

# SCIENCE OF LEARNING: READING

**RESEARCH PROFESSIONAL PAPER**

SURVEY RESULTS ON  
REMOTE EARLY LITERACY  
INSTRUCTION  
DURING THE PANDEMIC



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# INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, digital learning has become more prevalent within the K-12 setting, and literacy experts have been researching the impact of technology on students’ literacy achievement. Even before the inclusion of technology within the classroom, researchers had outlined the intricacies of the science and art of teaching and learning how to read based on contributions from neuroscience, cognitive frameworks, and linguistic theory. The ubiquitous nature of technology, widespread usage of artificial intelligence, and the inclusion of gaming theory in learning software have propelled students to become digital learners acquiring literacy skills on digital platforms. Educators are increasingly incorporating online programs into their daily lessons to varying degrees into what is now becoming a digital-first era.

The recent pandemic, however, has accelerated this digital transition for all classrooms throughout the nation and has swiftly changed what used to be a nice-to-have for some to a necessity for all. What was already a monumental task of effectively teaching reading in an in-person setting is now compounded by the additional hurdles posed by remote learning. Numerous surveys capture the challenges of this new digital world, including families’ unequal access to technology, instability of internet connections to support high-bandwidth

online classes, difficulty of managing class behaviors remotely, and caregiver support needed for young learners to log in, stay engaged, and complete instructional tasks independently (Herold, 2020; Kraft & Simon, 2020).

The science of reading principles apply to all learning environments, whether in-person, remote, or a mixture of the two. Early literacy educators still need to adhere to research-based practices of delivering systematic, explicit, cumulative, diagnostic, and culturally responsive literacy instruction with opportunities of guided and independent practice with immediate feedback that is essential to be delivered through any medium (Foorman et al., 2016; NICHD, 2000). However, research on how best to translate these principles onto the remote environment is admittedly thin (Schwartz, 2020).

In this paper, we describe early literacy educators’ experience during the transition of their literacy instruction to the remote learning environment due to the closure of the school buildings from the pandemic. Early literacy educators expressed their challenges of teaching literacy remotely, areas that require additional support and improvement, and bright spots that emerged from the challenges.

# METHODOLOGY

In early Spring 2020, 137 kindergarten through third grade teachers across the country responded to a survey designed to learn about their early literacy instructional practices. Follow-up phone interviews were conducted with nine of those teachers. Appendix A describes the methodology in detail, and the survey and interview questions are included in Appendix B and C, respectively.

	Survey					Interviews				
Grade	K	1	2	3	Total	K	1	2	3	Total
# of teachers	36	29	41	31	137	2	3	2	2	9

# CONTEXT

Questions about the remote learning context revealed much about how teachers in kindergarten to Grade 3 spent their time as they and their students adjusted to new ways of teaching and learning.

## FREQUENCY OF REMOTE INSTRUCTION

When asked if they were able to deliver reading and writing instruction during school closures, most teachers surveyed responded that they were able to deliver reading and writing instruction during school building closures. Overall, 77% of teachers responded that they were able to deliver reading and

writing instruction to their students during school closures, with kindergarten teachers being the most likely to provide remote instruction (See Figure 1). Of those teachers who did deliver remote instruction, the frequency varied from once a week to daily, with daily remote instruction occurring most often (See Table 1).

Some of the teachers interviewed shared that although they were able to provide remote instruction to their students during school building closures, their districts did not allow them to provide live, synchronous instruction. In these instances, the only option for instruction delivery by the teacher was for teachers to produce pre-recorded videos.

Figure 1: Were teachers able to deliver reading and writing instruction during school closures?

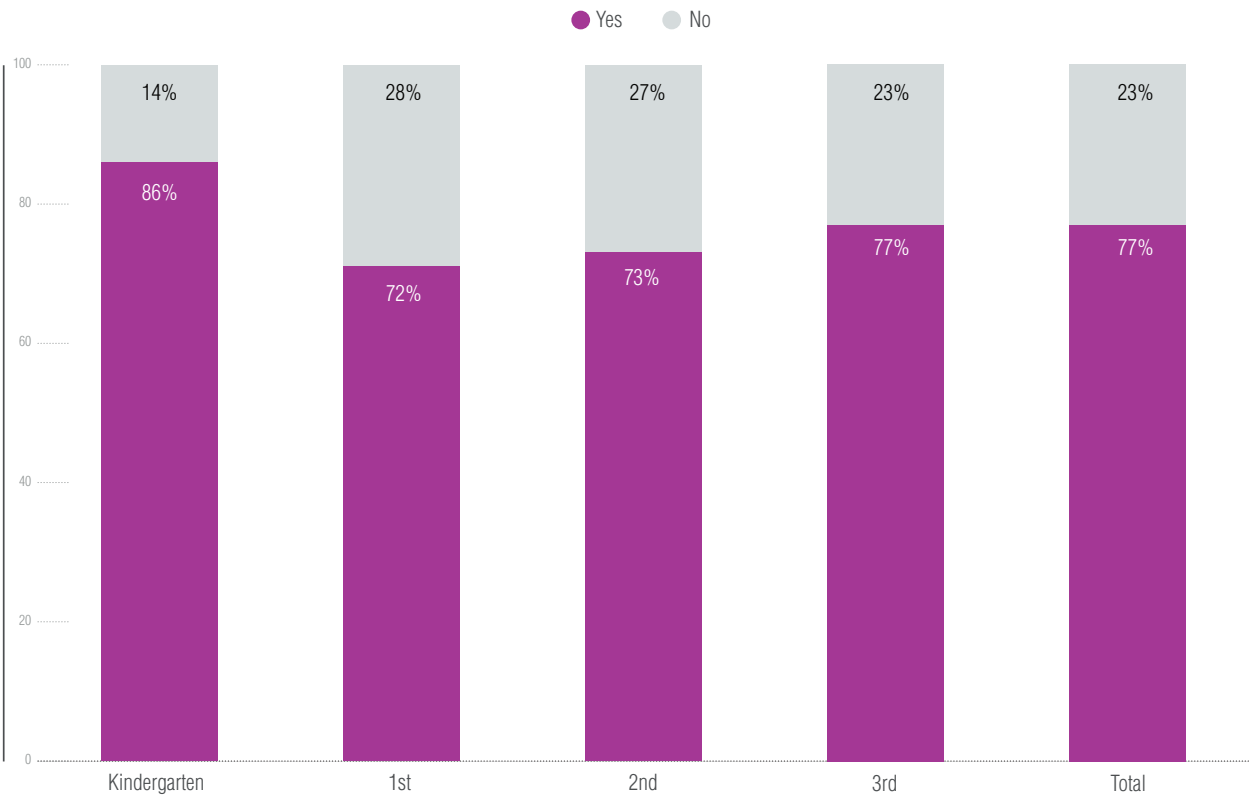


Table 1: Frequency of remote reading and writing instruction

	Kindergarten	1st	2nd	3rd
Once a week	10%	10%	10%	8%
Twice a week	29%	24%	0%	21%
Three times a week	13%	5%	13%	17%
Four times a week	6%	0%	13%	0%
Daily	42%	57%	57%	38%

## TEACHING READING AND WRITING USING DIGITAL PLATFORMS

The teachers surveyed and interviewed reported using a variety of digital platforms to deliver remote instruction to their students. Table 2 presents the digital platforms that teachers most frequently mentioned.

**Table 2: Digital platforms used to deliver instruction remotely**

	Kindergarten	1st grade	2nd grade	3rd grade
Zoom	19	10	15	11
Google Classroom	12	10	17	13
Links to Videos	18	15	17	15
Google Hangouts	9	5	5	4
Seesaw	8	6	10	8
Flipgrid	4	4	3	8
Schoolology	0	1	1	1

Many of the teachers admitted having to learn the technology rapidly. One first-grade teacher shared, “The shift to distance learning made me learn technology pieces and platforms I had never used before and didn’t even know had existed.” Another first-grade teacher said, “I did whole class Zoom, small group Zoom, family Zoom, and one-on-one Zoom. I spent hours upon hours upon hours on Zoom.” In some – but not all – cases, districts provided professional development to help teachers master the skills they needed for this new teaching context.

One kindergarten teacher, who said she was not able to do live instruction, talked about the six to seven videos she produces each day: “I made a morning video of expectations for the day and a short, three-minute video reviewing sounds or making words. And I would make a bedtime story for them to play at 7PM at night so they could watch that. I made about one-hour worth of videos a day for students. And while the students were able to type in their comments to me, because these were asynchronous videos, I couldn’t give them the live feedback.” A first-grade teacher shared that she and her colleagues also “made videos of ourselves and released those to the students each day as if they were gathered on the carpet so students could get their goals for the day. The difference was I couldn’t actually have a conversation with the students and they couldn’t have a conversation with me or with each other.”

Teachers had to rely on technology not just to deliver instruction, but as a central location to post assignments or links to videos they or their colleagues created; technology also often provided a way for students to submit their work for feedback. Three popular methods used by both the teacher survey responders and interviewees were Google Classroom, SeeSaw, and Flipgrid. One teacher started having her students use Flipgrid to record themselves reciting a memorized poem or sharing a response to literature. Another teacher shared that her students submitted videos of themselves reading aloud via Flipgrid and that because students were able to go back and watch their own videos before submitting, they would often read the story aloud several times before submitting a “just right version.”

A few of the teacher interviewees expressed that despite the many challenges associated with remote learning, they were not concerned with students’ access to grade-level texts, as their schools had provided user-friendly digital libraries, allowing students to access a wide range of book selections.

## CHALLENGES

Many teachers mentioned three main instructional challenges during remote learning:

- Writing instruction
- Differentiating instruction
- Meeting the instructional needs of English learners and students with special needs

## WRITING INSTRUCTION

Teachers across all four grade levels shared how difficult it was to deliver writing instruction and give feedback on writing assignments in a virtual classroom. In fact, one teacher shared, “I did not teach one writing lesson the way it should have been taught. There is no part of my writing instruction during distance learning that I am proud of.”

When asked why writing instruction was such a challenge, one first-grade teacher expressed that the iterative writing process in the classroom is hard to duplicate in an online synchronous setting, let alone an asynchronous one. “Writing was a big challenge because with live in-class instruction, students are getting so much real-time coaching and cheering from the teacher and they are getting so much from their peers. It just isn’t the same online.”

One third-grade teacher had found a way to deliver guided writing instruction but admitted it was not sufficient. The teacher explained the process: “There was an app I could use while I was recording called Whiteboard from Microsoft. I could make all of my documents PDF and upload it to record with. So I had lined paper and the students could see my paper on their screens at home, and I used a stylus and I could write with them. I could make my mistakes and cross [them] out and talk about how to make my writing better. I survived, but it was a challenge and far from perfect.”

Another teacher explained a cumbersome-sounding process used to provide feedback on students’ writing. She explained: “Because [her] first graders are writing with pen and paper and not using Google Classroom, they would write something and take a picture and submit it. I would then print out the picture, and depending on the quality of the picture, I would write feedback on it, take a picture of that and send it back to the students. It was a complicated and time-consuming process. Writing is definitely an area that I need to figure out how to make it work better for distance learning.”

## ADDITIONAL INSTRUCTIONAL CHALLENGES DURING DISTANCE LEARNING

1. Many students did not have access to devices and internet, and therefore were unable to access instruction.
2. Students did not have access to hands-on learning materials they would have access to if they were in the classroom.
3. Giving students immediate feedback on submitted work was a challenge many teachers could not find a solution to.
4. Students did not show up to class.
5. Too much parent involvement – difficulty assessing student understanding because parents help too much with the assignments.
6. Not enough parent involvement.

## DIFFERENTIATING INSTRUCTION

Teachers had also found differentiating instruction difficult during distance learning, specifically when their primary instructional format was delivering whole-class instruction. The challenge was assigning meaningful activities to the majority of students while also differentiating instruction to small groups. One teacher summed up the challenge: “I couldn’t just leave the rest of the class unsupervised in a breakout room doing independent work while I was meeting with a small group.” Additionally, teachers delivering asynchronous instruction spoke of developing one instructional video for the whole class; but because it was not live instruction, they did not know what content or skills to differentiate and for whom.

Instructing small groups of students was mentioned as one strategy for differentiating instruction. One first-grade teacher shared, “I have a clipboard that has all the kids’ names on it and I make observation notes. James is doing a great job using periods and capitals in his writing, but he needs to work on adding more adjectives to his writing. And if I notice that someone else also needs to practice that, I’ll use that information to make small skill-based groups of four to five students.” Survey results revealed that teachers spend about the same amount of time delivering whole-class reading and writing instruction as they do in small-group instruction, as shown in Table 3.

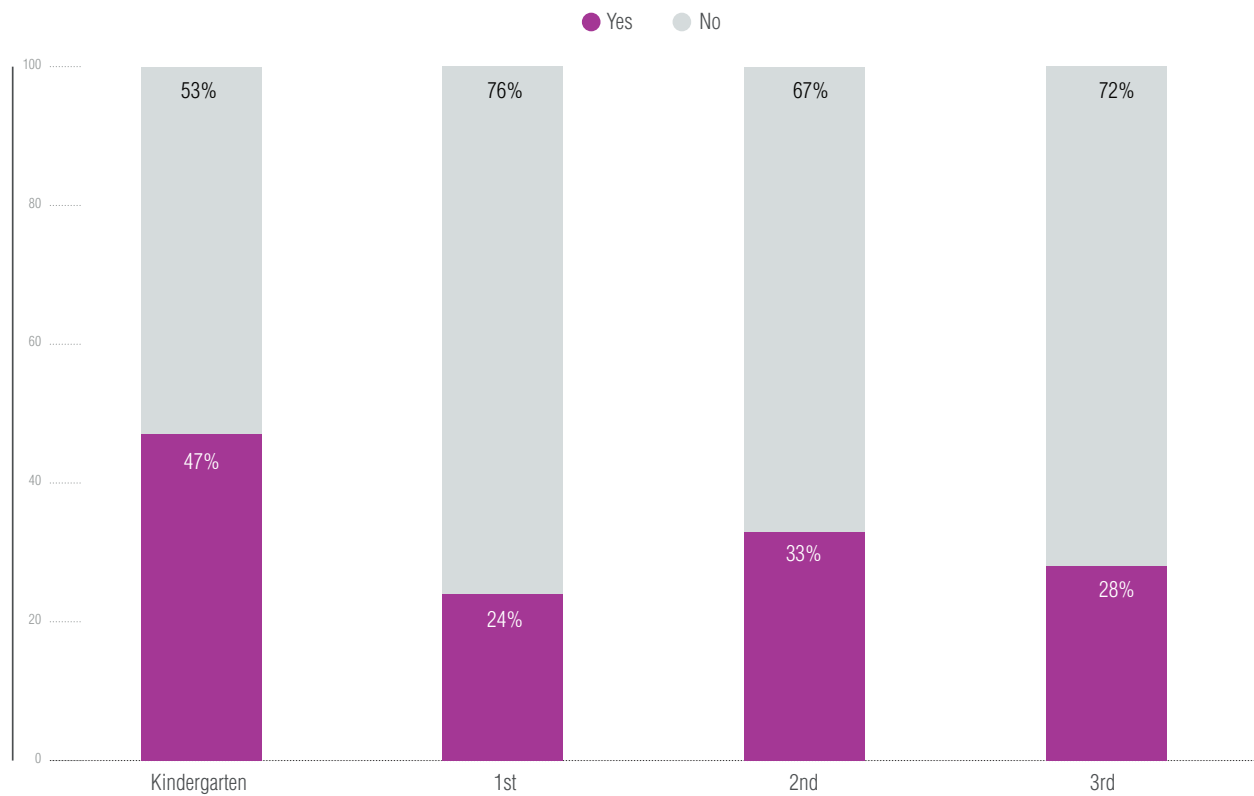
**Table 3: Number of instructional minutes spent on remote whole-class and small-group reading and writing instruction**

	Whole-Class Reading and Writing Instructional Minutes	Small-Group Reading and Writing Instructional Minutes
<b>Kindergarten</b>	54 minutes	53 minutes
<b>1st Grade</b>	77 minutes	80 minutes
<b>2nd Grade</b>	36 minutes	39 minutes
<b>3rd Grade</b>	30 minutes	33 minutes

However, many other teachers reported that they were not able to schedule small group virtual meetings with students during distance learning to differentiate reading and writing instruction for students. Figure 2 illustrates these difficulties by grade.

Kindergarten teachers seemed the most successful in being able to conduct small-group meetings, likely motivated by the need to avoid whole-class instruction when possible. As one kindergarten teacher shared in an interview, “Whole class Zooms with five year olds are a hot mess. [Zoom calls are] awful. They all talk at once or they walk around and want to show you their bathroom.”

**Figure 2: Percentage of teachers who met with small groups of students during distance learning**





## MEETING THE INSTRUCTIONAL NEEDS OF ENGLISH LEARNERS AND STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

In addition to finding it challenging to differentiate instruction for all their students, teachers voiced their concerns about meeting the instructional needs of their more vulnerable student populations, English learners (ELs) and students with special needs.

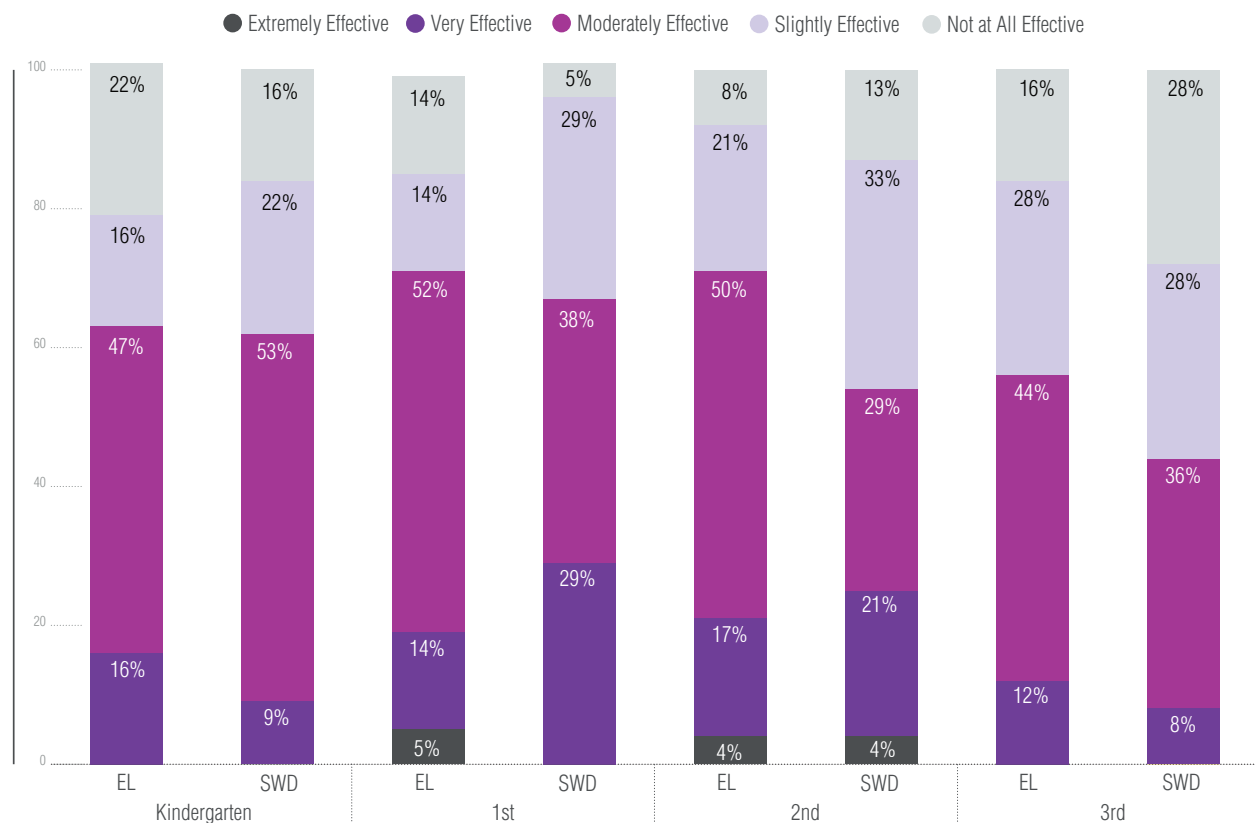
The majority of teachers surveyed perceived themselves to be only moderately effective or slightly effective in delivering reading and writing instruction to EL students and students with special needs (See Figure 3 for additional detail).

Teachers shared that they had often used visuals, pre-teach vocabulary and contextual information, or encourage conversations to help their ELs participate more fully; but these strategies were challenging to implement in a virtual context. Likewise, teachers' in-person strategies for engaging students with special needs were not possible. These strategies ranged from giving students letter manipulatives to providing additional explicit instruction or rewarding students to foster

motivation. A distance learning environment with limited time on a screen provides few opportunities for teachers to give feedback and respond to students' needs, and this becomes completely impossible if teachers are delivering instruction asynchronously.

Teachers mentioned the "extras" they typically would provide to support young ELs and students with special needs. For example, giving students "extra time with an instructor in small groups four days a week" or having one-on-one aides to support students. Another teacher pointed out, "The medium of distance learning is very auditory. It requires students to listen and process and learn, but for students who are not auditory learners and have trouble processing auditory information, this format is not ideal for them. I try to be conscious of all the different learning styles in my regular classroom, but it's hard to attend to all those needs in a Zoom classroom."

**Figure 3: Effectiveness meeting the instructional needs of English learner students and students with special needs**



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

At the time the survey and interviews were conducted, it was not yet known whether instruction during the Fall of 2020 would occur in-person, remotely, or in a hybrid model. Therefore, teacher interviewees were asked to speculate about the possibility of distance learning continuing in Fall 2020. When asked what curricular supports would help improve reading and writing instruction, teachers noted the following:

- Professional development
- Instructional videos and online activities
- Books and reading materials

**Professional Development.** The first feedback teachers gave on ways to improve the remote instruction process is that they would need additional professional development, general support, and time to figure everything out. One teacher stated, “I have never worked so hard in my life as I did those first three or four weeks until I found my rhythm.” Another teacher shared, “I will tell you, in 25 years in education, I have never worked longer or harder. I don’t even know how to articulate what I want. But it’s hurtful to hear parents disparaging the teachers when we are working really hard to try and figure everything out.”

**Instructional Videos and Online Activities.** While teachers spoke about spending much of Spring 2020 creating instructional videos and finding online learning activities for students to engage with, they would also like access to a library of instructional resources to support remote instruction. One first-grade teacher shared how within her district, all the first-grade teachers across the district created a library of instructional videos that they shared online with one another in a folder, reducing the burden on individual teachers. She commented, “I think at the beginning when we were all deer in the headlights, we decided to work together to create videos and put them in one central location so we could all access them instead of re-creating the wheel. It worked so well, we stuck with it.” Many survey responders also indicated that this type of repository of instructional videos would help support their instruction.

**Books and Reading Materials.** Many teachers also noted that it would be extremely helpful to have additional resources on books and reading materials. Although many survey responders said they used Epic as a resource to ensure their students had access to appropriate grade-level reading materials, other survey responders expressed the need for even more reading materials, both online and also disposable readers to send home with students who do not have reliable access to internet.

As they reflected on distance learning in Spring 2020 and looked forward to its continuation in Fall 2020, many teachers pointed out that when schools closed in March, teachers and students were “nearing the finish line,” and teachers had relationships with students and students’ families. Teachers anticipated that Fall 2020 would be different because these relationships would not exist. Teachers expressed anxiety about establishing new relationships, about instructing students whom they didn’t know, and about addressing issues of learning loss with a group of parents they have never met and students who haven’t been in school for six months. One teacher said, “Not knowing these kids is going to be intense.” Another admitted, “It’s scary. Thinking about that causes me real anxiety.” And a third said, “That’s the heartbreaking part. We will just have to do our best to get to know each other a little so we can at least set a tone so we can start teaching and learning together.”

## LOOKING FORWARD AND REFLECTING ON BRIGHT SPOTS

Despite the challenges, teachers did mention some positive, unexpected surprises of distance learning that offer some bright spots. Comments from four teachers provide examples of young learners for whom distance learning seemed to offer real advantages.

First, for students who had a hard time focusing in the regular classroom, the distance learning format offered an environment where they were able to really focus without the distraction of classmates. One teacher affirmed this: “I had one little boy who was always so involved in what other people were doing, and he was so worried he wasn’t doing it quite as well. And he just did all his own work at home, and he got to take off the stress of worrying what everybody else was doing and it was so incredible!”

Second, asynchronous learning benefited students who tended to get up and move around the classroom and fidget in a typical learning environment. A teacher said that such students “could pause the video, get up and move around and get a snack without distracting others, and then come back to resume the video when they were ready to focus again.”

Third, some students could be bolder with online distance learning. One teacher noted, “It was neat to see them speak up a little bit more. I had this little girl in my class who never raised her hand once. I don’t think she voluntarily spoke in class once.

But in distance learning she just absolutely shined. I don’t know what it was, but when she had to submit videos on Flipgrid, she turned it into a whole production. She created a stage for herself, and she had such freedom that she just thrived.”

Fourth, for students who struggled socially, distance learning was a positive experience. One teacher shared, “I had this one little boy who hated school; it felt like he was always bullied, and he didn’t fit in. But without the bullying, learning became a real positive experience.”

And lastly, many teachers felt that one positive effect of distance learning is that parents became more engaged in their children’s learning because “collaboration between parents and the teacher became critically important.” Not only was there more communication with parents, but teachers felt that parents really had an opportunity to see their children as learners and gain some appreciation for the job that teachers do. One teacher said that she “had parents calling me in tears at a total loss. I think there may be more of an appreciation and understanding that the craft of teaching is an important one, that not just anyone can do well.”

## CONCLUSION AND KEY TAKEAWAYS

In summary, the survey and interviews with early literacy teachers revealed the following key takeaways related to remote reading and writing instruction during the COVID-19 school building closures:

Challenges:	Recommendations for Areas of Improvement:	Bright Spots:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Writing instruction</li> <li>■ Differentiating instruction</li> <li>■ Meeting the instructional needs of English learners and students with special needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Professional development</li> <li>■ Instructional videos and online activities</li> <li>■ Books and reading materials</li> </ul>	<p>Early literacy educators found that remote instruction allowed some <b>students</b> to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Show increased focus</li> <li>■ Take brain breaks freely when needed</li> <li>■ Be bolder in a remote class</li> <li>■ Become more confident without the presence of bullying</li> </ul> <p>Teachers also noted that remote instruction encouraged <b>caregivers</b> to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Increase involvement and engagement in their child's learning</li> </ul>

Despite educators from across the nation needing to find novel ways to reach, connect, and instruct children how to read and write during a pandemic, some positive findings emerged as bright spots amidst the challenges and difficult circumstances educators needed to overcome. It is evident that increased collaboration and support is necessary between school administrators, educators, and caregivers to ensure young learners' literacy success. The survey findings add to our growing knowledge about teaching reading remotely and bolster the call for equitable access to a one-to-one device environment while applying evidence-based instruction in all environments. When educators receive the professional development they need and have access to high-quality instructional videos, online activities, and digital reading materials, our students will be better able to acquire the skills they need in this digital-first world – becoming the confident and skillful readers and writers we aspire them to be.

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## APPENDIX A

### METHODOLOGY OF THE SURVEY AND PHONE INTERVIEWS

The original research plan for the study was to collect observation and interview data that would yield a picture of “a day in the life” of an early grade literacy teacher. However, COVID-19 related school building closures necessitated a change in plan and a pivot to collecting survey data to supplement the interview data.

The original data collection protocols were augmented to gather information about literacy teachers’ reading and writing instruction during COVID-19 school building closures. The responses to the COVID-19 related survey responses and interview questions are the basis for this paper.

In early Spring 2020, 137 kindergarten through third grade teachers across the country responded to a survey designed to learn about their experiences as they tried to deliver explicit reading and writing instruction to their students during the COVID-19 school building closures. We wanted to know the following:

- The types of content teachers were able to deliver
- The digital platforms used to deliver content
- The greatest instructional challenges to delivering reading and writing instruction to students
- The curricular supports that would help make reading and writing instruction during distance learning a bit easier

After analyzing survey results, we created a more focused and targeted interview protocol that would allow us to identify themes and patterns in teachers’ instructional practices and provide a fuller understanding of teachers’ reading and writing instruction given the COVID-19 related school closures. Interviews lasting one hour were conducted with nine teachers, including, two kindergarten teachers, three first-grade teachers, two second-grade teachers, and two third-grade teachers. We asked teachers about their experiences teaching reading and writing remotely in a distance learning format, the successes and challenges of distance learning, and their worries and anxieties about starting the 2020–2021 school year in a distance learning format without knowing any of their students or their families.

## APPENDIX B

### READING AND WRITING INSTRUCTION DURING COVID-19 SCHOOL BUILDING CLOSURES: SURVEY QUESTIONS

To answer the following questions, please respond based on your instruction during COVID-19 school closures.

1. Were you able to deliver reading and writing instruction to your students during the COVID-19 school closures?
  - a. Yes (if yes, how frequently per week)
  - b. No (if no, please skip to the end of the survey)
2. What methods did you use to deliver reading and writing instruction to your students during the COVID-19 school closures? Select all that apply.

a. Zoom meetings	g. Paper packets	m. Readwritethink.org
b. Google classroom	h. ABCya	n. Seesaw
c. Google Hangouts	i. Epic	o. Schoolology
d. Links to videos	j. Lexia	p. Flipgrid
e. Raz kids	k. Starfall	q. Other
f. ReadWorks	l. Storyline Online	
3. Were you able to assess your students' reading and writing progress during the COVID-19 school closures?
  - a. Yes (if yes, please share how you assessed)
  - b. No
4. Were you able to schedule small group virtual meetings with students to differentiate instruction?
  - a. Yes (if yes, how often per week?)
  - b. No
5. On a scale of 1-5, with 1 being not effective and 5 being very effective, how effectively have you been able to deliver reading and writing instruction to your English Learner students?
6. On a scale of 1-5, with 1 being not effective and 5 being very effective, how effectively have you been able to deliver reading and writing instruction to your students with disabilities?
7. What were some of the greatest instructional challenges to delivering reading and writing instruction to your students during the COVID-19 school closures?
8. What are some curricular supports that would help make reading and writing instruction during the COVID-19 school closures easier?



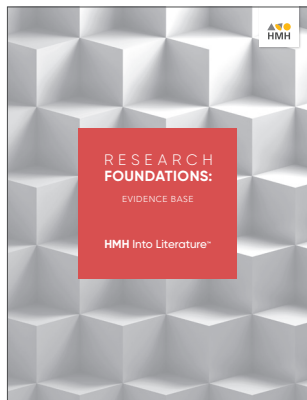
## APPENDIX C

### READING AND WRITING INSTRUCTION DURING COVID-19 SCHOOL BUILDING CLOSURES: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me a little about how reading/writing instruction has changed with the school closures and the move to distance learning?  
Probes: How long does it take to plan a typical lesson? What supports did you receive from your school/district to help with the transition to distance learning? What supports could you still use to make your reading/writing instruction during distance learning more effective?
2. In what ways have you interacted with parents of children in your class?
3. Have there been any positive surprises to online reading/writing instruction?
4. What have been some of the biggest hurdles and challenges to online reading/writing instruction for you as a teacher?
5. From what you've seen, what were some of the biggest hurdles and challenges for your students?
6. In what ways, are you still able to differentiate your instruction?
7. Preliminary research is suggesting that students will retain about 70% of this year's gains in reading compared to a typical school year. How do you think that will affect your approach to instruction next school year?
8. As of now, how do you anticipate your literacy block will be different than the typical reading/writing instruction you talked about earlier in this interview?

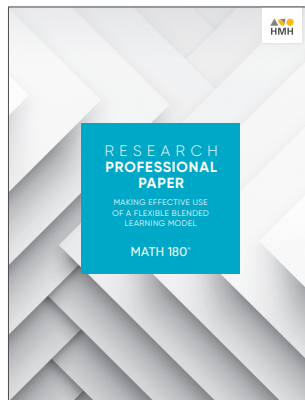
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