

**Literacy Instruction Needs for Classrooms Impacted by the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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**Abstract**

In this study, researchers examined Louisiana public school teacher's perspectives to learn about their perceptions and experiences with remote instruction, including literacy education, during the COVID-19 pandemic in Spring 2020. Through an inquiry-based approach, researchers considered the role of technology and literacy education prior to and during the global crisis to gain a stronger understanding of ways in which educator's instruction has been altered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Study findings confirmed that most participants' instruction had been impacted, but approaches to distance learning varied considerably. In this paper, we share key findings from this research along with recommendations that would be beneficial in a situation in which in-person instruction is not the best option.

*Keywords:* COVID-19 pandemic, remote learning, technology, literacy education, teacher perspectives, access

**Introduction**

March 2020 brought along an unprecedented time in recent world history. With the influx of cases caused by the COVID-19 global pandemic, everyday ways of life were suddenly altered. Travel, jobs, and even grocery shopping began to "look different," and the education system was certainly no exception to this. In many instances, schools, including elementary all the way through post-secondary education, shifted from in-person to remote instruction (Gemin et al., 2018) and in some places, this shift occurred within a matter of days (Kennedy, 2020). While this change occurred across the country and the world, experiences caused by this sudden, new approach to education varied greatly. For instance, expectations for online learning have been inconsistent across the country, and even within the same state or school district (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2020). To further highlight educational inconsistencies, accessibility has become a major concern, including availability of educational resources, as well as internet and device access

(Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020). It is important to understand details of these responses and the impacts on education during an emergency situation or other scenario in which face-to-face instruction is not the best option or is not possible.

### **Purpose**

As university professors navigating our own courses shifting from in-person to online instruction, we became increasingly aware of these inconsistencies within and across nearby public-school districts. Anecdotally, we learned some schools had established expectations for teachers delivering online instruction and some were even able to issue devices to all students; however, this was not the case everywhere. Several teachers voiced concerns regarding inequities for students without devices or reliable internet and worried that struggling learners may fall further behind as days outside of the classroom continued to rise. As such, this study sought to examine teacher perspectives within Louisiana to learn about teachers' perceptions and experiences with online or remote instruction as it pertained to literacy education during the COVID-19 pandemic in Spring 2020. Through an inquiry-based approach, this study focused on the role of technology in daily, face-to-face classroom instruction and its perceived influence on the transition to online educational opportunities for teachers, students, and parents. This allowed us to determine if there were issues regarding access to quality instruction during the pandemic, and to then identify what these disparities might be. By gathering teacher perceptions across one state, it was our goal to have a stronger understanding of the variation in available technology and related resources, experiences with online or remote instruction, and ways in which educator's instruction had been altered given the COVID-19 pandemic.

To achieve this goal, research questions were posed that focused on educator perceptions of the pandemic's impact on literacy education and essential next steps for supporting educators in delivering literacy instruction during the pandemic. However, after conducting this research study, it became evident that we first needed to examine COVID-19 impacts on education more broadly. As such, within this paper, we share research findings that detail perceptions of Louisiana public school educators in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Spring 2020. With more technology available in today's classrooms, it is important to understand if and how it is being used to enhance learning, including literacy learning, and the role of technology both in and outside of the classroom. We then provide recommendations for better supporting teachers so they can provide continuous high-quality instruction to their students, whether in an in-person

or remote learning environment. Finally, we share next steps for learning about literacy instruction specifically and ways in which teachers can progress forward when teaching during an unprecedented time.

### **Review of Literature**

The COVID-19 pandemic spread across the globe in a matter of months. This global pandemic forced brick and mortar school systems to close in-person classroom gatherings and transition to online learning methods of instruction that were determined to be a safer option. According to Van Lancker and Parolin (2020), “The UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization estimates that 138 countries have closed schools nationwide, and several other countries have implemented regional or local closures. These school closures are affecting the education of 80% of children worldwide” (p. 243). A study in England recognized the impact that school shutdowns would have on all children, specifically noting that challenges “range from technology and internet availability, to the level of access children have to additional support, and the resources available for schools to conduct remote learning” and must be recognized as the transition to remote learning took place (Cullinane & Montacute, 2020, p. 2). Masonbrink and Hurley (2020) corroborated this by emphasizing the need to “prioritize research to plan for safe and equitable school re-opening and mobilize resources for capacity building to support the continued need for universal remote public education system[s]” (p. 3).

Similar to occurrences at the global level, the United States also faced school closures and the abrupt transition to online learning settings. With the goal to avoid disruption of learning, teachers and administrators quickly began to rely on parents and caregivers as instruction shifted from taking place in school to the home. According to an Education Week article, in the United States “At their peak, the closures affected at least 55.1 million students in 124,000 U.S. public and private schools” (Coronavirus and School Closures, 2020) needing access to technology, reliable internet, and a safe place to engage with lessons being delivered in online settings. A survey fielded in April and May 2020 reported that 25-50% of teachers indicated a lack of clear expectations as a challenge in supporting students during remote instruction (Hamilton et al., 2020). In particular, it was noted that “although responses did not generally differ by grade level, we observed clear patterns in differences by school urbanicity, poverty level, and student racial/ethnic composition” (Hamilton et al., 2020, “Principals described numerous challenges”

section). It is evident that this disruption particularly impacted low socioeconomic children from impoverished homes.

At the state level there were also struggles, despite educational waivers such as those in Louisiana related to assessment and student attendance (Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE], 2020). In April 2020, the Acting State Superintendent of Education in Louisiana wrote a letter to the governor expressing the need for continued learning to ensure “academic progress and social support” even while school systems were closed for in-person instruction. Once schools were officially closed for the remainder of the academic year, numerous local publications addressed concerns regarding the amount of in-person instructional time lost and related remote learning challenges (e.g., Sentell, 2020). Across Louisiana, each jurisdiction approached this unprecedented task of moving forward despite hurdles with loss of economic opportunities, increased illness and deaths, and limited access to educational resources.

This research paper speaks to challenges in shifting from in-person to remote instruction without sacrificing the quality of instruction. Overall, a lack of access, appropriate academic supports and resources remain issues that must be addressed to avoid learning gaps and eliminate learning loss. By better equipping teachers and students with necessary supports, educators can continue to focus on ways to improve literacy and other academic content milestones necessary for academic success and beyond.

### **Methodology**

For this research, an inquiry-based research design was employed. In his book, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, John Dewey described five research foci to guide inquiry-based tasks (1938). These areas of focus are: 1) suggestions, 2) problems to be solved, 3) developing a hypothesis, 4) reasoning, and 5) assessing (p. 107-112). By using this framework to guide our study, we were able to address a problem by collecting data and testing our hypothesis. Dewey (1938) also noted a possible sixth phase that encouraged giving suggestions, which we address in the form of final recommendations.

### **Participants**

Potential participants to be eligible for this study, had to be PreK-12<sup>th</sup> grade public school teachers in Louisiana (including public charter schools) for the 2019-2020 academic year. According to the 2017-2018 Educator Workforce Report there were 49,196 teachers in Louisiana (LDOE, 2018). To recruit participants, public records were examined to determine contact

information for school administrators in every PreK-12<sup>th</sup> grade public school in the state of Louisiana. Administrators were contacted twice via email and asked to forward the introductory email and survey to teachers in their school.

In total, 311 individuals responded to the survey. Of this number, 282 were eligible for study participation based on the aforementioned criteria. Study participants represented all eight Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) districts within the state with most participants (79) indicating the school in which they teach is located in Southwest Louisiana (BESE District 7). Table 1 includes participant subject area(s) and grade level(s) taught.

**Table 1**

*Participant teaching background*

<b>Subject(s) taught in 2019-2020 school year</b>		<b>Grade level(s) taught in 2019-2020 school year</b>	
<i>*Note that participants could select multiple options if applicable so percentages not given</i>			
English Language Arts	79	PreK-1 <sup>st</sup> grade	48 (19.05%)
Math	59	2 <sup>nd</sup> -5 <sup>th</sup> grade	71 (29.17%)
Science	55	6 <sup>th</sup> - 8 <sup>th</sup> grade	52 (20.63%)
Social Studies	63	9 <sup>th</sup> - 12 <sup>th</sup> grade	54 (21.43%)
Art	9	Other	27 (10.71%)
Music	4		
Special Education	33		
General Education, all subjects	47		
Other	47		
<i>Total</i>	<i>253</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>252</i>

### **Data Sources and Data Collection**

The primary data collection instrument used was a researcher-created survey. The instrument itself includes 30 items that allow for a mix of open and closed responses. Items were designed to address the following categories: participant's original and current teaching assignment (prior to and since COVID-19), the role of technology and literacy within their classroom, and participant perceptions regarding impacts on teaching in light of the pandemic. Closed-ended items included how frequently participants use technology during classroom instruction, how often participants embed literacy instruction within their classroom, and the degree to which they perceive their instruction has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Some open-ended items included: "If applicable, describe ways you normally use technology in your in-person classroom instruction," "Describe the ways in which you emphasize literacy (i.e., reading, writing, speaking, listening within your content area) within your in-person instruction," and "Can you elaborate on ways in which your teaching and assessing expectations have changed or stayed the same [since the COVID-19 pandemic]?"

Surveys were sent via email to school-level administrators at each PreK-12<sup>th</sup> grade public school within the state of Louisiana. As stated, administrators were asked to forward the email containing study information, which described an overview of the study and included a link to the survey itself. If interested, eligible participants could select the link which took them to a consent form and then the survey. The survey instrument was housed on SurveyMonkey. Initial emails were sent out at the end of April 2020 and data collection took place through the remainder of the academic year.

### **Data Analysis**

To begin data analysis, an initial review of participant responses was analyzed and recorded, noting teacher participation from each of the eight BESE regions across Louisiana. Next, survey responses were downloaded into Microsoft Excel and initially examined to determine overarching trends or patterns. The open-ended (qualitative) items were aligned with corresponding multiple-choice (quantitative) items and overall responses were then examined according to each BESE District. The data was again sorted to identify themes and analyze the data from a holistic, state-wide perspective.

## Findings

### Instruction Impacted by COVID-19

The first finding confirmed our belief that the majority of participants' teaching assignments were altered due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Of those who responded, more than 86% indicated that in-person instruction was cancelled or postponed. Less than 0.5% indicated that their in-person instruction was occurring as planned and not impacted by the pandemic and 4.3% reported that they continued their online instruction as planned and their instruction was not impacted by the pandemic. The remaining 8.66% of respondents indicated "other" when asked how their teaching assignment for the 2019-2020 school year had been altered due to COVID-19. While it was clear that the majority of teachers were no longer engaging in in-person instruction, there was variation in response to cancelled or postponed in-person instruction. For instance, 30.32% of respondents indicated that in-person instruction was cancelled or postponed and that they were currently meeting online with some synchronous instruction. 33.21% indicated that while in-person instruction was cancelled/postponed, they were currently delivering instruction online with no synchronous instruction. The remaining participants who indicated cancelled/postponed instruction (23.10%) responded that there was currently no online instruction taking place. When asked if their classroom instruction was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, an overwhelming 99.05% of participants said "yes." Furthermore, 88.10% of participants indicated that their routines were affected "a great deal" and 9.05% indicated their routines were affected "a lot" by the pandemic.

### Role of Technology

To consider the role of technology during COVID-19, we first asked participants to indicate the frequency in which they used technology within their classroom prior to the pandemic. Responses are included in Table 2 below. Examples of technology used included Google Classroom; programs such as Zearn Math, ReadWorks, Pear Deck, and AutoCAD; devices including Smart or Promethean Boards and Chromebooks for students; and other teacher-specific technology use.

**Table 2**

*Frequency of Technology Use during Class (pre-COVID-19)*

Every day	170 (76.23%)
A few times a week	35 (15.70%)

Once a week	10 (4.48%)
A few times a month	3 (1.35%)
Once or less than once a month	5 (2.24%)
<i>Total</i>	<i>223 (100%)</i>

Next, we sought to learn about teacher perceptions regarding their students' ability to access technology outside of the school setting. When asked approximately what percentage of their students' teachers believed had access to a device to access remote instruction, the average number was 58% of students. In regard to internet access, the average number was slightly lower at 55% of students. Teachers were also asked open-ended questions about their perceptions of technology access and its impact on instruction and learning. There was considerable variation in answers, with some participants indicating they believed technology access was a major influence and others stating that other factors were more impactful when it came to students' ability to access remote instruction. Table 3 below includes examples of teacher responses.

**Table 3**

*Technology Access and Perceived Impacts on Instruction and Learning*

*Survey Question: To what extent, if any, do you believe access to a technology device and reliable internet is influencing your students' ability to access remote instruction?*

- "HUGE! I believe that if all students had access to both they would be able to be accountable and we could have an organized setting."
- "It is a major influence, but... third graders working alone on a device often don't have the focus and internal drive to remain on-task and our parents have made it clear that they aren't prepared to be home educators."
- "Access is a big problem. If you have one computer and 4 to 5 children."
- "Not much....biggest impact has been that all work is optional and earns no grades."
- "We completed a survey and found which students have internet and technology devices. Since I know that at least 40% have the ability to access remote instruction but less than 8% are participating, other factors must be involved..."

*Survey Question: How might issues of access to technology devices and internet be addressed so there is more equitable access to online learning for your students?*



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- “1 to 1 student technology and internet access provided to all students.”
  - “More formal curriculum planning incorporating use of appropriate devices for all learners within a grade level.”
  - “If every student had access to technology (iPad or laptop), then we’d have been able to mandate the assignments and recorded the grades. Then I feel the instruction level would have been very different instead of non-existent. My students have started their summer early.”
  - “Hopefully, a district wide plan will be made so that students can access free wi-fi if we continue distance-based learning in the future.”
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### **Role of Literacy**

As noted at the beginning of this article, the intention of this study was to learn about impacts on literacy education specifically. While it became evident that we first needed to consider educational impacts more broadly, literacy-specific survey data was collected. Therefore, in this section, we share teacher perceptions regarding the role of literacy education before and after the shift to remote instruction during Spring 2020 caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Regarding literacy specifically, study participants were asked how often they embedded literacy instruction within their classroom prior to the pandemic (see Table 4 for participant responses). Examples of in-class literacy practices that participants shared in an open-response item included Accelerated Reader, daily read-alouds, classroom turn and talks and presentations for speaking and listening, a combination of formal and informal writing assignments, and utilizing district-provided texts.

**Table 4**

*Frequency of in-class Literacy Instruction (pre-COVID-19)*

Always	176 (78.92%)
Usually	35 (15.70%)
Sometimes	10 (4.48%)
Rarely or never	2 (0.90%)
<i>Total</i>	<i>223 (100%)</i>

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Participants were also asked about school or district provided support for teachers' literacy instruction during the pandemic and how they might provide support for students' literacy learning. In regard to district and school supports for teachers, several common responses included professional development and online learning resources for teachers, delivering instruction in easily accessible formats for students, adjusting course and lesson times, and having clear expectations. When asked about ways in which the participants themselves could support students' literacy learning during the pandemic, several respondents indicated that they had done what they could or they needed additional support before they could do anything else. Some responses included, "I am unsure given the nature of our current reading curriculum," "I have sent reading material home in their take home packets. That is all I can do," and "I need more support from the district as a teacher to answer this." Others suggested reaching out to students on an individual basis, having required and consistent video conferencing to provide synchronous virtual instruction, and recording instruction for students to view asynchronously.

### **Perceptions on Teacher and Student Expectations**

A final area of researcher interest addressed through survey items was that of teacher and student expectations for the Spring 2020 semester during COVID-19 (survey items are included in Table 5 below). However, only two participants responded to these two items with the remaining 280 eligible participants skipping this item. Since data from these survey items was limited, we were unable to arrive at a clear understanding of teacher or student expectations during COVID-19 for the Spring 2020 semester.

### **Table 5**

#### *Survey Items: Teacher and Student Expectations*

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Which statement is most accurate regarding the administration's academic expectations for teachers at your school during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- It is mandatory that teachers assign lessons and assessments.
  - It is expected that teachers assign lessons and assessments.
  - It is strongly encouraged that teachers assign lessons and assessments.
  - It is optional that teachers assign lessons and assessments.
  - Teacher have been told NOT to assign lessons and assessments.
  - Other (please specify).
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Which statement is most accurate regarding the administration's academic expectations for students at your school during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- My students have mandatory lessons and assessments to complete.
  - My students have lessons and assessments that they are expected to complete.
  - My students have lessons and assessments that they are strongly encouraged to complete.
  - My students have lessons and assessments that are provided to them to complete, but are optional.
  - My students have no lessons and assessments that have been provided to them to complete.
  - Other (please specify).
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### Discussion

Through this work, our belief was confirmed that there was variation in the ways in which Louisiana public schools approached the shift to distance learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. While the majority of respondents indicated that their instruction had been impacted, the ways in which it was altered and how teachers were continuing to provide instruction to their students varied considerably. This included some teachers engaging in synchronous virtual learning with their students, while others were not engaging in any online instruction. This is important to consider given the amount of in-school time that students missed during the Spring 2020 semester (approximately nine weeks) as a result of the global crisis. Considerable research has been conducted on the summer slide and student learning loss, and the closing of most Louisiana schools in March 2020 only increased the amount of time students were not participating in consistent, in-person instruction. As such, it is important for educators, including teachers and administrators, as well as educational policymakers to consider the potential for increased learning loss that occurred during the extended school closures. Though the intention of this study was initially aimed at literacy in particular, it became clear through survey data that technology was participants' primary focus, suggesting that this challenge needed to be addressed first before we could examine literacy impacts specifically.

While the majority of study participants indicated consistent technology use within the classroom, it does appear that the ways in which some technology was used might not easily

transfer to distance learning for students. For example, technology tools such as Smart or Promethean Boards will likely not be used as part of online distance learning, or at least will not be used in the same ways as during in-person instruction. Even though many online educational resources can still be utilized (e.g., Zearn Math, ReadWorks), participant responses suggested a considerable portion of their students do not have access to a device (42%) or reliable internet (45%) to engage in such online learning experiences. This data is based on teacher beliefs regarding student access to devices and reliable internet. Therefore, while these numbers do not reflect exact representations of student access, it still highlights teacher beliefs that a considerable portion of students lack necessary resources to engage effectively in online or remote learning experiences. In addition to access being a noted concern, accountability was also a focus for participants when it came to students engaging in online learning as evidenced in data included in Table 3. Because of inconsistent access to resources, participant responses suggest that much of the online learning was made optional for students so that those without access would not be penalized. As a result, however, several participants indicated that those students with technology access were not engaging in the online learning because it was not mandated.

Finally, the lack of response to survey items regarding administrative expectations of students and teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic is important to note. While findings cannot be drawn from this given the number of participants who skipped the two survey items, a lack of response could potentially suggest unclear or inconsistent expectations and warrants further exploration. As literacy educators, we are particularly interested in teachers' perceptions regarding COVID-19's impact on literacy education and ways to support educators when delivering literacy instruction. However, findings from this study suggest that addressing technology access and educational accountability when in-person instruction is not feasible should be considered first. If students are not engaging with online learning when in-person instruction is not possible, whether due to lacking necessary resources or not being required to do so, the classroom connection is broken and high-quality online literacy instruction becomes a missed opportunity.

### **Recommendations**

Through survey data, Louisiana public school educators shared their perceptions of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on their instruction during Spring 2020. Based on said data, we have three recommendations that would benefit a scenario in which face-to-face instruction is

suspended or limited. First, there is a need for technology that can be used during in-person *and* remote instruction. An example of this would be having a 1-to-1 ratio for students and devices so students can be readily supplied with a device to borrow in the event that in-person instruction would need to quickly shift to remote instruction. A second recommendation is to utilize curriculum that is flexible and technology-friendly so teachers can easily adjust to an online format if needed. Included within this recommendation is the need for teacher autonomy so that these changes can be made to adapt instruction to a virtual learning space. Finally, there is a need for clarity in communicating expectations for online learning that are aligned to individuals' specific context (e.g., grade-level, content area, curriculum resources available).

### **Implications**

In order for the aforementioned recommendations to be met, well-developed protocols need to be put in place that address the most prevalent concerns highlighted within this study. First, technology access needs to be made available for all students, along with reliable internet options. If all students have the same device (e.g., a Chromebook), teachers will be able to design and implement remote instruction that is accessible for all students. Additionally, plans for internet hot spots will ensure that students can use the device they have been given to its fullest capabilities. Professional development (PD) sessions for teachers are needed to demonstrate ways in which they can implement online learning resources to provide instruction in this new format. These sessions should also focus on supporting teachers in applying best practices when delivering content normally taught in-person to a virtual setting. Creating a district-wide plan to address issues of access, accountability, expectations, and support for teachers and their students during remote instruction is instrumental in ensuring high-quality learning experiences while also maintaining the health and safety of our Louisiana schools and those who work and learn in them each day. Once these recommendations are enacted, teachers can then turn their attention to literacy-specific supports for students.

### **Future Research**

Currently, the 2020-2021 academic year is underway. Similar to Spring 2020, different school districts across the state are implementing varied approaches to providing instruction in ways that allow for social distancing and adhere to other guidelines created based on the continued presence of COVID-19. The work from this study provides a snapshot of teacher perspectives during Spring 2020. Future research could add to this picture by examining current

approaches to instruction in the 2020-2021 school year across the state. Comparing approaches to instruction generally, and literacy instruction specifically, from the Spring 2020 semester to today would provide a much-needed look at educational changes that have been implemented to provide Louisiana students with a quality education, while continuing to ensure student and educator safety during the global pandemic. Furthermore, we would like to examine experiences of and supports for teachers of special populations (e.g., at-risk students), as well as other states' responses to education during COVID-19. As technology-related challenges are increasingly resolved, we will turn our attention to a literacy-specific research focus. By continuing this research, we plan to provide practical recommendations designed to support teachers and the students with whom they work.

### **Limitations**

It is necessary to acknowledge limitations to this study. In particular, while an exact response rate for eligible participants is not clear, it is evident that the participant response was limited. One potential reason for the low number of responses was that recruitment emails were sent to school-level administrators to forward to teachers at their school, rather than sending the study email to teachers directly. Another reason for this low response rate could have been the overwhelming amount of teacher responsibilities during this extreme shift in education, limiting teachers' availability to participate in the study.

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**Dr. H. Michelle Kreamer** is an Assistant Professor at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Her research interests include pre-service teacher education, writing instruction, and the role of multiple adults in classrooms to support students. Through her work, she hopes to better support teachers and the students with whom they work.