Book Chapter

Digital Inequities: Promoting Digital Justice during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the actions taken by 12 US content teachers during the pandemic to provide their emergent bilingual learners (EBLs) with a digitally just education. When the pandemic forced schools to close their doors and transition to a virtual setting, teachers were faced with the reality that EBLs lacked the digital resources, skills, and literacies to successfully participate in virtual schooling. Based on the theory of digital justice, which seeks to promote digital equity for minoritized populations, this investigation was carried out to better understand how content teachers supported their EBLs during the pandemic. Through a series of semi-structured focus group interviews, data were collected and analyzed through open and axial coding. The findings from this study revealed how teachers provided technology for their EBLs, which strategies they took to support EBLs' digital literacy development, and how virtual instruction impacted educational expectations. The findings also highlighted the issue of who was responsible for providing digital justice which has large implications on providing socially just educational experiences. This work emphasizes the importance of not only closing the digital divide, but also proactively developing EBLs' digital skills and literacies necessary for 21st-century careers.

Keywords

Digital Divide; Digital Justice; Emergent Bilingual Learners; Equitable Education; Challenges in Virtual Learning

Introduction

As 2019 came to an end, news of a potential pandemic began to spread. It was not long before COVID-19 would irrevocably leave an impact on the world. As doctors and scientists raced to develop a vaccine, families, individuals, and caregivers were forced to reconceptualize many aspects of their everyday lives, from employment and schooling to family gatherings and social functions. The new conceptualization of daily life led many to experience a flood of emotions including fear, boredom, anxiety, and depression [1]. While the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are unknown [2], we have seen that as schools adapted to the new teaching and learning circumstances, learning loss occurred; more specifically, "[COVID 19] has widened the inequality of learning opportunities, placed vulnerable minorities at a greater disadvantage and heightened socio-emotional and mental health issues among learners" [3] (p. 3). In this investigation, we seek to contribute to our growing understanding of equitable education and the impact of COVID-19 on the educational opportunities of emergent bilingual learners (EBLs).

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced US kindergarten through 12th grade (K-12) schools to shift from in-person to virtual instruction. Although this shift was necessary to prevent the propagation of COVID-19, teachers and students had to quickly reinvent schools to address this new emergency remote teaching (ERT) context [4]. A large body of research has documented how teachers responded to the demands of virtual learning [5-9]. There are also numerous studies describing the experiences of K-12 and university-based English as a second or foreign language programs outside of the US [10-13]. What is missing from these investigations, however, is research documenting the experiences of K-12 content teachers working with EBLs in a US context [14]. The following investigation was carried out to address this research gap.

Digital Justice during COVID-19

Guided from a digital justice perspective [15], this investigation examines how K-12 content teachers responded to the new challenges posed by ERT for EBLs using interview data on the challenges and strategies that they dealt with. While highlighting the efforts of teachers and school districts to meet the needs of their EBLs, this investigation also calls attention to the long-standing inequities made salient during ERT [15-17]. Although each district took steps to ameliorate digital inequities, the participants found many of their EBLs were ill prepared to meet the demands of virtual education which aligned with similar research [14,18,19]. Their insufficient preparation largely stemmed from two issues: the first was a lack of access to digital devices; the second was a lack of digital literacy skills required for full participation in ERT. Resulting from what some have referred to as the digital divide [20-22], teachers and school districts were tasked with providing adequate tools and developing digital literacies for EBLs and their families to fully participate in ERT.

The Current Investigation

This investigation centers on the efforts of 12 US K-12 content teachers and three instructional coaches to provide a digitally just educational experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. This research investigated how participating teachers dealt with virtual teaching and learning especially when they had challenges. There were two research questions that guided this investigation: (1) When the pandemic forced schools to shift to emergency remote teaching, what challenges did US K-12 content teachers encounter working with emergent bilingual learners? And (2) How did teachers deal with these new challenges?

Terminology

A note on terminology: The term emergent bilingual learners (EBL) will be used to describe students often referred to as English language learners (ELLs) or limited-English-proficiency students (LEP) within the US education system. The term, EBL, emphasizes and positions bilingualism as an asset, whereas previous labels focus on what students lack [23]. Therefore, as a means of celebrating diversity, the term EBL was chosen by the researchers and utilized throughout this paper.

Theoretical Framework

Digital Justice and the Digital Divide

This investigation is guided by the framework of digital justice. The foundation of digital justice stems from the notion of the digital divide [16]. Originally, the "digital divide" referred to the binary condition of possessing or lacking digital resources [22]. However, over time the term, "digital divide", evolved and now it includes the differences between user skills and knowledge as well as the "social inequalities" (gender, race, disability, income, etc.) that are seen as precursors to or even causes of the digital divide" [16] (p. 767).

The reality of the 21st century is that "those who function better in the digital realm and participate more fully in digitally mediated social life enjoy advantages over their digitally disadvantaged counterparts" [24] (p. 570). As the world becomes more digitized, EBLs should have equal or more opportunities to develop the skills which allow them to take part in this increasingly technological society. Nevertheless, as van Deursen and colleagues contend, "Those who are marginalized in important domains are likely to also be marginalized in their digital skills and uses of technology, creating a vicious cycle where historically marginalized groups are further marginalized by technology" [17] (p. 470). As an example, Heeks demonstrates how digital inequities abound in what he labels "adverse digital incorporation" [16] (p. 768), which he characterizes as dominant groups exploiting others through the design, implementation, and use of digital resources.

Digital Justice

Striving to overcome the negative repercussions of the digital divide brings us to the concept of digital justice. As a social justice movement, digital justice seeks to provide EBLs with the digital resources, literacies, and skills required for learning [15]. Given the demand that EBLs develop digital 21st-century skills [25], and given recent experiences with ERT, the urgency of digital justice cannot be ignored. It is essential that all students, "regardless of socioeconomic status, physical disability, language, race, gender, or any other characteristics that have been linked with unequal treatment" [15] (p. 383), receive the benefits of a digitally just education.

However, as will be reiterated throughout this study, digital justice demands more than providing technology and resources to EBLs with the hope that they will intuitively know how to effectively use those tools. EBLs must be taught how to do more than access a shared file or link; they need to be taught how to find answers, evaluate information, and even engage in online communities. A digitally just education demands that EBLs be given an opportunity to develop the digital literacies necessary for success through the purposeful and meaningful integration of technology in educational settings. Such a move would require schools to design a curriculum that could sustain the ongoing need for EBLs to acquire the digital literacies necessary for future careers in our technologically adept society. The current investigation explored how content teachers strove to provide digitally just educational experiences for EBLs during ERT using the interview data, which might contribute to increased awareness of practicing equity when preparing and implementing content teaching for EBLs during the pandemic.

Literature Review

Emergency Remote Teaching

The pursuit of digital justice requires teachers to actively combat the inequities faced by marginalized populations [15,17,26]. Ideally, this would be a choice; however, for many teachers and students alike, agency was taken away when COVID-19 safety protocols forced schools to shift towards ERT [4,6]. ERT occurs when social and political strife, natural disasters, or when health crises create situations where traditional face-to-face learning cannot safely continue [4].

Hodges and colleagues argue that there are major differences between intentionally planned online instruction and ERT [4]. One of the primary differences is the time and resources educational institutions devote to high-quality online course development and facilitation [27]. This contrasts with the more reactionary ERT, where there is little time to prepare and transfer in-person courses to a temporary virtual format [4,9]. While researchers have championed online learning as effective pedagogical practice [5,7], many teachers during the pandemic found they were unprepared for the challenges that accompany virtual, and in this case, ERT [5-7].

Inequality and Emergency Remote Teaching

Combined with the difficulties of transitioning to a virtual format, teachers of EBLs also had to contend with societal inequities; moreover, a shift towards virtual education did not remedy the marginalizing impact of race, language, socioeconomic status, and culture [20,28]. Efforts have been made to address longstanding inequities, yet EBLs continue to be disproportionately impacted when it comes to access and use of educational technology and resources [14]—inequities that became more evident and exacerbated as schools were forced to implement ERT [29].

Teachers' Choice

Where teachers previously chose the degree of technology integration for their instruction, the pandemic forced their hands [**5**]. On top of the added stress from living during uncertain times, virtual learning was no longer an option only for the teachers who were comfortable with technology nor was it a choice for families who could not afford the necessary equipment and internet connections; COVID forced virtual learning on underprepared teachers and communities [**4-8**]. When ERT dictated that teachers incorporate technology into their instruction, the reality of digital inequities could no longer be ignored. The remainder of this literature review looks more closely at the related issues of the digital divide and digital literacies as obstacles countering the implementation of a digitally equitable education during the pandemic. We start by examining the digital divide and research regarding students who have and do not readily have access to digital resources. However, as possession of digital resources was insufficient to ensure that EBLs had equitable access to education, after discussing the digital divide, we transition to a review of digital literacies.

Digital Divide

While the notion of the digital divide is not new, it has for many people been considered a challenge of the past; with the emergence of mobile technologies, it had been assumed that all US students had readily accessible technology [30]. This perception was shattered when the pandemic forced schools to move to ERT. Overlooked yet preexisting inequities became more visible between students who had and those who did not have access to digital resources [31].

As these inequities became perceptible worldwide, education agencies responded as best as they could; some utilized radio, some provided DVDs, and others utilized television programs [32]. Within the US, however, schools increasingly relied upon the internet for continued education, which required students to have access to both internet-capable devices and stable internet connections, something not all students had [31]. Access, or lack thereof, to educational technology is not a new phenomenon; rather it has gained greater attention during the pandemic. For example, before the pandemic, rural communities had limited or no internet access; after gaining access to the internet, consumers expressed their concerns about limited bandwidth as community internet use might diminish their ability to fully participate in online school or work activities [31].

Our understanding of the digital divide continues to evolve over time. Where it originally referred to gaps between those who had and those who did not have access to technology [22], the term now encompasses ideas related to communities for whom electronic materials are not relevant [33], bandwidth and internet connectivity struggles [21,34], technology use in different communities [20], and the exploitation of digitally disadvantaged populations [16]. The use of the term, "digital divide", in this paper, however, follows Dolan's description. She explains the digital divide as:

The divide in the ways technology is used [by students], influenced by the differences in the socioeconomic status of students and the schools they attend; their teachers' pedagogical beliefs about, and training in, technology; and the way technology is either restricted or supported by administration and governing agencies [21] (p. 25).

The pandemic-imposed shift toward virtual learning brought with it a greater awareness of the digital divide as many students had limited access to the necessary digital resources to participate in remote learning [31].

The Digital Divide and Equity

Regardless of the reason for the digital divide, EBLs must be given opportunities to utilize digital resources and develop digital literacies necessary for success in the 21st century. Ruben, Estrada, and Honigsfel argue that action must be taken to better understand and close the digital divide as a means of providing equity for EBLs [35]. Until this divide is addressed, EBLs with limited access to technology will continue to be marginalized and ill-prepared for future careers, opportunities, and demands [30,36]. Nevertheless, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the disparity between students who had access to technology and those who did not became more apparent; there grew a gap that teachers and districts were required to address to ensure equitable educational opportunities for EBLs.

ERT and Digital Literacy

It is generally accepted that teachers were unprepared for the unprecedented shift to ERT [31]. Many educators had received little training about virtual teaching and learning before the pandemic, so they lacked the necessary knowledge and experience to fluidly transition from in-person to virtual settings [5,7,8,20,31]. ERT left them to develop new lessons and materials that could be delivered online, but relatively few teachers examined EBLs' needs and skills such as digital literacy; moreover, they focused on developing "new" lessons for virtual learning [10]. There were social programs and community organizations that provided resources and opportunities, "to help disadvantaged people become more digitally included by providing free computer and Internet access, as well as basic digital skills trainings" [37] (p. 92). There is, however, a difference between possessing a basic understanding of educational technology and utilizing the technology to the fullest extent for learning [4,38].

Longstanding Call for Digital Literacy Development

When the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act was ratified into law, there came a strong emphasis on preparing students for 21st-century careers, which inevitably necessitated technology skills [25]. While NCLB reiterated the importance of digital literacies for all students, DelliCarpini reiterated that "developing technological literacy skills for [EBLs] is critical to equitable access and participation in the types of 21st Century language skills that are a requirement in our increasingly technological society" [25] (p. 20). Similar calls have been made by researchers attending specifically to the needs of EBLs and their teachers alike to be well-versed in digital literacy to meet the demands of technologically adept societies [21,28,39].

The pandemic clearly demonstrated that we have not yet met or exceeded the mandate of NCLB. During virtual learning, EBLs fell behind in their learning largely because they had not developed the digital literacy skills required to fully participate in school [10]. In response, Alakrash and Razak reiterate:

[more] than ever before, teachers and students are in crucial need of the digital-literacy skills that would allow them to identify the nature of the information they are surrounded by; find out if it is useful and credible; and protect themselves from lagging in the education process [10] (p.3).

Defining Digital Literacy

Never has the importance of digital literacies been more visible than during the pandemic. Determining which digital literacies EBLs should develop, however, is complex, as the term "digital literacy" has become somewhat ambiguous with varying definitions [40]. Descriptions of digital literacy range from a more literal interpretation that equates digital literacy to print literacy, meaning it is a mere transfer of one's print literacy (reading/writing) skills to digital environments [41,42]. Other definitions of digital literacy are more complex, incorporating the skillset required to make and interpret meaning in digital environments, which include but are not limited to the interpretation and production of print, audio, and video materials [43].

The definition of digital literacy as adopted for the current investigation is derived from Mantiri, Hibbert, and Jacobs, who characterize a digitally literate person as one who:

Can use technology strategically to discover and evaluate information, connect and collaborate with others, produce and share original content, and use the internet and technology tools to achieve many academic, professional, and personal goals [44] (p. 1301).

Mantiri and colleagues' description of a digitally literate individual reflects the demands EBLs were faced with as they engaged in online learning [44]. EBLs had to navigate the online world to acquire new learning, communicate with their peers, and engage with their instructors, all of which require greater skills than simply reading and responding to content posted in online classrooms.

Digital Literacy and EBLs

Before the pandemic, the development of EBLs' digital literacy had been investigated [25,39,42], although with somewhat mixed results. Gilbert [39], working with adult EBLs at a private language school, examined reading strategies while working through digital texts. He found that interacting with a digital text requires different cognitive processes than print texts. Gilbert's participants also commented on the difficulty of focusing on the main idea of their reading when presented with a series of distracting hyperlinks and external resources. Notable from this investigation is that the hyperlinks, supposedly included to clarify confusing ideas, served as an additional source of confusion [39].

Interestingly, whereas Gilbert's investigation demonstrated frustrations associated with hyperlinks, Kasper [42] touts hyperlinks as a resource that permits EBLs to, "benefit from increased opportunities to process linguistic and content information" [42] (p. 96). Kasper, working with university-level EBLs, found that technology-mediated reading significantly increased EBLs' reading comprehension. These two studies were selected as exemplars because although Gilbert and Kasper have differing perspectives on hyperlinks, they both argue—as do others [45]—that EBLs must be taught how to effectively utilize the digital resources they have been provided, or, "students may become lost in a sea of information" [46] (p. 111). It is not enough to merely provide EBLs with technology-mediated resources if educators do not explicitly teach them how to effectively use those resources [28]. As mentioned above, this would require teachers to reexamine their curricula to find ways to purposefully integrate the sustainable development of digital literacies into their instruction. Nevertheless, as will be demonstrated below, EBLs' digital literacy development is an area where schools needed to improve and sustain it as part of their curricular and instructional guide.

Materials and Methods

As in-service teachers were faced with the new challenge of ERT, the researchers saw a need to support teachers in this new challenge. To meet the in-service teachers' needs, the following two research questions were posed:

(1) When the pandemic forced schools to shift to emergency remote teaching, what challenges did US K-12 content teachers encounter when working with emergent bilingual learners?
(2) How did the teachers deal with these new challenges?

Based on these questions, qualitative data were collected through semi-structured focus group interviews. The focus group interviews were recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Once completed, the data were analyzed with the intent of understanding how content teachers supported their EBLs' virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. What follows is a detailed description of the research procedures and analysis.

Research Context

This research investigation was completed as part of a National Professional Development (NPD) grant focused on training content teachers to strengthen their ability to provide equitable educational experiences for EBLs. Within the grant, participating content teachers completed seven teaching English to speakers of other languages [TESOL] courses, which prepared them to obtain their TESOL teacher certification. A total of four school districts across a large Midwestern area participated in the National Professional Development (NPD) grant, 2017–2022, sponsored by the Office of English Language Acquisition. Of the four school districts participating in the grant, Tunis is located in a rural area, Beauton and Crow City are in an urban area, and Crow City School District is located in a suburban location.

Twenty-six content area teachers participated in this NPD grant and came from a variety of subject and grade-level classes (pre-kindergarten, elementary, science, music, social studies, etc.). Each district also had instructional coaches who were an integral component of the NPD grant project. Within their districts, coaches facilitated monthly meetings which allowed the content teachers to come together and discuss coursework, reflect on teaching, and make plans to complete assigned projects. Coaches also served as collaborative thinking partners who provided feedback on lesson plans and their delivery through classroom observations. Importantly, instructional coaches functioned as district-specific supports for the content teachers as they began to enact racially, culturally, and linguistically equitable teaching practices for EBLs.

Summer Institute

One of the fundamental elements of the NPD grant project was to prepare and provide an intensive summer institute. Traditionally, summer institute was a four-day professional development (PD) event carried out in person where teachers, coaches, district leaders, and the university team met in person since the TESOL courses were offered online. The educators were engaged in professional development (PD) activities, so they could help EBLs improve their content competencies. However, resulting from COVID-19 safety protocols, the 2020 summer institute transitioned to a virtual format.

While preparing for the virtual summer institute, the university grant team decided to reduce it from a four- to a three-day event. In place of continuing with traditional practice, the team elected to reduce the overall virtual time commitment to two and a half days with fewer contact hours each day. With this decision, it was determined that the grant team would offer a series of optional virtual Saturday PDs throughout the semester to provide ongoing support to content teachers.

Focus Group Interviews

The grant team also invited content teachers to participate in two semi-structured focus group interviews in conjunction with virtual Saturday PDs. We chose to include focus group interviews for several reasons. First, we wanted to tailor coursework and PD activities to teachers' actual needs and not our perception of their needs. Second, as participants would already be present for virtual PD activities, it would be more convenient for them to remain a few minutes on Saturday as opposed to finding a time during their already hectic schedules to meet one-on-one with a researcher. Third, the research team believed it was important for teachers across districts to compare situations and potentially share ideas with each other that they might not otherwise have the opportunity to do [47,48]. Finally, when researchers posed the interview questions (see Appendix A), they were able to observe the other participants as they interacted with and discussed the interview questions [49].

Participants

Participant recruitment was completed through email. All of the potential participants were members of the national professional development grant project mentioned above. This project was specifically designed to align with a series of Saturday morning virtual professional development activities. Prior to the professional development activities, potential participants (twenty-six content teachers and four instructional coaches) were sent an email inviting them to participate in the focus group interviews.

Twelve teachers and three instructional coaches agreed to participate (See Table 1). Eleven of the twelve teachers were female, and all the teachers identified as White. Most of the teachers indicated that they spoke English at home; however, four of them reported some proficiency in languages other than English (Spanish, Swahili, Thai, and Bosnian). Seven of the participants had five or fewer years of experience teaching. Of the five teachers who had more than five years of experience teaching, the most experienced had eighteen years. The majority of the participants were elementary teachers, with only three teaching at the high-school level.

Table 1: Focus Group Participants.

Teacher	Gender	Race	Home Language	Multilingual	Content	Years Teaching	District
Brian	Male	White	English	Yes (Bosnian)	Elementary	4	Beauton
Darla	Female	White	English	No	Kindergarten	4	Beauton
Ellen	Female	White	English	No	Elementary	7	Beauton
Heidi	Female	White	English	Yes (Spanish)	Elementary	5	Beauton
Olivia	Female	White	English	No	Elementary	6	Beauton
Sierra	Female	White	English	No	Early Childhood	8	Beauton
Alice	Female	White	English	Yes (Spanish)	Sheltered Social Studies	3	Crow City
Jamie	Female	White	English	No	Elementary	2	Crow City
Laura	Female	White	English	Yes (Spanish, Swahili, Thai)	High School Science	3	Crow City
Brianna	Female	White	English	No	Elementary Music	18	Tunis
Shelby	Female	White	English	No	High School Math	6	Tunis
Tabatha	Female	White	English	No	Early Childhood	3	Midtown
Sandy	Female	While	English	No	Instructional Coach	10+	Crow City
Emma	Female	White	English	No	Instructional Coach	10+	Crow City
Grace	Female	White	English	No	Instructional Coach	10+	Beauton

Note: All names and locations are pseudonyms.

Three instructional coaches accepted the invitation to participate. The three coaches worked with the content teachers from Beauton and Crow City school districts. The three instructional coaches were all female. Two of the coaches worked in elementary schools as English Language Learning (ELL) teachers, with the third working at the middle- and high-school levels in the same capacity. Each of the instructional coaches had more than ten years of teaching experience before becoming an instructional coach for the grant project. The coaches identified themselves as monolingual with their home language being English. In total, there were 15 participants in the focus group interviews.

Interview Protocols

The primary purpose of the semi-structured focus group interviews was to gain insight into the teachers' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic so the NPD grant team could tailor PD activities and coursework. Thus, an interview protocol was crafted to facilitate the focus group interviews (see Appendix A). As there were two focus group interviews, the protocol was divided into two parts. Questions from part one were created to elicit conversations about the digital resources and challenges participants faced when they shifted to virtual instruction. The choice to focus on challenges with digital resources and technology was made because many of the conversations that the research team had regarding ERT were focused on technology struggles and challenges. Our goal was to provide an opportunity for teachers to hear from teachers in other districts and promote the sharing of ideas. The second portion of the interview protocol focused on EBLs and their families. We chose to focus on attendance and communication in response to the interactions the grant team had with the participants. Many teachers had expressed concern about the diminishing attendance patterns of their EBLs. In some cases, teachers had completely lost contact with EBLs and families. Participants were asked to consider how they communicate with families and discuss differences in attendance patterns compared to previous years as well as reflect upon their success with virtual education.

Data Collection

The data for this investigation came from focus group interviews. Two focus group interviews took place in October and November 2020. Both interviews occurred on Saturday mornings directly following grant PD activities. Before any data were collected, and in accordance with ethical research, Institutional Research Board (IRB) approval was sought and granted. Participants were also informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any point. Compensation was offered to participants for their time.

The focus group interviews took place over Zoom [50]. Participants were divided into four groups of between two and four participants, except for one November focus group where a participant was unexpectedly disconnected leaving only one teacher and the interview facilitator. Each group had a separate Zoom breakout room with an NPD grant member who facilitated the interview. Utilizing the capabilities of Zoom to record the proceedings of each breakout room, the audio and videos from each breakout room were recorded and secured on a password-protected computer for later analysis. Once the interviews were completed, they were transcribed utilizing the Otter.ai [51] transcription service. The data were then uploaded into QDA Miner Lite [52] for analysis.

Data Analysis

Once the data were uploaded to QDA Minder Lite [52], they were open coded. The initial open coding was completed by the first author. The researcher first read through the data and highlighted any portions that stuck out as important. Upon completing the first read-through, the highlighted portions of the data were analyzed for emerging themes and ideas. Upon subsequent analysis of the transcripts, the researcher continued to highlight portions of the data followed by grouping data with similar themes. The first author continued this process until there were no new highlights added to the data. Once completed, the highlighted data were organized by emergent themes a codebook was created which was shared with the second author.

Working collaboratively, the authors created an initial coding scheme from the emergent themes in the data. When the preliminary coding scheme was developed, the researchers returned to the data and applied the new coding scheme [53]. After the data were re-coded, they were organized using QDA Miner Lite [52]. The researchers then actively sought to reduce the number of codes by combining similar ideas or eliminating codes that were not robustly supported by the data resulting in the development of the final coding scheme.

With the final coding scheme, we returned to the data and re-coded the transcripts. During the final iteration of the analysis, we also started to group codes together into a series of themes. Through the final analysis, the data were organized into three emergent themes: (1) providing technology to students and families; (2) developing digital literacies; and (3) adjusting educational expectations during the pandemic. As the themes emerged, the researchers met and discussed them. Throughout our conversation, we questioned and challenged each other to inquire if the analyzed data supported or did not support the research questions. Frequently, this entailed returning to the data to find answers to the questions and challenges posed to each other. Through this process of challenging and questioning each other, and then finding responses to our questions in the data, we were able to ensure the findings supported our claims [48].

Findings

Through a qualitative analysis of the data, three themes emerged. The first two themes were directly related to the digital divide and the development of digital literacies, which were the overt challenges teachers had to address (Research Question 1). Within these themes, we were presented with the ways in which teachers responded to these challenges presenting potential solutions (Research Question 2). The third theme represented an unforeseen obstacle that also impacted the education experiences of EBLs. Specifically, the third theme explores the educational expectations of teachers and parents during ERT. The themes were presented in a sequential order in which the participating teachers addressed them during the interviews.

The first theme, providing technology to students and families, described the limited access EBLs and families had to the required technology to participate in ERT. This theme focused on the efforts of content teachers and school districts to provide technology and ongoing support during the pandemic. The second theme, developing digital literacies, stemmed from the first theme in that providing technology to EBLs and families was not enough; they needed to develop the digital literacies required to participate fully in ERT. In this theme, the teachers described how they supported their EBLs to develop the necessary skill set for engaging in virtual learning environments. The third theme that emerged from the data was adjusting educational expectations during the pandemic. Regardless of the change in educational format, teachers wanted to provide high-quality educational experiences during the pandemic as well.

Theme 1: Providing Technology to Students and Families

Districts' Response to the Digital Divide

When schools transitioned to virtual instruction, it became apparent that many EBLs and families did not have the required tools and resources to participate in ERT. When asked if schools provided EBLs with devices, Brian, an elementary teacher responded, "Yes, they were. They were asked if they didn't have a device of their own". When asked to clarify what type of digital tools were provided to his elementary students, Brian further stated, "They were given Chromebooks, so laptops, and then internet was provided if it was confirmed to be an emergency situation where they genuinely couldn't get access" (Brian, Focus Group 1, November 2020). Interestingly, what was considered an emergency that would grant EBLs access to district-provided internet services was not further elaborated. When asked a follow-up question, Shelby, a high school math teacher described her district's efforts to acquire technology.

Shelby stated, "So, at the high school, we are still waiting for our Chromebooks to come in. We ordered them in like May or June, and we still don't have them" (Shelby, Focus Group 1, November 2020). Shelby taught at Tunis school district which is a rural district that struggled to provide virtual schooling to their EBLs because the community lacked the infrastructure and tools for EBLs to have consistent, reliable internet access they required to participate in ERT. Yes, Tunis had ordered Chromebooks and was taking action to address the technology gap, but within the community there were infrastructural challenges that made ERT difficult. Because of the technological struggles Tunis faced, virtual instruction was offered as a choice to EBLs; however, the choice of virtual instruction was predicated on whether a computer could be provided, and an internet connection established within EBLs' homes.

Linguistically Responsive Tech Support

Laura, a high school science teacher, had a somewhat different experience. Her school district was able to provide computers and WiFi hotspots to EBLs who lacked them. However, the tools provided did not always function well. She described her frustration in helping her EBLs repair faulty equipment. She stated:

> Originally, they [the district] were only doing one hotspot per family, and then they had extra. So, then they changed it to one hotspot per kid. But that required families to go back to the Board of Education to pick up another hotspot. And some of the hotspots they gave out aren't really super effective. So, kids have hotspots, but they [the hotspots] don't do much [with]. (Focus Group 3, November 2020)

Laura went on to describe the school district's effort to provide students and families with resources for getting repairs and technological assistance. The district established a phone number that families could call for technical support, as well as a physical location where hardware could be repaired as needed. Laura, however, was unhappy with the phone system and repair services because she believed they were not accessible to linguistically diverse students as the primary language required to access these services was English.

From a digital justice perspective, the participants' districts took the first steps at providing, or attempting to provide, EBLs with the necessary tools to engage in ERT. Granted, the efforts and resources may not have been linguistically responsive, nevertheless, efforts were still made within the short amount of time to meet the new needs [1]. While this theme illustrated the initial steps toward digital justice, the next theme highlighted that having digital resources would not mean the EBLs could engage in virtual education without digital literacy skills.

Theme 2: Developing Digital Literacies

Once EBLs were provided with the necessary technology and tools to participate in virtual school, it became insurmountably important for them to learn how to use that technology for educational purposes. The second theme related to developing EBLs' digital literacies which was an aspect of ERT multiple participants reported they were not expecting to address. Two types of mindsets were present throughout the data. The first mindset represented teachers who acknowledged the importance of teaching their EBLs how to use the technology; the second mindset came from teachers who were focused on continuing schooling and did not emphasize the teaching of digital literacies.

Training EBLs to Use Technology

When reflecting upon her EBLs' preparation to participate in virtual classrooms, Laura emphasized the importance of providing ongoing training to EBLs. She claimed that support was a must, "Definitely for the kids. Some just sort of lack like… there's a gap in tech literacy. So, if you and I saw a blue word that's underlined, we're like, oh, that's a link" (Laura, Focus Group 3, November 2020). Interestingly, Laura positioned herself and others in her focus group as individuals who were readily able to identify and utilize hyperlinks within a document while simultaneously indicating that those with "gaps in tech literacy" lack those same skills. Throughout both interviews, Laura frequently spoke about home visits and her efforts to ensure that not only did her EBLs have functional digital technologies, but that they also knew how to use those tools successfully for school.

Tabatha, an elementary school teacher, similarly recounted that when she first started to teach virtually, she was required to provide her EBLs and families with training before they could equally participate in; developing digital literacies fell upon her shoulders. Tabatha stated:

> At the beginning of the school year, for me, helping my kids or helping my families, get on Teams and get on Seesaw, that was on me, like I, myself had to make these little videos of how to do it and show them how, and call them and walk them through and everything. [There] wasn’t really anything from the district. They [the district] did a lot of training for teachers on how to use those tools, but not necessarily for the families. (Focus Group 4, November 2020)

To develop digital literacies, Tabatha created a series of tutorial videos; however, not all the participating teachers provided similar training. Brian described the action his school district took to support EBLs and families. He stated:

> So, we were…we didn’t directly provide training, but our librarians were available for the first several weeks of school when we were all virtual. And parents could sign up for a time slot to come up with their computer and with their child to get some training on how to use the virtual learning platforms and how to use the computer and stuff like that. So, that was provided to the families. (Brian, Focus Group 1, November 2020)

Brian later acknowledged that while the librarians were very busy, he was unsure how many EBL families took advantage of the training nor what the training entailed. Brian and Tabatha were both elementary teachers from the same school district, yet they interpreted their responsibilities for developing digital literacies differently.

Content over Digital Literacy

Alice, a high school social studies teacher, commented on the difficulty EBLs experienced because of their unfamiliarity with the digital tools provided:

I'm a high school teacher so my classrooms look pretty different but we are using Teams, and I'm not a huge fan of it only because it makes it difficult to get my [EBLs] to, or I should say, emerging bilinguals as we are learning in our class. It's hard to get my emerging bilinguals into breakout rooms with my paraprofessionals because they don't really quite understand, like, I click this to join this room. It would be nice if I could just manually drop them in, right? (Focus Group 5, October 2020)

Alice's statement represented a different mindset from that expressed by several participants in this investigation. Most of the participants were interested in supporting their EBLs and families in developing their technology skills. Alice, however, did not express interest in developing EBLs' digital literacies as she was focused on school guidelines and ensuring that her students were in the right place at the right time. Furthermore, Sandy, a teacher and instructional coach in the same district as Alice, stated that the district failed to provide any training to teachers, so EBLs and families could participate in the virtual learning environments. Sandy said:

Teachers are doing their own thing…but like [the] district, I think, I don't know, our district person hasn't really…the person that I would think to be in charge of it, hasn't really been doing the job. (Focus Group 2, November 2020)

Interpreting Responsibilities

Comments from Alice, Sandy, Brian, and Tabatha demonstrated the similarities and differences in how teachers and districts interpreted their responsibilities toward developing their EBLs' digital literacies. Brian and Tabatha's district provided training to teachers, EBLs, and families although the trainers varied from school librarians to the teachers themselves. Alice and Sandy's district, on the other hand, provided little guidance on supporting EBLs and families during ERT.

What is consistent across participants is that content teacher participants realized that having technology alone was insufficient for EBLs to succeed in virtual instruction. As will be discussed below, the struggle arose when determining who was responsible for developing EBLs' digital literacies. While the majority of the participants in this investigation created materials and facilitated the development of digital literacies, as demonstrated by Alice's comments above, not all teachers actively followed the same path.

Theme 3: Adjusting Educational Expectations during the Pandemic

While analyzing the data, a third narrative emerged which was somewhat unexpected (Research Question 2). Along with discussing the importance of providing technology to EBLs and addressing the need to develop digital literacies, multiple participants discussed educational expectations during the pandemic.

Focus on the Positive

Several teachers acknowledged the difference between in-person and ERT situations and adjusted their expectations to match. Yet, other participants indicated that some EBLs' parents and even teachers did not adjust their expectations differently to account for virtual, home-based, learning.

Brian openly discussed the change in his expectations when he spoke about focusing on the positive and being flexible during ERT. He said:

> And if you push too hard, I don't know about you guys, but I'm afraid I'm going to have kids just stop showing up. So, you just got to celebrate the good stuff, and just ignore all the bad stuff that's happening in the background, all the video games, all of their sleeping. (Focus Group 4, October 2020)

Brian demonstrated an understanding of how ERT impacted his EBLs in their homes. In a similar manner that teachers were unprepared for the virtual shift, EBL families had to make similar adjustments in their homes. Spaces that had not always been designated as educational spaces were redesignated as such. In response, EBLs and teachers had to learn how to operate in these new environments. In an effort to encourage continued participation, Brian elected to focus on the positive aspects of remote learning with his EBLs in place of dwelling on the negative ones.

EBL Participation in Virtual Instruction

Not all participants recognized how shifting education to the home would impact their EBLs. Jamie questioned, “Why, if we did the assignment in class, [EBLs] don’t have it done? I don’t understand” (Focus Group 4, November 2020). This statement followed her description of how EBLs are exposed to numerous distractions in their homes (siblings, video games, cell phones, etc.). Jamie’s focus group conversation then shifted to parental responsibilities, a topic not consistently addressed in the data. Nevertheless, Jamie’s group charged parents with removing distractions and ensuring that children were actively participating in ERT without considering how her EBLs’ home lives differed from their own.

Shelby’s focus group similarly discussed student participation. At one point, Shelby claimed that her EBLs would not participate in class during virtual instruction, a claim she reiterated as reflecting the experiences of her colleagues; something she described as “high school kids are just lazy” (Focus Group 1, November 2020). Shelby was asked to clarify her statement about why her EBLs would not participate in class, and she stated:

> I mean, a lot of them [worked prior to the pandemic]. They [worked] as soon as they [left] school until two in the morning, and then they [came] to school every day. So, in their minds, they’re like, well, if I don’t have to be at school during the day,

then I’m just going to go to work during the day so I don’t have to work until two in the morning and I don’t blame them. (Focus Group 1, November 2020) Initially, Shelby had not considered the experiences of her EBLs nor how the pandemic had altered their ability to work and support their families; she was ready to attribute their lack of participation in virtual schooling to being lazy teenagers. However, after further prompting, she recognized that her EBLs had responsibilities outside of school. Furthermore, she began to empathize with her EBLs as she realized how busy they were. Nevertheless, some teachers were quick to judge their EBLs without acknowledging their lived experiences during the pandemic.

Parental Expectations

Parents similarly expected that their children would be provided with a rigorous, high-quality education regardless of the virtual format. Tabatha and Jamie, conversing with each other in their November focus group, expressed that parent expected, as Jamie put it, “great things from their children”. Jamie further described how her expectations for her son had changed because of the new educational format but reiterated that her EBLs’ parents, “still expect that same grade level that their kids were getting in the building, they expect the learning to continue”. Tabatha added that from her perspective she was afraid of overwhelming her EBLs and their families with too much work. Nevertheless, she stated “I’ve had parents say like, you know, we want more work…They want more…I can’t just give them a bunch of assignments, but those expectations are still very high”. Throughout the pandemic, many teachers and parents recognized the need to adjust their expectations; however, that did not appear to be the case for all EBL parents and teachers.

Discussion

When COVID-19 necessitated the shift to virtual learning, it brought to the surface digital inequities regarding EBLs. Not all families were readily capable of facilitating ERT for their children; many EBLs lacked the resources which would grant their full participation in ERT [21,36]. Accounting for the needs of EBL families, content teachers, and school districts took a digital justice stance and found ways to distribute digital resources and support to the EBLs who lacked them. Granted, not all the resources and supports provided by teachers and districts were linguistically responsive to EBLs' needs. It should still be recognized that during an ERT experience with limited time and resources to effectively implement virtual instruction [4], efforts were still made to address EBLs' needs for continued learning. ERT is characterized as a short-term solution [4], yet as time progressed, the teachers and school districts invested in WiFi hotspots, technological devices, and support systems that would last throughout the duration of remote learning.

In this section, we will unpack the findings to discuss the larger issues that arise. We begin addressing the idea of who is responsible for providing digital justice. From that point, we transition to the importance of collaboratively establishing educational expectations based on EBLs' needs and home lives. After looking at these two points, we bring them together to link digital justice with social justice and the importance of providing equitable educational experiences for EBLs. This section concludes with a discussion of the research questions as well as suggestions for future investigations.

Who Is Responsible for Digital Justice?

This investigation also reiterates what has been argued by previous research regarding the use of digital resources for education, specifically regarding the difference between having a digital device and knowing how to utilize that device for educational purposes [21,25,39]. However, what we see from the data is tension regarding who should develop EBL's digital literacies. All participants agreed that EBLs needed support to develop the skillset required to be successful in schools, but there were large inconsistencies with how that training took place.

From the data, we observed three layers of responses to the development of EBL's digital literacies, the first of which is a district-level response. On this level, the districts provided resources and support for those resources, but they were not able to meet the specific needs of EBLs throughout the district. This was the cause of Laura's frustration; she found that the tech support center her district established was tailored to the majority group and lacked the linguistic support her EBL families needed. The second response was at the building level where more training and support were provided, but this was carried out through the school librarians with little investment from classroom teachers. Brian was proud of his school's response to EBLs' needs but he could only vaguely describe the type of training provided and was not sure who had attended those trainings. While the building-level support appeared to be more detailed than that provided by district-level support, there was still a sentiment expressed by teachers that developing digital literacies was someone else's responsibility.

The final layer or response came from teachers—this is where we see the greatest variability. Tabitha was invested in developing her EBLs' digital literacies, so she created lessons and videos to develop the required skills for success during ERT. Brian was not as engaged in developing EBLs' digital literacies. While he agreed that his EBLs needed to develop their digital literacies, he relied more on the support of others to develop the skills. Finally, we see Alice whose focus was strictly content; she was frustrated by technology and wanted to be able to do as much for her students as she could by allowing them to focus on her social studies content.

Examining the tension between who should address EBLs' digital literacies and how is a cause for great concern. As this investigation is framed from a digital justice perspective which is strongly connected to social justice, questioning who should be involved in developing digital literacies and how is akin to questioning who is responsible for social justice in schools. Andrews eloquently argues that all teachers need to be prepared from the foundation of their teacher education courses to recognize and address the inequities that exist in educational systems and within the larger society [54]. We not only echo Andrews' statements but reiterate that social justice is not an aspect of education that we can wait for others to address. All educators at the district, building, and classroom level need to be actively engaged in creating socially just educational spaces which extend beyond physical classrooms to include digital educational spaces as well.

Collaborative Development of Expectations

The second major finding is directly related to expectations of virtual learning. When schools transitioned to ERT, the participating teachers were left scrambling to redesign their lessons to meet this new demand. However, as teachers redesigned their lesson plans, we saw a disparity in the expectations EBLs were held to. For example, Brian was happy to celebrate all of the success and positive aspects of virtual learning at the expense of pushing students, “too hard” (Focus Group 4, October 2020). Unfortunately, the notion of pushing students too hard was not explored within his focus group. However, where we saw Brian holding back to ensure his students continued to participate, Jamie was challenged by parents to push harder and to continue to hold students to high standards.

The variability in expectations could be accounted for by several factors. First, given that many of the participants were underprepared and under-trained to deliver online instruction, it may have led them to lower their expectations for themselves and their EBLs. Where this was their first virtual teaching experience, many teachers had not delivered instruction in an online format; it could also be that they did not know how to maintain and support their EBLs in achieving high standards. While ERT is characterized as a temporary response to crises, teachers should still be trained on incorporating more technology into their lessons and curricula. As the world continues to grow in the use of technology, it becomes insurmountably important for teachers to tap into the potential technology offers in enriching the instruction and educational outcomes of EBLs, part of which necessitates learning how to establish and support high-standard, high-quality technology-mediated educational experiences.

Creating high standards, however, starts with a clear understanding of where EBLs are currently in their access to and use of digital technologies. Laura was almost surprised when she learned, speaking about hyperlinks, that her EBLs did not understand how to recognize or use them. She stated that EBLs lacked certain digital literacies that many others would not think about because they already possessed them. These comments reflected a belief that EBLs were missing something when in reality, her comments were reminiscent of what had been argued by researchers regarding the unequal distribution of digital literacies [21,36]. Nevertheless, once Laura had a clearer understanding of her EBLs' needs, she was able to train her EBLs and help develop the digital literacies required to participate in virtual learning.

For teachers to hold their EBLs to high standards, they must work in collaboration with EBLs and their families to collectively decide on what those standards might be. A commitment to social justice is a commitment to understanding the counter-stories and lived experiences of marginalized populations. We cannot make assumptions about EBLs without the risk of succumbing to stereotypes and being led away by false impressions. Shelby was quick to claim her EBLs were lazy teenagers and only after being questioned about her assumptions, she realized that her EBLs had to manage more than just schoolwork. Jamie and Tabatha likewise questioned how parents supported their children and even charged parents with doing a better job at removing distractions, yet they never commented on the home life and circumstances of the EBLs.

Teachers were not the only people to experience new stressors during the pandemic. EBL families were also under a lot of stress as they took the brunt of unemployment, food insecurity, changes in childcare, and even trauma [55,56]. Therefore, on top of addressing the new stressors brought on because of the pandemic, EBLs were also tasked with converting their living spaces into educational spaces. Had there been more communication between families and teachers it is possible that high, achievable expectations could have been collaboratively established and mutually supported.

Digital Justice as Social Justice

Digital justice, and to a larger extent, social justice, does not pertain to one individual. To reshape the face of US education into a more equitable experience, it requires that everyone take a stance. We cannot sit by and wait for others to take care of social justice, because it may never happen if we do. Furthermore, as educators, we must take a closer look at the experiences we are providing our EBLs and look for opportunities to infuse social justice within our actions. When we focus singularly on one area, as Alice did with her content instruction, we miss opportunities to practice equity in these ERT settings.

As previous research has demonstrated, the digital divide not only refers to the possession of digital resources but also how those resources are used [21,25,39,42,44]. Participants in this investigation found themselves retroactively training EBLs to develop the digital literacies necessary to participate virtually in school. When the pandemic forced ERT, light was shed on the lack of preparation EBLs had received to utilize educational technology on the part of the teachers [5,7,8,20,31]. The experience with ERT should serve as a wake-up call to educators regarding the importance of providing EBLs with equitable, not the same, opportunities to develop the requisite technological skills for success [25].

Implication

Returning to the Research Questions

The research questions for this investigation were (1) When the pandemic forced schools to shift to emergency remote teaching, what challenges did US K-12 content teachers encounter working with emergent bilingual learners? and (2) How did teachers address these new challenges? The primary challenges teachers encountered were directly associated with digital justice; many EBLs and families either lacked the technological resources or digital literacies to fully participate in online learning and, regardless of these challenges, teachers and parents maintained high expectations for student outcomes. Teachers and districts rose to these challenges and found resources (grants and donations) which could provide technology and develop the skills that were required for EBLs to participate in ERT.

This investigation also sheds light on the expectations placed on EBLs for their success. During the COVID-19 pandemic, EBLs were expected to meet high expectations for which they were unprepared (lacked digital resources or digital literacies). While many content teachers who participated in this investigation altered their expectations to account for the variety of EBLs' experiences in virtual learning, there remained several teachers and parents who maintained their pre-pandemic expectations for educational outcomes. Perhaps more open communication between teachers and families would have helped establish a set of expectations that would appease the desires of parents and teachers alike.

Finally, despite the many calls for EBLs to be prepared for 21st-century careers [25], a stronger digital justice stand must be taken moving forward. We need to move beyond just providing access to material through digital means and teach EBLs how to ask questions and find the answers using the digital resources they have accessible to them. EBLs throughout the pandemic struggled with technology, parental support, language barriers, and lack the technical training which restricted their ability to participate in ERT [49]. Essentially, many EBLs are not prepared to meet the new demands they face in a digitized educational system, which begs the question, how prepared are EBLs to meet the demands of their future careers in an ever-increasingly technological society?

Limitations

As is the nature of research, limitations need to be acknowledged. First, the questions that were crafted to facilitate the focus group interviews were intended to focus on EBLs' learning in the ERT. Many of the participants, however, responded with the more general term, "students". Throughout the interviews, the researchers asked clarifying questions to refocus responses on EBLs, but there is a possibility that participants described the experiences of all their students and not just their EBLs. This may imply how teachers perceive their EBLs in the classroom. If teachers did not distinguish between their EBLs and mainstream students in terms of their teaching approaches in the ERT setting, it may have contributed to the digital divide and social injustice, resulting in marginalized populations not being treated equitably during the pandemic.

Second, this investigation dealt directly with the teachers' perceptions of EBLs and their experiences during the pandemic. The findings from this investigation would be strengthened if data were gathered directly from EBLs and families, then compared to teachers' responses for stronger triangulation. However, because of the COVID protocols developed by participating school districts, it was not possible for the research team to reach out to participants' EBLs.

Third, this qualitative research did not necessitate a large number of participants; there were 15 teachers and coaches who engaged in the focus group interviews, all of whom identified as white and monolingual. With a larger number of participants from more diverse racial and linguistic backgrounds, the findings would become more generalizable to other populations. As the participants of this investigation identified as white middle class English speakers, their experiences during the pandemic may have been different from EBLs and their families who struggled to obtain technology or lacked the required experience to participate in virtual schooling. Had there been greater diversity among the participants, we may have been able to gain a greater understanding of ERT for individuals who do not belong to the mainstream population; therefore, the findings may be representative solely of the dominant perspectives.

Fourth, one of the drawbacks of focus group interviews is that the group dynamics allow some voices to overpower others, resulting in one voice that leads the conversation and others following. Had one-on-one interviews been implemented, more voices and perspectives would be present throughout the data.

Finally, one of the limitations of this investigation is the depth at which the researchers were able to explore in-service teachers' and EBLs' experiences during the COVID pandemic. This is due to the study design in particular. We found that we did the same as several of the participants in that we merely shifted in-person focus group interviews to a virtual format. However, such an approach does not capitalize upon the full capabilities of digitally mediated qualitative research. Online Photovoice and Online Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis are examples of two qualitative research methodologies that could have been used to provide greater insight into our participants' lived experiences [1,2]. As digital technology continues to develop, so too must the research methodology so that more in-depth data may be collected and analyzed.

Recommendation for Future Research

This investigation sheds light on the complexities of digital/social justice. One of the areas of concern that arose focused on who is responsible for establishing social justice in educational settings. While we believe it is the responsibility of all individuals involved in education to contribute to equitable and socially just education, more research should be completed regarding the impact of districts, school building policies, and individual teachers.

Follow-up studies are also necessary to look at how digital justice has progressed or rescinded after ERT has come to a close. During the initial preparation of this manuscript, many schools had returned to in-person settings and the district-provided resources were collected from EBLs homes. However, to fully understand the impact of the pandemic on digital justice, replication studies should be completed. In any future replication studies, it would be important to recruit EBLs as participants as well so that another perspective could be added to the data.

Lastly, one of the struggles our participants encountered was determining what digital literacies needed to be developed. While this is an ongoing debate in the field, developing a more concise description of what digital literacies are needed for students to be successful in school and in future careers. We recognize the complexity of this call given it is associated with the ever-changing nature of technology.

Conclusions

This investigation has highlighted the efforts that teachers and school districts invested in the success of their EBLs in ERT. Similarly, it emphasized that not all EBLs were ready for the shift to ERT because they lacked the technology or digital literacies to implement that technology for educational purposes [14,18,19]. Calls have been made for all students to be prepared for future careers that increasingly require digital literacies [21,25,28,39]. Until educational systems meet this call, minority students will continue to be marginalized in technology use and digital literacy development. We emphasize the need for schools to develop curricula that incorporate opportunities for continuous and sustainable development of EBLs' digital literacies.

It is possible that the participants in this investigation took a digital justice stance regarding their EBLs and sought to provide technology, developed digital literacies, and even adjusted their expectations to match their circumstances. However, at the time when this manuscript was being prepared, schools returned to in-person learning; the temporary shift to ERT was no longer required, as COVID numbers had decreased. As EBLs returned to in-person learning and ERT might not be required, the technological resources, the internet connections, and the active development of digital resources were also coming to an end. However, many teachers who went through the ERT might still utilize technology-mediated resources such as hyperlinks for the content reading and Zoom calls with families along with interpreters.

While we would not begrudge educators for the desire to return to some form of normalcy, we challenge them to consider the progress made during the pandemic regarding digital justice and to continue pushing to close the digital divide. For a moment in time, families that had never had a computer or internet connection were given tools and learned skills that many take for granted such as joining a Zoom call or working with Google Documents or Microsoft Teams. In an instant, those opportunities were taken away as schools returned to in-person learning. Digital justice demands that we do more than provide resources solely during emergencies, it cannot be a temporary stance because of ERT. We need to look forward to the careers of tomorrow and provide all students with the opportunity to prepare for the technological requirements those careers will demand. Until we determine how to close the digital divide, marginalized students will continue to be marginalized in digital spaces, resulting in limited opportunities for future careers [15,17,26].

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Appendix A

Focus Group Interview Protocols:

1. Tell me about some of the new teaching tools you are using these days (pandemic).

a. How does your school connect to students in general, for example, using Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams, or some other program? How do these tools work (or not) for your ELs?
b. What programs or apps does your district require or recommend for EL teaching?
c. What do you think about those programs or apps? Tell me more about how you use X program or app. Are they challenging? Helpful?
d. What programs or apps have you found on your own? Which ones are your favorite and why? How have you used them?
e. What kind of teaching tools would you like to have to meet the needs of ELs? What kind of support would you like or need with these teaching tools?

2. How are your English Learners and their families doing these days?

a. Tell me about how you communicate with your ELs. What works well? What do you find challenging?
b. Tell me about attendance this year with ELs. Do you notice any differences compared with last year?
c. Can you tell me what you’ve done in class this year that was successful for your ELs?
d. How do you communicate with your EBLs’ families? What works well? What do you find challenging?
e. What supports do you need in this area?