Using Social Media to Engage Culturally Diverse Parent, Family, Community in Education

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ABSTRACT

Social media plays an important role in the interaction and communication between home, especially culturally diverse families, and schools. This qualitative multiple case study aimed at exploring how international students who are also parents respond to the use of social media in communicating with the school and teachers in the US. Participants responded to the question - How can social media tools (Or new technologies) be used to engage parents, families, and communities in education? Five participants, who were students from a US university at the time of the data collection, volunteered to be interviewed. The participants were from three regions – Asia, North African, and the Middle East. The study found out that digital used by the school to engage culturally diverse parents assisted the parents to familiarize themselves with local cultures. Also, parents who used social media community platforms such as WhatsApp commented that the tool has helped them to build community among parents and suggested that schools should use such mediums to help build a community for parents.

Keywords: parental involvement/engagement, community building, international students/parents, culturally diverse parents/families/communities, social media, education technology, digital tools

INTRODUCTION

Technology has been a powerful tool for transforming social interaction and assisting to strengthen the relationship between teachers and parents (Graham-Clay, 2005; Olmstead, 2013).
Thus, it has helped to affirm and advance relationships between educators, students, and parents. Parents working schedule impacts the number of time parents could visit schools. Some parents have busy working schedules and some also work double shifts (Alzaid, et al. 2020). As a result, technology as a medium can be used by schools to inform parents about students’ achievement and behavior, and school activities. In addition to parents’ working schedule, there may also be several unforeseen contingencies that could restrict direct teacher and parents’ physical interactions. This warrants the need to explore other avenues to maintain teacher-parent-communication relationship. It, therefore, has become relevant that teachers engage parents through using technology, especially, social media tools.

Parents and family involvement in education has a vital role in children's education (Epstein, 1985; Roekel, 2008). In addition, the community as a whole plays an essential role in the growth and development of youth. School, family, and community partnerships are related to student achievement and school success (Roekel, 2008). Epstein (1992) describes six types of involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. This shows the multiple roles parents play in their child’s educations. Parents play a vital role in students’ learning and such roles are confined to the home. As Epstein indicated, with continuous communication, teachers and parents can better position themselves to understand students’ and experience so that they can provide learning experiences that support students’ learning.

Cibils (2017, p.55), on the other hand, revealed that “what accounts for parental involvement is unilaterally defined by the school and limited to those behaviors and attitudes which reflect strict alignment with school policies and decisions”. There are, therefore, certain cultures that do not conform to the mainstream culture that influences school policies. As a result, such behaviors are mostly sidelined by the school structures either consciously or unconsciously. Therefore, since parental characteristics influence how they interact with the school and among themselves (Civil, Bratton, & Quintos, 2000; Epstein & Salinas, 2004; Erol & Turhan, 2018; Yamamoto, 2015), it becomes relevant to explore how schools promote parental social networking between linguistically diverse parents.

As stakeholders of education are considering the use of social media tools to engage parents (Willis & Exley, 2018), it becomes pertinent for researchers to explore the attitudes and perceptions of parents from different cultures other than the mainstream culture (Alzaid, et al. 2020). Diverse parents’ perception of social media adoption for community building between parents and teachers will influence how teachers adopt tools to engage parents. This because the heterogeneity of parents’ culture impacts how they interact in every social environment (Gentina, & Singh, 2015). Consequently, teachers’ knowledge of parents’ attitudes and perceptions will help teachers to assist parents to develop a positive attitude toward social media and use emerging technology to a sense of community. The purpose of this article is to share the results of a qualitative multiple case study aimed at exploring how international students who are also parents respond to the use of social media in communicating with the school and teachers in the US.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section gives an overview of research on parental involvement and parents to parents to parent interaction. It also highlights how communication technology tools have been
used by schools to engage parents and the challenges associated with using communication tools to engage parents.

Parental Involvement, Parent-Teacher Communication and Parent Social Networks

Parental involvement occurs in many forms. Parents engage in students’ home learning, participate in school events, and volunteer in their children’s school. Parents also communicate with teachers about students’ learning (Alzaid, et al. 2020; Epstein, 1992, 2011). Hence, parental involvement transcends beyond teachers engaging directly in students’ learning at home to include the relationship they maintain with teachers. Communication between parents and teachers has been proven to improve students’ academic achievement (Epstein, 2011; Hornby & Blackwell, 2018). In the view of Vijaya (2017), parent-teacher communication is vital in parental involvement. It should not be seen as an ephemeral interaction between teachers and parents about students’ performance, but long-lasting relationships teachers and parents create with the view of promoting life-long learning for students.

In addition, research indicates that parents’ involvement in their children's education could be strengthened by social networks that are created among parents (Curry & Holter, 2019; Ee, 2017). That is, when opportunities are created for parents to interact among themselves, they can support each other and improve their involvement in students’ education both at home and at school. Supporting parent to parent interaction leads to a sense of community for parents (Alzaid, et al. 2020). Parents are capable of supporting each other to promote their involvement in their children's education. Parents discuss among themselves students learning, school activities, and challenges they face engaging in their students' learning. It is against this backdrop that schools should support parents by developing communication tools that bring parents together.

Also, parents 'social networks evolve easily along the lines of parents' demographic characteristics (Leo, 2010). Thus, parents easily build networks with other parents who share the same characteristics and interests. However, bringing parents together can be challenging in elementary schools. Schools lack efficient strategies that could bring linguistically diverse parents together to build a sense of community or parent social networks (Curry & Holter, 2019; Ee, 2017). That is, parents’ involvement in their children’s learning is strengthened by social networks that are created among parents, however, the creation of these social networks is made possible when schools provide opportunities for parents to interact among themselves (Curry & Holter, 2019).

Using Technology to Improve Teacher-Parents Relationship

Technology has improved communication between parents, communities, and schools in several ways. Graham-Clay (2015) explained that classroom phones and voice mail, video technology, radio announcement, and school websites are ways teachers can utilize to engage parents. Similarly, Hendley (2002) recounted that online communication is effective in improving parent-teacher communication. Analyzing a schools’ webpage, Hendley hinted that such that webpages engaged parents in school activities. Bahceci (2019) also realized that the use of a digital tool, Class Dojo, by schools to engage parents increased the rate at which parents inquired about contents their children were studying at school. Thus, using technology, teachers will be able to engage parents in schools’ activities. Parents, therefore, need not be in the physical environment of the school; they can still inquire about schools’ activities and participate remotely in some school activity. According to Beecher and Buzhardt
Innovative tools and programs that utilize mobile technology possess the capability of delivering content to parents and teachers. Thus, teachers and parents should be actively engaging with mobile technology to increase their enthusiasm to adopt innovative technology.

Thompson, et al., (2015) noted that the use of smartphones could augment communication through the use of social media to increase the modes of parent-teacher communication. They found that most parents preferred emails since they can reply at their own convenience time. Again, the proliferation of smartphones will enable parents to easily access emails from teachers. They also note that texting also works well for getting quick feedback from parents.

Olmstead (2013) aimed at determining how emerging technologies facilitate efficient parents-teachers communication and parent involvement. The study was conducted through the lenses of social constructivism and the social cognitive theory of self-efficacy. Olmstead used semi-structured interviews to collect the data. The study revealed that technology assists in keeping parents informed about how students are performing. Also, the study revealed that "majority of parents were interested in receiving information about their child through the use of text messaging, but most of the teachers were not willing to use this type of communication p.36." This indicates that there are some constraints in using technology to engage parents. Teachers' willingness to use a particular tool or strategy plays a role.

Challenges to The Use of Technology in Teacher-Parent Relationship

As schools and teachers use technology to improve their communication with parents, they also experience several challenges. Patrikakou (2016) indicated that the digital divide between the higher income and lower-income families seems to close due to the expansion of mobile technology and the declining cost of mobile devices. Also, the call for national broadband technology hints at a future where families could access the internet and social interaction will be continuously be altered. Graham-Clay (2005) reiterated that teachers should be aware of families that may not have access to technology so that they do not marginalize them. For instance, Hendley (2002) also ensured that parents who do not have access to computers were provided with weekly newsletters.

Patrikakou (2016) concluded by stating that everyone needs to be well versed in the use of technology, and schools should be able to assist parents to navigate the use of technology and media to be well equipped to get involved. That is when parents realize the usefulness of mobile devices and acknowledge their ease of use, schools would be able to mitigate barriers parents experience when it comes to getting involved in students' education. This mediating process, in the form of educating parents on technology use, would parent to build resilience. Also, Graham-Clay (2005) presented opportunities that include technologies that are available for teachers to implement to increase parents' involvement in education. Graham-Clay stressed that teachers need to continue the development of their skills to improve their interaction with their parents.

Ho, Hung, and Chen (2013) further showed that teachers' attitude influences their adoption of communication tools. They investigated teachers' attitudes towards adopting mobile phone texts as a medium for parent-teacher communication. They concluded that "perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use have direct positive relationships with attitude, and attitude further influences behavior intention directly” (p.113). The study suggested that attitude
should be seen as a mediator between perceived usefulness and behavior intention. Schools should therefore factor in parents’ attitude as they design social media tools to engage parents.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To ascertain the perspectives, beliefs, and strategies ISP who have been using educational technology or digital tools for CB, strengthening PTP and to be involved in their children’s education in U.S, the study will use Epstein’s six types of parental involvement. According Epstein (1985), schools need to provide opportunity to assist parents in the area of parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with community. Epstein focused on the need for collaboration between the home, community and school to assist parents in the various types of parental involvement. Therefore as “Technology can decrease the sense of fear that educators and families often experience as they start to think about increasing collaborative activities, or the isolation that some schools feel as they begin to develop a program of partnerships” (Simon et al. 1998, p. 268), the study will use Epstein’s six types of parental involvement to examine how educational technology has assisted ISP in parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with community by exploring their beliefs, perspective and strategies.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design for the study was a qualitative multiple case study with the overarching research question - How can social media tools (Or new technologies) be used to engage parents, families, and communities in education? Participants who responded to semi-structured interview questions were international students who couple as parents with their children either in the elementary school or high school in a U.S. Southwest borderland. In all, five (5) international students from North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia participated in this study. The participants were made up of four males and one female.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interview was by the researchers to allow for conversations, between the interviewer and the interviewee, that are impulsive and include in-depth answers (Ryan et. al., 2009). Interview from each case was transcribed and analyzed for relevant themes.

To identify contrasts and possible similarities across the case, this study used comparative analysis (Parra, 2010; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Comparative analysis also aided in deepening researchers' understanding and their interpretation of responses in relation to the research question that was asked. Comparing responses helped the researchers to address validity and reliability of the questions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Optional member checking was used for the trustworthiness of the study, and participants were sent the case study write-ups to check for accuracy (Guba, 1981; Lincoln, 1995). It must be noted the data was collected before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the analysis of the data occurred during the pandemic. As a result, the researchers used web conference tools and shared document tools, Zoom, and Microsoft online respectively, to continue working on the research paper as a team. As the researchers were analyzing the data, they also took into consideration the effect of the pandemic on technology/digital use.
FINDINGS

Responding to how social media tools could be used to engage parents, families, and communities in education, all the participants, affirmed that social media tools are effective communication tools schools can employ to assist diverse parents. The study found out that the international students, who have their children in the US elementary and high school, perceive that social media could assist them to build a community among parents and with the school. Also, Social media tools could help them familiarize themselves with the local culture and further make it easier to seek academic support for children from other parents and the school.

Community Building

The study unearthed that social media tools fostered building a community between parents and schools. The results indicated that if parents are put on one platform and encouraged by the schools, they will interact with each other. Most of the participants, who noted that they belong to parents' groups on WhatsApp (not related to school parents' groups), elucidated that the tool assists them to communicate among themselves, and also share information. They recommended that schools could capitalize on the opportunity to bring parents together. Social media tools, therefore, serve as an opportunity for improved parent-teacher communication. These findings align with findings from Bahceci (2019) and Thompson et al. (2015) that the use of digital tools by schools to engage parents increased the rate at which parents communicated with the schools that the use of smartphones could augment communication between parents and the school through the use of social media.

Abdullah from the Middle East, for instance, responded that using social media is helpful though his children’s school was not using it. He stated, “I think social media has a good advantage to communicate with school society and parents”. Using social media, Abdullah felt he could communicate with parents, especially parents from his home country he had never met.

He also stated, “I know there are some Arab parents in school where my son attends but don’t know who they are because there’s no way to communicate with them”. Hussain, who is from the Middle East also revealed that he used a tool like WhatsApp with friends for social interactions not for the school. However, though he specified that he does not regularly use WhatsApp for interaction, a social media tool for parents to interact among themselves will be helpful. He stated, “I don’t have time to interact more with these social media tools...to communicate with parents, sometimes you need [An opportunity for parents to interact among themselves using social will be helpful]”

Fatima who is from North African recounted that she uses a group chat on the WhatsApp platform with other parents, and it helped them to build a parents’ community. She also noted that it has helped them to make it easier to build a community among themselves to support their children’s education. Similarly, Adnan commented that social media tools are capable of enhancing communication between schools and families. He made this claim in reference to Facebook messenger since he is familiar with this tool. Adnan stated, “But now it's the time of technology...using just the Messenger group, even if it's not the best communication channel...if you want to enhance that communication, it is helpful.”

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Providing Academic Support to The Children

The study also found that bringing parents together and using social media could facilitate the provision of academic support for children. Thus, when parents come together, they are able to support each other to find solutions to academic problems. This demonstrated that the provision of academic support will not be the sole responsibility of the school. Also, as international students, the participants showed that academic support their children is needed if their children are to survive in the US school system. However, with access to digital tools and using social media, it will be easier for parents to build networks and support each other. Similar research also realized that parents, collaborating among themselves to build a network, support themselves and it improve their involvement in the children’s education.

Both Abdullah and Fatima expounded that social media tools had helped build a community where parents could acquire academic support for their parents. In Abdullah’s words when explaining how social media groups could provide support for parents stated:

Through my experience with using WhatsApp group, our community can share some experience related to academic and they help each other when someone need help in an academic matter like homework, and discussion about some classes and share advice. Always they help each other when they face some problems.

Similar Fatima shared an experience she has with using a WhatsApp group. In Fatima’s words, [We] created WhatsApp group to share some material that help us as parents to help our children. We do not have any experience, so we had to find out by [our] own. We needed to look for resources and buy books for our children’s exam. [This is] one-way schools can use technology [to help people] who are planning to take the ACT test. They [schools] can create groups [digital tools] for parents or for students to communicate and share resources and even ideas.

The experienced they shared indicated schools could assist parents to form social networks using social tools. The goal for such an endeavor will be assisting parents to share academic resources among themselves. This will however assist new parents or parents from different cultures to makes inquiries about where they can get educational resources. Also, it will make it easy for diverse parents to seek help not only from the school or teachers but also from other parents. Social media tools will therefore make it easier for parents and teachers to find and share resources.

Familiarizing Parents with The Local Culture

The study also revealed that the participants acknowledge that if schools use social media to engage families and teachers, it will assist parents to get acquainted with local culture and share their culture. Some of the participants indicated that when teachers or schools send in-class activities through digital tools, it helps them to learn about the cultures and traditional celebrations in the United States. Most parents admitted they do not know much about the local culture and celebrations their children participate in while at school. However, when an opportunity was created for teachers to take pictures and video the activities to a school platform, parents were able to find out more about activities in the US. Thus, if schools use social media tools where they can share activities in school with parents, they will be well informed about the event in their new environment.
Amir from Asia shared that using social media tools will assist him to know many cultures. Though he may not physically present in the school environment, the images teacher will post will give him an idea of what is transpiring in the school. Amir explained that most of the things happening in the classroom are based on the local culture and they, are parents, should be able to experience. Amir stated:

Valentine's Day and so many other cultural things going on in school.
What I find interesting is I get to know more about celebration and so many things which I have never, ever heard. One thing gives a lot of local cultural flavor. I've been here for five years but I don't know many cultural things here. But the class Dojo [school adopted communication tool] helped me because they celebrate different cultural events in the classrooms and immediately share for us to see.

Adnan on the other hand noted that the school’s communication tools have helped them to know about the local culture and also comprehend the school’s environment. Adnan on the other hand noted that the school’s communication tools have helped them to know about the local culture and also comprehend the school's environment. He stated, “They [digital tools] helped us at least. Gather our thoughts and understand the school environment, because, without those communication tools, we wouldn't know really nothing about this [local] culture”.

CONCLUSION

The research study shows that the use of social media networks and modern digital tools will enable parents not only to communicate with teachers and the school but also with other parents’ community. Social media communication thereby could help build a community among parents as well as it could expanding parent engagement to include culturally diverse parents which can benefit families, schools, communities, and for the futures of individual children. Also, throughout this study, it was made clear that diverse parents benefited from using social media as it assisted them to learn about the interior cultures, traditions, and annual feasts that are customary in the United States of America. This study also showed that the use of social communication among parents has become a means for parents to solicit academic support for their children. Parents could use social media platforms to communicate among themselves to show solidarity and cooperation to obtain academic support for their children.

Also, earlier indicated, the analyses of the data took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers further realized the study could be relevant as physical contact between humans has been restricted. Thus, the increase in COVID-19 should serve as a hint to school to find possible means of improving and maintaining teacher-parent communication. A pandemic should not further widen the gap between parents and schools. It is against this that schools need to effectively utilize emerging technology to stay in contact with parents and build a sense of community using social media tools. Schools should also assist parents to realize the usefulness of using communication technology tools to connect with the schools.

This study included only five participants and it will be relevant to include more participants in future studies. Also, the pandemic became an obstacle since the study made provision for only face-to-face interviews as a result, not all targeted participants were accessed by the researcher.
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