

## Article

# We Never Left Work: Challenges to Sustaining High-Quality Teaching and Learning during COVID-19

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**Abstract:** During the shift to online remote learning at the height of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, a group of researchers administered a qualitative survey with a desire to hear teacher voices. Responses were received from many areas of the world from educators at all levels of teaching. In this paper, we analyzed qualitative survey responses from 314 literacy educators in the United States. These educators were K-12 teachers, instructional coaches, and instructors from teacher education. We sought to learn how a sampling of U.S. literacy educators was impacted by COVID-19 in their teaching and in their profession. Teachers experienced stress and uncertainty as their roles and responsibilities shifted. The story told about teaching and learning was rewritten. Data revealed implications for the future of teaching and the teaching profession.

**Keywords:** teaching; pandemic; resiliency

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## 1. Introduction

The worldwide COVID-19 pandemic brought stress, change and uncertainty to educational contexts at all levels [1–4]. Millions of educators and students around the world were impacted in significant ways [5]. Regardless of the teachers' environment or their position as K-12 educators or as teacher educators, they were still responsible for teaching engaging lessons and ensuring student learning success amidst turmoil [6]. Many teachers reported burnout and thoughts of leaving the profession due to new demands placed upon them [7]. The need for professional development and support for those in the teaching profession and those entering the profession became clearly evident [8,9].

Social media became a place for teachers to vent frustrations and share support. Blogs and discussion boards appeared, highlighting the stress teachers faced. News outlets reported on the challenges faced by teachers. Podcasts highlighted teacher burnout. In our work, we sought to systematically explore teachers' perceptions and experiences as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. A group of nine international researchers from Australia, Singapore, New Zealand, and the U.S. sent a survey through their respective networks to teachers and teacher educators in their home countries. Survey results yielded responses from teachers across disciplines and grade levels. This article focuses specifically on 314 survey responses from literacy educators K-12 and those working with preservice educators in the United States.

The purpose of this paper is to identify key issues that influenced how literacy educators engaged in instruction during the pandemic. The ways in which teachers engage in their work inform student learning [10], and student learning remained the goal of instruction—even during the uncertain times of the pandemic. Understanding obstacles to instruction can provide insights into how we, as a field, can pivot during difficult times to better meet students' learning needs and better prepare future educators to meet these needs [11]. Understanding these obstacles can also help build sustainable teacher training

and resiliency. The following research question guided this work: What do 314 U.S. literacy educators say about how COVID-19 has impacted their teaching and their work?

### *1.1. Review of the Literature*

In this review of literature, we examine two different areas of research that set a foundation for our study. First, review information related to teacher burnout and retention. Second, we review information related to teaching in times of uncertainty. Taken together, these areas of scholarship—that were particularly prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic—help to set the stage for our findings with respect to literacy educators’ voices about their own experiences during the pandemic.

#### *1.1.1. Teacher Burnout and Retention*

The extant literature shows that the teaching profession is no stranger to burnout [12,13]. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers with fewer than five years of teaching experience were leaving the profession at rates between 19% and 30% [6]. Although teachers with more experience were leaving at a much lower rate, they were not immune to a reduction in stamina due to the ever-increasing demands of the profession [6]. With COVID-19 added to the mix of stressors contributing to burnout, teachers reported varying degrees of negative emotions, fatigue, and distress as they navigated the turbulent waters of teaching during the pandemic [14–16].

Major contributors to teacher burnout at the onset of the pandemic ranged from a lack of in-person interaction with students to the pressures of switching instructional delivery methods overnight [7,17]. Teachers went from quickly scanning their classrooms to determine which students needed one-on-one help to worrying about whether students had access to the internet and devices to log on to Zoom sessions [18]. In addition to online challenges, when classes finally resumed face-to-face, teachers felt taxed with shouldering additional roles and endured secondary traumatic stress while supporting their students [19]. They became counselors as they helped students deal with fears and loss. They became nurses and administrators dealing with absences, illnesses, and quarantines. They took on these shifts in roles while they themselves coped with the tensions associated with COVID-19 [4,20,21].

In fluctuating teaching environments, teachers experiencing burnout are more likely to contemplate exiting the profession [22]. Burnout left unaddressed can lead to a negative effect on teachers’ health and quality of life. Issues with teachers’ mental and physical health will cause issues for schools and administrations in the future [23]. The U.S. is already seeing the effects of this burnout as many schools began this year without a teacher in each classroom [24]. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, in July 2022, the United States had 270,000 fewer teachers than in 2020, and 55% of teachers indicated a desire to retire early or leave the profession [25]. The teacher shortage, exacerbated by the challenges of remote teaching, stress, burnout and lack of support, has now become what the Washington Post terms “catastrophic” [26]. In addition to teachers leaving the profession, many young people are opting against teaching as a career choice [27]. The pandemic brought to light the lack of respect for the teaching profession [26]. The pandemic also revealed a profession in turmoil, with teachers assuming new responsibilities and roles while still receiving low pay in comparison to other professions [27]. It behooves school principals, districts, and governments to pay attention to the practical concerns of teachers or face the consequences of low retention and teacher attrition [3].

#### *1.1.2. Teaching in Times of Uncertainty*

The outbreak of COVID-19 produced uncertainty as teachers were forced to change from in-person instruction to emergency remote teaching in most settings [2,28,29]. The term uncertainty in the context of this article refers to feelings of tension or stress in situations involving unknown information relating to the future. Research reveals that

uncertainty came in many forms. For instance, during COVID, teachers dealt with the stress of figuring out how best to teach content in times of crisis [30]. Also, during COVID, teachers wrestled with the anxieties of keeping students engaged online using a variety of formats while simultaneously being effective in their methods [2,30].

During times of stress, teachers often question their own professional competence and capacity and even question their identity as teachers [1,31]. The pandemic was certainly one of these times of stress. Teachers working remotely reported depression and isolation [15]. Results of a large online survey conducted by Kush and colleagues [15] found that during the height of the pandemic, teachers showed significantly high negative mental health outcomes. In some cases, teachers demonstrated issues with negative mental health that were more significant than healthcare workers on the front lines of the pandemic [15].

Feelings of uncertainty in education and teaching are not new, but the catastrophic backdrop of the pandemic heightened a feeling of facing the unknown among teachers [1–4,32]. No matter how seasoned or novice an educator was with technology prior to the pandemic, all teachers were plunged into extreme quarantine measures, which necessitated a radical shift in their primary teaching practices from face-to-face to online environments [33,34]. This transition brought uncertainty to a new height for all teachers, regardless of experience. This uncertainty was further exacerbated for some who were not skilled with various technological platforms and methods of instruction [20,28].

In the past, schools addressed issues relating to teacher preparedness by providing opportunities for teachers to work collaboratively with colleagues to develop strong professional communities [35–37]. Although these professional relationships could strengthen teacher identity and confidence, the quarantine resulted in a lack of physical space, greatly limiting collaborations between teachers and colleagues and teachers and students. The lack of physical space and face-to-face interaction limited spontaneous collaboration or support. Without this physical support structure, many teachers were left to navigate uncertainty alone [20,38].

While we may all hope to avoid another worldwide pandemic, it is certain that education will face additional challenges and times of uncertainty in the future. Lessons learned from the uncertainty surrounding COVID-19, and the rapid shift in teachers' roles and responsibilities, can inform our future work in education. In particular, the work we report in this paper adds to the extant literature by foregrounding teachers' voices when teaching during times of potential burnout and uncertainty. Understanding teachers' experiences and perspectives can provide a foundation for preemptively considering ways to prevent teacher burnout during times of uncertainty.

### *1.2. Theoretical Lens*

We use positioning theory [39] to frame our study because it can serve as a useful analytic lens to explore how meanings are produced in and through discourse. According to Gee [40], discourse is defined as language in use in particular contexts. Positioning theorists [39] argue that people position themselves and others intentionally and unintentionally through discursive practices. Moreover, scholars of positioning theory [41] have used the positioning triangle as a heuristic to explain how people use discourse to position themselves and others.

The three angles on the positioning triangle include storylines, positions, and acts. Storylines refer to narrative conventions that shape how discourse gets enacted. A common storyline in Western cultures might include good triumphing over evil, for example. Actors in storylines can position themselves and/or others; positions are clusters of rights and duties that actors in unique storylines perform. For example, waiters in restaurants or nurses in hospitals enact rights and duties as a result of societal/institutional expectations pertaining to their occupations. Finally, acts refer to the social meaning of actions. For example, writing an email message is an action. The social meaning of the email

message may be an invitation to a holiday party or a request from a boss to complete a work-related task.

Our work in this paper is set against the huge shift in the ‘typical’ storyline of public schooling that occurred because of COVID-19 [5]. Schools had to pivot quickly from mostly face-to-face contexts to online contexts [42]. This massive shift in public school storylines brought about teachers’ renegotiations of their ‘rights’ and ‘duties’ in their work as well as the school-related ‘acts’ in which they engaged. In this paper, we foreground literacy teachers’ perceptions of these shifts in terms of ‘rights’ and ‘duties’ as well as their professional ‘acts’ as literacy teachers. In short, we seek to unpack how dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic repositioned literacy educators and how they repositioned themselves in their work.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. *The Big Picture and Data Sources for this Study*

Motivated by a desire to hear teacher voices during the rapid transition in teaching contexts and methods brought on by the pandemic, a faculty member at Southern Cross University in Australia put out a call on Facebook and contacted fellow researcher colleagues who might be interested in collaborative research that would attempt to capture the experiences of educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. Eight academics from around the world joined the research project to make an initial team of nine educational researchers.

The primary research tool for this project was one qualitative survey that included six demographic questions and sixteen open-ended questions about the impact of the pandemic on teachers’ lives and experiences. The survey was created on Qualtrics and was distributed through various international educational networks, including the International Literacy Association. The survey invitation included IRB-approved language regarding confidentiality, and participants agreed to participate in an anonymous manner. In total, 624 educators from Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, and the U.S. completed the survey as a result of purposive sampling with the opportunity for snowball sampling as the survey was shared among colleagues. The research team of nine shared data, and within their respective disciplines, individual researchers explored a variety of dimensions of the data.

This paper features an analysis of survey responses from 314 literacy educators in the United States who are members of the International Literacy Association. These surveys from the U.S. literacy educators on which this paper is built were K-12 teachers, instructional coaches, and teacher educators. Thus, respondents provided information from a variety of roles and levels of experience pertaining to literacy teaching.

### 2.2. *Data Analysis Procedures*

The three authors of this paper comprised the research team for this work. Although our author team read responses across all the survey questions, our data analysis specifically focused on questions about how COVID-19 impacted respondents’ teaching and learning, including questions that asked respondents to provide concrete examples of successful teaching and learning encounters during the pandemic.

Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach [43]. Three researchers first studied the data and then applied initial codes. We shared our initial coding with one another and refined our codes. Once we had sufficiently refined our codes, we went back through the data set coding survey responses with the refined codes. Next, we went through our coded data and determined themes that cut across the coded data. Once data were coded into major themes, we identified subcategories for each major theme.

Using this thematic analysis approach allowed for flexibility while we strove to provide a rich, detailed, and complex account of survey data collected in our written report

[43]. Dialogically engaging multiple analysts throughout each step in the process improved the rigor of our coding and thematic analysis [44].

### 3. Findings

We identified two major themes as we analyzed the survey responses from 314 U.S. literacy teachers. By far, the largest theme of responses focused on teachers being un/underprepared to move to online instruction. The second major theme addressed teachers' personal struggles and concerns.

We refer to our theoretical lens as we present each of these themes. Positioning theory draws our attention to storylines, which are enacted and created through discourse as individuals and groups enact rights and duties within their unique contexts. While unpacking the themes we discerned in our research study, we examine the shifting storylines (due to COVID) in which we functioned, and we consider the ways respondents re-negotiated rights and duties with respect to their work as literacy educators.

#### 3.1. First Theme: Being Un/Under-Prepared to Move to Online Instruction

Key ideas pertaining to our first theme center around the following sub-categories, being un/underprepared: (a) with respect to the loss of meaningful interactions with students and colleagues, (b) to deal with the demands of technology during COVID, and (c) to deal with shifting demands from parents. We address each of these sub-themes, in turn discussing implied or explicit shifts in rights and duties because of changes resulting from COVID.

#### 3.2. Being Un/Underprepared for the Loss of Meaningful Interactions with Students and Colleagues

Because teachers were spending time learning to navigate new technology, they found they were spending less time connecting directly with their students. They reported that teaching became largely about assigning work and giving students time to complete it independently. Student engagement became passive, and teachers felt more like moderators than instructors. One teacher reported, "All of my teaching was online for the final three months of the school year. This greatly limited the scope of my teaching and our daily routines. For the students, learning became very independent". Another respondent discussed that learning had to become more independent for students because of a lack of time. Time demands were used in other ways, and there was little time left for planning live interactions and engaging lessons. This respondent stated, "I've spent more time self-teaching the technology platforms, creating digital assignments, and communicating with both students and parents". In short, in many instructional contexts, 'learning' became largely independent work time for many students.

Respondents not only shared a lack of connection with students, but they also reported feeling disconnected from their larger professional communities. Many did not have professional development offerings usually provided throughout the school year because of the pandemic and social distancing. There were no informal discussions related to teaching and research during the day; there were no informal discussions about students and teaching. One teacher reported that it was "too easy to disconnect from others". Though a few respondents had the availability of online professional development materials, it was not a "real time, in-the-moment, shared experience" with colleagues that teachers could 'process' together.

Finally, because many hours were spent online daily dealing with teaching, planning, and instruction, there was little time reported for casual professional social interactions. Some participants mentioned longing for casual conversations with colleagues. Others worried that their students were not engaging in social interactions with each other. One respondent created an online recess time for kindergarten students, but fewer participated

as time passed. Another respondent felt that “people were craving a connection” and students and teachers alike needed to feel a social bond with others.

Stepping back, we draw on our analysis of educators’ survey responses about being un/underprepared for the loss of meaningful interactions with, and between, teachers and students to summarize the gist of educators shifting rights and duties in their work (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). Figure 1 provides a brief summary overview of rights and duties, as well as the unintended consequences of these ‘new’ rights and duties as a result of COVID.

‘New’ Duties			‘Former’ Rights
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Teachers must spend extensive time learning and navigating (i.e., teacher learns first, then teaches children and parents) new online technology</li></ul>	<b>Tension Between ...</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Time and space to interact in meaningful ways with students and colleagues that scaffold and support student learning and support relationship building</li></ul>	
Unintended Consequences			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Disconnect (i.e., “ruptures”) between teachers and students, and teachers and teachers</li><li>Teachers developed online assignments/tasks (often “canned” and “less organic”) that students primarily completed on their own</li><li>Diminished opportunities for spontaneous discussions and relationship building (between teachers and students and between teachers and teachers)</li></ul>			

**Figure 1.** Tension between rights and duties regarding loss of meaningful interactions.

Notice that ‘new’ duties (i.e., teachers spending extensive amounts of time learning and navigating new online technologies) as a result of COVID-19 means that there is now tension for educators and students because the ‘new’ duties make it impossible for teachers and students to engage in former ‘rights’ pertaining to meaningful interactions and relationship building. As a result, there are ‘new’ unintended consequences that negatively impact school engagement and students’ learning.

### 3.3. Being Un/Underprepared for Technology Demands during COVID-19

As teachers shifted from teaching face-to-face at school to teaching online at home, they were faced with learning new online systems and formats for delivering instruction. Most respondents had not worked in an online environment previously and faced a steep learning curve that required a significant investment of time and increased stress. One respondent stated, “COVID-19 has forced me to move online and learn how to engage students in a different format. A lot of new technology had to be learned in a short amount of time and determining how math, reading, writing, etc., would be delivered. I spent a lot of time learning more about some already familiar online learning platforms, but I also sought out new platforms and invested a lot of time in understanding new ways to deliver learning to my second graders. Weekly preparation increased dramatically, and my time invested nearly doubled”. Another participant stated: “It’s been a steep learning curve for teachers and students”. Finally, one teacher commented, “School closed and we worked online with students for the last quarter of the year. My learning was focused on the understanding of Google Classroom and Zoom”.

Accessing online ‘help’ formats became problematic for teachers when they did not have knowledge of various technology platforms or did not have the technology or the technical skills needed to access online platforms. Several respondents reported that they had no support for learning new technology, and this was a source of discouragement

and frustration. One respondent stated, “I felt very much alone and that I did not have anywhere to turn for help”. Another teacher did not have an online system available and reported having to teach over the phone for a time until an online platform could be put in place. In short, teachers felt helpless and alone as they navigated their own learning while trying to set up online instruction for their students.

The majority of educators responding to the survey spoke of fatigue, issues with maintaining a schedule with clear boundaries, and the need for connection outside of school times for both teachers and students. One participant said she felt “useless” at the end of a long day. Many reported having to deal with planning, emails, and meetings well into the evening hours with no clear boundary for personal or family time. Teachers reported feeling exhausted, stressed, and full of anxiety. For example, most survey participants reported being exhausted from being online for every activity and interaction, and one reported student video chats into the evening to be “exhausting”. Students were also fatigued by screen time, and many participants reported that optional times for online learning were skipped by students and attendance in online classes waned as the pandemic continued.

As Figure 2 reveals, with new technology demands as a result of COVID, many teachers had to learn new online technology and platforms mostly on their own and teachers’ work hours increased. Thus, teachers reported feeling exhausted, frustrated, and stressed.

‘New’ Duties		‘Former’ Rights
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers must learn online technology with little to no help</li> </ul>	<b>Tension Between...</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teach students in person during ‘normal’ working hours</li> </ul>
<b>Unintended Consequences</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fatigue</li> <li>Frustration</li> <li>Stress</li> </ul>		

**Figure 2.** Tension between rights and duties regarding technology demands.

### 3.4. Being Un/Underprepared for Shifting Demands from Parents

Some respondents reported that parents became more demanding during online instruction. Parents could ask questions in real-time during online teaching and were able to view teaching and interject comments. Some parents were busy working during the day, and they demanded more teacher time in the evenings and on weekends for video chats or emails. Overwhelmingly, though, respondents reported a lack of parental support as a major concern. One respondent summed it up in this manner, “Many parents are working outside of the home and are not able to help their children connect with teachers or content online”. Another respondent went into more depth about how she had to support families, going beyond the online classroom.

“[I] had to pause while trying to help families navigate lending devices and set up WiFi for families. Have helped families obtain food—through delivering it myself or hooking them up to different food sources if they have transportation. Had to figure out online platforms to use and then teach families how to use them”.

Whereas this latter respondent was supporting families and parents and not lodging a complaint about doing so, the quote helps to illustrate the kinds of demands put on

teachers to support parents and families as parents and families navigated new online school contexts and technology.

Figure 3 reveals that teachers reported engaging with parents in different ways that included interruptions during online lessons and ‘meeting’ online during evenings and weekends. In general, these new duties related to parents meant diminished boundaries between school-related work and teachers’ home lives.

'New' Duties		'Former' Rights
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Engage with parents in ‘new’ ways (e.g., support parents beyond the ‘normal’ school day, engage with parents in the midst of student lessons)</li> </ul>	<b>Tension Between ...</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Engage with parents at times that ‘worked’ for teachers (i.e., not during instruction or on evenings and weekends)</li> </ul>
<b>Unintended Consequences</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parent interruptions during Zoom lessons</li> <li>Lack of boundaries between school and teachers’ home lives</li> <li>In some cases, lack of parental support for children’s online learning</li> </ul>		

**Figure 3.** Tension between rights and duties regarding shifting parent demands.

### 3.5. Second Theme: Teachers’ Personal Struggles and Concerns

The second theme we identified from our data analysis included teachers’ personal struggles as well as their concerns about students without access to technology and/or parental support to engage in school. We address each of these issues in turn, again noting the shift in duties and rights relative to these struggles and concerns.

### 3.6. Teachers’ Struggles: Loss of Independence, Creativity, and Home Life

Things changed overnight, and methods of instruction had to be reinvented in online formats. One might surmise that teachers then had a lot of freedom to design their instruction and methods for reaching students. Surprisingly, however, many teachers reported a feeling of a loss of freedom and independence. Some teachers explained that they had to report more often to administrators, and everything they planned and carried out was now visible. One respondent said it this way:

“I feel my independence has been curtailed somewhat. All lessons have to be on a plan sheet in about five different places when they only needed to be in my plan book before. I feel held back by administrators that are balancing unknowns with programming”.

Because of the time required to learn new online systems and new ways of teaching, many respondents felt they did not have time to create innovative lessons. One teacher mentioned, “[I] stopped thematic study in process, began using disconnected learning tasks for speed of use and to get kids onboard quickly”. Another teacher commented, “It [i.e., COVID] has forced me to rethink teaching and the [student] work I require”. In short, transitioning to online learning did not result in more choice and creativity for teachers relative to their instruction.

Many respondents indicated that a key complexity with respect to COVID-19 was the lack of distinct boundaries between home and work. For example, respondents discussed the difficulty of trying to take care of others (e.g., children and elderly parents) while also attending to heavy work demands from home. One respondent stated:



I was overwhelmed with taking care of my own family and aging in-laws that live with us. My husband's health is compromised as well. I only had time to teach remotely for my students and take care of my family. I also had to help my 7th grader to complete her work online. My senior was rather self-sufficient, but I had to make sure he was okay, too.

Building on the difficulty of managing both home and work from home, another teacher discussed the need to work longer hours just to complete her job: "After 13 March, we started remote learning and teaching online. It was very difficult teaching and trying to care for my 10-month-old and 4-year-old child. I was working much longer hours and felt completely drained." Taken together, educators who wrote about the complexity of dealing with COVID-19 and their personal life responsibilities indicated that living and working in one multipurpose space at home took a physical and emotional toll on them.

As Figure 4 reveals, educators' new duties, which included spending more time working online while simultaneously taking care of their own families, resulted in the loss of their rights with respect to autonomy and creativity, as well as a lack of a 'separate' time for a personal life. Key unintended consequences included struggling with the complexity of trying to teach online while having less family time and sometimes having more administrative oversight.

'New' Duties		'Former' Rights
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spend more time planning 'new' online instruction and submit to heightened administrator scrutiny for online instruction</li> <li>• Simultaneously take care of loved ones (e.g., spouses, aging parents, young children) at home while also teaching online at home</li> </ul>	<p><b>Tensions Between ...</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More autonomy and creativity with planning and instruction</li> <li>• Separate time and space for teaching and separate time and space for taking care of loved ones</li> </ul>
<b>Unintended Consequences</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More oversight from administrators</li> <li>• The complexity of trying to teach online at home while also taking care of loved ones at home</li> <li>• Lack of division between work (teaching) and home (family) duties</li> </ul>		

**Figure 4.** Teachers' struggles and shifting duties and rights.

### 3.7. Teachers' Concerns about Widening Gaps between the 'Haves' and 'Have Nots'

Survey respondents noted a widening gap between students who were from low-income families in comparison to their more affluent counterparts. The gap was not solely characterized by achievement levels but encompassed multiple facets of students' lives with respect to learning in different home environments. For example, respondents highlighted areas of friction such as access to the internet or technological devices, adequate parental support, or preexisting learning difficulties, which often became more pronounced when using online platforms. The following response illustrates one respondent's concern about students' access to the internet.

My district moved to 100% eLearning in March 2020, and it is highly likely we will face 100% virtual instruction when the new school year begins. There are a high number of pupils in poverty in my classroom, and that creates an issue with access, not only due to Internet connectivity issues but also due to inconsistent childcare situations because many parents have to work. If I can't get the

kids online and engaged each day, my level of skill or the care that I put into my planning doesn't matter. If I can't reach them, I can't teach them.

Similarly, respondents stated that lack of parental support was largely dependent on whether or not parents could afford to take time away from work or other pressing life demands to attend to their children's online schooling. For instance, one teacher reported the agonizing reality that some parents had 'their backs against the wall' and felt torn between helping their child/children with school or providing for their basic needs:

I see a gap in the haves and the have-nots. The children I had the most interaction with (via Zoom sessions) were the children who already were doing well and had strong home support and involvement. The children mostly came from well-educated parents in affluent professions. The children I never saw after March 13th were children who were performing just below, or farther below grade level expectations—aka: the kids who needed me the most.

A final observation in this category consisted of respondents' distress with reference to their students who were already struggling academically before shifting to an online platform due to COVID-19. One teacher stated: "I teach at-risk students who live in poverty. Most have low reading levels and live in poverty, preventing them from being successful with distance learning". Overall, respondents seemed to conclude that moving online perpetuated the learning disparity among their students.

As Figure 5 indicates, new student duties as a result of COVID-19 made it necessary for students to learn from home—often without the necessary technology to do so. This created tension between students' former rights to be at school in person and use the resources provided by the school and their new duties to learn from home. A chilling unintended consequence of COVID-19 is that students got behind in their learning. In fact, some scholars [45] suggest that some students may never get caught up to where they 'would have been educationally' had it not been for COVID-19.

‘New’ Duties		‘Former’ Rights
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Students must learn from home—even without the necessary resources (e.g., internet, computers, adult supervision)</li></ul>	<b>Tension Between ...</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Students had the right to attend school in person and use the shared resources (e.g., computers, books, etc.) of the school</li></ul>
Unintended Consequences		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Students got behind in their learning because they may not have had the physical, material, and/or human resources needed to engage meaningfully in their schoolwork</li></ul>		

**Figure 5.** Teachers' concerns about low-income students' learning.

#### 4. Discussion

The purpose of this survey research project was to identify and discuss what 314 literacy educators in the U.S. said impacted their teaching and their students' learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Understanding what educators have to say about their work during COVID-19 matters because teachers' work informs and influences student learning. Understanding teachers' perceptions of their experiences can provide insights into ways that educators can pivot during difficult times to meet student learning needs. Such understandings can also inform the field about better future educator preparation, including ways to promote sustainability and resilience in teacher preparation.

Teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic proved to be an incredibly stressful time for the literacy educators who completed our survey. Teachers found themselves facing new and constantly evolving duties as they ‘rewrote’ the stories of their experiences teaching literacy during COVID. For example, the line between personal and professional life became blurred as teachers carried out their work online in their homes, and boundaries between home and school disappeared. Educators, and their students, experienced many unintended consequences due to the rapid shift to online teaching. They experienced stress, anxiety, and feelings of being overwhelmed as their new duties resulted in significant shifts from their former rights. Our respondents reported all these sources of stress along with a heightened awareness of student needs, both academically and emotionally.

There is no doubt that changing storylines around teaching during the pandemic persist, despite a return to a new ‘normal’ in schools. The stress experienced by educators and students at all levels will likely have residual and lasting effects [46]. Teachers are leaving the profession, and high school students are not choosing to enter the profession. Rights and duties shifted during the pandemic and many of the new challenges have persisted despite a return to physical spaces and face-to-face educational contexts. Though we all hope that we will not experience a pandemic, or other major life-changing events, in the future, teaching is an unpredictable human endeavor. Change, challenges, and uncertainties will undoubtedly arise in the future, and if we have learned anything from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is that educators must be better prepared to navigate future changes, challenges, and uncertainties in the current global world.

We provide possibilities for ways forward based on the findings in our work. In short, we provide ideas for ‘new’ post-pandemic storylines that may support educators as we face future changes, challenges, and uncertainties. These includes:

#### *4.1. Restore a Meaningful Balance to the Rights Educators and Students Enjoy and the Duties They Must Enact*

During the pandemic, rights shifted as a result of new duties. For example, personal time and space became public. Extensive duties were added to teachers’ workloads. With the current return to a semblance of normalcy, it is important to re-examine the rights/duties continuum with educators and students. In short, teachers and students must (re)position [39] themselves in their work in ways that ‘re-set’ the rights/duties continuum that was interrupted during the pandemic, thereby agentically enacting revised educational storylines that are designed to foster meaningful student learning and teacher well-being.

#### *4.2. Create Meaningful Professional Learning Opportunities with Educators That Attend to Fostering Resilience and Learning to Navigate Uncertainty with Authority and Flexibility*

Professional learning experiences have the potential to improve teacher efficacy, especially in periods of uncertainty and burnout [46]. Though educational institutions have been offering professional learning experiences in a predominantly face-to-face manner for decades, the pandemic did not allow for this mode of delivery [20]. Schools fell short in supporting teachers at a time when it was needed most [20]. It takes time, support, and practice to learn to teach effectively online, and teachers were not afforded time, support, or practice during the rapid shifts in roles and responsibilities brought on during the pandemic [34,47].

Historically, professional learning offerings for teachers have often been selected by local, state, or national mandates and/or commercial curricula adoption with little teacher input to topics of study [34,48]. Professional learning opportunities should be based on teachers’ needs and professional goals [6,49]. Teachers must have a voice in selecting professional learning topics and in the design and enactment of professional learning opportunities [6,49]. Inevitably, as schools transitioned rapidly, seemingly overnight, to online learning during COVID-19, teachers needed and desired professional development related to virtual teaching, technology, and developing home and school partnerships, but little was available [6].

#### 4.3. Create Equitable Teaching Environments for All

Teaching during the pandemic put student inequities in the spotlight. While inequity has always been an issue for students at all levels [50], COVID-19 has made educational inequities impossible to ignore. Some students had access to high-quality internet and adequate technology, while others did not. Some students had support in their home and family community, while others did not. We must provide tools for teachers and schools to address inequities so all students have access to equitable educational opportunities.

#### 4.4. Limitations

A response rate of 314 educators in the U.S. is admittedly a small sample size and a limitation of this work. However, the survey was administered during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the findings were that teachers felt stretched, stressed, and exhausted. Hearing the voices of 314 educators during such a challenging time was a success in many ways.

The results discussed in this article are based on responses from the United States as part of a larger study. This does not allow for a deep examination of a more global response or for comparison across contexts globally. This would be a logical next step in the research.

#### 4.5. Concluding Comments

Educators are key characters in ever-changing educational storylines; however, educators are not characters without agency. The pandemic was a historically challenging chapter in the story of educators' and students' lives. Not only should we learn from the pandemic, but we must also 'act on what we have learned' in ways that promote and foster educator and student agency. As highlighted in our discussion, the implications for moving forward in a post-pandemic world of education include restoring a meaningful balance of educator and student rights and responsibilities, redesigning and offering professional development to support resiliency, and focusing on equity. We must better support teachers both in times of uncertainty and in preparation for times of uncertainty. We must be sure that all teachers and students have equitable access to the tools they need during times of uncertainty. The story needs to be rewritten and shaped by the experiences and voices we have highlighted.

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