

POLICY BRIEF

Understanding K-3 Teachers' Literacy Instructional Practices During the Pandemic-Impacted 2020-21 School Year

Tanya S. Wright, EPIC, Michigan State University

Lori Bruner, University of Alabama

Amy Cummings, EPIC, Michigan State University

Katharine O. Strunk, EPIC, Michigan State University

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic deeply affected K-12 schooling during the 2020-21 school year, as educators worked to support students' learning while prioritizing the health and safety of children and adults. There has been a great deal of attention paid to the COVID-19 pandemic's negative effects on elementary literacy outcomes, and for good reason: English Language Arts (ELA) assessment scores have declined both nationally and in Michigan.¹

Early media and empirical reports suggest that remote or hybrid instruction was ineffective and led to negative achievement growth during the COVID-19 pandemic.² However, we know little about the actual literacy instruction teachers provided in elementary classrooms—whether remote or in-person—during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly from observations of instruction during this time. Without such evidence, it is difficult to truly understand what affected children's literacy progress during the COVID-19 pandemic. Understanding more about teachers' literacy instructional practices during this time can help educators and policymakers to best support children's literacy development in the aftermath of COVID-19 pandemic.

We examine literacy instruction in K-3 classrooms in Michigan during the pandemic-affected 2020-21 school year by combining data from statewide surveys of K-3 teachers before and during the 2020-21 school year with videos of classroom instruction across in-person, virtual, and hybrid instructional modalities. We ask four research questions:

1. How did teachers describe their literacy instruction before and during the pandemic-affected 2020-21 school year?
2. What literacy instructional practices did teachers implement during the pandemic-affected 2020-21 school year?
3. How did teachers' implementation of these literacy practices align with research on early grades literacy instruction?
4. How did the amount of instructional time teachers provided and the modalities in which they delivered instruction influence their instructional practices during the 2020-21 school year?

Understanding more about teachers' literacy instructional practices can help educators and policymakers to best support children's literacy development in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

DATA AND METHODS

We employ an instrumental case study design to examine the literacy instruction K-3 teachers in Michigan provided during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.³ We rely on statewide survey data from teachers to understand how they described their literacy instruction before and during the 2020-21 school year. We have data from 7,110 K-3 teachers (a 43% response rate) in 2019-20 and from 5,811 K-3 teachers (a 30% response rate) in 2020-21.

To understand how teachers enacted literacy instruction across different modalities, we collected and analyzed 2,330 minutes of classroom videos from 25 teachers, along with 162 classroom artifacts (e.g., student work, links to virtual classroom libraries) and electronic surveys to help us evaluate practices that could not be observed in the videos. Teachers varied in their instructional modality: 12 were teaching in-person, six were teaching virtually, and seven were teaching in a hybrid format. The teachers also varied

across grade levels, with two kindergarten, 12 1st-grade, six 2nd-grade, and five 3rd-grade teachers.⁴

We compare the instructional practices teachers used before and during the COVID-19 pandemic in various modalities to eight research-based literacy instructional practices outlined in Michigan's *Essential Instructional Practices in Early Literacy for Grades K-3*.⁵ These are:

- Fostering **literacy motivation and engagement** within and across lessons,
- Engaging students in **read-alouds** of age-appropriate books and other materials,
- Teaching via **small group and individual reading instruction**,
- Building **phonological awareness**,
- Providing explicit instruction in **letter-sound relationships**,
- Providing research- and standards-aligned **writing instruction**,
- Engaging children in efforts to build **vocabulary and content knowledge**, and
- Providing abundant **reading materials and reading opportunities** in the classroom.

KEY FINDINGS

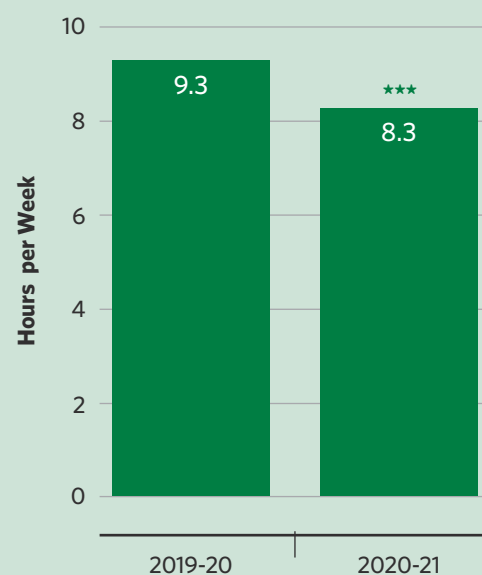
Teachers Spent Less Time on Literacy Instruction During the 2020-21 School Year Than Before to the Pandemic

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, in the 2019-20 school year, teachers reported spending an average of 9.3 hours per week on literacy instruction. In 2020-21, teachers spent, on average, one fewer hour a week on literacy instruction, reporting an average of 8.3 hours.

Regardless of Modality, Teachers Reported Substantial Challenges to Providing Literacy Instruction During the COVID-19 Pandemic

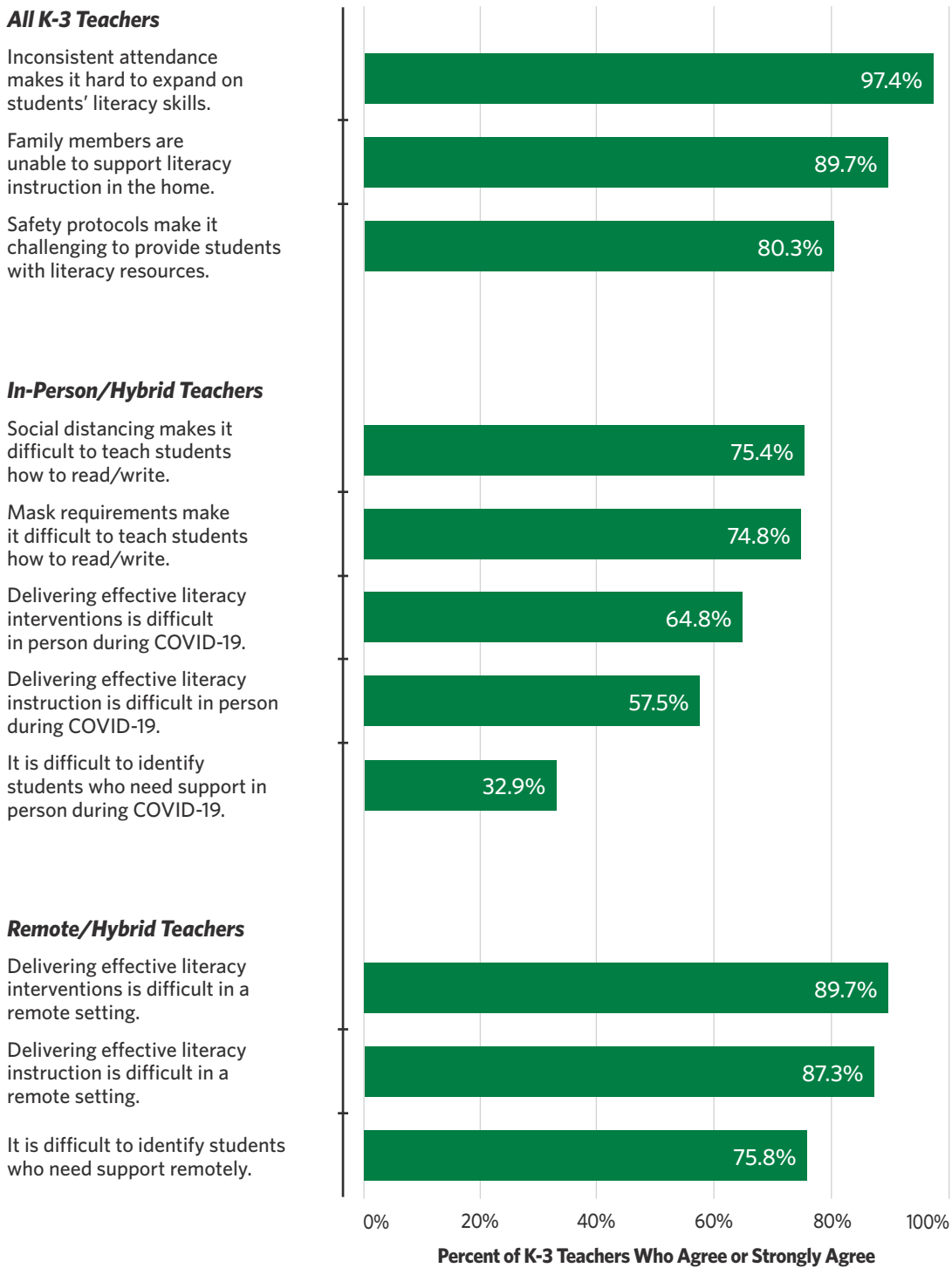
Teachers reported delivering literacy instruction across a range of modalities: 42% were primarily in-person, 33% were hybrid, and 26% were remote. Teachers in different modalities held varied perceptions of how the COVID-19 pandemic affected literacy instruction. Most remote and hybrid teachers reported that delivering effective literacy instruction and interventions was difficult in a remote setting and that it was difficult to identify students who needed additional support. Meanwhile, teachers delivering in-person or hybrid instruction reported that social distancing and mask requirements made it difficult to teach students how to read and write. Regardless of modality, however, nearly all teachers reported that inconsistent attendance made it hard to expand on students' literacy skills.

FIGURE 1. Hours K-3 Teachers Spent on Literacy Instruction in a Typical Week



*Note: Teachers were asked, "How much time do you spend on literacy instruction (i.e., reading and writing in a typical week)?" $p < 0.10$ +, $p < 0.05$ *, $p < 0.01$ **, $p < 0.001$ *** indicates statistically significant differences between 2019-20 and 2020-21. Sources: 2019-20 and 2020-21 EPIC Read by Grade Three Law surveys of educators*

FIGURE 2. K-3 Teachers' Perceived Effects of COVID-19 Pandemic on Literacy Instruction



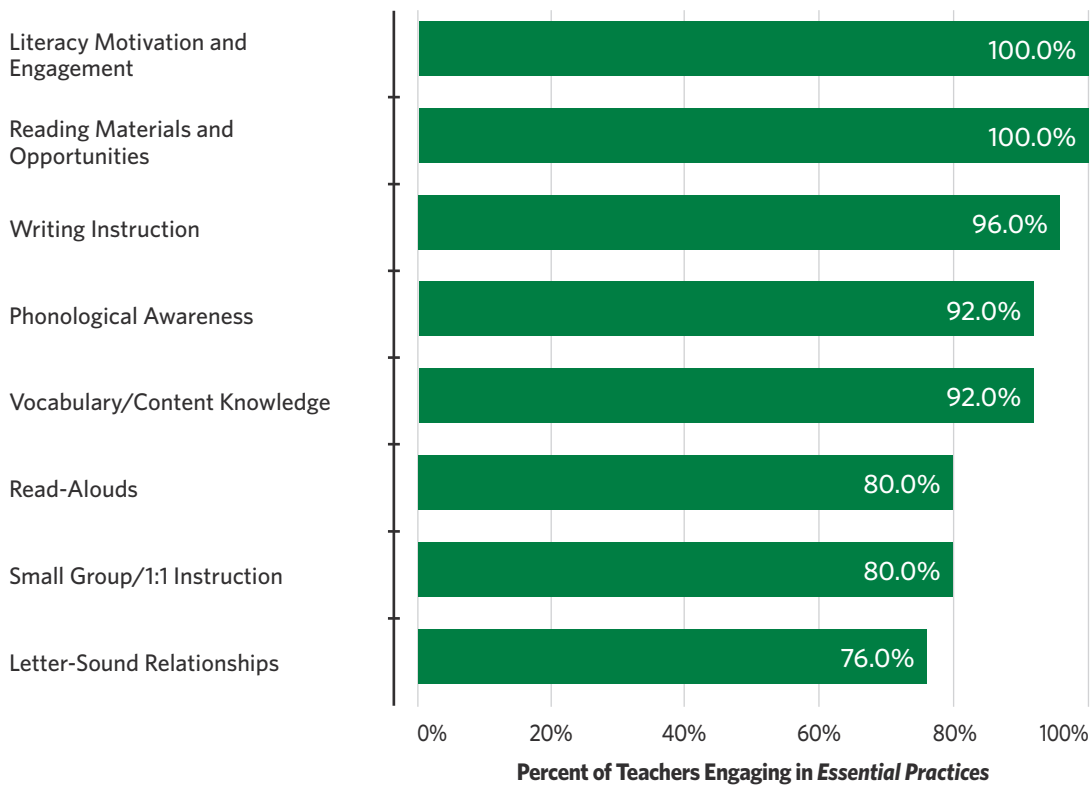
Note: Teachers were asked, "To what extent do you agree with the following statements about how the COVID-19 pandemic affected your literacy instruction?" (Strongly disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly agree) Source: 2020-21 EPIC Read by Grade Three Law survey of educators

Teachers Implemented *Essential Practices* Before and During the Pandemic-Affected 2020-21 School Year

Although teachers reported spending less time on literacy instruction during the 2020-21 school year, we observed teachers implementing the focus areas outlined in the *Essential Practices* at comparable rates as they reported in the statewide surveys in 2019-20, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶ In 2019-20, over 92% reported using each of the eight *Essential Practices* we examined.

Observational data provide evidence that teachers' literacy instruction in 2020-21 was also well aligned with *Essential Practices*. As shown in Figure 3, we observed over three-quarters of teachers engaging in each of the *Essential Practices*. Importantly, we did not observe systematic differences in the percentage of teachers engaging in these practices across modalities; teachers instructing students in-person, in a hybrid setting, and remotely all engaged in the *Essential Practices* at similar rates.

FIGURE 3. Percent of K-3 Teachers Engaging in *Essential Practices*



Source: EPIC 2020-21 observational study of literacy coaching

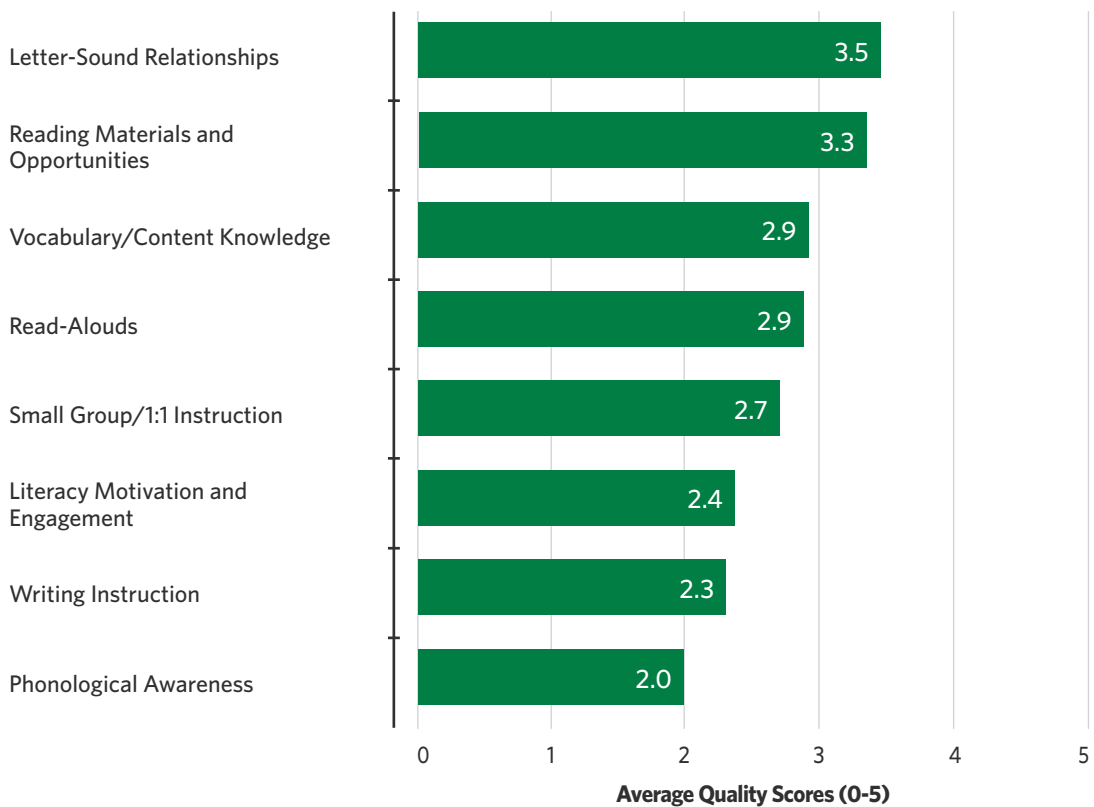
Importantly, teachers who were afforded more time for literacy instruction implemented a greater number of recommended practices within each focus area in the *Essential Practices* document. For instance, while 96% of teachers provided writing instruction, teachers who had more time for literacy instruction were able to implement a greater number of research-aligned writing practices

during a lesson, such as providing explicit instruction in the writing process (e.g., researching, revising), offering children opportunities to study mentor texts, and providing explicit instruction in writing mechanics (e.g., spelling strategies, sentence construction). This suggests that teachers may have contended with reduced instructional time by focusing their attention on a select few recommended practices for each literacy focus area instead of implementing a range of practices.

The Quality of Literacy Instruction During the COVID-19 Pandemic Varied Widely

We measure quality of instruction using the evidence-based practices outlined in the *Essential Practices*. An average quality score of “3” (on a 5-point scale) represents “proficient” instruction. As shown in Figure 4, the quality of teachers’ literacy instructional practices varied. Teachers in our sample received the highest average quality scores for instruction in letter-sound relationships and for providing reading materials and opportunities. In contrast, they received the lowest average quality scores for writing instruction and instruction in phonological awareness. These areas of literacy instruction might serve as a focal point for ongoing teacher professional learning.

FIGURE 4. Average Quality Scores for Teachers’ Literacy Instruction



Note: The maximum quality score that teachers could receive was five indicating strong alignment with research. Source: EPIC 2020-21 observational study of literacy coaching

Two additional findings related to instructional quality may have implications for policy and practice. First, we did not observe differences in teachers' average quality scores based on modality. Second, we did not find that the amount of instructional time was related to the *quality* of teachers' literacy instruction. We observed some teachers in our sample providing research-aligned literacy instruction in relatively short periods of time (e.g., 30 minutes). Therefore, instructional time was related to the range of *Essential Practices* that teachers addressed but not the quality of instruction provided.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Despite the relatively small number of teachers in our observational study, our findings provide some important considerations for policy and practice. First, our study calls into question some existing theories about instructional modality that have been posed to explain why the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected literacy outcomes for many elementary students. We observed some virtual and hybrid teachers in our sample implementing literacy instruction that was well-aligned with research. These teachers typically used simple technology tools (e.g., breakout rooms) to enact research-aligned literacy instructional practices seen in traditional in-person classrooms (e.g., small group instruction). Therefore, it seems that teachers who knew how to enact research-aligned instruction found ways to use technology to continue to do so.

Second, the quality of teachers' instructional practices varied within each modality. Therefore, continued efforts to improve the quality of instruction in K-3 classrooms are crucial for supporting children's literacy development in the aftermath of COVID-19 pandemic. These efforts should include ensuring that teachers have access to high-quality curriculum materials and ongoing professional learning opportunities, including literacy coaching.

Finally, teachers reported spending an average of one hour less per week on literacy instruction in 2020-21 than they did in 2019-20. While instructional time did not seem related to the quality of teachers' instruction, our results suggest that teachers who were afforded more time for literacy instruction were able to enact a greater number of research-aligned literacy instructional practices. It will be important to provide more time for teachers' literacy instruction in the years to come.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Kuhfeld, M., Soland, J., & Lewis, K. (2022). *Test score patterns across three COVID-19-impacted school years*. (EdWorkingPaper No. 22-521). Annenberg Institute at Brown University. <https://doi.org/10.26300/ga82-6v47>; MDE. (2021, August 31). *Disrupted learning during the pandemic causes dip in state assessment scores*. Michigan Department of Education. https://www.michigan.gov/mde/0,4615,7-140-37818_34785-566928--,00.html; National Assessment of Educational Progress. (2022). *Reading and mathematics scores decline during COVID-19 pandemic*. National Center for Education Statistics. <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/highlights/ltt/2022/>
- 2 Darling-Aduana, J., Woodyard, H. T., Sass, T. R., & Barry, S. S. (2022). *Learning-mode choice, student engagement, and achievement growth during the COVID-19 pandemic*. (EdWorkingPaper No. 22-536). <https://doi.org/10.26300/jxcj-gs73>; Goldstein, D. (2020, June 5). Research shows students falling months behind during virus disruptions. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/05/us/coronavirus-education-lost-learning.html>; Huffman, K. (2020, March 27). Homeschooling during the coronavirus will set back a generation of children. *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/coronavirus-homeschooling-will-hurt-students-badly/2020/03/27/f639882a-6f62-11ea-b148-e4ce3fbd85b5_story.html; Kuhfeld, M., Soland, J., Tarasawa, B., Johnson, A., Ruzek, E., & Liu, J. (2020). Projecting the potential impact of COVID-19 school closures on academic achievement. *Educational Researcher*, 49(8), 549–565. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X20965918>; The New York Times Editorial Board. (2020, April 16). 50 million kids can't attend school. What happens to them? *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/16/opinion/coronavirus-schools-closed.html>
- 3 Baxter, P., & Jack, S. (2008). Qualitative case study methodology: Study design and implementation for novice researchers. *The Qualitative Report*, 13(4), 544–559. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2008.1573>; Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Sage.
- 4 More details about how we analyzed the data can be found in the working paper: <https://epicedpolicy.org/understanding-k-3-teachers-literacy-instructional-practices-during-the-pandemic-impacted-2020-21-school-year/>
- 5 We do not examine the other two focus areas in the *Essential Instructional Practices in Early Literacy: Grades K-3* because we could not fully evaluate these practices using our data collection methods. In particular, we were unable to observe teachers' work around *observation and assessment* and *collaboration with families*. ELTF. (2016). *Essential instructional practices in early literacy: Grades K to 3*. Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators General Education Leadership Network Early Literacy Task Force. https://www.gomaisa.org/downloads/gelndocs/k-3_literacy_essentials.pdf
- 6 ELTF. (2016). *Essential instructional practices in early literacy: Grades K to 3*. Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators General Education Leadership Network Early Literacy Task Force. https://www.gomaisa.org/downloads/gelndocs/k-3_literacy_essentials.pdf



Education Policy Innovation Collaborative

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY
236 Erickson Hall | 620 Farm Lane
East Lansing, MI 48824

(517) 884-0377
EPICedpolicy@msu.edu
www.EPICedpolicy.org