TikTok as a lens into teacher attrition: perspectives from #teacherquittok

Chelsey Barber

English Education Department, Teachers College, Columbia University,
New York City, New York, USA, and

Ioana Literat

Department of Communication, Media and Learning Technologies Design,
Teachers College, Columbia University, New York City, New York, USA

Abstract

Purpose – A key social networking site for teachers, TikTok offers a new and valuable lens on educator attrition. This study aims to explore social media’s role in the increased transparency around leaving the profession and the online narratives crafted around transitioning out of the classroom.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing on the conceptual framework of emergent storytelling and a recursive thematic analysis of videos and comments posted to the #teacherquittok hashtag on TikTok, this study examines how teachers are using social media to share their experiences of exiting the classroom.

Findings – The authors find that teachers used TikTok to share personal accounts that form a meta-narrative that provides context to their decisions to leave, share stories of loss and gain through negotiating the transition out of the classroom and finally debate the implications for preservice teachers. The authors discuss key takeaways for rethinking teacher support, teacher education and the role of social media in teachers’ professional lives.

Originality/value – While many studies seek to understand teacher attrition, this work examines how teachers’ stories shared on social media may be shaping attrition into an increasingly networked and narrated act.

Keywords Teacher attrition, Teacher morale, Professional identity, Social media, TikTok

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

“America Faces Catastrophic Teacher Shortage.” “Teachers Are in the Midst of a Burnout Crisis.” “The Teacher Shortage Problem is Bad. Really Bad.” Headlines like these featured prominently in American media over the past two years. While teacher attrition concerns remained a steady background hum for decades, increased media coverage suggests that states face a critical dearth of teachers (Nguyen et al., 2022). However, the stories we tell of teacher “shortages” are narratives about quantitative deficits – gaps in need of filling – rather than reflections on the nuanced motivations and stories behind these shifts.

Though attrition is an international issue (see, e.g. Federičová, 2021; Lindqvist et al., 2014; Toropova et al., 2021), this study explores teacher attrition in the USA. Adequate school staffing in American schools is a retention-based concern (Carver-Thomas and

The authors have no known conflict of interest to disclose. This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.
Darling-Hammond, 2019) and a problem of supply – as enrollment in teacher preparation programs continues to decline (Garcia and Weiss, 2019). Attrition in this landscape is a complex issue shaped by individual and contextual circumstances, but often reflective of the characteristics of teachers’ perceived working conditions (Geiger and Pivovarova, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2020).

Significantly, current understandings of attrition do not reflect shifts in the American teacher’s professional landscape that may reshape these perceived working conditions. Remote and hybrid instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic demanded rapid adaptation of teaching methods (Anderson et al., 2021; Noor et al., 2020). The return to in-person learning reignited a focus on trauma-informed practices with implications for student behavior and the ways teachers can and should meet those needs (Crosby et al., 2020; Yang, 2021). Moreover, a tense political climate and shifting policies across the USA have led to increased censorship of classroom curricula – particularly impacting English educators (PEN, 2022; Schwartz and Pendharkar, 2022). Simultaneously, discourses around “quiet quitting,” job hopping and salary negotiation started to appear on social media, offering a glimpse into opportunities outside of the classroom, with wages not reflected in teachers’ salary structures (Cassella, 2021; Scheyett, 2023).

Finally, much of this existing scholarship on teacher attrition focuses on characteristics like qualifications and demographics, or the larger structural conditions driving attrition (e.g. Borman and Dowling, 2008; Nguyen et al., 2020): the focus is on who is likely to leave, rather than the narrative experience of leaving the profession. This research often treats the decision to leave education as an issue of disaffiliation, insufficiently acknowledging the push and pull factors of exiting the profession (Amitai and Van Houtte, 2022).

In the present study, tapping into the important role of social media (Carpenter et al., 2022; Hart and Steinbrecher, 2011; Lantz-Andersson et al., 2018) and particularly TikTok (Hartung et al., 2022) as a site for teachers’ self-expression and community-building, we seek to foreground the stories that teachers themselves share online about leaving the classroom. Specifically, we ask: how do teachers themselves articulate and narrativize their experiences of exiting the profession on TikTok? And, how might the articulation of these experiences on social media contribute to broader cultural narratives surrounding attrition? Our inquiry is based on the qualitative analysis of content posted to the prominent #teacherquittok hashtag on TikTok, thus responding to Lantz-Andersson et al. (2018, p. 313) call to study “what teachers do online (rather than what teachers say that they do online)” – an approach critically underused in the literature.

Background and framing

Teachers on TikTok

A rich body of literature has explored social media as a critical space for teachers to express both personal and professional identities (Carpenter et al., 2022; Fox and Bird, 2015; Hart and Steinbrecher, 2011), and to find emotional and professional support, as well as a heightened sense of belonging (Lantz-Andersson et al., 2018).

Within the contemporary social media sphere, the popular short-form video platform TikTok has emerged as an important space for teachers to share and connect – a space that interweaves the personal with the professional (Hartung et al., 2022). Rather than forming special-interest groups like on Facebook, or maintaining a strictly professional identity like on Twitter and LinkedIn (Booth, 2012; Carpenter et al., 2022; see Lantz-Andersson et al., 2018 for more), TikTok “captures ‘glimpses and gestures’ of a different side to the teaching profession” (Hartung et al., 2022, p. 92), encouraging users to share more vulnerable versions of themselves than on other platforms (Bhandari and Bimo, 2020; Eriksson Krutrok, 2021;
Hartung et al., 2022). Though TikTok does not feature groups, the algorithm pushes content to users’ homepages (called For You Page – FYP), curating a sense of “algorithmic closeness” (Eriksson Krutrök, 2021). Thus, the so-called TeachTok (Vizcaino-Verdú and Abidin, 2023) exists as a “side” of TikTok where teachers can show the “fun, funny, playful, entertaining, expressive, contagious, dynamic, and affecting” (Hartung et al., 2022, p. 92) parts of the teaching profession not commonly shared elsewhere online.

Importantly, with 16–34 year-olds making up 80% of its user base (Wallaroo Media, 2023), TikTok skews much younger than other social media platforms and can thus shed powerful light onto the experiences of early career teachers – those with the greatest potential for longevity and impact; as we discuss in the last section of this article, understanding why early career teachers are leaving is particularly important in gaining better insight into ways that teacher education programs and policymakers could reduce teacher attrition. Indeed, exploratory research has already probed the potential of TikTok to illuminate the nuanced context of teacher attrition. Based on a smaller-scale quantitative study of the #teacherquittok hashtag, Kaiser (2023) suggested that the perspectives shared by teachers on social media can help us understand:

[... ] how current social, political, and cultural structures impact teacher stress and burnout [and] may provide meaningful information into how to better support and retain teachers in the current educational context (p. 8).

Here, we build on this work by adopting a larger-scale qualitative approach that looks at both social media posts and comments, and a conceptual framework (described below) that enables us to consider how the videos on #teacherquittok are forming a larger social narrative around attrition.

**Conceptual framework**

We see the analysis of TikTok content as a means of attending to individual and collective teacher voices in a naturalistic way – in the spaces where they feel comfortable expressing themselves. The benefit of analyzing social media content is that we are analyzing a form of expression that is naturally occurring, rather than created through researchers’ prompting; this “fly on the wall” approach thus has the benefit of capturing a phenomenon without worrying that researchers’ presence has affected it (Literat, 2021). Another key advantage is the range and diversity of voices that can be captured in this way, which allows us to explore the long-standing issue of attrition as a coconstructed social media narrative. In doing so, we move beyond focusing on individual choices, and toward understanding #teacherquittok as an example of “affective publics”: “public formations that are textually rendered into being through emotive expressions that spread virally through networked crowds” (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 14).

Dawson and Mäkelä’s (2020) concept of emergent storytelling is a particularly useful expansion on affective publics, enabling a deeper understanding of how individual stories become part of a larger narrative in social media spaces. As the authors describe it (p. 23), emergent storytelling is an “evolving nonlinear process of affective virality” involving three key concepts: shared stories (where similar stories, told by many individuals in online spaces, help to establish shared sentiments among tellers), cultural narratives (which act as “large-scale scripts” that underpin the individual stories) and narrativization (a nonlinear process which results from recursive circulation facilitated by the platform). On TikTok, then, the algorithmic arrangement of content “invites a sense of narrative progression” (p. 23), while the hashtag enhances the power of individual stories by “assimilating the first-person voice into that of a
larger networked crowd” through repetition (p. 26). In practice, each individual story on #teacherquittok can be viewed as part of a macrolevel cultural narrative.

Analyzing the videos and comments posted to #teacherquittok through this lens enables us to understand how individual stories can be viewed as a progressive, collective narrative, as well as how perspectives are reinforced or challenged within this space. Our aim is to understand how these individual stories, in conversation with a macroview of attrition, can offer a more expansive understanding of the discourse around “teacher shortages.”

Methods
Data collection
To develop the corpus, we collected all public TikTok videos posted to the hashtag #teacherquittok, which represents the dominant space of discourse around exiting the profession and offers far more posts and views than any similar tag within an American context [1]. While alternative hashtags like #teacherexodus and #teacherleaving were occasionally used, they are much less prominent than #teacherquittok and this content is often cross-posted to #teacherquittok. Furthermore, #teacherquittok was also the only related hashtag that had cultural visibility outside of TikTok as well, having been mentioned in the press. Using a singular hashtag had the methodological advantage of allowing us to capture the full conversation at the time of data collection, rather than sampling a limited number of posts from a wider range of hashtags. Given the usage of hashtags to garner visibility and add one’s voice to an existing conversation (Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019), relying on the #teacherquittok hashtag to build our data corpus enabled us to identify content from participants who voluntarily elected to share their experience of leaving teaching in a highly public and visible way.

At the time of data collection, in November 2022, there were 496 videos publicly posted to the #teacherquittok hashtag, with the earliest video posted in December 2021. All 496 videos posted in this time period were downloaded using Apify’s TikTok Scraper and saved to the first author’s computer for analysis. Scraped videos were cross-checked in-app to ensure the full corpus was downloaded. Comments were treated as a supplementary tool and were viewed in-app for context on salient videos.

The corpus included 188 unique users, of which six were prominent users who posted to the tag more than ten times. The remaining users include an additional 182 unique users, some only posting once, but many posting a few clips as they process their journey exiting the classroom. Importantly, all of these videos were posted by users who explicitly identified themselves as educators, former educators or students in teacher education programs; additionally, they appeared to represent a broad range of backgrounds, demographics and professional contexts.

All artifacts included in this study are shared publicly by teachers who have volunteered their perspectives, often stating explicitly their intention to draw attention to the issues presented. That being said, we recognize that the public/private divide in online spaces is blurred (Franzke et al., 2020). To protect user privacy, we replaced usernames with pseudonyms, we blurred or obscured faces in screenshots, and we avoided the inclusion of any personally identifiable information.

Data analysis
Videos were analyzed by the first author through a process of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2016). In the initial analysis, to gain a sense of what individual stories were shared and how users were sharing them, notes were taken on individual videos and the corpus in its entirety. Upon a second review of the corpus and
accompanying notes, initial codes were inductively developed around salient topics (e.g. grieving, issues in education, celebration, administration and student behavior). This round had an eye toward identifying “shared stories” as they emerged across the corpus. On the third viewing for reflexivity (Braun et al., 2016), the initial codes were revisited and considered in conversation with the corpus more broadly, reflecting on the ways these codes might coalesce into larger narrative themes or the cultural narratives and “large-scale scripts that belong to a collective group” (Dawson and Mäkelä, 2020 p. 23). At this stage, we began to capture relevant quotes and screenshots that illustrated these shared stories (e.g. ideological expression, emotional expression, practical expression and dissenting perspectives). Finally, themes were considered based on how they spoke to one another relationally, while reflecting on conflicts and tensions within them. In this way, we sought to narrativize them into a macrolevel narrative (Dawson and Mäkelä, 2020 p. 23).

Within this iterative process, we came to colace these shared stories into a meta-narrative of #teacherquittok that suggests a progressive pattern. This pattern begins with educators contextualizing quitting, offering up their experiences of negotiating the transition out of the classroom and speaking to the implications for preservice teachers.

Findings

Contextualizing quitting: narratives about why teachers leave

Mental and physical health. #Teacherquittok is filled with educators articulating that impacts on their mental and physical health drove them to leave the profession. These videos often adopted a confessional style, oscillating between tears and anger. The first-person narration in these videos, combined with the comments posted on them, is part of what helps develop a “shared story” among users on #teacherquittok. The relatability of this story was often evident in the comments. For instance, in her video, @Msquaresocial asked teachers to reply and comment “how often you have physical symptoms as a result of the stress or anxiety of your job.” Her video was viewed more than 38,100 times, receiving 2,162 likes and more than 1,000 comments sharing fellow teachers’ daily symptoms of headaches, insomnia, panic attacks, eating disorders, gastrointestinal issues and kidney and heart problems.

To combat these health issues and stave off leaving the profession, some users recommended avoiding work during off-contract hours while others shared ideas, worksheets and tools to offload the burden of lesson planning (often done during off-contract hours) [2].

Discussion on #teacherquittok moved beyond physical manifestations of mental health challenges toward the physical safety of teachers in response to violent student behavior. While many teachers insisted that “kids are not the problem” and that they will “miss the students,” this was not a consensus across the hashtag. Teachers used #teacherquittok as a counter-narrative to the perceived dominant narrative that excuses students from driving teacher attrition.

In the most commented-upon videos, a tear-filled @S8die, filming from her car, shared her experience as a pregnant teacher:

If anyone out there is still wondering, after all of teacherquittok, why all the teachers are quitting in droves, I am here to tell you another one. And I am probably going to get a lot of flack for this because you always hear the teachers saying it’s not the kids. Well, sometimes it is.

She explained that after reminding a student several times to be quiet in the hall, the student told a friend, “I am going to kick her in the stomach and kill her baby.”
In subsequent videos, filmed in her car, @S8die described the resulting consequence as a “slap on the wrist.” To “protect [her] own mental health and physical wellbeing,” she quit. Receiving encouragement and support from commenters, teachers often seemed less concerned about judgment for “blaming the kids” on #teacherquittok.

Stories of students pulling out teachers’ hair, hitting, bruising, causing sprains, broken bones, and other long-term injuries appeared frequently in these posts and comments. Significantly, these accounts were almost always coupled with hurt and frustration that administrative responses included phrases like “they are just kids” and “getting hit is part of the job.” It is, therefore, important to note that administrative response to student behavior seemed to be at the heart of this issue— not the initial behavior of the children themselves. Like @S8die, many of these videos are filmed in cars which can be read as a sort of liminal space between their work and their personal lives— outside of the dominant narratives of each space, where they are free to write and share their own stories.

Political issues. Finally, some teachers used the #teacherquittok hashtag to position themselves as conscientious objectors who no longer wish to be part of a system that does not prioritize students and teachers. These critiques highlighted parents’ lack of trust in educators’ expertise and movements in American politics, with lasting impacts on students and teachers alike. In doing so, they position themselves as activists through attrition (Dunn et al., 2017). This came into particular focus in February 2022. Though the use of the hashtag was fairly consistent over time, with an average of 50 publicly posted videos per month, February showed an 85% increase from the previous month. This time frame coincides with the introduction of Indiana House Bill 1,134, which would have required teachers to submit lesson plans well in advance to increase political and parental oversight in the classroom.

On top of the already draining demands on their physical and mental health, many educators expressed that bills like this would be the last straw and would push them to leave the profession. These politically driven policies often have outsized impacts on English educators and the texts and topics covered. One English educator, who routinely uses their TikTok account for school-based activism, highlighted this intersection by wearing a Black Lives Matter sweatshirt while shaking their head silently at a tweet by the Indiana Teachers Association condemning the bill (Figure 1). In another video—captioned “what the hell” and similarly making use of the greenscreen function over news that the Indiana House passed the bill – @Montblancsfinest exclaimed: “Wow, I could say I am shocked, but I am really not shocked… Who’s gonna teach y’alls kids now?” (Figure 1). Indiana House Bill 1,134 ultimately did not pass the state’s senate, but similar initiatives did and were brought up in the corpus. These included several initiatives in Florida, with particular emphasis on a new policy that allows military personnel to become teachers with limited training and experience in education (Figure 1).

The perceived working conditions of educators are well-understood as a contributing factor in attrition (Geiger and Pivovarova, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2020), however, attending to teachers’ tellings about these conditions on TikTok helps us to see teachers are generating a collective counter-narrative to dominant (mis)conceptions or expectations about teaching as a profession. These counter-narratives oppose the political narratives that dominate in the states they teach in, resist cultural narratives that exclude student behavior from conversations surrounding attrition as well as those that frame teaching as self-sacrifice.
Negotiating transition: telling stories of loss and gain

_Grieving identity._ While part of this collective narrative of attrition shows why teachers are leaving, #teacherquittok also voices the next step in this narrative progression – shifting from the classroom to new career paths. A prevailing narrative in this shared story is a deep sense of grieving “teacher identity.” Many teachers shared the moments right after submitting resignation letters (Figure 2). Often filming these moments through tears, at their school desks or in their cars, educators explicitly narrated that they did not want to leave teaching but felt they had to maintain their mental and physical health. They spoke of the grief of losing their identity, but also their guilt for “abandoning” their students. Others, over melancholy music, spliced impactful clips of their last few days in the classroom (e.g. deconstructing bulletin boards), with flashbacks to their younger selves excited to join the profession – e.g. footage from their graduation ceremonies, or their first steps into their classrooms (Figure 2). Often, these videos highlighted, via text blurbs or captions, that users never imagined leaving the profession or becoming the statistic that most teachers leave within five years.
These videos, taken together, offered shared stories that narrativize the internal conflict of exiting teaching. In sharing this internal conflict online, teachers help shape a meta-narrative that characterizes the transition out of the classroom as an emotional and unexpected change in their identity, highlighting the profound professional and personal entanglement of attrition.

*Embracing new lives.* This is not to say that all videos under #teacherquittok were of grief and sadness. Some users in the corpus focused on supporting fellow teachers looking to leave the classroom; often sharing free resources to facilitate the transition into new industries (Figure 3). These included advice for resume development, recommended job boards and encouragement and motivation for teachers looking to explore new jobs and industries.

Others constructed narratives that celebrated “post-teacher life,” highlighting newfound time, energy, a healthier work-life balance, increased salaries and improved working conditions offering “tours” of their new offices. In showcasing their lives outside of teaching, throws fundamental issues within education into sharp contrast.

*Figure 2.* Teachers share the moments immediately following submitting resignation letters (top) and last days in the classroom, interspersed with earlier, more hopeful moments (bottom)

*Source:* Author’s own creation
Illustrating the breaking of unspoken mores about teaching, users offered glimpses into things they “could do” now that they are no longer teachers. Some shared videos of consuming alcohol, going to concerts and dying their hair (Figure 4). Other videos displayed teachers donating paisley tops and Old Navy Pixie pants – their so-called “teacher clothes.” These videos not only celebrated the newfound freedom to express an identity beyond “teacher” but also implicitly and explicitly critiqued modesty culture imposed upon educators (Figure 4).

In conversation with the videos that celebrate breaking teacher taboos, these videos highlight how modesty culture is interwoven with gender and sexuality norms. A primary user in this space, @Magicschoolbusmillen, spoke directly in a video tagged with “teacher identity/cultural expectations/modesty/morality.” Interspersed with images of throwing clothing into a donation basket, the video explains:

[…] if you have ever wondered why teacher clothes look a certain way, and why teachers are expected to behave in certain ways, it stems from colonial times to modern times where there were morality clauses in our contract.

That demanded teachers be “pleasant, modest and a moral example to all.”

These videos illustrate the tension between the broader cultural narrative of who we expect teachers to be and the individual identities of teachers. The videos narrativize this process of negotiating transition, inviting a sense of narrative progression (Dawson and Mäkelä, 2020) from grief, through job hunting, to ultimately finding success outside of teaching.

*Stories shape the future*

*Perspectives of prospective teachers.* Through the narrativization on #teacherquittok, a broader cultural narrative is beginning to discourage prospective teachers from joining the profession. Testament to the wide reach of the #teacherquittok hashtag, education students often commented and posted videos on the tag.

Filmed in dorm rooms, or in cars on the way home from student teaching experiences, videos by current education majors talked about their nervousness, given that “every other video on their FYP is another teacher quitting” (Figure 5).
Comments – such as the ones below, posted on the first video captured above in Figure 5 – made it clear what a significant impact these accounts were having on future teachers:

@OtterTea: SAME I KEEP SEEING LIKE TEACHERS PACKING THEIR ROOMS UP.
Reply: JillLee30: it’s so discouraging.
Reply: DeeBuddy: it’s honestly KILLING me. Makes me so anxious to see it!

@EmmaRSmith, a former school counselor and now a core voice on #teacherquittok, recognized that much of the current frustration from educators is a response to a pattern of “bait-and-switch” in which education students only know the education system as students. She explained that aspiring teachers decide to pursue degrees in education “without having all of the information, they don’t know the reality of teaching, the reality of schools.” She argued that teacher identity is constructed through lived experience and that teacher education programs do not adequately prepare preservice teachers for sustainability in the profession.

More opportunities to experience the realities of teaching, as part of teacher education programs, may help mitigate this mirage. In a particularly poignant post, a student teacher sat crying in her car and explained that she has “decided to not become a teacher and it is really hard to make that realization after spending so much time, effort, and energy.” She described how much she enjoyed her first and only class, and how wonderful the students are, but that she realized that even though this was her “dream job” in her “dream district,” she “still didn’t want it.” She described feeling like a failure, especially because she “never even made it to be an actual teacher.” She points out that “the system is broken” and made her feel “mentally darker than she ever felt.”

Source: Author’s own creation
Not every video from current education students expressed dread, though. One particularly optimistic video highlighted that GenZ teachers are likely to be driven by activists and advocates, in line with the broader ethos of GenZ (Stahl and Literat, 2022). Videos framing GenZ as activists received optimistic comments such as “GenZ here working as a teacher, I’m ready when y’all are” and “1999 gen z here ready for some backup.” They also received darkly humorous comments like @Piperinfinity’s “from the tired veteran teachers dropping like flies- Go, my child. Avenge us. Fight.” This expressed ethos of advocacy among GenZ teachers has potential implications for teacher attrition. First, these younger educators may be more willing to advocate for better working conditions and work/life balance thus, stay in the profession longer. Second, their emphasis on advocacy and activism may increase their connection to the moral rewards of the profession (Kennedy, 2010; Santoro, 2011).

**Pushback from current teachers.** Seemingly in response to the disillusioned reactions from preservice teachers, current educators who were not looking to leave the profession offered a counter-narrative to the discourse on #teacherquittok. Many expressed concern over how the use of the tag may affect aspiring teachers. Some addressed student teachers directly, validating the experiences of fellow educators but assuring aspiring teachers that, in their view, it is a wonderful profession. For example, @TeacherTisha highlighted “neither experience invalidates the other,” but warns that future educators should not “rely only on one narrative” (Figure 6). Others took a more caustic approach to the negativity showing up on #teacherquittok. @ArmedForces8th posted a six-second clip with a biting tone that simply says “hi, I am one of those teachers who actually still likes their job.” In response to these more caustic videos, @Divergent_N_educator emphasized the importance of public discourse on TikTok in full view of future educators. Addressing his video to “Teacher Positive Tok” (a sarcastic reference to those who dislike the negativity of #teacherquittok), “we have a responsibility to future educators, to tell the truth.” While it is clear that #teacherquittok is making an impact on current and future educators alike, it is possible that the transparency it affords may give future educators a clearer picture of the battles they have ahead of them (Figure 6).
Discussion

Whether poignant or joyful, silly or serious, the content on #teacherquittok is an important window into teachers' perspectives and experiences when it comes to leaving the classroom. The larger narrative generated by these videos suggests that the decision to leave teaching is not one made lightly or without significant pain; our findings echo previous studies’ conclusion that, despite having found jobs they deem more professionally sustainable, former educators remain deeply connected to teaching on an emotional level (Amitai and Van Houtte, 2022). Our research also confirms previous conclusions that, rather than an issue of individual dissatisfaction (Ingersoll, 2001), or a lack of commitment or competence on the part of teachers, teacher attrition is best understood as a political and systemic problem that cannot be grappled with at the personal level (Kaiser, 2023; Santoro, 2011). Indeed, our findings show how teachers felt “pushed out” of the classroom (see also Amitai and Van Houtte, 2022). From an emergent storytelling perspective this work helps us to understand that, be it from political and social constraints on a teacher’s identity, or the mental and physical health concerns resulting from job-related stress and anxiety, educators choose to leave the field out of a sense of self-preservation. While these takeaways might be applicable to teachers elsewhere too, an important reminder is that our research centers on the context of the USA, and our findings are necessarily shaped by the larger political, economic and professional conditions affecting American teachers.
Of course, not everything on #teacherquittok ought to be taken at face value. The corpus needs to be considered in the context of social media use as a practice of self-branding and “calculated authenticity” (Banet-Weiser, 2012). In other words, we are offered curated glimpses into the experiences of teachers leaving; these glimpses craft the perception of authenticity, yet are not necessarily an unvarnished perspective (Bhandari and Bimo, 2020; Şot, 2022). We must also keep in mind that these videos are created by those educators who are most vocal about leaving, and shared in a deliberate effort to highlight experiences that challenge the education system. At the same time, social media like TikTok allow us to listen to educators in spaces where they feel safe and supported in expressing their concerns. In this sense, the experiences, perspectives and concerns they share in these spaces are highly valuable in terms of informing actionable implications and recommendations.

Our findings highlight the need for American policymakers to reframe how they view teacher attrition and reimagine ways to address it. Additionally, as social media makes postteacher life more visible, we may also gain a broader understanding of the types of roles educators are seeking beyond the classroom and how those roles fulfill the needs that were unmet by classroom practice. These needs can include higher salaries, but more often relate to increased flexibility, autonomy, and a healthier work-life balance. While salary has been a key area of study (Borman and Dowling, 2008; Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond, 2019) in the context of this corpus it is often discussed in conjunction with demoralization of teaching, as both low pay and low respect labor. When the moral rewards of education (Kennedy, 2010; Santoro, 2011) are stripped away, educators find little else in the profession to sustain them. These moral rewards are hampered by laws and policies that censor and restrict classroom practice. Policymakers should consider reforms that address the demoralization of teachers (Santoro, 2011) in conversation with compensation. This is particularly relevant for aspiring teachers, for whom the moral rewards of teaching are most advertised, yet least realized.

In view of the young demographics and cultural ethos of TikTok, our research affords insight into the experiences and perceptions of preservice and early career teachers; such insights are particularly significant for both policymakers and teacher education programs. These young or novice teachers are “invested leavers” (Glazer, 2020), having spent significant time and money pursuing teaching, with the anticipation of staying for a long time. However, a sense of demoralization broadcast on social media, and experienced during initial classroom practice, may contribute to attrition (Santoro, 2011). Although meaningful student teaching experience may help bridge the gap between expectations and reality when it comes to teaching (Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond, 2019), the increased transparency afforded by TikTok gives preservice teachers glimpses into “the frustrations, excitement, and even monotony of their teaching practices; work that is often otherwise invisible and unglorified” (Hartung et al., 2022, p. 86). Future research should consider in more detail, and ideally with more participant-centric methods, how the increased visibility around teacher attrition on social media may affect aspiring educators.

Last but not least, beyond these important implications for teacher support and teacher education, this research can also shed light on the evolving role of social media platforms in the lives of educators – and in the context of professional communities more broadly. It is commonplace that educational institutions police the boundaries of what teachers do online, often demanding that educators remove specific content that does not meet institutional norms (Carpenter and Harvey, 2019). With social media being an important space where teachers express their identities, these types of constraints may have an impact on educators’ use of social media, and their relationship with their work. In our research, social media functioned as a site for collective grieving, sharing and growing, with important implications for this professional community. Our findings also suggest that online teacher networks may not be as siloed as once believed. Aided by TikTok’s powerful recommendation algorithm, content from #teacherquittok is making its way onto the FYP of TikTok as a lens into teacher attrition.
teachers across career stages, disciplines or geographic contexts – thus perpetuating, but perhaps also nuancing, larger narratives of attrition. Future research should strive to elicit participants’ own perspectives and understandings of these loose, hashtag-based professional networks, as well as investigate how these dynamics might look differently on other social media platforms.

Notes

1. Though, based on our methods, we cannot assert categorically that all the teachers represented in our data are American, we used an English language hashtag that is seen to speak to the US context, and the contextual cues included in the videos reinforce this assumption.

2. While most of these shared resources were free, some users linked to units available for purchase, thus blurring the boundaries between “teacherpreneurship” (teacher-driven entrepreneurship) and more altruistic support on social media.

References


About the authors
Chelsey Barber is a doctoral student in the English Education Department at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her interests focus on the ways that participatory technologies are reshaping literacy practices for students and teachers alike and the intersection of English classrooms and social media. Chelsey Barber is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: cab2323@tc.columbia.edu

Ioana Literat is an Associate Professor in the Communication, Media and Learning Technologies Design program at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her research examines creative and civic expression in online contexts, with a particular focus on youth.

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website: www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm
Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com