, the advent of social media has had a profound impact on the position, adding another layer of complexity to the daily tasks of a principal. With the omnipresence of social media in society, navigating this fast-evolving domain has become increasingly difficult for administrators. This study seeks to answer the following question: To what extent is parents' use of social media impacting school principals?

Researcher Positionality

I have worked as an educator for the last 14 years, beginning as a high school teacher and ultimately spending the last six years in school administration. Early on in my career as a vice-principal, I learned how vital parents' role as stakeholders can be when making decisions about their children's education and school life. I received praise for my work with students and have been offered unwavering support for initiatives I have spearheaded at the school level. I have also been exposed to the unfounded accusations and what felt like irrational demands of unsatisfied parents taking to Facebook groups and Twitter feeds, seemingly searching for validation. The parental pressures of the job were becoming magnified through public online platforms.

The criticism of my staff and parents' online behaviour began to steer the direction of my daily work. I noticed that instead of reviewing the latest reading assessment levels, I was logging onto Twitter or searching up parents on Facebook to see if they had posted anything the day before. I was struggling to disconnect from my work at night and found myself clicking through posts on the local community pages to ensure I was not walking into any unforeseen minefields the next day at work. The fallout from unhappy parents' online posts was beginning to impact my to-do lists, question my efficacy as a leader, my relationships with the community, staff and students, my decision-making ability, and overall, my professional identity. When I would bring up the topic to other principals, they validated my concerns and echoed similar concerns about the trajectory of their days and their experiences with parents on social media. These conversations and self-reflection led me to wonder how parents, through their social media use, were impacting me, how this affected how we see ourselves as professionals, and the consequences on our professional identities.

I do not come to this research uninitiated in the field. I have personal experience as an administrator whose professional identity was reshaped through a now socially-mediated role and as a parent of school-aged children who actively uses social media. I bring an emic perspective to some of the nuanced pressures principals face, but at the same time, I, too, have been drawn into some of these posts within parent groups. While never commenting

myself, I am often conflicted when I see both misinformation and disinformation being presented through social media platforms, as I am sympathetic to their plights.

Situating the Study

Social media has quickly become a significant source of pressure for school administrators. This includes challenges at a micro level, such as dealing with cyberbullying and school communication, as well as at a macro level, involving the management of external stakeholder expectations and community perceptions, all of which they must navigate on a daily basis. Current literature on social media in education can be sorted into three themes: social media as a means of communication (Cox & MacLeod, 2014; Knake et al., 2021), as a pedagogical tool (Greenhow & Staudt, 2019; Wade, 2021), and overall warnings of the dangers of social media (R. v. Audet, 1996; Hickman, 2021; Laidlaw et al., 2021). There is a gap in the research on how social media, notably used by parents, impacts principals and how this influential tool is changing how school principals must do business.

According to Cox and McLeod (2014), social media in education can be a powerful tool as a means of communication. In referring to social media as the Fifth Estate and defining it as "an intersection of virtual influence in which embedded networks of individuals within social media may bring to bear change" (p. 2), Knake et al. (2021) discussed how the public operate to shape discussions and impact education. Dutton (2009) explained how the Fourth Estate of mass media has been replaced by the Fifth Estate; internet and digital technologies of communication networks that make boundary definitions difficult and regulation near impossible. As many K-12 parents would be millennials born from 1981 to 1996 (Dimock, 2019), they likely have been using online platforms from a formative age and are comfortable communicating in these digital spaces.

Greenhow and Staudt (2019) advocated for the pedagogical use of social media in education to facilitate active learning. Wade (2021), another proponent of social media use in education, felt the student experience itself can be improved through social media and feels educators can open a new world of communication by speaking their students' language. Amidst the numerous advantages, it is imperative to recognize the perils associated with the utilization of social media in educational contexts. Notably, the legal ramifications stemming from activities on social media platforms demand a more comprehensive understanding of these platforms by all stakeholders, substantiated by legal precedents (Hickman, 2021). Laidlaw et al. (2021) advocated for the education of educators themselves, given that their level of exposure to technology during their formative years might be different from the immersion experienced by contemporary parents.

Even though it is a generally accepted truth that administrators' time is increasingly consumed by managing issues and resolving conflicts related to social media use in the school community, the explicit impact parents are having through their use of social media remains an underrepresented area of study (Alberta Teachers Association (ATA), 2019). It is therefore crucial to understand more about this phenomenon and how it impacts the work of principals.

Methods and Methodology

As my objective was a deeper understanding of how parents' social media posts impact principals, Stakes' (1995) constructivist case study approach was employed as the methodological approach for this research. The qualitative case study method Stake (1995) outlined aligns with the interpretive/constructivist paradigm. Stake's approach to case studies explicitly centers on exploring the various viewpoints held by individuals connected to the case, intending to collect a range of mutually accepted and diverse perspectives in their understanding of the events. In this context, the fundamental belief about the nature of reality is that it is context-bound and uniquely constructed (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). A case study provides the prospect of profound understanding (Stake, 1995). Timmons and Cairns (2012) contended that the holistic data derived from case study research allows for a better understanding of complicated situations, and social media is nothing if not complex.

The data in this case study design was collected from an online survey and individual interviews with Canadian urban middle level (Grades 6-9) principals. Upon approval from the Research Ethics Office, I created a website that served as a landing page for further information about myself, my research, and criteria for participants, and provided links to the survey. Recruitment posters were created and shared across various administration-focussed

groups on Facebook whose members identify as principals worldwide, linking to this website. Facebook groups such as The Principals' Desk, with over 230,000 members at the time, provided an emic perspective into many issues, including how parents' online activity impacts their role. Interested participants were invited to click the link to complete the survey from the website. After these surveys, participants could self-select for individual interviews. From those interested, five Canadian urban middle level principals were interviewed using semi-structured interviews.

Surveys are an essential method of data collection in qualitative research as they allow for a "wide-angle lens" through which to see the different experiences of participants (Braun et al., 2021) also offer that this method is beneficial when researching an "un- or under-explored area" (p. 642), which is, in this case, the impact of social media on a school principal's professional identity. It is the information gleaned from these surveys that guided my interviews. The online survey conducted through SurveyMonkey.com allowed respondents to provide data regarding the nature of parents' social media use and how it impacts their work. By drawing from a larger sample size than individual interviews, the online survey protected against one individual being highlighted as a representative of their demographic or background (Braun et al., 2021). In completing the survey, participants could volunteer for individual interviews, which I used to delve deeper into understanding how online parent behaviour impacts school leaders.

To provide authentic voices, interviews were used as the primary data collection method. The qualitative interview is a powerful tool for gaining insight into how subjects experience their world and construct meaning; it gives the researcher a glimpse into the participants' experiences in their own words (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) argued that semi-structured interviews offer a particularly valuable approach to qualitative research. These interviews are characterized by a predetermined sequence of topics and some pre-prepared questions, providing a structured framework. However, they also allow for flexibility by permitting spontaneous follow-up questions and deviations from the scripted path, thereby enhancing the richness and depth of qualitative data collection. As the role of the principal is varied, an interview format that allows for flexibility is key. Allowing for flexibility in the process permits the participants to share in the order that makes sense to them and enables the researcher to build relationships through a more organic interview protocol.

Data Analysis

While traditional coding is often used in qualitative data analysis, other approaches may be more effective in interpreting what this data permitted me to say. The "Sort and Sift, Think and Shift" method of data collection introduced by Maietta et al. (2021) was undertaken where I constantly immersed myself in the data and took steps back to write and reflect on what I had gained. The constant building of knowledge was used as a guiding light for the next steps of deeper analysis.

Maietta et al. (2021) explained this iterative process of "Diving In" and "Stepping Back" (p. 2045) as containing distinct phases that the researcher works through in reviewing and analysing the data. One of the first steps in this "Sort and Sift, Think and Shift" process, is situating yourself as the researcher. The researcher must establish, through memoing, "The space I'm driving into," (Maietta et al., 2021, p. 2051), where reflections on what the researcher thinks they already know about the topic and how this research may fit into the already established research in the field, are articulated. After this, there is the Initial Learning Period (ILP), which includes a quotation inventory, diagramming and memoing, reading some of the data, potentially highlighting quotes, and writing about "What I know so far" in the form of a memo (Maietta et al., 2021, p. 2051).

Next, the phase of Episode Profiling is where the researcher begins pulling meaningful quotes, ranking them, diagramming them visually, and again pausing to reflect and memo; the authors refer to important quotes as "pulse quotes" (Maietta et al., 2021, p. 2050). Each source of data (each interview transcript) requires its own episode profile. I used a separate sheet in a Microsoft Excel document to keep these organized and accessible, named by the data source. I used Microsoft PowerPoint to create diagrams of pulse quotes for its ease of use in creating and manipulating shapes and text boxes for vertical analysis. After these have been created, it is time for the researcher to enter the phase of Topic Monitoring.

In the Topic Monitoring phase, the researcher must once again read their memos and episode profiles and pause to reflect on what they know from those pieces. Now comes the establishment of "turning point" quotes, which, according to Maietta et al. (2021), are of utmost importance as these powerful pieces of data "turn the way analysts see the data" (p. 2050). In horizontal data analysis, the researcher must then diagram and memo to determine what themes are present across all episode profiles.

Findings

By determining pulse quotes, turning point quotes, and making direct references to the literature, I could provide strong evidence to support the interpretations I made through my data collection. In analysing the data from both the surveys and the interviews, three themes were present: increased principal workload, questioning decision-making, and who they were as a principal.

All participants spoke to increased workload due to parents' use of social media. Phrases such as, "They [volatile parents using Facebook to vent their frustrations about the principal or staff] create a whole lot of work for me," or, "It's one more thing I have to monitor," and "It's bad enough I had to deal with students and cell phones, now I have to police parents [online] behaviour, too."

Principals voiced they were often frustrated when it came to dealing with parents' social media use as they questioned their decisions, "Every time a parent posts something [negative about the school or principal] on social media, it still hurts; it's who I am. I wonder how did I contribute to this situation?", or "Where do you go for support? The District? The Union? No one will back you up." With a marked perception of a lack of support in dealing with parents active on social media, it is difficult for any administrator to react.

Lastly, a way in which parents' use of social media impacts principals is on their sense of self as a principal, who they are in their role now, and what the future holds was evident in my data. "Professionally, it's really troubling that it's all out there [by parents on social media]. Your name, with these stories that you can't respond to - it makes you feel a little hopeless." Alternatively, more than one principal felt, "I don't think our job is what it should be anymore." Their professional identity was in question.

Implications for Future Research

This pilot, while small in scope, resonated loudly with many principals. Pempek et al. (2009) confirmed that social media wields the power to directly impact one's self-perception due, in part, to the ease with which one can instantaneously share and receive feedback from others, and principals are not immune. Examining how these external forces can deeply affect these internal processes within principals is imperative to ensuring principals can navigate their roles; people come to understand their professional identity by perceiving themselves through the perspectives of others (Caza & Creary, 2016). There are implications for parents, principals, school boards and departments of education. Through this research, parents will be able to understand how their actions impact the lives of the leaders of their children's schools and ensure more substantial relationships with principals and better educational outcomes. Principals will know they are not alone in their feelings; they will feel supported and be able to confidently lead their schools, knowing this issue will not be swept under the rug and their feelings are valid. School boards can better support their principals and families by encouraging communication while providing a more targeted leadership development curriculum to educate principals and families. Through this area of research, departments of education will be able to examine the policies that regulates some of these online actions and set the tone for future principals to navigate this domain of social media with less uncertainty and more support.

Hindsight is 20/20: Recommendations for new researchers

Completing this pilot was invaluable to my journey as a researcher. From initial proposal to ethics application, to interview protocols to analysis, this research pilot has allowed me to test the waters of research in a low-stakes but highly supportive environment. Some takeaways I will apply to my research in the future relate to study design, methodology, interviewing, and practicality.

(1) Ensure your methodology is the best choice to guide you to what you want to know. I quickly learned that the way this research proposal was designed was not best suited to a case study as the parameters were too broad to examine this phenomenon of parents' use of social media and the impact on principals.

(2) Always make sure your research question is prioritized. Interviewing for a novice can quickly get sidetracked. Have your research question front and centre and lead boldly with that in mind. I had to return and re-interview all participants with my research question leading the way, as I needed more data related to my question to draw solid conclusions.

(3) Be aware of your timing. The field of education has seasons: school start-up, progress reporting time, seasonal celebrations, long dark winter months, and graduation gear-ups. As researchers, we must be mindful of those seasons when using teachers or school leaders as participants. June is not a great month to recruit and interview principals; they have too much on their plates and speaking to a researcher is not ranked high on their priority list.

Conclusion

As we move forward with a growing number of social media users, it is imperative for the field of education to understand how the role of the principal is being impacted by social media activity, mainly by parents in their school community. By examining how parents' use of social media impacts school principals, the findings of this pilot spoke to themes of work intensification, questioning decisions, and their professional identity. Parents have long been hailed as allies in the stakeholder web of education. This research pilot serves as a springboard into further research that suggests perhaps parents' role, when examined through the lens of social media, can also be seen as disruptors. Being a school principal is often considered a challenging role, and my research, in chorus with others, suggests social media is making it even harder. Society needs to have principals and systems that are better equipped to weather this socially-mediated storm. This pilot has directly informed my research approach and evolved my thinking about becoming a doctoral candidate.

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