Social Media Groups on Far-Right Platforms: The Dark Side of Affinity Spaces for Teacher Professional Learning

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Biographies

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Abstract

Researchers studying teachers' professional learning on social media platforms have often turned to the affinity space conceptual framework to validate this phenomenon. While previous work has indeed documented much teacher activity of value, researchers have been slower to consider the shortcomings of the affinity space framework in the context of teacher development. In this study, we explore the "dark side" of teacher affinity spaces by documenting a teachers' group on a far-right social media platform. We found that although the group administrators began with a focus on teachers, most participants were non-teachers with political (rather than professional) concerns about U.S. education. Furthermore, both administrators freely engaged with far-right talking points in their activity outside the teachers' group and allowed the broader platform culture—including explicit racism and conspiratorial thinking—to seep into this affinity space. We conclude with a description of how researchers can respond to these findings by adjusting their approach to teacher affinity spaces, namely by paying more attention to what is being learned, asking how radically inclusive membership in affinity spaces may stand at cross purposes with teacher learning, and incorporating questions about the influence of social media platforms and media ecosystems.

Keywords: Affinity Spaces; Educational Technology; Far Right Social Media; January 6th; Professional Learning Networks

Structured Practitioner Notes

What is already known about this topic:

- Research suggests that social media can support teacher professional learning
- Social media spaces have been positively conceptualized as affinity spaces for educators
- Most teacher social media has analyzed mainstream platforms

What this paper adds:

- We offer detailed analysis of a conservative teacher group on a far-right platform
- This study offers a more critical consideration of the affinity space framework
- The conservative teachers group was less focused on education or teaching as there were more efforts at far-right agenda setting than is the case on mainstream platforms

Implications for practice and/or policy

- Scholars might more critically consider the political nature of the affinity space framework instead of using it to validate a phenomenon
- Research should more broadly attend to the quality of posts and resources in social media spaces
- Scholars and educators should consider how the "fuzzy boundaries" of affinity spaces affects teacher professional learning

Introduction

Researchers of teachers' professional use of social media platforms have typically been eager to validate this activity, arguing for its importance despite falling outside of traditional professional development practices. In keeping with this emphasis on validation, Gee's (2004, 2017) *affinity space* framework has become popular for explaining and understanding teachers' activity on social media (Hashim & Carpenter, 2019). In response to the *community of practice* framework—which itself offered a means of validating informal learning activities as worthy of scholarly attention (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger 1998)—Gee argued that even looser social organizations could still produce legitimate learning environments. Gee downplayed the necessity of formal membership or qualifications and expressed optimism that participants in affinity spaces could set aside distinctions between themselves (e.g., race, gender, class) in the name of shared interest and collaboration (Gee, 2004; Gee & Hayes, 2012).

Although the validatory nature of the affinity space framework has been useful for calling legitimate scholarly attention to teacher activity on social media (e.g., Staudt Willet, 2019; Staudt Willet & Carpenter, 2021), researchers have been slower to investigate the framework's shortcomings in the context of teacher professional learning. Despite his general optimism, Gee's (2003) precursor work to affinity spaces implicitly acknowledges that not all informal learning is "good or valuable" (p. 46); in later work, Gee and Hayes (2012) acknowledge that some affinity spaces may ultimately pit insiders against outsiders. More pointedly, Pellicone and Ahn (2018) have established that questions of (and discrimination according to) race, gender, and class are more salient in affinity spaces than Gee initially theorized, and Barden (2016) has noted that the original framework is largely unconcerned with questions of power and Otherness. These precedents invite researchers of teachers' professional use of social media to more carefully

consider that which should not be validated within this phenomenon; likewise, other important questions about the implications of affinity space framework for this literature (such as its downplaying of formal qualifications in a context of teacher deprofessionalization) remain unanswered.

In this paper, we seek to demonstrate the "dark side" of teacher affinity spaces by documenting activity in a teachers' group within a social media platform explicitly designed to support the far-right. We have previously argued (Authors, 2021) that the rise of far-right social media platforms has important implications for scholars of informal learning on social media, and we here respond to our own invitation to more fully explore these implications. In carrying out this work, we emphasize that while the group we studied describes themselves as "conservative teachers," most of its content is more accurately characterized as *far-right* and that we do not aim to villainize conservative teachers broadly. Indeed, conservative educators have always existed within and contributed to schools, and we do not intend to contribute to feelings of ideological isolation (e.g., Journell, 2017). Although we raise concern about far-right or conspiratorial fringe beliefs held by some teachers, we do not suggest that these beliefs are held by all teachers who identify as conservative; furthermore, our ultimate emphasis is on the importance of more critically considering the value of the affinity space framework.

Background

The rise of social media in the 21st century has resulted in profound changes to communication, social organization, and political movements. Initially, social media was hailed as a democratizing force, but numerous scandals, debates, and research have shifted sentiment to recognize increasingly complex effects (e.g., McNamee, 2020; Tufekci, 2017; Vaidhyanathan, 2018).

Teachers on Social Media

Like other areas of society, social media has resulted in changes in education, including how schools communicate information to community members (Michela et al., 2022), what information schools reveal about students (Rosenberg et al., 2022), and how students feel about themselves (Wells et al., 2021). There has also been substantial scholarship focusing on how teachers use social media platforms for professional learning purposes. These platforms include Twitter (Malik et al., 2019; Tang & Hew, 2017), Instagram (Carpenter et al., 2020), and Reddit (Na & Staudt Willet, 2022; Staudt Willet & Carpenter, 2020), among others.

Most scholarship on educational uses of social media have praised how platforms afford educators opportunities to share resources, find support, and grow networks (Author, 2021; Greenhow et al., 2020; Lantz-Andersson et al., 2018). In contrast, recent scholarship has increasingly addressed problems of social media related to education (Author et al., 2019; Author et al., 2023; Nagle, 2018; Veletsianos et al., 2018). These issues include problematic historical narratives in social studies resources on Pinterest (Rodríguez et al., 2020), tensions between social justice efforts and the for-profit business model of Instagram (Shelton et al., 2023), and the participation of inauthentic accounts in teacher hashtags on Twitter (Author et al., 2023). **Far-Right Social Media**

The rise of social media has facilitated more participatory, decentralized, and decontextualized engagement in public discourse by everyday citizens. Scholars and public commentary initially focused on the benefits of *participatory cultures* (Jenkins, 2006). Social media activism was also seen as supporting pro-democracy and civil rights movements; in particular, Facebook was cited as supporting Arab Spring revolutions (e.g., Ghonim, 2012) and Twitter as supporting anti-police brutality movements in the U.S. (e.g., Brewster, 2014). Adding

more nuance, Tufekci (2017) illustrated how social media platforms have been utilized successfully by both grassroots, pro-democracy activists and by state information operations intended to stifle democratic action, such as Russia's Internet Research Agency (IRA).

Recently, there has been more scholarship about far-right hashtag activism, particularly in U.S. far-right networks that consist of a complex ecosystem of right-wing political influencers and conspiracy theorists such as the QAnon network (Marwick & Partin, 2022). As Marwick and colleagues (2022) explained, "the internet does not cause radicalization, but it helps spread extremist ideas, enables people interested in these ideas to form communities, and mainstreams conspiracy theories and distrust in institutions" (p. 2). Far-right actors are able to mainstream fringe ideas "by using edgy humour to disguise the loaded racism of their messaging" and promoting extreme, in-group identities (Crawford, 2020, para 3).

Methods

In this section, we describe our methods for conducting a study that falls into a genre of research that uses digital data collected from social media platforms to study educational phenomena (Author, 2021).

Positionality and Research Ethics

We acknowledge that our research is influenced by our own understandings, experiences, and circumstances—often referred to as *positionalities* or *subjectivities* (Bhattacharya, 2017). In some cases, our backgrounds and experiences differed in a way that complemented each other and allowed us to better understand our data collectively. However, we share a number of privileged identities as white cisgender men who work in academic spaces, and we recognize that these positionalities influenced observations and interpretations.

Similarly, we have ethical obligations toward those who produced the data we studied in this project. This remains true even though these data were public and our institutions therefore did not require ethical approval or participant consent. Recognizing our position of power over unwitting participants (Fiesler & Proferes, 2018; Gilbert et al., 2021; Suomela et al., 2019), we have gone to great lengths to protect them. In particular, we concealed their identities by not identifying the platform or group, using pseudonyms for both user and account names, and lightly editing screenshots to hide personal information.

Data Sources and Collection

Data for this study includes 49 original posts and 209 associated replies in a teacher group on a far-right social media platform. On January 9th, 2021, the second author collected the unique URL associated with each post composed since the creation of the group; he then collected screenshots of those posts using the *webshot2* package (Chang, 2022) for the R programming language. He also collected screenshots of the profile page for the group's two administrators, including as many of their recent site-wide posts as fit in the screenshot.

The group we studied was created in early November of 2020. This suggests that this group's creation represents part of a broader migration to right-wing social media platforms in the aftermath of the election (e.g., Brandom, 2020, Author, 2023). The group described itself as for "conservative teachers" resisting perceived left-wing propaganda in United States schools. A screenshot of the "About" page for the group taken during data collection suggests that there were over 4,800 members. However, these numbers seem to be misleading: only 78 accounts had actually posted to the group, 50 of those accounts had only posted once, and only 16 accounts composed original posts (rather than simply replying to others' content).

Data Analysis

We conducted both *a priori* and emergent coding of data. A priori coding included identification of the type of post (original, repost, comment) and professional identity of the account (educator, non-educator, unclear). However, most coding was conducted through an iterative process of memo writing, code identification, and theme development (Charmaz, 2014). This process included multiple, iterative reviews of the data as we expanded and contracted codes, sub-codes, and topics to create categories that represented the breadth and depth of the phenomena.

Results

Our coding of posts eventually resulted in the codes listed in Tables 1 and 2. When possible, we kept the codes for our two data sets (group posts and administrators' site-wide posts) either identical or similar; this allowed for clearer connections across the data. In this section, we use these codes to describe patterns of activity in and across both contexts.

Creating a Group for Teachers

This teacher group was created and administered by two users: Abigail (@msabigail) is a Black woman with experience as an English teacher and school librarian in the South/Southwest of the United States, and Melissa (@its_me_melissa) is a white woman who teaches high school science in the South of the United States. Many of Abigail and Melissa's posts suggest that their intent behind the group was to provide a space for informal professional development, in the same vein as other teacher-focused affinity spaces on social media platforms.

As might be expected, *Relational* posts were prominent in the early days of the group as participants sought to know each other (see Table 1). For example, there was an important concentration of the *Inquire About Others* (n=5) and *Share About Self* (n=28) codes shortly after the group was created. Abigail began a thread that encouraged those joining the group to "get to

know each other better" by sharing their "expertise" (presumably grade level, content area, etc.) in the comments. Likewise, *Discuss Group Norms & Resources* posts (n=11) also went some way toward keeping the group focused on education. Shortly after Abigail's request for introductions, Melissa posted a set of group norms that established her and Abigail as administrators, encouraged participants to "stay on topic" by announcing that posts unrelated to education would be removed, and suggested that the group was "here to offer solutions and hope to those seeking educational assistance."

In particular, Abigail embraced a role as an administrator who facilitated an affinity space. Indeed, she was responsible for 90 out of the 258 posts we collected (34.88% of total activity in the group). Much of this high level of activity was due to her *Relational* involvement in nearly every thread present in the group. Two of these posts involved enforcing the group norms, asking a user to take down a fundraising link. However, we coded another 52 of her 90 posts (57.78% of her personal activity) as *Respond to Post*. These posts (e.g., "gotcha!", "awesome! Thank you! I'll drop them a line!", "absolutely agreed! Welcome to the latest crazy, lol!") encouraged and affirmed other group members' comments but were short and generally lacked the kind of substance necessary to advance meaningful discussion of educational issues. Although Melissa was also one of the more prolific members of the group, she was much more hands-off as an administrator. In two *Group Identity*-coded posts, she shared one resource recommendation and posted a meme image depicting a teacher in November as a bedraggled, exhausted variation of Mona Lisa. However, despite one post announcing that she had "cut the cord" to Facebook and would be "on here 100% of the time," she only contributed 18 posts to the group (6.98% of total activity).

Table 1

Codes generated from an analysis of the group posts.

Code	Subcode	Topic	Count	Percentage of Total Codes
Relational			**129**	**44.63%**
	Respond to Post		*85*	*29.41%*
	Share About Self		*28*	*9.69%*
	Discuss Group Norms & Resources		*11*	*3.81%*
	Inquire About Others		*5*	*1.73%*
Group Identity			**153**	**52.94%**
	Push In-Group Identity		*81*	*28.03%*
		Education	27	9.34%
		Homeschooling	15	5.19%
		Conservative Education	10	3.46%
		COVID-19 Conspiracy and Misinformation	5	1.73%
		Christian	5	1.73%
		White Supremacy	4	1.38%
		Alternative Health	4	1.38%
		Islamophobia	3	1.03%
		COVID-19 Conditions	3	1.03%
		Election Fraud	2	0.69%
		QAnon	1	0.35%
		Pro-Gun	1	0.35%
		Gendered Education	1	0.35%
	Push Against Out-Group		*64*	*22.15%*
		Anti-Public Schools	17	5.89%
		Anti-Left	17	5.89%
		Anti-COVID-19 Policies	15	5.19%
		Anti-Social Justice	7	2.42%
		Anti-Government	3	1.04%
		Anti-Big Tech	3	1.04%
		Anti-Media	1	0.35%
		Queerphobia	1	0.35%
	Affirm Group Purpose		*8*	*2.77%*
NA			**7**	**2.42%**
	NA		*7*	*2.42%*
TOTAL			**289**	100%

The Broader Far Right Context

For all of the group's purported focus on education, it is impossible to ignore its existence within an explicitly far-right platform; that is, this education affinity space should be understood as nested within a larger, political one (Gee, 2017). This can be seen in the administrators' activity outside the group (see Table 2). For example, on her main feed, Abigail did not engage in any *Relational* posting, instead focusing on material that focused on *Platform Identity*. For example, we coded two of her posts as *Affirm Platform Purpose*: In the first, she reposted a comment from the platform CEO celebrating the perceived growth of the platform; in the second (her only original post on her main feed), she linked to a video from the CEO and expressed her pride in being associated with this platform.

Much of Abigail's activity consisted of re-posting others' content that *pushed against out-groups* including Black Lives Matter (n=5), Antifa (n=5), big tech (n=4), COVID mitigation policies (n=2), the media (n=2), China (n=1), and President Joe Biden (n=1). Abigail also shared six posts which we coded as *Push Political Whataboutism*. For example, she reposted content from VDARE (a white supremacist website) that exaggerated a Black Lives Matter protest as "an attempted siege of the White House" and offered the conspiratorial comment that "it's an event we aren't supposed to remember." These kinds of posts were intended to reframe or rewrite history with a far-right narrative and misinformation that created a more favorable interpretation of the January 6th insurrection. Abigail also reposted one meme image (Figure 1) featuring burning property and an American flag as well as quotes attributed to female U.S. politicians. The quotes leave out context (Cox, 2021) in order to imply that women, especially Black women, had encouraged the destruction of property and violence, including against the Trump cabinet. The post included the vague and conspiratorial caption, "You're not supposed to

remember this." Another meme that Abigail reposted compared mask mandates to rape (Figure 2).

Table 2

Codes generated from an analysis of the administrators' site-wide posts.

Code	Subcode	Topic	Count	Percentage of Total Codes
Platform Identity			**66**	**95.65%**
	Push Against Out-Group		*39*	*56.52%*
		Anti-Big Tech	6	8.70%
		Anti-Media	6	8.70%
		Anti-BLM	8	11.59%
		Anti-COVID-19 Policies	2	2.90%
		Anti-Kavanaugh protestors	1	1.45%
		Anti-Antifa	6	8.70%
		Anti-Biden	2	2.90%
		Anti-China	1	1.45%
		Anti-Left	2	2.90%
		Anti-GOP	1	1.45%
		Anti-Election	1	1.45%
		Anti-Government	3	4.35%
	Push In-Group Identity		*17*	*24.64%*
		Insurrection Conspiracy	8	11.59%
		Christian	2	2.90%
		Christian Nationalism	2	2.90%
		Generic	1	1.45%
		Insurrection	1	1.45%
		Pro-Trump	1	1.45%
		COVID-19 Conspiracy	1	1.45%
		Alternative News	1	1.45%
	Push Political Whataboutism		*8*	11.59%
		Capitol Insurrection	8	11.59%
	Affirm Platform Purpose		*2*	*2.90%*
Group Identity			**2**	**2.90%**
	Affirm Group Purpose		*2*	*2.90%*
Relational			**1**	**1.45%**
	Share About Self		*1*	*1.45%*

TOTAL			**69**	100%

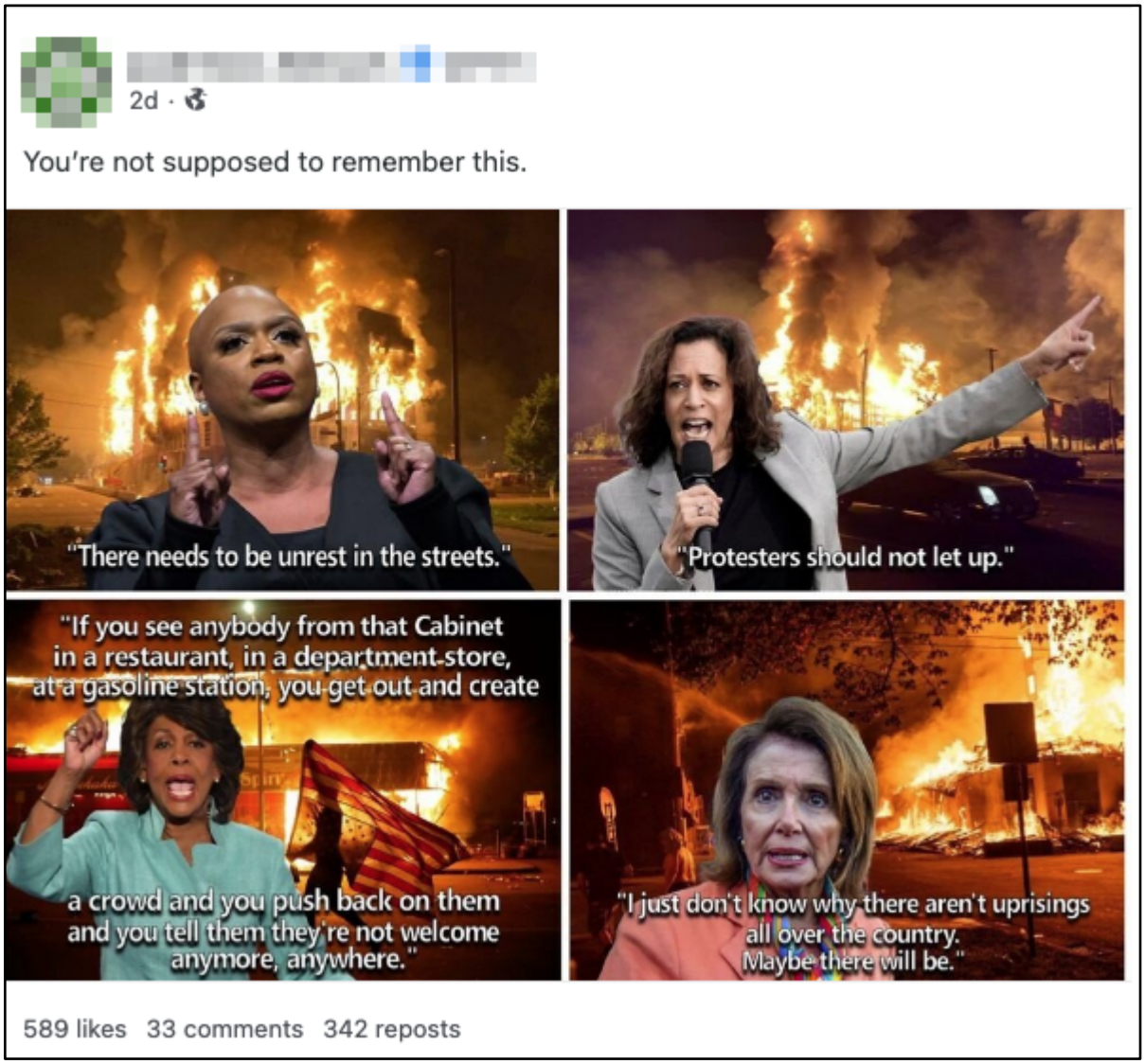

Fig. 1. An image meme criticizing protestors reposted by the primary group moderator, Abigail.

Fig. 2. Image meme criticizing mask mandates reposted by group moderator, Abigail.

Melissa showed a similar affinity for far-right politics on her feed. Two of her posts (coded *Affirm Group Purpose*) were versions of comments she posted in the teachers' group, and a third (coded *Share About Self* and apparently shared with another group on the platform) showed a picture of a place near her home. However, we coded all of her remaining posts—like Abigail's—as related to *Platform Identity*. We applied the *Push In-Group Identity* code 17 times

to posts in which Melissa and Abigail promoted Christianity, Christian Nationalism (e.g., "Jesus is still on the throne, is not up for re-election, and can never be impeached"), alternative news outlets, Donald Trump (e.g., "President Trump: Can you hear us ROAR?"), and conspiracy theories related to the January 6th insurrection. Melissa's posts on the overall platform were more extreme than Abigail's. For example, she posted a series of messages promoting a QAnon-style conspiracy theory that suggested that Donald Trump had been planning to "speak on the EBS [the U.S. Emergency Broadcast System]" to address the nation in the wake of the January 6th insurrection but was being impeded by corporate and "deep state" actors in an "act of war."

Mainstreaming of Far-Right Priorities

Given our previous findings, it is unsurprising that education and far-right talking points blended within this affinity space. For example, Abigail composed noncommittal or implicitly affirming replies to other participants' political posts and wrote 8 posts related to the COVID-19 pandemic, some of which shared misinformed skepticism related to mask-wearing and vaccines or called for "a class action lawsuit against school districts for mandating mask wearing." Like on her main feed, Melissa was more active in her partisan signaling. For example, one of her posts composed some time after the 2020 U.S. Presidential election had been called used the language "if Biden is elected," indicating a conspiratorial skepticism about the validity of the election results; she also linked to a teacher-written article defending Betsy Devos's tenure as Secretary of Education and shared a teacher's blog post expressing concern about the implications of a Biden presidency.

Naturally, these patterns carried over into other participants' activity within the group—beginning with the identity of these participants. Although Abigail and Melissa's work sought to cultivate a space for teachers to communicate with and support each other, only 18 of 78

accounts (23.08%) who posted to the space explicitly identified themselves as teachers. Three of these accounts described themselves as leaving or having left teaching (though we still considered them teachers for the purpose of analysis), with two of the three specifically decrying the "indoctrination" present in schools. Of the remaining accounts, 16 (20.51%) explicitly identified themselves as not being teachers, while 44 (56.41%) were ambiguous about their professional status. Despite representing a minority of accounts, self-identified educators accounted for over half of the activity within this group: 144 out of 258 posts (55.81%). However, this finding is influenced considerably by Abigail's prolific posting (90 posts and 34.88% of overall activity). Only three of these other teachers' posts were original posts, with the remaining 33 composed in response to other participants; furthermore, even the two most prolific of these educators contributed only six posts apiece.

The relative unimportance of teachers within this group is predictable given that group identity was largely rooted in far-right politics. That is, the "affinity" defining this space was ultimately not so much teaching as it was a particular, political vision of education. This is not to say that education was not a topic of conversation; indeed, of the *in-group* related topics, *education* (n=27) was the most common. Between them, teacher participants shared a number of educational tools and resources; however, our observations suggest that they did not rise above superficial or highly partisan conversations. For example, Abigail once introduced a website with the comment "Would you believe that kids are now overwhelmingly in favor of going back to just doing worksheets instead of being on a screen all day?!?!" Abigail's superficial evaluation of the value of worksheets seems to serve less as a pedagogical judgment than as a partisan critique of COVID-19 policies related to education. Along these lines, it is noteworthy that *homeschooling* (n=15) was the second most common *in-group* topic and *conservative education*

(n=10) the third-most. Furthermore, the two most common topics associated with the *push against out-group* code were *anti-public schools* (n=17) and *anti-left* (n=17).

Thus, even any discussion of education was in the context of far-right priorities. Consider the following excerpt from one post as an illustration of these connections:

> I sent my son to [school name removed], an all boys school, when it became obvious he was smarter than his 4th grade teacher. He is now a Constitutional expert.….as he was recently referred to in an article written about him. If I had left him in the gov't run schools he probably would have become a druggie or a breeder for loose money hungry females.

Another poster expressed that she pulled her middle school son out of public school because "I'm not interested in raising a socialist." Group members commended her decision, encouraged homeschooling, promoted conservative curriculum resources, and downplayed the importance of teacher professionalization. Abigail, for example, stated that "The state works so hard to try to shame and virtue signal parents for not being certified in education." Disdain for the broader teaching profession was common. Another group member stated, "I see public schools as holding facilities not centers of education any more," and another indicated that "A result of going to the average university in the US is actually losing knowledge rather than gaining it."

Far-Right Agenda Setting

As Table 1 illustrates, there are a wide number of in-group identities and issues that implicitly or explicitly sought to set agendas within this affinity space (or U.S. education more broadly). This pattern is perhaps best illustrated by @galaxydog. @galaxydog suggested that they were familiar with one of the largest school districts in the United States but identified as an IT systems administrator (i.e., not a teacher). However, this did not prevent @galaxydog from

active participation in this teachers' group. Indeed, with 21 posts (8.14% of total activity), they posted more to the group than any user except Abigail.

In one of their first posts, @galaxydog established a running theme for their activity in this space when they expressed concern that "the left has take[n] over the education system" and argued that there was a need to "take it back." This user made a series of requests that teachers work with them to collaborate on these efforts, which they later reframed as "putting together some kind of anti-communist curriculum," using materials from U.S. libertarian and right-wing sources such as the Mises Institute, PragerU, and Hillsdale College. Although both group administrators—as well as one other teacher and a seemingly non-teacher parent—expressed interest in these efforts, none of them publicly responded to @galaxydog's persistent invitations to meet and start working. In one of @galaxydog's last posts during the timeframe of our study, they neatly summed up their concerns in a meme image about "Children's Education" that they posted (Figure 3). The left side of the meme image read "Then" and showed a black and white picture of a young boy handling a rifle in a classroom; the right side read "Now" and showed a picture of a drag storytime (see Barriage et al., 2021; Keenan & Hot Mess, 2020).

Fig. 3. Image meme comparing boy holding a gun with drag storytime reposted by participant @galaxydog.

Other non-teacher participants likewise invited far-right discourses into this space, with varying levels of connection to education. One account, @AntiIslamclass, explicitly described their expertise as Islamophobia and shared a website dedicated to advancing Islamophobia (which Abigail said she was "looking forward to going back and reading through more of").

When @galaxydog created a post asking, “Girls do you want to start working on a Anti-Communist curriculum?,” @AntiIslamclass replied to see if their agenda would be included: “will an anticommunist curriculum ban islam?” Another account criticized Abigail for not following a QAnon influencer on the platform, arguing that “If teachers are afraid to research and find truth. Our kids are screwed.”

Two other accounts engaged in a racist argument in response to a video Abigail posted (which clearly showed her as a Black woman). This began with one account’s comment: “Feral libs: books are racist! You ain't need no books to burn and loot! Note that some feral [anti-Black slur] and [another slur] had to be taught how to pull down a statue." A second account responded to a reference by the first user to the “All Lives Matter” slogan (which dismisses the Black Lives Matter movement as overly narrow) by using anti-Semitic British Israelism to argue that White Anglo-Saxons represented a “pure… bloodline” that had replaced Jews as God’s chosen people—and were thus the only “lives” that “mattered.” There were no evident efforts (including by administrators) to moderate either the posts that sought to advance white supremacy or those that engaged in anti-Black racism.

Discussion

Although this teacher’s social media group is markedly different from those that have previously been lifted up as exemplary *affinity spaces*, it is difficult to deny that it qualifies as the same phenomenon. If, as Gee (2017) has argued, affinity spaces are “devoted to all sorts of different affinities” around which participants “act, teach, learn, and produce” (p. 28), there is no reason that this education-focused group within a far-right social media platform could not qualify as one of these diverse affinity spaces. Indeed, our data suggest that the group moderators intentionally patterned this group after established examples of teachers’ gathering in social

media groups to support each other's practice; that Abigail and Melissa had a narrow, partisan view of what that practice should look like does not disqualify it as a teacher-focused affinity space as the literature has heretofore understood the phenomenon. Indeed, the objectionable nature of the activity within this affinity space serves as an invitation for researchers to more critically consider this framework and how it is applied in our scholarship. In the following sections, we highlight some key questions that merit further attention in affinity space research focused on teachers.

What is Learned?

As previously noted, Gee himself has acknowledged that affinity-based learning is not necessarily good or valuable (Gee, 2003) and that the identities formed in an affinity space can be defined in terms of insiders, outsiders, and a hostility between them (Gee & Hayes, 2012). The affinity space that we have documented here clearly demonstrates these possibilities. In an analysis of 8 months of activity on the #Edchat Twitter hashtag, Staudt Willet (2019) concluded that posts "were almost all on-topic, related to education and the practice of teaching—with only 7% falling in the miscellaneous category" (p. 284); in contrast, the activity in this teachers' group regularly departed from educational topics and even more frequently filtered education through a right-wing lens that was tolerant—or even promoting—of racism and conspiratorial thinking. Furthermore, our codes emphasize that this space explicitly defined itself in opposition to perceived out-groups and that learning and production activities within the space were valued for their utility in competing against those out-groups.

These findings invite researchers to more critically consider what teachers are learning in affinity spaces rather than simply using the framework to rhetorically validate a phenomenon without further evaluation. If sociocultural approaches understand learning as "the strengthening

of [community] practices and participatory abilities" (Greeno et al., 1996), this group's building up a community identity and supporting each other in pursuing community goals must be considered as "learning." Yet, it is also clear that teaching racism or learning misinformation cannot be seen as valid simply for qualifying as teaching or learning. In the same way that other research has evaluated the educational resources that teachers are recommending to each other (e.g., Rodríguez et al., 2020), researchers must do more to evaluate exactly what is being learned and taught within affinity spaces.

Who Should Belong?

One of the defining features of the affinity space characteristic is that it does not attempt to define membership within a space (Gee, 2004). This feature has typically made the affinity space framework useful for understanding teacher activity on social media; for example, Author's (2016) review of 500 accounts associated with a collection of teacher-focused Twitter hashtags found that only 54% of account holders were clearly employed in schools (though another 33% articulated ties to education). Clearly, it is impractical (and perhaps even undesirable) for teacher spaces on social media to restrict participation to those who are demonstrably professional teachers. The affinity space framework allows for such a possibility without dismissing that activity as unimportant; indeed, Staudt Willet and Carpenter's (2020) discussion of anonymity in the context of Reddit-based affinity spaces highlights potential benefits of agnostic attitudes toward membership.

Yet, our data illustrate ways in which the "fuzzy boundaries" (Gee & Hayes, 2012, p. 133) of affinity spaces can be a problem in the context of teacher professional learning. Indeed, despite Melissa and Abigail's intentions of gathering a group of teachers, this particular space eventually organized itself around those with an affinity for right-wing views of education.

Motivated non-professionals like @spacebear and explicit bigots like @AntiIslamclass were permitted to direct the conversation and shape the identity of the group. Although the group administrators and members apparently did not perceive these users as bad actors, their presence highlights the way that an open membership can detract from the quality of teacher professional learning on social media. Indeed, the affinity space framework's downplaying of the importance of professional qualifications (e.g., Gee, 2017; Gee & Hayes, 2012) raises particular questions in the context of public school teachers. As previously noted, the affinity space framework has been used to account for the presence of other actors in teacher-focused social media spaces; however, our data (in which even professional teachers downplay their own status) demonstrate the need to investigate how this might relate to broader trends of deprofessionalization of teachers.

What Broader Influences are At Play?

The question that deserves perhaps the most attention from affinity space researchers is how broader platform and media influences necessarily shape the characteristics of an affinity space. As we have previously noted, Gee (2017) acknowledges that affinity spaces may overlap with—or be entirely nested within—larger spaces with slightly different affinities. This may be the most striking characteristic of the teacher affinity space that we have described in this paper. Although the initially assumed affinity for this space is for education (more particularly teaching), this relatively small space is clearly subordinated to a broader far-right affinity space that is co-existent with the social media platform where the teacher's group is based. While it is not impossible for a right-wing teachers' group to form on a more mainstream social media platform, the relationship between this explicitly far-right platform on this particular teachers' group is clear and compelling.

Yet, the affinity space framework in and of itself is largely agnostic to these questions. Indeed, Gee's work implicitly assumes that online spaces are designed and shaped entirely from the bottom up by their users rather than asking how the technologies and tools those groups use influence their activity. Thus, although previous research has drawn attention to how the nature of a platform may influence teacher experience (e.g., Authors et al., 2023; Rodríguez et al., 2020; Shelton et al., 2023), these studies have drawn (additionally or even exclusively) on frameworks other than the affinity space. As we suggest here—and as Barden (2016) has previously demonstrated—an affinity space framework is not incompatible with more critical theoretical frameworks; however, if researchers do not make a deliberate effort to blend these sets of considerations, affinity space research will miss important considerations. In particular, we recommend that researchers draw from studies and frameworks that ask questions about the influence of social media platforms (e.g., van Dijck, 2013; van Dijck & Poell, 2018) as well as media ecosystems more generally (e.g., McLuhan, 1964; Miroshnichenko, 2020; Strate, 2008).

Conclusion

This study challenges assumptions that the *affinity space* framework is inherently validating of teachers' social media use by documenting teacher activity on a far-right social media platform. The prevalence of far-right sentiments in this affinity space—including explicit racism and conspiratorial thinking—invites researchers to more critically evaluate *what* is being learned in teacher affinity spaces rather than simply validate social media activity *as learning*. Likewise, the influence of partisan, non-professional actors in this group raises questions about the affinity space framework's implicit dismissal of professional qualifications, and the clear influence of the far-right platform where this space is located emphasizes the need to combine more critical frameworks with the inherent optimism of affinity spaces. While social media

affinity spaces have genuinely provided teachers with benefits in terms of professional learning, this particular affinity space highlights the importance of more fully considering their dark sides.

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