Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education

Teacher Identities in the Digital Age: A Cross-Provincial Analysis of Social Media Guidance for Educators

Gemma Porter

Volume 19, Number 2, 2024

Special Issue: Professionalism, Incivility, and Social Media: Educational Foundations in Digital Times

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1115651ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.20355/jcie29608

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

University of Alberta

ISSN

1718-4770 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Porter, G. (2024). Teacher Identities in the Digital Age: A Cross-Provincial Analysis of Social Media Guidance for Educators. *Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education*, *19*(2), 131–154. https://doi.org/10.20355/jcie29608

Article abstract

This paper examines employer policies and professional organization guidelines governing teacher use of social media across four Canadian provinces: New Brunswick, Ontario, Saskatchewan, and British Columbia. Findings indicate that current policies and guidance often overlook the nuanced role social media plays in shaping teacher identities, focusing instead on risk management and narrow definitions of professionalism. This study advocates for policies that better reflect the complexities of teacher identity formation within digital spaces, highlighting the need for supportive guidance that empowers educators in their online interactions. By addressing this gap, the study lays a foundation for future research and offers practical implications for teachers, employers, and policymakers committed to fostering constructive digital engagement and teacher identity development.

Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education
Vol. 19, no. 2, 2024, Special Issue
DOI: https://doi.org/10.20355/jcie29608

Teacher Identities in the Digital Age: A Cross-Provincial Analysis of Social Media Guidance for Educators

Gemma Porter
St Thomas University
geporter@stu.ca

ABSTRACT

This paper examines employer policies and professional organization guidelines governing teacher use of social media across four Canadian provinces: New Brunswick, Ontario, Saskatchewan, and British Columbia. Findings indicate that current policies and guidance often overlook the nuanced role social media plays in shaping teacher identities, focusing instead on risk management and narrow definitions of professionalism. This study advocates for policies that better reflect the complexities of teacher identity formation within digital spaces, highlighting the need for supportive guidance that empowers educators in their online interactions. By addressing this gap, the study lays a foundation for future research and offers practical implications for teachers, employers, and policymakers committed to fostering constructive digital engagement and teacher identity development.

Introduction

Conceptualizing teacher identity[1] in the digital age raises interesting questions about the challenges and opportunities for beginning and veteran teachers alike. The unique nature of audiences in social media landscapes and the ability to engage in self-directed professional development and professional learning communities have direct implications for the ways that teachers are viewed by others and how they view themselves. Increased usage of social media platforms both within and outside of classroom spaces by teachers has resulted in the development of "best practices" policies and guidelines. With respect to public school educators, professional organizations and provincial/territorial government education ministries or departments develop such policies and guidelines of acceptable use. This paper offers an analysis of those social media usage policies and guidelines from across four provincial jurisdictions. By adopting this analytical process, I aim to provide a nuanced understanding of policy and guidance for educators engaging with social media.

Teacher education programs are well positioned to support preservice teachers as they transition into their roles as public educators. However, in-service teachers rely more heavily on guidance from policymakers. This study explores the intersection of provincial and territorial government policies and professional organizational guidelines concerning teachers' social media use and teacher identity. Accordingly, this analysis examines how *professional identity* (the external standards and factors shaping teaching) intersects with *teacher identity* (the personal, internalized understanding of oneself as a teacher). The research is guided by two key questions:

1. How do existing social media policies for educators align with current research on the role of social media in professional development and teacher identity?

[1] Teacher identity refers to the personalized, internalized understanding of oneself as a teacher.

2024, 19(2), pp. 131-154.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/JCIE

2. How can professional guidelines balance ethical principles with the promotion of authentic and constructive teacher identities?

Public school educators' experiences and development of teacher identities are unique. Although there are other professions where boundaries between personal and professional life are blurred, educators experience this in more obvious ways. In addition to personal investments like emotional support, informal counselling, extracurricular commitments, their position as role models has significant implications for teacher identity. A central aspect of the purpose of teaching since its inception in the 19th century has been the moral and civic development of children (Tomkins, 1986). Although morals and values have shifted over time, a consistent foundation in formal public schooling has been the civic and moral development of children. For instance, a quick examination of current global competencies across formal curriculum in every Canadian province and territory exhibits the continued value placed on civic and moral development.[2] As a result, teachers are subject to increased scrutiny with respect to the morals of the day. Whether referencing gendered expectations related to marriage and family in the 20th century or more recent examples of pressures to maintain the status quo with respect to heteronormativity in schools, educators have and continue to face the reality of upholding societal morals and values as public figures.

This is not to say that such professional expectations and adherence to accepted values are always problematic. To the contrary, the social and moral expectations of teachers are essential to ensuring the safe and caring development of students in schools. Historically, the establishment of codes of conduct/ethics within professional fields is long-standing. The necessity for such ethical obligations stems from the understanding that professions are characterized by relationships of trust – both at individual and public levels. This relationship of trust is foundational to all professional occupations, but the ethical dimension for any one

[2] Every province and territory includes citizenship as a core component in education across all disciplines and grade levels.

2024, 19(2), pp. 131-154.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/JCIE

professional becomes increasingly complex "in proportion to the extent to which the profession deals most directly and essentially with the human person ... and broader its public exposure" (Monteiro, 2015, p.69). The trust that is placed in teachers because of their close, day-to-day interactions with a vulnerable population means that there is an expectation for teachers to place the needs and care of their students above their own. As trusted public servants, teachers are expected to act in ways that always uphold that position of trust.

As society evolves and the digital landscape expands, teachers face new challenges and opportunities. A central dilemma for teachers in developing their teacher identity is the balance of personal beliefs and values with institutional and societal expectations. In the past, teachers have navigated such tensions in public and private spaces where audience and privacy contexts were much more lucid. In digital environments where security and privacy present valid concerns,[3] one of the most significant challenges of communication and representation is navigating the tensions between public and personal spheres. The unique context of communication on social media sites raises new questions about how teachers express themselves as people and professionals. According to Marwick and boyd (2010), the open[4] context of social media platforms means that it becomes virtually impossible to gauge where your comments might "end up." For instance, while nearly all comments on X, formerly known as Twitter, are read by a relatively small audience, most Twitter users have little idea *who* is reading them. This context creates a novel implication for audiences. Essentially, without direct knowledge of our audiences, we are forced to imagine them. Furthermore, many social media

[3] For instance, in the last two years major social media players have been implicated in privacy and security controversies, most notably Facebook and their dealings to enable Cambridge Analytica to gather and store user information and TikTok's connection with Chinese influence (Greenhow, Galvin, & Brandon, 2022).

[4] Social media usage is commonly referred to as open and closed. Open typically refers to social media accounts and platforms where anyone can access information and posts about the user. Closed refers to usage and accounts where privacy settings allow users to limit (to varying degrees) the access that others have to their information and posts. Although there can be more "closed" usage, several social media platforms have come under attack in recent years for releasing user data without permission, rendering notions of fully private or closed accounts highly unreliable.

2024, 19(2), pp. 131-154.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/JCIE

networking platforms "flatten" multiple audiences into one. This phenomenon, known as content collapse, presents challenges and tensions that do not exist to the same extent in face-to-face interactions. Since social media platforms frequently bring together audiences that we would not typically see convene in face-to-face interactions, it becomes almost impossible to differ our self-presentation strategies (Marwick & boyd, 2010). While these challenges may have limited implications for those working within career fields where public representation has minimal impact on their career trajectory, teachers do not have this luxury.

Navigating the world of the imagined audience while balancing societal and institutional expectations of the "good teacher" introduces complex challenges and significant questions for educators. Social media interactions create a new public forum for teachers—one that offers expansive networking and professional development opportunities but also presents risks tied to public perception. As teachers consider the outcomes of their engagement in online spaces, particularly when discourse may be controversial or sensitive, their sense of autonomy can become constrained (Carpenter et al., 2019)—an autonomy integral to their teacher identity.

Teacher Engagement with Social Media

Educators primarily engage with social media for professional development, collaboration, and sharing resources. Platforms like Instagram challenge traditional gatekeepers by providing accessible spaces for professional dialogue and advocacy (Shelton, Schroeder, & Curcio, 2020). Through these channels, educators are able to reclaim and redefine professional development in a digital context (Greenhow, Galvin, & Brandon, 2020). Social media's flexibility offers educators autonomy to personalize their growth beyond the constraints of time and place. This grassroots approach has gained particular value during the COVID-19 pandemic, expanding opportunities for networking and collaboration with peers from distant communities (Carpenter & Krutka, 2014).

Greenhow, Galvin, and Brandon (2020) note that most studies highlight teachers' use of social media for self-directed, community-oriented professional development, where unique communities of practice are created. These

2024, 19(2), pp. 131-154.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/JCIE

communities challenge traditional boundaries and suggest a need to redefine professional development. However, the direct pedagogical impacts of these online engagements remain unclear (Greenhowet al., 2020).

Carpenter and Krutka (2014) found that participatory cultures, such as teacher collaboration and resource-sharing, thrive in online affinity spaces. These spaces support the formation of teacher identities by enabling teachers to connect, collaborate, and reflect within communities that share values and goals, fostering both a sense of belonging and the development of social capital (Davis, 2015; Rehm & Notten, 2016).

While many studies investigate how and why teachers use social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook, research on the broader impacts of social media on teacher identity remains in its early stages (Greenhow et al., 2020; Robson, 2018). Robson (2018) notes that while some aspects of teacher social media use are understood, less is known about how these digital spaces shift the construction and performance of teacher identity. Through a digital ethnography, Robson (2018) examined the interactions of teachers within online social spaces, revealing that social and cultural dynamics in these spaces may necessitate a reconceptualization of teacher identity to account for the complexity of online contexts.

Further, Carpenter et al. (2022) explored how knowledge creation in online affinity spaces fosters a teacher identity aligned with qualities like collaboration, openness, and diversity. While networked audiences offer new avenues for connection, they also present unique tensions—particularly when social cues like race and gender are less discernible than in face-to-face interactions (Marwick & boyd, 2020). Additionally, "digital teacher lounges" and teacher online marketplaces (TOMI) can be challenging for teachers inexperienced in critical literacy. Monetized professional resource spaces and "influencer" accounts may promote capitalism, self-promotion, and individualism—values that conflict with democratic, collaborative educational ideals (Shelton, Schroeder, & Curcio, 2020).

2024, 19(2), pp. 131-154.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/JCIE

Conceptual Framework

Research into teacher identity serves as an analytical tool to examine the relationship between schools and society and supports early-career teachers in achieving success. Teacher identity is central to the teaching profession, guiding "what to be," "how to be," and "how to act" (Sachs, 2005, as cited in Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009, p. 178). Teacher identity serves as a valuable lens for research, as it recognizes teachers as multifaceted individuals navigating various social contexts. This perspective highlights the ongoing process through which teachers redefine their self-concept in relation to their interactions with colleagues, the characteristics of their work environment, their professional goals, and the broader teaching culture (Olsen, 2008). Gee (2000) outlines four interconnected aspects of identity—nature identity, institutional identity, discursive identity, and affinity identity—that help explain how individuals perceive themselves and are recognized by others. While this framework is valuable for understanding teacher identity in physical or traditional social spaces, it does not fully address the unique dynamics of online spaces. Robson (2018) argues that engaging in digital spaces requires distinct forms of performance and construction of identity, suggesting a need to reconceptualize teacher identity in these contexts.

In a digital ethnographic study of British teachers' online interactions, Robson (2018) developed a new theoretical framework to better capture how professional identities are constructed and performed online. Robson distinguishes between "performance" (active engagement) and "construction" (passive engagement) of professional identity, which reflect the nuanced ways teachers negotiate their identities in digital spaces.

Drawing on Goffman's (1959) ideas of performativity, Robson (2018) frames online spaces as front regions where teachers perform teacher identities. Active participation in these digital spaces allows teachers to manage impressions and present idealized forms of themselves. Passive engagement, such as reading and viewing posts, contributes to constructing teacher identity by shaping desirable teacher traits. Together, these processes form what Robson (2018) calls "embedded ideal identity," where teachers actively and passively negotiate and construct what it means to be a "good" teacher. This embedded ideal identity serves as both a

2024, 19(2), pp. 131-154.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/JCIE

mechanism of construction and the manifestation of performance (agency). The ideal embedded identity helps analyze how current policies reflect the unique challenges and opportunities offered by online contexts. As teachers increasingly turn to online spaces for professional development and advocacy, policies guiding best practices must reflect current research highlighting the tensions in online spaces for public educators.

Analyzing teacher identity also requires considering the historical context of teacher professionalism. Hargreaves (2000) identifies four phases of teacher professionalism, with the fourth phase characterized by a split between "post-modern" and "post-professional" models. Reflecting tensions between professional autonomy and increasing demands for accountability and standardization, Hargreaves (2000) argues that teachers experience a dual pressure between autonomy and external control. This context, dating back to the 1970s, persists today, as ongoing efforts to standardize and centralize education often clash with advocacy for policies promoting equity, diversity, and professional autonomy.

This conceptual framework, which draws on concepts of performance, construction, and external influences, provides a lens for understanding professional identities in relation to policies on teachers' use of social networking sites. Understanding the broader professional climate is essential for developing social media policy recommendations that support teacher agency. Such a historical and professional context deepens insights into current policies governing public educators' social media use.

Study Documents and Analytical Method

Both government bodies and professional organizations (including teachers' unions) establish expectations for teacher ethics and professionalism. In Canada, provincial statutes provide the legal framework, while professional organizations develop codes of conduct and ethics to guide professional behaviour. While statutes and professional codes broadly establish standards, localized policies and publications offer more prescriptive measures for specific issues, including teachers' use of social media. Together, these statutes, policies, and publications

2024, 19(2), pp. 131-154.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/JCIE

constitute the regulatory framework that governs teacher conduct, extending to interactions on social networking platforms.

This study analyzes two types of documents: employer-generated policies and publications from professional organizations. The focus is on policy and professional documents from four provinces—New Brunswick, Ontario, Saskatchewan, and British Columbia. Document selection was based on (1) the extent to which each document directly addresses social media usage by teachers and (2) representation of various regional contexts in Canada. District-level policies were chosen based on school district size. The appendix included provides a detailed overview of the documents selected for this study.

Documentary sources, however, should not substitute for other forms of data or be seen as complete explanations of broader phenomena. As Atkinson & Coffey (2004) note, we must consider documents for "what they are and what they are used to accomplish" (p. 47). In this study, documents are treated as social constructs that reflect the intentions and values of their creators. This critical perspective contextualizes the analysis within a broader socio-political framework and acknowledges potential gaps between formal policy and real-world practice. Although documents cannot capture teachers' interpretations or personal integrations of guidance and restrictions, they offer insight into the regulatory context teachers navigate as they develop—or avoid—an online presence.

By approaching documents as social constructs, we can more effectively interpret the implications of these policies and guidelines on teacher identity, particularly regarding social media use. This lens allows a nuanced view of how regulatory frameworks influence and are shaped by educators' experiences in digital spaces. The documentary analysis interrogates the social construction of policy guidelines and their impacts on teacher identity, as defined by Robson (2018). Utilizing discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992), this approach examines how language within these documents constructs and reinforces power structures, thereby influencing teacher identity in digital contexts.

2024, 19(2), pp. 131-154.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/JCIE

Themes within the documents were identified inductively, allowing them to emerge naturally from the data under the frame of embedded identity. This approach ensured that themes were grounded in the documents' content rather than shaped by external expectations. Six primary themes emerged, forming the foundation for data organization: "value added," "be professional," "alignment with pre-existing policies and guidelines," "the professional/personal divide," "risks," and "don'ts." These themes are critically examined in relation to Robson's (2018) concepts of constructed and performed identities.

"Value Added"

An evident theme in the contextualization of social media with respect to educational uses is the notion that social media, and technology more generally, has positive, value-added elements for both professionals and students. Though there is an acknowledgement of this value-added potential, different policies treat this potential in different ways including highlighting the appeal of social media and technology to education broadly conceived, specific attention to the benefits for teachers and the teaching profession, as well as a blend of these student/teacher benefits.

Saskatoon Public School Division (SPSD) Policy 141 opts to focus most prominently on the benefits of social media for students and student learning. SPSD uses the belief in the potential for social media to enhance student learning as a framework for providing guidelines for educators. Policy 141 recognizes this potential through a focus on the ways that social media enhances learning environments for students in the classroom. Social media "facilitates sharing of resources, unprecedented access to information, instant global communication, and continually evolving methods of collaboration and innovation" (SPSD, 2017, p.1). Vancouver School Board (VSB) Policy 403 takes a similar approach in opting to focus on the broad benefits of social media for student learning. Administrative Procedure (AP) 403 (2022) from the Vancouver School Board views social media as "a valuable communication tool" (p. 1). Social media platforms provide innovative ways for students to share information, and so the use of these platforms in the classroom

2024, 19(2), pp. 131-154.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/JCIE

"prepares students for a world where social media is increasingly prevalent" (VSB, 2022, p.1).

In providing guidance for educational professionals working in the Toronto School District (TSD), policy guidelines highlight the benefits of technology and social media for both teachers *and* students. Policy 735 (2022) begins by contextualizing the purpose of the document. The purpose of the document is comprehensive in that it aims to provide guidance for the use of social media for both student learning and professional development purposes. The "General Principles" section of the policy developed by the TSD then provides a follow-up to this dual purpose by noting that "social media presents a number of positive opportunities" (TSD, 2022, p.4) and that teachers "may use social media to compliment teaching and/or professional development" (TSD, 2022, p.4). These comments are mirrored in a professional organization document from the same province. In their guidelines for educators' use of social media, the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) speaks to the innovative qualities of technology for educators and their practice. According to the OTC (2017) social media creates opportunities for innovation in both learning and teaching through the creation of opportunities for "extending and enhancing education" (OCT, p., 2017). Furthermore, engagement within social media supports "powerful new ways for members to collaborate and dialogue" (OCT, 2017, p.2).

The general theme across documents was an effort to highlight the educational benefits of social media and sometimes technology more broadly. Notable benefits for teachers and their teaching identity are addressed by those policies that highlight the capacity for social media to be used as a gateway for meaningful professional development. The only document to address agency in the construction of teacher identities in a meaningful manner was by the Saskatchewan Teachers Federation (STF). While all other policies and guidelines examined alluded quite vaguely to the benefits of usage in educational contexts, the STF social media guidance document was the only one to encourage teachers to use social media as a platform for professional advocacy. The STF calls directly on teachers to use and engage with social media in an active way "with the hope that more people will be informed and talk about education" (STF, 2022, p. 3). The document pushes teachers to get engaged by liking, following, and posting to

2024, 19(2), pp. 131-154.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/JCIE

"flood those news feeds" (p. 3). For the STF, public access and sharing elements embedded within the nature of social media platforms ensures opportunities to "inform, educate, and establish a following of supporters to advocate for public education" (p. 1).

"Be Professional"

A key theme in constructing the ideal embedded identity (Robson, 2018) was the emphasis on professionalism in social media use. While the specific interpretation of professionalism varied across policy documents, two central subthemes emerged: maintaining public trust and adhering to established policies and codes of conduct. Policies link professionalism on social media to educators' responsibility to recognize their public role, emphasizing the importance of protecting public trust in education. Given the limited voice educators often have in political decision-making, engaging on social media takes on added significance as a political act, enabling teachers to participate in broader educational discourse.

To ensure "professional" use of social media, several policy documents analyzed provide specific guidance for educators. While all documents underscore professionalism as the foundational expectation, the framing and details of this professionalism vary. Notably, only the Toronto School Board (TSB) connects professionalism to the broader concept of digital citizenship, emphasizing that educators should "act and model in ways that are safe, legal, and ethical" (p. 1). The TSB's policy further specifies that educators should "ensure [a] safe, positive, respectful online and working environment," guided by "integrity, respect, care, professionalism, and trust" (p. 2). Similarly, Anglophone School District South (ASD-S, 2016) expects educators to monitor their social media presence to reflect principles of "honesty, respect, responsibility, and consideration of others" (p. 2).

A consistent theme across documents is the alignment of social media presence with other district policies and professional standards or codes of conduct. The TSB (2022) policy, for example, emphasizes three times that educators' social media activity should comply with applicable laws and TSB policies, such as those on equity, technology use, and harassment prevention. Saskatoon Public Schools adds

2024, 19(2), pp. 131-154.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/JCIE

that educators should uphold "the integrity of the division's core values and policies" in their social media interactions (SPSD, 2022, p. 1).

Some documents, such as the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) guidelines, acknowledge educators' agency in exercising individual judgment. While generally prescriptive, the OCT (2017) document explicitly encourages educators to use their "professional judgement to identify and avoid risk" (p. 2). The document reinforces the need for judgment to align with the ethical "cornerstones" of care, trust, respect, and integrity (p. 2). The Saskatchewan Teachers Federation (STF) offers similar guidance, reminding beginning teachers to "maintain exemplary professional standards" and use a "teacher voice" in digital spaces (STF, 2016, p. 93).

Ontario and New Brunswick policies additionally emphasize the importance of public trust. The OCT and TSB policies explicitly connect educators' social media behaviour to their public role, stressing that "maintaining professional boundaries is critical to sustaining public trust" (TSB, 2022, p. 2). The OCT (2017) further advises educators to be mindful of their "unique position of trust and authority" (p. 3) in online settings. Similarly, ASD-S defines professionalism in social media as "appropriate communication" that models conduct befitting the trust placed in educators (ASD-S, 2016, p. 2), echoing TSB's emphasis on boundaries as foundational to public trust.

"Professional/Personal Divide"

Many policy documents highlight the maintenance of professional boundaries as essential to upholding public trust. This boundary is challenging for educators, especially those who have lived and worked in the same community for many years, where the separation between professional and private lives can be complex. Policy documents and union guidance frequently address this professional/personal divide, with some acknowledging the complexities of digital communication, while others propose methods to maintain a clear distinction. For example, the Ontario College of Teachers (2017) notes that informal communication channels, such as social media, often "blur the professional boundaries" (p. 2). Similarly, Anglophone

2024, 19(2), pp. 131-154.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/JCIE

District South acknowledges that "in an online world, the lines between public and private, personal and professional can become blurred" (p. 3).

While these policies recognize the difficulty of maintaining separation, there is an underlying expectation that educators should nonetheless distinguish between their personal and professional lives. The Toronto School Board (2022) and Saskatoon Public School Division (2022) specify that policy directives apply to personal accounts only if the shared content could impact the school board or division. Likewise, the Vancouver School Board limits its policy to situations where personal social media use "creates an unsafe environment, violates policies, negatively impacts students, parents, employees, or contravenes professional standards for British Columbia educators" (VSB, 2022, p. 5).

However, these policies may oversimplify the issue. The assumption that a clear delineation between personal and professional behaviour is possible overlooks the unique scrutiny educators face. As established by the Supreme Court of Canada, educators' actions, even outside of work, are subject to scrutiny and can lead to disciplinary action, including termination. The expectation that educators can maintain a distinct personal presence online, separate from their professional responsibilities, fails to acknowledge the nuanced, ongoing processes by which teacher identity is both performed and constructed in digital spaces.

"Risks"

Across the policy documents, professionalism is framed as crucial to mitigating the risks associated with social media use. Anglophone District South (2016) cautions educators about the "numerous challenges and ramifications" (p. 4) tied to social media engagement. A central theme in the documents is the unique nature of online communication, which brings heightened risks to maintaining professional standards and public trust. The Toronto School Board (2022) specifically warns about the "permanence and potential for broad circulation" of online content, advising educators to "consider carefully who may see what they post online" (p. 4), even with privacy settings enabled.

2024, 19(2), pp. 131-154.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/JCIE

Given the lasting, widely accessible nature of social media, the policies emphasize the need for educators to be vigilant and aware of the risks. The Toronto District School Board (2022) highlights that expressing opinions online can have lasting implications, while the Ontario College of Teachers (2017) advises educators to familiarize themselves with relevant policies. Anglophone School District South (2016) takes a stronger stance, advising "extreme caution" in social media use, given educators' "24/7 responsibilities" and the heightened standards expected of them (p. 4). The New Brunswick Teachers' Federation and the Vancouver Teachers' Association further stress that "careless electronic communication may have unintended, but grave professional consequences" (VSB, 2022) and that "ignorance is not a defence" (NBTF).

Both the Ontario College of Teachers (2017) and Vancouver Teachers' Association emphasize risks associated with informal communication tools. The OCT (2017) explains that the increase in non-traditional communication methods introduces a greater chance for "unintentional mistakes" and cautions that social media can promote "more casual dialogue" (p. 2). To mitigate misunderstandings or unprofessional perceptions, the Vancouver Teachers' Association (2013) advises teachers to use a consistently professional tone in online interactions, as "casual, offhand remarks are easily misconstrued" (p. 1).

This emphasis on maintaining boundaries and professionalism creates a "catch-22" scenario for teachers. Policies advocate for the use of privacy settings to protect personal information yet caution that privacy settings are not foolproof. The Ontario College of Teachers (2017) suggests educators adjust settings to "maximize your privacy…ensuring that students cannot see or post" (p. 3), while the Saskatoon Public School Division warns that even the strictest privacy settings may not prevent unintended exposure. The Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation (2016) frames this as a heightened risk, advising that "nothing is private," and cautioning teachers against posting personal information online due to the potential for "unintended consequences far into the future" (p. 93).

2024, 19(2), pp. 131-154.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/JCIE

"Don'ts"

Professionalism remains the central theme across the policy documents analyzed, with "don'ts" framed largely around the need to avoid conduct that could be deemed unprofessional. These guidelines emphasize maintaining professional boundaries, refraining from derogatory comments about employers, colleagues, or the profession at large. Across various documents—from employer guidelines (Anglophone School District South; Vancouver School Board; British Columbia Ministry of Education) to professional organizations (Ontario College of Teachers; Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation; New Brunswick Teachers' Federation; Vancouver Teachers' Association)—a consistent directive emerges: educators are prohibited from "friending" students on social media. Though the language varies slightly, the message is clear nationwide: don't do it. The Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation (2016) captures this point vividly, stating, "your students have their own friends, and you are not one of them" (p. 93). Anglophone District South (2016) extends this boundary further, advising educators to avoid friending not only students but also any minors.

In addition to prohibiting connections with students on social media, these documents consistently caution against posting negative or disparaging remarks about employers, colleagues, parents, or students. While most professionals would likely agree on avoiding harassing or offensive language, some policies raise concerns by discouraging public criticism of educational policies or administrative decisions. Constructive criticism is integral to democratic practice, and educators, as experienced professionals, play a vital role in informing the public about educational issues. Yet, many of the policies analyzed in this study focus on deterring educators from public critiques of stakeholders. For example, the Saskatoon Public School Division (2017) advises that social media "should not be used to…publicly criticize students, staff, parents, or colleagues" (p. 2).

In contrast, the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation (2022) stands out by actively encouraging educators to use social media as an advocacy tool. Unlike other documents, the STF's social media guidelines promote political engagement and encourage members to voice their perspectives in support of educational advocacy.

2024, 19(2), pp. 131-154.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/JCIE

This unique stance recognizes the potential of social media as a platform for professional advocacy, suggesting a progressive approach to the role educators can play in public discourse.

Discussion

Given the nature of the employer-union/federation relationship, one might expect to uncover some differences in the form and function of discourse surrounding professional identities in social media contexts for teachers. Despite the assumption of control versus representation/advocacy that one might expect to sit at the foundation of the employer policies versus professional publications, implications for the performance (agency) and the construction (structure) of professional identity remain largely consistent across the selected publications. Both professional organizational and policy documents were largely concerned with setting out parameters for professional use of social media and the mitigation of risks to the employer and individual employee. This broad frame of what Robson (2018) terms "cost/benefits" analysis creates narrow parameters for performance (agency) of teacher identity and largely ignores constructive processes of teacher professional identity in online contexts. Instead, engagement in online spaces is constructed more simply in terms of pedagogical benefits and the performance of narrow ideals of "professionalism."

Despite this limitation, the documents do present several valuable considerations. Most recognize the positive influence that technology integration can have on the profession, on students, and on the broader educational landscape. Furthermore, these documents underscore the importance of setting boundaries and understanding the risks associated with social media. This guidance is crucial as educators increasingly maintain social media accounts where their online conduct remains relevant beyond typical work hours. While these cautions serve an important purpose, a critical examination reveals notable gaps and missed opportunities in addressing the complexities of professional identity in the digital era.

One noteworthy omission is the absence of guidance on the construction of teacher identity in online spaces. These documents tend to treat teacher identity as *fait*

2024, 19(2), pp. 131-154.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/JCIE

accompli, failing to recognize the dynamic and evolving nature of teacher identity within digital spaces. Online spaces offer unique opportunities for educators to actively (and passively) construct and perform (Robson, 2018) their teacher identities, a dimension that should be acknowledged and explored.

In addition, there is a conspicuous absence of guidance on critical engagement with social media. Digital literacy is frequently highlighted as an essential competency for students, yet the same priority does not extend to educators. With social media increasingly integral to professional environments—akin to the teachers' lounge or professional development seminars—it is essential that educators be provided with guidance to navigate these spaces thoughtfully and reflectively. By addressing critical engagement, policies could better equip educators to interpret, contribute to, and benefit from professional discourse online.

Current policies often limit themselves to a cost-benefit, do's-and-don'ts framework, neglecting the nuanced realities of educators' online engagement. To truly support educators in the digital age, employers and professional organizations must expand their guidance to acknowledge how social media intersects with and influences professional identity. This oversight is reflective of a broader trend toward the de-professionalization of teaching, where complex professional needs are reduced to regulatory compliance. The advent of social media and its increasing use in professional and commercial contexts creates a unique environment for educators navigating healthy ways to develop their professional sense of self. Unfortunately, the documents available to teachers to date offer little guidance or acknowledgement of the unique ways that social media is influencing professional identity. With no sign of social media platforms diminishing soon, it is crucial that policies and guidance evolve to empower educators in the digital age.

Recommendations

Employers and professional organizations are aware and thinking about the implications of teacher engagement with social media platforms. While such recognition is important, it is crucial to note the failure of current policies and professional publications to offer understanding about how such engagement

2024, 19(2), pp. 131-154.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/JCIE

informs both the performance and construction of teacher identity. Based on the findings and analysis presented in this paper, I propose the following targeted recommendations to create policies that reflect the unique nature of professional identity formation within social media spaces:

Embrace the Dynamic Nature of Teacher Identity: Professional guidance should recognize that teacher identity is fluid, particularly within digital spaces where engagement continually reshapes one's professional presence. Rather than a fixed role, teacher identity should be understood as something educators can actively refine and develop. This approach would empower educators to shape their online presence constructively, enhancing their careers and strengthening their relationships with students.

Promote Critical Digital Literacy: Make critical digital literacy a core competency for educators. Policies should guide teachers on engaging thoughtfully with online content and understanding the responsibilities involved in content consumption and creation. Educators who model and promote critical digital literacy skills not only contribute to a more informed educational community but also set a valuable example for students learning to navigate digital spaces.

Support Agentic Guidance: Shift from restrictive definitions of professionalism in online spaces toward policies that encourage informed, agentic participation. Empower teachers to take ownership of their digital presence and interactions, emphasizing autonomy and professional agency. This shift will help elevate the teaching profession by embracing the complexities of social media engagement, moving beyond a checklist of do's and don'ts to a framework that values informed decision-making and professional judgement.

Support research and continued research: Although research on teachers' use of social media for professional growth exists, there is limited understanding of how these interactions differ from those in traditional settings like the teachers' lounge. Professional organizations and policy developers could benefit from more robust research on these new digital "hangouts" to better tailor policies that align with educators' actual experiences and needs within online environments.

2024, 19(2), pp. 131-154.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/JCIE

Incorporating these recommendations into future policies and guidance documents will not only benefit educators but also contribute to centring educators as the decision-makers in the construction and performance of teacher identities in online spaces. Supporting educators to engage with social media in meaningful ways also helps to ensure that educators remain at the forefront of shaping the educational landscape.

References

Anglophone South School District. (2013). *Professional conduct*. http://web1.nbed.nb.ca/sites/ASD-S/DistrictPolicies/200%20-%20Human%20Resources/ASD-S-232%20Professional%20Conduct%202023.pdf

Atkinson, P. A. & Coffey, A. (2004). Analysing documentary realities. In D. Silverman (Ed.), *Qualitative research: Theory, method and practice* (2nd ed.), Sage, 56–75.

Beauchamp, C., & Thomas, L. (2009). Understanding teacher identity: An overview of issues in the literature and implications for teacher education. *Cambridge Journal of Education, 39*(2), 175–189. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057640902902252

Brickner, R. K. (2016). Tweeting care: educators' dissent through social media in the US and Canada. *Labour, 77*(77), 11.

British Columbia Ministry of Education. (n. d.). *Social media guidelines resource*. www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/erase/documents/social_media_guidelines.pdf

Carpenter, J. P., Kimmons, R., Short, C. R., Clements, K., & Staples, M. E. (2019). Teacher identity and crossing the professional-personal divide on twitter. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 81*, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2019.01.011

Carpenter, J. P., & Krutka, D. G. (2014). How and Why Educators Use Twitter: A Survey of the Field. *Journal of Research on Technology in Education*, *46*(4), 414–434. https://doi-org.proxy.hil.unb.ca/10.1080/15391523.2014.925701

Damico, N., & Krutka, D. G. (2018). Social media diaries and fasts: Educating for digital mindfulness with pre-service teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 73*, 109–119. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2018.03.009

Davis, J. (2006). The importance of the community of practice in identity development. *The Internet Journal of Allied Health Sciences and Practice. 4*(3), 1-8. https://doi.org/10.46743/1540-580X/2006.1111

2024, 19(2), pp. 131-154.

Day, C., Kington, A., Stobart, G., & Sammons, P. (2006). The personal and professional selves of teachers: stable and unstable identities. *British Educational Research Journal*, *32*(4), 601–616. https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920600775316

Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and social change*. Polity Press. Fox, A., & Bird, T. (2017). The challenge to professionals of using social media: Teachers in England negotiating personal-professional identities. *Education and Information Technologies*, *22*(2), 647–675. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-015-9442-0

Gee, J. P. (2000). Identity as an analytic lens for research in education. *Review of Research in Education*, *25*, 99–125.

Gee, J. P. (2004). *Situated language and learning: a critique of traditional schooling*. Routledge.

Greenhow, C., Galvin, S. M., Brandon, D. L., & Askari, E. (2020). A decade of research on K-12 teaching and teacher learning with social media: insights on the state of the field. *Teachers College Record*, *122*(6).

Hargreaves, A. (2000). Four ages of professionalism and professional learning. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, *6*(2), 151–182. https://doi.org/10.1080/135406000050058616

Kimmons, R., & Veletsianos, G. (2015). Teacher professionalization in the age of social networking sites. *Learning, Media and Technology*, *40*(4), 480–501. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2014.933846

Monteiro, A. R. (2015). Sociology of the Professions. In A. R. Monteiro, (Ed.), *The teaching profession* (pp. 47–60). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-12130-7_4

Marwick, A. E., & boyd, d. (2011). I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience. *New Media & Society*, *13*(1), 114–133. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444810365313

New Brunswick Teachers' Federation. (n.d.). *Freedom of expression and teachers' responsibilities as social media users*. https://nbtffenb.ca/media/20200428-Social-Media-Newsletter.pdf

Olsen, B. (2008). How reasons for entry into the profession illuminate teacher identity development. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, *35*(3), 23–40. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23478979

Ontario College of Teachers. 2017). *Professional advisory: Maintaining professionalism–Use of electronic communication and social media*. https://www.oct.ca/resources/advisories/use-of-electronic-communication-and-social-media

Rehm, M., & Notten, A. (2016). Twitter as an informal learning space for teachers!? The role of social capital in Twitter conversations among teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 60*, 215–223. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2016.08.015

Robson, J. (2018). Performance, structure and ideal identity: reconceptualising teachers' engagement in online social spaces. *British Journal of Educational Technology, 49*(3), 439–450.

Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation. (2022). *Information for teachers: Social media*. https://www.stf.sk.ca/resource/information-teachers-september-2022-social-media/

Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation. (2016). *Taking your place in the professional community: A handbook for beginning teachers*. https://wiki.usask.ca/download/attachments/1205043282/taking_your_place_professional_community_handbook.pdf?version=1&modificationDate=1504897300000&api=v2

Saskatoon Public Schools. (2017). Social media and online posting. https://www.spsd.sk.ca/division/adminproceduresmanual/Documents/AP%20141%20Social%20Media%20and%20Online%20Posting%20Jan%2011%202017.pdf

Shelton, C., Schroeder, S. & Curcio, R. (2020). Instagramming their Hearts Out: What Do Edu-Influencers Share on Instagram? *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education, 20*(3), 529–554. https://www.learntechlib.org/primary/p/215623/

Tomkins, G. S. (1986). *A common countenance: stability and change in the Canadian curriculum*. Prentice-Hall Canada.

Toronto District School Board. (2022). *Social media and online content*. https://ppf.tdsb.on.ca/uploads/files/live/89/2263.pdf

Vancouver Secondary Teachers' Association. (2013). *Professional boundaries and the use of electronic communication and social media*. https://vsta.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/SocialMediaBoundaries-InfoTips.pdf

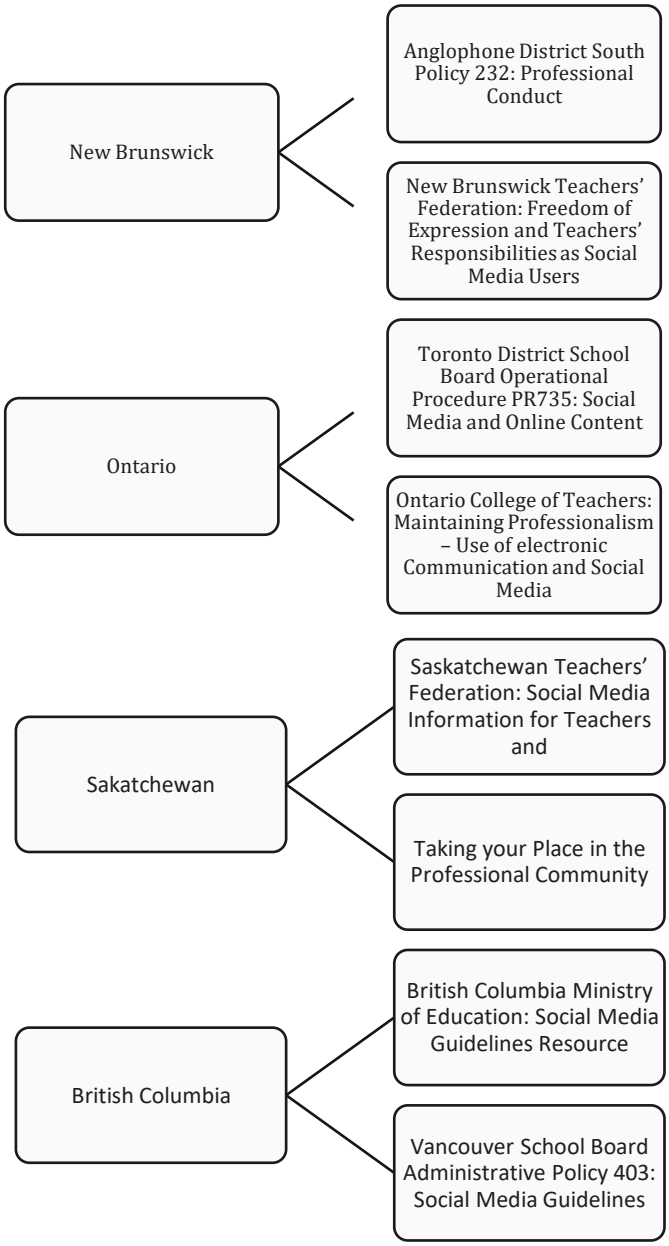
Vancouver School Board. (2022). *Social media guidelines*. https://media.vsb.bc.ca/media/Default/medialib/ap_403_social_media_guidelines.23044214519.pdf

Veletsianos, G. (2013). Open practices and identity: Evidence from researchers and educators' social media participation: Open practices and identity. *British Journal of Educational Technology, 44*(4), 639–651. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.12052

2024, 19(2), pp. 131-154.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/JCIE

Appendix

Documents Selected for Analysis



2024, 19(2), pp. 131-154.
http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/JCIE