

INSIDE THE DIGITAL WILD WEST: HOW SCHOOL LEADERS BOTH ACCESS AND AVOID SOCIAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the roles of Canadian school leaders in response to the rising phenomenon of student use of social media which impacts school climate and safety. The use of social media has resulted in more online text and image-based communication to multiple users and less face-to-face communication with single users. Adolescent communication, a previously invigilated phenomenon, has not yet been replaced by an online *social presence* with a *social regulation*. Secondly, there have been changes in national, provincial, and district Safe School policies in response to online misbehaviour that impacts student safety within the school environment. This small study considers the views of nine Canadian secondary school vice-principals about school policies and students' cyber behaviours. Their responses were collected on a NING, a private cyber environment. Findings indicate that when cyber events come to the awareness of the school administration, the school becomes a nexus for investigation and resolution. The study also finds that when Canadian secondary school administrators are compelled to respond to the event, these school leaders can and do access social media, employ cyber skills to identify users, intervene in wrongdoing and, in the process, follow and enact Canadian Safe School legislation. However, these same school leaders express great reluctance to use social media for their personal or professional purposes. The authors hypothesize that this may be due to their exposure to negative experiences with social media in schools.

KEYWORDS

Safe School policy, cyber behaviour, social media

1. INTRODUCTION

Online correspondence occurs at a distance – allowing a sender to be geographically and physically located a distance away from the receiver. With the introduction of handheld devices, users may also be young adults, adolescents, or children sending messages to multiple people without the awareness or consent of a supervising adult. Both social presence and regulation are impacted. Unfortunately, these online activities may involve a range of cyber-misbehaviours which can result in loss of privacy, loss of identity, and cyber-bullying. Cyberbullying is an international phenomenon that is increasing, and teachers are not able to respond or feel they are adequately prepared to deal with these events, particularly since they often occur outside of the school day (McNamara & Moynihan, 2010).

In Canada, Safe School policies which are designed to respond to issues such as bullying and cyberbullying, fall under the purview of each of the thirteen provinces and territories. One of these provinces, Ontario, has recently passed legislation: Bill 13, *the Accepting Schools Act* (Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 2012) which enables administrators to investigate and respond to these online contraventions of Safe School policy. This legislation requires schools and specifically school administrators, to address harassment, bullying, and discrimination in all forms, including online misbehaviour which occurs outside of school hours but impacts student-to-student relationships.

This study uses qualitative methodology to examine secondary school vice-principals' responses to incidents of cyberbullying over a six-week period using a private social media network, examining the roles of social presence and restorative practices in their responses to incidents of cyber aggression and online bullying. Social presence, earlier theorized in the context of building community in online teaching (Aragon, 2003) theorizes the separation or isolation of the online user. Rettie (2003) sees social presence as the judging of the perception of the other online participant. Schools are sites where cyber behaviour is investigated and

attempts are made to resolve the conflicts. Little is known about the lack of social presence in cyber-behaviours and its effect on school climate. This study expands our understanding of social presence where its absence may contribute to cyberbullying and its presence may be seen as a means to redress the wrongs.

Findings from this study indicate that school leaders recognize that school is a connection space for students, and they feel a strong sense of obligation to keep students safe, including during events that occur online and out-of-school. One unintended repercussion of the school leaders' online investigations, however, is that they tend to avoid social media for their personal and professional use due to its negative associations.

2. RESEARCH ON SCHOOLS AND CYBERBULLYING

The rise of online communication has implications for schools such as cyberbullying and its impact on school climate. Another area it impacts is policy. There are multiple policy responses to be considered in the Ontario, Canada legislative context. Theory related to social presence and social regulation also contributes to the deliberations and discussion in this paper. Although one research study cannot address every implication of social media use in schools, the authors endeavour to shed a light on the specific insights of a small group of Canadian school leaders who are working with new policies to help students be more aware of the impact of their actions on themselves and others.

2.1 Schools and Cyberbullying

Adolescents have access to new communication technologies all of which can establish instantaneous and anonymous communication, and are increasingly simple to operate. Simultaneously, there has been a rise in bullying and cyberbullying which now impact adolescents and this type of online aggression is perceived to be increasing (Calhoun & Daniels, 2008; McNamara & Moynihan, 2010). The examination of this issue has been identified as a “relatively new and emerging field of research” (Cassidy, Faucher, & Jackson, 2013, p. 576). Research from multiple countries indicates that cyberbullying is an international phenomenon and that schools are seen to bear some responsibility for responding to bullying and online aggression (Boulton & Mirsky, 2006; Calhoun & Daniels, 2008; Grossi & dos Santos, 2012; Hasenstab, 2012; Mark & Ratliffe, 2011; McNamara & Moynihan, 2010).

Education law and policies also recognize that schools have a role in responding to negative cyber phenomena. Ontario, Canada has published a series of policy responses in the past fifteen years toward promoting Safe School environments. Bill 81, (Legislative Assembly of Ontario (LAO), 2000) not only gave teachers the authority to suspend students, it required teachers to do so and gave teachers the right to extend suspensions issued by the principal. This legislation was modified in 2007 with Bill 212 through an amendment to the Education Act with respect to behavior, discipline and safety. Bill 212 required offenses of bullying to be mandatory suspensions of up to 20 days but also allowed school leaders to consider mitigating factors (LAO, 2007, S306 (3)).

Most recently, Bill 13, the *Accepting Schools Act, 2012* (LAO, 2012) amends the Education Act, separating definitions of bullying and cyberbullying and holding schools accountable for dealing with issues surrounding both offenses. This *Act* also requires schools and districts to create and enforce equity and inclusive education policies, and bullying prevention and intervention plans. School leaders must take active measures to ensure a positive school climate. This *Act* also adds more protection for victims' rights and stricter protocols for confidentiality in light of increased occurrences of online conflict (LAO, 2012).

In summary, school administrators have a legislated responsibility to maintain a Safe School environment and respond to incidents of harassment and discrimination if they impact the safe school culture. In both policy and practical terms, school is a *nexus* where the implications of 24/7 cyber events are manifest. School leaders are also ideally situated to access online communications to investigate incidents and to meet with students and their parents in a setting familiar to both. For these multiple reasons, schools are considered to be well-situated to respond to bullying and online aggression.

2.2 Social Presence Theory

Technologies such as the telephone started to change aspects of face-to-face communication. Short, Williams and Christie (1976) defined social presence at that time as the “degree of salience of the other person...and the consequent salience of their interpersonal interactions” (p.1). When Korzenny (1978) observed that face-to-face interactions were being replaced by electronic devices which altered long-established social patterns, he coined the term “electronic propinquity” to describe the changes in proximity when experiences became less direct than in person. Walther (1992) examined early studies on changes in the relational aspects of computer-mediated communication. He found that social connectedness took more time in the computer-mediated settings; the degree of connection was affected by the type of technology in use. Korzenny (1978) and Walther (1992) pioneered theory in *social presence*.

A key consideration in online learning theory is building community for distance learning (Aragon, 2003; Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000; Hege, 2011; Korzenny, 1978; Rettie, 2003). Definitions of social presence usually include some reference to the subjective perception of participants to other participants, sometimes in the context of learning communities. However, little research makes connections among social presence, social media, and school-based responses to cyber-behaviours. We hypothesize that, through legislation and predisposition, schools offer spaces where community and social presence can be re-built using restorative practices.

Aragon (2003) theorizes that interpersonal contact is more difficult to establish in the online setting because it affects proximity, eye contact, body language, and interpersonal awareness. Rettie (2003) sees social presence as a judgement of how the other participant perceives the communication or the event, including cognizance of the other person and their intention.

Deng & Tavares (2013) link social presence to student motivation, finding that students report feeling more at ease and casual on Facebook, with more connectedness and belonging. Hege (2011) cautions instructors to have a second Facebook account for professional purposes only. Facebook may increase social presence through immediate feedback and its “likes” function, while Moodle seems more formal, with less regulating instructor influence (Deng & Tavares, 2013). Social presence has also been described as the ability of online users to project their individual (personal) characteristics into the online community “real people” (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 94). Multiple researchers (Walther, & Bazarova 2008; Yamada & Goda, 2012) identify that social presence adds subjective qualities to online environments such as support for co-operative learning (Oyarzun & Morrison, 2013), building enjoyment, and virtual roles (Yeh, Lin & Yu, 2011).

Little attention to date has focused on the impact of the lack of social presence or gap in time to build social presence which may be occurring in cyberbullying and online conflict in schools. More studies are needed to understand how individuals operate within the anonymity of the online world. We theorize that a lack of social presence or time to develop social presence contributes to the negative quality of peer-to-peer digital communications, which can be corrected through person-to-person resolutions.

This research study examines the re-creation of social presence and regulation and the roles that administrators can play to help students understand relational issues created by or impacted by cyberbullying and online conflicts. This particular paper focuses on aspects of the study which reveal how secondary school administrators use social media to investigate and respond to online conflicts and cyberbullying, and how, in this process, they help increase social presence and social regulation. This study also investigates how administrators use social media for professional purposes such as investigating and documenting events of cyber harm.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs essentially qualitative methodology, including an online survey for the participants and collection of their perceptions about cyber incidents through a NING, which is a private blogging site. The Limesurvey was chosen as it is considered to be a trustworthy source of the anonymous data collection (Klieve, Beamish, Bryer, Rebollo, Perrett, & Van Den Muyzenberg, 2010). The quantitative questions in the survey included questions based on gender, age, years of experience, understanding of policy legislation, and familiarity with technology.

3.1 NING as Repository

An online private social network (NING) was used to collect the qualitative research. The NING requires a private login and password. The NING acted as a repository of information that captured the story-like experiences of the vice-principals and, it was hoped, would foster online discussion among the vice principals who could access it 24/7. Questions were asked that were intended to elicit their knowledge of and response to online aggression and cyberbullying as well as their understanding of relevant legislation in the context of their roles. Of added research value were the revelations the vice-principals made in relation to their use of social media both in schools and outside of them.

3.2 Access and Permissions

Three district school boards were approached for consent, and only one board chose to participate. Significantly, one school board felt that the research project relied too heavily on the use of an open source, free subscription type application to gather data. This school board cited the protection of the gathered information as a concern as well as information about events that happen at the school and the potential posting of images and video. Given the findings of this study, the decision not to allow participation is of interest as it suggests there may be systemic responses to the use of social media, even with considerable research safeguards in place that respected the anonymity, confidentiality, and ethics. The response of the school boards potentially also reflects a generally negative view of the use of social media by educators.

Despite the lack of consent from the district school boards, school leaders from two other districts heard of the study and participated anonymously. Within the NING, all of the participants used avatars and were instructed on protecting the identity of schools, districts, students, and themselves through the careful reporting of cyber events and responses.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

All of the data from the Limesurvey were compiled and are reported next in the Findings. For the responses to the questions in the NING, two levels of analysis were applied. First, the responses to each question in the NING were compiled. Next, the compiled data was analyzed to note reflective passages, key quotations, and patterns and themes in the vice-principals responses (Cresswell, 2012). At that level of analysis key themes and codes were identified, then organized to make sense of the data. For purposes of this paper, some of the key questions from the NING are reported in the Findings section which follows. At the final level of analysis, the findings were reviewed relative to the relevant literature, leading to recommendations presented in the discussion section of this paper.

4. FINDINGS

This study used a mixed-methods approach to data collection with an emphasis on qualitative data collection. Ten respondents completed the Limesurvey questions; however it was believed that one participant completed the survey twice. For the purposes of this study, it was decided to include the data rather than speculating about the respondent's double entry. Three male and 7 females responded. Six participants were between the ages of 35 and 45 and 4 were between the ages of 45 and 60. Seven participants had between zero and three years in their role. Three vice-principals had between four and six years of experience in their role. Most were fairly new at the role of vice-principal. The participants were also asked to indicate their degree of knowledge with the recently legislated Bill 13, the *Accepting Schools Act* (LAO, 2012) which requires schools to respond to any harmful cyber events affecting students and school community which are raised to their attention. Knowledge of the legislation was diverse as five respondents had limited knowledge, two respondents had some knowledge and three respondents had considerable knowledge.

4.1 NING Data

While the online survey was completed by all participants, the number of participants reading and posting online in discussions varied from week to week. For the most part, participation reflected the chronology of the postings; however, some respondents went back to prior postings from previous weeks or contributed to depth probing questions at different times.

NING Question: *“How has Bill 13 affected the work you do in schools? What other policy or legislation has affected your work? In what ways? What policies or rules do you think about when you are resolving safe school issues?”*

The respondents positively viewed the *Accepting Schools* legislation in two ways. To some, the legislation provided helpful and explicit information that could be shared with students and parents. The school leaders used terminology such as “clear direction” and “guidelines.” One vice-principal said that “Bill 13 has given school administrators clearer direction and guidance when dealing with students.” Another vice-principal said that the policy provided support for what was considered good practice, explaining in this way:

[The policy] defines bullying explicitly and it is helpful to have a detailed definition to which I can refer. This legislation compels the administration to notify both the parents of the student harmed as well as the student who has harmed someone...something that is ingrained in our practice.

For the most part, the vice-principals did not report that other policies were considered in the context of negative online behaviour and cyberbullying. Bill 13 was widely perceived to be a helpful policy both for the reinforcement of current practices as well as for support with future decisions. One participant said the policy provided guidance for “creating a safe school environment and responding to the activities of students despite location and time of day.”

NING Question: *“What in your view is cyberbullying? What does this term mean to you in relation to your experience as a VP? How is it distinguished from other negative online communication?”*

One school administrator reported that, “negativity and bullying has gone on since Socrates taught, but cyberbullying adds a new dimension to the role of the vp.” Throughout their postings, the vice-principals made distinctions between cyberbullying and online conflict. The respondents provided very clear terms of what they believed constituted *cyberbullying* citing the *repetition of events, power imbalances, and harassment* as its characteristics (similar to the description in the policy). Cyberbullying, as one respondent explained, “uses online means and applications to harass another person. This can be in the form of direct communication with the victim (emails, chats, posts on their apps) or online communication online about that person.” Another administrator indicated that “Cyberbullying is the use of technology to repeatedly intimidate and harass someone.”

The vice-principals in the study indicated that cyberbullying included direct and indirect references to another student whether that student was named or not. While *intent* was identified as an aspect of cyberbullying, it was also mentioned that a *lack of intent* did not preclude it. Vice-principals indicated that there were both positive and negative aspects to social media and its use by students. This had complex implications for their role as administrators because they said that they spent “an inordinate amount of time ‘sorting and sifting’ information on social media.” The administrators noted in their comments that social media escalates the harassment by its anonymity and brings shame to the student who receives it. There is a “profound impact if it is not discovered.” The potential for public shaming was cited as a great concern as “young people are given so much power in social media to broadcast their unkind thoughts that might have been either whispered or scribbled on a passed note in the past.” However, while acknowledging these negative aspects to online communication, the school administrators ironically noted that online communication nevertheless leaves “hard evidence” or a “digital footprint” that they could follow and use in their investigations. In summary, vice-principals could readily distinguish cyberbullying from other kinds of negative online communications, and were able to follow the evidence because online misconduct leaves a digital paper trail.

NING Question: *“How do you perceive your role as an administrator in the context of Safe School legislation like Bill 13?”*

When they reflected on their roles as administrators in the context of the legislation, the vice-principals repeatedly reported feeling a sense of duty or “obligation.” They took their responsibilities seriously in the context of the legislation as well as how they saw their roles based on the expectations of parents. They also

saw the negative and positive aspects of social media. They spoke of the obligation they felt to create a welcoming climate in their schools and to keep kids safe. One respondent stated,

Our role as Administrators is always one of providing all students with the opportunity to come to school and feel safe and successful. With respect to cyberbullying they reported that their role included prevention as well as investigation of cyberbullying, in order to care for kids and help them learn.

Another articulated that it was reasonable for parents to expect that when students were in school they would be safe. One administrator felt their role “is to continue to support students through the social media landscape, help them understand when they fall outside the lines of what is deemed appropriate, and hope for learning and better choices for the next time.” This was echoed by another vice-principal who spoke of the potential of social media and other technology to educate. While this respondent spoke of hearing about the negative actions of students on social media, the observation was made that, “however, other students use social media responsibly.” The vice-principal elaborated stating that a “finite group of students that ‘overshare’...lack understanding of their actions.” Again, this was an indication that some vice-principals perceive that many students do use and understand social media more carefully. In the context of Bill 13, vice-principals see their role as a duty or obligation to keep their school communities safe and to help students learn to communicate appropriately.

NING Question: *“Reflect upon the nature of an online community and its relationship to your school. You may consider your own experience with online communities (this one or another) as well.”*

The school leaders spoke of the negative and positive aspects of online communities relating to their work and their personal use. One respondent felt that online communities were helpful in providing an opportunity to “learn from other educators through online discussion, blogs, and connecting with others in similar roles to mine.” The vice-principal also saw this kind of communication as an alternative to what was perceived to be a decline in the funding of professional development. However, this respondent did not use the NING for these purposes and posted infrequently. One vice-principal acknowledged the potential for the positive use of social media as a communication link between schools stating, “This poses a timely question. Honestly, I have avoided being part of any social media network that offers the opportunity ‘to see’ my personal life.” Another respondent acknowledged the positive aspects of online communities such as Twitter, Vine, and Instagram for school communication. However, the darker side of social media, including the surreptitious filming of staff and administration, was also commented on, as was the degree of online humiliation that the victim receives, whether that victim is a school staff member or, of even greater concern, a vulnerable student. This participant stated,

Students are connected through their own online communities which are often the new “Wild West” where stray online bullets regularly wound its inhabitants through online insults, ‘beefs’, etc. As administrators we are asked to try to enforce law and order in these online environments.

In summary, when they reflected on the nature of online communities and their relationship to schools, vice-principals perceived and identified positive and negative aspects to these kinds of communication but they expressed hesitation to participate in them.

5. DISCUSSION

The review of the literature on social presence indicates that electronic media have been changing relationships for four decades (Korzenny, 1978; Short et al., 1976; Walther, 1992) leading to investigations of social presence as a quality that is impacted by the lack of proximity in place and time but can be addressed in online courses (Garrison et al., 2000). While researchers argue that social media interaction can evoke at least the vestiges of community (Köbler et al. 2010) and interaction is both immediate and intimate (Rettie, 2003), the feeling of being in a community is impacted by cyber-misbehaviour. The vice-principals in the study saw the positive and negative aspects of the social media in their investigations and did not pursue its personal use. Nor did they use the NING as a means of free expression.

Online communication changes relationships and communications in schools, impacting school climate and school safety. The participants in the study spoke of the challenges associated with the anonymous quality of cyberbullying and harassment, a phenomenon thought to be the underlying cause of cyber aggression (Mark & Ratliffe, 2011). Power imbalances appear to be connected to social roles and a lack of

social regulated presence (Yeh, Lin and Lu, 2011). The school leaders in this study see that it is of paramount importance to discover incidents of cyberbullying because of its “profound impact” on students. However, they also asserted that an “inordinate” amount of their time was spent investigating what some vice-principals felt was relational conflict and not cyberbullying. Of interest to this study was the breadth of restorative practices outlined, including conversations, questions, and impromptu conferences that were used in an attempt to offset anonymity and aggression.

The findings in this study indicate that vice-principals see that they have an obligation to keep schools safe and to create an inclusive and welcoming climate. There was evidence in the study that this responsibility felt by the vice-principals to maintain safe schools predates the existence of cyberbullying policy (Bill 13) and vice-principals extend its scope to include online conflict as well as a legislated response to cyberbullying. In holding this responsibility, however, the vice-principals do speak of a “new dimension” to their role and the amount of time spent navigating through social media. Vice-principals work to rebuild elements of community and social presence when they investigate and respond to incidents of online misbehaviour. The more positive, regulated aspects of community, achieved through restorative practices, help to respond to a lack of social and regulatory presence reflected in social media communications. Participating vice principals did not articulate the term *social presence* per se, but they did suggest that the anonymous quality of online communication could create the conditions that exacerbated peer-to-peer conflict and bullying.

Vice-principals connect social media to their roles as school administrators, likening their online social presence to the vigilance of the sheriffs in the Wild West, who by their presence “enforce law and order in these online communities.” They are reticent to use social media for other purposes, such as for personal use or had stopped using it entirely. Some vice-principals saw the value of Web 2.0 technologies for the purposes of professional development but did not view the NING in this study in this way. As they immerse themselves in technologies for their roles, they maintain a distance and wariness when it comes to their personal use of technologies. In the words of one vice-principal, their school experiences “jaded” them. It is hoped that these findings can be followed up and confirmed or explained further in future studies.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While small in scope, this study may inform or guide future studies. The vice-principals in this study reported that they enact policy which supports safe schools, and they see their role as maintaining school communities as safe places. While they engaged with and used Web 2.0 technologies to respond to online aggression and cyberbullying, events that had a “nexus” in their schools, they could see the negative and positive aspects of these media. One aspect of their role which may not yet be recognized is that secondary vice-principals also are teaching about appropriate online behaviours. They saw students’ missteps in the online world (such as oversharing) as opportunities or teachable moments. The vice-principals used social media for investigations, another area that could be considered in future study as it was not present in the literature reviewed. While they use these technologies in the day-to-day context of their jobs and for the investigation of online incidents, they would appear to use them with great reluctance for their personal use and this may extend to professional use.

There was a time in the not-too-distant past where school administrators focused their discipline-related responses to events and misbehaviour that happened during school time or on school property. This study indicates that the vice-principals in this study are responding to cyber events which occur off school property and outside of class hours in order to maintain student safety. This may help to explain the hesitation of some of the vice-principals in this study to use these same technologies beyond the scope of their school day. The Digital Wild West remains as space worthy of interest and further study.

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