

Social networking as a strategic tool in the management of school-based violence

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School-based violence is serious, and on the rise in South African schools. The violence affects learners, teachers, communities and the management of schools. Towards finding possible ways to manage school violence, this article presents social networking as a strategic tool in the management of school-based violence in high schools, based on the results of a study carried out in the uMgungundlovu district of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The study adopted a qualitative approach as a result of the interpretative nature of the causes of school-based violence in high schools. The sample of the study was made up of 18 participants and in-depth interviews were the main data collection instruments in the study. Content analysis using NVivo was employed in analysing data collected in the study. The study revealed how school managers employ social networking as information gathering tool and as a support mechanism in the management of school-based violence in high schools. The information gathered by school managers through social networking enable them develop intervention strategies in high schools that reduce school-based violence and create school climates that promote teaching and learning.

Keywords: education; managerial tool; networking; school-based violence; socialisation; South Africa

Introduction

Globally, several studies have been conducted on the phenomenon of school-based violence over the years, detailing the devastating effect it has on teaching and learning. South African schools are depicted as the most dangerous in the world (Mncube & Madikizela-Madiya, 2014). Mohapi (2014) states that school-based violence is a complicated phenomenon, which cannot be viewed through a single lens to elucidate the rationale behind why learners behave the way they do at home and how that leads to school-based violence in high schools. According to Marais (2011), school-based violence is a global phenomenon that affects one of the core institutions of modern society to some degree in virtually all nation-states. Marais (2011) argues that factors such as a high rate of unemployment, extremes of poverty and wealth, drugs and substance abuse, as well as easy access to fire arms are responsible for the high rate of violence in the communities and schools. School-based violence constitutes the perpetration of violence, violence victimisation, and antisocial behaviours that lead to school-based violence in high schools especially (Furlong & Morrison, 2000). The increase in school-based violence globally, such as the incidents in Columbine (1999), Red Lake Reservation (2006), Virginia Tech (2008), Connecticut (2012), and the Krugersdorp samurai sword killing (2008), proliferate great concern. The overall violent context in South Africa spills into the schooling system, where learners are often victims and perpetrators of violence. Schools' management are constantly looking for ways of prevention.

In the light of the above, this article explores social networking as a managerial tool in the management of school-based violence in high schools in the uMgungundlovu District of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Research shows that school-based violence is escalating despite measures put in place by the Department of Education and by schools themselves, to curtail it (Le Roux & Mokhele, 2011). This article examines the importance of social networking as a managerial tool in handling school-based violence in high schools. The core objective of this article is to unveil the strength of social networking to high school stakeholders as a managerial tool in addressing school-based violence. Social networking brings about the harnessing of information and resources from different professionals that could lead to the attainment of organisational goals, where intervention strategies are created and safe school environments are built in order to promote teaching and learning.

Literature Review

While the creation of a safe learning environment in school is a joint responsibility of all stakeholders; including the Department of Education, parents, educators and learners, school managements are faced with the immediate effects and are forced to do more than record violence at schools but to search for creative ways of addressing it. A study by Harber (2010), on schooling and violence in South Africa, emphasised that although the phenomenon of violence in South Africa is widespread and complex, schools have the potential to work towards its reduction. This study demonstrated how support between cooperating schools, and between schools and the police, can effectively make schools safer places by reducing violent incidences. This points to networking as a useful strategy.

The idea of a network is more recently being utilised in the information and communication technology sciences to denote the connectedness of two or more computers to enhance efficient information sharing (Adujo, 2010:12). Information and networking entities such as Facebook, Twitter, Yahoo and Google are the key players

in this new social networking establishment. Elefant (2011) notes that microbiologists consistently refer to cells as an information network, while ecologists conceptualise the living environment as network systems. Adujo (2010:11) meanwhile notes that the idea of a network was developed and widely used in science, within the context of this article there is an added component, which is that of the social dimension.

Social networking has been described as a physical or virtual network of individuals within society, generally, and in the corporate environment, specifically. Central to the notion of a social network is human connectivity, and much like human society itself, the social network has been the object of several fields of inquiry, such as sociology, political studies, policy, and developmental studies. Although with the advent of the internet and social networking sites, attention appears to have drifted to a more technological form of networking than physical exchange of information and ideas, which represents the important notion of personal relationships. These sites would not qualify for such a name as social networking sites if they did not function to the end of bringing about increased socialisation among people within a particular setting (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

The foundational idea of social networking, therefore, concerns every form of social tie. Social networking represents a complex set of personal and professional connections between individuals and organisations (Machirori & Fatoki, 2013). Several studies have classified social networking into two main groups, namely a personal social network, in which one individual is the cynosure of every other individual's attention and in some cases respect; and group social networking, in which every participant receives as much attention as everyone else and carries the responsibility for sustaining the network. It is the latter kind that, according to O'Neil (2012), helps us to discover who we are and, in the process, to define our existential selves. O'Neil (2012) further contends that individuals within such networks often consciously find it mutually beneficial to remain in the network.

Elefant (2011) describes social networking as an avenue for expanding the number of an individual's social contacts by making connections through other individuals. In the corporate context, networking provides a fitting avenue, albeit informal, to broaden one's customer base and to allow for consultation with other top officials, seeking organisational opinions and solutions to complex issues. Social networking in terms of organisational behaviour implies that aside from the formal work relationships between or among employees and employers of the same organisation, or even across organisations and industries, informal and traditionally freer spaces in which people share their thoughts and inspirations, as well as their

professional problems are helpful, and engender after-hours relationships. Social capital refers to the effects of social relationships derived from such relationships that play significant roles in the lives of the individuals in question (Lin, 1999).

Social networking brings about a commune in which people become aware of one another's strengths and abilities, and are able to develop a certain amount of reliance on them (Ragins, 2007). Social networks lay the groundwork for participants not only to rise to top-level managerial positions, but also to succeed in their chosen careers. The principle of networking in education has not received much theoretical attention, since the focus mainly by practitioners, has been on school improvement. However the interdisciplinary nature of education as field of study, enables drawing on theoretical bases in other related fields such as sociology and psychology. A broad term for these theories has been 'network theory' (Lin, 1999).

The broader category of network theory comprises four distinct theoretical perspectives. In the context of this study, constructivist organisational theory is relevant. Constructivist perspectives assert reality is socially constructed and that human behaviour within organisations is multidirectional conflicting (Bouchikhi, 1998).

Drawing on this perspective, organisations are envisaged to have its own unique culture and ontological perspectives, within the confines of its context. With this mind, Segre (2004) asserts that while organisations have freedom to construct their unique reality, a certain degree of anchoredness is essential to ensure its success. This means that while a socially constructed sense-making is important for effective organisational running, it is not sufficient. Without the input and evaluation of external sources, there is a risk of becoming short-sighted. This form of myopia may hinder the opportunities to engage with in other possibilities with the organisation's environment. One of the ways to prevent only inward-looking perspectives is to encourage networking with other partners (Downing, 2005).

Working collaboratively to build knowledge in teams is valuable when common goals are to be achieved (Borgatti & Foster, 2003). However organisations have its own vision, goals and ways of working and collaboration comes with its own set of challenges. In order for mutual benefit to occur, collaborating organisations need to allow for sufficient cognitive distance to facilitate new insights, while simultaneously having sufficient overlap for dialogue to be possible and constructive (Nooteboom & Gilsing, 2004). However, with continuous collaboration between organisations, they are likely to become more similar to one another (Brass, Galaskiewicz, Greve & Tsai, 2004). Greater similarity is advantageous in that it enables better communication, but it can also be disadvantageous by being blind to alternatives. In

view of the above discussion, it seems clear that drawing on constructivist organisational theory is useful understanding schools as learning communities. A constructivist point of view, contend that for this goal to be achieved, a community of schools, operating within a network, is likely to be more effective than individual ones (Barker, Quennerstedt & Annerstedt, 2015).

This implies that school social networks can be valuable constructs with common of effective teaching and learning. Effective networking is premised on the notion that all schools in the network are committed to a common goal and have the potential to both contribute to and benefit from the network. A further assumption is that of regular and equal participation between staff irrespective of rank (Greene, Choudhry, Kilabuk & Shrank, 2011). The importance of networking is also highlighted within a related theory which asserts that it contributes to the creation of social capital. According to Lin (1999:30), the three fundamentals of social capital are the social embeddedness of resources; their mobilisation; and their purposive implementation.

This perspective, asserts that the significance of networking lies both in its ability to share resources possessed by other stakeholders and to facilitate information sharing between those participating in a network. In this way, networks have the potential to influence social and political surroundings more than given individual actors do (Mills, S 2013). Since knowledge can be built individually and in teams, networks are able to increase the effectiveness of knowledge production and transfer. As N Mills (2011) argues, the value of networking lies in spanning structural holes where information or skills are lacking.

The above discussion emphasises the potential effectiveness of collaboration as mutually beneficial to all actors in a network. However it is important to be aware of the fact that the success of networking can be compromised where actors' capacities are unequal, or in situations where institutional can be found to limit or constrain individual actors (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011).

According to Hadfield and Chapman (2009), New Social Movements has relevance for networks of school managements. However schools are not compelled to become part of networks. When they do, it is totally on a voluntary basis.

The complexity of collaboration is further highlighted by examining Durkheimian notions of anomie, which can be explained uneasiness in individuals, with accompanying feelings alienation. The concept anomie applies to schools where rapid changes in policy and practice create challenges for management and staff especially where they feel isolated. This is compounded by having to deal with the challenge to embrace inclusivity and social

justice, while delivering on the demands of performance and competition (Brass et al., 2004).

In this sense, for networking to be seen as an important way of working, the focus has to move beyond improvement of academic performance, towards broader goals of addressing institutional anomie through fostering collaborative working with partner schools facing similar demands and problems (Segre, 2004). The research on schools facing challenging circumstances by Muijs, West and Ainscow (2010) and Wallace and Priestley (2011) reveal that struggling schools show stronger signs of the anomie and they are willing to be involved in a network with an expectation for more regulation and integration. Their participation in a network is based on their anticipation to be supported by schools with perceived human better resources.

Despite the merits of social networking as a managerial tool in the management of school-based violence, Willard (2006) posits that authenticating the validity of the information provided for managerial purposes remains void, and could be misleading, at the material time the information is required. Collin, Rahilly, Richardson and Third (2011) maintain that inasmuch as social networking has her own benefits in managing school-based violence, there remains a challenge regarding how personal information and privacy are handled. Nevertheless, Collin et al. (2011) insists that social networking enables school managers to develop mobile media literacy, which includes creative content and visual literacy for school managers.

The literature reviewed on social networking suggests that networking may create opportunities for school managers to deal effectively with the complexities of school based violence. It is from this premise that the current study proceeds.

Methodology

This article draws on data of a broader PhD study (of the first author) that adopted a qualitative approach. This is appropriate in view of the interpretative nature of the causes of school-based violence in high schools. The sample of the study was made up of 18 participants. The main data collection strategies included in-depth individual interviews. Content analysis using NVivo was adopted for data analyses in the study. The study was conducted using two high schools in different communities in the uMgungundlovu district of the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa. The qualitative research approach as a research strategy emphasises words in data collection and the inferences derived from these words in the process of data analysis (Bryman, 2012). The study adopted qualitative research approach to comprehend the complex social phenomena been investigated in the study from participants' viewpoint in the study (Curry, Nembhard & Bradley, 2009). An interview guide

that covered the research questions of the study shaped the interviews that took place. The interviews provided an avenue for the researcher to ask participants follow-up questions for clarity. A total of 18 in-depth interviews were conducted in the study.

Data Collection Procedure

The researcher obtained ethical clearance from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of KwaZulu-Natal and a clearance letter was issued to conduct the study. A gatekeeper's letter was also obtained from the Department of Education, KwaZulu-Natal, to enable the researcher to conduct the study in high schools in the UMgungundlovu district of KwaZulu-Natal. Participants were adequately informed that participation in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any point in time. Consent letters were duly signed by all respondents before the commencement of the research. Purposive and convenient sampling were both employed in selecting participants. The study employed semi-structured interviews for data collection in the study. A total of 18 participants took part. Pseudonyms were adopted to protect and maintain confidentiality of each respondent's identity.

A Case Study Approach

The study adopted a single case study technique utilising two (2) study sites in the research. The adoption of two (2) study sites strengthened the understanding of the phenomenon in the study and provided wider evidences emanating from participants in the study (Yin, 2013). The adoption of multiple study sites in the study provided better opportunities for naturalistic generalisation in a qualitative study of this nature. The adoption of a case study approach provides valuable insights and experiences that could generate theoretical ideas in real-life situations. This approach is useful because past problem-solving methodology is applied to forecast solutions to current problems and determine the managerial approach to be adopted in solving the problem (Yin, 2013). The adoption of the case study approach with two study sites enabled the researcher to identify various benefits of social networking as a managerial tool in the management of school-based violence in high schools.

Sample Size

Purposive sampling technique was adopted in the study. A total of 18 participants participated in the study. The composition of the sample was two principals, four heads of departments, four educators, four learners and four School Governing Board (SGB) members. In-depth interviews were adopted as data collection strategy in the study. The sample size for qualitative studies is much smaller than the sample size for a quantitative study, and the

ideal sample size is contestable. For instance, it has been suggested that the minimum acceptable sample size for a study of this nature is 15 participants (Mason, 2010), while Watson (2010) asserts that six participants are adequate in a qualitative research study. In a case study such as this that looks at the causes and management of school-based violence, 18 participants could be considered adequate for the study (Creswell, 2013). Nevertheless, the quality and depth of the data collected from few participants could be considered more relevant to this study, than seeking out a large sample size.

Data Analysis

A semi-structured interview guide that sought to respond to the research questions of the study. With the permission of the participants, an audio recorder was used to record the interviews. Thereafter, verbatim transcriptions of the interviews were done. The transcripts of the interviews were coded into NVivo and tree queries generated, which provided clear arrays of meanings. Content analysis using NVivo was employed in analysing the data collected in the study. Smith and Firth (2011) posit that the strength of NVivo in qualitative data analysis lies in the ability of the software to import data from Word documents.

Results

Telephonic networking emerged as the most used medium of social networking among school managers compared to face-to-face communication. Most school managers networked via cell phones at work and after working hours. The managerial benefits that emerged from the findings of the study are discussed within three themes. These are: (1) creation of social capital; (2) access to harness information and resources and; (3) reduction of turnover rate of teachers.

Creation of Social Capital

Findings of the study revealed that social networking creates social capital. The impact of social networking, which creates social capital, enables school managers to acquire skills and experience regarding how to approach and control risk factors that cause school-based violence in high school. School principals sometimes turn to colleagues in other schools when faced with critical work-related situations that, if not properly handled, could deteriorate into serious school-based violence issues. The findings of the study revealed that networking brings about the exchange of ideas and professional assistance on work-related matters amongst people in the same profession.

Creation of Access to Harness Information and Resources

Participants in the study maintained that they are able to harness information and new trends on school-based violence from other school managers

within the same social networking group. One participant in the study maintained that the prohibition on the sales of muffins by learners in school was as a result of unacceptable behaviour by learners in a nearby school as a result of the consumption of a Marijuana muffin sold within the school grounds by a learner. The banning of muffin sales in school by learners eradicated risk factors associated with Marijuana muffins in schools, which contributed to a school climate that promotes tuition and learning. Most participants maintained that social networking enables them to get valuable information that has increased their managerial skills.

Reduction of Turnover Rate of Teachers

The findings of the study revealed that the harnessing of information through social networking increases school engagement, which shrinks idle time for learners with anti-social behaviours in school, and creates a safer school climate. The impact of social capital on school managers enables them to manage school-based violence matters adequately and effectively, thus creating a safer school environment. Participants in the study revealed that they are willing and happy to work in a school with a minimal rate of school-based violence. Participants in the study posit that they would not hesitate to move if their life is threatened in any form to a school with a safer school climate that promotes teaching and learning.

Discussion

School managers have taken advantage of social networking as a communication medium to harness information for a decision-making process of greater quality at managerial level. Politi and Street (2011) argue that collaborative decision-making brings about improved knowledge, which translates to better decision-making by school managers that promotes pro-social behaviours in high school. A participant stated that;

I call Ntombi each time I am faced with work related challenge. I learn new things which carry out my work better and my disruptive learners better at almost no cost using WhatsApp.

It is evident from the participant's statement above that she acquires a lot of skills from networking which makes her work easier and reduces her burn out rate. The participant does not also feel the huge cost of calling via cell phone, because she utilises WhatsApp calls, which are cheaper and which enable her to talk for a long time, as long as she has data in her phone. As perpetrators find new avenues for perpetrating school-based violence, it has become vital for school managers to share information and ideas, as well as to support one another to achieve organisational objectives and a school climate that would promote effective teaching and learning. A participant revealed that:

Social Networking makes things easier, my friend have a better insight of school policies, so when I have behavioural issues with my learners, I call her for advice on policy issues so I do not get into trouble.

The findings from this study show that most school managers network telephonically, followed by face-to-face even when they are faced with policy interpretation.

Findings demonstrate that the most used medium of social networking to be the telephone, followed by face-to-face interaction. School managers prefer telephonic networking to face-to-face interaction because it is cheaper, and group collaboration can take place at the same time, thus promoting better decision-making. The managerial benefits of social networking identified in the study were that it creates social capital and provides the opportunity for school principals to harness resources held by other principals, thereby cumulating in the attainment of organisational goals. It is clear that social networking brings about significant managerial benefits.

Social Networking Creates Social Capital

The managerial benefit of social networking is its ability to create social capital. The creation of social capital through social networking leads to the creation of intellectual capital which increases managers' capacity to take improved managerial decisions that promote teaching and learning (Adler & Kwon, 2002). School managers gather information that is of vital managerial importance to them. This is done towards helping them avert violence in their schools through developing counter strategies that would defuse their problems. The information gathered from networking could serve as a back-up for managerial support purposes when the need arises. In this case, policy documents and in-depth interpretations of the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (Department of Education, Republic of South Africa, 1996) remain a core tool in managing school-based violence.

The South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 ((SASA), Department of Education, Republic of South Africa, 1996) empowers professional managers and school governing bodies to oversee the running and functioning of public schools to enhance teaching and learning. It states that it is the duty of these two bodies to ensure a safe school environment that is free of violence. Professional managers in the Act are defined as school principals who are the administrative heads of public schools. Jimerson, Nickerson, Mayer and Furlong (2012) argue that schools are tools that can be utilised to reduce and manage school-based violence and antisocial behaviour. Principals are tasked with the responsibility of ensuring that teaching and learning takes place in their respective places of primary assignment and of effectively managing factors that

adversely affect their core duty (Bester & Du Plessis, 2010).

Creation of Access to Harness Information and Resources

Schools and organisations depend on information to achieve organisational goals. According to De Carolis, Litzky and Eddleston (2009), social networking enables access to information, which remains a vital tool in the management of school-based violence. For instance, problems regarding school-based violence may not erupt in a day – sometimes it takes a long time before the actual violence manifests; therefore, the ability of principals to access this information may avert school unrest. Social networking hastens the timing, importance, and value of information acquired by members of a networking group for the attainment of organisational goals (Adler & Kwon, 2002).

Reduction of Turnover Rate of Teachers

Adler and Kwon (2002) contend that social capital reduces the turnover rate of teachers in schools. A participant stated that:

You know, when I have a problem I know who to call to solve the problem. Educators help one another very much and that's why I am still on the job. Aih!!!! with all these school violence issues, I would have long left.

The maintenance of a particular teaching team in a school consolidates specialisation, and in the long run, enables the school to achieve academic excellence. Social networking provides avenues for school managers to engage and motivate one another in this era of increased school-based violence. Prinsloo (2005) is of the view that teachers have a higher tendency to remain in a particular school where learners and teachers feel safe. A principal revealed that:

When we get to principal meetings we bond and exchange cell numbers. So, I call Mr Stone to get insight on his school-based violence intervention strategies to develop for my school.

School managers, like principals, with abundant social capital, can make an immense managerial impact in creating a safe school environment in schools that are free of school-based violence (De Carolis et al., 2009). According to Poland (2003) teachers and learners are justified in fearing for their own safety. The teaching and learning processes are often compromised by the need to address unacceptable behaviours and to prevent violence in schools.

Conclusion

The issue of school-based violence has becoming an increasing challenge for school managers to control and manage. The causes of school-based violence are multifaceted and as such there has not been any single approach that could be adopted by school managers to reduce school-based violence. This

paper identifies social networking as a possible strategic tool school managers can adopt in managing school-based violence in high schools. Adopting social networking facilitates exchange of information and joint creation of intervention strategies. The findings from this case study show that some of the managerial benefits of social networking are the following: (1) social capital is created, which improves the decision-making ability of school managers and fosters a safe school climate that promotes teaching and learning; (2) social networking enables school managers to harness other school managers' information and resources that ease the management of school-based violence in high schools; (3) social networking reduces the turnover rate of teachers by creating a safe school climate that assures teachers of some level of safety in schools and reduces burnout rate. The effective management of school-based violence is critical in order to create a safe school environment for teachers and learners and to promote quality teaching and learning.

Note

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