On the fly: Adapting quickly to emergency remote instruction in a family literacy programme

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Abstract
The COVID-19 pandemic has led to extraordinary changes in family literacy instruction, forcing face-to-face programmes to shift rapidly (or “on the fly”) to online, remote instruction. This study is one of the few on online teaching and learning in family literacy and, to the knowledge of the authors, the first on emergency remote instruction in a family literacy programme during the COVID-19 pandemic. This article examines how the Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy at The Pennsylvania State University in the United States has responded to the pandemic by converting its face-to-face family literacy classes into emergency remote instruction using online platforms. Serving eight immigrant families in 2019–2020 who live in the State College area in central Pennsylvania, the Family Pathways programme includes adult education, parent education and interactive parent–child literacy activities. The article discusses how teachers created online learning opportunities for parents and children to learn together, the strategies and resources instructors used to teach remotely, how challenges such as discomfort with technology were addressed, and what has been learned from the experience. Although COVID-19 presents unprecedented challenges for educators and learners in family literacy programmes more broadly, it has also compelled instructors in this particular programme to use remote instruction creatively and has revealed the critical importance of family literacy programmes as an educational support system for low-income and immigrant families.

Keywords Adult basic education · COVID-19 pandemic · Distance education · Emergency remote teaching · Emergency remote instruction · Family literacy

Résumé
À la volée : adaptation rapide à l’urgence du télé-enseignement dans le cadre d’un programme d’alphabétisation familiale – La pandémie de COVID 19 a entraîné des
changements extraordinaires en matière d’alphabétisation familiale, contraignant les programmes en présentiel à passer rapidement (pour ainsi dire, à la volée) à un mode d’enseignement à distance en ligne. Cette étude est l’une des rares à aborder l’enseignement et l’apprentissage en ligne en matière d’alphabétisation et, à la connaissance des auteures, elle est la première qui porte sur l’enseignement à distance dans le cadre d’un programme d’alphabétisation familiale durant la pandémie de COVID-19. Le présent article se penche sur la réponse que l’Institut Goodling de recherche en alphabétisation familiale de la Pennsylvania State University (USA) a apporté à la pandémie en transformant, à chaud, ses cours d’alphabétisation familiale en présentiel en cours à distance par le biais de plateformes en ligne. Le programme Family Pathways, qui accueillait en 2019–2020 huit familles immigrées habitant près de State College, une circonscription administrative dans le centre de la Pennsylva-nie, comporte des volets d’éducation des adultes, d’éducation parentale et d’activités interactives d’alphabétisation parents-enfants. Il examine différents aspects de ce programme : comment des enseignants ont élaboré des offres d’apprentissage en ligne pour permettre aux parents et aux enfants d’apprendre ensemble; les stratégies et ressources utilisées par les enseignants dans leurs cours à distance; comment les défis, comme le fait d’être mal à l’aise avec la technologie, ont été abordés et quels sont les leçons tirées de cette expérience. Bien que la COVID-19 pose plus globalement des défis sans précédent aux éducateurs et aux apprenants des programmes d’alphabétisation familiale, elle a aussi obligé les enseignants de ce programme particulier à faire un usage créatif du télé-enseignement et révélé l’importance décisive des programmes d’alphabétisation familiale pour offrir un système de soutien éducatif à des familles immigrées et disposant de faibles revenus.

Introduction

Distance education (DE) – especially the kind delivered through radio and television – has been used for decades to provide adult literacy education, particularly in lower-income countries (Aderinoye 2008). Today, DE is increasingly offered online via computers, mobile (cell) phones, tablets and other digital devices. DE classes are typically planned and designed months beforehand, whereas emergency remote teaching is “a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances” (Hodges et al. 2020, n.p.). The COVID-19 pandemic offers a distinctive opportunity to explore how adult basic education (ABE)1 and family literacy2 programmes have moved to emergency remote teaching.

1 Adult basic education (ABE) refers to an array of educational services offering adults the opportunity to acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills, as well as language skills, thus enabling them to become fully participating members of their community.
2 Family literacy emerged in the late 1980s in the United States (US). Family literacy or learning includes programmes, services or activities that provide education for both adults and children, encourage reading in families and/or help parents support their children’s education. From 1988 to 2011, many family literacy programmes were funded by federal Even Start legislation. Even Start integrated “early childhood education, adult literacy (adult basic and secondary-level education and instruction for English language learners), parenting education, and interactive parent and child literacy activities for low-
This article examines how instructors at the Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy (GI) at The Pennsylvania State University have responded to the pandemic by converting face-to-face family literacy classes into online, remote instruction. As researchers at GI, we used a case study approach to respond to four research questions:

1. How were DE strategies, digital tools and online resources in the Family Pathways programme used to provide remote instruction to families?
2. How did the family literacy instructors and programme help parents and children continue learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. What instructional challenges did instructors encounter, and how were they addressed?
4. What was learned from this experience that can inform others using remote instruction and DE modalities to support families?

To address these questions, the instructors (Anna Kaiper-Marquez and Emily Wolfe; the first and second authors of this article) analysed and reflected on their emergency remote teaching practices. The author team then collectively identified wider implications for family literacy.

We argue that although the pandemic has presented unprecedented challenges for adult educators and learners in the United States (US) and around the world, it has also compelled instructors to use remote instruction creatively and has revealed the critical importance of family literacy programmes as an educational support system for families.

**Literature review**

This section begins with a summary of insights from very recent literature on a new teaching mode termed “emergency remote instruction”. There is no published research on this type of teaching in our specific field of interest, because modern-day ABE and family literacy programmes have never experienced a global pandemic. Since remote instruction and DE share some similar instructional strategies, technologies and challenges, we also review pertinent literature on DE in ABE and family literacy, including parent education and parent–child interactive literacy activities (ILAs).

Footnote 2 (continued)

income families” (US Department of Education 2014, para 1). Although this four-component model is still widespread, many other family literacy models exist. See Gadsden (2017) on the development of family literacy in the US, and Hanemann (2015) for examples of international family literacy.
Emergency remote teaching

The term emergency remote teaching (or instruction) was coined in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Online distance education is an established, planned approach to designing educational content and using a suite of instructional strategies for online learners, whereas “emergency remote teaching should be considered a temporary solution to an immediate problem” (Bozkurt and Sharma 2020, p. ii) – in this case, pandemic-induced educational disruptions. Thus, emergency remote teaching and online distance education are not synonymous. Although focused on formal education in K-12 schools and higher education, the emerging literature on emergency remote instruction includes teaching and planning recommendations pertinent to adult education. These include engaging in “creative problem solving” (Hodges et al. 2020, n.p.), providing active learning opportunities (Quality Matters 2020), providing scaffolding and cognitive aids (Pohan 2020), fostering community and collaboration among learners (Pohan 2020; Quality Matters 2020), creating “a climate of empathy and care” through “emotional presence” (Bozkurt and Sharma 2020, p. iii), and providing adequate training and support for teachers (Karalis 2020).

A webinar sponsored by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL 2020) highlighted how the pandemic has affected family and community learning in Poland, Ireland, Germany and Pakistan. Salient insights included the expectation for parents and caregivers – particularly mothers and older girls – to assume a more active role in young children’s education at home and revealed challenges related to low parental and child literacy rates. Programmatic and policy responses included supporting social and emotional learning, providing self-directed distance learning, organising online meetings for families and experts (e.g. psychologists, educators), and providing creative family learning opportunities (e.g. online stories series with actors reading fairy tales, online science centres, family music projects). These practices have emerged in various UNESCO Learning Cities, for whom the webinar was organised. Sharing their experiences with these new forms of family learning, programme representatives highlighted the importance of cultivating a learning environment at home.

Distance education in adult basic education

In US-based ABE programmes, DE is nearly always online and asynchronous, meaning that teachers and students do not meet at the same time. There are four DE models:

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3 K-12 refers to education from Kindergarten (K) to grade 12, the final year of secondary school in the US.

4 UNESCO learning cities are part of “an international policy-oriented network” that “promotes lifelong learning for all”. See https://uil.unesco.org/lifelong-learning/learning-cities [accessed 2 September 2020]. Established in 2015, the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC) has more than 200 members.
(1) pure (no in-class instruction);
(2) blended (DE and in-class instruction are integrated);
(3) hybrid (online curriculum is not necessarily aligned with in-class instruction); and
(4) supplemental (online work is optional and outside of regular class time) (Murphy et al. 2017; Vanek et al. 2019).

Online instruction typically involves approved (commercial) products rather than teacher-created content. Instructors also use various online tools and resources to support and communicate with learners. The blended model is considered most effective and prevalent in ABE; structured programmes with in-person instruction combined with DE tend to be more beneficial than the DE model using digital technologies alone, particularly for beginner-level learners and those who need more guidance and support (Murphy et al. 2017).

Empirical studies indicate several benefits of DE. With flexible delivery, DE can serve geographically remote learners (Prins et al. 2012) and allow students to work at their own pace (Murphy et al. 2017; Prins et al. 2012). Online DE products can help teachers “identify struggling students”, “provide immediate feedback” and “differentiate instruction” based on students’ needs, thus helping to close educational gaps (Murphy et al. 2017, p. 31; see also Newman et al. 2015). As learners’ comfort with technology and their confidence in using it grows, their DE experiences can motivate them to continue learning (Porter and Sturm 2006) and apply their knowledge to real-life tasks (Rosen and Vanek 2017).

Many of the hallmarks of high-quality DE in ABE overlap with recommendations for remote instruction (as described above). Developing a consistent, personal teacher–learner relationship with regular communication is critical for enrolment, retention and learning in DE (Gungor and Prins 2011; Inverso et al. 2017; Porter and Sturm 2006). For example, a meta-analysis showed that instructors’ involvement and active online presence predicted DE programme effectiveness and learning outcomes (Zhao et al. 2005). DE teachers also need to build community among learners, for instance, by using communication applications (apps) such as WhatsApp (Rosen and Stewart 2015). In addition, DE instructors should provide meaningful, relevant, high-quality learning material (Inverso et al. 2017; Vanek et al. 2019).

Digital access is a pervasive challenge in online DE in ABE and online remote instruction. To participate in online platforms, learners need to access the internet and computers or digital devices, however, this is inequitably distributed by income, formal education, ethnicity and geographic location (Ryan 2018). Access is not only material; it also includes other domains: mental (e.g. anxiety stemming from limited basic computer experience), skills (e.g. limited knowledge of how to use digital devices) and usage (e.g. limited opportunities to use technologies) (Van Dijk and Hacker 2003), as well as the ability to use technology to solve problems (Vanek et al. 2019). Since smartphones have become widespread and mobile apps for

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5 A *meta-analysis* is a statistical procedure that combines and analyses data from multiple studies to develop a conclusion with stronger statistical significance.
learning are increasing, using mobile devices is one way to lessen the digital divide (Inverso et al. 2017; Rosen and Vanek 2017).

Because some learners have limited experience with digital technologies, teachers should assess their readiness for DE (Gungor and Prins 2011; Vanek et al. 2019). They should also provide well-planned orientations and continuous technical support (Porter and Sturm 2006); however, these may not be feasible in emergency remote teaching. Lastly, since DE depends on instructors who can use technology effectively, high-quality professional development is needed (Gungor and Prins 2011; Newman et al. 2015).

Next, we turn to DE in family literacy, parent education and ILAs. We identified few studies on this topic, which underscores the need for more research.

**Distance education in family literacy, parent education and interactive literacy activities**

Research on distance learning for family literacy programmes is scarce. The available literature concentrates on integrating technology into the family, the educational possibilities of technology (at home or in a programme), and/or the need for programmes to foster families’ digital literacy skills (e.g. Lynch and Prins forthcoming; Marsh et al. 2017; Rideout 2014; Stephen et al. 2013). Similar to Marsh et al. (2017), we “use the term ‘digital’ in relation to literacy to reflect the way in which reading and writing practices are increasingly mediated by new technologies in the new media age” (Ibid., p. 47). This research shows that in wealthier countries, digital technologies are already integrated into most families’ lives, making online DE or remote instruction a viable delivery method for family literacy.

Typically, parent education and ILAs are delivered face-to-face (Debruin-Parecki 2009); however, COVID-19 has reinforced the need for different delivery methods. In one of the only studies examining DE in family literacy, Beschorner and Hutchison (2016) compared the experiences and outcomes of adult learners completing a parent education class through face-to-face classes with those who had received online instruction. The differences in parental experiences included participants’ characteristics (various family members attended in-person classes, but only mothers attended online), attendance (higher for online classes) and social networking opportunities (face-to-face participants valued these opportunities more). However, the children of participants in both groups performed similarly, indicating that both methods were equally effective for teaching *dialogic* reading (i.e. shared reading in which the adult and child engage in an active conversation about the story) (Whitehurst et al. 1994).

A key focus of family literacy programmes is the opportunity for parents and children to interact to enhance children’s language and print literacy skills, while also allowing parents to practise what they have learned in adult education. Coupled with parent education, ILAs are opportunities for parents to discover how to positively influence their children’s learning and development. Research has consistently demonstrated that parent involvement enhances children’s language and print literacy development (Fan and Chen 2001; Sénéchal and LeFevre 2002), and that
shared reading is related to language, literacy and other academic skills development (Bus et al. 1995; Shalaadian et al. 2018).

Recognising that families already incorporate digital literacies in their everyday lives (Marsh et al. 2017; Rideout 2014), the Digital Parenting Workgroup at the University of Wisconsin (Clarkson 2017) produced a parent education programme (eParenting®) that combined online and face-to-face learning opportunities, focusing on “meaningful, positive uses of digital media with young children” (Clarkson 2017, p. 1). Both the face-to-face and online classes helped parents learn new parenting ideas and techniques for using digital media. This programme, along with Beschorner and Hutchinson’s (2016) study, demonstrates the need for further research on providing parent education online because this mode of teaching appears effective and there are myriad online teaching tools and learning platforms available.

Drawing on behavioural science insights regarding what researchers in that field term “nudges” (Hummel and Maedche 2019),6 family literacy programmes have also used text messaging and/or e-mailing to reach parents with tips and ideas for parenting and ILAs, and reminders about classes, resources and activities. For instance, parents in Head Start (a US early childhood education programme for low-income families) who received text messages about child activities as well as parent encouragement, engaged in more learning activities with their children compared to parents who did not receive messages (Hurwitz et al. 2015). Similarly, an eight-month text-messaging intervention showed that parents’ home literacy engagement and school involvement increased (York et al. 2019). Finally, in a randomised experiment to prevent summer (holiday) reading loss, parents received text messages with ideas for at-home literacy activities (Kraft and Monti-Nussbaum 2017). Consequently, attendance at parent–teacher conferences (interviews) increased, as did reading comprehension for third and fourth graders (but not first and second graders).7 These studies emphasise the importance of supplementing DE and remote instruction parent education with targeted text messages about family literacy resources and activities.

**Case study background: the Family Pathways programme**

Launched in July 2017 in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, in the US, GI’s Family Pathways programme expanded to the central Pennsylvanian town of State College in January 2019 with funding from the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE), Division of Adult Education. Normally, the programme components included face-to-face instruction in adult and parent education, face-to-face and take-home ILAs for parents and children to learn together, and early childhood education (children are required to enrol in an early childhood education programme or in school

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6 In the context of behavioural science, a *nudge* is a small action designed to encourage or persuade people to make specific choices without taking away their sense of freedom. In this case, text messages and e-mails were used to “nudge” learners to participate in classes and activities.

7 Internationally, first and second graders are also referred to as students in Years 1 and 2, while third and fourth graders are students in Years 3 and 4.
– kindergarten to third grade). A university town, State College is home to many international families. In 2019–20, the *Family Pathways* programme served eight immigrant families from China, Egypt, Iran, Japan, Panama and Turkey. The parents had second to fifth grade reading levels in English, and their educational attainment ranged from high school to post-secondary. Children (aged 12 months to eight years) were enrolled in different early childhood facilities or schools throughout the State College area. Classes were taught by two instructors (the first and second authors of this article: Anna Kaiper-Marquez [adult education/English language development] and Emily Wolfe [parent education/ILAs]).

Before the outbreak of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic and the issue of the statewide stay-at-home order in Pennsylvania (mid-March 2020), classes were held twice per week; each session included 2.5 hours of adult education and 1 hour of parent education. Face-to-face ILAs (with parents and children) were held on evenings, weekends or when schools were closed. The adult education, parent education and ILA components often had integrated themes such as environmental and social justice issues, culturally relevant topics and school engagement. PowerPoint slides were used to organise adult education classes, which typically included an introduction and check-in, warm-up activity, homework review, and a mini lesson with accompanying exercises and readings. Online videos and website activities were also frequently used in classes, and instructors organised a WhatsApp chat group to send parents information and updates about classes and invite learners to share pictures, recipes, questions and resources.

This case study describes the instructors’ experiences transitioning from face-to-face to remote instruction from the beginning of the statewide shutdown (March 2020) to June 2020. Five parents and 12 children were participating in the programme during this time. Three of the families were classified as low-income, according to US federal poverty criteria. As of this writing (August 2020), classes are still meeting remotely. In the next section, we provide findings related to our research questions.

**Transitioning to remote instruction**

In Pennsylvania, the COVID-19 quarantine was implemented swiftly with little time to prepare and shift from face-to-face teaching to remote instruction. Nonetheless, the transition to remote instruction in the *Family Pathways* programme was fairly smooth, since instructors already used a consistent structure in the face-to-face classes.

Before beginning remote classes, instructors quickly conducted an extensive online resource review and identified helpful resources and websites (e.g. USA

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8 Internationally, high school or secondary school refers to grades/years 7 to 10 or 12, and post-secondary refers to education undertaken after high/secondary school.
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Learns,9 Raising a Reader10 and Epic!11 that matched families’ interests and needs. Many of the resources and websites were then woven into the remote lesson plans developed for parent education and ILAs. Similar to the face-to-face parent education class and ILA take-home assignments, online tools and resources were presented and reviewed before parents implemented the activities at home with their children; parents then reported their experiences at the next class. Instructors also provided a weekly remote ILA class that parents could attend virtually with their children.

As instructors recast the classes for remote instruction, they maintained the importance of integrating the programme components. At the start of the pandemic, COVID-19 was on everyone’s mind; parents were quarantined with their children and stressed about having to oversee both their children’s and their own education. Instructors responded by organising lessons related to these topics, especially during the first month of the transition. As the pandemic experience became less of a shock, instructors shifted to topics that helped families experience some normalcy and fun while continuing to emphasise learning (e.g. exploring recommended family movies on Common Sense Media).12 The types of activities were also adjusted as instructors learned what worked and what did not. For example, as the pandemic progressed, families’ needs and schedules changed, prompting Wolfe to videotape the ILA class so it could be viewed asynchronously. She added individual mentoring sessions to review how the ILA went and provide other assistance. Instructors also realised early on that revising face-to-face lessons for remote classes took much more time, requiring the use of creative problem-solving to adapt activities for online instruction.

Teaching strategies, resources and examples

The remote instruction format included adult education with a focus on English language development (introduction to the lesson, warm-up activity, homework review, mini lesson, and exercises and practice); parent education (check-in and ILA debrief, online resource lesson); and ILA (assignment and remote ILA). A synchronous (real-time) class was offered on Mondays and Wednesdays for 2.25 hours per session (approximately 1.5 hours of adult education and 45 minutes of parent education). Instructors used PowerPoint slides to organise instruction and Zoom videoconferencing to interact with parents and their children. Initially, the synchronous

9 USA Learns is a free website run by the Sacramento County Office of Education (SCOE). Offering videos in English, Spanish, Arabic and Tagalog, the website is designed to help adults learn English and prepare for American citizenship online. Visit https://www.usalearns.org [accessed 21 August 2020].
10 Raising a Reader (RAR) is a US-American national early literacy programme designed for families with children aged 0–8. Visit https://www.raisingareader.org [accessed 21 August 2020].
11 Epic! is a subscription-based digital reading and learning platform. Visit https://www.getepic.com [accessed 21 August 2020].
12 Common Sense Media (CSM) is a non-profit organisation whose website offers reviews of films, books, music, games, television shows, websites and apps, taking into account age-appropriateness, educational value and overall quality. Its purpose is to help parents (and children) make informed choices about what to read, watch, listen to and play. Visit https://www.commonsensemedia.org/ [accessed 21 August 2020].
ILA class met on Tuesdays for 30 to 60 minutes, depending on attendance and the topic; however, as mentioned earlier, the instructor soon took to videotaping the class because parents were having trouble attending the ILA class at the scheduled time.

**Adult education**

**Introduction to lesson**

Adult education classes started with a parent reading the date to remind everyone of the pronunciation of ordinal and cardinal numbers. Another parent read the “Schedule for Today” for more pronunciation practice and to preview class content; then all parents participated in a 10- to 15-minute warm-up with a vocabulary review and a fun learning activity.

**Homework review**

Homework was a normal part of the face-to-face class and continued to be an important activity during remote instruction because it gave parents something to work on in addition to the supplemental distance learning activities (described below). Homework included worksheets on concepts, grammar or punctuation discussed in class; readings to complete before class; and writing prompts that connected to parents’ lives. With writing prompts, parents edited a screenshot of one learner’s writing together, looking for concepts, grammar or punctuation that needed review or would be covered in the mini lesson. Writing prompts helped the instructor informally assess parents’ progress, develop future lessons and identify concepts that required more instruction.

**Mini lesson**

The mini lesson involved a writing, reading and/or speaking activity. Lessons often took more than one class to complete and new lessons were introduced using PowerPoint presentations and videos. A typical lesson included a pre-reading vocabulary exercise followed by parents’ taking turns reading an article to practise pronunciation and comprehension. After reading the article, comprehension questions were presented using PowerPoint for parents to write down their answers at home. Kaiper-Marquez then called on parents to read their answers aloud and used PowerPoint’s animation feature to reveal the correct answer.

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13 Ordinal numbers relate order or position in a set (e.g. first, second, third), while cardinal numbers state how many of something there are (e.g. one, two, three).
Lesson content

Lesson content was informed by parents’ needs and requests as well as their progress in writing, reading and speaking, and assessments. Many lessons focused on information, vocabulary and ideas parents heard daily related to the pandemic. For example, opportunities to build basic skills and develop language were provided when parents responded to writing prompts such as:

Think about a time in the past when you were sick. How did you get sick? How did it make you feel? What did you do to feel better? What have you done since that time to help prevent getting sick again?

Vocabulary was connected to COVID-19, since many parents had questions about what they were learning from the news. Other activities included COVID-19-related reading passages, learning verb tenses and new vocabulary words from the readings, and discussing the pandemic. Initially, lesson content focused on being healthy and safe, learning at home and establishing family routines. Since the end of May, content included other important current events such as the death of George Floyd and other victims of police brutality.

Supplemental distance learning

Supplemental distance learning programmes (such as Khan Academy and Learning Chocolate) were used more frequently after transitioning to remote instruction. When the quarantine began, instructors set up individual learner accounts in Khan Academy. This free programme tracks the time participants spend using it, which was required for reporting programme performance. It also has a plethora of videos, exercises and quizzes on English grammar that helped offset the reduction in grammar instruction due to fewer hours in class. Instructors connected content from Khan Academy to lessons offered through Zoom classes and homework.

14 George Floyd was a 46-year-old African American man who was killed by police during an arrest in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on 25 May 2020.
15 Khan Academy is a non-profit educational organisation that offers video tutorials for children and adults on a wide range of subjects in about 30 languages. Visit https://www.khanacademy.org [accessed 21 August 2020].
16 Learning Chocolate is a vocabulary learning platform designed for child and adult learners preparing for proficiency tests such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). The platform offers language learning materials such as songs, films, themed illustrated interactive worksheets, etc. for free download in English, Japanese, Chinese (Mandarin), German and Spanish. Visit https://www.learningchocolate.com [accessed 21 August 2020].
Parent education and interactive literacy activities

Check-in and interactive literacy activities debrief

Wolfe began parent education classes with a review of the agenda and a check-in which helped parents practise their verbal skills, chat about how their families were doing and discuss any challenges they were facing (e.g. children perceiving their time at home as a holiday). Similar to face-to-face parent education classes, parents debriefed about the previous week’s ILA assignment. This allowed Wolfe to learn about what was happening at home and to help parents understand the skills their child gained during the ILA.

Online resource lesson

Many parents needed assistance communicating with schools and teachers to help their children continue learning when instruction went online. At first, much of the parent education class time focused on a selected online resource such as *When School is Closed: Resources to Keep Kids Learning at Home* (Reading Rockets 2020). Wolfe also reviewed the online resource “Wonder of the Day” on Wonderopolis17 with parents, talked about the activities available, discussed how to adapt the activities for different age groups and children’s needs, and outlined what children would learn. For example, *Reading Rockets*18 resources were often used as they were tailored to children’s ages and included a variety of interesting topics (e.g. flight, insects, planets and dinosaurs can be explored in *Start with a Book*)19 that parents could select with children, and they came with recommendations for books and activities.

Class discussions usually occurred over two sessions: the resource would be introduced in the first session and the topic more thoroughly discussed in the second session to prepare parents for the weekly ILA. While reviewing the online resource, parents had opportunities for additional adult education instruction as they took turns reading sections, explored new vocabulary and concepts, and navigated the online resource.

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17 Created by the National Center for Families Learning (NCFL), *Wonderopolis* is a learning platform that offers information about a wide range of everyday subjects. Posting an interesting new question every day, it inspires children (and adults) to think about things, do research and find answers. Visit [https://wonderopolis.org](https://wonderopolis.org) [accessed 24 August 2020].

18 *Reading Rockets* is a multimedia resource for parents, teachers, librarians, school psychologists, etc. addressing reading needs and challenges (e.g. dyslexia), and providing strategies and insights from current research. Visit [https://www.readingrockets.org](https://www.readingrockets.org) [accessed 24 August 2020].

19 Focusing on books, *Start with a Book* is a companion website to the multimedia platform of *Reading Rockets*. Visit [https://www.startwithabook.org/](https://www.startwithabook.org/) [accessed 24 August 2020].
Interactive literacy activities

After reviewing and discussing the online resource together during the parent education class, parents selected activities that were age-appropriate for their child and could be done interactively with materials already in the home (e.g. making pizza related to the book *Pete the Cat and the Perfect Pizza Party* (Dean and Dean 2019); or reading and discussing the seventh National Geographic Kids volume of *Weird but True!: 300 Outrageous Facts* (National Geographic Kids 2015), then completing fun National Geographic Kids online quizzes). Once parents had chosen their preferred activity, they reviewed other educational app ideas, child-friendly websites and writing ideas available on the resource to extend learning at home. In addition to the weekly ILA assignment selected from the website, parents were encouraged to access books related to ILAs and use the online resource *Unite for Literacy*, a collection of free books that can be narrated and translated into over 15 languages. Parents were asked to review the Unite for Literacy website for homework, find at least one book related to their chosen topic and read the book with their child as part of their weekly ILA assignment.

At the beginning of the quarantine, the parent education instructor maintained a traditional “take-home” model for ILAs by dropping off packets with ILA materials at families’ homes. However, after settling into a routine, Wolfe added a weekly ILA experience via Zoom, in which parents and children listened to her read a story, engaged in conversations about the story and reviewed book extension activities for the family to do at home. This remote ILA was first offered synchronously, but eventually became an asynchronous activity to accommodate parents’ changing schedules.

Identifying and addressing challenges

Instructors moved relatively quickly from face-to-face to remote instruction, primarily because they maintained a consistent class structure and continued using some of the same technologies. In addition, parents adjusted to new methods of teaching and learning fairly easily because they had access to mobile phones and/or computers with internet. However, some challenges did arise and had to be addressed creatively. During the first week of remote instruction, local schools closed, and parents and children of all ages were at home together. This made some programme components easier to implement (e.g. at-home ILAs) and others more difficult (e.g. children popping in during adult or parent education Zoom classes). Common

20 *National Geographic Kids* is a print magazine for children aged 6–14. It is complemented by an online component that offers educational games and videos about the natural world. Visit https://kids.nationalgeographic.com/ [accessed 24 August 2020]. Regional websites are maintained in the United Kingdom, Ireland, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand.

21 *Unite for Literacy*, a free online library, offers digital books in English and Spanish for reading – and in 50 languages, including a number of indigenous ones, for listening. Visit https://www.uniteforliteracy.com [accessed 24 August 2020].
challenges included dealing with digital inequities and discomfort with technology, managing instruction remotely, and addressing attendance and participation inconsistencies.

**Digital inequities and discomfort with technology**

Parents experienced several digital challenges. First, they had difficulty signing into Zoom, which was a new platform for all learners. Some parents could not remember their app store log-in and password, which complicated setting up their account. Using Zoom features (e.g. logging in, turning the camera and microphone on and off, adjusting settings, using the chat feature) was troublesome at first because parents had to learn how to navigate the technology, but they caught on quickly as spouses and children helped them to log on and instructors used screenshots of directions to guide them.

Parents’ comfort with using digital devices and online resources also differed. Pre-COVID-19, parents were confident using their smartphones. They used Google Translate to understand new vocabulary words, social media websites (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp) to connect with friends and family, and YouTube videos for entertainment and information. Although digital literacy skills development was part of face-to-face instruction, many parents were not totally comfortable using a tablet or computer (e.g. starting up and shutting down, using a mouse or keyboard), or using the other online resources for supplemental learning such as Khan Academy. This discomfort was exacerbated during remote instruction. Finally, to respond to parents’ preferences for receiving information, instructors sent information through both WhatsApp and e-mail.

Although parents had various levels of comfort with technology, they also had support systems that other learners both in the US and globally might not have. For example, the State College parents received more support from spouses and children to help them access remote classes than did the parents in our Williamsport Family Pathways classes. Moreover, Williamsport parents had substantial difficulty transitioning to online learning due to unstable or no access to the internet. Further, the ongoing technological support that instructors provided before the pandemic in face-to-face classes, and during the pandemic in remote instruction, was essential to increasing parents’ overall digital comfort; instructors spent considerable time helping parents troubleshoot technological issues whenever necessary.

**Class management**

Many organisations might not have access to two instructors and a tutor, but for the State College Family Pathways programme’s successful transition to online learning, having more than one instructor was vital. For example, effective use of the

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22 We have insufficient documentation from Williamsport to be able to make additional comparisons between the sites.
Zoom features took some time for instructors to learn, and they found it easier to deliver both adult education and parent education classes jointly, with one instructor teaching and the other managing technical difficulties, such as muting a learner with too much background noise. In addition, it was helpful to have the tutor engage in conversations with the parents if the instructor was having a technical difficulty or had to quickly adapt the lesson if, for example, an online link in the PowerPoint did not work.

Drawing not only on parents’ feedback, but also on her reflection on individual families’ needs, Wolfe decided to divide the lesson into two sessions because parents were overwhelmed with the amount of information they had to process. On Mondays, she provided a mini overview of everything about the ILA, including the resource, possible activities and a corresponding book. On Wednesdays, Wolfe provided more detail about the activity, such as how to tailor it to children of different ages. This curricular change helped keep families engaged and stemmed from Wolfe’s continual desire to understand families’ academic and emotional needs to determine what would work in this uncharted instructional environment.

Parents were preoccupied with the changes in their lives, so instructors sent a text or e-mail before class to remind them about ILA times or adult education homework assignments. Wolfe also reminded parents about the remote ILA at the beginning of each parent education class with a PowerPoint slide about the book and activity; she then sent a reminder with information about the next parent education class and links for completing the ILA assignment. For instructors and learners with limited data allowance or no internet access, these types of reminders might be more difficult to implement; however, the instructors also telephoned parents and dropped off instructional materials at their homes to maintain communication about upcoming classes and ILAs.

**Attendance and participation inconsistencies**

About a month after the quarantine began, remote ILA attendance became sporadic due to families’ scheduling conflicts or other issues. Wolfe began recording a story time on Zoom so parents could access it asynchronously. The recorded, interactive story time followed children’s TV presenter Fred Rogers’ philosophy of emphasising human relationships in teaching children by interjecting individualised comments to children. Rogers (also known as “Mister Rogers”) believed it was important to model listening to others and he did so by showing how to empathise with children (Johnson and Howard 2013).

First, Wolfe greeted each child and, drawing on previous interactions with the family, shared an anecdote to get children’s attention and personalise their
experience – for example, “Yasser [pseudonym], your mom says you are working on compound words! That’s great.” Next, she read the book, made comments about it, asked questions and paused to acknowledge an imagined response, as if the children were present. After the story, Wolfe referred to the ILA discussed during parent education class or showed prompts for extension activities. She then sent links of the ILA recording and other activities related to the book to the families.

Another challenge was that parents did not complete their homework as often during remote instruction as they did when they attended face-to-face classes. This was likely due to more demands on their time, in particular their needing to supervise and support their children’s education throughout the day. Since homework review was a critical part of the lesson, the instructors created sample homework assignments to use as examples in case those attending did not complete the assignment. The instructors understood that without internet access, activities such as these might be hard to administer. Nonetheless, these activities were successful primarily because the instructors emphasised building human relationships, which helped them to continuously address the families’ needs.

Discussion of experiences and lessons learned

The experience of adapting face-to-face classes to remote instruction demonstrated the critical importance of family literacy for low-income and immigrant families in the US. For example, the immigrant families were unfamiliar with school policies and requirements before the pandemic, and their limited understanding and ability to read English compounded their stress as they tried to navigate school websites, understand online school learning sites, read teachers’ e-mails and help their children learn at home during school closures. The lessons that instructors learned can help other educators provide family literacy programming at a distance, be it by choice or by necessity.

The importance of instructor–learner relationships

First, instructors’ existing relationships with families were critical to the transition to remote instruction. Families were eager to continue classes because of the trust they had in their instructors. Before COVID-19, the instructors had made a concerted effort to develop a relationship with each family and to be aware of their individual circumstances. By having this personal connection, families did not feel like they were “on a screen” but were instead having a conversation with their teachers and friends. The instructors also continued to develop these relationships by scheduling individual ILAs on Zoom with parents and their children if needed. This finding supports literature showing that building caring relationships with instructors is crucial both in remote teaching (Bozkurt and Sharma 2020) and DE (Inverso et al. 2017; Porter and Sturm 2006). In family literacy programmes that have few or no in-person meetings – whether because they use a pure DE model or because of
unexpected disruption—relationship building may be more challenging and instructors would have to add activities that help families get to know each other virtually.

**A significant increase in instructors’ class preparation time**

Second, shifting to remote instruction significantly increased instructors’ class preparation time, which may not be feasible for part-time instructors or those with heavy class loads. To keep lessons interactive and interesting to parents and children, instructors had to develop new lesson plans, look for or create videos, research useful multimedia resources and find creative ways to construct virtual interactive activities. Simple actions in a face-to-face class such as distributing handouts, creating pairs or small groups, or walking around the room to monitor learners’ progress are more complex and time-consuming in remote instruction. After planning the objectives and content of the lesson, instructors varied the presentation modalities by using short YouTube clips, finding or creating online quizzes, and adding animation, website links and screenshots of the PowerPoint slides. Instructors also asked students to have certain materials available during class time such as a reading selection that was sent beforehand.

**Involved instruction**

These actions illustrate the principle that “involved instruction” is critical for successful DE (Vanek et al. 2019) and remote instruction. In this approach, teachers actively engage in students’ learning, particularly by mediating between learner and online content rather than relying solely on pre-established online curricula (ibid., p. 49). Through their supportive, personalised teaching and creative use of online materials and digital tools, instructors modelled this teaching approach. Involved instruction is inevitably more difficult for instructors with large numbers of learners who have multiple academic and emotional needs, but for this programme it was crucial for maintaining families’ interest and persistence.

**Two unexpected outcomes**

The COVID-19 pandemic was challenging for instructors, but also engendered innovation and a positive outlook that are likely to remain when face-to-face classes resume. There were two unanticipated outcomes. First, the instructors are now planning to continue incorporating some aspects of remote instruction. Specifically, they will use Zoom when face-to-face ILAs are not possible (e.g. school snow days or parents needing to be home with sick children), and parents will continue to be enrolled in supplemental online programmes such as Khan Academy. Another outcome is that parents increased their digital literacy skills (e.g. their ability to use computers, smartphones, apps and digital tools) because they wanted to continue participating in the class. However, the instructors realised the need to make digital literacy skills development a more intentional part of their lesson planning. These
plans illustrate how a supplemental DE model can enhance family literacy programming and build digital literacy skills.

**Lifelong learning**

Finally, instructors found that parents were able to model *lifelong learning*\(^{24}\) for their children, an essential component in family literacy programmes. For example, children often sat on their mother’s lap while she participated in her adult education class. Children’s presence in adult education classrooms is often viewed as disruptive to learning, but during the quarantine children watched their parents be students too. Moreover, seeing their parents as students helped some children be less unruly because this was their “new normal”. Modelling is a foundational teaching practice within families, as children observe parents and other caregivers engage in language, reading, print (Burgess et al. 2002) and digital literacy practices. In this case, parents also modelled a positive orientation towards learning and adapting to unexpected circumstances.

**Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to extraordinary changes in family literacy instruction, forcing face-to-face programmes to shift rapidly to online, remote instruction. Although our findings are derived from a small number of families who participated in a specific type of family learning intervention in one location in central Pennsylvania, this study has global implications for remote instruction. The strategies used for teaching the family literacy components remotely are applicable to any programme that aims to support emotional and self-directed learning and enhance parents’ and children’s education. Moreover, although the *Family Pathways* programme instructors used US-based online resources, any programmes providing creative family learning opportunities will foreseeably find these or similar resources useful.

This study is one of the few on online teaching and learning in family literacy and, to our knowledge, the first on emergency remote instruction in a family literacy programme during the COVID-19 pandemic. We found that the consistent structure used in face-to-face classes helped both instructors and parents transition smoothly to an online format. Moreover, the shift to online, remote instruction encouraged instructors to find new ways to promote learning (e.g. supplemental distance learning programmes, online resources, recorded instructional videos, expanded use of social media messaging apps) that can be continued when face-to-face classes reconvene. Instructors also exhibited many of the features of high-quality DE and remote instruction cited in the literature, particularly in terms of maintaining caring,

\(^{24}\) A widely used definition of lifelong learning is “all purposeful learning activity undertaken throughout life with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competencies within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective” (EC 2000, p. 3).
supportive relationships with learners, thus creating an education support system for low-income and immigrant families.

Converting face-to-face programming to remote instruction was not without its difficulties, including parents’ digital challenges, instructors’ need to manage multiple distractions during class, and sporadic attendance due to parents’ responsibility for overseeing children’s schoolwork. Such challenges, particularly for programmes in areas with high poverty and limited internet access, must be further examined and mitigated to ensure effective and equitable programming for all families, both in DE and emergency remote instruction. However, even with these obstacles, this experience revealed that moving to remote instruction incited some benefits such as improvement in parents’ digital skills, greater participation between parents and children engaging in ILAs at home, and continued family learning that might otherwise have ceased due to the COVID-19 quarantine.

Ultimately, this case study supports a conclusion drawn by the UNESCO webinar on family learning (UIL 2020), namely that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to greater acknowledgement, in policy and practice, of parents’ and families’ pivotal roles in children’s learning and of parents’ and adults’ own learning needs.

Emphasis was previously placed on formal education, but now we are more clearly seeing the important role played by informal, intergenerational and family learning (ibid., n.p.).

Our study helps elucidate how instructors can nurture family learning through remote instruction.

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