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# Centering Teacher Expertise, Needs, and Wellbeing in In-Service Teacher Education: A Post/COVID-19 Study

**Astri Napitupulu \*, Jasmin Easterling, Leslie Hamm, Shea N. Kerkhoff \*, Diana Hammond, Tracy Brosch, Nancy Robb Singer and Katherine A. O'Daniels**

Department of Educator Preparation and Leadership, University of Missouri-St. Louis, St. Louis, MO 63122, USA
* Correspondence: abnndz@umsl.edu (A.N.); kerkhoffs@umsl.edu (S.N.K.)

**Abstract:** This paper shares findings of a qualitative study on professional learning with in-service teachers during COVID-19. From 2020–2023, the authors facilitated comprehensive literacy professional learning with in-service teachers from 40 schools in the Midwest U.S. Our work aimed to center teachers as experts and be responsive to teachers' social, emotional, and professional needs. Drawing on framework for adaptability, we analyzed formative assessments, interview transcripts, and written reflections to understand teachers' perspectives on professional learning and their praxis during COVID-19. Data revealed that participants perceived an increased need for professional learning on differentiation and focus on growth and joy. Against the backdrop of a neoliberal fixation on teacher accountability that increases stress among teachers on top of a traumatic global pandemic, we attempted to center teachers as experts and attend to teachers' socioemotional needs by offering flexible pathways with online options and offering in-person sessions for cultivating community. Future research on teacher education for in-service teachers can provide greater insight into teacher perceptions of their professional learning needs post/COVID-19, as well as how we center teachers as knowledgeable professionals in order to challenge hierarchical power structures and deficit discourses in ways that promote their professional, social, and emotional wellbeing.

**Keywords:** professional learning; professional development; in-service teacher education; COVID-19; neoliberalism

## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a point in history that disrupted education as we knew it. The success of remote learning was uneven at best; the academic progress of students during this time was largely dependent on caregivers who could provide additional instruction/support and K–12 students' access to reliable connectivity with their teachers [1]. Depending on the regional severity of the pandemic and state/local mandates for in-person instruction, some students were without a teacher for many weeks, others for many months. Regardless of the duration of remote learning, one thing is clear: the disruption had a profound and lasting effect on students who later returned to "normal" school when, in fact, much had changed in both educators and students [2]. Indeed, nothing was normal.

The purpose of this study was to investigate teacher education during and post/COVID-19. We use a slash between "post" and "COVID-19" to signify that communities around the world are still deeply impacted by COVID-19 while simultaneously we adjust to a "new normal". As part of a federally funded grant, our university-based research team facilitated professional learning (PL) on comprehensive literacy with 40 schools in a Midwest U.S. region. We intentionally framed our engagement with educators as PL rather than professional development (PD) because we understand our work as a "collaborative venture in which teachers are recognized as learners, leaders, and knowledgeable professionals" [3]. The data in this paper are drawn from the PL experiences grant school teachers engaged in from fall of 2020 through spring of 2023.

The primary purpose of the grant was to increase teachers' literacy self-efficacy and use of evidence-based literacy practices. Just as teachers and students in K–12 schools were adjusting to a "new normal", we, too, were striving to design and facilitate a different kind of PL. In PL experiences, we routinely center teachers' expertise and work to co-construct knowledge through participatory structures; however, entering the 2020–2021 school year, we realized the urgency to attend to teacher wellbeing and respond to teachers' social, emotional, and professional needs through dynamic systems. In this post/COVID-19 context, we wondered: (a) What PL do teachers need for their classroom praxis? (b) How does PL support teachers' needs as full humans—professionally, emotionally, and socially? (c) What factors of PL do teachers perceive as helpful in their classroom praxis?

We define praxis as the recursive and complex relationship of theory, practice, experience, and reflection. We use the word praxis as a signifier of the complexity of teaching and as resistance against the "teacher-as-technician" discourse used in neoliberal agendas to depoliticize and deprofessionalize teaching (i.e., Aydarova [4]; Sleeter [5]). Our stance in centering teachers' expertise and needs promotes teachers' participation in democracy and opposes the way neoliberalism through its tenet of accountability strips teachers' autonomy and agency [6]. Teachers' democratic participation in their education helps them build social connections within the learning community, which in turn fosters deeper learning [7]. Teacher education that allows room for democratic participation also helps empower teachers [8], which is essential to teachers' retention [9] and wellbeing [10]. Furthermore, empowered teachers have positive impacts on their students' achievement and their teaching career commitment [11,12].

## 2. Literature Review

Effective PL develops and sustains high-quality teaching and also fosters the ongoing learning necessary for teachers to hone their craft [13–16]. Didion et al. [17] conducted a meta-analysis to explore the effect of high-quality PL on the reading achievement of K–8 students and found that the former had an overall significant positive, average effect (Hedges' g = 0.18, $p < 0.001$, and a 95% CI of (0.09, 0.27)) on the latter. In another study, Wallace [18] found that the effects of teacher PL on student achievement in reading and math were mediated by teacher practice. In addition, according to Darling-Hammond et al. [19], effective PL is content focused, collaborative, job-embedded, and sustained over time. It includes active learning, modeling, expert support, and feedback and reflection cycles.

Unfortunately, research trends point to teachers' perceptions of PL as irrelevant to their or their students' learning [20,21]. For example, Lieberman and Pointer Mace [22] state, "Professional learning, though well-intentioned, is often perceived by teachers as fragmented, disconnected, and irrelevant to the real problems of classroom practice" (p. 226). On the other hand, research identifies three key components of effective PL as: aligning with the local context of teachers' classrooms [23], purposefully building on what teachers already know and acknowledging teachers' expertise [24]. In short, research suggests that teachers need PL that is content-specific and responds to their specific questions of classroom practice in order for it to be perceived as useful.

### 2.1. Research on Literacy PL

Because research points to the importance of being content specific, we reviewed the literature on PL within the field of literacy studies. Research specific to literacy PL has found the same elements of effectiveness as Darling-Hammond et al. [19], most importantly, that it needs to be sustained over time [25,26], job-embedded [27,28], and collaborative [25,27,28].

Additionally, research has found that literacy PL needs to be focused on needs arising from student assessment [27]. A focus on student assessment allows teachers to not only learn content knowledge, but also to recognize when and why students experience difficulty with it. In addition, research suggests that clear and intentional frameworks for teaching literacy are necessary components of PL in order to impact student achievement [16,29].

## 2.2. Supporting Teacher Needs and Wellbeing Post/COVID-19

Hascher and Waber's [30] systematic literature review demonstrated a need to attend to teacher wellbeing before the pandemic. However, recent scholarship has illuminated how the pandemic elevated the importance of tending to teacher wellbeing because of increased stress on teachers and worry about student safety leading to fatigue or even burnout [2,31,32].

Studies centering teacher wellbeing amidst COVID-19 found teachers' perceptions of wellbeing would be improved with increased flexibility and autonomy [31,33]. Research also suggested that teacher wellbeing could be supported by increased PL around supporting students' social–emotional needs. For example, Brunzell et al. [34] claim that as teachers learn how to support student wellbeing, they also become more attuned to supporting their own wellbeing. Likewise, studies demonstrate the potential of leadership and community support for teachers' wellbeing to the extent that they create cultures of inclusivity, relational support and development, and social connectedness; support teachers' emotional needs; and respond to teacher input for decisions and planning [31,35].

## 2.3. Impacts of Neoliberalism on Teachers

As both an ideology [36,37] and economic–political system [38,39], neoliberalism operates through multilayered and intertwined tenets, including deregulation, marketization, and privatization [40]. Subsequently, neoliberal forces take form in the loci of discourse and practices embedded in and reinforced by public policies [41]. Within the realm of educational systems, neoliberal assaults take place in multifaceted ways, such as overemphasis on students' quantitative measurement of achievement through standardized testing and pressure on teachers to achieve the standards with little to no acknowledgment of the different ways students learn, perform, and demonstrate their knowledge [36,42]. Utilizing a critical policy analysis, Au [43] further contends that through neoliberal accountability narratives, standardized testing is woven into school choice in which consumers (i.e., parents or caregivers) take school's results in standardized testing as a basis for deciding in which school they will enroll their children. As a result,

> "Good" teachers and schools produce high test scores in students, "bad" teachers and schools produce low test scores in students, parents can use the data to then make choices about where to send their children (a.k.a. where the investment of their public monies should go), "bad" teachers can receive low evaluations and be fired, "bad" schools with low test scores will lose market share and be closed, and "good" schools with high test scores will remain open and be successful (p. 42).

High-stakes standardized testing then holds teachers highly accountable, setting them as key educational actors in the neoliberal tenet of marketization of education via the discourse of accountability.

In another study, Pitzer's [44] discourse analysis found that neoliberalism made teachers feel disempowered through its overvalue of quantitative measures. The author's empirical study also reported how teachers directed their frustration with neoliberal accountability at their own students through deficit thinking and language instead of directing it at the system that created such a burden on teachers. The author also argued that the teacher shifted blame to the students for their underperforming on the test instead of critiquing the narrow neoliberal framework for success in learning. Other studies have shown how neoliberalism in education also creates, recreates, and exacerbates racial and social inequality tied to a property-based school funding system [45], standardized testing [42], and privatization of public schools under the guise of educational reforms [46], widening the gap between high- and low-income families.

Practicing teachers need ongoing, in-service PL that acknowledges this intricate tension rooted in neoliberalism. However, like education in general, PL as a form of teacher education is also impacted by neoliberalism. Sleeter [5] points out how PL, often worded

as PD, contributes to the neoliberal diminishment of teachers' professionalism and results in the perpetuation of accountability discourse through a heavy focus on content standards and standardized testing, with little attention to checking in with what teachers need professionally, emotionally, and socially. Ultimately, further study is needed to explore teachers' current needs and how PL can support teacher wellbeing and learning because of the effects of neoliberalism and the unprecedented experiences and effects of COVID-19 [47]. This paper contributes to this post/COVID-19 body of research.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

As teacher educators in this post/COVID world, we attempt to be consistent in acknowledging teachers' expertise, as well as their professional and lived experiences, as we respond to their multifaceted needs. Unfortunately, neoliberal, market-driven policies play out in education in ways that create barriers to democratic education and deprofessionalize teachers [48–50]. For the purpose of this study, we utilize a theoretical framework that interrupts the way neoliberalism impacts teachers' autonomy and agency.

Drawing on Gee [51] (2019), we use big "D" Discourse to signify the ways in which the language, actions, interactions, objects, tools, technologies, beliefs, and values relate to accountability in schools, position teachers and students in particular ways and subscribe particular identities upon them. Within the Discourse of accountability in education, neoliberalism impacts how teachers perceive both their autonomy and agency [52–54]. Teacher autonomy is defined as teachers' capacity and freedom to take control of and responsibility for their own teaching practice and reflection [55,56]. The theorization of teacher agency, however, is less straightforward. For instance, Priestly et al. [57] characterize teacher agency as "an emergent phenomenon, something that occurs or is achieved within continually shifting contexts over time, and with orientations towards past, future and present which differ within each and every instance of agency achieved" (p. 7). Following this line of reasoning, agency is temporal and relational. Although autonomy could be given to a teacher, only the teacher can achieve agency. Agency cannot be given, nor can it be inherent within the teacher. Agency is dependent on both the context, such as policy and school leadership, as well as on the actions of the teacher, such as taking initiative to adapt curriculum.

Research has found teachers exercising agency even in contexts of limited autonomy. For example, in a qualitative study in three European countries aiming to explore teachers' perceptions of their autonomy and agency, Erss [53] found that restricted teacher autonomy tied to teachers' criticism of their respective regulated national curriculum did not automatically lead to their agency being constrained. However, the teachers perceived summative assessments like final exams reduced both their autonomy and agency. Similarly, in a comparative study between Brazil and Norway, da Silva and Mølstad [52] found that their teacher participants were capable of exercising their agency amid limited autonomy caused by accountability pressure tied to their students' national tests scores. The teachers exercised agency through making curricular decisions. However, in a mixed-method study involving elementary teachers who taught math in the United States, Nguyen et al. [54] found that there was a positive correlation between teacher autonomy and teachers' perception of professional space afforded by the state. The latter then acted as a mediator for teacher agency.

According to a review of the literature by Acton and Glasgow [58], neoliberal policies have heightened the focus on teacher accountability in a way that privileges measurable outcomes above teachers' humanity. Neoliberalism as a structural power strips teachers' autonomy and negatively impacts teachers' wellbeing, heightening stress and burnout [58–60]. In Guerrero-Nieto and Quintero's [61] study on neoliberalism in education in Colombia, data showed that teachers were perceived as having less expertise compared to educational "experts," such as national agencies and university professors. This perception creates a hierarchy of expertise that disempowers teachers and is counter to democratic principles of education.

Hierarchies often place "accountability" on those at "lower" hierarchical levels. From the greater public, state, and administrative perspectives, deficit lenses of accountability are typically placed on teachers [62]. When students are perceived as not meeting current standards, the culmination of blame blankets educators. Unfortunately, this deficit lens is too often cast down from teachers to students and their families and communities as the sources of the deficit rather than the dehumanizing and inequitable systems as the source to blame [44]. Yet, research has shown that teacher wellbeing is a contributor to student outcomes [63,64]. These pervasive Discourses of accountability impact teacher wellbeing and, in turn, student outcomes.

Additionally, we draw from the framework for adaptability [1]. Against the backdrop of COVID-19, Green et al. [1] argue that the global pandemic exposed the existing instability and inequality in education caused by neoliberalism on education systems. Predicting another global pandemic, this time caused by climate change, the authors argue the need for more resilient systems of education that are capable of "maintaining stability, promoting equality, and expanding substantive freedom and well-being" (p. 859). The framework also underscores the stance of education as a public good; hence it operates to interrupt neoliberalism, and argues for shared responsibility—in contrast with the neoliberal tenet of deregulation that heavily places accountability on teachers as opposed to the whole society and the government—in order to create a more stable system in time of crisis like COVID-19 and in time of calm.

Green et al.'s [1] framework for adaptability in education holds all accountable through the idea of collectivization of risk, meaning that the successes and failures are not solely held by teachers. This requires the creation of structures that demand coordination among "the state, companies, labor organizations, and communities" (p. 862). Such coordination within and between the four groups consists of three critical elements: (1) cooperation, (2) inclusion, and (3) flexibility. The three elements are iterative and interwoven with one another and across four scale levels: individual, community, the state, and the global level. We predominantly rely on the first two scale levels in this article, as they are highly relevant for our study's context in which the teacher is an individual and our professional learning takes place in a community of teachers.

In the framework for adaptability, the first element is cooperation, meaning educational actors working together toward a shared goal with shared risk. The individual level's element of cooperation could take place between teachers, students, counselors, parents, teacher educators, or other educational actors. The element of inclusion ensures participation by all learners in educational activities and the creation of a respectful environment for learning. Inclusion requires knowing what learners need in order to be able to provide the support oneself or through cooperation with others. Flexibility and inclusion then can be amplified when teachers "have access to multiple modalities of education and multiple points of access over a lifetime" (p. 867). The flexibility at this level emphasizes empathy.

At the community level, the element of cooperation entails participation by educational actors and community members. For the element of inclusion, intra–inter-community connectivity is placed as a high priority. Flexibility at this level includes tending to social–emotional wellbeing and feeling a strong connection with the larger community. Green et al. [1] highlight how their proposed framework "values mutual caring and dialogue over profit-seeking, precision, and standardization" (p. 871). They further advocate to "stand with those social scientists who question the efficacy of the market in providing and reforming public goods such as education" (p. 873) as a way to interrupt neoliberalism.

Teacher education at the individual and community levels can be cooperative, participatory, inclusive, and responsive to teachers' needs and encourage teacher autonomy and agency as ways to interrupt neoliberalism. To align with our theoretical frameworks, we used an inductive qualitative design described in the next section.

## 4. Materials and Methods

This study is part of a larger mixed-methods study on the impact of professional learning on literacy outcomes across 40 schools. For this study, we used a qualitative inquiry approach [65] to explore in-service teachers' experiences of literacy PL intentionally designed to support teachers holistically in the context of COVID-19. Our research questions were: (a) What PL do teachers need for their classroom praxis? (b) How does PL support teachers' needs as full humans—professionally, emotionally, and socially? (c) What factors of PL do teachers perceive as helpful in their classroom praxis? Data sources included face-to-face interviews, formative assessments, and written reflections with teachers who experienced the PL.

### 4.1. Participants and Context

Our team directly collaborated with 40 schools in a metropolitan midwestern U.S. area. We worked with educators in public and charter schools at the elementary, middle, and high school levels in urban, suburban, and rural communities. We provided PL to teachers to support the literacy objectives of a major federal grant. This grant was awarded in the fall of 2020 during the pandemic. Although we met with teams of teachers and school leaders virtually in the spring of 2021,our first in-person PL experience brought together over 100 teachers in masks in August of 2021, when we focused on building a PL community, establishing a culture of reading, writing, and inquiry across our region, and cultivating teacher leadership and intentional instructional strategies.

In this context, we are engaged in an ongoing investigation into how to approach professional development to improve literacy instruction and the impact of teachers' professional learning on students' literacy development. While the impact studies are ongoing, this study looks more closely at how teachers were experiencing the professional learning in the context of implementation beginning during COVID-19.

Through collecting needs and assets with each school, we learned that while there were overlapping trends that emerged, needs among our teachers varied based on context and experience. Some needed fully online programs, while others requested in-person meetings. Some needed broad foundational literacy support, while others were ready to dive into topic-focused literacy programs. Some could not get leave from school because of substitute teacher shortages and wanted curated resources and short PL sessions on Zoom during the school day that they could access when it worked for them. These diverse needs led us to create pathway offerings responsive in both content and format. To learn about the experiences of teachers who engaged in PL, we collected data through one-on-one interviews with a maximum variation sample to represent the different geographical contexts of the schools served by the grant (see Table 1). We also collected online forms for formative assessment and reflection from all PL participants.

**Table 1.** Table of Interview Participants.

|  | Categories | Number of Participants |
|---|---|---|
| School Geographic Area |  |  |
|  | Rural | 3 |
|  | Inner-ring Suburban | 3 |
|  | Suburban | 3 |
|  | Urban | 3 |
| Subject Area Taught |  |  |
|  | ELA | 6 |
|  | Science | 4 |
|  | Social Studies | 1 |
|  | All | 1 |

**Table 1.** *Cont.*

|  | Categories | Number of Participants |
|---|---|---|
| Grade Level Taught |  |  |
|  | Elementary | 1 |
|  | Middle | 8 |
|  | High | 3 |
| Years of Teaching Experience |  |  |
|  | 0–2 | 1 |
|  | 3–9 | 0 |
|  | 10–19 | 7 |
|  | 20+ | 4 |

*4.2. Data Sources and Analysis*

We collected and analyzed three data sources: formative assessments, interview transcripts, written reflections. See Table 2 for a summary of our procedures.

**Table 2.** Summary Table of Data Procedures.

| Data Source | Description | Time Collected | RQ Addressed | Data Analysis |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Formative assessment | Needs and assets quantitative survey with teachers, qualitative survey, and group interviews with literacy team | October 2020–May 2021 | a | Descriptive statistics and content analysis |
| Formative assessment | PL artifacts and evaluation survey on Qualtrics with Likert and open-ended questions with teachers | August 2021 | a, c | Descriptive statistics and content analysis |
| Formative assessment | Check-in survey with literacy team leader from each school | October 2021 | a | Content analysis |
| Interview transcripts | Verbatim transcripts of one-on-one, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with teachers | October 2021 | a, b, c | Thematic analysis |
| Written reflections | Google form with open-ended questions with teachers | February 2022 | a, b, c | Thematic analysis |
| Formative assessment | Check-in survey with literacy team leader from each school | August 2022 | a | Content analysis |
| Formative assessment | PL artifacts and evaluation survey on Qualtrics with Likert and open-ended questions with teachers | August 2022 | a, c | Descriptive statistics and content analysis |
| Formative assessment | Check-in survey with literacy team leader from each school | October 2022 | a | Content analysis |
| Interview transcripts | Verbatim transcripts of one-on-one, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with teachers | October 2022 | a, b, c | Thematic analysis |
| Formative assessment | PL artifacts and evaluation survey on Google Forms with Likert and open-ended questions with teachers | February 2023 | a, c | Descriptive statistics and content analysis |
| Written reflections | Google form with open-ended questions with teachers | February 2023 | a, b, c | Thematic analysis |

Note: The research questions were: (a) What PL do teachers need for their classroom praxis? (b) How does PL support teachers' needs as full humans—professionally, emotionally, and socially? (c) What factors of PL do teachers perceive as helpful in their classroom praxis?

### 4.2.1. Formative Assessments

Before the professional learning began, we conducted a needs and assets assessment by giving a survey to the literacy team and to the teachers in each school and holding group interviews over Zoom with each literacy team. After each PL session, we asked for participants' feedback through an evaluation survey. Questions on the survey included: "Thinking about the year ahead, are there particular topics that you would like to see addressed or further developed in future PL sessions? What aspects of the PL were most helpful to you? Why? What changes would you make to improve this PL?" The number of responses on the surveys ranged from 24–57 participants. We also facilitated discussions during PL sessions and collected artifacts related to the RQs, such as goals written in digital notebooks and sticky-note responses to rose, bud, thorn prompts. Throughout our partnerships, we have also sent surveys to the leaders of the literacy teams for each school in order to check on progress toward the goals and to garner requests for support specific to their goals, so that we could provide responsive PL.

Likert and frequency questions were analyzed using descriptive statistics to guide our understanding of patterns across the region. We employed content analysis of open-ended responses to determine the categories of PL that participants reported needing and reported as helpful. We used these data to plan responsive PL.

### 4.2.2. Interviews

The next data source comprised transcripts from 12 one-on-one, semi-structured, in-depth interviews [65] with teachers. Interviews were conducted on Zoom in October 2021 and 2022 and lasted approximately 40–60 min. The purpose of the interviews was to learn about teachers' experiences of the PL sessions and to hear their perspectives on how, if at all, the PL had impacted their praxis. Interview protocols included questions such as, "Has your thinking or any of your practices changed as a result of the PL? What literacy practices have you learned through the PL that you have implemented in your teaching? What do you notice about students and their learning when you implement these practices?"

The research team individually read the interview transcripts, created analytic memos, and coded descriptively. We then met collaboratively to discuss patterns we noticed in the data and to create a codebook. Next, we assigned each transcript to two researchers who returned to analyze individually. Once each transcript was coded by two team members, the team met again to discuss the comprehensiveness of the codes [66].

### 4.2.3. Reflections

Each February, we collected written reflections from teacher participants across the 40 schools. We sent a Google Form with open-ended questions for teachers to reflect on their experiences implementing learning from the PLs in general. Responses were anonymous. For written reflection data analysis, research team members read 81 reflections, then individually wrote analytic memos as they read. After we discussed our initial impressions of the data in group meetings, we began line-by-line coding as the first cycle coding [66] using the codebook from the interview data. We conducted rounds of individual coding, followed by team meetings to discuss coding and improve or add to the codebook. As Saldaña [66] suggests, having an organized record for our initial codes allowed us to "reorganize the codes into major categories and subcategories" (p. 41). Through discussion, we then grouped and mapped our codes to show the relationship among them and ended with 16 codes organized under five categories: growth, responsive, flexible, joy, and impact of COVID-19. After another round of analysis, we ended with three themes by describing the impact of COVID-19 and the need for flexibility within each theme. The three themes described in the findings section are (a) increased need for PL on differentiation, (b) increased need to focus on growth, and (c) increased need to focus on joy.

*4.3. Researcher Positionality*

The research team included graduate research assistants, professors of literacy and language arts education, grant program facilitators, and participants from grant schools. The first three authors are graduate research assistants with the grant and advocates for humanizing education. The first author is a doctoral student from the Global South who identifies as a multilingual and cisgender woman of color. With 11 years of teaching experience in a public high school in Indonesia, she is a proponent of teachers-are-experts perspective and critical of global neoliberal assaults on public education. The second author identifies as a Black, cisgendered, heterosexual, able-bodied woman. She has four-and-a-half years of teaching experience in public middle schools. She believes in the necessity of educators engaging in dialogic consciousness in order to combat the hierarchical systems that harm BIPOC teachers and students. The third author identifies as a white, cisgendered, heterosexual, able-bodied woman. The next two authors also hold leadership roles with the local writing project site and joined the grant as project coordinators. They were primarily responsible for facilitating programming for the schools. Both have over a decade of experience teaching in the community being served and began the Ph.D. program simultaneously with the beginning of the grant work. Both identify as white, cisgendered, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-class women as well. The last authors are professors of literacy education, co-PIs of the grant, and serve in leadership roles with the local writing project site. In this capacity, they had worked with schools and teachers in the community for years prior to this particular teacher education grant. As university-based educators and holders of the financial award, they understand that their role in this work is a role of power. Additionally, the three identify as white, cisgendered, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-class women who walk through the world with privilege. Individually and collectively, the research team engaged in continuous reflexivity and aimed to dismantle hierarchies of power as much as possible through our leadership style, discourse, and critical theoretical framings.

**5. Findings**

Drawing from Apple's [48,49] interrupting neoliberalism approach rooted in Freire's [49] critique of neoliberalism in education, we noticed three main themes in response to our research questions. (a) What PL do teachers need for their classroom praxis? (b) How does PL support teachers' needs as full humans—professionally, emotionally, and socially? (c) What factors of PL do teachers perceive as helpful in their classroom praxis? The following section describes each theme in turn.

*5.1. Theme 1—Increased Need for PL on Differentiation*

Teachers perceived an increase in student absences and in differences in students' knowledge and skills when entering the 2021 school year. In regard to attendance, a middle school teacher from a rural district explained in the interview how COVID-19 caused a change in attendance policy and how frequent student absences made teaching difficult.

> Attendance [this year] is not counted against children. I know today we had 80% attendance, so there are just some new issues than we had in the past. We don't have any time to spare and then with different kids always in and out of quarantine, or just not showing up, that's definitely been my struggle of the year. Everything is always building upon prior lessons, and it just becomes a hot mess.

By disrupting the planned sequence of learning, frequent absences made it difficult for students to keep up with lessons and to experience deeper learning by building on prior knowledge and collaborating with peers. The teacher went on to say how group work was difficult to accomplish when students were absent for collaboration times.

The teacher was having difficulty keeping up with the necessary reteaching while still keeping students on track for completing the curriculum when so many students were at

different places. Their experience was echoed by other teachers too. For example, another teacher stated,

> It [lesson sequence] took longer for my students to get through because of some things that they didn't know and their abilities when working with two years of interrupted education, so there were gaps. And so there were some things that I had to go back and give a little bit of support before we could even start.

Teachers reported needing more support on differentiation, and some teachers wanted support for the workshop model of teaching literacy in order to meet "the kids where they are. However, in our national context, the workshop model was being critiqued by science-of-reading advocates. We, therefore, felt compelled to differentiate our PL opportunities to respond to the different local contexts.

Teachers across data sources spoke of collaborating with other teachers as impactful. Specifically, one teacher from a suburban school reported collaborating with other teachers during PL as helping them think through what scaffolding could look like in their own classroom by observing what teachers in other grade levels and contexts are trying. The teacher reported that the in-person PL was helpful for her classroom praxis by saying,

> Actually, talking through the process of annotating with someone even in different grade levels helped a whole lot because it allowed me to see a broader view of what annotating looks like, differentiate it. And so not just different grade levels, but students of different ability levels.

As teachers grappled with how to meet the needs of their students, they found that time to process with colleagues was a key affordance of the PL opportunities. Yet, these opportunities were far and few between.

In addition to teachers dealing with the challenge of student absences, teachers were also dealing with the challenge of the frequent absences of other teachers in their building and of substitute teacher shortages. Participants reported having to substitute for others during their PL and preparation times. For example, a participant reflected, "We are struggling with how to provide new learning to our teachers with a sub shortage and overwhelmed teachers". Because of the shortage of substitute teachers, schools were not allowing teachers to attend off-site PL and were even canceling on-site PL. One middle school teacher from a suburban school explained in an interview how this impacted their emotional and social wellbeing. They stated:

> Our district just canceled all essential PD because there's a sub [substitute teacher] shortage. We can't find subs, and so we're like "well". They're trying, really trying. I miss all that, just the socialization. A piece of it's like being a stay-at-home mom for a while, you know? Then you miss that interaction with other adults, and you don't realize how much you need it until you don't have it. So, it's just the wellbeing, just checking in.

This teacher perceives PL as offering value beyond instructional support. Likewise, another teacher described in the reflections needing to "be able to network with people". For them, it was an avenue for connection and collaboration with their colleagues during a time that forced teachers into isolation.

Due to the new challenges that COVID-19 brought, it was clear that not only did students need opportunities for differentiated learning experiences, teachers did as well. In response, we offered PL through multiple and flexible channels. For example, we offered asynchronous online courses with flexible deadlines. One participant reflected, "I was thankful that the courses and things are left open so that we could get to it". In addition, an elementary teacher reflected on how the focus on being responsive to schools' needs in the PL related to their praxis by saying, "I feel that it is helping us to take a deeper look at what our students really need in the area of literacy and what professional development the teachers need to meet the needs of the students".

Ultimately, the teachers described the flexibility and responsiveness of the PL to be what made it most impactful. Commenting on both the online and in-person aspects of the PL they participated in, a middle school teacher from an inner-ring suburban school stated in the interview:

> [Through the] online course we were able to download a lot of the resources to use. And then through the [in-person] regroup and the summer launch, we were actually able to see some of them being used in action. So when we would go back to the course, I was like, okay, I'm going to use this. I'm going to take this down. But I think I took a lot of my resources from probably the online course and then maybe got different ideas about using them during the regroup, just hearing other colleagues talk about how they use them in their classes as well.

Overall, participants in schools that varied according to grade levels, geographical contexts, and resource availability perceived that COVID-19 increased the need for differentiation in their praxis and in PL.

*5.2. Theme 2—Increased Need to Focus on Growth*

Despite a desire for things to go back to "normal" post/COVID-19, teachers expressed that, if anything, conditions were more challenging than they had been before students returned to in-person learning. A suburban middle school teacher stated in the interview:

> Looking at the data from benchmarks and we just got MAP [state assessment] scores, we have our work cut out for us. It's just, with that being said, um, I thought this school year would be easier, but I'm finding that it's actually harder this year, the second year into it.

Participants across contexts described the increased time needed to attend to students' social and emotional needs and the increased time needed to reteach before moving into the planned curriculum. For example, a teacher from a rural middle school stated in an interview, "It took longer for my students to get through because [there were] some things that I had to go back and give a little bit of support before we could even start". Likewise, a high school teacher from an inner-ring suburban school said in an interview,

> The freshman took—I'm not exaggerating—until January to learn and do school, like the routine of school: You come in, you sit down, you do work. I mean, by the end of the day, they were spent, they were just so done . . . This was the first time we've had to deal with this.

Teachers across contexts and data sources used Discourses of accountability related to "learning loss" and lamented the perceived changes in the kids after returning to in-person learning. Specifically, nine out of the twelve teachers interviewed used the term "learning loss". It was apparent that changes in both instruction and mindset would be needed.

The most marked signal of changing mindsets during the PL came through as teachers emphasized the need to focus on student growth over proficiency data. They constantly sought productive ways to adjust their teaching and their expectations. For example, in the interview, an inner-ring suburban middle school teacher said,

> You know, we hear in the news a lot about how our kids are falling behind a lot post/COVID. But I think that this [way of approaching literacy taught in the PL] helps because it allows you to slow down and think about your thinking. And now I'm developing that habit of mind, so I'm applying it more [with my students]. And I think processes like this will help our students to catch up because it's not just [students saying], "I'm looking at the data". But now [they] can explain and tell more about what [they're] thinking.

Rather than the Discourse of learning loss, a suburban middle school teacher in the interview talked about starting with:

> Meeting them where they are and then provide them instruction. I really think that's the key. That you just have to talk to your kids, and get to know them as learners, and you know, give them goals, individual goals based on their needs, and work with them there.

They went on to say how they look at growth as one small step at a time in the right direction. They talked about how the PL was framed as "making change one baby step at a time". They described the PL in this way:

> They make it manageable in these easy baby steps, so it doesn't seem so intimidating. So I'm like, OK, just give me the next steps because really, even in my teaching on day to day like OK, what am I doing tomorrow, you know. So I need this by then.

Similar to the baby-steps approach, an elementary suburban teacher perceived that the PL provided her space to reflect on the importance of slowing down the learning process, saying that the impact was "taking the time to really promote that growth". In addition, a rural middle school teacher described how the focus on the writing process that she learned in the PL and was implementing in her classroom translated into a focus on evidence of learning and not a numerical grade.

> I actually get to be more monitoring-process instead of monitoring-behavior. It's just great. That's been a very big help. Next time, of course we have the mechanics and the usage issues that we're not addressing [in writing], but the kids were saying "Well, next time could you put, you know, quotation works around this, so that I know it came from that video". So the evidence is more than just a number on a piece of paper that says, this is the grade; it's that I had evidence of the process was learned.

In addition to focusing on growth, data highlighted the need to focus on joy, which leads to the third theme.

*5.3. Theme 3—Increased Need to Focus on Joy*

There were different reasons and contexts in which the need for a focus on joy was discussed by participants. Teachers from different contexts explicitly mentioned noticing increased social anxiety in their students. For example, a rural middle school teacher said in an interview:

> I have also found, and I've taught about 20 years, more issues this year with social anxiety. Just more than your average junior high kid awkwardness. But true social anxiety than I have ever seen before, and this is a concern. Well, I think that our children who were virtual last year the entire time especially have this new nervousness of being around other people, that things are too loud, just a lot of things like that.

To respond, we intentionally focused on joy as an overarching theme of the summer launch of the PL the second year. In reflecting on our PL experiences, participants across contexts and data sources wrote about the impact of the PL on their praxis as related to enjoying literacy and a love of learning as important impacts. For example, an urban elementary teacher reflected that an impact of the PL has been "Increased literacy joy for students, parents, and staff with literacy events". Similarly, an urban high school teacher wrote in the reflection, "The love of learning and writing has emerged," and a suburban middle school teacher said that he enjoyed the PL, and as such, "it helped me alter my writing instruction and assignments in ways to help my students enjoy their own writing". This teacher made the connection between the experiences they had in PL and their praxis.

**6. Discussion**

To address the research questions, we found three themes that emerged from the participants: an increased need for PL on differentiation, an increased need to focus on

growth, and an increased need to focus on joy. Our data showed that in a post/COVID-19 era, teachers desire PL and avenues of practice that allow them to see students and be seen themselves as full human beings. The themes invite a larger conversation about how Discourses of accountability stemming from neoliberalism beckon us as researchers and practitioners to think critically about the hierarchical structures that exist within education that prevent teachers from slowing down to consider both their professional and personal needs. Our data showed glimpses of how, when teachers are able to attend to their social, emotional, and professional needs, they are able to extend this holistic mindset in responding to the needs for their students, as well as celebrate the moments of growth and joy they experience through learning.

The first theme underscores how teachers' needs for PL on differentiation emerged from their understanding of their students and their own needs for a similar approach in learning amid and post/COVID-19. In this way, our PL contests neoliberalism in two ways. First, by responding to our teachers' needs through a both/and design in our online and in-person collaborative learning spaces, we acknowledge teachers' expertise in assessing and expressing their own needs. This is the opposite of the way neoliberalism views teachers through a deficit lens by dictating to them what to do and what to need, stripping them of their agency and expertise [48]. Second, our PL approach corroborates the *framework for adaptability* [1] in which we provide support for our teachers through flexible and participatory models of learning. We argue that our teachers' participation through online and in-person engagements in our continuous PL counts as democratic participation [5] because they were learning with and from each other and had autonomy to make decisions related to their praxis. We also resisted deficit discourses by centering teachers as experts who bring their local knowledge and professional and personal assets to the PL experience that contributes to the learning of the whole community (Fernández, 2019). Hence, in referring back to Apple's [48] (2006) interrupting neoliberalism through democratic ways of doing, we see how our PL attempts to interrupt neoliberalism in similar ways.

Implications of our data also highlight the need for flexibility [1] in PL offerings due to the substitute teacher shortage in our context. Our participants appreciated the flexibility of asynchronous online PL, and they still highly valued the collaboration and support that in-person offerings afforded. Because of the substitute teacher shortage, many of our offerings were moved to nights and weekends, times outside of teachers' contractual hours. In order to counter Discourse in the U.S. that teaching is a "calling" not a profession and that teachers have a moral responsibility to "do whatever it takes" or "give 100%" to make sure that students' succeed (see [61,67]), we compensated teachers' time outside of contractual hours. We agree with Bartlett [67], who argues that teaching is "difficult, complex and emotionally draining work entailing long out-of-classroom hours" (p. 567) and that "work overload exhausts their enthusiasm and erodes their commitment" (p. 568). We add to this argument that our data demonstrate that teaching is even more emotionally and physically draining and that attention to teachers' wellbeing is even more important than before COVID-19. Data suggested that our hybrid model where we met face to face for three days in the summer and then one day during the fall and one day during the spring with the rest of the PL online satisfied teachers' competing needs for both flexibility and community. This both/and approach in our PL then iteratively includes the three critical elements—cooperation, inclusion, and flexibility—proposed in the framework for adaptability [1] on both individual- and community-scale levels under our state-level grant work. In our model, our teachers cooperated with each other and participated by bringing in their own expertise. Our hybrid model also provided "access to multiple modalities of education and multiple points of access over a lifetime" [1] to teachers as a way for them to experience inclusion that was amplified through the flexibility of our PL. Flexibility in our PL also acted as a mechanism to support teachers' wellbeing through providing them opportunities to learn at their convenience and opportunities for connections with one another. Furthermore, as the framework [1] also "values mutual caring and dialogue over

profit-seeking, precision, and standardization" (p. 871), we confirm its alignment with our second finding.

As identified in theme two, COVID-19 exposed the necessity to slow down and attend to student growth rather than overemphasizing quantified assessments. Because we provided ongoing PL, we were able to offer time for inquiry and reflection, counter to the PL too often found in schools that is a one-off focused solely on technical knowledge to increase test scores [5]. Teachers perceived that slowing down seemed to benefit their students and themselves. While the importance of tending to students' growth as opposed to standardized proficiency scores is not a new concept, COVID-19 presented new limitations by causing many students to need explicit and intentional differentiation. It is possible that COVID-19 intensified the need for teacher education to focus on the development of teachers as whole humans who need time to process and work through content as they figure out how to walk their students through the same thing.

The current neoliberal Discourse privileges numerical data and meeting standardized proficiency outcomes. This is reinforced by policies (i.e., No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top) that place quantitative data and post-positivist epistemology on a pedestal with an assumption that these data are objective [60]. Although quantitative satellite data can illuminate patterns of interest, it is not intended to provide actionable information for individual educators, nor does it capture students' growth over time [68]. As Choi states in a podcast hosted by Safir and Mumby [69], standardized tests "produce the results they are intended to get. And the results they are intended to get are a stratification of performance that's tied to socioeconomic factors ... which result in tests that replicate the inequities in society" (21:36). This assessment system is rooted in white, Western ways of knowing that perpetuate practices of classification, comparison, and evaluation in contrast to a holistic approach more conducive to supporting students' growth [68,70]. Furthermore, all data collection and analysis involve decisions by researchers that introduce subjectivity. Although researchers can work to limit subjectivity, it can never be removed completely, even with quantitative standardized assessments [71].

Future research could serve to identify what actionable information teachers extract from their current assessment tools, whether they have the autonomy to act on their findings, and whether they perceive student growth to be captured by current assessment methods. In addition, it opens up avenues to talk deeply and critically about the importance of teacher and student wellbeing in relation to learning. Those findings could support the development of a framework for assessment that contributes to overall wellbeing by considering how the elements of holism (e.g., cognitive, social, emotional, and physical) interact to support learning.

Implications for practice include the continual endeavors to resist neoliberal Discourse that, as Aydarova [4] describes, positions "teacher education programs as producers of one-dimensional teachers trained to deliver content knowledge to their students without interrogating broader socioeconomic contexts of their practice" (p. 12). We can do so by bringing multiple ways of knowing in the world to our PL ways of knowing, learning, and being. For example, Greene et al. [72] describe the "kitchen table" as a representation of an inclusive space for Black women "to be seen, to be heard" and to receive "affirmation and healing" (p. 239). Haddix et al. [73] describe how the "kitchen table" relates the importance of a dialogic space where educators support one another in "their personal, social, and professional lives" (p. 380).

Aguilar and Cohen [24] discuss the concept of PL as a party with the understanding that teachers find joy in coming together, which relates to theme three about the need for joy. The authors also state that if teachers feel joy, they are also more likely to feel comfortable learning together. Since learning can be a vulnerable venture, creating a joyous atmosphere for PL provides space for teachers to open up, share, and question. This type of learning invites teachers to take ownership in expressing the growth they need. According to Cunningham [74], "With joyful teaching and learning at the center, emotion, pedagogy, and content knowledge became intertwined" (p. 3).

Furthermore, Black scholars have often used joy as a practice of resistance [75,76]. As Peoples and Foster [77] argue, the concept of joy as resistance serves to push back against traditional school narratives and models of reform that only reinforce the oppression of BIPOC students. COVID-19 exacerbates this oppression through language like "learning loss" and an increased need to "catch students up". Focusing on joy turns the focus from product to people, allowing both teachers and students to celebrate individual beings that enter classroom spaces and PL by centering their journey on knowledge.

We can also resist and act by bringing a Freirean [78] definition of praxis as critical reflection on action to our PL in ways that also encourage educators to bring critical reflection on action to their classrooms. This is especially important in the current times that discourage critical reflection [79,80]. Our ability to incorporate PL opportunities and communities that are intentionally reflective and supportive of teacher agency will determine how effective we are in our learning community at large. Specifically, in our context of a prolonged five-year literacy grant, we can continually reflect and analyze teacher perspectives on teacher needs to create responsive professional learning experiences.

*Limitations and Implications for Future Research*

This is a secondary analysis of data that were collected for a different study. We acknowledge that this means that the data may not comprehensively answer our research questions. However, through open coding, we found the themes of this study were so prevalent that we could not ignore making them visible to the field. Future research on teacher education for in-service teachers can provide greater insight into teacher perceptions of their PL needs post/COVID-19, as well as how we center teachers in order to work against hierarchical power structures and deficit discourses in ways that promote their professional, social, and emotional wellbeing. Furthermore, future research can explore the impact of teacher wellbeing on student learning and can explore the ways that ongoing [5] and critical (Fernández, 2019) PL influences teachers' praxis with students. Finally, interrupting neoliberalism in education requires collective and multi-level engagements from classroom praxis, teacher activism, to participation in policy analysis and critique (i.e., [5]; [49]). Future research might attempt to connect PL that acknowledges teachers' expertise and needs—in contrast with neoliberal accountability Discourse—with relevant educational policies tied to teacher education by utilizing a similar framework of interrupting neoliberalism.

## 7. Conclusions

In order to center educators as experts in their crafts, we facilitated teacher-led online and in-person PL experiences and curated content that supported teachers' wellbeing and self-efficacy. In centering teachers as experts, we aimed to disrupt the narrative of university-based literacy researchers as experts or school administrators as solitary change agents in order to spark teachers' interrogation of hierarchies within education systems and ultimately create more just systems that holistically support people and their learning. Throughout our work with teachers in 40 schools across the urban, suburban, and rural communities in our midwestern U.S. region, we have consistently heard teachers request applicable support and development amidst the waves of change in education in general but also within the wake of COVID-19. This study contributes data-based findings related to teacher wellbeing and literacy education with in-service teachers. Implications of these findings suggest hybrid models of teacher education for in-service teachers, both in-person and online, and both within and across schools, as we move forward in the new normal world.

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