Exploring TikTok's Role in K-12 Education:
A Mixed-Methods Study of Teachers' Professional Use

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Increasingly, social media spaces have become places for teachers to exchange ideas and acquire new information in support of their professional learning. The popular app, TikTok, has become one of the social media spaces that teachers are using for that purpose. Teachers' use of online social media spaces to support their learning may have important implications for professional development and for classroom teaching practices. To gain an understanding of how K-12 teachers are using TikTok, this mixed-methods study was designed to investigate their professional use through an online survey and interviews. A total of 101 participants completed the survey, and 14 survey participants completed follow-up interviews. The teachers in this study were found to use TikTok to attain and share ideas with other teachers and to build and maintain connections with students. With the rise in popularity of social media spaces, including TikTok, these findings have implications for teachers, school leaders, teacher educators, and policymakers. Further, the findings also suggest exploring some larger questions related to social media use by teachers, in general. Policy implications based on the findings are explored.

Purpose

In 2016, TikTok, one of the largest social media apps in use today, was launched. It has since become a "global phenomenon" (Montag et al., 2021, p. 2). As with other social media sites such as Facebook, YouTube, X, and Instagram, teachers took notice of the platform and began to use it as a space to create content, with much of it showcasing everyday experiences in the life of teachers. With over a billion active users (D'Souza, 2024), it is important to take a closer look at TikTok to identify its appeal and understand how teachers are using it.

In 2023, TikTok was the second most popular downloaded app, just behind Instagram (Curry, 2024), yet the amount of time spent on TikTok is greater than all other social media apps (Woodward, 2024). A recent report noted that adults spent an average of 54 minutes on TikTok, followed by YouTube with 49 minutes, and X and Instagram with roughly 34 minutes apiece (Dixon, 2024). Montag et al. (2021) suggested that TikTok can be a useful channel to provide educational content for teachers. This seemed to be the case during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many teachers joined TikTok to produce content and connect with their students (Hartung et al., 2020).

For about 2 decades, teachers have been using online social media spaces to exchange ideas and as a source for professional learning (Van Den Beemt et al., 2020; Visser et al., 2014). The desire to turn to social media for information related to education is not unusual, as previous research has uncovered. For instance, teachers are present on X, formerly known as Twitter, many of whom use it to support their professional learning (Carpenter & Krutka, 2015; Forte et al., 2012; Nochumson, 2019).

In a study about educational influencers on Instagram, Shelton et al. (2020) reported that "influencers" or those users who have "microcelebrity status" because they promote "education-related products, philosophies, or practices" (p. 530) — shared helpful pedagogical practices, including lesson planning and motivational support. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers have found that teachers used social media to help them with the transition to remote teaching (Hartung et al., 2022; Trust & Whalen, 2020). Significantly, TikTok videos with the hashtag, #remotelearning, received over 318 million views as of this writing. Currently, TikTok has since switched from displaying hashtag view counts to showing the number of posts with specific hashtags. For #remotelearning, there are over 56,000 posts.

Society is undergoing a social networking revolution, whereby learning has become more personalized (Aburizaizah & Abdulaziz Albaiz, 2021). Teachers are part of this transformation. Many teachers are creating and viewing video content on TikTok. Given this information, it is important to understand what teachers are contributing and, importantly, what they are learning and applying to their own teaching practices. To date, researchers investigating TikTok have explored several different issues: the ways students expressed themselves in videos during the pandemic (Literat, 2021), the ways English language learners use TikTok (Zaitun et al., 2021), the use of TikTok by graduate students studying sports sciences

(Escamilla-Fajardo et al., 2021), and the ways science concepts are communicated to students (Zeng et al., 2021).

Thus far, there are limited studies seeking to understand how the K-12 population of teachers has been using TikTok (Hartung et al., 2022). The purpose of this study was to explore the landscape of TikTok and delve into the ways in which K-12 teachers are using this social media platform. Understanding how teachers use TikTok along with their perceptions of its benefits or drawbacks adds to emerging literature exploring not only educators' use of TikTok, but educators' use of social media more generally.

What Is TikTok?

TikTok is a short-form video creation social media app that was developed by a Chinese company called ByteDance in 2016 ("TikTok" can refer both to the app and to a video created on the app). The time limit of TikToks has been expanding and can now be up to 60 minutes. Livestreams for users with more than 1,000 followers have unlimited time to go live. However, short TikToks, often 15 seconds or less, tend to be more appealing and are more likely to be viewed in their entirety. To describe TikTok, the journalist, John Herrman, characterized it as "assertively answer[ing] anyone's *what should I watch?* with a flood" (2019, para. 9). The "flood" aptly describes the millions (literally) of videos available on a range of subjects. As of December 2023, 625 million TikTok videos are watched per minute (Marino, 2023).

The use of TikTok by teachers has begun to "shape and make visible particular versions of the teaching profession" (Hartung et al., 2022, p. 3). For instance, a popular math teacher on TikTok, Mrs. Kelly (@the_mrskelly) who has over a million followers, creates short math videos demonstrating how to solve problems on a white board, usually to upbeat music, without her voice, but with text on the screen describing how to solve the problems. In addition to the problem-solving clips, she has posted playful scenes of her students as she enters the classroom announcing, "The floor is lava." All the students immediately push back their chairs and stand on their desks.

TikTok has been described by some as "similar to physical playground experiences where [users] keep in touch with friends and meet new ones" (Meng & Leung, 2021, p. 2). On the one hand,

> There is an unmistakable sense that you're using something that's expanding in every direction. The pool of content is enormous. Most of it is meaningless. Some of it becomes popular, and some is great, and some gets to be both. (Herrman, 2019, para. 18).

On the other hand, when a user opens the TikTok app, they can immediately view short video clips on the "For You" page determined by the algorithm. Tolentino (2019) described the TikTok algorithm as giving "us whatever pleases us, and we, in turn, give the algorithm whatever pleases it," (para. 16) potentially leading users to spend more time on the app than intended and possibly leading to addictive behavior (Montag et al., 2021).

While TikTok may be viewed as an entertainment space, the possibility to learn new ideas exists as teachers scroll through TikToks. In their recent study, Hartung et al. (2022), described the rise of a TikTok teacher in Australia, Mr. Luke (@iam.mrluke), whose enthusiasm and high energy are part of the appeal of his TikToks to teachers. Herrman (2019) expertly harnessed the feeling that comes from using TikTok:

> [It] encourages users to jump from audience to audience, trend to trend, creating something like simulated temporary friend groups, who get together to do friend-group things: to share an inside joke; to riff on a song; to talk idly and aimlessly about whatever is in front of you. Feedback is instant and frequently abundant; virality has a stiff tailwind. Stimulation is constant. (para. 18)

The extensive range of options for users to create and recreate content in the TikTok app contributes to the appeal of this social media space and lets users express themselves, while offering an "escape from reality" (Anderson, 2020, p. 8).

Mixed Views on Tik Tok

In addition to being a conduit for trends, which might accelerate or augment specific trends, there are privacy concerns related to TikTok, including whether the Chinese government is gathering information about its users (Fowler, 2020). On April 24, 2024, President Biden signed a law intending to ban TikTok in the United States unless it is sold within one year (Allyn, 2024). The law stated that TikTok must be divested from the Chinese owned ByteDance to protect users' data from the Chinese government (Maheshwari & Holpuch, 2024). The Senate Intelligence Committee had requested an investigation into TikTok by the Federal Trade Commission to determine if employees of ByteDance in China have access to data about American citizens (McCabe, 2022). Fears of Chinese espionage, surveillance of Americans, the dissemination of disinformation, and interference in elections were some of the main reasons for calling for a TikTok ban (Allyn, 2024).

In response, ByteDance, headquartered in Singapore, claimed that all US user data will be stored on servers owned by Oracle, thereby eliminating China's access to the data (Chan & Hadero, 2023). Regardless of how the possible ban on TikTok plays out, digital technology, including social media, keeps advancing with the goal of learning more about its users "at more intimate levels and … often without our knowledge" (O'Shea, 2019, p. 23). Moreover, there will likely be a replacement app (e.g., Instagram Reels) if TikTok ultimately is banned.

While teachers may have found some positive uses of TikTok, there have been some concerns. For instance, some TikTok trends have encouraged students to engage in destructive behaviors at their schools and toward their teachers. One trend, the "Devious Licks" challenge, called for students to take items from their schools such as soap dispensers, safety signs, and classroom phones as a prank (Goldstein, 2021). As a result, TikTok removed the search phrase "Devious Licks" so videos promoting the trend would not appear.

Gillespie and Thompson (2021) described how some teachers may feel inadequate and shameful if the appearance of their classrooms does not match what they see on social media. As teachers and researchers, they revealed how the seemingly happy-looking teachers on social media, in their "perfectly curated learning nests," contributed to the sense that Gillespie's own "ordinary classroom was not good enough" (p. 260). The ideal classroom environment was portrayed as "highly stylized...like homes, with cozy couches, fluffy rugs, decorative pillows, framed art, and ambient lighting" (p. 259). They also noted that teachers' struggles tend to be contagious, such that viewing other teachers' so-called "perfect" classrooms may lead to teachers fretting about perceived imperfections in their own classrooms.

While students are most likely viewing TikToks created by their teachers, it appears that some teachers are interacting with their students' TikToks. This could potentially lead to questionable communication practices between teachers and students. Some school districts have policies stating that employees can only communicate with students and parents on school-related matters through district-approved networks (Papandrea, 2012). Posting to online social media websites is not without risks to teachers. Russo et al. (2010) noted that "teachers who post inappropriate content and communication on personal social networking sites that reflect poorly on their professional status and judgment may face disciplinary action for misconduct (or "conduct unbecoming")" (p. 8). As a result of many of these concerns, the question arises as to what policies, if any, should be put in place to help guide teachers in their use of social media?

Review of Relevant Literature

To understand the emerging influence of TikTok, it is important to apply some theoretical concepts that may be reflected in the use and appeal of this newer medium. This literature review describes connectivism, microlearning, and nanolearning as theoretical frameworks for the use of TikTok by teachers.

Connectivism

In 2004, George Siemens and Stephen Downes developed a theory they named connectivism, which some consider "the first Internet-native learning theory" (Weller, 2020, p. 115). Connectivism describes learning that occurs online as part of a cycle in which individuals continue to find relevant information while connecting with others about what they have learned and gathering more information (Kop & Hill, 2008). Taking the definition of connectivism a step further, Prestridge et al. (2021) use similar terminology, "connected learning," to describe "any learning experience where people co-create and share artifacts meaningful to their community (centered production), which affords abundant resources accessible to all (openly networked) who share a common purpose" (p. 2172).

Learning through the connectivist framework entails being able to create and maintain "connections that are current and flexible enough to be applied to existing and emergent problems" (Anderson & Dron, 2011, p.

87). For instance, the rise in hashtags related to remote teaching and learning on TikTok illustrates how teachers sought information related to the emerging pandemic. Further, the social connections between teachers on TikTok are visible, providing users with the potential for connections that they would not necessarily have made in real life (Prestridge, 2017).

Siemens (2018) stated, "Personal knowledge is comprised of a network, which feeds into organizations and institutions, which in turn feed back into the network, and then continue to provide learning to individuals" (Connectivism section). Based on this characteristic of connectivism, it is conceivable that teachers who take ideas from social media, including TikTok, may bring those ideas into their teaching practices. Further, while they may or may not create new TikToks to demonstrate how they have implemented their new learning, this process of iterative interaction has the potential to become a continuous cycle of learning. Moreover, viewing teachers on TikTok may influence other teachers to reflect upon their own teaching practices which is a key element to growing as a professional (Postholm, 2012).

Taking the connectivism framework a step further, Duffy (2008) realized that the use of online videos, with a platform such as YouTube, could be used for the "rapid deployment of scattered expertise and the dynamic reconfiguration of content" (p. 40) in educational curricula. As a result, in the online world more generally, there is a broader range of resources and ideas for teachers to adopt beyond formal learning opportunities, such as traditional professional development for teachers or structured courses. Moreover, today's online social media spaces have been able to "dismantle some of the learning supports upon which education has depended in the past" (p. 32).

Microlearning and Nanolearning

While the connectivism framework can be useful to describe the "how-to" process of obtaining information and connecting with others on TikTok, microlearning and nanolearning help to explain how that information is processed. Hug and Friesen (2007) suggested that while microlearning can involve a wide variety of media, there are some defining characteristics such that learning occurs in a short amount of time and with small units of content.

Microlearning involves the ability to instantly access chunks of important information, such as with videos (Paul, 2017). Ding et al. (2022) found that business students who viewed short instructional videos performed better than students who attended virtual seminars. Seemingly, videos of 2 minutes or less kept students most engaged. While present-day attention spans are shifting (Javorcik et al., 2023), Dolasinski and Reynolds (2022) suggested that "learning that captures the interest of the learner is paramount to success" (p. 552).

Khlaif and Salha (2021) distinguished between microlearning and the concept of nanolearning. While microlearning incorporates "learning activities chunked into small units to achieve a learning objective," nanolearning includes "self-contained, small, and unified pieces" that contribute to microlearning (p. 213). Aburizaizah and Abdulaziz Albaiz

(2021) further defined nanolearning as "shorter learning capsules in which maximum useful information is synthesized" (p. 84). They described some other characteristics of nanolearning, which include the following:

- applies to online or electronic learning,
- the learning takes place in under ten minutes,
- interactions with an instructor in real-time do not need to occur,
- suitable for learning information that is not too complex,
- best if used to learn information with a narrow focus.

Javorcik et al. (2023) suggested that effective teaching can happen by "shortening the time required to learn new information, improving the activation and motivation of students, as well as their attention span" (p. 13). For example, Mery (2022) suggested removing any extra "fluff" or information that is not useful. This is similar to how users generally watch YouTube videos by fast-forwarding to the information they seek. Further, Mery argued that learners are more likely to be motivated to learn if they see a short video and think they can successfully complete it since it is not an overwhelming task.

Zhang and West (2020) claimed that "a new model of professional learning is needed: a model emphasizing just-in-time instruction, focused interventions, flexible and accessible models, and learning tailored to the goals of the professional" (p. 310). Mery (2022) suggested that adult learners "want to decide what they want to learn, when, and in what order" (p. 10).

Because of its user-friendly interface and popularity, TikTok videos have potential uses in pedagogy and professional learning (Khlaif & Salha, 2021). For example, they suggested that a learning objective could be presented in a microlearning situation and then broken down even further into smaller 15-second video chunks on a platform such as TikTok. A benefit to shorter instructional videos includes the ability to watch the videos multiple times, potentially leading to greater retention of information, as well as a reduced cognitive load on working memory, which makes information easier to consume (Mery, 2022; Taylor & Hung, 2022).

Methodology

This was an exploratory study, which used a sequential mixed-methods approach (Creswell, 2014, p. 15). A mixed-methods approach was selected to increase the validity of the study's findings by collecting information in more than one way. Phase I included an online survey, in which the responses were analyzed first to "inform the collection of the second data source" (McKim, 2017, p. 203), which in this study were interviews. The following research questions guided this study:

1. Do K-12 teachers describe using TikTok as an educational resource to support their professional learning? If so, in what ways?

2. Do teachers find benefits in using TikTok? If so, what are they?

Data Collection

Purposive sampling directed at teachers using TikTok was used to obtain a range of respondents teaching kindergarten through 12th grade. Upon receiving Institutional Review Board approval (Teachers College IRB, 21-406), data collection began in two phases. Phase I involved the distribution of an online survey designed to collect both qualitative and quantitative data about K-12 teachers' use of TikTok. The survey design was based on a prior survey that I had used to gather information from a study on teachers' use of X (Nochumson, 2018). That survey was validated with a pilot study and factor analysis of questions. For the current survey, the questions were slightly tweaked to pertain to teachers' use of TikTok, and validity was completed with the face validity test (Gaur & Gaur, 2009), in which a content expert reviewed the questions.

The survey included 24 items. These items included eight closed-ended and four open-ended questions, along with one 5-point Likert rating scale. Items on the Likert scale were ranked from *never*, *a few times per year*, *per month*, and *per week* to *every day*. A total of 101 survey responses were collected.

Phase II involved in-depth, follow-up interviews with respondents who completed the survey (Creswell, 2014). The final question in the online survey asked participants to enter their email addresses if they would participate in follow-up interviews. Fifty-one respondents agreed to follow-up interviews, though 14 semistructured interviews were fully conducted. Interviews were scheduled via email. On average, interviews lasted 25 minutes in duration, with the longest being 36 minutes and the shortest, 18 minutes.

Recruitment of Participants

The recruitment of participants was a challenge. I have been unable to find similar studies in which participants were recruited via TikTok videos. Gilbert et al. (2021) recruited an online sample of Facebook users for their research study through Qualtrics, albeit at an expense, and Richter et al. (2022) recruited teachers via Instagram. While this type of data collection using TikTok is new, it also involved modifications along the way. To recruit participants, I used the medium itself to post a video asking for participants. Popular hashtags were targeted, such as #edutok, which had received over 135.5 billion views at the time the research was being conducted (McGlew, 2021).

Using TikTok's analytics, the average watch time was 5.5 seconds of the 13 second recruitment video, meaning that viewers did not see the last part of the video asking potential participants to take the survey. This recruitment methodology was also limited by the fact that the people viewing the TikTok were not necessarily teachers. I purchased a TikTok promotion package for $60, which helped receive 4,477 views and 314 "likes." The promotion, however, did not translate into survey responses from teachers.

I also contacted teachers directly on TikTok who had links to their Instagram accounts in their profiles. Not all teachers on TikTok included

their Instagram links in their profiles, and some of the Instagram accounts had private settings so direct messages could not be sent. I also shared the survey link on X, Facebook, and LinkedIn.

Data Analysis

The quantitative and qualitative data from the survey were analyzed simultaneously. SPSS was used for statistical analyses of quantitative data. Qualitative data from the survey was analyzed using the Text iQ feature in Qualtrics, which allowed for questions to be coded and themed according to Neuman (2014). An open coding approach was used to generate codes from the open-ended questions in the survey and interview responses (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Cresswell, 2014). The frequency of responses was quantified, and codes were created (as recommended by Hesse-Biber, 2010). A content expert reviewed the codes to determine their appropriateness and relevance to the research questions (as recommended by Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008).

Table 1 illustrates the codes used to categorize the responses. Roller and Lavrakas (2015) suggested generating questions postsurvey analysis to get more detailed knowledge from participants and "to maximize credible and analyzable outcomes" (p. 51).

Table 1
Codes From Interviews

Categories	Codes
Barriers to use of TikTok	Administrator support Algorithm Equity Misinformation Parents Security risks Unhelpful ideas
Benefits of using TikTok	Bring ideas to the classroom Connect with students Sharing with other teachers The nature of TikTok
Reasons for using TikTok	Accessibility to students during COVID pandemic Authenticity of teachers on TikTok Professional development

Results from the survey were analyzed prior to the interviews to help inform the interview questions (as recommended in McKim, 2017; Vogt et al., 2014). Semistructured interview questions (see appendix) were conducted and transcribed with an online transcription service, Trint, and coded for themes in NVivo (Vogt et al., 2014). The codes were generated based on the frequency of participants' responses. The findings from the interviews were compared with the survey results to gain a more comprehensive understanding of teachers' use of TikTok. Findings from both phases are discussed individually with interpretations set forth in the discussion.

Findings

Survey Analysis

The purpose of this research study was to gain insight into how TikTok is used by teachers of grades K-12. Most participants reported living in the United States, although international participation included Canada, the UK, Australia, Mexico, and a few others. A little over a quarter of participants (25%) taught language arts, and all grade levels from elementary to high school were represented.

Frequency of Use

Sixty percent of respondents reported joining TikTok as a result of the pandemic. Table 3 illustrates the frequency of teachers' TikTok usage, in which 68% of participants reported using it daily.

Table 2
*Survey Participant Sample (*n = *101)*

Participant Characteristics	*n*	*%*
Location		
United States	83	82%
International	18	9%
Number of years teaching		
1- 5 years	25	25%
6-15 years	43	43%
16-25 years	30	30%
25+ years	3	3%
School type		
Public	99	99%
Virtual public school	1	1%
International	1	1%
Number of students in school		
500 or less	33	33%
501-1500	53	53%
1501-2500	7	7%
Greater than 2500	8	8%

Participant Characteristics	*n*	*%*
Highest degree earned		
Bachelors	32	32%
Masters	66	66%
PhD	1	1%
Doctoral	2	2%
Subject Areas Taught [a]		
Math	17	17%
Language Arts	25	25%
Science	6	6%
Social Studies	12	12%
Art	2	2%
Music	4	4%
Technology	16	16%
Drama	2	2%
World Languages	5	5%
Library/Research skills	6	6%
Special/Gifted Education	4	4%
Grade level taught [a]		
Elementary (K-5)	41	41%
Middle (6-8)	52	52%
High School (9-12)	31	31%
[a] Some participants teach more than one subject area and grade level		

More than half of participants (52%) reported viewing TikTok videos created by teachers every day. Slightly more than a third of participants (34%) responded that they actively follow TikTok accounts by teachers who regularly post helpful videos daily. Remarkably, 74% of participants reported implementing new ideas they learned from TikTok directly into their teaching practices.

Table 3
*The Frequency of Teachers' TikTok Use (*n = *101)*

Category	n	%
Length of Time as a TikTok User		
Less than 6 months	15	15%
6 months to 1 year	35	35%
1-2 years	44	44%
More than 2 years	7	7%
Frequency of TikTok use		
Daily	68	68%
2-3 times per week	20	20%
Once per week	3	3%
2-3 times per month	4	4%
Once every 2-3 months	3	3%
Once every 6 months	3	3%

Purpose of Use

A general overview of the data from the Likert scale suggests that teachers mainly used TikTok in a passive way, consuming videos rather than creating their own. This finding is consistent with another popular online video platform, YouTube, in which users were mostly consumers of videos instead of contributors (Tan, 2013) and with Instagram, in which teachers were mostly information seekers rather than creators (Richter et al., 2022).

Nine participants reported creating TikToks every day, 16 reported a few times per week, and 20 reported a few times per month. It is worth noting that these represent 45% of participants who currently create and post their own TikToks, while another 18% reported that they plan to create Tiktoks in the future.

Responses to open-ended questions in the survey were coded within the Text iQ feature of Qualtrics. Table 5 illustrates the codes that emerged during the analysis of responses to the item, "Please describe the meaningful experience because of your interaction on TikTok."

Table 4
*How Teachers Report Using TikTok (*n = *101)*

Category	*n*	%
Length of Time as a TikTok User		
Less than 6 months	15	15%
6 months to 1 year	35	35%
1-2 years	44	44%
More than 2 years	7	7%
Frequency of TikTok use		
Daily	68	68%
2-3 times per week	20	20%
Once per week	3	3%
2-3 times per month	4	4%
Once every 2-3 months	3	3%
Once every 6 months	3	3%

Table 5
Open-Ended Survey Responses About Meaningful TikTok Experiences

Code	Number of Responses	Examples of Responses
Sharing and learning new ideas	17	We've seen STEAM challenges that we've replicated. We've learned about mindfulness. We've considered how different people interact with religion.
Connections made with other teachers	11	I feel solidarity with other teachers & get advice & ideas from other teachers through TikTok
Connections made with students	4	I have been able to reach out to students who weren't completing work during the pandemic, who weren't answering emails, schoology messages, and parents were unavailable. Some of them commented on my tiktoks, and then I was able to talk to them in the comment section and get them to work!

One participant described how her students responded to an activity she learned from TikTok: "My students loved it! I joined as a way to connect with them and share tik toks with them directly. I need to get better at making my own!" Another participant described her use of TikTok with

students as "a more 'modern' take on education. It was related to the world as they know it." Likewise, a high school teacher described gaining "a certain amount of social capital that is hard to replicate" by telling her students that she learned of an idea from TikTok. Establishing connections with students and their personal world may increase their motivation to learn (Thoonen et al., 2011).

In a more specific example of teacher learning, a first-grade reading teacher reported learning "some new callbacks and some new reading center activities." Moreover, a seventh-grade mathematics teacher reported,

> Students love new back to school activities I've found on TikTok, as well as the bulletin boards I've created from TikTok, the google slides and google forms other teachers have shared, and they love to be a part of my TikTok ideas and creations, too!

A chi-square test of independence was performed to determine if any relationships existed within the data. The relationship between the length of time teachers had been using TikTok and their implementation of teaching methods was significant, X^2 (6, N = 101) =19.44, p = .003. As Figure 1 shows, 86% of teachers who had been using TikTok for 1-2 years had implemented new ideas in their classrooms. Apparently, the longer teachers had been using TikTok, the more likely they were to incorporate some of the information into their teaching practices. Likewise, it could also be the case that teachers had success at implementing new ideas into their teaching, and thus, they continued to use TikTok as a resource.

Figure 1
Percentage of Teachers Who Have Implemented New Teaching Methods, Ideas, or Activities From TikTok
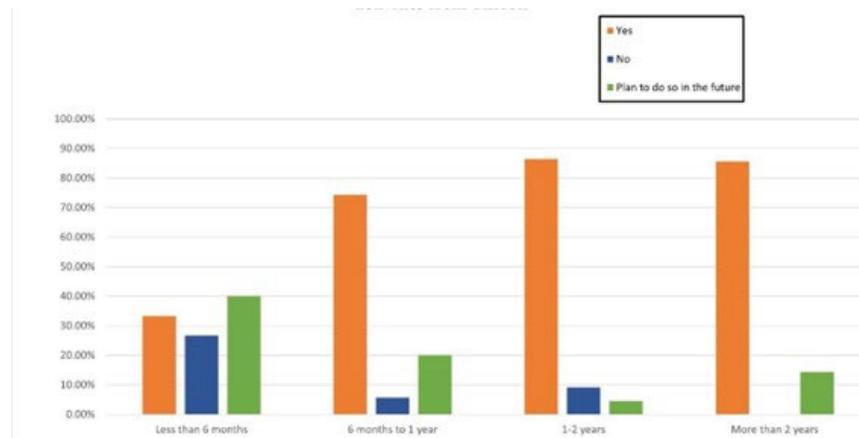
Meaningful TikTok Experiences

Forty-three participants reported having meaningful experiences resulting from their use of TikTok, with the most common response including the ability to share ideas with other teachers. For example, one

participant in the online survey described how TikTok was meaningful: "I have received messages from teachers telling me about ideas of mine that they have used with their students with success." This experience fits with Kop and Hill's (2008) description of connectivism, in which knowledge is "*literally* the set of connections formed by actions and experience" (p. 7).

Participants were asked how their students responded to any new ideas that they implemented in their teaching. More than half (52%) described their students as responding positively to the new ideas. A few said their students were excited to know that their teachers were learning and gaining new ideas from TikTok. Another participant commented in an open-ended survey response, "Anything I've gotten from TikTok has been a hit. TikTok is so up-to-date and in-touch that if it's being used by teachers and their students are liking it, then mine will as well."

Participants who created their own educational TikToks were asked to describe the types of responses they received. Of the 42 participants who responded to this question, 34 reported positive responses. Most of the positive responses to the open-ended survey questions were related to the number of viewers, such as the following response from a K-12 technology teacher: "I had a snow day video that gained 200,000 views in less than 24 hours. I was hooked for a while after that." Some participants reported that TikToks with "controversial topics," such as teacher salaries and teacher and student behavior, or funny classroom stories generated more engagement than TikToks with teaching advice.

As a result of receiving positive interactions, such as likes and supportive comments, some participants mentioned wanting to create more TikToks. A middle school librarian reported that she

> got a lot of likes and thank you comments for sharing how I use Flipgrid in the library. I really liked connecting with other Librarians/Teachers. The positive response did make me want to create more, but I'm so busy I just haven't.

The potential to reach a wider audience was noted by a few teachers. For instance, a high school social studies teacher reported, "I've posted 54 educational videos, I've received 4,687 likes. I enjoy posting but wish I reached [sic] more people. I've created less [sic] due to work and the lack of virality of previous videos." Several other participants reported a range of viewership with their TikToks, as the following middle school librarian described:

> I cannot figure out the TikTok algorithm, but I've had one video in the millions, a few with 400K or more, but most sit somewhere between 400 and 3000. There are some videos with low views and a LOT of interaction, and that's valuable as well.

The unpredictability regarding the number of TikTok views seemed to be an area of interest to participants, as this comment to an open-ended survey question from a high school art teacher illustrates: "My video views/engagements vary greatly. Typically, ed videos are mid-level performance for me, with about 50k views, 10k engagements. That being said, TikTok is unpredictable." Bhandari and Bimo (2022) also found a

"heightened awareness" (p. 5) by TikTok users who wondered about the inner workings of its algorithm.

Drawbacks of TikTok as Described by Respondents

When asked about drawbacks they had experienced on TikTok, almost a quarter of participants (22%) reported that rude comments and negativity toward the teaching profession were the most frequent types of negative experiences. As one participant expressed, "There is a lot of negativity around the profession. It can be harmful to the overall profession," which may lead future teachers to question their choices of becoming a teacher. Hearing other teachers complain on social media may influence teachers to question their own job satisfaction. In fact, there is a segment of TikTok known as #teacherquittok featuring teachers describing their personal accounts of leaving the classroom (Barber & Literat, 2024).

Entire classrooms are now on display in many TikToks, letting viewers see how desks are arranged, signs on the walls, and different types of technology. Another participant received comments about signs on her walls during the COVID-19 pandemic, noting that people love to "criticize teaching styles and especially mask protocols. I have received many comments about the social distancing signs in my classroom. There are also people who think some of the songs I have taught are inappropriate." Regarding rude comments, a middle school music teacher explained, "A lot of people think that they know everything about your classroom from 1, 3-minute video, and it's frustrating. Lots of homophobic comments when they see my pride flag." A middle school science teacher reported a similar experience, "Because I'm gay and sometimes you can see a pride flag on my wall. I get hate comments, other times they can be very sweet." In fact, in a case a few years ago, a teacher reportedly resigned after being asked to remove a pride flag from his classroom.

Interview Analyses

Fourteen interviews took place via the Zoom videoconferencing app with participants who also responded to the survey and expressed a willingness to be interviewed. Table 6 displays some information about the participants, including their pseudonyms.

Teacher Professional Learning

Heather, a middle school librarian, described her learning:

> There are so many things that I learned from TikTok that I can use immediately, and I follow a wide range of teachers of all grade levels. So it's interesting to me about the kinds of things that will inspire an idea. ... It's basically like having a conversation with other teachers, but you can kind of pick what you're talking about and who you learn from. And the algorithm is magical. Like once you are on TikTok for long enough and watching the videos and interact, it starts giving you things that are super valuable to you.

Table 6
*Interview Participant Profiles (*n = *14)*

Participant	Location	Grade Level(s)	Subject Area
Amber	Georgia	8th	Social studies
Bryce	Pennsylvania	Middle/High	Music
Cassidy	Kansas	High	Technology
Charles	Ohio	High	Instructional coach
Fiona	Illinois	High	Social studies
Georgia	Louisiana	Middle	Art
Heather	South Carolina	Middle	Library
Jeff	Pennsylvania	Middle	Social Studies
Katie	Maryland	High	German
Lucy	N. Ireland	Middle/High	Computer Science
Mia	Dominican Rep	Middle	All
Mike	Illinois	High	Instructional Coach
Rachelle	Canada	Middle	Physical Education
Vida	Missouri	Kindergarten	All

While there are many videos on TikTok, Cassidy discussed how she managed large amounts of information: "I probably saved anywhere from 15 to 20 videos a week about either teaching strategies, teaching ideas or, like, free resources, either so I could use or I could share."

Fiona also described her experience learning from TikTok:

> When I'm sitting there and I'm trying to build a Bitmoji classroom, and I'm pausing and replaying the same TikTok that's teaching me how to do this, and it's taking me almost an hour to make sure everything's where I want to... I felt that I genuinely learned something, I worked with material, even if I have to go back to the TikTok.

Fiona's description fits with a potential benefit of short videos, which can be described as examples of nanolearning — making it easier for teachers to learn a particular skill quickly. Some respondents claimed that this quick access to information was needed for their busy lives as teachers. Nanolearning with small chunks of information facilitates learning, since

viewers are not overwhelmed with information and they can easily rewatch videos multiple times (Taylor & Hung, 2022).

Lucy recalled a situation in which a TikTok video that explained the negative effects of competition between students made her reflect on her own teaching:

> I would always be like, if we're good, we'll play a game. … And it wasn't until then I saw on TikTok that promoting competition is also not helping in the classroom. … Then I reflected. … We need to instill the passion for learning rather than have competition or behavior.

Some participants, such as Bryce, remarked that "the very nature of social media is that it tends to precipitate what's trendy. So I think it would be more something on the surface, like I just tried this activity and it worked great." This comment illustrates that teachers may be getting mostly surface-level ideas as opposed to more thorough and in-depth curricular plans.

Connecting With Students

Middleton (2022), a business school professor who used TikTok to teach his students, argued the "need to develop new ways to connect with students" (p. 230). Several participants described how easy it was to use TikTok to connect with and relate to their students. For most of them, the COVID-19 pandemic provided the impetus to use TikTok, as Jeff described: "I was using it at that time to connect with students, so I made a happy birthday [TikTok] to a student. … So initially, it was a way to connect with the kids in a way that's ….cool… Maybe meet them where they're at." Mike, a high school instructional coach, had a similar experience: "I try as an educator always to try to get to that level or pull in that kid that may be unreachable, so to speak. So, at that moment in time, it just happened to be TikTok."

Lucy, a teacher who has disabilities, also found a way to use TikTok to help her talk about her disability with her students by viewing other disabled teachers having conversations with students: "I think TikTok has given me more confidence about talking about my disability in the classroom because there are disabled creators and there's [sic] disabled teachers [who] want to talk … with their pupils, I then try to emulate."

Hesse-Biber (2010) suggested that convergence between survey and interview data supports the validation of the findings. Some of the information acquired from the interviews agreed with the findings from the survey. The crossover information includes participants' description of benefits of using TikTok, such as learning new ideas and connecting with students.

Discussion

This research study addressed the following research questions:

1. Do K-12 teachers describe using TikTok as an educational resource to support their professional learning? If so, in what ways?
2. Do teachers find benefits in using TikTok? If so, what are they?

Many participants in this study (60%) reported joining TikTok during the pandemic, which may reflect the fact that TikTok provided immediate information applicable to their needs (Mery, 2022). This goes back to the literature regarding nanolearning, whereby adult learners want more agency over their learning — they "want to decide what they want to learn, when, and in what order" (p. 10). This could be seen as providing the kind of just-in-time support that teachers were seeking during the pandemic and, perhaps, further reflects their lack of preparation for such a traumatic educational interruption.

Participants described using TikTok mainly by viewing teacher-created TikToks and by following teachers whose TikToks seemed to provide helpful information. These findings align with what prior research has revealed, namely that social media creates new ways for teachers to express themselves and to see what other teachers are doing (Carpenter et al., 2019; Kimmons & Veletsianos, 2014).

While it is tempting to think that teachers are learning new information because they are viewing TikToks by other teachers, this may not necessarily be the case. Understanding what teachers are learning from the TikTok platform has yet to be captured. Hug and Friesen (2007) would likely agree that, while "learning can be playful, entertaining and even joyful, we do not maintain that microlearning is simply a question of dressing up and manipulating avatars or tinkering with bits" (p. 5). Further, short TikToks only provide brief access to information whereas issues in education can be complex and require more depth (Middleton, 2022). Kerr (2007, as cited in Kop & Hill, 2008) went further, challenging connectivism itself since it does not explain the deeper processes such as making and building understandings which are needed to learn.

TikTok has allowed teachers to showcase their classrooms and teaching styles. Before social media, teachers could go into their classrooms, close the door, and little would be known about the lessons of the day. TikToks have opened some of these doors to the public, for better or worse, as teachers view other teachers in their own classrooms. Teachers do not necessarily appear to be rehearsed or polished. Hartung et al. (2022) noted that "amateurism and producing less-than-perfect or unprofessional media content conveys a sense of unfiltered and in-the-moment authenticity" (p. 5). In a comparison to teachers on Instagram, a user of the X platform described the TikTok community as being "incredibly supportive and helpful to me. Everyone seems much more realistic and down-to-earth than Instagram celebrities" (Weaver, 2021).

Pushing back against the view that these videos are more "real" and, therefore, valuable, Hug and Friesen (2007) cautioned that "the dynamics of amateur content production and consumption, and the business models that have been developing along with them require in-depth investigation rather than continued celebration" (p. 8). Further, teachers who have amassed thousands of followers and have crossed the threshold into social media influencers may be perceived as "credible, inspirational experts and

opinion leaders" (Carpenter et al., 2022, p. 3). This perceived authenticity may be appealing to teachers who view TikToks, yet there may be a tension between teachers who are looking for practical teaching ideas and the actual content being shared, some of which is exaggerated for audience appeal.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Two main areas in which implications for policies and practice should be considered are in teacher education programs and in school communities. Despite a potential ban on TikTok in the United States, chances are that teachers and future teachers will still be accessing short-formed videos through other means such as Instagram Reels or other apps that could replace TikTok. Therefore, it makes sense to continue to investigate K-12 teachers' use of social media platforms, including TikTok, and how they are being used for professional learning. Policymakers should be aware of how teachers are using various social media platforms (Manca & Ranieri, 2017). The potential for more guidance for teachers, including preservice teachers exists.

Teacher Education Policies

There are important implications for the field of teacher education, considering how much information TikTok provides and the fact that teachers are learning from it, as this study revealed. McKoy (2023) pointed out that teacher education programs should be aware of preservice teachers' "preference for short-formed media" (p. 119), which captures their attention and engages them immediately. This fits with the nanolearning approach that the structure of TikTok provides.

In addition, preservice teachers were drawn to "attention getting features" such as "cute classrooms, teacher outfits and pleasing colors, rather than analyzing the content" (McKoy, 2023, p. 119). With guidance from teacher educators, preservice teachers can learn strategies to help critically evaluate information in TikTok videos, beyond their cutesy appearances, paying close attention to credibility and quality. For example, viewing TikToks with strategies for teaching students with ADHD could lead to helpful discussions between preservice teachers and teacher educators (Heubeck, 2023). McKoy (2023) suggested that preservice teachers view the comments alongside teachers' TikToks to gain further insight into the effectiveness of shared teaching strategies.

Classroom teachers as well as preservice teachers should learn about school policies that exist to protect them and students from untoward usage (Greenhow et al., 2019; Manca & Ranieri, 2017; Van Den Beemt et al., 2020). Some teachers in this study reported receiving negative comments about their teaching and classrooms. Having the knowledge of how to respond or not respond to negativity online will empower teachers as users of social media. Fox and Bird (2017) would likely agree, as they argued that "more constructive guidance on professional social media etiquette is now needed" (p. 669). Li and Greenhow (2015) suggested a similar idea for educational researchers in that they should learn how to disseminate their research ideas to wider audiences via social media. The

need for this type of training seems to exist beyond the teaching profession.

Taking these ideas a step further, Shelton et al. (2020) called for teacher educators to guide and support teachers in "critically developing and maintaining diverse (professional learning networks), and by steering edu-influencers (or aspiring influencers) to beneficial pursuits as teacher leaders" (p. 550). Further, Nochumson (2018) suggested a mentoring program in which more experienced users of social media educate not only newer teachers to social media platforms, but current teachers as well. In fact, Zavyalova and Galvin (2022) described how a couple of experienced teachers in their YouTube study "spoke about consciously becoming virtual mentors in order to make a difference" to teachers who were new to setting up their own YouTube channels (p. 193).

School Community Policies

Recently, harmful trends against teachers have been promoted on TikTok. These include videos encouraging violence in schools, (Mak, 2021), the #deviousLicks challenge, in which students were encouraged to destroy school bathrooms, and the slap-a-teacher challenge. In the UK, some students began creating fake TikTok accounts to upload doctored videos of teachers using sexually explicit and homophobic materials (Wightwick, 2021). School administrators have found themselves scrambling to respond to the increase in the number of videos that impact their teachers, students, and schools. The December challenge encouraged students to commit violence in their schools (Mak, 2021). O'Brien (2021) remarked that TikTok needs to "get better at playing the role of sheriff" (p. 124).

Becky Pringle, the head of the National Education Association (NEA), called for social media companies "to publicly pledge to students, educators, and families that they will "regulate lies and fix algorithms to put public safety over profits" (Klein, 2021, para 6). Some users on the X platform have called for support for teachers and schools to have advance warnings over potential activities that may harm them such as a "social media threat watchlist" (Freeth, 2021).

It would seem prudent for social media companies to collaborate in some ways with schools and communities to ensure the safety of students. TikTok could have teacher ambassadors who are recognized as responsible educators whose content has been vetted for use in teaching, or perhaps social media companies could offer training programs for teachers to get the most out of their experiences online.

The rise in teachers' use of social media and the emergence of social influencers on platforms may have an impact on administrators and policymakers, as they draw attention to issues that are important to teachers (Carpenter et al., 2022). School administrators may want to consider implementing a social media curricular requirement in schools to educate all students about social media and the consequences of inappropriate conduct. Additionally, students and their parents should be aware of explicit laws that exist to protect people from online harassment. In some cases, parents may face police action because of how their children behave online (Adams, 2021). Unfortunately, awareness of these types of

issues only happens once a notable incident has occurred, such as the physical assault on a teacher by a teen who then faced jail time (Vigdor, 2021).

Limitations

This study contained several limitations. First, the survey was distributed via several social media spaces to teachers who are already users of social media; therefore, the results may be skewed toward teachers who may hold more favorable views of social media. In addition, because the sample was small, it is not possible to generalize these findings.

Even though participants' confidentiality is of utmost importance, potential participants may have rejected the idea of participating in a research study that targeted them due to uncertainty as to how it would work. I had to contact individual teachers through X, formerly Twitter, or Instagram, which may have led to a removed sense of anonymity. However, Gilbert et al. (2021) found that social media users who viewed their information as public were supportive of research being conducted within social media spaces.

Conclusion

This research study explored how K-12 teachers reported using TikTok. Teachers reported learning from TikTok, just as they did from X (Carpenter & Krutka, 2015; Nochumson, 2018), Facebook (Van Den Beemt et al., 2020), YouTube (Zavyalova & Galvin, 2022), and Instagram (Carpenter et al., 2020; Shelton et al., 2020). Ultimately, several new questions emerged for future research such as he following:

1. What should teachers be doing with TikTok and other social media?
2. Why do teachers use social media spaces to support their learning?
3. What types of support do teachers need as they increasingly utilize social media spaces to learn?
4. How should teacher education programs prepare teachers for tools such as these?

While many teachers feel that the professional development available to them is not meeting their needs, it seems reasonable to expect school districts and colleges and universities that prepare teachers to acknowledge that social media has a role to play in the professional learning of teachers. As Kop and Hill (2008) pointed out, "School systems tend to value education that is grounded in traditions of the past, steeped in values that have developed over centuries" (p. 11). Perhaps the time has come to challenge social media providers to make thoughtful use of their platforms to create in-depth professional development. This could broaden the definition of professional development to include individual teachers' online experiences with social media.

The 2020-22 school years, directly impacted by a pandemic, forced educators, administrators, and policymakers to grapple with providing an education to students in different forms; the same could be said for

teachers' learning. Manca and Ranieri (2017) argued that there should be "greater recognition ... for the adoption of innovative teaching practices" (p. 619) that come from social media, which could result in the transformation of overall teaching practices. Regardless, it is anticipated that the use of social media by teachers will continue to increase. Thus, it is imperative to better understand its current and potential value to teachers.

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Appendix
Interview Questions

Based on 45% of respondents who said they plan to create TikToks in the future.

How would you describe your use of TikTok?

- Have you experienced any drawbacks or negative experiences? If so, please describe.

- Have you changed your attitude about social media based on your experience with TikTok?

- Many teachers reported that getting positive feedback on their TikToks makes them want to create more. Is this true for you?

74% of teachers reported incorporating new ideas in their teaching.

- Have you incorporated new ideas that you learned from TikTok? If so, please give an example.

- How have your students responded to the new ideas?