

First-Year Teachers' Use of Social Media for Professional Learning

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This qualitative study examined 1st-year teachers' perceptions of how social media supported professional learning across affective, social, and cognitive domains. Using interviews and focus groups, three novice teachers described using platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube to access instructional resources, seek emotional support, and build virtual communities. Social media enabled just-in-time learning and affirmed teachers' sense of belonging, confidence, and professional identity. Although participants valued these digital spaces, they acknowledged limits in addressing complex, job-embedded needs best met by in-person colleagues and mentors. Findings suggest that social media serves as a meaningful extension of teachers' professional learning networks, complementing formal support structures. However, participants often accepted online educators and content as credible without critically examining their visibility or authority. Implications highlight the need for educator preparation and induction programs to foster critical engagement with informal digital learning environments.

Even under the best circumstances, new teachers often feel unprepared for the complexities of their professional role (Staudt Willet, 2024). First-year teachers face daunting challenges, such as classroom management, differentiation, parent communication, and time management, contributing to feelings of vulnerability and stress, which can ultimately lead to teacher burnout (Dias-Lacy & Guirguis, 2017; Fantilli & McDougal, 2009; Herman et al., 2018). This burnout can manifest as emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and low levels of self-efficacy, resulting in teacher turnover as well as diminished performance from teachers who remain in the profession (Herman et al., 2018).

Additionally, novice teachers often struggle with feelings of isolation, particularly when implementing innovative teaching practices (Ito et al., 2018). The multifaceted demands on teachers contribute to alarming attrition rates, with approximately 44% of new teachers leaving the profession within their first 5 years (Ingersoll et al., 2018). Several years ago, this exodus was estimate to cost U.S. school districts \$20,000 per departing teacher in recruitment and training expenses while also negatively impacting student achievement (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Ongoing professional learning can help alleviate these challenges and provide early-career teachers with opportunities to learn about practical strategies, discuss common teaching issues, and build supportive communities (Romano, 2008). Research indicates that continuing professional development is directly related to student achievement gains. For example, Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) reported that 49 hours of teacher professional development annually can boost student achievement by approximately 21%. For early-career teachers, ongoing learning opportunities are especially critical, as sustained support during the initial years of teaching can encourage teacher retention (See et al., 2020).

Traditional workshop-model professional development, however, often fails to meet teachers' evolving needs. Such professional development can be generic, costly, and disconnected from daily classroom practice (Carpenter & Krutka, 2014; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). In contrast, effective professional learning is ongoing, closely connected to teachers' instructional contexts, and responsive to their immediate challenges (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Limitations in traditional professional development have prompted many teachers to seek more flexible, personalized, and accessible forms of learning.

Social media has emerged as one such space, offering teachers continuous, just-in-time opportunities to connect with colleagues, access resources, and expand their professional learning networks (PLNs; Bruguera et al., 2019; Greenhalgh & Koehler, 2017; Mercado & Shin, 2025; Mercieca et al., 2024). While prior research has documented the ways teachers, in general, use social media (Greenhow et al., 2018), less is known about how 1st-year teachers specifically perceive and engage with social media during the transition into classroom teaching.

Drawing on a theoretical framework that includes affective, social, and cognitive dimensions of learning within the context of PLNs, this study examined 1st-year teachers' perceptions of the role of social media in supporting their professional learning. The following research questions guided the inquiry:

1. How do 1st-year teachers perceive social media as supporting their affective needs, such as motivation, confidence, and sense of belonging, during their 1st year of teaching?
2. How do 1st-year teachers use social media to engage with others and learn through observation, modeling, and interaction?

3. How do 1st-year teachers perceive social media as informing or improving their instructional practices?

Theoretical Framework

This study was informed by a theoretical lens that brings together research on teachers' PLNs and the affective, social, and cognitive domains of teacher learning. PLNs provide a way to understand how teachers learn across both formal and informal activities (Aguilar et al., 2021). Formal learning is structured and goal oriented, while informal learning develops through teachers' everyday work and interactions (Eraut, 2004; Kyndt et al., 2016). In addition, research on teacher learning has highlighted that professional growth involves emotional experiences, social relationships, and the development of knowledge and skills (Trust et al., 2016). Integrating these perspectives offers a lens for examining how 1st-year teachers use social media within their PLNs and how those experiences reflect multiple dimensions of learning.

Professional Learning Networks

Trust et al. (2016) conceptualized PLNs as dynamic systems that support professional learning through the people, resources, and tools that teachers engage with across contexts. Within this framework, PLNs are "uniquely personalized, complex systems of interactions" (p. 28). PLNs can include traditional professional development opportunities but also extend to informal learning beyond the local school context, including online environments (Aguilar et al., 2021; Krutka et al., 2017). Carpenter et al. (2021) further emphasized that professional learning occurs within interconnected contexts that range from the daily interactions of classrooms and schools to broader institutional, policy, and cultural environments. Influences at each level shape the people, resources, and tools that teachers prioritize in their growth. This research has established PLNs as the broader conceptual foundation for understanding the ways teachers build and sustain their PLNs through social media.

Affective, Social, and Cognitive Domains of Professional Learning

In their study of educators' perceptions of the ways PLNs shape their teaching and learning, Trust et al. (2016) described professional learning as a holistic process that develops teachers' affective, social, and cognitive learning domains. This conceptualization provides a useful framework for understanding teachers' experiences within digital PLNs and informs the current study's analysis of ways 1st-year teachers use social media for learning.

Affective learning encompasses the emotional and motivational aspects of professional growth. It involves emotions, attitudes, and interests that influence teachers' self-understanding and sense of efficacy (Dettmer, 2005). Educators report that participation in PLNs provides encouragement and inspiration, promoting a sense of wellbeing and professional reinvigoration. These emotionally supportive environments can contribute to a sense of self-worth, confidence, and belonging,

especially important given the emotional demands of teaching (Bloom, 1977).

Social learning occurs through observation and modeling (Bandura, 1977), as well as interaction, collaboration, and the building of relationships (Dettmer, 2005). Through collaborative exchanges, teachers generate new ideas, revise their thinking, and feel part of a larger professional community (Hur & Brush, 2009; Zuidema, 2012). Trust et al. (2016) reported that educators involved in PLNs believed these networks expanded their exposure to new ideas and offered an antidote to feelings of loneliness or isolation in the profession.

Cognitive learning refers to the development, acquisition, and application of increasing complex knowledge and skills. Bloom et al. (1956) identified cognitive learning as a central objective of education, encompassing processes such as remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, and evaluating information. Within the context of professional learning, cognitive development involves teachers' engagement with new ideas, conceptual knowledge, and strategies that inform instructional decision-making and classroom practice. Participation in PLNs supports cognitive learning by exposing educators to information and perspectives that can expand their understanding of content, pedagogy, and problem-solving (Greenhalgh & Koehler, 2017; Trust et al., 2016). From this perspective, the cognitive domain captures how teachers build and refine the knowledge base that contributes to their professional growth.

As a whole, this framework guided the study reported here by focusing attention on the types of learning enabled through social media mediated PLNs and the ways these experiences support 1st-year teachers during their initial year of practice.

Literature Review

The following literature review situates the study within existing research on teacher professional learning and the emerging role of social media as a space where educators, especially novices, seek emotional, social, and instructional support.

Evolving Forms of Teacher Professional Learning

Teacher professional learning has traditionally taken the form of formal workshops and mandated training. While teachers have long participated in professional learning to support their instructional practice (Dede et al., 2009; Kyndt et al., 2016), many educators report dissatisfaction with these traditional formats, often citing a lack of alignment with their immediate needs (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Richardson, 2003). In contrast, workplace and self-directed learning provide opportunities for educators to learn in context and to focus on topics of immediate relevance (Beach et al., 2022; Kyndt et al., 2016). When teachers drive their own professional learning, their sense of agency increases and their ability to adjust to shifting professional demands and expectations is supported (West, 2025).

Recent research shows that many teachers engage in online self-directed learning and value its usefulness, accessibility, and applicability to their daily practice (Parsons et al., 2019). Tour (2017) found that teachers participating in informal, online PLNs engaged in “essential professional practices,” using these spaces to locate resources, exchange ideas, and reflect on their teaching experiences (p. 188). As teachers continue to explore digital resources for professional learning, social media, in particular, may offer a flexible, personalized, and just-in-time professional learning alternative that educators increasingly find more relevant to their daily work (Carpenter et al., 2024; Greenhow et al., 2020).

Social Media as a Site of Professional Learning

Teachers engage with social media for multiple purposes, often beginning with personal use before gradually expanding into professional domains (Carpenter et al., 2020; Carpenter & Krutka, 2014). Through various digital platforms, teachers share instructional ideas and resources (Marcelo-Martinez et al., 2024; Mercieca et al., 2024; Staudt Willet, 2024), build on one another’s contributions (Hur & Brush, 2009), and refine their thinking through ongoing interaction (Zuidema, 2012). Studies suggest teachers use these spaces to participate in professional dialogues with communities beyond their local contexts (Carpenter & Krutka, 2014; Staudt Willet, 2024).

Teachers commonly use Instagram, Pinterest, and TikTok for resource sharing, while X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook are favored for idea exchange and dialogue (Staudt Willet, 2024; Xu et al., 2024). Among these, X has received substantial attention for enabling real-time professional learning through hashtags, chats, and asynchronous discussions (Carpenter & Krutka, 2015; Mercieca et al., 2024). Teachers also turn to these platforms for collaboration, networking, and emotional support (Davis, 2015; Kelly & Antonio, 2016). Emerging studies have begun to examine teachers’ professional learning on other social media platforms, such as Pinterest (Hu et al., 2018) and Instagram (Carpenter et al., 2020).

Despite commonalities in teachers’ use of social media for professional learning, there is considerable variation in the levels of engagement. Some teachers passively view content and read online exchanges; others participate actively by giving and receiving feedback (Prestridge, 2019). Prestridge posited that many begin as “lurkers” who observe and collect resources before taking a more active role. Platform-specific features shape not only how teachers participate but also the kinds of learning they derive from different online spaces (Carpenter & Krutka, 2015; Greenhow et al., 2020; Mercieca et al., 2024).

Early-Career Teaching and Induction Support

Understanding how 1st-year teachers seek and receive support requires situating their experiences within the broader challenges of induction into the profession. Teacher induction refers to the “transition from preservice preparation to practice” (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p. 1027). Beginning teachers encounter unique challenges and steep learning curves as they undergo the induction process and learn to navigate their school’s ethos

and practices, including established curriculum and instructional methods, administrators' expectations, and classroom management (Feiman-Nemser, 2003).

Despite new teachers' eagerness to learn from more experienced peers (Kyndt et al, 2016), the presence and quality of formal induction programs vary across and within school districts (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Although some teachers experience formal induction programs, others are left to sink or swim on their own, often resulting in feelings of isolation, unmet learning needs, and turnover (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, 2003; Wang et al., 2008).

Given the variation in formal induction processes, informal learning is instrumental to 1st-year teachers' professional development (Hoekstra & Korthagen, 2011). Beginning teachers frequently rely on informal social networks, particularly relationships with mentors and peers within their schools, for support (Baker-Doyle, 2011). However, the quality of informal support available often depends on school culture, leading novices to supplement their face-to-face networks with online communities and social media (see also Staudt Willet, 2024).

Novice Teachers Use of Social Media for Emotional, Social, and Instructional Support

Amid high rates of early-career teacher attrition, social media platforms have become important supplemental support systems for new teachers, offering resources and connections that can help mitigate stress and burnout (Mercieca et al., 2024). Empirical research has shown that novice teachers use social media to address affective learning needs by seeking emotional reassurance, validation, and spaces to express frustration. In their study of beginning teachers' posts on Reddit, Na and Staudt Willet (2024) found that early-career teachers turned to the platform to articulate feelings of isolation and insufficient support. Similar patterns emerge across other platforms, where teachers describe using social media to receive encouragement and share emotional challenges (Carpenter & Krutka, 2014; Hur & Brush, 2009; Staudt Willet, 2024). Research on self-directed online learning suggests that these interactions may also bolster teachers' self-efficacy and confidence during the early stages of their careers (Beach et al., 2022).

Novice teachers also use social media to network with peers. Studies show that digital networks extend teachers' access to colleagues beyond their immediate environments, enabling cross-grade, cross-subject, and cross-context interaction (Staudt Willet, 2024). These expanded networks allow novices to exchange ideas and receive feedback from other teachers (Hur & Brush, 2009; Zuidema, 2012). For early-career teachers navigating inconsistent or limited induction support, online PLNs often function as critical sources of collegial guidance that supplement school-based resources (Trust et al., 2016; Staudt Willet, 2024).

Novice teachers frequently turn to social media for instructional resources, practical strategies, and just-in-time ideas they can implement immediately in their classrooms (Hu et al., 2018; Mercieca et al., 2024). These platforms also expose novices to new pedagogical perspectives and

problem-solving approaches, supporting their cognitive development of knowledge for teaching (Greenhalgh & Koehler, 2017; Trust et al., 2016). Over time, research suggests that early-career teachers' engagement may evolve from resource gathering toward more complex forms of learning such as reflective dialogue, conceptual exploration, and collaborative inquiry (Mercieca et al., 2024; Staudt Willet, 2024).

Despite growing evidence that early-career teachers rely on social media as part of their professional learning, the specific experiences of 1st-year teachers during induction remain underexamined. By focusing on the perspectives of novice teachers, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the ways social media functions as an emotional, social, and instructional support during the transition into teaching.

Methods

Participants

Participants were recruited from a university-based educator preparation program in the southern United States. At the start of the 2020–2021 academic year, site coordinators overseeing the program's student teaching field experiences invited recent graduates to participate via email. Interested individuals completed a brief survey to confirm they met the following criteria: (a) graduated from the program in spring or summer 2020 and (b) were employed as full-time, certified 1st-year teachers. Participants who completed all components of the study received a \$150 Amazon gift card.

Three 1st-year teachers participated in the study (see Table 1), representing a range of grade levels and subject areas. Daisy and Cara identified as white, while Brenda identified as white and of Hispanic/Latino descent. All three experienced a shift from in-person student teaching to virtual mentorship in March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic prompted school closures.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Participant	Race	Age	Grade(s) Taught	Subject(s) Taught
Daisy	White	18-24	1	Social Studies, Science, Math, Reading, ELA
Brenda	Hispanic	25-34	3	English Language Arts, Reading
Cara	White	18-24	10, 11	English

Data Collection and Analysis

To understand the perceptions and experiences of 1st-year teachers, qualitative data were collected during the 2020–2021 academic year. Each participant completed three individual interviews (October, February, and March) conducted via phone or Zoom. A semistructured interview guide provided targeted questions aligned with the study's focus, while allowing flexibility for follow-up questions. Interview questions explored participants' overall experiences and perceptions of preparedness during student teaching and their 1st year in the classroom. Topics included preparedness to teach, the impact of COVID-19 on preparation, challenges transitioning from teacher candidate to certified teacher, addressing gaps in preparation, and technology readiness. The following list provides sample interview questions:

1. How are you filling gaps in your preparation, knowledge, or experience?
2. What resources are available to you either in your school, through your educator preparation program (EPP), or in your district to help increase your sense of preparedness?
3. Which resources have you used to increase your sense of preparedness?
4. What resources do you wish were available to better support you?
5. What experiences have best helped you prepare for using technology in the classroom?

Each interview lasted approximately 1 hour and was recorded and transcribed. At the end of each academic semester (December and May), participants participated in a focus group session. Focus groups were conducted over Zoom and lasted approximately 1.5 hours. A focus group protocol for each session was developed based on an initial analysis of the interview data and allowed for a deeper investigation of emerging themes. Focus groups were recorded and transcribed. The following focus group questions demonstrate the iterative nature of their development:

In the interviews, Facebook groups were mentioned quite a few times as valuable resources.

Can you talk about how you used these groups? Specifically,

1. How often do you visit a teacher's Facebook group, either to read existing posts or ask questions?
2. Have you joined multiple teacher Facebook groups? If so, how many? How are they different from each other? Do they serve different purposes? If so, what?
3. What is the most valuable thing you have learned about teaching from being part of an online community (like a Facebook group)?

The first and fourth authors read and coded the data using multiple coding rounds. Transcripts were first read for general impressions and identification of relevant passages (as recommended in Kekeya, 2016). The coding approach followed Williams and Moser's (2019) articulation of open, axial, and selective coding stages. At the first stage, an open coding approach using who, what, when, where, and how questions captured descriptive qualities of the data. Open codes were then compared, grouped, and organized into categorical axial or parent codes. Last, selective coding, informed by the theoretical framework, was used to identify themes. Table 2 provides the codes used.

Table 2
Coding Framework

Open Codes	Categories	Themes
More helpful than other resources Content grabs attention	Inspiration/ Interest in content	Affective learning
Not alone Shared challenges Relatable peers	Emotional support	
Shares resources Interactive	Community	Social learning
Learning from each other	Connection	
Solidarity		
Grade/curriculum resources Solutions for problems Instructional strategies	Gain ideas	Cognitive learning
Social emotional learning Technology use	Fill gaps in knowledge	
Convenient Timely	Immediacy	Just-in-time learning
Relevant Passive engagement with content Active engagement with content Self-directed	Personalized	
Context-specific questions Procedural concerns	Limitations	Limits of social media for job-embedded learning
Collegial relationships Learning within school context	Job-embedded needs	

Findings

Participants used social media in various ways to support their professional learning. They viewed it as a tool for self-directed, accessible, and targeted learning. Although individual usage varied, common patterns emerged in how participants engaged with different platforms for affective, social, and cognitive learning. All three described a sense of belonging to a virtual community of teachers, connecting with individuals and groups that shared relatable and useful content. They reported both sharing and learning new ideas, although they primarily used social media to gather, rather than contribute, resources. Whether actively posting or passively browsing, participants felt their teaching benefited from these interactions. Despite their strong reliance on social media, they saw it as only one piece of their broader PLNs.

Social Media as a Tool for Self-Directed, Timely, and Targeted Learning

Participants reported receiving little to no explicit guidance from their educator preparation programs (e.g., field supervisors, instructors, or mentor teachers) or from their current placements (e.g., administrators or coaches) on using social media in a professional context. As Daisy noted, “I don’t remember professors ever really telling us to look up other teachers [on social media] and how they do things.”

In the absence of formal instruction, participants took initiative, using social media as a tool for self-directed learning. For example, when in-person observation was no longer possible due to the pandemic, Daisy turned to the internet to learn from experienced teachers:

If I can’t see a teacher do it in person, well, I’m going to go see what a teacher does, how they prepare for summer, how do they get their room ready, how do they prepare their curriculum. It’s all over YouTube and online.

Similarly, Brenda and Cara recalled how they proactively “joined groups on Facebook” or “looked up YouTube videos” to supplement their own development as teachers.

Brenda and Daisy noted that when compared with traditional professional development or resources, social media often provides more relevant, accessible, and targeted learning opportunities. Daisy said, “There’s a whole joke about it. I spend an hour on TikTok and learn more professional development that pertains to me better than anything we’ve been given at school, because it’s real teachers. They’re being honest.” Daisy added, “I think that’s why YouTube or TikTok, those things are easier, because they’re quicker. They take less time to get to the point and to learn something to help us.”

Brenda noted that, despite having supportive administrators, “sometimes it’s easier for me to do it myself or figure it out on my own than try and go ask for help.” Similarly, Daisy stated that it was “easier to just grab your phone and connect with people at a drop of a button.”

First-Year Teachers' Uses of Social Media for Professional Support and Growth

Brenda and Daisy reported frequent use of multiple social media platforms, while Cara engaged less often and limited her use to only a few. Despite these differences, clear patterns emerged in the ways each platform was used. All three participants were members of teacher Facebook groups, followed educators on Instagram, and watched instructional content on YouTube. Brenda and Daisy turned to Facebook for grade-level resources and content ideas, while Cara used Instagram primarily for inspiration. Brenda and Daisy also used Pinterest and, in Daisy's case, TikTok, to discover new ideas. YouTube served as a key resource for Brenda and Daisy when seeking step-by-step guidance or filling knowledge gaps. Across platforms, all participants expressed feeling a sense of community, particularly through Instagram and Facebook groups.

Accessing Grade Level and Curriculum-Specific Content

Participants described how Facebook teacher groups were often based on a shared grade level or curriculum. Daisy explained how her decision to join Facebook groups was strategic and intentional based on her needs: "If I want a group [that's] curriculum-based, I look up the grade level and curriculum. I'll say [something] like, 'first grade Go Math group' and that'll pop up, and then I can join it."

Within Facebook, Brenda shared that she was part of a group of "third-grade reading teachers" and "[local area] third-grade teachers," as well as a group dedicated to "Go Math," the curriculum used at her school. Similarly, through Facebook, Daisy connected to "other first-grade teachers in Texas" and a group based on the "Wonders for ELA [English language arts] curriculum."

Through these groups, Brenda and Daisy expressed that they were able to obtain and ask specific questions to teachers with relevant knowledge. Daisy noted, "I can talk to them, ask them questions. I get ideas from them." They were also able to access helpful resources. Brenda shared how, through a third-grade Facebook teacher group, she was able to access resources that "all these teachers compiled on this big Google Drive." She added, "And so for me, as a 1st-year teacher trying not to recreate the wheel, it was great for me to have this resource." Cara turned to Instagram for content-specific resources. "I found several high school ELAR [English language arts and reading] teachers on Instagram that will post some interesting things." In these cases, the resources and ideas provided served as a foundation on which participants could build.

Discovering New Ideas and Inspiration

Participants also recounted "coming across" or "seeing resources" on social media, which helped to provide them with ideas and inspiration. They described their role as a "lurker" or "silent scroller" as they passively engaged with the content. As Brenda described, "I just looked at what other people are saying, what other people are doing, and just take it in for

myself.” While there may not have been an immediate use for the content participants encountered, they tended to file ideas away for a later time. For instance, Brenda stated, “I kept seeing pictures of a crime scene, and I mean, I want to figure out how I can tie that in.” Later, she saw an opportunity to creatively incorporate the crime scene and actual events into a lesson she was teaching on inferencing:

So, we actually did have someone, someone ate our music teacher's pizza, and that actually really did happen. And so, I just took that and ran with it. I put some footprints, I printed out some fingerprints, and everything I really did was all, I just Googled everything, made up my own story, and then created a chart where they had to write the evidence down, write what they know about the evidence, and then what their inference was based off the evidence.

Participants used social media for inspiration and new ideas on a range of teaching topics. Daisy described following one educator to improve her use of technology, learning “how to make things on Google Classroom efficient, how to make things easy to grade, how to integrate technology into your curriculum.” Cara used Instagram to “get ideas for resources” and often drew inspiration from content creators. Rather than searching for specific resources, participants typically followed individuals they believed offered valuable content. During student teaching, Brenda observed her mentor teacher adapting ideas from colleagues and adopted that practice herself. “Everything is out there for you if you want it to be,” she explained, noting that resourcefulness and avoiding “reinventing the wheel” often mattered more than creating something entirely new.

Filling Gaps in Knowledge

During the pandemic, participants felt a heightened need to address students’ social-emotional learning and turned to social media for support. For instance, Daisy felt compelled to conduct morning meetings, something not taught during her teacher preparation program. To better understand how to conduct the meetings, she said, “I had looked on YouTube before to look at a lot of morning meeting types of things that teachers do for grades like first and kinder.” She connected morning meetings to social-emotional development and described how students “go around, and they can talk about their feelings and learn those things.”

Similarly, Brenda “wanted to make sure that mental health was a priority.” After seeing an affirmation mirror on Pinterest, she was inspired to create one of her own. She explained how she strategically used the mirror to support students’ emotionally, “... when I can tell it's a rough morning for most of my kids, I'll make them stop in front of the mirror.” Brenda then further elaborated on how the affirmation mirror was useful in building students’ self-esteem, “And it says, ‘I am,’ and it has affirmations around it, and they have to pick an affirmation and look at themselves in the mirror and say, ‘I am smart. I am beautiful. I am wanted.’”

Amid the pandemic, schools’ social distancing requirements also prompted participants to develop new ways to connect with students. Daisy said,

I made this little template where kids could come in and do no-contact hellos, they wave or whatever. I had this little thing done that I had just made for my class, and people wanted it, so I was sharing those kinds of things.

The fact that teachers on social media requested Daisy's template suggests that others also felt an immediate need for resources to connect with their students.

Giving and Receiving Advice

Each of the participants explained how, through social media, teachers were able to readily ask for and share advice on a wide range of topics. Brenda and Daisy reported how users would help others by sharing their own successes, saying things like, "I did this today, and it really worked," and "Hey, I've done this cool thing." Conversely, participants shared how teachers would regularly ask for guidance and input on current concerns, posting questions like, "Do you have advice?" "Do you have experience with this?" or "What are y'all doing for STAAR prep [state standardized testing in Texas]?"

The participants also sought information from the online communities, whether by asking directly or looking at existing content. Daisy recalled how there was a Facebook group, Teachers Ask Teachers, which was dedicated to sharing advice among group members. "You can ask a question and post it, and then you can get responses from all over. And they're always very helpful." Daisy said that other teachers' advice helped her "figure out what my path is as far as being a better teacher too." For instance, Daisy noted that although she "knew a lot of the (math) strategies from my college courses," she still had to "figure out more myself." She shared how she sought clarification about how to schedule math blocks by posting on social media:

How do you work your math block? I'm struggling with this. How many times do you see your kids that are lower, and how do you provide time for that? How much is too much time as a whole group?

Brenda recalled how she used YouTube to better understand what was previously taught during her teacher preparation program:

I know we covered it [running record] briefly in the preparation program, but it's just... I'll watch a YouTube video on how to take a running record and understand, and try to understand, what all information I need and try and just... I try it out on one kid and see if it works.

YouTube provided Brenda with direct strategies that she then used with her students. In each case, after being in the classroom, participants came to find that they needed additional information they may not have anticipated. Specifically, Brenda and Daisy said that, although they had seen teaching in action, they were still learning about "things on the backside" that went on "behind the scenes" using social media.

Being Part of a Community of Teachers

Participants said that social media made them feel like they were part of a community of teachers. Cara noted that for her, “a lot of times it’s hard to connect with younger teachers,” and Facebook served as a “way to connect to one another” and “network.” She said that using Facebook groups, she was able to unite with teachers virtually, “Obviously, we can’t meet in person right now... So, it’s like everyone introducing themselves, and what grade level do you teach? Tell me about yourself...”

Daisy also shared how Facebook groups served to connect teachers, particularly new, young teachers facing the challenge of transitioning online instruction amid the pandemic: “We are so tech-advanced, and we’ve been thrown into learning how to teach technology-wise.”

Each participant said that as a member of an online community of teachers she was not alone. Cara stated, “I’m not the only one doing this. I’m not the only one navigating my 1st year teaching during COVID. So, I feel like that [Facebook] group is more for the support.” As such, she was able to engage with others who shared the unique experience of both becoming certified and being a new teacher amid the global pandemic. Brenda echoed a similar sentiment: “I think the biggest thing is just like you’re not in it alone.” Daisy added that knowing that there were other teachers like her online brought her some comfort: “I think for me it makes me feel a little bit more like, okay, I’m not the only one that goes out. I’m not the only one that’s feeling this.”

Further, Brenda explained that seeing other teachers’ struggles on social media helped her feel a sense of unity and shared experience:

Like, another teacher is having that struggle. And I think that’s one of the biggest things that I’ve seen in those teacher groups, is even teachers that have been doing it for 20-something years, like, they have the same issues that I might be having.

As Brenda reflected upon one Instagram teacher’s content, she explained, “It’s just kind of cool to see like, I mean, we’re all human, like regardless of where we teach or who we teach, we all have the same struggles outside of that.” Thus, for Brenda, teaching struggles served as a thread uniting all teachers.

Social Media Is One Dimension of 1st-Year Teachers’ PLNs

When compared to traditional professional development, Daisy and Brenda felt social media had certain advantages. However, the participants also said that there were limits to the type of assistance social media could offer. They all mentioned developing their professional learning within their schools through targeted activities and relationships with mentors and administrators.

For instance, Brenda described participating in learning walks where teachers would “pick someone we want to go see, and they choose someone that they would like us to see. We had one in the fall, and we have one coming up for the spring semester.” Throughout the academic year,

Brenda participated in four learning walks and noted, “I was able to learn a few things from the two teachers that I did go and watch.” Cara described the social aspects of learning with her department team of four teachers:

We all get along really well. And I feel like I have their support, and I can talk to them like, ‘Hey, I’m kind of struggling with classroom management or struggling with this, or do you have ideas for that?’ And they’re very supportive of that.

For Daisy, there were some topics, such as special education (SPED) referrals, that were better answered by those at her school rather than on social media.

I don’t think I’ve ever asked a question about SPED referral (on social media), because I knew that things were probably different for different schools....I’ve mainly heavily relied on my coworkers, the diagnostician and my curriculum instructional, because I think that’s a little bit more sensitive and a little bit more extensive....It’s a lot easier to kind of go down the hall and ask, do I need this, this or this?

Despite the many perceived benefits of social media for professional learning, all participants viewed it as supplementing, rather than replacing, the professional networks in their schools.

Discussion

This study examined how 1st-year teachers perceived and used social media to support their professional learning as they transitioned into the profession. Participants were eager to engage in self-directed professional development and described frequent participation in PLNs through social media. Consistent with prior research (Aguilar et al., 2021; Carpenter et al., 2020; Trust et al., 2016), participants reported variation in platform use, mentioning Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Pinterest, and Instagram as outlets for professional learning; yet common patterns emerged. All participants perceived social media as a more efficient and immediate route to relevant learning than traditional professional development and as supportive of professional growth across affective, social, and cognitive domains. Cognitive learning was often just-in-time, driven by immediate classroom needs. Participants acknowledged that social media helped them build knowledge in practice; however, they recognized that it could not fully replace job-embedded learning.

Social Media for Affective Learning

Traditional professional development often emphasizes cognitive content, such as instructional strategies and classroom management, while minimizing or ignoring affective aspects (Lovren & Jablanovic, 2023; Salo et al., 2024). Yet, social media can be a powerful tool for affective learning. Research suggests that teachers use social media not only to grow in knowledge but also in confidence, empathy, and purpose (Greenhow et al., 2020; Mercado & Shin, 2025).

Participants in this study stated that social media strengthened their self-confidence and reassured them that they were not alone in their teaching struggles. They believed it pulled back the curtain on the realities of teaching and offered honest, relatable educators who shared both successes and challenges. One 1st-year teacher noted that social media helped humanize the teaching profession by revealing its everyday complexities and providing practical strategies for managing them.

Novice teachers may perceive traditional professional development as presenting idealized scenarios that make it difficult to apply abstract concepts to their own classrooms (Steward & Jansky, 2022). Social media, by contrast, appeared to bridge that gap, offering concrete examples of theory in practice. Seeing novice and experienced teachers on social media face similar struggles legitimized participants' own experiences and alleviated self-doubt. As participants discovered new ways to apply theory to practice, they broadened their perspectives and found inspiration.

Prior research indicates that social-media-supported PLNs can broaden teachers' exposure to new and alternative instructional approaches and encourage self-reflection of their pedagogical values and professional identity (Greenhalgh et al., 2020; Greenhow et al., 2020; Mercieca et al., 2024; Montgomery, 2018; Staudt Willet, 2024; Trust et al., 2016). While this potential exists, evidence from this study offers limited support for such deep reflection. Participants occasionally mentioned adapting ideas from posts or videos to fit their classrooms, but their comments focused more on practical application than on examining underlying beliefs or philosophies. In this way, social media appeared to support surface-level adaptation rather than sustained critical reflection on teaching values and practices.

Although participants primarily consumed, rather than produced, content, they also actively engaged in online communities by participating in discussions, asking questions, and sharing resources. This participation seemed to have contributed to a growing sense of agency and ownership over their professional learning. Teachers expressed an appreciation for the ease of access and practicality of social media content, which they believed allowed them to problem-solve quickly and pursue topics relevant to their immediate needs, often while dialoguing with online peers. In this way, participants perceived that social media supported independent and interactive forms of learning, enabling them to curate and contribute to professional development experiences rather than relying solely on administrators or district mandates to define them.

Social Media for Social Learning

Participants consistently described a sense of belonging as an important outcome of their engagement with social media. While the emotional experience of belonging to a broader teaching community aligns with the affective learning domain (Allen et al., 2021), participants' descriptions of the process by which that sense of belonging developed involved components of social learning. Their participation reflected socially situated learning processes that allowed them to connect with others, share experiences, and observe models of teaching practice that informed their own growth. This finding echoes prior research highlighting the

emotional and relational benefits of online teacher networks (Allen et al., 2021; Gao & Li, 2019; Kachchhap & Horo, 2021; Staudt Willet, 2024).

Although participants' engagement was largely observational and centered on resource exchange, it reflected aspects of the observational, modeling, and interaction processes that Bandura (1977) identified as central to social learning theory. Through social media, 1st-year teachers observed peers' instructional decisions, classroom setups, and management strategies, using these as reference points for their own practice. This form of learning, grounded in observation rather than direct collaboration, appeared to support teachers' perceptions of professional growth by normalizing challenges and presenting tangible models of what they believed to be effective teaching. At the same time, participants also engaged in interactive elements of social learning by joining discussions, posing questions, and sharing resources within teacher groups. These activities helped them clarify ideas, receive feedback, and situate their own practice within a broader professional context.

Social media expanded participants' PLNs beyond their immediate schools to include educators from different regions and countries. Through participation in grade and content-specific groups, 1st-year teachers gained exposure to a wider range of approaches and perspectives than might be available locally. In this way, social media appeared to function as a modern extension of the traditional teachers' lounge, a space historically known for informal collaboration and the exchange of practical knowledge. While physical lounges have sometimes been stigmatized, research shows they often serve as important sites of spontaneous sharing and collegial support (Mawhinney, 2010).

Similarly, digital platforms such as Facebook groups or X can facilitate collaboration and collective problem-solving at a broader scale (Mercieca et al., 2024). Prior research suggests that such informal interactions foster a sense of professional belonging and contribute to teachers' identity development by situating learning within ongoing social interactions (Greenhalgh et al., 2020; Mercieca et al., 2024; Staudt & Willet, 2024). Consistent with the literature, 1st-year teachers felt that social media provided a virtual setting for collegial support and belonging, elements that contribute to teachers' professional longevity (Allen et al., 2021; Kachchhap & Horo, 2021).

Social Media for Cognitive Learning

Cognitive learning involves acquiring knowledge, developing higher-order thinking skills, and applying new information to practice (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Participants perceived that social media informed and improved their instructional practices by serving as (a) a source of information and high-quality content, (b) a space to process information, and (c) a tool for applying new knowledge to their classrooms. Much of this learning was just in time as 1st-year teachers sought resources to address immediate gaps in understanding with direct implications for their instruction.

Participants described social media as a vast repository of ideas with low costs for information-seeking, simply requiring them to pick up a phone.

Consistent with research on digital learning (Firth et al., 2019), this perception illustrates how technology has transformed the accessibility and immediacy of professional knowledge. Bloom's revised taxonomy presents cognitive learning as hierarchical, moving from lower to higher order thinking skills, from the process of remembering to creating (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Participants' use of social media primarily supported lower levels of this hierarchy by helping them access and remember key information, though some evidence suggested movement toward higher order processes when they analyzed and adapted resources for their own contexts. Participants primarily described acquiring rather than producing resources, a pattern observed in other studies (Hu et al., 2018) and potentially influenced by the time constraints and limited repertoires typical of 1st-year teachers (Dias-Lacy & Guirguis, 2017).

The frequent use of targeted searches for instructional resources and pedagogical guidance illustrates the deliberate ways teachers sought to address specific classroom challenges. They joined Facebook groups or followed accounts aligned with their grade level, subject area, or curriculum to locate specific instructional strategies or examples. These interactions allowed them to pose questions, synthesize information, and compare multiple approaches, cognitive processes that support deeper learning through analysis and collaborative inquiry (Bell et al., 2010; Butler & Schnellert, 2012; Cravens & Hunter, 2021).

Social media also enabled teachers to revisit and extend concepts introduced in their preparation programs. For instance, one participant described using YouTube to explore different methods of conducting running records after finding that her coursework covered only a basic procedure. Such examples illustrate how social media may support 1st-year teachers as they refine and contextualize formal learning.

Participants' engagement with social media also reflected how teachers use digital tools to address immediate learning needs. They described searching for resources related to social and emotional learning, an area where they felt underprepared yet increasingly responsible for during the pandemic (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020; Mollenkopf et al., 2020). They turned to social media for concise, actionable strategies such as morning meetings, affirmation exercises, or classroom greetings that could be implemented quickly. This type of just-in-time learning may have reduced the cognitive effort required to translate abstract concepts into practice (Sweller, 1988) and helped teachers focus on applying ideas directly to their classrooms. Consistent with Dong et al. (2020), participants' use of online discussion groups and videos provided opportunities they perceived helped them process and refine new knowledge through conversation and example, illustrating how social media can support the integration of new content into existing professional frameworks.

Limits of Social Media for Professional Learning

Although 1st-year teachers relied heavily on social media to support their professional learning needs, they viewed it as a supplement rather than a substitute for the PLNs within their schools. Job-embedded learning, such as coaching, mentoring, professional learning communities, and teacher

study groups, remained central to their professional growth (Balta et al., 2023). Participants emphasized that complex or procedural issues, such as special education referrals, were better addressed with administrators and colleagues who understood their local context. This reliance on in-person expertise suggests that while social media facilitated quick problem-solving it did not fully meet 1st-year teachers' needs for sustained, context-specific learning.

Observing and learning from more experienced teachers appeared central to participants' professional growth. They valued proximity to mentors and grade-level teams, describing these relationships as essential for developing instructional judgment and confidence. Engaging in job-embedded, self-directed professional learning fosters teacher agency and contributes to instructional improvement at both the classroom and school levels (Tichnor-Wagner et al., 2025). For participants, the limitations of digital spaces in facilitating deep, contextually grounded professional learning suggest that social media serves as an important supplement, but an insufficient substitute, for the situated and relational knowledge cultivated through in-person collaboration. As Dodemaide et al. (2022) found, the value derived from social media depends heavily on individual circumstances, usage patterns, and the quality of online connections, indicating that its benefits may be contingent rather than universal.

Implications

While the specific platforms teachers use, such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, may change over time, educators will likely continue to rely on social media for professional learning. As Trust et al. (2016) cautioned, focusing too narrowly on specific platforms overlooks the broader significance of educators' participation in online PLNs, where learning needs are met through ongoing digital engagement. Building on this understanding, this study offers several implications for teacher preparation programs, professional development practices, and future research.

Findings suggest that social media functions as a meaningful extension of teachers' PLNs, complementing formal support structures. However, participants often viewed online educators as authentic and credible without questioning why certain voices seemed trustworthy or how social media elevated particular content. While participants frequently described the educators they followed online as honest, relevant, and credible, their assessments of credibility were largely intuitive rather than evaluative. They trusted content that appeared authentic but rarely articulated clear criteria for reliability or expertise. This tacit trust underscores an emerging tension: While social media can democratize professional knowledge, it also makes it difficult for teachers to discern the credibility of the content they encounter.

Teachers' struggles to evaluate the credibility of social media content may arise not only from individual judgment but also from the way social media platforms curate and elevate content through algorithmic sorting and influencer visibility. Social media platforms use algorithms that personalize and prioritize content to maximize user engagement, often

showing teachers material that reinforces their existing interests or search behaviors (Fyfield et al., 2021; Kim, 2017; van Dijck & Poell, 2018). Research suggests that early-career teachers rely heavily on algorithmic search results, lacking the content knowledge and experience to assess the quality of the materials they encounter (Fyfield et al., 2021).

Moreover, education influencers, teachers who use social media to gain a following, influence other educators, and monetize their influence, increasingly set idealized norms within current teaching practices (Carpenter et al., 2023). These individuals can democratize professional knowledge by sharing lived experiences and classroom insights. As Shelton et al. (2020) observed, education influencers can “celebrate teachers’ diverse stories” (p. 530), offering a more inclusive representation of the profession. In this sense, social media can help reclaim voices that have historically been minimized in institutional contexts (Apple, 2013), positioning teachers not merely as recipients of professional development but as contributors to professional knowledge.

Conversely, the influence of these voices presents potential challenges that merit closer examination. Social media platforms’ emphasis on engagement and watch time can lead influencers to prioritize entertainment or marketability over pedagogical rigor and authentic community-building (Bishop, 2018; Mercado & Shin, 2025). The professional advice they share can blend authentic experiences with sponsored content or personal branding, sometimes promoting commercial products or practices not grounded in evidence (Carpenter & Harvey, 2019). Exposure to idealized depictions of teaching can also prompt unhealthy self-comparison among novice educators, who may feel inadequate when their realities diverge from the often polished narratives they encounter online (Staudt & Willet, 2024; Willis et al., 2023).

In light of these tensions, teacher educators are uniquely positioned to explicitly prepare early-career teachers to navigate, evaluate, and ethically participate in digital professional spaces. Teacher preparation programs should help preservice teachers evaluate digital content critically (Rice & Deschaine, 2021), recognize the social and commercial forces shaping online discourse, and reflect on their own self-directed learning habits. Coursework might include assignments that ask preservice teachers to assess social media content for accuracy, contextual relevance, and pedagogical value, or to curate collections of resources tailored to their subject area. Creating internal discussion forums or digital networks can also provide safe, structured spaces for collaboration and critical reflection.

Given the appeal of brief, practical content on platforms like YouTube and Instagram, teacher educators could help candidates move beyond surface-level consumption by modeling reflective, evidence-informed inquiry. Baek and Barab (2005) found that while teachers value practical discussions about curriculum and instruction they also need opportunities for deeper engagement that connect immediate needs to long-term learning goals. Given that many online communities prioritize ready-to-use materials over reflective dialogue, cultivating inquiry-mindedness in teacher candidates remains essential (Zuidema, 2012).

Districts and induction programs, likewise, have an opportunity to leverage teachers' self-directed learning while promoting thoughtful digital engagement. Professional development models could move away from one-size-fits-all formats toward more flexible, responsive approaches. Districts might formally recognize reflective participation in online professional communities or provide mentorship that bridges informal learning with local instructional goals. New teacher workshops could incorporate topics derived from teachers' real-time needs (Neumann & Smith, 2020) and include sessions on curating and evaluating social media resources. Establishing school or district-based digital communities can further encourage collaborative learning while modeling responsible, research-informed participation in online spaces.

Although participants in this study did not describe significant stress or fatigue related to social media use, prior research highlights potential risks associated with the continual availability of digital professional spaces (Willis et al., 2023). The blurred boundaries between personal and professional life can contribute to cognitive overload and diminished wellbeing when teachers feel pressure to remain constantly connected or responsive (Fox & Bird, 2017; Helleve et al., 2020; Staudt Willet, 2024). These findings suggest a need for teacher preparation and induction programs to address digital balance alongside digital literacy, helping teachers establish healthy, sustainable patterns of engagement with online professional learning communities.

Areas for Future Research

Although based on a small sample of 1st-year teachers during the 2020–2021 academic year, these findings offer meaningful insights into ways novice educators use social media for professional learning. However, since perceptions of professional learning can vary based on job satisfaction, workplace stress, and individual context (Yoon & Kim, 2023), future research should include more diverse and representative samples. Longitudinal or mixed-methods designs could extend understanding of how social media use evolves over time and measure not only teachers' perceptions but also observable professional learning outcomes across affective, social, and cognitive domains. Comparative studies between novice and veteran teachers would further illuminate how experience and professional identity shape engagement in digital learning spaces and how these practices influence retention, burnout, and instructional growth.

Data for this study were collected during the unique conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, when social distancing and remote teaching heightened teachers' reliance on digital platforms. As social media use continues to evolve, future research might examine postpandemic trends to determine whether the patterns identified here have persisted, expanded, or diminished. Investigating how social media-based professional learning is incorporated into teacher preparation coursework and sustained through the early years of teaching could reveal how informal, self-directed learning becomes part of teachers' ongoing professional practice.

Last, social media algorithms and education influencer culture will likely continue to shape what information novice teachers encounter online and

what counts as credible or desirable teaching. Future research might examine how early-career teachers' engagement with social media relates to professional learning, instructional effectiveness, and retention. Related questions include the following: What effects do prominent education influencers have on early-career teachers' perceptions of the profession? Do teachers who engage regularly in online professional learning remain in the profession longer? Does social media engagement contribute to teaching effectiveness, and through what mechanisms?

Conclusion

This study highlights both the promise and the limitations of social media as a space for 1st-year teachers' professional learning. Digital platforms can expand access to timely resources, collegial support, and professional affirmation, yet they also raise concerns about content credibility and users' discernment. For 1st-year teachers, effective professional development must extend beyond isolated sessions to include ongoing, personalized, and context-responsive learning. Social media offers a flexible and accessible avenue for growth and plays an increasingly vital role in how novice teachers engage with professional learning. By recognizing the diverse ways educators use digital platforms and by fostering critical, balanced engagement with these tools, teacher preparation programs and professional development providers can better support beginning teachers' professional growth, confidence, and wellbeing. Continued research is needed to understand how teachers' use of social media for professional learning evolves over time and how effective practices can be integrated into teacher preparation and induction programs to promote teacher development, retention, and instructional excellence.

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