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**Principals' Experience of Social Media  
in New Zealand Schools**

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree  
of  
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at  
**The University of Waikato**  
by  
**STEPHEN DUNSMORE**



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## **Abstract**

This study looks at the penetration of social media into the contemporary educational landscape. Its aim is to understand the impact of social media on principals in New Zealand schools through the exploration of their experiences and perspectives, in the context of what is undoubtedly a complex and challenging leadership role.

Social media has emerged as a ubiquitous technology that facilitates exchanges and makes collaborative stake-holder interactions possible (Bryar and Zavattaro (2011, p. 327). The positive and negative impact of this has not gone unnoticed by school principals, who as educational leaders, are expected to keep abreast of contemporary events which might impact on their individual schools. Principals demonstrate a growing awareness of the power, potential and influence that social media wields. This study captures some of those issues and challenges.

This study reflects the experiences of six school principals interviewed from a range of educational settings. The research concern was: How do NZ principals experience and perceive social media? And what strategies can they adopt to address the challenges and impact of social media on their principal roles?

Key findings from this study comprise insights from principals on their perceptions of social media. These include a range of motivations for use of social media and their awareness of the need for an online presence, despite the perceived challenges and the dominance of Facebook. Challenges include the permanence of digital footprints, the right to privacy, managing the misuse of social media platforms and the potential threats to their learning organisation. Insights of the practical issues of the day-to-day management of social media are explored, including the 'public vs private persona' of users, and the higher standard to which principals are held due to the nature of their position. Principals demonstrate that they are resilient - leadership challenges are discussed as is legislation, policy, practice and training and the nature of available advice and support.

This thesis adds to the limited research literature available about the use of social media by principals in New Zealand schools. It contributes to the body of knowledge and acknowledges the agility required of principals in their day-to-day management of learning organisations.

Recommendations to principals include a need to be fully cognisant of their digital footprint and work on the assumption that everything that is ever placed online is public and permanent. They can learn about the many affordances of social media but also be cautious of the sources of information they choose to rely on.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

BoT – Board of Trustees

CERN – European Organisation for Nuclear Research

EduCanz – Education Council of New Zealand

ERO – Education Review Office

FEDU – Faculty of Education

ICTs – Information and Communication Technologies

MoE – Ministry of Education

NAGs – National Administration Guidelines

NZC – New Zealand Curriculum

NZEI – New Zealand Educational Institute Te Riu Roa

NZPF - New Zealand Principals' Association

NZSTA – New Zealand School Trustees' Association

OAG – Office of the Auditor-General

OIA – Official Information Act

PLD - Professional Learning & Development

WPA – Waikato Principals' Association

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# **1. Introduction: Principals' Experience of Social Media in New Zealand Schools**

## **1.1 Overview**

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how social media is experienced by New Zealand principals in their role as school leaders. The scenarios described below may be at the extreme end of a long scale but are typical of the worst-case scenarios that principals across the country have to consider and deal with.

This research sits within my area of interest in principal leadership in a New Zealand context, with a specific focus on the experience of social media on the principal role. This introductory chapter briefly discusses the complex role of a principal and my motivation for the research. The rationale for research in this area, the research question and its significance to contemporary leadership challenges are discussed and explored. It is my expectation that this research will be of interest to busy principal colleagues, many of whom have not had the opportunity to rigorously consider the changing landscape of social media. Education in New Zealand has been subject to considerable pedagogical and political change since I entered the profession in 2004. What appears to be a modern phenomenon, outside the normal ebb and flow of changing philosophies and educational approaches, is the impact of digital technologies and social media platforms, particularly in the education sector.

## **1.2 Scenarios**

The following three scenarios are descriptions of actual events which have impacted principals or educational institutions and illustrate the impact of social media into the contemporary educational landscape. They are worth highlighting in some detail at the outset of this research as they exemplify the influence social media holds over the principalship role. These scenarios are significant, authentic and recent examples of the power social media currently exerts across education. Events such as these do not go unnoticed by school principals who, as educational leaders, are expected to keep abreast of contemporary events which might impact on their individual schools. Knowledge of each scenario provides its own warning of the potential of social media to damage an individual or an institution.

## **Scenario 1: Privacy**

On an ordinary day, in a small country school, a principal gets a call from a parent asking if they have seen the story that has just been notified on their phone, on a newsfeed from the Stuff website. Imagine their worst fears have suddenly been realised when they hear that their school bus driver has been arrested and charged with driving drunk that morning. Further imagine the furore when it turns out the police have used their local Facebook page to identify both the name of the town and the fact that the driver is female; the police have not named the school nor contacted the principal but it is easy to draw conclusions. This news quickly makes its way to Wellington and before they have heard of any details of the incident from official channels, the Minister of Education's office wants to know why they have not been given a 'heads-up' about possible reputational damage to the Ministry. When the principal calls the local police station, the duty office refuses to speak to them, even as principal, citing privacy reasons. For the next three days the school and the wider community is inundated with enquiries from local and national news networks. Despite attempts to communicate through official channels, the principals' own school-age children, school parents and teaching staff are contacted through personal Facebook accounts to help develop the story around the events. TV crews set up positions; the school appears on national news; the principal is bombarded with requests for interviews. The principal is not only forced to deal with the safety issue involving the driver but significant invasions of the privacy of staff, students, families and wider community by the news media in the search for a salacious story.

## **Scenario 2: Hate**

On a Friday afternoon, no different from any other at their school, the principal is winding down for the weekend and ready to go out to the school gate at 3:00 pm to meet parents and see students off for the weekend. Imagine their reaction when they start to get news reports of a massacre through the radio and alerts on their phone. Soon all the news outlets are full of news of the 15 March 2019 Christchurch mosque attacks. Those horrific events are streamed live on social media and then replayed continuously during the afternoon, into the evening and throughout the weekend. Blanket coverage continues across every local news media outlet and across the world. Having processed those dreadful events over the weekend, imagine the principal sitting in the office the following Monday morning when, at 9:10 am, they receive an email from concerned parents. A group of them have just noticed

some boys in the school, holding sticks, pretending they are guns and rounding up students with brown skin – playing ‘Hunt-the-Mussah’. The parents have already discussed it together in their group-chat. The principal has barely had time to process the events of the previous Friday for staff and students. They now have a group of concerned parents who have been discussing what they have seen in the playground, at their school, just minutes before. The parents are outraged and demanding immediate action against those students. The principal has a responsibility to deal with the tragic events of the mosque shootings with the school community. Now they also have to deal with the behaviour of some pupils exposed to the events through social or news media and seemingly content to re-enact them. This forced acceleration of the decision-making cycle, driven by community outrage and the speed of social media, is a challenge to school leadership that is unlikely to diminish.

### **Scenario 3: Court**

In 2020, the principal of an Australian high school won a court action against a group of parents who had set up a social media campaign against her in 2016. The principal decided that the online abuse she endured amounted to defamation. The protracted court case was very expensive for all parties. Some of the individuals involved refused to apologise for their online comments, citing arguments around free speech and fair comment. Some of the defendants in the case were bankrupted. The stress on the principal and her family was significant but she had pursued her defamation case citing her personal safety and that of her children as paramount (ABC News, 2020). Yet in the end, the judgment that was broadly in favour of the principal also raised some worrying precedents that might be repeated here in New Zealand. In the judgement it was stated that a principal is not only a private person but has a public persona and as such is held to a higher standard of behaviour. This also implied the right to be targeted with personal attacks in the execution of a professional role. Many principal colleagues might be surprised that one can win a highly damaging, expensive and time-consuming court case yet somehow still be made culpable for embarking on a defamation case in defence of their reputation.

#### **1.2.1 My interest in principals’ experience of social media**

I came into my current role as a primary school principal almost 10 years ago after a career outside of education. What continues to challenge me and retain my interest is the degree

of diversity and complexity associated with the principal role. My previous experience of work, in a variety of challenging positions, was that one had to become an expert at something relatively complex but specific and then move on to become an expert at something else in a new role. What I find most interesting about the principal role is the requirement to be an expert on many things simultaneously or immediately learn to be an expert on anything that might suddenly arise. No matter the size of a school, the demands of principalship are many and various, the lines of responsibility onerous and the size of the task in contemporary New Zealand schools is not diminishing (Branson, 2014, p. 11).

### **1.2.2 A principal's role**

In New Zealand, the reforms of the 1989 Education Act established schools as self-governing legal entities, separate from the Crown (Education Act, s107, 1989). The breadth of the role that the Principal is responsible to the Board and school community for is worth re-stating here.

Areas of practice highlighted in the principals' professional standards, as stated in the Primary Principals' Collective Agreement (NZEI, 2019) include:

- Culture: Provide professional leadership that focusses the school culture on enhancing learning and teaching
- Pedagogy: Create a learning environment in which there is an expectation that all students will experience success in learning
- Systems: Develop and use management systems to support and enhance student learning
- Partnership and Networks: Strengthen communication and relationships to enhance student learning

There are organisations outside of school that provide advice and guidance to ensure these organisational and managerial tasks are carried out effectively. The New Zealand School Trustees Association (NZSTA), the Ministry of Education (MoE), the Education Review Office (ERO), the Office of the Auditor General (OAG) amongst others, including the education sector unions, are established to guide and support schools. However, speaking from experience, the advice a principal can receive is often unclear, contradictory or incomplete.

It is important to also recognise the role of Boards of Trustees (BoT) at this point. Boards are elected from the communities in which schools sit. Normally five or more representatives are elected from the community to provide a governance role for the school, setting the strategic direction and establishing governance for the school by developing policy. The mission of NZSTA as stated on its website is to “Lead and strengthen school governance in New Zealand” (NZSTA, n.d.) <https://www.nzsta.org.nz/our-organisation/> In every case the key role in the school remains that of the principal.

The principal’s role in a school is also contradictory. The recent review of education in New Zealand (Tomorrow’s Schools Independent Taskforce, 2018) noted that the principal’s position is that of employee of, chief advisor to and also member of a school board. The principal sits at a nexus of being responsible to the board for the day-to-day running of the school within the board’s policy framework, yet simultaneously the chief advisor to the board in the formulation of that policy. It is my experience, and the experience of many colleagues, that boards are often wholly reliant on the principal to ensure that the board’s governance role is fulfilled adequately whilst still ensuring the efficient running of the school itself. There are many highly effective school boards but continuous change in the educational sector, and the significant challenges this presents, can be hazardous to principalship.

It is interesting to note that in 2018/19 alone, 15 primary school principals have had exits from their schools negotiated by the New Zealand Principals’ Federation (NZPF) under the Legal Assistance Scheme (NZPF, n.d.). This scheme allows principals to access independent legal advice when a conflict arises in relation to their employment. School BoT are represented in the employer role by NZSTA. The complexity of principal leadership in New Zealand schools is not diminished by the rise and perceived threat from engagement with social media, in a professional role.

### **1.3 Research Interest: Social Media**

I suspect that increasing use of social media in schools by teachers, students, parents and media organisations makes principalship even more demanding than ever and I have noticed the adverse impact of social media on my principal colleagues. Many school leaders attempt to utilise social media to increase social capital as part of a school communication strategy, or to maintain professional networks, while others choose to try and ignore it. In 2018, I came

across a Facebook post (since removed) on the NZ Principals' Closed Facebook page. In the post, a beginning principal asked for advice in regard to a parent with history as a sexual abuser. The dangers associated with this post highlighted to me the awareness that social media platforms, tools and responses to their use requires a nuanced understanding for any educational leader. Placing privileged yet identifiable information online, leaving a digital footprint, seeking the wisdom of crowds over expert advice, looking for swift, not always thoughtful responses are but a few of these dangers, others of which are highlighted in the scenarios shared at the start of this chapter.

### **1.3.1 Introduction of digital technologies in schools**

Since the 1990s there has been a desire by governments in New Zealand to introduce and integrate the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for learning in schools. These initiatives include:

- Interactive Education: An ICT Strategy for Schools (Ministry of Education, 1998)
- Digital Horizons: Learning through ICT (Ministry of Education, 2002)
- Enabling the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learner: An e-learning Action Plan for Schools (Ministry of Education, 2006)

The major revision to the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) in 2007 invited schools to explore "... how ICTs can open up new and different ways of learning" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 36). The emphasis until recently has been leveraging ICTs for improved learning outcomes. However, the rapid development of what was formerly known as Web 2.0 in the early part of this century and the subsequent rise of contemporary social media platforms across society present quite different challenges for principal leadership.

Much has been written about the complex role of the principal as the leaders in any school. Gronn (2003) and Hargreaves (2005), amongst many others, have explored the motivations, philosophies and styles that can be adopted by school leaders. Notwithstanding any of the models, the specific attributes of a principal or approach being taken to lead a school, the common theme is that 'the buck stops here' with the principal, no matter what the circumstances or events that take place. The current and emerging challenges of social media

amplify and accelerate the demands on a principal to learn and adapt their leadership qualities to accommodate them.

### **1.3.2 Implications of social media platforms for principals**

School principals require an awareness of educational and social trends that impact on their learning organisations (Senge, 2006). The emergence and rise of social media as a common tool of choice for communication and collaboration by teachers, the school community and students indicate that it cannot be ignored. As such, principals are forced to embrace tools for which they may have had no training or expertise. There is an expectation that principals adopt social media tools with little guidance on how to do so in a professional, ethical, safe and socially acceptable manner (Forbes, 2017). Amongst all the other roles of principalship, the abundance of social media has begun to shift the role of the school leader from site administrator to community engagement specialist (Dixon, 2012). It is not possible for effective principal leadership to ignore social media; awareness of the platforms, tools, opportunities, threats and responses to use of social media is a vital part of the armoury for a modern principal.

There are some complex ethical issues to be considered including the blurring of lines between what is public and what is private (Warnick & Warnick, 2016). This a particular issue in smaller schools where the role of the principal may include that of a teacher as well as a community leader, whilst at the same time the principal may also be living within the community in which they work. Legal issues can emerge around freedom of expression on the one hand and the expectations of the teaching profession on the other. Principals enjoy a degree of latitude not available to many government employees but this does not confer on them the absolute right to speak their mind on any subject that takes their interest. It might leave a board of trustees vulnerable and in conflict with either government policy or the Code of Professional Responsibility and Standards of the Teaching Council (Teaching Council, n.d.). The wellbeing of school staff and community must also be a consideration where adverse publicity is drawn or negative comment is made on social media. Individuals within a school community may place themselves at risk by entering online debate in regard to contentious subjects, where polarising of opinion is common and binary solutions are the norm.

These issues matter because what are now seen by many as ‘societal norms’ are not universally agreed on across all sectors, particularly in Education.

#### **1.4 Introducing the Imperative for Research**

Dede (2016) contends that “An increasing proportion of people in all age groups are using social media as the dominant means of informal learning, developing strengths and preferences in how they create and share knowledge and in what types of authority they accept as certifying its accuracy” (p. 92). Currently, Facebook is the dominant player in the social media space. “It is compelling for one reason in particular: meeting parents, caregivers, and learners in the space where they ‘hang out already’” (McLeod and Lehmann, 2011, p. 175). It is my hope that my research findings may raise awareness across NZ schools, help to suggest guidelines for principals, and help to identify areas where supporting policies may be developed. For school principal leadership to remain effective in the longer term, social media cannot be ignored.

##### **1.4.1 Principals’ experience of social media in New Zealand schools**

By interviewing a number of current NZ school principals, I expect to gain an insight into their understanding of social media challenges and opportunities in a contemporary educational context. I will explore how they understand evolving social media platforms and trends that affect their roles as leaders, how they utilise and encourage (or otherwise) a ubiquitous societal change that shows no sign of receding.

##### **1.4.2 Organisation of the thesis**

The thesis is set out in six chapters, described as follows:

###### *Chapter One: Introduction and Overview of the Study*

This chapter begins by contextualising the role of social media in New Zealand schools and provides a rationale for studying the principals’ experience of it. The research interest of how social media impacts a principal’s role, the overarching aims of the study and the consequential questions this raises are presented towards the end.

###### *Chapter Two: Literature Review*

The second chapter of this thesis is a literature review which undertakes a short historical review of the emergence of social media as a defined concept and a modern reality in New

Zealand schools. It goes on to explore significant issues and conflicts associated with privacy and online identity before concluding with an exploration of some leadership challenges and implications caused by social media in schools.

#### *Chapter Three: Research Methodology*

Chapter three scopes the research paradigm, ontology and epistemology adopted for this research. It sets out and justifies the role of the researcher and use of the chosen research method together with selection of the interviewees and consideration of how the data is analysed. The chapter concludes with a description of the quality of the research and a restatement of ethical considerations the study has taken into account.

#### *Chapter Four: Report of Findings*

This chapter presents a summary of the data from the six interviews undertaken with the principals. It introduces the individuals themselves using pseudonyms, to provide a reader some general background and context before grouping the findings under three overarching but complimentary themes. It uses both direct quotes as well as noting general responses from the group to the interview schedule.

#### *Chapter Five: Discussion*

This penultimate chapter links the literature to the findings using the research question framework to identify areas of interest and overlap. The discussion also identifies areas of similarity and disparity arising from the interview data before exploring some of the contemporary challenges to principalship that social media presents.

#### *Chapter Six: Conclusions, Recommendations and Limitations*

The sixth and final chapter presents conclusions that arise from the research and suggests areas for potential further study. This chapter concludes by identifying limitations of this thesis as a piece of research.

The following chapter is the literature review. It encompasses some of the evolution of social media, emerging issues associated with its use and contemporary challenges for principal leadership this presents.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter describes how the history, evolution and growth of social media has been reflected in academic literature and how this has impacted on school leaders. It is presented in three sections, summarised in Table 1. The first section explores the development of social media technologies and their emergence in education. The second section looks at the major issues and challenges for school principals, focussing on the potential of the new technology. This includes how platform use has emerged in schools and impacted on school principals' privacy in their leadership roles. The final section looks at contemporary leadership challenges for school leader, issues facing schools, including legislative responsibilities.

This literature review incorporated a wide range of sources including peer-reviewed papers, scholarly articles and books together with online resources and reports from electronic media and documentaries. Key search words included social media, privacy, education, platforms, legislation, leadership, Facebook. Possible sources were sorted and refined as literature deemed interesting but irrelevant was discarded. This process was repeated throughout the research phase of my study to better reflect findings from the data collection phase.

Table 1. Areas of Literature Review

<b>Areas of Literature Review</b>		
Development of social media technologies & emergence in education	Issues and challenges facing leaders	Need for forward thinking
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Definitions</li><li>• Emergence</li><li>• Evolution</li><li>• Corporatisation</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Persona</li><li>• Footprints</li><li>• Reliability of Information</li><li>• Inevitability</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Legislation</li><li>• Presence</li><li>• Expectation of Abuse</li><li>• In Contemporary Media</li></ul>

### 2.2 Development of Social Media Technologies and Emergence in Education

Social media platforms emerged in light of advances made by technology companies in the latter years of the last century. The platforms incorporated the enhanced communications

capacity of data networks, linking users together and allowing for levels of interactivity which had hitherto been impossible to achieve.

### **2.2.1 Definitions**

Bryar and Zavattaro (2011, p. 327) aggregate a number of definitions of social media and conclude that “Social media are technologies that facilitate social interaction, make possible collaboration, and enable deliberation across stake-holders”. Similarly, Conole (2010, p. 142) agrees that social media are tools and platforms which are “participatory, characterised by user-generated content and peer critiquing”. These complimentary descriptions provide definitions that comfortably embrace the current state of the social media landscape. The emphasis on interactivity and user-generation of content are the keys which set social media apart from other technological advances.

### **2.2.2 Emergence**

The emergence of Sir Tim Berners-Lee’s nascent world wide web outside of CERN between 1989-1991 was swiftly followed by the formal adoption of the globally standardised infrastructure of Web 1.0 under the World Wide Web Consortium <https://www.w3.org> (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 11). Van Dijck identifies the emergence of Web 2.0 less than a decade later as an inflection point where the egalitarianism of enthusiastic communities of users and coders was replaced with corporate entities driven by commercial imperatives. Obar and Wildman (2015) emphasise the transformative nature afforded by the developing technology from the early 2000s. “Social media services enable new forms of socialisation that, when successful, can become integral to the daily lives of millions of people” (p. 749). However, they also qualified this enthusiasm by acknowledging that some forms of social media can also be injurious.

The new term Web 2.0, a pre-cursor description of social media, was first described by DiNucci (1999) as “a transport mechanism, the ether through which interactivity happens”. The development of two-way communications, and interactivity in particular, fundamentally changed the user experience on computers, and later phones and tablets. Another essential feature of the new web platforms was straightforward user generation of online content and the move away from merely consumption to creation. Aced (2013) emphasises that it is the participatory nature of Web 2.0, and thus the creation of content for others, that sets it apart

from the original experience of the world-wide-web in the 1990s. The development of early, easy-to-use platforms such as Facebook and Flickr (2004), YouTube (2005) and Twitter (2006) allowed users to generate content, share and collaborate. It is platforms such as these, existing in an online environment, which make up social media as they are now known.

### **2.2.3 Evolution**

At a fundamental level, social interaction through communication has been ever present. Van Dijck et al., (2018, p. 5) observes that as communication technologies have changed over time, “communicative routines or cultural practices” have also changed with them. The continual expansion, penetration and prevalence of social media across society, including in schools, has forced educational leaders to address the issues this presents. Obar and Wildman (2015) submit that the challenges of social media require dexterity in order to be effectively managed. Although many social media platforms have come and gone over the past two decades, in the early years of their development new uses to which platforms could be put to use were somewhat aspirational and perhaps idealised. Recognising Facebook in particular as “dominating the conversation”, Stoller (2013, p 5) considers social media platforms as a broadly positive opportunity for use across educational institutions as well as between individuals. He considers how educational leaders might use the new communication spaces to better engage others and simultaneously give others personal insights into their leadership.

Contemporary school leaders recognise the importance of communication with their communities and the affordances of social media are many. Dixon (2012, p. 1) sees opportunities for greatly enhanced community engagement and senses an opportunity to “shift the role of the school leader from site administrator to community engagement specialist”. By the end of the second decade of the 21st century, social media platforms are ubiquitous and largescale penetration of the Facebook platform in particular is embedded as a societal norm and a means of increasing social capital. Wang (2013, p. 60) states that “all levels of educational institutions have embraced a new way of using social media to communicate with stakeholders” but also acknowledges that often a lack of policies and processes to manage them adequately exposes institutions to risk. That risk to principals in their leadership roles lies in adaptation to the speed of technological innovation, preparation

for effective use of social media in a professional setting and understanding of the potential consequences when things go wrong with their use.

#### **2.2.4 Corporatisation**

Microsoft's acquisition of LinkedIn (Microsoft, n.d.) illustrates the amalgamation and corporatisation of platform ownership. The lines between purely social platforms or networks as distinct to professional ones is increasingly blurred. Facebook in particular makes links between personal and professional accounts for the same person. This can be seen with 'friend' recommendations appearing in one account that appear to have been gleaned from another. The algorithms that make separation of roles increasingly difficult to maintain is a contest unlikely to be won at the individual level. As Van Djick et al. (2018, p. 10) note, the algorithms are "everything but transparent... (are) increasingly complex and are subject to constant tweaking". In the educational sphere they also identify that the "platformization" (p. 118) and therefore commercialisation of data goes hand-in-hand with a tech company's business model. Altruism, and education as a public good, "cannot be seen as apart from the larger ecosystem of connective media through which (tech companies) thrive" (p. 119).

### **2.3 Issues and Challenges Facing Leaders**

As noted in the introduction to this research, school principals have complex roles which encompass a wide variety of tasks ranging from the mundane and routine, to management of their school in moments of crisis. The inexorable rise of social media has added significantly to the challenge of school leadership. Expectations for their use, lack of adequate training and the serious consequences of getting things wrong may place principals in precarious positions, not entirely of their making.

#### **2.3.1 Persona**

For many members of a wider school community, the private and personal persona of the principal appear one and the same. With the increasing prevalence of social media, it is becoming increasingly difficult for school principals to maintain any form of separation. Van Djick (2013, p. 200) notes that it is implicit that social media platforms push to achieve a "uniform online identity" so that the advertisers, on whom the platforms rely, can maximise their use of "truthful data". The willingness of school principals to adopt and utilise platforms such as Google Workspace, Facebook, YouTube or Twitter and LinkedIn in educational

contexts merely extends the data the big tech companies 'scrape' for future commercial use. Mancosu and Vegetti (2020) describe how the systematic collection of user data is ongoing through the Facebook platform, despite regular reports of periodic legal scandals and dubious ethical practices involving the company. The algorithms that sit behind the platforms work relentlessly to make connections across their networks, thus eroding the perceived privacy of the principals as discrete users in multiple roles.

As technology companies have gradually aggregated social media platforms and aligned formerly separate online entities, it is becoming harder for any principal to disaggregate their personal and professional persona. This is one of the key fears of professional educators. Forbes (2017, p. 177) identifies the potential for unethical, irresponsible and possibly illegal use of social media to impact on the professional credibility of users. Fox and Bird (2017, p. 649) refer to potential generational differences between social media users in maintaining work-life separation and balance, whilst at the same time attempting to keep separate identities. This is challenging for many educators but may be mitigated by their adoption of many differentiated 'I' (identity) positions as social media users. This potential for identity discontinuity reflects the tensions, overlaps and gaps social media presents school principals in their professional roles.

Key in attempting to manage these challenges are the privacy and security settings for each platform. However, Cho and Jimerson (2017, p. 896) identify that the myriad of different security settings across social media platforms is an inhibiting factor when considerations of user confidentiality are taken into account. They conclude that is unlikely that the casual user will be able to take full advantage of these affordances and "it will become important to attend to the intended and unintended consequences of interacting in these environments" (p. 897). The prevalence of Google applications in schools, provided free to educational establishments, has implications for any user. Though Google's terms and conditions have changed over time to address some privacy concerns, the company still gathers huge amounts of data and aggregates it.

### **2.3.2 Footprints**

As part of their high-profile positions in school, principals are generally expected to be the public face of the school. However, use of social media platforms in schools leaves principals

with the issue of managing their online digital identities and therefore their digital footprints. Cho and Jimerson (2017) explore how school leaders manage the dichotomy of engaging publicly using Twitter whilst maintaining (or even minimising) details of their personal identity and yet still connect meaningfully online. They explore the multiple roles of being both instructional leaders and the official voice of the school; they highlight the need to manage digital identities and compartmentalise personal and professional interests (p. 892). When principals use digital platforms to speak on behalf of the school, the permanence of those digital footprints should be recognised. Whilst acknowledging the potential advantages of Twitter and other platforms for online professional learning, they also note the emergence of self-censorship online in recognition of such footprints. This in turn might inhibit “open, honest conflict and discussion” which is the hallmark of academic debate (p. 896).

When judging whether or not a digital footprint has the potential to affect privacy or security a number of factors have to be taken into consideration. Muhammad et al. (2018, p. 572) identify them as Risk, Control and Trust, stating that it is the “self-perceived sense of risks in leaving personal information on social media and their sense of trust in social media providers (privacy) have a huge impact on their use of social media and their digital footprint generation.” This level of trust is likely to vary between users and platforms which in turn will reinforce or deter the willingness to leave a digital footprint.

Zimmer and Kinder-Kurlanda (2017, p. 78) further consider the permanency of digital footprints against the background of the European Court of Justice 2014 decision to force search engine operators to consider removal of personal information in certain situations. This is a complex area and not all social media platforms adopt the same strategies for managing data. In the case of Twitter, they explore how retention or deletion of tweets illustrates the dichotomy of creating digital footprints in relation to some uses of social media. Twitter retains all tweets from active accounts for research or paid-for purposes; at the same time Twitter permanently removes deleted tweets or suspended accounts from its historical archive. Whilst this raises issues for some researchers for the collation and validation of data, not all general Twitter users, or indeed school principals, would be aware of this facility. In any case, tweets can still be copied and downloaded outside of the Twitter platform’s official

archive and may remain public in another form. This is likely to be an ongoing digital privacy concern.

As at August 2020, the Google terms of service stated that in order to operate and improve services, data collection “includes using automated systems and algorithms to analyse your content”. This is something principals, teachers and students should develop a heightened awareness of, in relation to establishing a digital footprint or profile, which is held, analysed and monetised, by a tech company.

### **2.3.3 Reliability of information**

One of the major perceived advantages of adopting social media platforms in schools is the ability to quickly access information and collaborate with colleagues. Facebook in particular, with more than three billion active users (Facebook, n.d.), is the predominant platform for communication within many school communities and between principal colleagues. That is not to say that information on this or any other social media platform is always accurate or reliable. Ditto and Lopez (1992, p. 1) identified that “information consistent with a preferred conclusion is examined less critically than information inconsistent with a preferred conclusion” also known as confirmation bias. Furthermore, Rong et al. (2015, p. 267) conclude from their study of online debates that social media users “become opinion allies or enemies if they often support or oppose each other”. Thus, online discussions may lead to groupthink whereby people make conforming decisions and minimise critical thought. This undermines the aspiration that access to information through social media will be free of deliberate or unintentional biases.

The notion of sourcing accurate information through the wisdom of crowds is further challenged by Baeza-Yates and Saez-Trumper (2015) who suggest a limited number of very active users on Facebook and Twitter may generate the wisdom others rely on. This is exemplified through the New Zealand Principals’ Facebook page which has over 1000 registered users but may have many fewer active participants. Reinforcing this concern, Bhatt et al. (2017, p. 912) suggest, from their analysis of Twitter users, that lack of diversity between users may be a limiting factor of “self-organising structures, such as communities and cliques, using social media data”. Information overload is often a problem encountered by school principals and in the attempt to make sense of this, reliance on social media may prove a

misleading or limited source of accurate and balanced information. As Robert and Romero (2015) hypothesise, the very fact that a larger crowd might have a diverse range of knowledge and skills might tend to decrease the performance of that group in terms of generating the very wisdom that is sought. Thus, the effectiveness of groupthink in generating useable, accurate data is at least contestable. Mayo-Wilson et al. (2012, p. 712) observe that relying on the wisdom of either individuals or groups when making judgements is a complex matter: discernment on social media should be the key driver for a principal when looking for reliable information.

#### **2.3.4 Inevitability**

Notwithstanding the complexities of platform management and negotiating of boundaries there remains an imperative to use, and deeply engage with, social media in schools. Stoller (2013, p. 8) notes that students' digital identities are evolving and the issues this presents principal leadership cannot be ignored. Engaging with social media rather than ignoring the implications, complexities and challenges presented seems a logical pathway for leaders to consider. Acknowledging the non-binary positions of private and public, Papacharissi (2010, p. 307) suggests that effective social media users should engage in a process of "self-presentation" which includes a notion of variable-privacy. This also takes into account varying one's approach to social media use, dependent on the intended audience, and the modifying one's online behaviour accordingly. School principals must therefore become adept at navigating the intricacies and contradictions use of social media presents them in a professional setting. The natural conclusion of this is that social media users, must develop "a redactional acumen (that) becomes a survival skill, as individuals exercise, become comfortable with, and play with a networked sense of self" (p. 317).

This heightened awareness of managing the advantages and disadvantages can mitigate many of the perceived hazards associated with social media use. Chugh and Ruhi (2017), in their review of Facebook use in higher education settings, suggest that there are significant pedagogical opportunities available that faculty and students already take up. Ahlquist (2014) also argues that the educational leaders need to adapt and accept the reality of the changes social media impose on the education system for individuals, groups and the wider community. School principals should not ignore this evolving phenomenon which, whilst no longer new, continues to provide fresh challenges to leadership.

A potentially significant change of practice for many principals identified by Williamson and Johnston (2012, p. 26) notes the potential of social media to “revolutionize the way we lead and the way our schools work”. Prime amongst these is to move from merely sharing information widely in a school community, to leveraging the potential of platforms to provide authentic community engagement. This is a leadership challenge that some principals may relish whilst others will remain wary of. A recent American study by Dodson (2019) in rural Kentucky, that in some ways might mirror rural New Zealand, revealed that the majority of principals were willing to increase the use of social media tools and devices in their schools. There was some division on whether technology was driving educational goals (P. 41) or vice versa but general agreement on the need for principals to undergo PLD in use and management of social media in relation to their professional positions.

## **2.4. Need for Forward Thinking**

Social media use in and across schools presents principals with some hitherto unexpected challenges. Some of these are external and legislative whilst others sit firmly within the purview of the school itself. Overarching all of these is the fact that the principal of a New Zealand school is ultimately responsible to the Board of Trustees for control and management of all aspects of running a school under both general law and the Board’s general policy direction. (Education Act, 1989, Section 76). This includes use of social media in a professional role as the school leader.

### **2.4.1. Legislation**

School leaders are aware that general legislation is under constant review and often evolves against a background of societal change. Williamson (2018, p15) describes how the Harmful Digital Communications Act 2015 is intended to “deter, prevent and mitigate harm to individuals by digital communications” and provide victims with a means of redress. The Act further defines digital communication as any form of electronic communication that includes any form of text, image or recording.

Giving effect to the 2015 Act, Netsafe was endowed as the approved agency to deal with issues and complaints arising. The organisation is very visible across the Education sector in particular and this leaves any school principal with new and complex issues to manage. Although it is widely acknowledged that most improper use of social media between students

takes place outside of a school, the impact often reveals itself at school. Nagel (2018, p. 90), citing the American experience, identifies high percentages of online harassment between students from social media sites. Much of this conflict is later played out in school and may eventually cross principals' desks.

Principals' roles in schools are girdled in general law by many other legislative acts. Rudman (2020) identifies several acts relating to employment law which have to be considered in schools. In New Zealand, the role of Office of the Privacy Commissioner and impact of the Privacy Act 2020 in particular, have become more evident in schools owing to the growing use of Official Information Act (1982) requests to publicly funded entities. At the time of writing the Education Review Office itself details 24 such requests on its website since 2018. Many more remain unpublished. The Ministry of Education website lists 59 such requests in 2020 alone.

In light of such requests, many school leaders have concerns about what is in the public domain and what can remain away from scrutiny. Dalziel (2009) rehearses many of the potential pitfalls associated with use of ICTs in schools in regard to advice around privacy. This is particularly pertinent when conflicting interpretations of what is classified under the term 'privacy' and what is considered under 'confidentiality' are raised by parents who increasingly make demands of principals to provide data or commentary held electronically about students. Dalziel (2002) also identifies many contemporary concerns school principals now share about their own personal information being considered private or subject to public scrutiny. This can include all emails and texts made from personal devices. In turn, this may make principals more wary of expanding their digital footprint by engaging with social media.

A recent egregious case in Australia in 2020 highlighted where the line of public or private blurred and resulted in the defamation of a principal in their public role via an attack through social media. The judgment in the case of *Brose v Balluskas and Ors* (2020) illustrates how abusive comments made via social media can be targeted against an individual as part of a campaign in support of a minority view in a school community. In this case the comments took on an amplified importance owing to the very nature of the comments but also the fact they were distributed on a public forum (p. 30). The ability of any New Zealand school

principal to navigate the developing legislative minefield, without significant expert legal advice, is likely to be very limited.

#### **2.4.2 Presence**

Fullan (2001, p. 51) contends that it is “relationships, relationships, relationships” that are the key to organisational success. Whilst echoing the famous whakatauki “he tangata, he tangata, he tangata”, in a contemporary context, modern methods of maintaining those relationships now include use of social media platforms.

Many opportunities exist for principals to engage positively with social media, especially when informing their leadership practice. Nussbaum-Beach and Ritter (2010, p. 129) state that leaders should “...take the posture of learners themselves. They model becoming connected”. They go on to suggest that cultivation of connected teachers at school level, or with other stakeholders through use of social media, is part of developing stronger learning communities (p. 134). This can be particularly relevant in a New Zealand context where school leaders can be geographically isolated.

Forbes (2015, p. 3) goes further and states that “cultivation of a social media profile and footprint that is in keeping with one’s goals as an educator” is a prerequisite for effectively engaging with other educators professionally using social media. Given the diversity of age, experience and aptitude across the principal demographic in New Zealand schools, some upskilling might be required to achieve this ideal. In the context of using social media for improving teaching and learning, and by implication leading, Forbes (2017, p. 179) also identifies an imperative for all educators to develop social media proficiency and thence a “Professional Online Presence”. This may be a key driver for principals in their school leadership roles.

This potential to leverage effective leadership using social media is emphasised throughout the literature. Sanfelippo and Sinansis (2015) also acknowledge the potential of expanding professional learning networks using social media. They cite a case study where the use of Twitter allowed an isolated principal to connect with like-minded educators, follow leaders in the educational field and develop expertise hitherto unknown. Despite this largely positive picture across the literature of social media amongst professionals, little is made of

potentially significant downsides for principals engaging with social media; the positives for effective use of platforms remain the dominant theme. However, a cautionary article (Ministry of Education, 2015) suggests that use of social media in educational settings may be disadvantageous to a sense of belonging to the institution, rather than engender it. It is concluded that this may be due to the reduction in the quality of off-line social relationships in and across schools, as a result of high levels of social media use by students.

#### **2.4.3 Expectation of abuse**

Many school leaders are used to a certain level of abuse from some parents and students. It was previously identified as an offence under s139(c) of the Education Act 1989, to intentionally insult, abuse or intimidate a teacher or member of school staff. Use of social media throws up some unexpected consequences for principals exercising a desire to engage with social media.

Twitter's rules and policies (Twitter, n.d.) state that "Some Tweets may seem to be abusive when viewed in isolation, but may not be when viewed in the context of a larger conversation." Given the vitriol often displayed publicly on Twitter towards anyone with an opposing viewpoint, it might be expected that principals are reluctant to share a controversial or non-mainstream point of view publicly and in consideration of their digital footprint.

Facebook seeks to mitigate potential abuse of users on the platform through the development of Community Standards. "Our commitment to expression is paramount, but we recognise that the Internet creates new and increased opportunities for abuse." (Facebook, n.d). It also acknowledges that the Community Standards are a "living set of guidelines (which) must keep pace with changes happening online and in the world." The Standards are reviewed at a global level twice a month which gives Facebook an opportunity to 'move the goalposts' as and when they like. Media coverage (Telegraph Online, 2020) and (Reuters, 2020) of Facebook banning a group of one million users critical of the Thai monarchy is arguably an example of corporate decision making to protect company interests above Facebook's previously stated "commitment to expression".

School principals should be prepared for vitriol if their online musings are widely read or in any way controversial.

#### **2.4.4. In contemporary media**

School principals lead and manage their schools in a contemporary environment rich in social media and accompanying commentary. The Social Dilemma (Orlowski, 2020) details some emerging concerns around its use which are highlighted by the very engineers and entrepreneurs who developed the platforms that many principals are now concerned about.

This documentary film acknowledges and informs the reasoning behind the reluctance of some of the principal interviewees in this study to fully engage professionally with social media. Former employees of social media platforms articulate moral qualms in regard to the ethical implications of designing social media which both manipulate and monetise their users. The developers' acknowledged initial intention was to leverage social media technologies as a general public good. However, what later initiated was a process whereby the platforms themselves had to be monetised. Social media companies recycle user data to sell advertising; social media consumers themselves effectively become the product that the tech companies are selling. "Social media isn't a tool that is just waiting to be used, it has its own goals and it has its own means of pursuing them by using your own psychology against you." (Orlowski, 2020, 30:00).

The documentary posits that the whole business model of social media has become focused on keeping users engaged and active on whichever platform to maximise opportunities for advertisements to be served to them. Facebook's invention of the tagging feature, which enables users to identify and comment on their own and others appearances in photos, is a prime example of this platform evolution. Lanier (2018), cites Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now. "It's the gradual, slight, imperceptible change in your own behaviour and perception that is the product." (Orlowski, 2020, 14:24).

Zuboff appears in the documentary stating that, social media has become surveillance capitalism. She argues elsewhere that social media is now established "to predicate and modify human behaviour" (2015, p. 75) and that users have fed social media server data that is "acquired, datafied, abstracted, aggregated, analyzed, packaged, sold, further analyzed and sold again" (p. 79). She identifies a lag in "social evolution" (p. 83) which outruns general understanding of privacy and associate laws.

It is straightforward to connect the concerns of school principals to this background of general apprehension surrounding personal privacy and the commodification of social media data.

## **2.5 Summary of the Literature**

This literature review traces the emergence of social media from Web 1.0 of the late 1990s to the landscape we recognise today and identifies the significant threats and opportunities this presents for school leaders. Agreed definitions accord with contemporary views of what social media actually represents. Associated with social media management by principals, are challenges and privacy issues that come with personal and work-related use of platforms. Expectations for use of social media in school as a communications medium has increased and extra responsibilities have been placed on a principal's leadership of this change. Risk associated with social media use is balanced by the opportunities for professional growth and connection with other educational leaders that are afforded by the simplicity and ubiquity of the platforms.

However, significant concerns about digital footprint persist. There is an urgency from the social media platforms themselves to aggregate persona, scrape data and build ever detailed profiles of every social media user. Notwithstanding this knowledge, there is also an imperative to better engage with students, parents and the wider community in a medium many are very familiar with. This potential advantage of developing an online presence must be weighed against some inertia in the profession and possible reluctance of some school leaders to embrace wider societal change. The corporatisation, and monetisation, of social media has moved it rapidly from many short-lived, niche applications to several dominant platforms with a truly global reach. With this switch, and corresponding exponential increase in users, come questions around the validity of information available online and how this can be discerned.

Legislation has adapted to the challenges of social media in wider society and in schools but left complex and overlapping responsibilities for principals to negotiate. Amongst these is a growing acceptance that school leaders are now open to online abuse or criticism as part of their job. What remains certain that the social media phenomenon is entrenched across society and shows every sign of penetrating deeper into daily life. Emerging from the literature as a focus for this study, three overarching questions arise and form the basis of the

interview schedule. The first question aims to address each of the six interviewees' personal experiences and perceptions of social media; these both inform a professional approach in a work environment and reveal potential inbuilt bias or preconceptions. The second question focuses more on the day-to-day events and challenges caused by social media which add complexity to already demanding leadership roles. The third question is an invitation to take an overarching look at how social media impacts a school in general terms and address what external or internal processes might be in place to assist in managing it.

The next chapter describes the methodology chosen to allow research to be undertaken with principals in New Zealand Schools.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter reviewed literature that relates to the development of social media over time and some contemporary challenges this presents for school leaders to anticipate future needs. The personal experiences of principals using social media, their daily management of platforms in their schools and the wider implications for their schools are the basis for this study. This chapter discusses the choice of research methodology. Earl Rinehart (2017) identifies the role of a school principal as highly relational, so it was with this in mind that I sought to uncover the experience of principal colleagues. However, I also remained aware of potential inbuilt biases my qualitative approach might highlight whilst working with colleagues.

Writing in the *Philosophical Review* in 1927, Dewey explored the circularity of attempting to define Civilization, History and Philosophy. He stated, in relation to Philosophy, that any view taken of the term would inevitably “only expound, in some indirect manner, the view of Philosophy to which one is already committed” (Dewey, 1927, p. 1) and to think otherwise would be to simply deceive oneself. In Dewey’s view, a researcher adopts a position whereby the appearance of “original inquiry” is undermined by a pre-existence of “philosophical conceptions”.

I took heed of the decades old warnings and I remained cognisant of their implications throughout my research. As a researcher there was a plethora of advice in relation to the paradigm, ontology and epistemology of research. In choosing an overall approach for my research I had considered several options, each of which had its own advantages. However, as Savin-Baden and Tooms (2017) suggested, data generated from some qualitative research might now be readily presented as quantitative and vice versa, using digital tools and techniques. “Increasingly, methods overlap, with non-numerical data being recategorized and subsequently quantified” (p. 99). I acknowledge lines of delineation within paradigms that are blurring. Denzin and Lincoln traverse a landscape of terminology and redefinition, and acknowledge the suggestion that research might now be considered inquiry and that previously distinct paradigms are becoming hybrids. “The field of qualitative research is on the move and moving in several directions at the same time” (2018, p 9).

It is against this changing and fluid background that this chapter was written and I clarify the approach I chose for this research. Firstly, the research paradigm is described and justified together with a description of the role of the researcher. Secondly the methodology, recruitment and selection of interviewees and analysis of data is discussed. The final section reviews the ethical considerations of the research and trustworthiness of the results.

### **3.2 Research Paradigm**

This research was located within the broad, qualitative paradigm, still relevantly described by Denzin and Lincoln (1994, p. 2) as “...multimethod in its focus, involving an interpretative, naturalistic approach to its subject matter”. This indicates that qualitative researchers study, make sense of and interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.

Denzin and Lincoln (2018, p 97) later identified five major paradigms and perspectives which overlay research; positivism, post-positivism, critical theory, constructivism and participatory action frameworks. It is within a constructivist epistemology that my research took place; “social reality is constructed by the individuals who participate in it” (Gall, 2007, p. 21). My research question was aimed at collecting the authentic voice of principal participants, understanding their individual perspectives together with their lived reality, in their own specific contexts.

The purpose therefore of undertaking this qualitative research was to “examine people’s experiences in detail” (Hennink, 2011, p. 9) and thus understand the issues being studied from the perspective of the study participants. “It is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018, p 10). My role as a current principal, and connection to other principal colleagues, drove me to this straightforward conclusion.

### **3.3 Role of the Researcher**

Undertaking this research, I considered my role as a researcher carefully. I remain a current school principal, therefore the interviewees were also my colleagues. We shared a mutual interest in the experience of social media in our school contexts and viewed this as a continually evolving social phenomenon. Social media, in its various guises, has remained increasingly prevalent in wider society and impacts our roles as leaders in schools. This evolving leadership challenge was both nuanced and complex and so it had driven me to

conduct some formal research. This contemporary relevance could also be considered “well timed” (Menter et al., 2011, p. 35) and thus be potentially valuable to colleagues and the wider educational sector in the New Zealand context.

Reflexivity was a significant factor I took into account throughout my research. It is “a process that involves conscious self-reflection on the part of researchers to make explicit their potential influence on the research process” (Hennink, 2011, p. 19). This was particularly apposite given the participants of the research were all known to me professionally through local networks and I was employed in the same role, as school principal. After the first interview was completed, I compared my notes and the transcript to the interview schedule and noted that I had followed the expected outline of the interview fairly accurately. As I grew in experience over the subsequent five interviews, I also grew in confidence to interject and tease out details offered by the participants. At the same time, I remained conscious that by developing a strong rapport from the position of an insider-researcher I had to take care not to unduly influence or introduce bias into the conversations and thus invalidate the data. I acknowledged the important position of subjectivity that the study participants held and that both personal and interpersonal reflexivity needed to be constantly considered. I remained mindful that a researcher must remain “sensitive to the important situational dynamics between the researcher and researched that can impact the creation of knowledge” (Hesse-Biber, 2006, p. 146).

### **3.4 Research Method**

Use of the interview as a research method remains an increasingly prevalent medium of qualitative research that has a rich history, and is still evolving. From Booth’s initial use of the social survey in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 647) or ethnography rooted in the 1960s (Menter et al., 2011, p. 129), the interview remains a flexible tool that can provide a rich vein of data for researchers to mine. It is generally agreed that an interview can be considered a conversation or dialogue which generates knowledge. Anderson (1990, p. 222) defined the interview as “as specialised form of communication between people for a specific purpose associated with some agreed subject matter”. An interview has purpose and focus allowing the researcher “privileged access to a linguistically constituted social world” (Kvale 1994, p. 147) and “an inter change of views between two persons conversing about a theme

of mutual interest” (Kvale, 1996, p. 2). The strength of this method and its suitability for conversing with principal colleagues led me to adopt it for this research.

Within these relatively straightforward, complimentary definitions sat variations and complexities that belied an initial surveying of the interview as a relatively direct tool for researchers. Mutch (2005) identified 3 main sub-types including structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews before going on to look at the intricacies of each.

**Structured:**

Mutch noted that a structured interview might be taken as equivalent to an ‘oral questionnaire’ or set of prescribed questions. Menter et al. (2011) also noted a prescribed approach to a structured interview often produced largely quantitative data. Qualitative research, Mutch (2005) argued, invited the use of semi-structured or unstructured interviews. These might take longer but elicit deeper understanding because of the interviewer’s contribution to the process and interaction with the participant.

**Semi-structured:**

This interview variant, based on a set of guiding questions, could be adapted and developed by the interviewer as the process went on. Menter et al. (2011) suggested an analogy for this in exploring general territory from an overall map whereby the interviewer and interviewee(s) negotiated the route.

**Unstructured/Non-standardised:**

The unstructured interview was akin to a conversation around an overarching theme the unveiled itself in the course of the discussion. Likely to be informal and conversational, the unstructured interview sought to understand the research topic from the viewpoint of the interviewee. This could be a particularly suitable approach when complex interactions over an extended period of time might be undertaken to gather data. Kvale (1996, p. 13) cautioned against their use by an inexperienced researcher owing to the skill levels required to make methodological decisions on the fly.

Menter et al. (2011, p. 126) identified the power of the interview as capturing data beyond merely “the descriptive” including explanations of why interviewees acted in certain ways or how certain outcomes might come about. When research on attitudes, perceptions or meaning is undertaken, the information gleaned could act to illuminate social actions and processes that were harder to track using quantitative methods.

In Cohen et al. (2018, p. 508) the interview is conceived either as a means of gathering data, testing hypotheses or acting as an explanatory device, or as a triangulation which validates other corresponding research. They conceived the interview on a continuum from closed questions with limited response options to open questions where interviewees answered in their own way.

After due consideration of the options, I adopted the semi-structured interview as the most appropriate research method. It allowed for some structure to the conversations but also the leeway for me to digress as anecdotes or distinct areas of interest emerged. It also allowed the participants themselves the freedom to raise areas of interest to them I might not have uncovered by questioning.

### **3.5 Recruitment Process**

The initial plan for recruitment and implementation of my research was amended in light of the emergence of Covid-19. I originally invited expressions of interest from potential interviewees to take part in my research through the newsletter of the Waikato Principals’ Association, of which I am a member. I aimed to enlist between four and six principals willing to participate in the study. I was willing to accept up to the first six who applied and hoped to draw from a range of school sizes, experience levels and school types. My aim was to ensure that a range of experience in use of and response to social media would be considered from those who volunteered to assist with my research. If three or fewer colleagues volunteered to be interviewed, I would invite those who had expressed an interest to suggest another participant to take part. A potential conflict of interest was that the participants in the research were also members of the Waikato Principals’ Association. This was mitigated by maintaining the professional standards expected of the profession. <https://teachingcouncil.nz/content/our-code-our-standards> The values and code of

responsibility described in the document reflect the expectation for educators to act with integrity and conduct themselves professionally at all times.

In the event, the Covid-19 national emergency was declared in New Zealand at precisely the same time as I canvassed for interviewees. As a principal myself, I recognised that school priorities took precedence above everything else. The response to my initial invitation was zero.

In order to allow my research to proceed, I consulted with my supervisor and adopted a different recruitment approach, initially approaching colleagues who had previously expressed a general interest in my research topic. A blend of Convenience Sampling whereby a researcher “selects a sample that suits the purposes of the study” (Gall, 2007, p. 175) and Snowball Sampling whereby a researcher “might discover an increasing number of well-situated people” (p. 185) to take part in the study proved effective. One participant suggested another and so-on. I recognised that this selection of participants was unlikely to have been as random as would have been the case if responses to the advert had been accepted in order. In addition, I considered how my knowledge of the participants contexts might introduce bias into my interviews. Notwithstanding these considerations, a group of six principals, three males and three females, from a range of small to large primary schools selected in rural, semi-rural and town locations proved sufficient for data collection.

This amended methodology may have relieved pressure on the wider group of colleagues I initially aimed to recruit from. Despite the necessary change in process for interviewee selection, participation in the study was still wholly voluntary. One potential interviewee initially accepted the opportunity but later withdrew due to workload pressures. I was not seeking to generalise any findings but rather understand particular individual experiences with social media so this withdrawal was only a minor difficulty.

At the start of each interview the participants were invited to summarise their career trajectory to date. At the end of each interview, they were invited to summarise their thoughts in relation to use of social media in their professional roles. This was also an opportunity to interject any other thoughts that had not been discussed or uncovered during the interview itself, or to be provided later by email. The interviews themselves were

focused around the guiding questions in the interview schedule that the interviewees had previously been sent. The questions were broad enough to encompass a range of experience and the semi-structured format allowed for digression when the occasion arose. This permitted the interviewees a degree of latitude when answering and elicited authentic, unscripted and personal responses to the questions.

### **3.6 Data Analysis**

As acknowledged by Menter et al., (2011, p. 146), even a small group of interviews might result in a large volume of data. In the case of this study the six, up to one hour-long interviews were fully transcribed from audio and zoom/video recordings of the interviews. These were checked by both myself and the participants carefully for accuracy prior to coding. Given the quantity of data, I consulted with my supervisor who acted as a critical friend during the moderation process. The coding process involved copious note making alongside the transcripts, initially in alignment with the interview schedule. Inductive coding (Johnson and Christensen, 2012, p. 525) from the notes and observations was then used to group and repeatedly regroup responses and insights from the interviewees, until dominant themes emerged.

### **3.7 Quality of the Research**

The literature is equivocal on exactly which criteria would define the overall quality of a piece of qualitative research. Savin-Baden and Major (2013, p. 471) acknowledge a “fundamental disagreement” amongst scholars as to what this might be. However, in terms of validity, this research satisfied the criteria as work which was demonstrably accurate and verifiable as representing what the interviewees actually said. In terms of reliability this piece of research stands alone, with the specific data drawn from the interviewees themselves, but would be likely repeatable with a similar group. As my first piece of research, I identified authenticity as a key component of gauging the quality of the data collated and analysed.

Denzin and Lincoln (2013, p. 249) identify five criteria for authenticity of research within a constructivist paradigm. These included fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity and tactical authenticity. Gall et al. (2007, p. 610) suggested their own list of five attributes. Lists of assessing trustworthiness of research

varied in the literature between authors and my research took into account this range of advice.

Throughout my research I adopted principles of collecting authentic voice, complete with “lapses, pauses, stops, starts and reformulations” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013, p. 253). I acted reflexively as a researcher by continually reflecting critically and finally representing the data as text. Early transcripts were sent to participants, reworked for clarification where required and finally verified by the participants in line with ethical expectations.

Although there was no opportunity in this study to triangulate the data collected by the use of other research methods, the authenticity of the data is evident in the voices of the participants as it appears on the page.

### **3.8 Ethical Considerations**

Approval for this research was dated 9 March 2020 (FEDU 012/20). A memo was later submitted to the committee detailing a request to amend the recruitment plan for interviewees.

#### **3.8.1 Access to participants**

I was in contact with potential interviewees as part of my work as a school principal, as part of the Principals’ Council of the NZEI and as a member of the Waikato Principals’ Association. Although I knew them through professional networks, I mitigated any risks to them associated with this study by ensuring that any participation was purely voluntary and there was no obligation on them whatsoever to take part. Furthermore, the opt-in style of volunteering at the outset of this research put the onus on potential interviewees to accept or to ignore the invitation as they wished, without having to provide an explanation. Even having modified the recruitment process (detailed above) due to Covid-19, I followed these ethical principles. After an initial phone call to any potential interviewee, all relevant information was provided to them by email. I further confirm that I was not in a position of authority over any potential participants and was not an appraiser for any of them. Thus, none of the interviewees could be considered to have been coerced into participation.

### **3.8.2 Informed consent**

Given the unique circumstances of the Covid-19 emergency, face-to-face meetings were impossible during the consent process. Communication was by phone or Zoom/video call throughout. Interviews took place during the Level 4 lockdown phase of the Covid-19 management plan and were at the convenience of the principals involved. I remained keen to mitigate any additional stress to colleagues during this period and worked around times that were convenient for them. A signed consent form (Appendix 1) to take part in the research was obtained from each participant once they had had the opportunity to read an information sheet (Appendix 2) about the proposed research and have any of their questions answered. I reviewed the forms with each participant prior to their signature being obtained. This process took some time as the participants were very busy in their work contexts and some took a few weeks to respond. Copies of introductory letters, information sheets and consent forms are noted as appendices to this research.

### **3.8.3 Anonymity and confidentiality**

Anonymity of participants was not relevant to this research project. I knew all of the them professionally. However, all data collected and published was anonymised and steps taken to ensure any specific instances, events or schools referred to were not readily identifiable. In this way I safeguarded the participants' privacy and made sure anyone close to any specifics of an incident would not be recognised. Social media presented particular obstacles and challenges for ensuring that privacy was maintained due to online searchability. I ensured any specific phrases gleaned from the interviews were paraphrased or reworded, where appropriate, to make them difficult to trace.

I used pseudonyms throughout the research findings, coded the research and transcribed the data myself to ensure confidentiality. The University of Waikato's Ethical Conduct in Human Research and Related Activities Regulations (2008) were adhered to for the safe storage of all data collected during the research.

### **3.8.4 Potential harm to interviewees**

The principals were not coerced into the study as there was no power-gradient between me as a researcher and the principal colleagues I approached. Notwithstanding the Covid-19 emergency, the interviewees were only asked once if they wished to participate and I

reminded them on several occasions that they could withdraw at any time. One potential interviewee declined to take part due to workload. If an interviewee later read the transcript of their interview and was then subject to any emotional distress, harm or embarrassment they retained the right to withdraw consent for use of the data or of have specific elements of their data removed. This was the case for one of the interview participants who requested a specific element of the interview be redacted. There was also a risk to schools that a participant might be exposed and the Board of Trustees subject to reputational risk. All possible steps to prevent this were undertaken, as detailed above, through use of pseudonyms and anonymising of specific details that emerged from the data.

Throughout the interviews I found the principals eager to talk and share their stories. They used me as something of a sounding board in relation to their own thinking about social media. All wanted their experiences to be heard and saw my research as assistive in that regard.

### **3.8.5 Participants' right to decline to participate and right to withdraw/withdraw data**

Participants retained the right to withdraw from the study at any time and have their data destroyed, up to the point where they approved their interview transcripts for analysis. As noted in Johnson and Christensen (2012, p. 115), as there was no coercion or power imbalance between researcher and interviewee, the ethical imperatives were preserved and the right to withdraw could be considered valid.

### **3.8.6 Sharing of findings**

The completed thesis will be available through University of Waikato Research Commons and I will inform all participants once it has been accepted. In addition, I will email a copy of the completed research to each participant together with a one-page summary of my findings.

I informed participants that the any data collected for completion of my Master's thesis may be used in presentations or in any scholarly articles and other publications.

## **3.9 Conclusion**

This chapter described and justified the method chosen for this research. The study aimed to accurately capture the experience of New Zealand school principals in relation to their use of social media in a professional setting. It was a form of practitioner research (Menter, et al., 2011, p. 4) that extended my own professional knowledge both as a principal and a

researcher. Recruitment strategies, trustworthiness of the data and ethical considerations are also detailed. At the time of embarking on the study, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the educational landscape was very different. Modifications to the original FEDU approval were required. The use of the semi-structured interview as a method, and the ability to conduct a modified form of interview remotely from the participants using digital technologies during the New Zealand lockdown, did not detract significantly from the findings or framework originally envisaged and approved for this research. The next chapter presents the findings from the six, semi-structured interviews.

## 4. Report of Findings

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the six participant interviews. Key themes emerged during the analysis phase and there were areas of significant intersection in the data, shown in Table 2. The interviewees' data is presented as an overall synthesis of a selection of their responses and includes verbatim quotes taken from the much longer interview transcripts. The authentic voices of the principal participants are evident from the text and they provide the richness associated with the use of the semi-structured interview as an effective data collection tool. Whilst there is inevitable overlap of detail across the themes, four main areas of interest are identified.

Table 2. Key Themes from Findings

<b>Key Themes from Findings</b>			
Perceptions and Needs	Challenges in Schools	Practical Issues	Leadership Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Motivations for use</li><li>• Need for Presence</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Digital Footprint</li><li>• Privacy</li><li>• Managing Misuse</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Managing social media day-to-day</li><li>• Persona and Privacy</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Policies, Practice and Training</li><li>• Seeking Advice online</li><li>• Seizing the Opportunities</li><li>• Threats and Metaphoric Language</li></ul>

#### 4.1.2 The six principal interviewees

I am eternally grateful to the six principal colleagues who agreed to take part in my research as interviewees. Principal colleagues were drawn from schools ranging from a rural, sole-charge school with around 30 students to large urban schools of up to 900 students enjoying very ethnically diverse populations. Similarly, the leadership experiences of each principal participant also varied considerably in terms of longevity in the education sector itself to previous leadership roles or opportunities in schools. I acknowledge the time given and patience shown to me by my principal colleagues during the data collection phase of this

research which occurred throughout the pressured and uncertain Covid-19 crisis. Whilst necessarily focussing on the needs of their schools, all six principals willingly gave time and mental energy to take part in the interviews. Without their willing participation and provision of rich, authentic data my research would have faltered.

#### **4.1.3 Introducing the principals**

A career summary of the six principal interviewees is provided in Table 3.

Hilda is the principal of a small rural school. She has decades of teaching and middle-primary leadership experience behind her but is now enjoying her first principalship role. Hilda carefully balances both school leadership responsibilities and a classroom teaching role.

John is a principal in his 10th year leading a thriving rural school near one of the Waikato's major country towns. He has taught overseas but predominantly in a variety of New Zealand state schools. John's successes in his current school have now led him to seek a new role, in a larger school with a different demographic profile.

Jazmine is a highly experienced teacher, as well as a principal of 5 years' experience, who has enjoyed a diverse range of roles in education as both a deputy principal and acting principal and now principal for the first time. She is applying her Master of Educational Leadership knowledge, alongside a high performing staff, in a high-profile urban setting.

Bob is in his third year of principalship. Having entered teaching as a second career he brings unique insights to his role leading a medium sized, country school. Also armed with a Master of Educational Leadership degree, he has embarked on a programme of change leadership in his school.

Margaret, a principal of 10 years standing, has been leading her school during a period of community uncertainty. Her clear-sightedness has given her the drive to embed much needed change and the positive results of her work are already being felt across her student body and the wider community.

Shaun is a career educator who is now working in a large urban school. Like Bob and Jazmine, he has previously completed tertiary study to master's level and was recently appointed to

his new role. Shaun’s current school has a very different demographic profile to his previous school and he is relishing the challenges this is presenting.

Table 3. Career Summary of the Principal Interviewees

<b>Career Summary of Principal Interviewees</b>			
Pseudonym	Experience in Role	School Type	Tertiary Study Level
Bob	3 Years	Rural Years 1-8	Master of Educational Leadership
Hilda	2 Years	Rural Years 1-8	Bachelor of Education
Jazmine	5 Years	Urban Years 1-6	Master of Educational Leadership
John	10 Years	Rural Years 1-6	Bachelor of Education
Margaret	10 Years	Rural Years 1-6	Master of Educational Leadership
Shaun	10 Years	Urban Years 1-6	Master of Educational Leadership

Analysis of the interviews reveals some common themes across all the schools but also some significant differences in approach to similar issues that arise. I explore these in turn, reflecting the voices of the interviewees. However, the most surprising element revealed during the research analysis is the common thread of balancing perceived opportunities associated with social media engagement and the very real threats it also presents to the role of principal. This is a constant message no matter what the local context of each school.

## **4.2 Perceptions and Needs**

### **4.2.1 Motivation for use**

Principals’ individual motivations for using social media were varied and some were more reluctant to do so than others. Bob stated that he felt the use of Facebook in particular was non-negotiable as it was already in use when he took up his position but explained his personal hesitancy.

“I was forced to do it socially by my family, and kind of got it without choice as Principal of the school.” - Bob

John was also less than enthusiastic about using the platform in a professional setting. He introduced Facebook to his school out of perceived necessity and his concern to get timely and accurate information to his rural community in what he perceived as an effective way, thus preventing a barrage of repeated questions.

“I have been reluctant to join because of the pitfalls that I can see from it but have eventually agreed to do so and tried to put restrictions around it. So, we (the staff) thought well, we need to get onto the Facebook to make sure that we're covering as many parents as we can and maybe we can stop this ‘I don't know what's going on caper.’” - John

Whereas Shaun described the strongest antipathy for engagement with social media overall, and with Facebook in particular, he still affirmed its use at his school to help his community feel informed and connected.

“I probably have a deliberate disconnection with social media because of my job. It's a good tool to communicate but it's also very dangerous.” - Shaun

Other principals were more sanguine about using Facebook as a communications tool. Margaret, a long-time Facebook user herself, said her motivation to make use of the Facebook platform in her school setting came originally from her perspective as a parent and a teacher.

“I was teaching my own children at the school I was working at. So, there was a bit of a parallel for me and I remember specifically Facebook. There was a crossover for me being a parent and being a teacher in the same school.” - Margaret

Keeping up to date with the online environment her children had experienced, and by implication the current student and parent community, was also important to Margaret.

“When I was raising my children, I always tried to be an early adopter, to be one step ahead of what the kids were dabbling in so I had a bit of an idea of what was going on.” - Margaret

Jazmine also formalised the use of Facebook in her school early in her principalship. Prior to her arrival, “social media was a total no-go...” for her school. Her challenge was to recognise and corral a number of unofficial Facebook groups forming around the school to fill the absence of an official school page.

“There was an obvious need for it, so I started the Facebook page within the month that I got there.” - Jazmine

Jazmine therefore saw Facebook as part of a wider strategy to revamp an outdated communications plan for her school, which included the school’s website, and develop effective messaging to parents and the wider community.

The most enthusiastic user of social media was Hilda. She was a habitual communicator who had been comfortable in the wider world of social media since its emergence nearly two decades ago. She utilised both Twitter and Facebook extensively in professional settings and made considerable use of online platforms for personal and school purposes.

“To me, social media can be in all different forms. Without listing them all - Twitter, Snapchat and all those, the big guns... It's just a way of communicating with parents, students, however in a way that fits each person and I think the advantage of social media platforms is that there is no one platform or one app or one thing...”

Hilda described herself as strong advocate for use of ICTs in schools. She freely adopted whichever platform was required and varied their use to suit the individual communication preferences of the parents in her learning community.

All the principals said that they utilised Facebook to communicate responsively, at speed and for ease of accessibility within their school communities. They tacitly agreed that, owing to its pervasiveness as the current dominant social media platform, Facebook was a necessity. The three male principals interviewed were much more reticent to engage with

Facebook than the female principals. This unexpected gender division was very evident in regards to motivation to engage with any social media in a professional setting.

#### **4.2.2 Need for presence (Dominance of Facebook)**

Consistently throughout the data was recognition of the important role Facebook in particular played in schools. All the participants agreed that it was an essential part of their school's communications strategy, whether it be used formally or otherwise. There was some differential in how this looked between schools but the overwhelming message was that the use of Facebook was unavoidable.

"We can't put our head in the sand and ignore it (Facebook); it's here, we have got to embrace it and use it to our advantage." - Shaun

"I think it's emerged in school basically because it's been a heavily up-taken thing privately. So, schools have seen it as an opportunity to connect with parents in a format that most parents are used to using. It's almost like a case of necessity rather than an option." - John

Where no social media was present in a school, Jazmine, a newly appointed principal, addressed this quickly.

"Our school didn't actually have a school Facebook page when I arrived." - Jazmine

"It was getting out of hand because then there was (*sic*) various little groups that started having their own Facebook page... outside of the school... the PTA they had one... and there was another group of parents who also had one... there was an obvious need for it... so I started the Facebook page within the month that I got there..." - Jazmine

As part of the process of generating community buy-in to the work in the school, Facebook was seen generally as an easy and effective way to communicate.

"It's a useful tool especially for putting up things like photos and comments and notifications or cancellations, but we only use Facebook only for that, we don't have those other side platforms." - Bob

As a result of the wide uptake in general across school communities, Facebook was the default dominant platform. Hilda focussed her community communications more towards Facebook and away for her formerly preferred platform, Twitter.

“For me personally, I use Twitter less now because I'm so busy as a principal. I use it a lot as a professional learning, following people that I respect as leaders in certain areas, things like that. So, I like that aspect of Twitter. So, I use that more as a professional development tool for myself.” - Hilda

Shaun was very cautious around the use of Facebook but recognised the importance of social media in his school community and his need to engage with them. He felt strongly that ignoring this community need would be to ignore a prerequisite for successful, direct communication.

“Being connected is being kind, being disconnected is being unkind.” - Shaun

Shaun was still willing to engage with social media, even Facebook, despite the significant concerns this raised for him.

### **4.3 Challenges in Schools**

#### **4.3.1 Digital footprint and privacy**

The principals recognised data-trails and digital footprints associated with ICT use in schools and on social media platforms. Shaun expressed how he had been subject to an Official Information Act request in relation to a student and noted that some teachers, parents and students did not understand that everything posted or completed online can be traced.

“They went to the Privacy Commissioner and demanded every single email that had ever been sent about their child.” - Shaun

“Kids are dumb if they think they can go online and do that. They haven't got the fact that you're traceable.” - Shaun

Jazmine expressed concern about a culture in her school where everything that was shared with parents was also deemed to be ‘fair-game’ to be served up on social media platforms.

“I think that’s a global problem, school camps and things like that particularly where it’s almost like live-blogger, live-stream what they’ve been up to, to everyone outside the school setting, to every man and his dog and it’s not appropriate.” - Jazmine

“We do have it sometimes, when we have parents who have posted online, they’ve been in school... you know the school concert and have posted it online but quite honestly we can’t stop that. We will often say at the beginning of things, now please we have a photographer covering this and we will put those photos up... please do not take photos or videos and we do video the school shows so they can access it that way.” - Jazmine

Margaret recalled how she inadvertently discovered her own digital footprints.

“Many years ago, I made some comments on a forum, prior to being a teacher I think, maybe when I was a student and made some comments and there was nothing wrong with the comments I made. But it’s surprised me that they popped up through a Google search. That experience made me really mindful of anything that’s ever posted anywhere can just kinda pop up.” - Margaret

Bob stated his straightforward viewpoint thus: “The fact it’s a digital footprint stays with us for ever and ever.” – Bob

This is evidence that the interviewees were familiar with the data trail they were leaving in their roles using any form of digital communication. Awareness of the consequences of this, and the potential for its misuse, remained significant.

#### **4.3.2 Managing misuse**

All principals expressed concerns about managing the potential misuse of social media by staff, students and parents. They adopted varying methods of exerting control and influence which was scaled by the size of their specific school context.

Bob’s approach was to take a broad overview and deal individually as an issue arose.

“Really, rather than a high trust model it’s more a management by exception model where if you don’t stuff up then I’m happy to have you use it.” - Bob

“I had a couple of teachers who are no longer with me (and not because of this reason) who used to use it a lot in class... The only reason I found them on social media was because others within my community were friends with them and could see they were active on social media at varying times and passed comment on the fact that they felt that was a bit unprofessional.” - Bob

Bob also recognised where his responsibilities resided when issues outside his school context were brought to his attention.

“The complaint came in that this former student had done this to a current student and the school needed to be involved in the fix if you like. But again, it was completely outside of school time, and not on school devices or using school digital conduit, there’s nothing we can do about that you know.” - Bob

“I think there is a narrow thread of the keyboard jockey who likes to throw a comment up and watch it burn as everybody zeroes in on it like moths.” - Bob

Jazmine saw that the lack of parent awareness of what their children were doing on-line was often at the root of problems that came across her desk.

“Parent ignorance. One of the things that has really surprised me is the naivety of parents as to what their children are accessing outside, out of school.”

In relation to one incident in particular Jazmine observed the disbelief of parents that their own children were taking part in online abuse and parents were ill equipped to deal with it.

“So, for example we had a kid that just recently who, it came at me through another family that this child from a home that I was really surprised this happened in, was taking images of himself and posting through Tik Tok, defaming children in the class and a teacher as well in really quite a harmful way. And when we contacted the parents, they just like were flabbergasted and couldn’t believe what he was doing. So, I think the naivety of parents about what their children were actually accessing and how they are using social media outside of school is of real concern.” - Jazmine

“There was no respect and no teaching of those basic values of actually, that means you can say no to your children and you can put some boundaries around the things that they do... because you are actually the parent... So, I think some of that parenting has shifted and it’s just easier sometimes to let things go because parents are really busy.” - Jazmine

“It has been fascinating at the questions that have been brought up during the conversation and you think that parents just don’t know that parents just don’t understand.” - Jazmine

John’s approach was different in that he allowed and encouraged use of comment on his school pages and dealt with issues there as they arose.

“We do regularly need to contact the parents and just say remember this is an education platform and that it's still school-based so you need to make sure that communication amongst yourselves is stuff that is appropriate for the school to be dealing with. Either get them to change their comment or we just remove.” - John

John had adopted a historically relaxed approach over a decade to managing social media in his current school. However, in his previous, much larger school he had dealt personally with a very serious incident requiring the assistance of outside agencies.

“Yes, it was a Facebook post. It took a fair bit of work. They weren't keen to do anything about it - free speech and all that sort of shit - but the stuff that was posted on it was really clear. It was in... it was inappropriate. It wasn’t just a bit of name calling or is... wasn't some sort of embarrassing photo. It was completely, completely out of the norm and it was fairly serious so did eventually put it down.” – John

“I think only once did we end up going directly to the company and having something withdrawn.” - John

Hilda’s small context and close community links had reduced the chance of awkward issues arising through social media use at her school.

“We have high engagement, apart from a couple of families, but they are positive. I'm really lucky. I'm not worrying about somebody coming along and posting some negative, nasty stuff. I haven't had to deal with that yet you know. Yeah, I guess I've just been lucky but I have in my previous schools had to deal with negative stuff.” - Hilda

Concern around personal privacy and dignity whilst using social media was foremost in the minds of all of the principals. There was a general awareness that engaging actively with social media platforms was potentially putting staff and students at risk.

“I'd inherited a situation where every teacher had their own Facebook page and that page wasn't private. There was (*sic*) all sorts of information going out there about children and I was really, really concerned.” - Margaret

Furthermore, Margaret instituted procedures whereby staff and students had some control of what was being put online by “giving teachers a chance or the staff a chance to check the photo before it gets published.” Margaret, in particular of all the principal participants, was mindful of “protecting the staff, protecting teacher time, protecting the school - all those sorts of things.” - Margaret

There was also an accepted recognition of the size of any potential audience. Jazmine stated that “What you put on Facebook you are inviting the world to.” In larger schools there was often a number of children who had restrictions on how their images and identity details could be used.

“We have a number of children who do not have permission to go either on Facebook images or newsletter images – they don't want their children involved in that - and that's a new and deliberate group of parents who have actually thought this through... they don't want the images of their kids of when they were 6, in skimpy shorts and not much else, on there.” - Jazmine

“So specifically, (it) would be things like identifying children. I suppose just being mindful of photos going online that protected the dignity of children.” – Margaret

Each principal and each school had a different approach to managing the potential for misuse. Trust, the size of the school and the levels of engagement with the respective communities were all factors in how social media were managed.

## **4.4 Practical Issues**

### **4.4.1 Managing social media day-to-day**

Hilda and John explained how their small size relative to larger town schools allowed them to enjoy a more dynamic, reciprocal approach to communication with social media. Getting a positive message out into the community was a priority for them.

“We use three of the main digital methods. So, we have emails, we have... because there's only one family in the entire school that doesn't have an email account, there's the Skool Loop app that we use so it goes quickly to people's phones and then the Facebook page.” - John

“I suppose with the size of the school it's probably more manageable on a laissez faire type of approach whereas in a much larger school there has to be more stringent controls around stuff to make sure that things can't go wrong.” - John

“I'm in a small context. I don't think this is manageable in a large school where you do probably need to lock yourself into a couple of things. So, it's about engagement and about how you connect best in whatever forum it is.” - Hilda

By not pre-approving comments both Hilda and John recognised this as encouraging positive community engagement.

“Yep, yep we don't worry about pre-approving. We didn't want this platform to be another one where the school constantly has to make sure, or constantly be allowing stuff to be put out there, because then we'd be always either holding information back or needing to get in there when it's parent to parent comment. It might as well have just come to us in the first place.” - John

“Yeah, yep, like I said with our platform we do allow parents to comment because we know that the vast majority of parents know each other. So, it's not going to be a slanging match whereas the bigger the school gets the more removed parents are

from each other and so the more opportunities of that are for that to happen. So, probably in a larger school I would have it closed down so that anything that gets posted would have to be passed by us before it happened.” - John

Hilda also acknowledged that her authenticity came through using platform-based engagement.

“I’ve never had an issue with it because what I think it does, it does two things. It opens you up to being more one more vulnerable and people can take advantage of that, also opens up to you being a person and you can build a positive relationship and I’ve only experienced that side of it.” - Hilda

“I think I probably potentially put myself at risk but I think I’m clever enough to know my audience, ok.” - Hilda

The data showed a correlation between the size of the school and the distance of the principal from the exertion of overall control of social media communications. In the smallest schools the role of the principal was necessarily different to those in much larger ones and therefore delegation of responsibility was the norm in larger schools. Shaun stated that, when describing his school Facebook page:

“I don’t frequent it because I’ve got other people who are doing that, always. I have that delegated to one of my deputy principal’s who’s very IT savvy.” - Shaun

Other principals were more dismissive of actively managing social media on a day-to-day basis.

“My Office Manager and Deputy Principal do most of the Facebook stuff, I just find that...I really can’t be bothered with it, I don’t see it as being important in my day-to-day work and if I didn’t have to have it I wouldn’t.” - Bob

“Yeah it’s our office manager mainly. She’s right into Facebook and knows quite a bit about it. She’s the main one but I also get on there fairly regularly.” - John

When establishing their Facebook pages shortly after being appointed, both Jazmine and John adopted a novel approach to setting them up. This was reflective of their lack of personal expertise in a potentially complex area of ICT.

“We just went to the individual people who had set up the Facebook pages the community were accessing... there were two or three people... just approached those people.” - Jazmine

“Yep for me I was hopeless. I had no idea what I was doing with Facebook so I ended up contacting a couple of parents who use Facebook quite a bit and got them to walk me through some of the things we could do.” - John

After control of community pages were vested back in her school, Jazmine stated that “I have a communications role designated in our school to our office manager; it’s part of her role and it's quite a big part of her role.” Control of what was communicated was therefore maintained centrally in her school.

“Well, our school account... there’s actually only three people or four people who have access and I’m one of them but I never post. Everything is ready to go through our IT person and our IT lead teacher has access as well. They are the only people who have access.” - Jazmine

The principal who most confidently used and controlled her platforms was Hilda. Her familiarity and confidence with ICTs, plus regular and diverse social media use, were in stark contrast to all other interviewees.

“I became that person in my school who was the go-to person around, you know, new and current practice using digital technologies funnily. I sold things in practice you know, like classroom practice based on the research, the impact that that technology can have.” - Hilda

Key amongst the reasoning behind a principals’ tight control of messaging was an awareness that anything emanating from the school had to portray the schools in positive light.

Bob stated that “Any communications out with the school brand have to go through the three administrators of the school page.” Shaun was even more definitive, stating that “Nobody will post anything on a school Facebook page unless it goes through my DP.”

By way of contrast, in a smaller school setting, principals took more personal responsibility. Margaret observed:

“I've done that 100% myself because I felt that there were two aspects of it, one was just having that consistency with what's going out.” - Margaret

And later, the second aspect having established protocols with her DP:

“We decided that we would go for one school Facebook page where the content could be controlled by two people. It was really tightly controlled.” – Margaret

The practicality of effectively using social media was often related to the size of the school. No single approach suited all the principals. Their respective willingness or reluctance to welcome engagement through the Facebook platform is illustrative of this.

#### **4.4.2 Persona and privacy**

One of the primary issues that affected all interviewees was concern over mixing of personal and professional personas on social media platforms. The algorithms that managed the means of communication on social media platforms tended to try and force both correlation and aggregation. Bob stated his concerns succinctly.

“My professional persona and my personal persona are slightly different beings and I like to be able to relax into my life as a social person and I like to be able to interact with my family. Some of the things they post which I find funny and maybe ‘like’ might be things that perhaps wouldn't find a fertile breeding ground in school.” - Bob

“In my personal Facebook it doesn't even have in there that I'm Principal of \*\*\*\* School. It's just me.” - Bob

Margaret actively managed her profiles and used different devices to try and secure separation of what was public, relating to her work, and her private life.

“I have a really clear boundary for what is work-related and what is private but I'm also aware that anything I put online at any time with my name attached could be linked to my professional life. I work really hard to keep that private and very, very separate from any online profile I might have an association with my work.” - Margaret

Shaun expressed his concerns bluntly. “I probably have a deliberate disconnection with social media because of my job. I deliberately avoid social media in my role.”

The perils of the private lives of educators potentially affecting professional roles were summarized vividly by Bob with advice he had given to a member of his teaching staff who was applying for a new teaching position.

“It’s great to have photos of yourself getting oiled up in your bikini by your boyfriend on Facebook but is that necessarily the image that you want to start your new pathway in your career with? You know, people are going to take a view.”

The smaller context of Hilda's school allowed her a shorter line of sight to her community and she felt much more comfortable sharing per private and public profiles but still retained some concerns.

“So, I'm calculated but I communicate shitloads through different forms with my families and I'm quite transparent, I'm personable I'm... I have a blurred line no doubt about it.” - Hilda

John retained his laissez faire approach and a high trust model that had so far allowed him to manage occasional issues in his community and with his staff.

“Yeah, we make it up as we go along. Most, all of the staff really, don't really want to contribute to any of the social media stuff anyway. They... we do talk quite a lot about the difference between public and private.” - John

“We do have one staff member who is a very, a huge Facebook person - absolutely loves being on Facebook and spends quite a lot of time on there, advertising herself.

***(Not between nine and three, I hope? (laughs)*** No thankfully, but sometimes it gets awfully close!” - John

Jazmine recognised that not all staff wanted to take the risk of social media use whilst having a professional role in a school. Nevertheless, she recognised the advantages of its use.

“We still have one of our senior leadership team that actually does not have a Facebook page... does not believe in social media to that extent and had a huge influence on the school and so there was no Facebook page until I arrived. But it’s not about us, it’s about our community needs and the best way of communication with our communities.” - Jazmine

The personal privacy of the principal participants themselves was also threatened. Hilda described a formative experience where her image was ‘tagged’ by a friend and a misleadingly framed photograph of her holding a paintball gun was brought to the attention of the school.

“A parent or somebody saw that and didn't lay a complaint but mentioned it to somebody at school and... and that was a highlight to me thinking you are... you’ve got to be really careful about images you post because it can be taken, you know, out of context. I’ve got that mantra in the back of my mind, “What will that look like in the media? What will the headline say? Principal holds gun against...” - Hilda

Owing to the way Facebook in particular aggregated data, all the principals actively managed their personal profiles. All but one took care to either never post at all or at least modify how they engaged personally and then in their professional role, to minimise the chance of ‘profile overlap’.

John did not use his personal Facebook page any more. He stated “I think I've posted two things on it and eight years that I've had it. I try to keep my private and my public completely separated.”

“So, I have a personal Facebook account where I post nothing - there are no photos of me. Somebody was putting together a CV for me at one stage and she said, ‘I went onto your Facebook page and it was useless - there was nothing there!’” - Shaun

Hilda had significantly modified the way she posted to her own personal page whilst she continued to blend her private profile and professional profile, when communicating with her community.

“I'm really aware my Facebook page has changed so much over the years; I don't post stuff that I think is you know... I post pretty lame stuff if you wanted a better word. You know I wouldn't put 'Feeling really emotional at the moment...' if I'm going through shit emotionally. You know, I put a picture of my cat and things up.” - Hilda

The principals all agreed that disassociating their personal and professional online data was becoming increasingly problematic and remained a significant concern.

## **4.5 Leadership Challenges**

### **4.5.1 Policies, practice and training**

Principals identified few opportunities to take formal training in the use of social media. They had all interacted with platforms privately over time but were now presented with the challenge of managing something they were not formally trained in the use of. Jazmine pointed out, “No I haven't really received any real training. We try to access as much stuff as we can.”

“I probably gained expertise by osmosis really, it's one of those things if you're exposed to something for long enough with ugly users you're going to meet people, especially in a professional setting, who are better users than you and a lot that are not as effective. And I'm lucky that my DP is a highly skilled user of all things digital. So, she was able to give really good counsel on what it should look like and how it can be locked down, and I think the fact that people don't use it effectively isn't necessarily because they don't want to, I think they don't use it effectively because they don't know how to.” - Bob

“I think ignorance is our greatest Achilles heel in anything like this isn't it? You wish you'd plugged that hole before it was opened up!” - Bob

One partial solution identified by principals was to devise a policy framework in the school to address potential issues. This had been implemented differently across the 6 schools and the effectiveness of the school policies was difficult for principals to gauge. There was evidence of a willingness to have a school policy at least for compliance purposes, even if it was recognised as likely to be of limited use.

“We have written a policy and stuff, and conduct and teachers are not to post anything about school and no photos without our permission... but we don’t want any staff photos out there.” - Jazmine

“We’ve got a Use of Digital Technology Policy and a Digital Use Agreement that all our teachers have to sign, and in that Digital Use Agreement we’ve got caveats around that the private use of social media in no way ever brings disrepute or positions the school in a poor light.” - Bob

“We have policies and we are with School Docs so I'm pretty sure we're covered. You know, I guess I'm a little bit casual.” - Hilda

“If I had a teacher that I thought could be a little bit inappropriate, the way they communicate with other parents, then I’d be having policies and conversations.” - Hilda

“I'm not falling back on a policy that my teacher has signed and says you won't do this. They wouldn't even be aware of it.” - Hilda

The interviewees were also largely unaware of legislative changes that impacted on their roles and responsibilities in schools. The Harmful Digital Communications Act 2015 had implications for them as did the Vulnerable Children Act 2014, which highlighted child protection responsibilities pertinent to all schools. Principals were generally unaware of the detail of the Acts and stated that commercial providers of policies to schools might give them the ‘top-cover’ they perceived they needed.

“We also moved to School Docs so we know that our policies do include all of that latest legislation and then as that information has come in, we have reviewed against what we do just to double check that our things are okay. I hope...” - Jazmine

“I’d need to look into them a bit more carefully because I'm not really looking at them very much.” - John

Answering in relation to a question about her awareness of her responsibilities under the Harmful Digital Communications Act, Hilda responded:

“What's that? I'm laughing because yeah, I'm sure there probably is one!” - Hilda

Nevertheless, she remained confident that she could avoid any potential pitfalls.

I'm quite intuitive and I think I'm a really good judge of people but I'm not naive - the fact that I could easily get burnt.” - Hilda

Thinking about how one of his teaching staff maintained private connections on social media with past and current students, John responded thoughtfully.

“And the biggest issue I have there because we don't have a policy, and now I wonder whether we are sort of too late, is connection with previous or past students. And current... but they are part of her private Facebook connections and we haven't had any issues come out of that but I am sort of waiting for the day when it does come around.” – John

There was a divide between the principals in their awareness of any legislative responsibilities and their school's preparation or training to cope with challenges social media might present. The majority adopted a just-in-time approach to dealing with issues as they arose.

#### **4.5.2 Seeking advice online**

The principals expressed a range of views as to whether or not they would solicit or trust advice and information given to them from social media platforms. Seeking answers online to specific questions was infrequent. Hilda had occasionally posted to get a specific question answered and expressed how she used Twitter as a time and cost-saving substitute for Professional Learning & Development (PLD).

“That's my filter! When I see it, loads people conversating about it, I think oh, okay, it might be worth having a look.” - Hilda

“I use a lot as a professional learning, following people that I respect as leaders in certain areas, things like that. So, I like that aspect of Twitter. So, I use that more as a professional development tool for myself.” – Hilda

John described how he was also a light Twitter user.

“I did have, I do have a Twitter account and I do a little bit of following there what e-learning, the Microsoft Edu, Twitter and I forgot his name, it’s gone out of my head... the guy at Core Education, Derek Wenmoth. Yep, so I follow his Twitter account as well. So, I follow those two in particular but I really don't post anything on there again either.” - John

Hilda worked around her relative isolation from main population centres by following her interests online and responded to a question about her own contributions to providing colleagues with online PLD.

“Hearing somebody else say that, you know, makes me reflect on what I want to do and what I love... I get more out of that than the humdrum stuff or some of the stuff in my current role.” - Hilda

“I think there is so much opportunity to share good practice. - Hilda

Bob and Jazmine both expressed a preference for an interpersonal communication as opposed to a general, online approach to contacting colleagues.

“I’ve got a range of people whom are trusted and confidential colleagues whose advice I rely on and I would ring them or seek counsel from them.” - Bob

“I’m a face-to-face person although, no I guess for people that I use as mentors I do lots of face-to-face with them - online.” - Jazmine

Four of the six principals expressed a range of views from mild amusement to outright cynicism in relation to the New Zealand Principals’ Facebook page. This was particularly pertinent as over 1000 school leaders were registered to the page at the time of data collection. The page was heavily utilised during the Covid-19 lockdown period in New Zealand, during the data collection phase of the research.

“I had an interesting conversation with a Leadership Advisor ... there seems to be a core group of probably 20 school leaders who seem to contribute in huge quantity. And frankly, my comment was to him ‘I don’t know where they find the time...’” - Bob

Bob had removed himself from the New Zealand Principals' Facebook page recently.

"I got off it primarily around the time of our recent industrial negotiations simply because I couldn't stand it anymore and I really didn't know how to turn it down – the volume was deafening in that thing." - Bob

John used Facebook but it was notable that he preferred direct, personal contact with colleagues.

"We use the Facebook page both the rural schools one and a general principals' one, both of those. Other than that, most of the contact with other principals is more direct either via email or a phone call or personal meeting." - John

In a follow up email from her interview, Margaret noted:

"The amount of time I spend looking at the Principals' Facebook page is disproportionate to the value I place on the content. It's entertainment."

In relation to her position as a beginning principal, Hilda described how she had used Principals' Facebook to get quick answers to questions. However, some content was harder for her to take seriously.

"I laugh at some of this stuff. It's a little bit... some people you think need a bit of a shake-up but it also saves a bit of time." - Hilda

All Principals acknowledged how the private Facebook page could sometimes get quick answers to straightforward questions but generally doubted they would use it as a primary source of information.

"Sometimes you know I have an actual question! Like something I'm thinking, shit I don't know where to go for that and that's what I found early on, I found it really useful. People are incredibly helpful and you know..." - Hilda

The principals expressed a range of views on how social media might be used to augment their leadership through PLD or by simply getting answers to questions quickly. Information

sourced on social media was used cautiously but they agreed there were times when this method of getting a repose was very useful.

#### **4.5.3 Seizing opportunities**

Principal interviewees reticently accepted the emergence and rise of social media as irreversible and took positives from it. However, Shaun expressed his regret at the general acceleration of communication cycles over his career.

“Instant Society: it makes us busier, doesn't it?” - Shaun

“I originally set up my own personal Facebook account because I was trying to track down somebody I'd lost.” - Shaun

“When in 2007, when I began as a principal, mail was still quite prevalent - lots of envelopes and an in-tray and at one stage in the day I would say “I'll do my mail.” - Shaun

Jazmine was sanguine about managing social media challenges:

“It's the way the world has gone. I'm not sure it's a good way and it's actually being driven by money and consumerism and it's here and it's bigger than I am and our schools and we just have to learn to manage the good parts of it.” - Jazmine

“Yeah, it's just another whole layer of complexities (laughs) and it's time consuming and it's another major health and safety risk factor to be considered as well.” - Jazmine

John recognised some advantages to use of social media:

“For our school the social media experience has been a positive one so far. We did go to some pretty good lengths right at the very start to make sure our community were very clear that the use of social media in our school and associated to our school was about positive interactions.” - John

“It wasn't to be a personal platform for airing your views, all your perceptions of things and so as a result it stayed quite positive and because of our size it has been easy to

manage in the loose system that we have which has allowed the positivity to grow.” - John

Hilda was very positive about how social media was embedded in her school. She also expressed how this was counter-balanced by the overall learning needs of students.

“They do Twitter talks and that is part of their classroom program. I’m fortunate, I made a really strategic decision when I first got there about the teacher that I employed in that senior classroom - full-time teacher she was... She shares the same vision as me she is technologically adept as well and she also has that humane side. She has a... she is a fantastic teacher of the key competencies and encompasses... she's got a beautiful mix of both.” - Hilda

“When we've done a consultation with the community their biggest thing was around respectful, kind, caring, resilient children. So, it's those soft skills and that's where my shift has been. I see that as far more important; I'll stand by that. It's far more important that we grow these beautiful citizens who can connect in a way using whatever platform out there but at the core of it it's about the heart.” - Hilda

“For me, as I said to you, it's about that relational stuff. It's the soft skills of how do I grow the whanaungatanga of my... because that's what my school needs at the moment.” - Hilda

The principals expressed a range of views ranging from nostalgia for simpler times to excitement about the opportunities social media presents for students. There was, however, general agreement about its inevitability in their professional settings.

#### **4.5.4 Threats and metaphoric language**

Three principals used the language of war to describe their apprehension and fears associated with managing problematic issues arising from social media. This finding chimed with the general recognition of the perceived dangers of engaging with communities on social media platforms. Referring to the previous principal, Bob recognised some historical issues in his school.

“There had been wars fought by my predecessor over Facebook, mostly around the comments that got put up.” - Bob

“My predecessor... perhaps he wasn’t a person who enjoyed conflict.” - Bob

“I’ve been lucky, but it’s a ticking time bomb.” - Bob

John and Bob both expressed fears that, despite their best efforts, trouble could emerge at any time and that managing emerging issues was a “minefield”.

“So, I think it's unfortunately, it’s the nature of the job we have. No idea who we’re gonna piss off and we don't know how they're going to react when you get pissed off. Whether they just quietly just pull out of the school and go somewhere else or whether they go on the full attack.” - John

“Even with the car park Mafia you had a chance to go to deal with the issues or the thoughts or the concerns. Whereas with social media it can just explode and you have no chance to actually deal with it in time. I try not to worry about stuff I can’t control.” - John

“I inherited that as a means of communication with the school and I can’t say I was totally thrilled about the idea because it is a little bit of a smoking gun really, Facebook.” - Bob

Shaun also agreed with John that the cliché of parents firing off emails with lack of thought was in fact a reality for him.

“It's also a system that is so fraught because we have keyboard warriors...” - John

“At this school there seems to be a whole lot of Computer Warriors that sit at home and type what they're thinking, you know?” - Shaun

It is of note that the military metaphors used to describe experiences with social media were confined to the three male interviewees. There was no identifiable pattern associated with the three female principals.

This chapter has summarised the findings from the data under four main headings. The integrated nature of social media is emphasised by the overlapping discussion the principals engaged in.

The next chapter is a discussion of the findings presented here and their relation to the literature review in Chapter Two.

## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter reported the findings from the principal interviews and organised them to reflect general themes that emerged whilst keeping in mind the overall shape of the interview schedule on which the interviews were based. The general experience with social media of the six principal interviewees contained both contrasts and similarities; they identified common challenges and opportunities, revealed a lack of knowledge in some areas but also heightened awareness in others. They highlighted both difficulties and advantages of adding another complex management task to running effective schools. Owing to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, there was inevitable overlap of ideas throughout the principals' personal reflections. This chapter revisits the data and relates it to relevant literature in order to further understand the implications of the findings. The discussion follows a similar structure to the previous chapters and uses the minor headings as signposts for the reader. This is intended to emphasise the themes of the overarching research questions which are repeated, and amplified, below.

#### **Principals' Experience of Social Media in New Zealand Schools**

RQ 1: How do NZ school principals experience and perceive social media?

- Opportunities, threats, inevitable consequence of technology

RQ 2: How does social media impact on principals' roles?

- As additional tasks, management challenges

RQ 3: What strategies do principals adopt to address the challenges of social media?

- Differentiated approaches, ad-hoc management, delegation to others

Table 4 illustrates the general structure and relationship between the areas of literature review, findings and this discussion chapter.

Table 4. Areas for Discussion

<b>Areas for Discussion</b>		
RQ 1: How do NZ school principals experience and perceive social media?	RQ 2: How does social media impact on principals' roles?	RQ 3: What strategies do principals adopt to address the challenges of social media?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opportunities</li> <li>• Communications</li> <li>• Need for online presence</li> <li>• Need to manage risk and prevent harm</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• User digital footprint</li> <li>• Use of social media platforms</li> <li>• Privacy of user persona</li> <li>• Managing misuse</li> <li>• Metaphoric language</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional networks on Social Media</li> <li>• Training and support</li> <li>• Policies, procedures and legislation</li> <li>• Wisdom of Crowds</li> </ul>

## 5.2 How do NZ school principals experience and perceive social media?

All six principal participants in this research recognised that social media, as a societal phenomenon, could not be ignored in an educational workplace. Though each possessed a different personal experience and perception of social media, unique models of implementation specific to each of their schools were accepted as an inevitable consequence in each individual context.

### 5.2.1 Opportunities, RQ1

Opportunities presented by new digital technologies since the early part of this century are now very well established, if not ubiquitous, across society. Principals were generally cautious when adopting or using platforms in their workplaces however, despite the affordances in a professional setting. Obar and Wildman (2015) identify the dominance of Facebook as the lead platform and this was paralleled in the schools associated with this research. Only one school principal (Hilda) comfortably integrated at least three social media platforms in her principal role: Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. The male principals conveyed a certain reluctance to seize the opportunities (John, Bob, Shaun) whereas the female principals (Hilda, Jazmine, Margaret) expressed a more generally positive attitude towards using social media. Shaun expressed his “deliberate disconnection with social media” because of his job. Jazmine stated that it was “not something I naturally enjoy” but despite her initial reticence regarding social media in a professional setting, its use was firmly embedded in her school. The female

principals tended to adopt platforms earlier and more willingly than male counterparts, focussing on potential positive outcomes rather than possible negative experiences. They also tended to try and leverage the effectiveness of Facebook in their schools more so than their male counterparts. “I’ve dabbled a few times with advertisements... and I’ve been astounded by the analytics that come back for a \$3 ad” (Margaret). A Harris Interactive study (Huffington Post, 2011) looking at social media habits of adults reveals that women are significantly more likely to use social media than men and males are more likely to use phone or voice to communicate. This matches the general data from the principal interviews.

### **5.2.2 Communications, RQ1, RQ2**

The need to communicate quickly, effectively and broadly across a school community is a key aspect of the role of any effective school principal. Fullan (2001), writing about managing complex change just as social media began to emerge globally, strongly advocates the need for strong relationships across a learning community as a prerequisite for effective principalship; the ability to deliver timely, effective messaging is a key aspect of this role. All principals recognised this need and used social media as an adjunct to traditional newsletters, written or electronic, in their own schools. “I send an email direct to every family; we have a school app.... and on Facebook we follow up with ‘You have been sent an email...’” (Shaun). This had the potential to reduce the repetitive re-transmission and sharing of information previously made available elsewhere and reduce the “I don’t know what’s going on caper...” (John). Regular use of Facebook in particular for incidental communications was recognised and adopted across all six schools associated with this research. The flexibility of being able to post text, video and pictures easily was a major attraction to its use. Having access to a primary social media platform allowed uniformity and control in each school, while also providing opportunities for community reciprocity. This ability to better engage with a school community was widely noted in the literature and summarised by the definition of social media suggested by Bryar and Zavattaro (2011) as “technologies that facilitate social interaction, make possible collaboration, and enable deliberation across stakeholders”.

### **5.2.3 Need for online presence, RQ1, RQ2, RQ3**

There is little possibility of ignoring social media in a contemporary school setting. As noted reluctantly by one principal, it was seen as an inevitability. “We can’t put our head in the sand” (Shaun). The principals all recognised that a large proportion of their communities

expected to see a social media presence from their schools and similarly, as noted by Dixon (2012), this added the role of community engagement specialist to their already complex roles. A strength of social media is the interactive nature of the medium. John and Hilda in particular encouraged unmoderated comment through social media to support interaction with their communities. Other principals took a more measured approach and focussed less on interaction or responding to comments than sending out their schools' positive message. In the literature, Van Dijck et al. (2018) further note the development of social media platforms over time and track the increasing penetration across general society which has created new societal norms. School principals act in response to this change and adapt accordingly, albeit somewhat reluctantly at times.

#### **5.2.4 Need to manage risk and prevent harm, RQ1, RQ2, RQ3**

The National Administration Guidelines in New Zealand (NAGs) state that boards of trustees in New Zealand schools have a responsibility to ensure physical and emotional safety of students and employees (NAG 5). Control over social media use in schools is incorporated within this overarching statement and was a widely held concern expressed by all principals. Sometimes a chaotic medley of 'pages' was encountered by principals who had to rationalise different approaches in the same school to put forward a cohesive single school voice and exert some control over what was being posted (Jazmine, John). Authority to post was usually vested in a trusted administrator or staff member, if not the principal of each school themselves, so school generated content could be vetted and pre-approved. There was a direct, inverse correlation between size and closeness to the delivery of messages by the principals. The care and control of school social media platforms to mitigate risk and prevent harm remained a priority for all. Issues surrounding managing potential harm in a school setting highlighted by Wang (2013) were recognised by all principals. Margaret in particular, from experience with her own children, recognised that students had a right to protection on social media which had been hitherto unnecessary.

#### **5.3 How does social media impact on principals' roles?**

The potential advantages of engagement with social media were evaluated by all the principals against the challenges their use presented. All six recognised that anything put online or shared electronically had the potential to carry more 'weight' than traditional forms

of communication. In addition, the principals noted that their current students were of a different generation and thus have profoundly different expectations for social media use. This is echoed in the literature by Ng (2012) who recognises that digital technologies, and specifically social media, means students will be learning in a fundamentally different way than in the past and have very different expectations of its use in educational contexts.

### **5.3.1 User digital footprint, RQ1, RQ2**

Key amongst the challenges the principals recognised was the emergence of digital footprints and the data trails created by use of social media. Shaun was very cautious about this having been subject to OIA requests in the past. Jazmine and Margaret identified how students' images or other information in a school setting could be used without their knowledge or agreement outside a school environment and this caused them concern. "There was (sic) all sorts of information going out there about children..." (Margaret). "It's almost like live-blogger, live-stream...to everyone outside the school setting." (Jazmine). The longevity of these trails was recognised as concerning for both students and staff. Not all the principals though had comprehensive social media agreements or references in their staff code of conduct. Bob had advised staff members accordingly, having discovered potentially embarrassing photos of them online. Hilda and John in particular took a more laissez-faire approach towards leaving a personal data trail and were generally more comfortable with an increased level of online engagement. Muhammad et al. (2018) analysed many of the factors associated with user willingness to leave digital footprints and the widely known and acknowledged issues this presents any social media user. Despite concerns, a social media user's sense of trust in a platform itself was deemed to affect the perceived risk and thus the willingness to keep using it. Principals' awareness of the risks was not enough of a barrier to refrain from engagement.

### **5.3.2 Use of social media platforms, RQ2, RQ3**

All the principals described how they were self-taught in terms of managing social media in their professional settings. "I probably gained expertise by osmosis really" (Bob). "Zero training. Self-taught I suppose" (Margaret). However, only one principal (Jazmine) had engaged a PR company to review her school's communications strategy to provide some overarching advice and guidelines about what her school would put on different communications channels. How social media platforms, and Facebook in particular, were

managed in school settings varied across the schools. Often a staff member with some experience or expertise was utilised to manage settings and administer the social media feed, often a trusted DP or Office Manager. John approached parents who “used Facebook quite a bit” for initial guidance. Trujillo-Jenks (2016) identifies through case studies how electronic devices and online platforms are often introduced into schools with no professional development or insufficient guidelines for use. Lacking formal guidelines, our principals took individual approaches to introducing and managing their respective Facebook pages with varying approaches and results. None of the principals was aware of the guidelines in MoE (2015) which aid the use and understanding of digital technologies. None of the principals stated that they were aware of, or had made use of, documentation in The Kit produced by Netsafe (n.d.).

### **5.3.3 Privacy of user persona, RQ2, RQ3**

All the principals acknowledged was how their personal identity might be merged with their professional one through use of social media platforms. Hilda was most sanguine about this, seeing it as an inevitability of her readiness to communicate openly and freely with her community. She adopted several platforms and moved between personal and public persona dependent on the nature of the conversation and the person she was communicating with. “I communicate shit loads through different forms with my families.... I have a blurred line no doubt about it” (Hilda). At the other end of the scale Margaret remained very concerned that her professional and private lives remained separate “It’s really important to me to have a clear distinction between the two.” (Margaret). It is against these wholly competing approaches, which principals try to manage, that the literature identifies how the social media platforms seek to break down the barriers their users might try to put in place. Van Dijck (2013) sees the futility of attempting to retain personal privacy as the limited data presented by users is overpowered by the algorithms that sit behind the platforms. Evidence of this is Facebook making friend suggestions to professional/principal Facebook accounts which include private/personal names from the other accounts they might hold.

In the literature, Stoller (2013, p. 8) considers how this new reality for principals cannot be countered or ignored and states that privacy “has become much more fluid due to social media sharing” and can be considered the “new normal”. The majority of the principals in this study would hesitate to embrace this approach to managing their online identities. John

stated that he had only posted privately to his Facebook page twice in that last eight years. Shaun never posted anything privately to Facebook to the point where someone assisting with CV writing described his personal page as “useless as there was nothing there” (Shaun). Only Hilda confidently navigated the boundaries of public and private in her principal role. Fox and Bird (2017) explore how in pre-social media times, educators might expect to be able to keep separate public and private persona. This may no longer be the case as we now have to negotiate identity tensions caused by the uncertainty of “fluctuating I (identity)-positions”.

#### **5.3.4 Managing misuse, RQ2, RQ3**

Although misuse of social media in schools was a looming threat acknowledged throughout the interviews, occurrences of damaging incidents were relatively few. John described how incidents involving cyberbullying occurring outside of school had been brought to his attention by parents. He felt that it had impacted on relationships in his school and he had to deal with them. “On probably 90% of the occasions I got the stuff withdrawn under threat of “We’ll get something done about this if you don’t” (John). Likewise, inappropriate language from parents responding to social media posts was dealt with directly and effectively. In the case of using offensive language John insisted that parents “change their comment or we just remove”. The difficulties associated with managing social media as “digital leaders” are highlighted in Alqhist’s (2014) social change model which looks at individual, group and community levels of engagement. Wang (2013) also describes the “hot potato” of effectively managing social media in a public setting whilst dealing with issues associated with the self-expression/freedom of speech issues created when encouraging the reciprocal engagement which social media is defined by.

The reality of the threat to individuals through misuse of social media was a constant theme throughout the six interviews. Hilda described how one photograph of her with a paintball gun had been shared online. It had been taken out of context and forwarded to her school. “A parent or somebody saw that and didn’t lay a complaint but mentioned it to somebody at school.” - Hilda.

#### **5.3.5 Metaphoric language, RQ2, RQ3**

Inadvertent, or deliberate, use of language that can be interpreted by others as insulting, provocative or incendiary is a concern for many principals and may explain the reluctance to

some to better engage online. Ahlquist (2014, p. 58) recounts the incident of a career-ending tweet from a Twitter user with only 200 followers, before suggesting users of social media should become well acquainted with some principles of digital literacy and etiquette. She further warns that “Leaders should ask themselves how does my social media activity impact my company, family, or institution?” (p. 59). Unfamiliarity with emerging social media tools has huge potential to undermine principal leadership and leave individuals, schools or Boards of Trustees vulnerable to criticism.

There is a long history of using violent language and metaphors associated with war around subjects seen as contentious by others. These origins are widely attributed to Thomas Sydenham, a 17<sup>th</sup> Century British physician, in relation to the medical profession. “I attack the enemy within,” Sydenham is reported to have stated. “A murderous array of disease has to be fought against, and the battle is not a battle for the sluggard.” (Latham, 1848). Warlike metaphors are now abundant and Cohen (2011, p. 200) exposes how they are increasingly pervasive, and “play an indispensable role in developing collective understanding” which aid complex issues to be grasped more easily. It is perhaps with this potential in mind that many principals prepare themselves to combat what they see as inevitable controversy, should they be perceived to stray from bland, socially acceptable social media discourse.

Symptomatic of different gender-approaches to engaging with social media was the male principals’ use of war-like metaphoric language in respect to the perceived threats they saw from it. As noted above, the male interviewees were generally less enthusiastic users compared to their female colleagues. Interestingly, they all chose to use war-like language to describe their concerns and hesitations. Common phrases such as managing the “minefield” that they perceived social media to be were often used. Shaun’s description of being personally attacked by “keyboard warriors” was very pertinent to his specific situation. Bob described the “ticking timebomb” that use of social media in his school represented. Whereas John explained his continuous awareness that annoyed parents in his school might go on “full attack” at any moment. These phrases represented the persistent and real fears that reflected the male principals’ dispositions towards social media, yet did not completely inhibit their use of it in a professional setting.

Whilst Sydenham is credited with introducing militaristic metaphors in relation to managing disease, they are now in common use in many spheres of society; the contemporary wars on drugs, personal freedom, trade, poverty and crime are but a few. Cohen (2011, p. 200) identifies that militaristic, metaphoric language can help complex issues be understood more easily. He also notes that “facilitating the effective deployment of martial metaphors is the fact that the current era is characterized by polarized politics (and) uncivil public debate” (p. 202). In the case of social media in schools, our male principal interviewees certainly recognise this and they adopt approaches which highlight their caution and awareness of the potential pitfalls of open, online discourse.

## **5.4 What strategies do principals adopt to address the challenges of social media?**

Complexity of engagement with, and effective use of, social media presents significant challenges for principals. The requirement to have strategic overview of this as part of a principal’s normal workload is another burden on an already demanding role.

### **5.4.1 Professional networks on social media, RQ3**

The main professional social media network used by the principals was the NZ Principals’ Closed Facebook Page. Established on 28 October 2015, at the time of writing it has over 1100 members listed from the approximately 2,500 currently New Zealand schools. Its stated purpose is to allow principals to “reflect, discuss, question, ponder and tear into education-based issues”. Four of the principals in this study were current members but their usage of the page varied considerably. Jazmine and Shaun were not current users of this page.

The perceived usefulness of the Facebook page was viewed questionably by the other four principals. Bob’s general frustration and dismissal of much of the commentary on the page came through strongly. He had largely disengaged from it after the 2019 collective agreement negotiations where he found that much of the online discussion toxic, stating that “The volume was deafening in that thing”. Noting the dominance of a limited number of users present on the page, Bob found it hard to fathom where principal colleagues found the time to spend engaging with it. Similarly, Margaret viewed it as “entertainment” in terms of some of the content and Hilda thought some of the users “need a bit of a shake-up”. Nevertheless, some useful information could still be found there and quick, straightforward answers could

be asked and answered using the page. None of the principals stated that they would use it as a primary source of information but it often pointed them in the right direction when an issue or question arose.

LinkedIn was also used sporadically by four of the principals. Bob, Jazmine, Margaret and Shaun were registered members. It was seen as more of a professional tool than Facebook though John admitted his registration and profile were largely placeholders and he jokingly stated that he might not even remember his login details. Similarly, Shaun did not keep his profile up-to-date, however Margaret and Jazmine did. Margaret acknowledged that she would look for articles and “more serious debate” on LinkedIn than through Facebook. The random nature of discussions on the latter called her to question the validity of some of the information shared on that platform.

Hilda remained the most prolific and versatile user of social media in the group. She had used Facebook to contact principal colleagues and offer online support during the Covid-19 lockdown in New Zealand. Hilda had used Google Workspace tools to provide remote training in the use of Google Classroom and other tools to up to 50 professional colleagues. She was unfazed at how generously her work had been received and viewed it merely as “paying it forward” (Hilda).

The literature generally viewed use of social media as an essential component in a modern educators’ toolbox of skills. Forbes (2017) suggests that educators cultivate their personal online presence and make use of platforms before adopting them for student learning. Furthermore, this should go hand-in-hand with joining networks of fellow professionals in the field. Recognising some of the challenges associated with developing this new mindset, Stewart (2014) also acknowledges the need for educational leaders to make the time to immerse themselves in a technology-rich environment in which social media is an increasingly dominant force. This may be all the more important when more distributed forms of leadership become evident in schools. As acknowledged by Nussbaum-Beach (2010) the traditional role of principalship can be challenged when teachers, students and parents can be empowered by being connected; principals can become “capacity builders” in their learning organisations and thus leverage the potential of the new affordances of social media.

#### **5.4.2 Training and support, RQ1, RQ3**

When looking for expert advice, professional development or support, principals described few options open to them. As noted above, they were generally self-trained in use of specific platforms and felt there were few official resources to support both themselves and their communities with challenges associated with social media use. However, one private resource identified by four of the principal interviewees was John Parsons. Parsons <https://www.citizen21.co.nz> is an established cyber security and risk assessment advisor in New Zealand and has worked widely in schools since 2007. He is in high demand across New Zealand schools and trains school staff and students in effective ways of managing online identities and potential hazards. Whilst also available for crisis management and advice, his general approach is to identify the family as the first-teachers and put responsibility for use (or misuse) of social media and the wider online world firmly in the hands of families. This educative approach has been adopted widely in many of the schools he has worked in. In the case of our principal interviewees, Margaret, Jazmine, Shaun and Bob were all aware of his work though Bob admitted that he was not sure he was his “cup of tea” as a presenter. Jazmine noted that Parson’s handling of the lack of parental knowledge regarding issues arising from social media was “fascinating” (Jazmine). Margaret referred to Parsons as her “guru” and default advisor whose educational programme was woven into her local curriculum.

In tandem with subject matter experts working in schools, other online resources were available to principals. Netsafe <https://www.netsafe.org.nz> was established originally as Internet Safety Group in 1998 and has evolved to now be a prime support for both the Ministries of Education and Justice and has a statutory role under the Harmful Digital Communications Act (2015). Although John had been involved in arranging for abusive posts to be taken down from Facebook in his previous role as DP at another school none of the interviewees mentioned Netsafe as a resource for advice. Similarly, IT service providers were only mentioned by Bob as a trusted source of training and support when things go awry. This tends to indicate that principals are confident enough that if things were to go wrong, they can get the advice they need quickly and act accordingly. In the case of Hilda that might be a trusted colleague, or even her local Ministry of Education office.

### 5.4.3 Policies, procedures and legislation, RQ3

In New Zealand schools, principals are responsible to their respective boards of trustees for implementation of general law and board policies through, formerly, the Education Act 1989 and latterly the Education and Training Act 2020. These responsibilities tend to be already set out within established procedures such as a policy for employing new teachers or monitoring workplace health and safety. Templates are available from the New Zealand School Trustees' Association (NZSTA) which facilitate general policy development. Rudman (2020) comprehensively lists such legislation, however the high-level of the actual legislation has less impact on the day-to-day running of schools than one might imagine. Bob noted that he had a Use of Digital Technology Policy and a Digital Use Agreement for all staff. Others relied on a staff Code of Conduct as a cover-all. In contrast, both Jazmine and Hilda shared their reliance on School Docs <https://www.schooldocs.co.nz> to provide current policies which incorporated the latest legislation however, Jazmine was less than sure if the content was always adequate.

The principals were generally aware of other legislation that might affect them navigating digital environments in their leadership roles, such as Official Information Act 1982 requests, but had few specific policies or procedures which specifically covered dealing with more problematic areas, such as social media. Hilda and Margaret stated that they were unaware of their responsibilities under the Harmful Digital Communications Act 2015 and John acknowledged, in relation to policies and legislation protecting students, that he was "not looking at them very much". The 2015 Act states that the professional leader of a registered school may bring proceedings in a district court to protect a pupil who is subject to harm caused by digital communications which include any electronic form of communication, written or visual. John had previously dealt with a significant incident of online abuse resulting in a take-down of posts about a student. It was therefore interesting that he remained unfamiliar with that specific aspect of the Act.

The Privacy Act 2020 also impacts directly on principal leadership, as communications previously thought of as entirely private may be looked at today from a very public perspective. The Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand's Code of Professional Responsibility (n.d.) states that members of the teaching profession must demonstrate a high standard of professional behaviour and integrity. With this in mind it is not surprising that

the principals sought to retain a public and private persona when engaging with social media. The Netsafe guidelines for school also encourage teachers to be aware of this very distinction but as noted above the blurred lines between public and private are increasingly difficult to manage. Dalziel (2002), referring to the former Privacy Act 1993 (now updated in 2020), notes that “in the area of personal information, particular challenges are created by the capability and increased use of technology”. Nearly two decades on from this analysis, the principal interviewees are at least aware of the implications from that piece of legislation and continue to strive and keep that which they deem to be private very much in their personal private sphere.

#### **5.4.4 Wisdom of crowds, RQ1, RQ3**

Wisdom of crowds aims to harness the aggregated judgment of a group to make superior judgements by applying collective intelligence. A perceived advantage of social media throughout the literature is the ability to build reciprocal relationships with a wide number of professional colleagues. This was acknowledged in the interviews although some principals expressed the preference for face-to-face in person or one-to-one-online meetings with colleagues. Jazmine stated that she preferred direct personal contact and expressed her concern that the diversity and range of information and opinions online can be overwhelming. “There is the danger of quality education being watered down by lots of ideas...” (Jazmine). In contrast, Hilda had proven herself very comfortable seeking opinions, contacting colleagues using social media and working with them collaboratively in an online environment.

Given this general expectation of more connections equalling better, some aspects of the literature are more equivocal. Baeza-Yates and Saez-Trumper (2015) refer to “digital exhibitionists” who are few in number but tend to be very active. This had been noted by both Bob and Margaret who were less than convinced about the quality of some of the online discourse on the Principals Closed Facebook page. Whilst some principals (Bob, Hilda & Margaret) might go online to get a general view about a current topic of interest, they did not wholly rely on the advice they saw. This approach to assessing quality is also recognised by Baeza-Yates and Saez-Trumper, who note that some online contributions end up in a “digital desert” whereas others are retweeted, liked or upvoted. Likewise, Robert and Romero (2015) note that there is no clear link between reference group size and performance owing to issues

of diversity in the group and uncertainty in relation to the expertise, knowledge or skills of contributors. Whilst Bhatt et al. (2017) also agree there is no consensus on the effectiveness of referring to crowds to find wisdom, Gonçalves et al. (2011) state that Dunbar's Number puts a biological constraint on the number of meaningful interpersonal relationships a person can maintain at between 100-200. Thus, the effectiveness of wisdom of crowds is questionable at the very least and not relied upon by the principals. As Shaun noted, he would much rather meet someone in person and discuss an issue than communicate electronically therefore his reliance on the wisdom of crowds is likely to be minimal. This general sentiment is echoed by five of the six principals with Hilda, the most prevalent user of social media, remaining more open to widespread consultation with colleagues than the others.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

The discussion chapter aimed to collate and identify the basis and primary drivers for principals' engagement with social media. All the interviewees accepted that the phenomenon of social media is here to stay and is increasingly prevalent across society, particularly in schools. Some accepted this with reluctance whereas others were more open to using the affordances of the medium. There is general recognition of the pitfalls as well as the advantages of taking an active role on social media and this mirrors the dichotomy of attempting to maintain personal privacy in a public sphere. Leveraging social media for professional use was limited in this group, as were formal processes for managing social media in schools with staff, students and community. Nevertheless, despite the overall reticence in the group, there was found to be some engagement, even at a basic level of communication within a school community. Of concern to all the interviewees was the trajectory, intensity and longevity that engagement with social media in their professional roles invites.

The next chapter will bring together central themes, draw conclusions and suggest areas for further study that address the limitations of this small research study.

## **6. Conclusions, Recommendations and Limitations**

### **6.1 Conclusions**

The previous chapter discussed connections between the findings from the principal interviews and made links to literature which surrounds aspects of social media. This chapter pulls together the main points of interest raised and draws conclusions that inform principals' leadership roles. Recommendations that support principal leadership in schools are made, together with an acknowledgement of the limitations of the study. This research aimed to explore 3 main questions relating to:

#### **Principals' Experience of Social Media in New Zealand Schools**

RQ 1: How do NZ school principals experience and perceive social media?

RQ 2: How does social media impact on principals' roles?

RQ 3: What strategies do principals adopt to address the challenges of social media?

##### **6.1.1 Experience and perception, RQ1**

The six principals who took part in the study came from a range of school sizes and contexts. Some were revealed to be early adopters of social media in their personal lives and this had gradually transferred to their use of social media platforms in schools. Others were less inclined to willingly adopt social media in their professional roles but did so with reluctance. Notwithstanding the size and context of each school, social media was evident in each: Facebook was the predominant platform of choice. The principals all recognised that effective communication with their wider community was an essential element in their roles and adopted social media use accordingly. It was accepted that the rise in use of social media was a societal expectation. Practical use of social media was often delegated out to other trusted staff members, where appropriate.

Each school adopted a different approach to managing one of the prime perceived advantages of social media: reciprocation. Whereas the need for an online presence was a general expectation, the ability to actively engage online with a school was viewed as problematic by some of the principals. One deliberately eschewed online interaction whereas others managed contact by preapproving comments or actively moderated them after they had been posted. In general terms, the smaller the school the closer the principal was to the

community and the more confident they felt in engaging in an online discourse. This was usually general, low-level school information being pushed out to the community and was not philosophical discussion around pedagogy or other major educational issues that may have been of higher interest.

It can be concluded that, despite some qualifications and different implementation strategies, all schools might be expected to have a presence on social media which reflects changing societal expectations. Whilst the schools in this study were dominated by Facebook, other existing or emerging platforms could be adopted to improve reach and the ability to reciprocate.

### **6.1.2 Impact on principals' roles, RQ2**

At the forefront of all the principals' concerns was how information or comments placed online was made public. This acknowledged the personal privacy and dignity of students as well as their own. Throughout the interviews there was a lingering sense that by making information public, principals were making themselves potentially vulnerable. All acknowledged awareness of a digital footprint and this was a significant inhibiting factor to five of the six interviewees taking a more active part in online discussions.

The ability to manage a principal's personal and public persona was prime amongst their concerns. Whilst the literature explored the blurring of what could be considered public or private, even the most voracious of users, Hilda, showed some reticence about using her personal and professional accounts when interacting with her community. The inability to defeat platform algorithms which aim to unify user identities may become part-and-parcel of social media use.

Several examples of student misuse or inappropriate parental behaviour were raised but these were relatively infrequent and minor. The level of each was manageable and in the range of what might be expected in regular school environments. However, the threat of a catastrophic event on social media of some sort was still perceived as real albeit unlikely. Whilst the wider media is full of examples of serious social media mishaps and missteps, the principals were very keen to avoid these so tailored their use accordingly; they had the

potential to be career ending. This mode of self-censorship is referred to in the literature and runs contrary to the promise of freely exchanging ideas using digital platforms.

It is reasonable to conclude that there will be a gradual erosion of the separation between the private and public personas principals are keen to maintain. Judicious use of information and care around what is posted is unlikely to create an adverse digital footprint. However, it is also acknowledged that this limiting of discourse runs somewhat contrary to the ideals of the free exchange of ideas, envisaged as social media platforms evolved. It is only in exceptional cases that severe adverse consequences might be realised and the minor occurrences that currently arise in schools are relatively easily managed as a normal part of the wide-ranging duties of a digitally capable school principal (Ahlquist, 2014, p. 59).

### **6.1.3 Strategies to address challenges, RQ3**

Managing and leveraging social media for whatever purpose is another layer of complexity that impacts on principal leadership in schools. Whether a high-trust or strict-control model is implemented in a workplace, there is a need to put in place policies and practices which protect boards of trustees, school leadership, teachers and students. Specific policies can be written for social media or a more general approach around teacher professional standards of ethics and behaviour taken. Whatever method, there is widespread recognition of social media being a new-normal in educational settings. In this study, only one principal expressed a desire to integrate social media in to the learning programmes of students; this is likely to become an emerging expectation for all students as they progress through the school system.

Unfamiliarity with use of some current platforms for educational outcomes was evident, although the majority of principals engaged with Facebook in their leadership roles. Distinctions between the value placed on social media in this particular professional setting were evident. This related to both the content of posts and the relatively few active members on the New Zealand Principals' Closed Facebook page. Other platforms, such as LinkedIn, were also used by the interviewees to varying extents. The research phase of this study took place during the Covid-19 lockdown in New Zealand and it was clear that many principals outside of the study valued the informal nature of the media and the speed of response to their questions. This included principal leadership at a national level which regularly surveyed

the membership of the New Zealand Principals' Closed Facebook group as asked for thumbs up or thumbs down in relation to specific topics of interest.

The potential of social media to allow engagement in professional learning, keep abreast of current thinking in the sector or maintain connections with colleagues was limited in the majority of participants in this research. Direct communication with colleagues remained the norm and controversial subjects were generally avoided. In the event of a complex issue arising in a school, there was one independent expert identified as capable of giving appropriate advice and his work was evident across most of the schools. The use of militaristic metaphoric language by the male principals indicated that confidence in the benefits outweighing the disadvantages of social media is a battle yet to be won.

A conclusion to be drawn from these final areas of interest is that confident use of social media by school principals is a prerequisite for effective leadership. Unless one is engaged with the platforms, one cannot be completely aware of the advantages to be gained or the pitfalls to be avoided. Some structures around social media use should be evident in all schools and its uptake to inform both PLD and learning programmes should be explored. This should be balanced by provision of adequate advice and implementation strategies which would allow school principals to adapt to the new opportunities social media presents and which cannot be ignored. Otherwise, their conventional leadership approach is likely be challenged by more social media literate staff, students and communities.

A final challenge all school leaders must address is how to tackle the potential dangers associated with social media amplification of crisis. At the outset of this research, I highlighted three scenarios that emphasised how social media impinges on principal leadership roles. These were real events that showed how social media impacts digital footprint, invades personal privacy and forces acceleration of the decision-making cycle. These very real dangers, presented at the fringes of most principals' experiences, remain present. At the end of this research, a contemporary case of a social media campaign by parents ending in the murder of a teacher in Europe (France 24, 2020) proves once again that awareness of the potential risks must be balanced against the possible advantages social media presents. It is not difficult to imagine scenarios, even in New Zealand, whereby honest, open yet provocative discussions can end in blinkered campaigns against an individual.

## **6.2 Recommendations for Further Research**

This study has provided a snapshot of the lived experience of social media use by six current New Zealand primary school principals and its impact on their professional roles. The research was undertaken during a period of national emergency in New Zealand during the Covid-19 pandemic but this does not detract from the validity of the findings. In fact, the need to modify the original research methodology and engage with remote methods of communicating and interviewing the principals lends weight to the value inherent in digital communications, of which social media are a part.

The findings of this study identified specific areas where the awareness of the group of principals was limited. Areas for further research associated with social media use in schools could be derived from some or all of the following suggestions:

### **6.2.1 Effective practice**

Implementation of social media as a tool for learning and professional development. Current best practice could be identified and examples found and shared across a defined group of like-minded principals. This would serve to expand the personal capacity of individual principals and begin to address the potential social media deficit that is likely to arise from an aging principal population and an ever-youthful school population of students.

### **6.2.2 Managing personal attacks on social media**

One principal interviewee in this study had been subject to a personal campaign against his leadership. How school leaders cope or are supported when they are subject to attack on social media would be likely to elicit experiences and strategies other principals could learn from.

### **6.2.3 Depth of understanding in regard to policy, procedure and legislation**

The digital landscape is changing in complexity at an exponential rate. Whilst this is only one aspect of principal leadership to be managed, keeping abreast of such change is likely to become increasingly challenging. How principals cope with accelerated rates of change in the digital sphere and implement this in their schools would be of interest to both policy makers and principal incumbents.

#### **6.2.4 Teacher, parent and student perspectives on social media use**

This study focussed on school principals' experiences of social media. As a reciprocal process, use of social media in schools could be considered from other perspective including teachers, parents and students.

#### **6.2.5 Use of alternative paradigm and/or methodologies**

Studies which use an alternative research paradigm or methodology give different opportunities for collecting relevant data in different forms from the qualitative interview used in this study.

### **6.3 Limitations of the Study**

The limitations of this study relate generally to the research methodology employed and the small sample size.

Firstly, a single hour-long interview with each of the six principals provided an ample initial opportunity to traverse the general nature and landscape of each individual's experience of social media use in their leadership role. There remained the potential for selection bias due to the recruitment of principals with at least some interest in social media who were also users to a greater or lesser extent. Multiple interviews, perhaps with few participants, would have allowed the researcher to review initial findings before reinterviewing with a different set of guiding questions from a revised interview schedule. This would likely have elicited deeper and more specific answers to complex questions and offered the interviewees more opportunity to explore specific areas of interest or concern to them.

Secondly, the snowball sampling to select the interviewees could have been modified if a mixed methods approach had been adopted. Prior to the interviews being undertaken an initial, wide-ranging survey across principal groups nationally could have identified potential interviewees. This would have gleaned both wide ranging quantitative data and specific qualitative data which, when combined, would have addressed some of the standard objections to qualitative interviews identified by Kvale (1994).

Thirdly, a case study approach might have been adopted to look in more depth at the use of social media by specific principals who used the medium effectively in their context. This

would have helped derive examples of best practice and methods of implementing social media use which could have been of benefit to many principals.

Finally, owing to all the factors listed above it is impossible to generalise the findings of this research outside of the targeted group of interviewees. Their authentic voice, genuine experiences, hesitations for use and fears from abuse of using social media are genuine and well founded. Six hours of interview transcripts reveal thoughtful, professional yet personable and approachable principals committed to their schools and the wellbeing of staff, students and their communities.

My experience with colleagues as a first-time researcher has given me a unique opportunity to spend time exploring a challenging subject. My most significant learning on this journey has been the need for this type of research to provide opportunities for personal professional growth and insight into the mindset of other New Zealand primary school principals. I remain immensely grateful to them for making time for me during the most challenging year for education in New Zealand anyone could imagine and would wish never to be repeated.

## **6.4 Coda**

As a coda to this piece of research, written just prior to the time of submission, three items of note relating to social media use involving educators in New Zealand became evident. Given that the initial interest for this research was driven by a post to the New Zealand Principals' Closed Facebook page in September 2018, it is appropriate to discuss more contemporary events which show that potential issues with social media identified then are still both relevant and prevalent today.

The first of the items of note was also a post on the New Zealand Principals' Closed Facebook page requesting advice from colleagues. This was in relation to a married parent at a school who was identified on the Tinder dating app by a teacher. Having been alerted by the teacher, the principal at the school sought advice from colleagues as to whether they should challenge the parent. The parent had children enrolled at that school. Some 28 principal colleagues commented on the post, including a very senior official at the Ministry of Education.

The second item concerned a media report in the New Zealand Herald Online (NZ Herald 2021), published on 31 January, in relation to the deputy principal of a school. The deputy principal was involved in a boat-rage incident which was captured on video and widely circulated on social media, then on mainstream media. The event resulted in a significant concern for the principal of the associated school, the BoT and the deputy principal herself.

Finally, an article appeared in New Zealand Herald Online on 4 February (NZ Herald, 2021), describing teachers' reactions on the New Zealand Teachers' Closed Facebook page to a proposal to teach the Treaty of Waitangi to 5-year-olds. Many of the comments were polarising. Some teachers expressed disbelief that supposedly confidential posts on that page had been shared outside the closed group. Perhaps this should not in fact have been that surprising to them, given the nature of social media itself.

This indicates that there may be a rich vein of research yet to be mined in relation to the use of social media across the wider education spectrum here in New Zealand.

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## 8. Appendices

### Appendix A – Invitation to Take Part in Research

Dear Colleagues,

As part of my study towards a Master of Educational Leadership qualification I am undertaking research entitled '*The Impact of Social Media on Principal Leadership in New Zealand*'. I extend this invitation to you all to consider taking part. I am aiming to interview up to 6 colleagues for the purposes of data collection.

I will accept up to the first 6 whether or not you are a regular user of social media. My study takes account of those who choose not to participate in the use of social media as well as those who are users. The motivations and experiences of any user/non-user will provide valid data for the study.

You would take part in a one-hour interview in relation to your experiences of social media in your school leadership roles. I would ensure your privacy is respected. My research has full Ethics Committee approval from the University of Waikato.

If you would like to volunteer to participate please email me [sdunsmore@gmail.com](mailto:sdunsmore@gmail.com) by 30 March 2020 with your contact details.

Kind regards,

Steve Dunsmore  
Principal  
Horsham Downs School

*This research has been approved by the University of Waikato Faculty of Education Ethics Committee on 9/3/2020. Approval number: FEDU012/20*

## Appendix B – Participant Information Sheet

As part of my study towards a Master of Educational Leadership qualification I am undertaking research entitled '*The Impact of Social Media on Principal Leadership in New Zealand*'. I extend this invitation to you all to consider taking part. I am aiming to interview up to 6 colleagues for the purposes of data collection.

You are agreeing to becoming a participant in the master's level research being conducted by Steve Dunsmore and have the opportunity to ask questions about your involvement in the research.

Your involvement in the research will entail:

- Participation in a single 60-minute individual semi-structured interview with Steve, which will be recorded, transcribed, confirmed and discussed with you.
- Reading and approval of the transcript of the interview

Your total time commitment to my research will be 60 mins for the interview + 30 mins to review the transcript.

Your comments will be part of a thesis and subsequent conference papers, presentations and scholarly articles or publications. You will not be named in any publication or thesis and pseudonyms or codes will be used to label your contributions

You are free to withdraw from the research at any time and have your data destroyed, up until the point where you have approved the interview transcripts for analysis.

If you have any question for me as the researcher please email me [sdunsmore@gmail.com](mailto:sdunsmore@gmail.com) or contact me by phone on 021 138 3717.

If you wish to seek redress for concerns you may contact the research supervisor, Dr Dianne Forbes [dianne.forbes@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:dianne.forbes@waikato.ac.nz) at Te Kura Toi Tangata Faculty of Education, University of Waikato.

While every effort will be made to ensure confidentiality, this cannot be guaranteed.

An electronic copy of the thesis will become widely available, as the University of Waikato requires that a digital copy of Masters, MPhil and Doctoral theses be lodged permanently in the University's digital repository: Research Commons.

## Appendix C – Interview Consent Form

**Title of Project:** *The Impact of Social Media on Principal Leadership in New Zealand*

As part of my study towards a Master of Educational Leadership qualification I am undertaking research entitled '*The Impact of Social Media on Principal Leadership in New Zealand*'.

You will be taking take part in a one-hour interview in relation to your experiences of social media in your school leadership roles. I will ensure your privacy is respected.

**Name of Researcher:** Steve Dunsmore

Note: This consent form will be held in secure storage for a period of 5 years, after which it will be securely destroyed.

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above project and the researcher has answered any queries to my satisfaction.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw up until I approve the interview transcript without giving any reason and without consequences.
3. I understand that I will not be identified and I will not be named in the thesis or any publication. Pseudonyms or codes will be used to label my contributions to this study. While every effort will be made to ensure confidentiality, this cannot be guaranteed.
4. I give consent to an audio recording being made of my interview for reference by the principal researcher only.

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number/s: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D – Research Questions: Interview Schedule

1. How do NZ school principals experience and perceive social media?
  - a. How long have you been in a principal role in NZ schools?
  - b. What does social media mean to you?
  - c. How would you rate yourself as an adopter of these new technologies?
  - d. At what point did use of social media become evident in your workplace?
  - e. Would you describe yourself as generally a consumer of or a participant in social media?
  - f. Which platforms do you currently prefer or favour?
  - g. Explain how you personally use social media at home or at work.
  - h. How do you separate the 'private' and 'public' in an online world?
  - i. Are some aspects of social media you find most useful?
  - j. What has most surprised you with the emergence of social media?
  
2. How does social media impact on principals' roles?
  - a. Describe how social media is used in your school.
  - b. How do you manage the various platforms in your principal role?
  - c. Are there specific occasions when you were personally impacted by social media at work?
  - d. What amount of time do you allocate to social media use in your school?
  - e. Summarize what training you have received in use of social media.
  - f. Have you/your school experienced any specific difficulties as a direct result of social media use?
  - g. What are the main positives of having access to social media in the workplace?
  - h. How do you manage your time engaging on-line?
  - i. Describe how your use of social media has changed the way you interact with principal colleagues?
  - j. Who would you contact for advice around use of social media?
  
3. What strategies do principals adopt to address the challenges of social media in a school community?
  - a. What policies or procedures does your school have for the use of social media in the workplace?
  - b. Do you have a specific delegation to manage social media use in your school?
  - c. Are there education programmes for students in your local curriculum?
  - d. How does your school staff engage with social media platforms in their teaching roles?
  - e. What are some of the advantages and disadvantages you see of social media platforms in school settings?
  - f. Explain what community engagement looks like at your school.
  - g. Has social media changed the way you engage with parents?
  - h. How do you manage student use of social media in your school?
  - i. What is your understanding of your responsibilities in your role in regard to social media use?
  - j. What is your understanding of the principles of the 2013 Harmful Digital Communications Act for your school?