Literacy in Lockdown: Learning and Teaching During COVID-19 School Closures

Liz Chamberlain, Jan Lacina, William P. Bintz, Jo Beth Jimerson, Kim Payne, Remy Zingale

> Across the globe, students have been away from schools and their teachers, but literacy learning has continued, so during a time of lockdown, what happens to literacy events and practices for students and their teachers when schooled writing is not an option?

In this piece for The Inside Track, we consider how schools in the United States have been educating the very youngest students to how colleges of teacher education are grappling with a transition to a new shelter in place at home and virtual teaching and learning during the global pandemic. This contrasts to the emergence of public environmental literacy events observed in the United Kingdom, specifically in the South of England. Over the course of the first six weeks of lockdown, the affordances of the range of these events and the influence of the specific, local cultures (Street, 1984) were documented, highlighting how the immediate physical and virtual environments appear to have become more significant during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As students and their teachers respond and react to new literacy experiences, we hope to expose potential points of intersection where students, with encouragement from their teachers, crafted new and hybrid literacy practices appropriated and recontextualized within new communicative space(s) (Dyson, 2001). Writing instructional practices across the world vary to some extent; in the United States, there are many similarities to what are considered best practices, despite each state holding different standards for writing instruction (Lacina, 2018). Teachers in the United States focus much more of their instructional time in the area of reading, instead of writing (Edwards, 2003; Puranik, Al Otaiba, Sidler, and Greulich, 2014). However, much

has been written about teacher planning and instruction with process writing instruction, such as writers' workshop (Troia, Lin, Cohen, & Monroe, 2011). Within a writers' workshop classroom, the teacher uses literature as a model for writing (Lacina & Espinosa, 2010); the teacher teaches minilessons and scaffolds the teaching of writing. Researchers also have noted the importance of teaching writing within the content areas (Fisher & Frey, 2020) and the need to teach using the new literacies (Lacina & Block, 2012). Researchers who study writing instructional practices have found that there is great variance between teachers' writing instructional practices (Cutler & Graham, 2008); with such variance,

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there are also connections between teachers' writing instructional practices and their beliefs about teaching writing. Students' out-of-school literacy lives often demonstrate a broader conceptualization of writing than is displayed in their school writing (Chamberlain, 2019; Dyson, 2020). Current definitions of literacy appear to mean reading, not writing. It is easier to test, measure, and compare reading proficiency than writing accomplishments. However, writing is better positioned as purposeful in the lives of students and reflected through sociocultural and situated identities where writing is framed as a mode of social or personal action (Prior, 2006; Rowsell & Pahl, 2007). The National Literacy Trust's recent research based on over 4,000 questionnaire responses (Clark, Picton, & Lant, 2020) of children and young people in the United Kingdom suggested that new and positive writing habits have been developed during this time of lockdown. Educators have studied students' consumption and production of texts through a framework of multimodality in both in- and out-of-school contexts (Lenters, 2016, 2018). Studying a framework of multimodality in the area of literacy has helped educators rethink the way literacy is instructed in school spaces (Kendrick & McKay, 2004; Kress, 1997; Lenters, 2018). However, rather than polarizing the literacies acquired in different settings, those of school and away from school, which serves only to limit our understanding of such encounters, the learnings from the examples in this piece aim to make visible the unique nature of students' interactions with their writing (Reder & Davilla, 2005) when schooled literacy (Cook-Gumperz, 2006) is not an option.

Multimodal Learning and Literacy

The following two examples from the United States illustrate diverse learning environments and examples of students and future teachers as they transitioned to virtual learning. First, we describe a university laboratory school located at a private liberal arts university in Fort Worth, Texas. The second example, from a teacher education program located at a large state institution in Ohio, describes the transition to a virtual environment.

Starpoint School at Texas Christian University

Jan Lacina, Jo Beth Jimerson, Kim Payne, Remy Zingale

Starpoint School is a university laboratory school located at Texas Christian University (TCU) in Fort Worth, Texas. Starpoint School provides students with learning disabilities, ages 6–11, with specialized instruction taught by faculty with training in dyslexia and related reading disabilities, as well as attention-deficit (hyperactivity) disorder. The school also serves as an on-campus site for TCU College of Education teacher candidates as they receive guidance in teaching students with learning disabilities.

As COVID-19 impacted our university community, Starpoint School transitioned to a new online environment, continuing with a focus on literacy learning. The entire staff at Starpoint School met daily to thoughtfully plan instructional strategies, to discuss strategies for strengthening parent–teacher communication, to ensure the provision of critical counseling services, and to continue to build the overall school community culture. Led by Interim Director Jo Beth Jimerson and Assistant Director Kim Payne, this work came together in a completely virtual school community.

Sustaining a Sense of Community

Already a close-knit community, some of the aspects for developing community were transitioned to a virtual environment. For example, the virtual conferencing platform Zoom was used to hold weekly parent–teacher coffees, during which parents learned about supporting their children with disabilities in remote learning contexts from TCU special education faculty. Recognizing that students sheltered at home had increased need for social engagement with peers, and to support students' social and emotional needs, teachers organized Zoom lunches for their classes and between classes at Starpoint and another TCU laboratory school, KinderFrogs (which serves young students with Down syndrome). School leaders and staff considered areas in which they would like additional professional development while teaching and working in a new virtual environment; sessions were led by TCU faculty experts, on such topics as educational technology and writing instruction. Parent–teacher conferences also occurred in the Zoom platform, as did class meetings as showcased in Figure 1.

Jo Beth Jimerson, the interim director at Starpoint School and an associate professor of educational leadership, explained the transition to virtual schooling during COVID-19:

> In some ways, learning during the time of COVID-19 presented us with paradoxes. We had to rethink how we supported students as learners and as human

Figure 1
Zoom Class Session at Starpoint School

Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com.

beings—to support the whole child. Literacies seemed to be a doorway to learning and to easing anxieties. Students took turns creating "morning announcement" videos and often put a creative spin on how they shared weather facts and favorite quotes with their peers. As students listened to teachers read books and stories, they were able to hear familiar, soothing voices while they built listening and comprehension skills. Students wrote in virtual journals—sometimes with words on a page and sometimes by animating a drawing to tell their stories for them—and their journals opened up avenues for reflecting on the highs and lows of their weeks, academically, socially, and emotionally. Stories opened up safe avenues for students to talk about emotions as they could talk about characters, and situate their own fears and hopes within the context of a fictional narrative. Literacies in multiple formats helped us keep connected as a community.

Teachers and students remained flexible and open to new ways of literacy learning during this time period. Teachers and administrators maintained the importance of the whole child; not only the academic aspect of literacy learning is essential, but also the social and emotional aspects of learning cannot be forgotten.

Planning Instruction in a New Way

The third-level class at Starpoint is similar to U.S. second/third grade in public schools in the age range of the students and the content being learned. Literacy is a strong focus of this class both on campus and now during the new virtual environment. Teachers thoughtfully planned instruction for their students throughout the new online environment while using

the platform SeeSaw with built-in annotation tools to capture what students knew and to demonstrate their learning in various writing formats. Teachers sought for students to not only use SeeSaw to document their learning during a novel study but also to document their learning and understanding through reenacting scenes from the book, as depicted in Figure 2. SeesSaw also provided a way for students to respond to their reading in a written format during the virtual schooling experience. In the example in Figure 3, students used SeeSaw to illustrate their understanding of *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White.

Teachers at Starpoint School understand the importance of fluency development, with students in the primary levels and as they transition to the intermediate levels of the school. The strong relation between oral reading fluency and reading comprehension during the primary grades has been well documented through research (Sabatini, O'Reilly, Halderman, & Bruce, 2014) and is especially important for students of all ages at Starpoint. Teachers plan oral reading fluency practice to help in the building of decoding skills, which in turn supports prosody development and reading comprehension (Breznitz, 2006). During a study of *Charlotte's Web*, Mrs. Payne and Ms. Zingale designed instruction to support literacy development. With the readers in their classroom, it was important for students to hear fluent readers during a novel study as reading and writing instruction now moved online. Mrs. Payne and Ms. Zingale implemented a Mystery Reader program to support fluency development and prosody. A Mystery Reader is a parent, guardian, relative,

Figure 2
Charlotte's Web Display at Home

Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com.

Figure 3
Characteristics of Charlotte
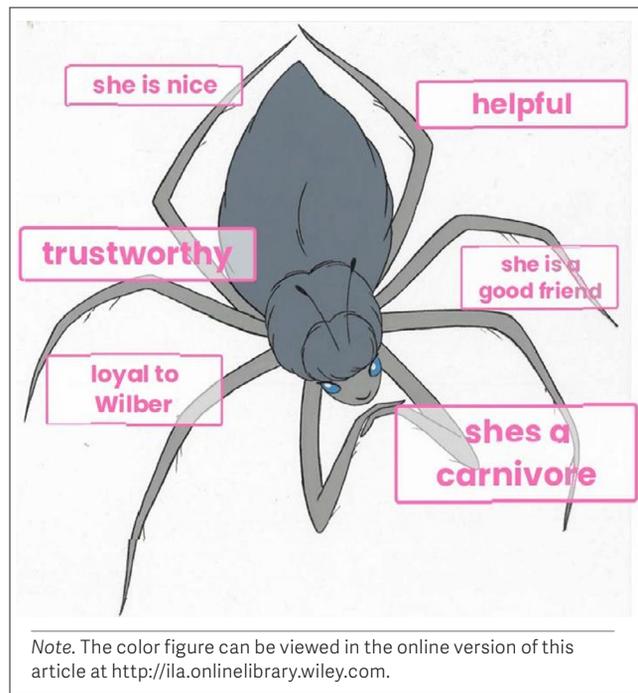
Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com.

sibling, close friend, or teacher who shares a favorite or well-liked children's book with the class. The role of the Mystery Reader is to remain anonymous until that person enters the classroom on the designated reading day. In this case, the Mystery Reader remained anonymous until reading in the new virtual environment. The graduate student who cotaught this class, Ms. Zingale, explained the benefits of the Mystery Reader:

> Mystery Reader helped the students feel a little bit of normalcy with getting a clue each day of the week, then the reader coming on Friday to our Zoom, and then they ate lunch with us. They got to guess who it was and talk to each other about who it might be, which kept them engaged with one another. It was something that they loved, and it didn't disappear like many things did due to the online learning platform.

Just like the Mystery Reader program, writing instruction also continued in a new platform through a virtual environment. Mrs. Payne, the classroom teacher, explained,

> Multimodal learning was important in a virtual format. It allowed students to demonstrate their level of understanding in a variety of ways. Daily journals, responses to our class novels, projects, and voice recordings gave information not only about literacy but also of the

individual child's interests and feelings during these uncertain times.

Multimodal texts communicate information not only through the linguistic mode but also through visuals, photos, drawings, graphics, and even video. In the third-level class at Starpoint, students conveyed their understanding of *Charlotte's Web* not only through the construction of text but also though their verbal presentation and illustrations, which included video elements, as noted in the following video clips created by the students: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NL1kOX44H78&feature=youtu.be and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OpZKFbYTN4s&feature=youtu.be.

In closing this example, although instruction moved to a format that most teachers and staff did not prefer, they came together to find strategies to support not only literacy learning but also strengthening an already close community of learners and their families. Students proudly posted their multimodal texts to culminate their novel book study, and this project documented their literacy learning in new ways. Students were no longer restricted to just print technology; they had the opportunity to document their learning through a linguistic mode, visual elements, drawings, and video production.

As the school prepared this past summer for the possibility of resuming a shelter in place in the fall and virtual schooling again, school leaders developed a COVID-19 instructional and transition plan to aim for a seamless transition from face-to-face instructional delivery to virtual learning at home for Starpoint students. Although far from the ideal, the reality of our current global pandemic forces teachers and schools to think and learn in new ways.

Transitioning to Online Literacy Teaching: Challenges and Opportunities

William P. Bintz

On March 16, 2020, I was sitting in my university office preparing to teach my graduate literacy course starting in 10 minutes. Suddenly, I received a university-wide text notifying faculty that starting immediately, all undergraduate and graduate courses were no longer to be conducted face-to-face. I knew students were already in the classroom; however, I had no choice but to pack my computer bag and go home.

The next morning, there was a whirlwind of information communicated electronically by university administration about next steps for faculty and students. Opportunities, consideration, and flexibility were major themes, especially in the context of virtual teaching, course expectations, course evaluations, and alternative grading options. Faculty were encouraged to revise syllabi and offer asynchronous and synchronous options for students (student communication via email, open forms, chat rooms, discussion boards, audio and video conferencing applications, collaborative team/group work, simulations, and Q&A sessions) and offer students alternative grading options, such as, pass/fail instead of traditional letter grades. To help do this, a variety of online workshops were quickly developed and offered to faculty and graduate teaching assistants, such as "Remote Instruction: Student Engagement" and "Remote Instruction: Course Delivery and Design Workshops."

Once I caught my breath, I realized that moving from face-to-face to 100% online raised important questions and challenges: Did my students have enough devices at home? Did they have internet at home? What about students who lived in rural areas without internet? If they had internet, did they have videotelephony and online chat software platforms sponsored by the university, such as Skype and Zoom? If not, could online instruction be provided through other internet platforms, such as Amazon fire sticks and gaming systems? I had very little experience with teaching online, but fortunately, my university provided much information and technical assistance for professors to not only teach online but also teach online in efficient and creative ways.

For example, I always require my graduate students to read and respond to self-selected professional literature, primarily peer-reviewed articles, on literacy topics relevant to the course. At times, I bring a collection of articles to the class and invite students in pairs to browse the articles and then select two or three to read and discuss with the whole class at the next class session. At other times, I invite them to self-select articles by accessing the databases on campus at the main library. Unfortunately, the main library was closed indefinitely because of COVID-19. Therefore, I adjusted the syllabus to now include directions for how students can access the main library databases from off campus.

Another example is that I always require my students to familiarize themselves with major

literature awards and award-winning literature. I do this because, over the years, when I ask students to identify a major literature award, they mostly name the Caldecott Medal or the Newbery Medal. Furthermore, although they can identify these awards, they know very little, if anything, about the history and purpose of them. Therefore, I bring to class an extensive collection of award-winning literature from my own professional library and share it with the whole class. I invite students to take note of all of the awards these books have won and to select one award to study in depth and report back to the class. In the spring semester, I had to transition this in-class literature award study to online. Specifically, I invited students to do the following:

- Access the American Library Association online (http://www.ala.org/). Click Awards, Grants & Scholarships. Then, click ALA Book, Print & Media Awards. On that page, you will find an alphabetical list of award names; for example, under the letter *B* is the Mildred L. Batchelder Award. Many of these are awards for outstanding pieces of literature. Take some time and review these major literature awards. Select one award that attracts your attention. Review the award to gain some expertise about it.

- Post your new expertise online about your selected award for others to learn and comment. Your post should include, but not be limited to, the following: What is the history of the award? What are the criteria for winning the award? What are some books that have won the award?

- Read one of the books from your selected award and post online why you think the book deserved to win the award. Because physical access to libraries are not permitted during COVID-19 lockdown, here are a few websites that can be used to borrow books identified as winners of a particular award: The Ohio Digital Library (http://ohdbks.overdrive.com), Internet Archive (http://archive.org), International Children's Digital Library (http://en.childrenslibrary.org), and National Emergency Library (http://blog.archive.org/national-emergency-library), as well as many state, local, and regional library websites, including the Kent Free Library (http://kentfreelibrary.org), Cuyahoga County Public Library (http://cuyahogalibrary.org), Kent State University Libraries (https://www.library.kent.edu), and Cleveland Public Library (http://cpl.org). Students can, of course, use their own personal collections of books and borrow books from students, teachers, and others to find books that have won a particular award.

- Read and respond to two different student online submissions that provided expertise about an award that was different from yours.

Still another example is that I always require my graduate students to conduct meaningful and thoughtful interviews of self-selected students in a grade or grade band in which the graduate students wish to eventually teach. In particular, they gain much knowledge from using interview instruments such as the Burke Reading Interview and a variety of literacy-based instructional strategies with students enrolled in the Curriculum and Instruction reading clinic. These instruments and strategies are usually conducted face-to-face; however, now they needed to be conducted online. To do this, I collaborated with the Early Childhood Program director to provide my graduate students with a list of parents who expressed interest in gaining additional literacy experiences for their children. The graduate students used this list as a resource to work with children online.

Most of my graduate students are practicing teachers. Like me, they also experienced challenges in moving from face-to-face to online instruction. For them, the content remained the same, but delivery of instruction changed extensively, especially in the area of writing. One high school English language arts teacher stated,

> I met with students via Zoom twice per week and adapted my course calendar for scheduled meetings and an individual to-do list. Going from five days per week of class to two, I had to choose and plan class time more carefully, balancing what instruction to deliver and what resources/activities to go under the independent portion. The most difficult part for me and my students was the lack of feedback I was able to give them as they worked. Typically, I meet with each student every week to confer or catch things to comment on just by walking around the room. As a writing teacher, this is a critical part of instruction. As my students finished their final writing project for the course, I did a mandatory conference over the course of a week with each student where they shared their screen and walked me through what they had so far. With 50 students, and using Zoom, this was EXHAUSTING and so time-consuming. Discussions were also a challenge via Zoom. You can't read the body language (or even see everyone), so people hesitate to throw out their opinions the same way they do in person.

Similarly, one elementary teacher stated,

Ordinarily, my students would read and reread a picture book, listen to an audiobook of it, work through new and interesting vocabulary words, complete pre- and post-reading activities, ask and answer lots of questions, and most importantly, have really cool discussions around a text. When instruction transitioned to online, I was challenged to figure out how to implement all of those things. In the meantime, I've been using a combination of online learning platforms. I try to find a video that will introduce and model a comprehension strategy, or I record myself introducing and modeling a comprehension strategy. Then, I assign a reading passage that has questions attached to it, for the students to practice the strategy on their own. My teaching has changed dramatically. It's hard for me to believe that what I am currently doing is even remotely engaging. But I'm not sure how to facilitate natural conversation around a text with students with special needs over the computer. It's challenging because I know that conversation and connections with a text are integral to learning.

Away From Schooled Writing

Liz Chamberlain

In addition to dramatic changes in teaching for educators and their students, students' interactions with literacy also appear to have been affected by the at-home nature of lockdown. When schooled writing is not an option, what types of multimodal practices do students choose to engage with, and how do they make these literacy events available to the wider public? In the weeks that followed lockdown, towns, cities, and villages across the United Kingdom began to take on a more colorful identity. Children and their families began to share their at-home literacy practices by posting in windows, on pavements, in gardens, in trees, and in local parks. At the start, the multimodal nature of these practices included words, pictures, numbers, posters, and chalked games in public spaces, but as weeks passed, writing events began to be presented through the rainbow lens with heartfelt messages of thanks to key workers punctuating the previously private into public writing examples. The examples shared in this piece form a small sample of a larger research project that aimed, over the first six-week period of lockdown, to document the range of public literacy practices and events created for others to see, either intentionally or as an afterthought.

Over the initial weeks of lockdown, the streets were quiet, but as March moved into April, writing and artwork began to emerge out of houses and spill over into gardens, on walls, and into public spaces. On daily walks and cycle rides on a six-mile radius of where I live, I began to document the found writing by photographing it in situ. I made a conscious decision to collect only writing that was obviously intended for a public audience. There were examples of writing posted in windows and in the trees of front gardens, but these artifacts were included only if it was possible to ask for verbal permission—often in the form of the universal mimed sign for "do you mind if I take a photograph?"—through kitchen or lounge room windows. Information about the wider literacy project that these figures form a part of will be shared when restrictions allow; only examples with explicit permission are included in this piece.

The definition of writing underpinning this project uses what Heath and Street (2008) called "those events and practices in which the written mode is still salient, yet embedded in other modes" (pp. 21–22). However, the project also takes a broader literacy lens, by including events related more broadly to reading and multimodality, such as Michael Rosen's *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*, and displayed responses to festivals or celebrations, such as the Christian festival of Easter that fell during data collection.

Across six weeks, over 60 unique writing artifacts were photographed, with the greatest number documented on April 10 and April 11 and again at a later date in May. In the beginning, the purpose of the writing appeared to be to entertain or communicate with the passing audience. There were chalked pavement games, teddy bears in windows or sitting in the front seat of cars going nowhere, painted stones and messages on paper-chain Easter eggs hung from trees, and children's names also featured. One family created a different daily scene in their front garden featuring an oversize teddy bear: One day he was in bed, and another day, he was climbing out of a window. In another village, a local teacher shared an idea she had read about and created a wildlife park in her front garden. Over the following week, other children took the same idea and made it their own: Different animals were chosen and researched, and informational posters were displayed, posing questions for passing visitors (see Figure 4). Parents reported younger siblings adapting the ideas for their own level, whereas older children appeared to be using school-learned literacy practices, as they set out their posters in the appropriate and familiar text-type format.

Figure 4
Giraffe Information Poster

Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com.

The obvious argument about these observed events is that the identity of the author remains unknown. An assumption had to be made about the potential age of the artifact's creator, but in some cases, there were parallel examples. For example, a pavement game in a local park was adult-initiated (see Figure 5), as a comment on Facebook revealed its author. A young child responded to the stimulus but did not copy her dad's writing; instead, she used the same medium of chalk to create her own picture of the Disney character Moana on a boat.

This crossover of adult/child text creation also appeared to evolve as the weeks passed. The shift from entertainment as the key purpose of the writing began to move into writing refracted through the specific nature of the pandemic. From the end of April, the majority of writing featured a rainbow, either explicitly (see Figure 6), or through the selection of rainbow font colors, or in direct messages to

Figure 5
Dad's Pavement Games

Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com.

Figure 6
National Health Service Rainbow Poster in House Window

Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com.

passersby. The rainbow symbol was adopted early in the United Kingdom as a sign of support for key workers, including those working for the National Health Service.

Children's absorption of health messages also appears in artifacts photographed during later weeks (see Figure 7), with Valerie's earnest appeal to passersby to respect the lockdown restrictions. Her writing pours out from the driveway of her house onto the pavement, and the reader has a sense of her impassioned plea that we, as her community, should abide by her request. The specific nature of lockdown led to an increase in public writing events marking a visible shift from the sub-rosa writing practices that children often engage with at home (Chamberlain, 2019). Within lockdown, there was an opportunity for children to engage in multimodal creative expression and to exercise agency over their writing, potentially a positive outcome of this unprecedented time. However, as is the nature of the English weather, two heavy downpours of rain washed the chalk writing away, cardboard posters

Figure 7
10-Year-Old Valerie's Message to Her Community

Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com.

became a sodden mess, and all that remained were brief reminders and remnants of those situated and meaningful writing practices.

Transitioning Back Into Formal Literacy

It was not just the rain that led to shifts in public literacy events as lockdown continued. In Fort Worth, Texas, we witnessed the beautiful drawings and out-of-school writing authored by children. We noticed a fairy garden, which included messages from fairies (children) to anyone who walked down the park path. Chalk drawings and messages filled driveways, and children walked the Texas neighborhood counting red hearts taped to each windowsill. For many children across the globe, home literacy practices soon transitioned to schooling online, including teacher education programs. At Starpoint School in Fort Worth, depending on the age of the student, the home-schooling day varied in time and seatwork at the computer. Staff thrived in finding the instruction to best meet the unique needs of their learners, and this practice moved to a virtual environment with success.

Conclusion

What has been learned about these new literacy practices from young writers, or as teaching and learning left classrooms and lecture theaters and transitioned from face-to-face to online instruction? By learning from the ways in which children chose to make visible their agentive writing lives during the time of lockdown, one positive outcome is to inform practitioners and policymakers as to the potential of students' writing repertoires when away from school. For the teacher educator, perhaps the most important lesson was best expressed in an email by one graduate student: "Hi, Dr. Bintz: On behalf of the class, I write to say that we miss you and each other." These students remind us that literacy is not a spectator sport but a social engagement. Online instruction is a valuable tool but cannot substitute, much less replace, a teacher. Teachers at Starpoint also recognized the value of social engagement, but despite the mode of delivery, they kept students at the heart of their instruction. A graduate student who cotaught the level 3 class at Starpoint School in Fort Worth summarized her learning as a teacher:

> Virtual learning taught me various platforms to use to keep children engaged in learning and ways to teach virtually. I learned how students can show me how they are learning math concepts or reading strategies in various ways. I also learned the importance of being in person with students beyond just learning. Many of my students struggled heavily emotionally through the weeks, and I started personally Zooming children to help out. This experience really helped me value in-person learning and the value it brings!

As we prepared for the fall semester, instruction continued to evolve with our unpredictable situation. For example, students at Starpoint School are required to wear a mask each day at school, as are their teachers. Wearing a mask poses new challenges to communication and interpretation of messages; we will continue to learn and adapt to this situation to best serve the students we teach. These new learnings make a valuable contribution to the anticipated shifts as to what primary education and its curriculum should look like for students and their educators in the post-COVID-19 world.

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