Research Paper

An Assessment of The Use of Social Media to Engage Parents in Zimbabwe Secondary Schools: A Case of Bulilima District, Zimbabwe.

Muchemwa Stella[1], Ncube Ruth,[2]

[1]Lecturer In The Languages And Communication Department, Solusi University.
[2]Lecturer In The Languages And Communication Department, Solusi University

Abstract: *In today's technological era, communication has been made easier, faster and more reliable than in the past. This is mainly due to the use of technology; even parent can track record of what happens at school. This study assessed the use of social media as communication strategies between parents and secondary school authorities in Zimbabwe. The researchers interviewed deputy headmasters from all boarding secondary schools in Bulilima District, Zimbabwe. Findings showed that schools communicate and engage with parents pertaining to school issues that involve their children, for instance, meetings; prize giving days; disciplinary issues; payment updates; consultations and education policy making. When asked whether the parents have social media gadgets for communication purposes, the respondents concurred that a reasonable number of parents have smart phones and only few parents have computers. Few school authorities said that they are mainly limited to phone calls when communicating to parents due to predicaments in their geographical locations. The study concluded that although technology can be used whenever possible with satisfying results, in terms of efficiency and timely, it cannot necessarily substitute face to face communication between the schools and the parent but only complement it.*
KeyTerms: *parents engagement; social media; communication*

I.   INTRODUCTION

Development in technology has made life in most spheres, including communication, easy and reliable making the world a global village. Most of the societal members of the global family are taking advantage of such developments including parent when communicating with their children's school authorities.Fleming(2012) purported that digital technology is providing a growing variety of methods for school leaders to connect with parents anywhere and at any time. In Zimbabwe, Museka and Taringa (2014) argued thatsince the turn of the new millennium the country has experienced extensive expansion of internet access through desktop computers, laptops and cell phones.

Communication between the school and parents is crucial for it enhances the student's development. Henderson and Mapp (2002) argued that the evidence is consistent, positive and convincing that families have a major influence on their children's academic achievement in school and general achievement through life. They further elaborated that this is because when schools, families and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more. Harvard Family Research Project (2014) realized that social media provide parents, practitioners and policymakers with the means to stay up-to-date on the ways that technology can be harnessed to enhance children's learning.

Cooper (2014) established through research that parental involvement increases the odds for student success in a number of ways, including better attendance, higher grades and test scores, and better social skills and behavior. Students with involved parents were also more likely to attend post-secondary education. Cooper (2014) quoted Joyce Epstein's six specific areas in which schools can engage parents:

- Parenting – Schools can offer information and tools that help parents better understand their child's development and create a home that facilitates learning.
- Communicating – Schools can communicate important school events and information with parents.
- Volunteering – Schools can recruit parents and families to volunteer at the school and at related community events.

- Learning at home – Parents need information on classroom activity so they can help their children continue their learning at home.
- Decision making – Parents want to be involved in important school decisions. Surveys, PTO meetings, and community discussion provide that opportunity.
- Community collaboration – School can develop partnerships with neighboring businesses and organizations to provide services to the community.
- Henderson and Mapp (2002) also highlighted that many studies in America found that students with involved parents, regardless of their income and background, were more likely to:
- earn higher grades and test scores, and enroll in higher-level programs.
- be promoted, pass their classes, and earn credits.
- attend school regularly.
- have better social skills, show improved behavior and adapt well to school.

This means that parents' involvement in school affairs is an important strategy for addressing the students' achievement gap. This is also supported by Zebron, Sigauke, and Musingafi (2013) who listed the various functions of the family that include biological, physical and physiological care as well as educational related ones.

When considering social medial as a communication tool, there are two-way communication digital tools which 712 Educators (2015) named as E-mail and social networking. They argued that a direct e-mail communication between the school authorities (including teachers) and parents can convey positive messages and confirm actions in supporting student learning. Likewise, some schools have Twitter accounts and Facebook accounts that allow interaction among parents, teachers and other community members with the following advantages: information can be disseminated and shared instantly; photographs from school events can be shown and resources that are connected to student learning can be shared leading to greater transparency.

Blogs (using free blog software such as and WordPress) and Wiki platforms can be utilized for similar uses for they can be can be organized and maintained by multiple people. Also, their pages can accept comments from readers. Live Chats, for instance, Skype and Google Hangout can also be utilized for online meetings especially in urban setup, with the main convenience of minimizing travels.

Stribbell (2014) gave his self-experience information as a teacher in America when technology for communication became a necessity as his school expanded. They resorted to a School Website and they used Facebook to celebrate the great things happening at the school, for instance: to promote sports, arts, and cultural events; post blog articles, news items, and announcements, publish fundraising goals and Share educational mem. Teachers at his school used Twitter to ask questions, share resources and document learning activities. LinkedIn was used to recruit potential teachers and reach the working parents and to post major school events and announcements. YouTube blogs were also used at that school.

This study used the Engagement Theory as it has been modified by Marcum (2011). This has been done in order to show a clear picture of the concepts under consideration in the study. Marcum (2011) argued that engagement occurs when people undertake tasks related to their competence, immerse themselves and persist because of the value they attribute to the work. He further elaborated that engagement occurs when an individual/group undertake tasks related to their interests and competence; when they participate freely with the associates because of the value they attribute to the work. This means that the engaged agents choose to participate because they can influence the decisions taken. This theory is therefore suitable to the study since schools engage parents, value their contributions, hence meaningful participation of parents into their children's related activities.

II.   LITERATURE REVIEW

Campbell (2011) argued that recent government publications such as the 2010 white paper, the special educational needs (SEN) and disability green paper commented on the importance of parental engagement. His study explored how different schools engage hard-to-reach groups of parents. Findings showed that all forms of positive parental interaction with the school are important and can have a positive impact on children's learning, behaviour and school attendance. The research also found that schools in different contexts use a wide range of practical strategies to encourage parents to engage more with school. The study concluded that best approaches to engage parents are tailored to specific parental needs; context was considered an essential factor when considering parental engagement strategies.

Fleming(2012) observed the situation in New York City and realized that through Twitter feeds, Facebook pages and text messages sent in multiple languages, school staff members were giving parents instant updates, news and information about their children and their schools. Also, the districts were providing parents access to Web portals where they could see everything from their children's grades on school assignments to their locker combinations, even to the extent of what they were served for lunch. He argued that even when

socioeconomic disparities in internet access can make such digital-outreach efforts challenging and at times divisive, some parents can be taught how to use technology to become more engaged in their children's education.

Kumar and Malay (2012) designed a study to identify the relationship between school-parents cooperation in enhancing Indian parents' involvement in their child's education. Respondents were parents of students and students who were studying in National Type Tamil Schools in the district of Kerian, Perak DarulRidzuan, Malaysia. Findings showed a moderate relationship in school-parents partnership in enhancing Indian parents' involvement in their children's education. The more the parents felt welcome at school, the higher their involvement in their children's education. The parents also showed higher involvement when the school was cooperative in discussing their children and when the parents were kept informed about the meetings, activities and events that they have to attend.

Borgonovi and Montt (2012) studied researches on parents' engagement in their children's education in Europe under the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). They highlighted that such a study in 2009 which involved 14 countries showed that parental engagement influenced their children's score. The findings from this research suggested that parent involvement is different from parent engagement for the latter is more strongly related to successful learning outcomes than the former. According to the research, activities that are part of parent engagement include reading to children when they are young, engaging in discussions that promote critical thinking and setting good examples to children. Findings also showed that levels of parental involvement vary across countries and economies. The study recommended higher levels of parental involvement that may increase students' both cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes and may help reduce performance differences across socio-economic groups.

In Africa, Falconer-Stout, Kalimaposo and Simuyaba (2014) highlighted that community schools in Zambia are locally founded, financed and managed through a parent community school committee (PCSC). In a study, they sought to establish howPCSC roles may contribute to community school learning performance through comparison of a high-performing and low performing school, each with an active committee. Results showed that active PCSCs can help schools achieve high relative learning performance especially when both pupil and teacher attendance is timely. This requires PCSCs to engage beyond the traditional 'builder' role, which is prioritized in the current Zambian community school policy framework, by tying valuable forms of government support to infrastructure requirements. This study recommends further engagement of PCSCs in order for committees to fully exercise accountability.

In Zimbabwe, Ngwenya and Pretorious (2014) investigated the attitudes of Zimbabwean education managers and school governors towards Parental Involvement (PI) programmes in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province using a survey design on attitudes towards PI and the management style employed in the process. Findings showed that the combined responses of ninety-eight education managers and school governors revealed a sound alliance that existed between education managers and parents where success and failure were collectively celebrated and condemned respectively. The study however showed that parents were excluded in the formulation of the vision/mission statement and in academic issues. This is against the engagement theory.

Another study in Zimbabwe was carried out by Chindanya (2011) who purported that although there is compelling evidence that parental involvement positively influences children's academic achievement, parental involvement has received scant attention in Zimbabwe. His study aimed at establishing how parents in a materially poor rural district of Zimbabwe were involved in their children's education. Findings showed that parents, teachers and school administrators had very limited understanding of parental involvement. They generally thought that parental involvement was confined to activities done at school such as payment of school fees and levies, providing labour for the construction and renovation of school buildings and providing teaching/learning resources. This was based on the belief that parents were too poor and too lowly educated to meaningfully be involved in their children's education (although a few parents believed that their socio-economic status did not prevent them from participating in their children's education). The study exposed parents, school teachers and school administrators made wrong attributions about themselves and each other in connection with limited parental involvement in their schools.

Mafa and Makuba (2013) in a study focused on the schools' involvement of parents in their children's education in Zimbabwe. They realized that participants (teachers) understood the meaning of parental involvement and they were aware of the benefits accruing from such an involvement. The participants confirmed that they were making attempts to involve parents in their schools although with some challenges, hence low levels of parental involvement. The study recommended strengthening home-school ties; equipping schools with the necessary resources to enable them to involve parents in more meaningful ways; exploring other avenues of communicating with parents and sensitizing parents on the need to be actively involved in the education of their children.

The literature above shows that some researches have been done in Zimbabwe on school-parentsengagement and found out that it was limited. This study wants to assess the current school-

parentsengagement state especially considering the development in technology which makes communication easier than before.

III.   METHODOLOGY

Research Design
This research used a qualitative approach.

Population and Sampling Techniques
The population of the study was all the boarding secondary schools in Bulilima District, Matebeleland South, Zimbabwe. Deputy-school-heads were the respondents of the study.

Research Instruments
Formal interview schedules were drafted by the researchers, validated by coworkers and were ready for use.

Data Gathering Procedure
Interviews were done in three manners: face to face interview were conducted to respondents whose schools could be reached (their responses were recorded in a notebook); recorded telephone conversations were applied to far away participants whose interview were through the phone and finally, Short Message Service (SMS) were used for participants where the above two strategies could not apply. After collecting data, the researchers sat, discussed, analyzed and coded the audio interviews, the SMS and book recorded interviews. Commonalities and trends were found and noted. The prepared information was then used to answer the research questions as findings.

4. Findings and Discussions
All the respondents agreed that they communicate and engage with parents pertaining to school issues that involved their children, for instance, meetings (for example, Annual General Meetings); prize giving days; disciplinary issues; payment updates; consultations and education policy making. A respondent explained:

Excerpt 1: We communicate with parents on academic issues, disciplinary issues, school development, challenges within the school operations, special functions as well as spiritual matters. *Respondent 7*
This is similar toStribbell (2014) findings who gave his self-experience information as a teacher in America when technology for communication became a necessity as his school expanded. The responses showed that communicating with parents is not a problem at all mainly because parents' information is recorded in the students' registers next to each child's name. These finding are similar to those by Mafa and Makuba (2013) who found that participants (teachers) in Zimbabwe understood the meaning of parental involvement and they were aware of the benefits accruing from such an involvement, hence they put effort to involve them.
On technology used for communication with parents, the respondents indicated a variety of ways. One responded echoed:

Excerpt 2: We use phone to call parents on issues I have mentioned above. We also sendWhattsapp messages to parents that have close relationship with teachers. But officially we use broadcast messages through administration members only. We sometimes use service providers like Econet. However, our E-mail usage is limited because our internet providers are weak. *Respondent 4*
This finding is supported by Fleming(2012) who observed the situation in New York City and realized that through Twitter feeds, Facebook pages and text messages sent in multiple languages, school staff members were giving parents instant updates, news and information about their children and their schools.
The other respondents indicated that they make use of the old media, that is, the radio, television and the newspaper to broadcast notices. They said that they usually use phone calls for on emergencies (for example, unforeseen changes of dates and disciplinary cases), private matters and when following up fees payments. One respondent summed up the associated advantages as:

Excerpt 3: Instead of sending students home, it is cheaper for the parents and safer for the students to use phone calls. *Respondent 1*
All the respondents concurred that technology can be used whenever possible with satisfying results, in terms of efficiency and timely. Although face-face communication need not to be preplaced, they argued, technology has cropped in with dominance; even parents from afar and even those in the diaspora can be reached out. However, technology can be ineffective at times, for example, when making announcements to

parents for there is need for constant reminders. These findings are different from those by Chindanya (2011) who found that parental involvement has received scant attention in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe.

It was also indicated that where internet is available and reliable, communication between the school and the parents should be continuous and not constrained especially through schools Websites. Parents can log-in and be able to access all necessary information of the school. These findings tally those by Campbell (2011) who found that schools in different contexts use a wide range of practical strategies to encourage parents to engage more with the school.

When asked whether the parents have social media gadgets for communication purposes, the respondents concurred that a reasonable number of parents have smart phones. However,only few parents have computers, or they might have computers but no internet communication especially those in the rural areas.

When answering the question on the frequency of social media use, some respondents said that they use it mainly during the school term when the students are at school. This is when the parents need to be informed about their children and the school most. One respondent said:

Excerpt 4: Communication with parents is concentrated during the school term. If it is at the end of the term, we just send our students with newsletters.

Respondent 10

The researchers had the privilege to see some of the Newsletters from some of the schools; they are usually lengthy. Information they contain include, school requirements (especially for form one students), school events, dates and school development activities.

Few respondents said that they are mainly limited to phone calls when communicating to parents due to predicaments in their unfavorable geographical locations. They either have poor internet connections or they have no connections at all. They also complained that one of the service providers that was prepared to operate in their area (Bulilima District) has proved to be too expensive. These particular respondents wished for the installation of fiber optics in their area.

When answering the question on how can face-to-face communication between parents and educators can be supported by technology, one respondent said:

Excerpt 5: Face to face communication between parents and educators can be supported by the use of technology, for instance when conducting a meeting, power point presentations can be used. This will make issues clear. Imagine when presenting financial statement, showing learners' performance or showing improvement/challenges faced by the school.

Respondent 7

This finding shows that technology cannot necessarily substitute face to face communication between the schools and the parent, it can only complementing it.

IV.   CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that schools in Bulilima District, Zimbabwe communicate and engagement with parents pertaining to school issues that involve their children. Schools use a variety of technology to communicate to parents using new technology, like, smart phones and computers as well as of the old media, for instance, the radio, television and the newspaper to broadcast notices. School authorities said that they usually use phone calls for on emergencies (for example, unforeseen changes of dates and disciplinary cases), private matters and when following up fees payments. This is made possible by the reasonable number of parents who have technology gadgets such as smart phones; only few schools are limited to phone calls when communicating to parents due to predicaments in their geographical locations. The study realized that technology can be used whenever possible with satisfying resultsin terms of efficiency and timely.Although technology can be used whenever possible with satisfying results, in terms of efficiency and timely, it cannot necessarily substitute face to face communication between the schools and the parent but only complement it.

Recommendations

The study recommends the strengthening of home-school ties by engaging parents regardless of their level of income and education as well as cultural backgrounds. Parents and the community should be involved so as to reduce the achievement gap amongstudents. It also recommends the designing of programs that supports families to guide their children's learning starting from pre-school up to high school.

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