

PLANNING TO CULTIVATE SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS ONLINE: LESSONS FROM FOUR JAMAICAN SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

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ABSTRACT

Establishing social connections is crucial for providing exceptional educational experiences, whether in-person or online. However, online teaching presents challenges for principals as it limits their ability to interact with students face-to-face, resulting in less contact time. Additionally, the current COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the administrative demands on school principals, further reducing their available time. This study investigated how school principals develop social relationships with teachers and students online, their feelings about it, their motivation, and how they acquired this knowledge. Using a qualitative, semi-structured, one-on-one interview methodology, the research explored the central question: How and why do school principals develop social relationships with teachers and students online? The findings uncovered that school principals employ various strategies to foster online social bonds with teachers and students. However, while the strategies used with teachers primarily focused on administrative functions and emotional support, those used with students were not intentionally geared towards academic engagement. As such, this research concludes that an opportunity exists for Jamaican school principals to fully harness the power of social relationships to enhance their students' academic performance. Consequently, a recommendation is that principals be offered various training opportunities to become more strategic in leveraging social connections to enrich learning experiences.

INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly, the pre-COVID-19 classroom context presented several avenues for social interactions between teachers and students and their peers (Kwaske & McLennan, n.d.) and for school principals to interact with their students. Unfortunately, this conventional interaction was severely disrupted after the World Health Organization (2020) affirmed COVID-19 as a pandemic. This occasioned large-scale crisis-response transport of universities, with online learning as the educational platform (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2023). In Jamaica, universities and K-12 educational institutions were impacted by a similar large-scale shift from face-to-face teaching and learning to online. Online learning is a mode of remote education capturing any teaching-learning experiences with reliance on the Internet as the dominant purveyor of class exchanges and communication (Appana, 2008).

Given the inadequate preparation among teachers to utilise online pedagogies and of students to learn online, concerns still exist about whether online learning is a sub-standard instructional delivery modality (OECD, 2020). Likewise, doubts exist about its suitability for principals to connect with their students. This is especially true in contexts like Jamaica, where the sophistry of technological integration in pedagogical interactions could be higher. Given teachers' consistent online contact with students, they can implement reconsidered approaches to develop these relationships, even if severely hampered. On the other hand, the online teaching modality limits principals' contact time with students because of the inability to do walk-ins and meet students in offices or other spaces for physical interactions. This compromises their ability to develop social relationships with their students effectively.

However, Kwaske and McLennan (n.d.) warned that educational stakeholders must treat social relationships more seriously in online learning environments. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2020) advanced some benefits of support that seem to validate Kwaske and McLennan's caution: Varying categories of support are confirmed to be helpful for the cultivation of optimistic attitudes towards learning and can guarantee that students attain the outlooks and temperaments that can amplify their capacity to maximise online learning opportunities. OECD (2022) also advanced that positive attitudes towards learning, self-regulation, and intrinsic motivation can improve academic performance, especially if online learning continues.

This importance of building social relationships in online pedagogy invariably drives the assertion that as a strategic imperative, school principals in Jamaica and, by extension, the Caribbean should have a plan to purposively develop and nurture social relationships during online schooling as part of their instructional leadership portfolio. It remains to be seen if school principals embrace this as a part of their administrative and leadership philosophy. However, the role of school administrators in the success of online academic programs has been previously explored. Wiley University (n.d), for instance, suggests that school administrators play a role in developing the independence of the organisational structures and provide strong support for online decision-making and execution. They ensure the process is transparent and that it involves appropriate stakeholders, from faculty members and administrators.

At the same time, the crisis has exacerbated school principals' personal, operational and leadership demands (Boswell-Lewis et al., 2022; Kaufman et al., 2022). This reduces their available time as they juggle consistently shifting demands, which remains part of their competing reality and could further negate their efforts. Consequently, the need exists to know if they are managing this aspect of their responsibility. Additionally, understanding principals' leadership behaviours on this subject matter remains relevant even though the COVID-19 pandemic has eased because other crises will occur in the future and "though the hybrid classroom existed well before the pandemic, Covid-19 necessitated — and ultimately normalised — a combination of in-person and remote learning throughout academe" (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2023, p.8). Though this statement referred to the higher education context, it is quite applicable across educational levels. Online learning is forecasted to be a constant among instructional delivery tools, and helping students get the best experiences should be prioritised. Therefore, this research explored whether school principals are prioritising or making deliberate efforts to plan for robust, meaningful social relationships with students and teachers, what motivates them, and the strategies they employ to accomplish such.

BACKGROUND

Long before the Covid-19 crisis, social relationships in and out of educational circles were highly valued. Broadly defined, the existing associations among people who have regular interactions to which the participants ascribe personal meanings are called social relationships (August & Rook, 2013). From a psychological perspective, a social relationship is the emergent quality from repeated interactions (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2018; para.1). The concept of connections is entrenched in both definitions, an element of relationship support. Supportive relationships play an essential role in creating an environment of nurturing in schools where all members of the school: students, teachers, staff, parents and administrators are known, appreciated and cared for (Chourn & Sorajjkool, 2017).

In a study investigating students' perceptions of online and face-to-face learning courses, Bali and Liu (2018) reinforce Chourn and Sorajjkool's observations by naming social presence as one of the most critical factors in online learning spaces. Another study confirmed the importance of

social interaction for students' online learning experience. Hurst et al. (2013) found that all classes in the study attributed social interactions to students' learning experiences related explicitly to 1) the positive work environment it created and 2) how it enhanced their critical thinking skills by accommodating various angles from which to view concepts (Hurst et al., 2013).

Online Learning Negatively Impacts Students: The Jamaican Context

The problem arising from the persistent need for online instruction yields the unintended consequences of social separation, drastically reducing social interactions. In Jamaica, for example, unruly/disruptive behaviours have increased since schools have returned face-to-face, and experts have anecdotally connected this to the absence of social interactions for the two years students have been out of school. Lowrie-Chin (2021) observed that learning loss is not the only area in which it is evident that school closures have an impact. She named an increase in illnesses related to diet, such as diabetes and hypertension and a raft of psycho-social manifestations, such as feelings of loneliness, hyperactivity, hypertension, unruliness, unhappiness, isolation, frustration, and disquiet, as among those impacting Jamaican school children. A year later, the impression remained. A UNESCO representative to Jamaica, Kamoshima (2022), expressed concern that the disturbing events of violence between students indicate that we are facing a development of mental health problems exacerbated by COVID-19. These problems are not fresh but have multiplied, like the learning challenges before the pandemic.

Positioning the School Principal in the Instructional Leadership Role and Social Relationships

Research shows that principals may have a profound indirect impact on the learning experience of the students (Weber, 1989). Therefore, school principals are foregrounded in this study because of the roles and expectations of Instructional Leadership and the guiding theory of this research ascribed to them. Instructional Leadership is the behaviours of school principals aimed to promote and improve schools' teaching and learning processes, including school planning, school management, school facilities and resources to provide optimum experiences for teachers, students, and parents (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). Bush (2020) rationalises Instructional Leadership's increasing importance to prioritising teaching and learning as the main activities of educational institutions. The importance of these activities is subsumed under four anchors: visibility in their leadership role, provision of resources, being an instructional resource and communicating (Wilma & Smith, 1989).

All four pillars align with the direction of this paper, which investigated how principals build and nurture social relationships online. In this role, principals focus on constructing an environment free of disruption, developing pointed teaching objectives and harbouring high expectations of both students and teachers (Hattie, 2009). The effectiveness of these demands can be amplified when school principals acquire deep knowledge about and understanding of their teachers and students. Student learning, then, becomes the litmus test of effective teachers, principals and, ultimately, schools (DiPaola & Wagner, 2018). This requires specified characteristics of the principal (Santos & Villanueva, 2020). Among them, displaying competency is a hallmark of an excellent instructional leader.

Additionally, such principals are up-to-date with content and pedagogical innovations, such as new technology, impacting an improvement in instructional programs. Hattie (2009), who conducted over 800 meta-analyses investigating achievement, noted that Instructional Leadership ranked higher than other types of leadership in its impact on student learning. The learning leader

(DiPaola & Wagner, 2018) is responsible for understanding students and teachers as a critical entry point to responding to their needs. Whether in online or face-to-face instructional environments, cultivating meaningful relationships is a critical starting point, but it is especially needed online, given the isolationist tendencies of that space.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The main research question of the study is:

How and why do school principals cultivate and maintain social relationships with teachers and students online?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH

This research is significant for several reasons, three of which I will outline. Studies on building social relationships with students have focused mainly on teachers building relationships with their students or principals building relationships with their teachers. Therefore, the gap in this discourse is the inadequate attention researchers pay to the perspectives of school administrators, pre-COVID-19 and after, to how principals build relationships online with their students, generally and in Jamaica, specifically. This research addresses this gap by examining why and how school principals build social relationships online and by getting their perspectives, a position not frequently explored. Given the continued imminent threat of crises in various forms, the findings of this research are significant in assisting educational policymakers in crafting a social relationship policy for online schooling. They will be helpful to school principals in Jamaica and similar spaces as they seek to strengthen or initiate deliberate efforts to plan strategically for building social relationships with their students and teachers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Importance of Building Social Relationships Online

In a supportive online learning space, teachers not only successfully utilise relevant practices of pedagogy to address the learning needs of their students, but also nurture a constructive relationship between themselves and their students to encourage students' inspiration and engagement with lessons (Lai, 2017). Kwaske and McLennan (n.d) expanded the list of justifications, increasing student commitment and motivation, which can improve student performance. In this light, they encourage educators to ponder how they will rupture online spaces in which social interactions are meaningful and sustainable, especially when students must balance their studies with other life activities. This suggests that where these relationships do not exist, they are encouraged. Other researchers solidify the importance of social relationships in academic settings, which can also be relevant to online learning settings. For example, while Lai (2017) and Kwaske and McLennan (n.d) argue for the academic benefits, Yeager et al. (2013) proffer its academic-psychosocial value noting that, generally, a positive of interacting socially in educational settings is that it promotes an awareness of belonging. Where this awareness is missing, demotivation for matters related to academic work is a consequence. Will (2020) aptly sums up the benefits: When student-teacher relationships are strong, there is a distinct connection to medium and long-term developments on numerous fronts. Regardless of the student's family and surroundings, school administration can anticipate reduced dropouts, antisocial behaviours, and the need to suspend students, as well as increased attendance and performance and elevated academic commitment among students.

Zelihic (2015) explored the importance of relationship building in online classrooms related to students' levels of success and advanced the argument on the benefits of building relationships online:

The consensus is that courses are more effective and students more engaged if they feel connected to a professor. This relationship, created out of necessity in a classroom setting by the shared nature of frequent teacher-student interactions, can evolve into one of trust, mutual respect, and, at times, admiration (p.4).

The common thread among what researchers have found, though with varying degrees of emphasis, is that students will be motivated to become more engaged in wanting to learn online when they enjoy a strong social relationship with their teachers. Zelihic (2015), however, adds that both students and teachers alike will accrue benefits when teachers build relationships online. However, the students are not the only ones who enjoy such benefits; where the learning processes are more refined, the teachers' experience is higher productivity. Given that learning is a crucial function of schools, any strategy that has the potential to maximise this role should be high on the priority list of school principals.

Consequences of Lack of Social Interactions in the Online Teaching Modality?

Across the world, part of governments' response to the COVID-19 pandemic was a total lockdown of educational institutions in some places of business and the imposition of measures that required social distancing to become a priority. This upended the normal modes of interactions, even within single families, and not without some deleterious repercussions. In the academic arena, the absence of standard social exchanges, a part of the essence of face-to-face interactions, can contribute to the already-existing feelings of isolation motivated by the other social distancing procedures occasioned by the pandemic (Tea, P.I., 2022). Other researchers have noted that among the emotions students experienced during the pandemic are general feelings of loneliness and fatigue resulting from isolation (Labrague et al., 2021). Such a state of mind can lead students to experience stressful personal and learning conditions. Therefore, it becomes even more critical for schools, especially those in administration, to include building social relationships in their planning processes. Compared to other ages, this cannot be overstated; young adults [school-aged students included] place a much higher value on being socially connected (Arslan, 2018). Therefore, if the lack of or reduced socialisation preoccupies students, a case can be made for how this could impact their overall potential lack of responsiveness to online learning.

Strategies for Building Social Relationships Online

During periods of high-stress levels, teachers may be compelled to increase their intentional efforts toward connection with their students to develop trust and maintain engagement (Tackie, 2022). Once the pandemic struck, schools were required to pivot by initiating remote teaching and learning. This burdened existing connections due to varying stresses and a digital divide among stakeholders (Beaunoyer et al., 2020). The cruciality of social relationships among students and teachers was long established in all teaching modalities. However, moving fast and ill-prepared online elevated this need for school principals to build these social relationships strategically.

Among the strategies touted as helpful in building social relationships online are an infusion of fun during class time, giving students personalised notes and feedback, prioritising relationships before content and taking time to understand students' interests beyond the bounds of their academic involvement (Will, 2020). In addition to these suggestions, building relationships with parents and teachers, building peer connection/buddy systems, doing regular check-ins daily or weekly and mapping student relationships with adults (Protherro, 2020) are other viable approaches that the classroom teachers and school principals can implement. Unlike Protherro's (2020) communal-type

approaches, Hasem's (2020) strategies for building social relationships with students online are more individualised. Generally, he encourages teachers to find ways to involve students' faces and voices in classes. More specifically, he explained that this involves asking students to lead particular classes and assigning projects that require students to record themselves to share with the class.

Though some of UNESCO's (2022) suggestions are similar to those offered before, their strategies are more encompassing. As a general rule, stakeholders should connect schools, parents, teachers and students by mobilising tools at their disposal. They also suggest establishing communities to ensure regular human interaction, enable social care measures and address potential psychosocial challenges students face when isolated. Online teaching-learning spaces are diverse and present limited opportunities to communicate verbally and observe paralinguistic cues, necessitating extra effort from school administrators to nurture resilient student-administrator relationships. If the response demand on teachers is this great, one can extrapolate that school principals, with their multiple and complex demands, who sometimes enjoy a more distant, though undesirable, relationship with students, are more unlikely to agree. Hence, Tackie's (2020) claim that there is a need for greater intentionality should hold great significance for school principals as well.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

To understand the position of the principals, this qualitative investigation aimed to explore whether the principals develop and foster a social relationship with their teachers and students online, their motivation to do so and how they accomplish it. The study used a semi-structured interview methodology to obtain information from four purposively selected expert Jamaican school principals, at least one from each county, who all engaged in teaching and learning online. There was a need to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon of social relationships online. These four participants were sufficient to provide and facilitate this opportunity because qualitative research engages an examination of a few individuals, sometimes just a single person (Litchman, 2013).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this qualitative research were collected using one-on-one, in-depth, open-ended video conference interviews, using one main research question and four interview questions that provided a valuable way of accessing the participants' thoughts of building social relationships online (Brown, 2009). To elicit rich data about this central research question: "How and why do school principals cultivate and maintain social relationships with teachers and students online?" participants responded to four interview questions:

1. What is your understanding of social relationships?
2. Describe your feelings about building social relationships with teachers and students online and why.
3. How do you cultivate social relationships online with teachers and students?
4. How did you learn about the sources of support for these strategies you utilised in building social relationships online?

Additionally, open-ended interviews were ideal because qualitative studies make superb use of them in facilitating flexibility and responsiveness at the highest levels of the issues that will

arise for interviewees and respondents (Schwandt, 1997).

The project's goal was explained to each participant, after which each participant was asked to participate. A verbatim transcription of each audio was performed, and an initial reading was done to secure a general understanding of each of the emergent themes in the transcripts, which were then compared among the four transcripts. This process adhered to what Boeije (2002) described as a constant comparison, whereby the researcher moves from within the artefact to within the group, a process which facilitates naming themes and establishing connections among them. Boeije's (2002) constant comparison method suggests an open approach, which worked excellently for this project because it facilitated both anticipated and emergent themes from the data source, which deepened the scope of analysis.

Reliability and Validity

Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to get them to speak freely and completely about how and why they develop and nurture social relationships online during interviews lasting 1 to 1 ½ hours to obtain prolonged engagement in a single setting and generate thick and rich data. Each interview transcript was returned to the participants to allow them to read and comment on their contributions to ensure their ideas were accurately represented. Sagor (2000) advises that such a practice adds authority to a research process, boosting its reliability. Additionally, after re-verifying and coding the member-checked transcripts, independent reviewers were engaged in a deep analysis to ensure consistency of thematic ideas, check for discrepant ideas, and locate possible biases.

FINDINGS

This section delves into the findings emanating from the research that aimed to explore the methods and motivations of principals in developing social connections in online environments. To achieve this objective, four interconnected interview questions were conducted to examine the principals' perspectives on social relationships, their attitudes towards establishing online social connections with teachers and students, and the underlying motives behind their actions. The major findings of this study are:

1. Principals' Understanding of Social Relationships in Schools

There were slight variations in participants' responses. Generally, it was conceived as a motivation tool, while others linked it to a practical function. Principal Maurice tabled that "social relationship is interpreted to be the unwritten curriculum that exists in the school that you encourage, but which needs management because it can be misconstrued if not guided properly." Principal Dane's understanding underscores the motivational aspect of Maurice's definition but not the need to impose limits. He shared that social relationships are "the kinds of systems created for relationships to be formulated, and how schools are structured to allow everyone to relate and become supportive of each other."

Unlike the previous definitions, Principal Jack and Principal Joshua understood the concept more as an administrative tool. Jack explained that "social relationships, in schools, is about how we build strong relationships among stakeholders to ensure that there is a high degree of effectiveness in the operations of the school and getting the various machinery of the school to work effectively." The element of limitation, which Maurice expressed was echoed in Joshua's description who noted that social relationships "does not mean that we are going to be chummy." Rather, he invited us to view it as a mechanism which aids how "we build strong relationship among stakeholders to ensure that there is a high degree of effectiveness in the operations of the school and getting the various

machinery of the school to work effectively.”

2. Principals’ Reasons of Building Social Relationships with Teachers and Students Online.

All four principals felt that it was imperative to build social relationships with students and teachers online. Generally, there was a high level of consistency among their descriptions of social relationships and the importance they ascribed to them. However, some, for example, Dane, expressed an initial uncertainty about its methods “because it was new to them.” The degree to which they expressed importance ranged from “important” to “very important” to “strong belief in building social relationships.” The following is a presentation of the various rationales the principals gave for building social relationships with students and teachers.

Why do school principals build social relationships with teachers online?

Several reasons accounted for principals’ rationale for building relationships with teachers online, including the general categories of providing emotional support and, relaxation and efficiency in administrative functioning.

Social relationships and emotional support

The principals felt that building social relationships online was an excellent source of emotional support. Apart from bridging the disconnect among teachers and rebuilding comradery, making social connections as a system of support, a navigation tool for challenges, and a means to combat isolation and alienation were also reasons principals advanced. Dane said he realised “strong feelings of disconnection among teachers online.” In this light, he encouraged video conferencing as he felt this would be an excellent way to “encourage them,” and this would maintain connectivity online. Therefore, the administrators “would have expressed to them that intimacy was still possible.”

Another reason for building social relationships for emotional support was a recognition that teachers were “extremely stressed because the pandemic resulted in a kind of isolation for them”, as Jack explained. He elaborated that a sense of community and family was fundamental; so, building social relationships “was to ensure that administration provided support for teachers to deal with the challenges that they were facing, so they felt supported at all times.” Interestingly, though this is geared toward teachers, it was still tied to organizational functioning. He reinforced the importance of providing the “various resources to bring teachers up to speed so that they can meet the established standards of the school.”

Maurice felt building social relationships with teachers online was crucial because “the space felt alienating; many persons felt disconnected, while others felt trapped in their spaces; [therefore] it was important to build and maintain connections, previously enjoyed face-to-face.” In other cases, such as Joshua’s, building social relationships is just a matter of “providing necessary support for each other for matters related to our families, or whatever struggles we may be encountering.”

Administrative Efficiency

Administrative efficiency to advance the business of the schools was the dominant driving force behind school principals’ thrust for engagement in social relationships. This manifested as the need to maintain accountability, motivation to teach, smooth execution of processes and development of increased commitment.

Dane felt that bonding with teachers in the online space “ensured that they performed their

teaching and learning-related tasks.” On the other hand, Jack was more specific in explaining his efforts at building social relationships online. He elaborated:

It was instrumental in navigating the school's various challenges in that context. One of the greatest assets during times of crisis was the ability to still access divergent views for the effective operations of schools around common goals. Social relationships are engines of change, given their usefulness to administrators who want to bring about changes in schools.

Maurice’s position echoed similar resonances: “It makes them [teachers] feel better about the organisation and consequently feel more invested in it. This makes them give more of themselves to the organisation because it engenders a sense of trust and care.” Joshua’s reasoning for building social relationships is linked to administrative effectiveness as he explained that “strong relationships online are necessary to achieve strategic goals and accomplish other activities in the school.” He explained, “Teachers need to have strong relationships with the students they are teaching online, to reach them and teach them [since] if you know certain things about students’ backgrounds, it puts you in a better position to serve them.” He is the only participant who directly connected building online connections with students to their learning.

Reasons school principals build social relationships with students online

While the rationale behind establishing social connections with students lacked discernible patterns, unlike the reasons for cultivating relationships with teachers, there were some connections between the two. However, the underlying themes were less dominant than they were about teachers.

Accountability and leadership presence

Joshua tied his position for building social relationships to the administrative role of being visible among the students, explaining that “from any leadership standpoint, a principal should be visible. The need to be visible, he remarked, was that students needed to know they could reach out to him at any time. Dane’s response indicated that he attended to the emotional support of students; however, for the most part, it seemed to be a strategic move to ensure accountability. As part of the justification for emotional support, he shared: “Many students were handling death and grief, and we needed to provide support for them, and that was the space we could reach them.” Grief and death can cause strong negative emotional responses. This might explain his other reason for building social relationships to account for all: “We did not want to fall prey to our students going missing. So, when the government reported that one hundred and twenty thousand (120K) students were missing or not connecting online, we could account for all of ours.” Adding to the reasoning of accountability and visibility, Jack recollected, “I made myself available to restructure our motivational sessions because we wanted the boys to be able to speak purpose to their lives at this critical point.” Not all administrators had similar levels and severity of challenges.

Social relationships as a response to the dislocation of school

While some principals were ensuring each student was accounted for and establishing their leadership presence online, Maurice reflected on the depth of his challenges, which spurred the need to develop social relationships with his students online:

School was an escape from home for many of our students, which was no longer available. The disadvantage for those students was that many lost their meals; some had to remain

in their homes under cramped conditions, and many were stuck for extended periods with their abusers, some of which we were aware of and others that we might not have been.

Additionally, he continued his lament that students were enduring these conditions while balancing learning. This was because, according to him,

online was seen as being home, and many did not associate with their home as a learning space. Creating an atmosphere so students could freely relate in the online space was urgent and needed, so we activated various teams to get them in that mode.

Though Maurice did not describe his reason for building social relationships as etched in the human factor of schooling, his and Jack's reasoning bear some similarities, though differently nuanced, as described below.

Social relationships as a response to the human element of schooling

Jack linked his motivation for building social relationships online with students to a "response to the need for human development in these tough times when students just want to sign off." Therefore, "it was important to pique their curiosity ... since the heart of a school is really about human beings," he counselled. He further reasoned that even while juggling the rough administrative demands, the reason for doing that is for human development. Consequently, "administrators must work on engaging people on the level of their emotions." However, his reasoning ended not only at the place of emotional engagement. He argued that "teachers and students will want to go the extra mile and buy in on the school's activities if they are strongly connected to a sense of purpose." He reinforced that building social relationships is crucial because "it is one of those critical things where people do not care about your plans unless they know you care about them."

3. Principals' Strategies to Build Social Relationships with Teachers and Students Online

Upon carefully analysing the principals' approaches to fostering social connections, I identified three overarching themes: entertainment, communication, and emotional support. Additionally, I observed a fourth category, academics, playing a role. For an in-depth breakdown of the strategies employed by principals for cultivating relationships with students and teachers, kindly refer to Table 1.

Table 1. Strategies Principals Used to Build Social Relationships Online with Teachers and Students

Strategies Principals Used to Build Social Relationships with Teachers	Strategies Principals used to Build Social Relationships with Students
Entertainment	Entertainment
Games comedy shows Sip and paint Virtual socials online Hat, scarf & tie day & tea parties	Games Movie night Online walkthroughs Online concerts
Communication Strategies	Communication Strategies
Video-conferencing Regular communication Purposive individual check-ins Randomized individual check-ins Online teachers’ lounge	WhatsApp group with parents and students Meet and greet in Google Classroom Online Social Interaction Policy
Emotional Support	Emotional Support
Regular motivational quotes Temperature checks – Guidance Counselors posts and teachers respond No screen-day for recalibration Staff Welfare Committee	Motivational sessions Mental health empowerment sessions Establishing leadership presence Special sessions for parents to deal with students
Academic	Academic
Remote Learning Taskforce Innovations Committee	Headmaster’s quest

An analysis of the findings on the strategies that principals used to develop social relationships online with their teachers and students demonstrated that solid emphasis was not intentionally placed on the academic element of schooling. Whereas only one direct academic strategy was reported, entertainment and emotional support accounted for 7 of 16 strategies engaged with teachers. Eight of 12 strategies were also linked to these categories for students. For the teachers, five strategies were associated with communication as opposed to 2 for students.

4. How School Principals Learned about Their Strategies to Build Social Relationships with Students and Teachers online

Some support systems were common across schools but fell into four broad categories. They were either internal to the local or external to the school context, self-initiated personal development or prior experience.

Internal to the local school context

Among principals, those sources of knowledge generated within the schools, the Remote

Learning Taskforce, which “dealt with the documented hiccups whether from parents or students,” and the Innovations Committee, “which was challenged to table solutions to various challenges, arising out of the crisis, are sources of knowledge unique to Jack’s school. Only Dane spoke about developing The Online Social Interaction Policy, “a response to the School’s Board [of Governance] asking us what we were going to do to ensure that teachers and students were engaged.” All principals learnt from some workshops, from their Staff Welfare Committees, their Guidance Teams, and their Deans of Discipline.

External to the local school context

From those sources of knowledge that came outside the school context, Jack and Dane spoke to help from the Central Ministry – Ministry of Education, Youth and Information in Jamaica, but in opposing terms. Dane felt that “the Ministry’s Education in Emergency documentation had a lot of guidance regarding how to deal with online school”. By contrast, Jack recalled that though the Ministry tried, he “found that it sent out too many bulletins. Even with the best of intentions, they were just stuff that they grabbed off the Internet, sources that I [he] had already read.” Two other principals, Dane and Joshua spoke to the strong support they got from their Education Officer, citing in both instances that they each enjoyed a strong relationship, before the era of online learning. All principals agreed that the Jamaica Teachers’ Association (JTA) was a source of knowledge. Dane and Joshua spoke about learning from short courses the National College of Educational Leadership (NCEL) offered. Jack and Maurice attributed credit to their schools’ Past Students’ Association. Still, only Jack spoke to the Jamaica Association of Secondary Schools (JASS) sources of information, and all principals invited guests to present on various topics.

Self-initiated personal development and prior experience

Apart from those initiatives that emanated from the school and external spaces, all principals reported that, in some instances, they had to initiate their learning journey about how to build relationships online. Only some had relevant prior experiences on which they drew. They shared common strategies such as watching YouTube videos, reading blogs extensively, and networking with other schools. Only three principals shared that they all pulled on prior experiences: Jack and Joshua reported they had previous experiences as Education Officers. Joshua also applied knowledge from the Child Development Agency, and both Joshua and Dane found skills gained through their work with Social Development helpful in building relationships online.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

School principals were familiar with the basic concept of how social relationships function within the teaching-learning construct. Many scholars (Lai, 2017; Will, 2020; Yeager et al., 2013) attribute developing and cultivating social relationships in online learning to improved student engagement and learning outcomes. In contrast, this research found that principals were more explicit in connecting it to the general motivation of staff and for administrative purposes related to the functions of schools. These functions are crucial and have broadened the scope of how these relationships work, hence cementing their importance. However, they deviate from the philosophical position that excellent principals must be up-to-date with content and pedagogical innovations (Santos & Villanueva, 2022) and deeply understand students and teachers (DiPaola & Wagner, 2018) to maximise instructional experiences. This and the fact that only one principal explicitly linked efforts at building relationships online with student learning indicates an area of concern in the Jamaican educational context. While scholars will raise a plausible argument about

how the moment of crisis may have influenced principals' responses, it is yet to be understood whether the insufficient focus on building social relations as a learning strategy was intentional or was not treated as a priority, given the myriad of other demands the crisis situation brought on.

The importance principals attribute to building social relationships with teachers online

The principals place solid value on building social relationships online with teachers, which signals a strong responsiveness to their needs. This finding corroborates the idea that social presence should be a dominant element of online learning engagements, as Chourn and Sorajjkool (2017) found in their study. The literature acknowledges that social relationship online cultivates a sense of belonging in the classroom among teachers (Yeager, 2013). This research expanded this body of work, demonstrating that school principals know that teachers also need to feel valued and supported in online teaching spaces. It suggests that when principals planned to build social relationships in online teaching communities, they engaged in the strategic utility of social relationships. This meaning is further reinforced because they linked social relationships to teachers' motivation for work, implicitly linking it to teaching.

The importance principals attribute to building social relationships with students online

There was unanimity among principals about the importance of building relationships online. Each tabled a different reason for its pertinence, though all were linked to the intention of providing support. Similar to how the connection to teaching was not explicit, the connection to students' learning was vague. This could be a general deficit in an overall understanding of the more profound academic value of building social relationships in this context, as Zelihic (2015), Lai (2017) and Will (2020), among other researchers, have argued. Notwithstanding, the formed social relationships could motivate students to attend classes and be engaged, as Zelihic (2015) offered. Additionally, Yeager et al. (2013) posit that forming social relationships influences students' performances since it promotes awareness of belonging and thwarts demotivation that would negatively affect academic performance.

Contrastingly, the greater motivation for principals' planning behaviours seemed to have been embedded in response to the maladies of the pandemic. These behaviours favour Weber's (1989) observation of the profound indirect impact that principals can have on teaching when they are accountable and visible.

Tackie (2022) noted that where stress levels are high, teachers might be forced to become more intentional to develop trust and maintain engagement. In this study, the principals are the ones who were found to increase their intentionality, thus widening the pool of available personnel to which students can have access. Locally, Lorie-Chin's (2021), Kagoshima's (2022) and internationally Labrague et al.'s (2021) descriptions of the emotional struggles students experienced aligned as possible symptoms of the causes (cramped conditions, being trapped with their abusers, lack of food, etc.) that principals described.

Strategies principals used to build social relationships with students and teachers

Many of the strategies principals reportedly utilised as part of their plan to build social relationships online are similar to what the literature advised. Prothero's (2020) Community-type approaches, UNESCO's (2022) integrated approach, including the inclusion of parents, as well as the more individualised approach of Will (2020) and Hashem (2020), though to a lesser extent.

Cumulatively, the employment of these strategies evidenced strong sensitivity in principals' planning to provide support. DiPaola and Wagner's (2018) argument that in responding to students' and teachers' needs, principals carry the distinct responsibility to understand them validates this leadership practice. This demonstrated that their planning considered that young adults place premium value on social interactions (Arslan, 2018) and prioritised relationships before content per Will's (2020) philosophy.

The principals implemented strategies to minimise the possibility of students feeling isolated from each other and detached from their teachers. This is crucial in helping students feel seen and develop a sense of belonging. The implementations sought to counter what Tea (2022) and Labrague et al. (2021) noted as some emotional challenges students experienced resulting from the pandemic – feelings of isolation, loneliness, and fatigue.

Interestingly, while the strategies sought to create and maintain social relationships online, they may only serve as a foundational component to positively impact students' performances. A justification for this is that if the strategies led to adequate student performances, it would be inadvertent since the principals' approaches did not seem intentional in achieving that objective. Lai (2017) stated a two-pronged approach to catering to students in the online space: to use the relevant pedagogical practices to satisfy students' learning needs and forge constructive relationships between themselves and their students to inspire them to engage in lessons. For social relationships to impact students' learning, there should be a direct link between social relationships and instructional practices. Based on the principal's responses about why they endeavoured to form social bonds, the element of intentionality for students' learning seemed missing. The seeming lack of intentionality indicates gaps in their understanding of Hattie's (2009) findings that instructional leadership trumps other types of leadership related to its impact on student learning. The weak planning emphasis on academics also runs contrary to Bush's (2020) claim that instructional leadership prioritises teaching and learning as the main activities of schools.

Sources of strategies that principals use to build social relationships in schools

The sources of knowledge informing the strategies the principals selected to support their effort to build relationships online with teachers and students reinforced the importance of the full participation of all related stakeholders when planning. Most of the external sources that principals tapped into for support were bodies already in place for school leadership support. This raises the question of whether other external sources of support were unavailable and what motivated their choices. Overall, Santos and Villanueva's (2020) notion that principals must display excellence and remain up-to-date with relevant teaching-learning initiatives became relevant because principals reconstructed their instructional leadership pedagogies to respond to the needs of students and teachers.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY, PRACTICE AND RESEARCH PRACTICE

A concern arising from the analysis of the data was what appeared to be the lack of principals' intentionality in using social relationships to enhance students' academic performance. It is recommended that principals be exposed to a combination of training opportunities to become more strategic in utilising social relationships as a tool for elevating learning experiences. Such training would:

1. Empower principals with skills and competencies that will enable them to more effectively consider how the formation of social relationships can become a tool for bolstering students' academic performances. These strategies would prioritise the psycho-social advantages and the

benefits to students' engagement and commitment to learning.

2. Equip principals to guide the development, implementation and assessment of activities that embed social relationships in their whole school pedagogy. Teachers could be involved in constructive dialogues to determine the best-suited strategies – strategies that not only have students communicating with teachers and classmates for conversation and fun but also provide students with opportunities to demonstrate their academic competencies and give teachers a chance to provide students with meaningful feedback.

3. Help school principals understand more deeply that their investment in teachers prioritises student learning, connecting the philosophy behind their administrative and leadership decisions, given that emotional support is part of their reason for developing social relationships with teachers.

Practice

Only one of the four principals thought favourably about the Ministry of Education and Youth as a source of knowledge for valuable strategies to cultivate social bonds in online instruction. At the Macro level, it is recommended that educational planners in Jamaica and the Caribbean revisit the schools' curriculum to develop a comprehensive social relationship planning policy framework for principals' use in schools. Such a framework would make explicit the connections between social bonds and learning and provide suggested strategies for implementation.

Principals could share best practices in their Quality Educational Circles or other professional learning spaces, even locally, as some activities are common to all schools. This information would strengthen Caribbean countries' existing crisis response policy framework.

It is recommended that the National College for Educational Leadership develops a course or expand its current Virtual Instructional Leadership course to include in its Aspiring Principal Programme. Current principals could also access the same course micro-credentials.

Research

The participants in this study have not significantly attributed their tactics for building social bonds to an overall strategy for academic improvement. Therefore, further research could explore students' experiences with how the strategies influence their motivation for school work. Additionally, it was apparent that implementing the strategies was a planning response to the COVID-19 pandemic circumstances. It would be helpful to explore if principals still implement these practices or how they inform face-to-face practices.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the extent to which school principals prioritize planning to foster strong social connections with students and teachers online and the methods and motivations behind their efforts. The findings revealed that principals were primarily motivated to build social relationships with teachers online to address administrative demands and provide socio-emotional support. Conversely, their focus on students was centred on their overall well-being. Interestingly, the participants did not prioritise academic justifications for building social relationships online. This presents an opportunity for the Jamaican and broader Caribbean educational systems to explore ways to enhance principals' leadership behaviours. The research also highlights various policy, practice, and research possibilities. Therefore, the question is not whether these changes are necessary or feasible but rather whether we, as a region, value this aspect of learning support enough to implement the required changes and integrate it into our schools' cultural practices to catalyze learning further.

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