UNRAVELING THE SPECTER WITHIN: SOCIAL MEDIA IN EDUCATION IN GHANA

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Abstract
It is a commonplace fact that the world is going through a digital revolution. Social Media has come to stay. It is new, it is exciting, it is dynamic, but it is also invasive. Educational institutions are also living through this digital revolution – the pace of change is staggering. Schools, regions and entire countries are turning Education on its head and redefining the experiences of teachers and students. There are however fears of the volatility of Social Media on the one hand and on the other, the possibilities and opportunities it offers Education. The purpose of this study was to explore the use of Social Media in the Ghanaian educational landscape, to find out the opportunities and challenges involved in teaching and learning, and to examine the factors that can contribute to its successful adoption in our Ghanaian context. The study uses a qualitative case study approach, focusing on the phenomenon of Social Media in two selected public and private schools. Twenty (20) teachers were selected in all (10 from each school) using simple random sampling. The use of in-depth face-to face interviews was employed. Respondents were asked a series of open ended questions. Interviews lasted between 10-15 minutes per each respondent. Responses were recorded and transcribed for further analysis. Data was analyzed by coding and using thematic categories. The Research has shown that Social Media has great value for academic related purposes particularly as a teaching and learning tool, however actual use by schools in Ghana is minimal. Findings showed opportunities that include the extension of the classroom beyond the school, learning as a partnership that enhances collaboration, and the enhancement of understanding in socially related topics. Findings revealed challenges with the use of social media with regards to exploitation, abuse and addiction. The technical know-how of teachers and the cultural perception of parents also emerged as challenges and matters of interest. Technical, infrastructural and financial constraints also featured prominently as the main fabrics that create the divide between the affluent and the less affluent in the different category of schools. The research has also revealed that there could be very practical ways of managing the excesses or challenges whilst ensuring maximum benefits to the users of social media. These have implications for policy. Our ability to tip the balance the right way will determine to a large extent whether or not Social Media becomes a useful tool for innovation and development in Education in Ghana.

Keywords: Social media, collaboration, critical thinking, digital literacy, independent learning, virtual community.

1 INTRODUCTION
The rapid upsurge in the use of Social Media is driven by the global revolutionary developments in information communication technologies. “Social Media is seen as a powerful driver of change for teaching and learning practices in terms of openness, interactivity and sociability.” [1]. In this era of technology, students identify a lot with this mode of communication as it resonates with their technical and exploratory capacities and serve as useful tools in their acquisition of knowledge. The exponential growth in the use of social media for education has been largely due to its user friendly nature and convenience in promoting collaboration and interactive learning. In spite of the numerous benefits Social Media offers, there are risks associated with its usage in teaching and learning. [2].

Social Media has been defined as the means of interaction among people in which they communicate, collaborate and share information online in a social dialogue as creators of user generated content in a virtual community”.[3]. It refers to a wide range of applications enabling users to create, share, comment and discuss digital contents. Social Media is also described as dynamic, interactive, democratic, people centric, volatile, social and adaptive. Due to these features, Social Media are often seen as a means to deeply transform teaching and learning practices as more social, open and collaborative oriented.

“The use of Social Media encourages students to participate and create in-depth learning through interaction, critical thinking, and collaboration.” [4]. The student to student interactions and the student
to teacher interactions enhance critical thinking. Students critically look at new information, analyse, interpret and evaluate information. Students build learning communities through collaboration and the construction of new knowledge.

“A number of Social Media platforms have been given credit for their educational application and potential in spite of the fact that these platforms were not originally designed for educational purposes. Several institutions have adopted social media as a means of building relationships with students, disseminating information and class materials, and offering learning opportunities and engagements.” [5]. Facebook can be an effective pedagogical tool considering its three dimensions, which are communication, collaboration, and resource and material sharing. Online games are known to have significant importance in child development whilst blogs are useful in improving writing skills and enhancing feedback among students and faculty. [5]. “The integration of technology and education connotes innovative and influential ways to impact personal development.” [6]

Crook however, cautioned against “the possible tensions that may arise when incorporating participatory practices associated with Social Media into formal contexts: tensions such as reshaping the traditional role of the teacher and student, the closed boundary of school classes as opposed to the open boundedness of Social Media, individual and collaborative learning and their implications for assessment and learning styles.” [7]. In terms of instructional usage, some studies have revealed that performance by students who used mobile phones in class was worse than that of those who did not. One study reported a negative correlation between broad Facebook usage and academic performance among students. [8]. Bowman et al also brought to light the damaging effects of social media and multi-tasking on the education process.[9] Social media usage in the classroom creates distractions and allows students to degrade the experiences of those around them.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the use of Social Media in the Ghanaian educational landscape, to find out the opportunities and challenges involved in its use in teaching and learning, and to examine the factors that can contribute to its successful adoption in our Ghanaian context.

2 METHODOLOGY

The study uses a qualitative case study approach, focusing on the phenomenon of Social Media in two selected schools in Accra: A public and a private school. 20 Teachers were selected in all (10 from each school) using simple random sampling. “A Simple Random sample is a subset of a statistical population in which each member of the subset has an equal probability of being chosen.” [10]. The method was chosen to enhance the generation of a sample that is representative of the group being studied. The subject areas for these teachers ranged from Mathematics, English Language, Geography, Religious Education, History, ICT, Critical Thinking Skills, Biology, Integrated science, Music, French, etc.

The use of in-depth face-to-face interviews was employed. Respondents were asked a series of open ended questions. Interviews lasted between 10-15 minutes per each respondent. Responses were recorded and transcribed for further analysis. Data was analyzed by coding and using thematic categories. Interpretations and meanings were given to the data collected.

Karl Max’s ideas on social capital highlighted the divide that separated the rich from the poor. He suggested that there were 2 types of people that existed: the “haves” and the “have-nots”. These he believed would be in a constant struggle for resources. [11]. He believed the situation would be unfair in the distribution of wealth and would create problems for the society. The same could be said of the divide that exists between the public and the private schools. Public schools in Ghana are characterized by lack of infrastructure, resources, and lack of financial independence. Whereas the private schools are supposedly better endowed, more financially capable and therefore achieve better academic results. The choice of these two schools divides was to bring out the contrast that characterize them and to highlight the importance and the need to bridge the gap in terms of infrastructural support and resources required to enable the less deprived schools improve in their use of social media.

3 RESULTS

The research questions centred around thematic issues such as the general knowledge of Social Media, pedagogical instruction, opportunities and challenges, professional development of teachers,
safety and responsibility, challenges for adoption, and general stance on the use of social media in teaching and learning.

3.1 Social media – awareness and usage

Respondents showed a high level of awareness on Social Media in both public and private schools. Responses reflected and emphasized the nature of social media. Some of the responses included:

“A virtual platform where people meet to interact”,

“Use of technology in imparting information to people”,

“Digital way of interaction among people across the globe”

“Network platform where people communicate, share information, ideas, pictures”

Respondents re-echoed the interactive nature of Social Media and its ability to provide a platform that enhances the exchange and sharing of information, and the building of relationships for different purposes such as social or educational.

A small minority of the teachers in the public school however showed little knowledge on the subject matter. Nonetheless, the general level of knowledge about social media in both schools was high.

The most widely used forms of Social Media in these schools are WhatsApp and Facebook. Others such as twitter, Instagram, tango, snap chat, etc. do not have wide patronage but are gradually gaining grounds. This is synonymous with the larger global picture which indicate that Facebook and WhatsApp have the widest readership.

It was observed from the study that all schools were guided by the regulations of the Ghana Education Service (GES). The institutional body’s position on the use of Social Media was that schools should not allow the use of mobile phones and other electronic gadgets by students. Schools therefore had to adhere to these directives that were in line with the Ghana Education Service regulations. Nevertheless, indications showed that teachers and students were engaged in the use of social media especially in the private schools in their teaching and learning.

3.2 Benefits of social media in teaching and learning

Teachers in the private school indicated that the use of Social Media enhances the understanding of socially related topics and provision of specific knowledge. A Geography teacher for instance, explained the effectiveness of the use of YouTube videos in depicting to his students what earthquakes and volcanic eruptions look like. He argued that in our part of the world (i.e. in Ghana), such occurrences were rare thus Social Media becomes very useful in providing specific knowledge to his students and enhancing their understanding of the subject matter.

Teachers to a large extent believe that the extension of the classroom beyond the school is helpful to the students. According to some of them, they have Facebook pages where they post assignments, and relevant topics for discussion. If a student has problems whilst working on an assignment at home, they are able to contact the teacher for assistance and not have to wait till the next day at school. Discussions are held via these page groups where students share their views alongside their teacher who acts as a facilitator. As summed up by one teacher:

“…….we have a group page where we encourage the students to share their views. We act as moderators, they pour out their knowledge on a particular subject. We manage their views and correct their misconceptions…….”

Another teacher comments on the benefits of time:

“We get connected with students outside the school. The time spent in the classrooms is not enough and requires personal effort from the students that requires research outside the classroom. Social media provides that extra extension that enables the student to continue his studying beyond the walls of the classroom”

According to some teachers, learning is more of a partnership so it stays with students over a long period of time: Teachers highlighted the opportunities that Social Media provides in transforming the roles of the teacher and student from “teacher knows it all” and student as a passive recipient to teacher as a facilitator and student an active receiver. According to one teacher:
“……learning has become more of a partnership, where the student searches for information and shares that information with the teacher. This process enables what is acquired through research and sharing to stick better and knowledge gained stays with the student over a longer period of time.”

Other benefits they shared include the fact that Social Media enhances group collaboration and sharing of ideas. It provides access to useful resources all over the world. Teachers confirmed their ability to address challenges in teaching with other teachers all over the world. They emphasized the importance of social media in developing the culture of research and independent learning, which they believed formed a very solid foundation for higher education.

3.3 Challenges in teaching and learning

Teachers cautioned on the possible exploitation and abuse of Social Media resulting in excessive use/addiction. According to one teacher in the public school

“……in trying to find out information, students are likely to veer into sites that may have very little to do with what they are studying. They go back and find out more and use it in a wrong way which goes against them.”

They talked about the possibility of students being exposed to unwanted or unguided information and sometimes X rated information. They explained that there is a lot of information out there that may not be appropriate for students. Sometimes teachers have a lot of difficulty in disabusing the minds of the students on some wrong information that has been chanced upon. They purported:

“The very Nature of social media leads to students drifting from original purpose of learning to entertainment”

They were concerned about the level of maturity of the students and still believed that a greater majority did not have the willpower to choose right over wrong or to do what is expedient and necessary rather than what is fun and easy.

Another teacher remarked:

“Our A Level students are allowed to bring their lap tops to school for academic purposes however you see them on Instagram and Facebook instead of using it to study. I doubt if they are able to strike a balance between leisure and studies.”

The technological knowhow of teachers was brought to the fore during interaction with the public school teachers. They felt that they were supposed to take the lead as teachers and provide direction. However a great majority of them were still not knowledgeable on Social Media issues and the use of some of these contemporary gadgets. One teacher noted:

“We are very conservative, we don’t want to embrace change, maybe it’s because we don’t have the resources”

Other challenges highlighted included lack of strict monitoring policies, inadequate infrastructure, and unstable power systems.

3.4 Professional development of teachers

By virtue of the use of Social media, teachers are able to link up with other colleague teachers on other platforms and share ideas on particular topics. Teachers having challenges with developing case studies can communicate with other experienced teachers. The private school for instance has developed group pages for teachers where relevant information is communicated (for e.g. skills for the modern day teacher)

According to one teacher:

“Social media improves the delivery style of teachers, enables us have richer information, richer content, and more engaging lessons…”

They highlighted the fact that social media provides easy access to critical information for teachers and other researches that have been done in the field. One teacher noted:

“Social Media makes teachers’ versatile –using contemporary techniques rather than old style.”
Teaching is also likely to stretch the thinking of children and especially the highflyers, who may switch off or find lessons boring without the use of additional enhancers. With the use of Social Media, the teacher by being a facilitator is able to guide the student and make the learning process even quicker.

3.5 Challenges in the adoption of social media

Respondents provided their views on some issues that could affect the implementation of Social Media in their schools. They talked about the issue of perception. They revealed that society has certain myths about Social Media that they find hard to break. In some parts of society, parents and teachers seem to dwell on the negative aspects of social media thereby missing the opportunity to gain new knowledge that could prove very useful. One teacher noted:

“Some parents would raise objections because they really want to protect their children from vices”

Convincing parents known as the “BBC” era of parents (Born before computers) seemed to them a possible obstruction in the adoption process.

“A lot of education is needed to move people from a mindset of conservatism to a liberal, free and open mindset that accepts change.” remarked one teacher.

Financial constraints were a major hurdle that was envisaged as likely to pose challenges in the adoption process. The public school complained of low government funding that barely meets their requirements. They spoke of the inadequacy of equipment again due to lack of funds. One teacher noted:

“……can you imagine that in a school of over 500 students, the GES has only provided us with 5 computers. How do we move ahead with this social media thing?”

They spoke of less endowed students being deprived of benefits and opportunities afforded by Social Media. Children with economically sound financial backgrounds would be able to afford the gadgets and equipment needed to engage in social media, whereas those whose economic backgrounds are not strong would not have the wherewithal and therefore not benefit from the use of Social Media.

Other adoption issues include technical challenges. This has to do with (regular and stable internet supply, high speed quality). Teachers also talked about effective monitoring systems within the school’s central administration. The issue of teacher adaptation to new and trending technology was also highlighted as a possible obstruction to the adoption of Social Media in teaching and learning. Summarizing his views on possible adoption challenges, a teacher explained:

“Students would become more possessed with phones and gadgets and would want everything to be done through social media. Their minds would be more concentrated on the phone. Listening to the teacher becomes boring. Students may think teachers who do not use social media are boring and outdated. It is good to introduce technology in teaching and learning, but we should not lose the student teacher touch in the classroom. That’s why they come to school….for you to monitor progress…”

3.6 Internet safety and responsibility

Responses were sought on issues to do with internet safety and responsibility. Some of the pertinent issues were discussed.

Teachers expressed the need for education on the benefits and dangers associated with misappropriate use of social media. They believed that students needed to be educated on the possible threats and consequences of the negative side of social media.

The need for strict monitoring and supervision was highlighted. The teacher’s role in providing strict supervision in the use of social media is key to ensuring the safety of children. Suggestions were made on the adoption of central monitoring systems in schools where the schools regulate the computers and the gadgets and ensure only particular apps are installed for particular purposes. This would enable some restriction on the use of certain sites that students may want to venture into. In addition, the call was made for schools to adopt the use of monitors and cameras in their bid to control the misuse of social media platforms. Central administration authorities could also ensure the use of codes or passwords for the various sites.
The subject of Moral Education, was brought to light. The campaign for moral discipline and ethics needs to be heightened within the school setting. Students with high moral discipline are more likely to stay away from sites and information that are not beneficial to them. Parental controls should be enforced at home. Parents should be watch dogs and install applications (apps) that control access to particular sites. One teacher comments on the subject:

“For me the bigger challenge is when these children get home…the parents are the first point of call. They should be watchdogs. They need to monitor which sites these children are going to. But the problem here is that some of these parents do not even know how to install restrictive apps or even passwords or codes. It is a real challenge…….”

3.7 Observations

The research brought out some highlights that characterized both public and private schools. As indicated in the introduction, the gap between the seemingly endowed and the less endowed have a bearing on the use of Social Media by these schools.

The Perception on Social Media in private schools was favourably skewed towards its adoption in teaching and learning, whilst perception on the adoption of Social Media in public schools was only partly skewed towards the adoption of Social Media. This could stem from the fact that most of the teachers in the private school were much younger and had the high probability of being in the category of Digital Natives. On the other hand, the teachers found in the public schools were much older and had longer years of teaching experience. This presupposes they could belong to the class of Digital Immigrants.

Major concerns for the private school was the issue of safety and responsibility in the use of Social Media in teaching and learning, whereas major concerns for the public school included affordability, cost, and infrastructure. The differences in concerns expressed show to a large extent the level of progress in the use of Social Media these schools. The public schools were more concerned with the infrastructure i.e. the equipment, the internet setups, which suggests that the schools may not even have started using social media in teaching and learning. The private schools on the other hand seem to suggest they were a step ahead in the use of social media since the pertinent problems have to do with ensuring stability in the learning environment such that good progress can be made whilst using social media.

Even though the schools policy and the Ghana Education Policy indicated “no use of electronic gadgets and mobile phones in school”, teachers and students were proactively engaged in the use of Social Media in teaching and learning. On the other hand, there was no indication of the use of Social Media in teaching and learning in the public school.

Generally, the Level of awareness for both public and private schools on the opportunities and challenges was high.

4 CONCLUSIONS

There are implications for policy makers within the educational sector. Schools curriculum should be tailored to incorporate the use of Social Media in lessons. Teachers have emphasized the importance of Social Media in particular subject areas. Government policy makers need to review their stance on the “no use of electronic gadgets in schools”. Research needs to be undertaken in areas such as the challenges and the benefits of using social media, based on which policy makers can formulate good policies to counteract the bottlenecks that emerge in its use.

There needs to be a shift in paradigm or cultural change in perception/level of acceptance. This has implications for Adult Education. There has to be some form of educational campaigning to bring to light the invaluable inroads the Ghanaian educational system would make if it incorporates the use of social media in teaching and learning. Teachers and parents need a lot of education and enlightenment on the subject matter. In addition, education is essential at all levels i.e. primary and secondary levels.

There is the need for training of primary and secondary school teachers in the use of Social Media tools. Teachers are expected to lead the way in teaching and learning in this digital era by facilitating and guiding the learning process. It presupposes that they are expected to be more knowledgeable in the use of social media and should be a step ahead of their students. Additionally, heads of institutions in collaboration with the Ghana Educational Service could come up with a policy on “training for
teaching via social media in schools”. Teachers should be encouraged to take interest in it and to be adaptive as the world goes digital.

With regards to restrictive use and tight supervision in schools, the Ghana Education Service in collaboration with governmental educational institutes should introduce policies to enhance the monitoring and control of the use of social media in schools. Schools should have privacy policies and regulatory policies that spell out clearly the “no go” areas in the use of Social Media. Regulatory practices such as parents and students alike signing agreements to commit to such policies should be encouraged.

Government bodies responsible for education in Ghana in collaboration with the Ghana Education Service need to make conscious efforts to prioritize the use of Social Media in teaching and learning through investments in technology and resources. There has to be a strategic plan in place to infuse the curriculum with digital literacy by investing funds into an area that could immensely change the educational front.

The study has highlighted the concerns and opportunities Social Media presents from the perspectives of teachers in private and public sector education in Ghana. Social Media offers significant opportunities for teaching and learning, nonetheless, the adaption by schools in Ghana is minimal. The obvious bottlenecks that social media present are inevitable, coupled with technical, infrastructural and resource challenges. The need to revisit educational policies on the use of electronic mediums that facilitate the use of Social Media in schools was prevalent. The responsibility lies with the educators in harnessing the benefits Social Media provides whilst managing the extremes through concerted efforts between teachers, parents, and students. Once these barriers have been identified and managed in our specific context, Social Media could be developed as a powerful tool for driving innovation and development in education in Ghana.

REFERENCES


