Research Article

Digital Bootstraps: Teacher Discourse on Online Learning with Elementary Students

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Abstract: The discourses educators engage with and through shape how they position themselves and their students, constructing powerful storylines through their speech acts. This article examines how educators frame equity in online learning, revealing a dominant cultural narrative: educators perceive themselves as burdened by the growing demands of social inequity, yet powerless within a static and unsupportive system. This often leads to the adoption of a neoliberal "bootstrap" ideology, where students and families are expected to overcome systemic barriers through individual effort—an approach that ultimately reinforces existing inequities. These narratives also expose a deeper crisis in education: the disempowerment and deprofessionalization of educators themselves.

Keywords: teacher discourse, educational equity, online learning, teacher positioning

1. Introduction

Examining elementary educators' discourse surrounding equity in online learning reveals a persistent trend: educators often approach these issues from a deficit perspective (Kazemi & Franke, 2004; Sherin & Van Es, 2009; Uzun et al., 2021). In this article, equity is defined as the disruption of oppression based on race or ethnicity, socioeconomic-status, and/or ability for a more socially just future. Under this definition equity is the desired outcome of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2021a; 2021b; 1994) and acknowledges that teacher discourse can be powerful tools for equity depending on the various storylines and positioning inscribed within them, With the exponential expanse of online education since 2020, those working with our youngest learners in the early childhood and elementary years have been especially burdened with trying to adapt to online learning with a population perceived as developmentally incapable of succeeding in fully online environments, leading to a "bootstraps" theory of equity in online learning. This colloquialism describing an impossible task, once meant as a satirical joke, has been used in education research to describe neoliberal situations where responsibility for academic progression is shifted to the individual learner thus absolving institutions and stakeholders from confronting systemic issues (Hamilton & Zufiaurre, 2013; Maleswena, 2022). This grounded theory study began with a broad inquiry: How do elementary educators conceptualize responsibility for education in online learning? From this starting point, the research evolved to address two central questions explored in this paper:
- What do shared educator discourses reveal about societal understandings of responsibility for equity?
- What are the implications of institutionalizing these discursive frameworks of equity?

2. Contextualizing theory

2.1 *The influence of teacher expectations*

The well-established idea that teacher expectations influence student outcomes is shaped by various quantitative and qualitative assessments, both formal and informal, as well as non-cognitive factors and socially constructed narratives which impact student achievement. In the late 1960s, Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968a; 1968b) introduced the concept of the "Pygmalion Effect", demonstrating how teacher expectations could significantly impact student achievement, especially among historically marginalized students. This effect creates a self-fulfilling prophecy in classrooms, where students expected to perform poorly receive less support and resources from well-meaning educators. Research has consistently shown that teacher expectations, such as ability tracking in schools, can negatively affect student outcomes, including engagement (Carbonaro, 2005; Kelly & Prince, 2009) and achievement (Ehlers & Schwager, 2020; Gamoran & Mare, 1989). When educators are presented with students who are already labelled as high or low achievers, they tend to adopt reward, instructional, and assessment practices that align with these expectations (Stevens, 2007). In a large part due implicit and systemic racism, deficit labels are often disproportionately applied to students of color (Perez, 2019; Redding 2019). These perceptions often have a greater impact on student outcomes than the students' initial ability levels and placing students in higher ability tracks or groups has led to significant achievement gains (Andersen, 2018; Gamoran & Berends, 1987).

Yet, teachers often make judgments that extend beyond traditional quantitative methods like grades and tracking groups, and research has demonstrated that teachers frequently adapt their teaching based on various non-cognitive factors, such as perceived effort (McMillian et al., 2002) and positive attitudes (Kelly, 2008). When evaluating their students, teachers draw not only from their own lived experiences but also from the figurative worlds of their youth (Kim, 2017; Lortie, 1975) and in those figurative worlds are socially constructed narratives of about gender, race, ability, and socioeconomic status. In the United States, issues of racism are often intertwined with classism, suggesting that poverty and economic disparities stemming from generations of white supremacy (Gould & Wilson, 2020) can be used to explain away achievement gaps ignoring both the complex intersectionality and struggles specific to each. Teachers' perceptions of obstacles related to race and socioeconomic status, particularly those they consider beyond their control, are among the strongest predictors of student achievement (Dell'Angelo, 2016). Other researchers have linked teacher expectations to stereotypes about gender (Muntoni & Retelsdorf, 2018), race (Gollub & Sloan, 1978; Santiago-Rosario et al., 2021), ability (Hancock et al., 2021; Rolison & Medway, 1985), and socioeconomic status (Auwarter & Aruguete, 2008; Pinchak, 2017) along with various intersections therein.

2.2 *Language and perception*

The relationship between language and perception is deeply intertwined, with each influencing the other in a reciprocal manner. Researchers have explored various aspects of this connection, such as the influence of color and emotion on perception (Plebe & De La Cruz, 2015) and have electrophysiological evidence supporting this link (Athanasopoulos et al., 2009). For instance, Lupyan et al. (2020) found that individuals who speak different languages perform differently on certain perceptual tasks, highlighting the impact of linguistic diversity on perception.

Further contributions to this field come from studies in embodied cognition, which suggest that our bodily experiences influence cognitive processes (Eerland et al., 2011), and cognitive linguistics, which examines how language shapes our mental representations (Evans, 2012) both which have further contributed to establishing the link between language processing and perceptual representation. These studies collectively reinforce the idea that language processing and perceptual representation are intricately connected. Ultimately, language acts as a bi-directional performance of perception, continuously shaping and being shaped by how we experience and interpret the world. This dynamic interplay underscores the profound influence of language on our cognitive and perceptual frameworks, indicating that a thorough understanding of discourse can aid in understanding our perceptions.

2.3 *Teacher talk*

Teacher talk also plays a reciprocal role in shaping educators' perceptions and influencing student outcomes. Research indicates that the language used by teachers in the classroom can significantly impact student motivation,

learning, and performance (Boden et al., 2020). Early childhood researchers have long recognized the importance of teacher talk in classrooms for language acquisition (Jin & Webb, 2020) and early science instruction (Studhalter, et al., 2021). When teacher talk takes deficit-based narratives it can have long-lasting impacts on students' self-esteem and academic performance. When teachers consistently highlight students' weaknesses rather than their strengths, students may internalize these negative perceptions and perform accordingly, hindering students' academic growth and motivation (Roy & Roxas, 2011; Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017). Additionally, these narratives can influence how resources and support are allocated, often resulting in less support for students who need it the most or missed students where extra support is needed but not offered due to perceived aptitude.

Unfortunately, many teachers' discussions with colleagues tend toward deficit biases. During professional conversations about students, teachers often focus on sharing with other educators what students cannot do (Kazemi & Franke, 2004; Sherin & Van Es, 2009). Suh et al. (2013) found that in teacher professional development spaces, discussions about 'low students' frequently followed a tracking storyline, assigning perceived lower-status or less mature students to less advanced courses, regardless of an institutionalized tracking system. This practice can reinforce existing inequities and limit opportunities for students to excel.

3. Methodology and methods

This study, centred on constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), commenced in the spring of 2020, with data collection continuing through the fall of 2020 until data saturation was achieved. To gain a deeper understanding of the narratives shared by elementary educators regarding equity in online learning, positioning theory (Davies & Harre, 1990; Harre & Moghaddam, 2003; Van Langenhove & Harre, 1999) was employed.

3.1 Data collection

Data collected included sixty-seven (67) educator surveys (Appendix A) and six (6) semi-structured interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) utilizing a life-story approach (Chilisa, 2012). To enhance validity and reduce sampling error, a large random sample from a clearly defined population was recruited using diverse strategies (Check & Schutt, 2012; Singleton & Straits, 2009). Mixed methods surveys (Check & Schutt, 2012), incorporating both qualitative and quantitative questions, were distributed through professional networks and a limited run of paid targeted advertising on Facebook and Instagram. These ads were aimed at users with children in their homes and/or who identified as early childhood and elementary educators.

A total of 423 unique surveys were initiated, but only 138 were completed, with 67 respondents self-identifying as educators. Incomplete surveys were excluded to ensure only finalized responses were included in the final dataset. Participants had the option to skip any question and still complete the survey. Survey validity was reinforced by using responsive services and a clearly defined population of interest (Blumenberg et al., 2019), controlled for sampling error (Dillman et al., 2014), and non-response error (Ponto, 2015) using industry standard software Qualtrics.

As shown in Table 1, survey and later interview respondents represented a diverse array of educators from public/ private and secular/parochial schools across various geographic regions in the United States. Most survey respondents indicated they worked at low-income (40) and racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse schools (42). Six educators volunteered for interviews conducted via teleconferencing software between September and October 2020 as an extension of the survey (Singleton & Straits, 2009). Despite this diverse representation of schools, as will be discussed in limitations, racial data of the participants was not collected and while diversity may have been more present in the survey data all but one of the interviewee's presented visibly as white.

Table 1. Survey respondent data

	Demographics	Survey respondents
School type	Public school	120
	Private school secular	4
	Private school religious	6
Geographic region	Midwest USA	31
	East coast USA	2
	Southern USA	7
	West coast USA	4
	International	2
School size	Large	11
	Medium/"Average"	6
	Small	15
School racial & ethnic demographics	"Diverse"/"Multiracial"/Multicultural	37
	Black/African American	5
	Latinx	6
	Predominantly white/"few students of color"/"lacks diversity"	10
Socioeconomic status	Lower socioeconomic status	40
	Middle-class socioeconomic status	7
	Upper-class socioeconomic status	3

3.2 *Data analysis*

The data analysis process incorporated both conversation analysis (Gee, 2014; Raclaw, 2010; Raclaw et al., 2020) and a socio-cultural approach to critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2001; Willig, 2014; Wodak & Meyer, 2009) in a two-stage approach indicative of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). These methodologies were chosen to uncover the institutional discourse present in educator speech, highlighting the formalistic features of both approaches. Research increasingly reaffirms human-computer interaction research by demonstrating that computers function as social actors in modern society and humans will generally activate human-to-human interaction strategies when engaging with technology (Raclaw et al., 2020). By framing and examining the online survey data as an interaction wherein each question-answer pairing construct a basic sequence of interaction (Schegloff, 2007) the text of the survey can be analyzed using positioning theory (Davies & Harre, 1999; Van Langenhove & Harre, 1999). As a selection, Table 2 shows the coding of each equity-oriented survey question and the relevant concept codes which were generated from the conversation analysis.

All text from the surveys and interviews was coded in the first round with conversation analysis, initially employed due to the prevalence of institutional language. However, the inherent power systems and structures within the educational context required a more critical lens. Therefore, critical discourse analysis was utilized to address the broader sociological issues and power structures at play. This approach enabled a deeper exploration of the socio-cultural dimensions of educator discourse, focusing on how language reflects and reinforces societal power dynamics and inequalities. After this round was complete the coded data was grouped by frequency and connection to each other to show connections, patterns, and themes in the discourse.

Table 2. Coding of educator survey responses

Questions	Educator codes
Q 11-Has equity been considered/discussed in your school in the transition to online learning? If so, how?	Total responses: 43 Total codes: 68 Assessment (2) Equity as technology (21) Positive examples (8) Equity overcorrection (1) Perceptions of online learning (3) Equity as personal responsibility (4) Equity as parental responsibility (11) Teacher practices (15) Educator identity (2) Food insecurity (1)
Q 12-What does equity during this transition look like to you in an ideal situation? How does your ideal situation compare to your current situation?	Total responses: 43 Total codes: 96 Equity as technology (26) Positive examples (3) Expectations (3) Perceptions of online learning (8) Equity as personal responsibility (13) Equity as parental responsibility (19) Perceptions of the transition (4) Educator identity (5) Teacher practices (7) Social inequities (2) Developmental inappropriateness (1) Emotional language (4) Privilege (1)
Q 22-Do you feel that all your students have the tools and support to succeed at online learning?	Total responses: 44 Total codes: 70 Negative response (24) Equity as technology (7) Emotional language (3) Expectations (2) Positive examples (1) Perceptions of online learning (3) Equity as personal responsibility (16) Equity as parental responsibility (10) Teacher practices (2) Perceptions of the transition (2)

This combined method allowed for a detailed examination of the patterns of discourse among educators, The findings from both methodologies revealed significant overlaps in their ability to identify and analyze institutional discourse, but by combining conversation analysis and critical discourse analysis, the study was able to detail a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which educators navigate and negotiate power within their professional interactions.

4. Findings

To illuminate educators' understandings of equity in online learning at the elementary level and the implications of institutionalizing these storylines in our collective consciousness, this section is divided into two themes. The first theme, *Equity Storylines*, addresses the question: What do these shared educator discourses reveal about social understandings of responsibility for an equitable society? The second theme, *A Bootstraps Theory of Equity*, addresses the question: What are the implications of institutionalizing these discursive frameworks of equity? This theme investigates how these storylines and positionalities ultimately hinder both educators and students while calling attention to an underlying threat to high-quality education: the deprofessionalization of educators.

4.1 *Equity storylines*

Despite the diversity of the schools represented by participants, common storylines (Davies & Harre, 1999) emerged consistently across the data sources. These storylines illustrate a shared cultural understanding among educators across the United States, framing equity as a function of technology, parental responsibility, and/or personal responsibility. These shared narratives shape how educators perceive emergency online learning, reinforcing their positions and manifesting in their speech acts. While not every respondent cited every storyline, at least one was present in 83.7% of the text selections related to equity discussions. It is important to note that these storylines, regardless of their origins along a spectrum from empathetic to patronizing, can reinforce oppressive systems and structures if they result in lowered expectations.

4.1.1 *Equity as technology*

When discussing equity in online learning, educators frequently turned to technology storylines, which accounted for 71.2% of the total instances of equity storylines. These narratives suggested that if a school could provide internet access and adequate devices, then online learning would be inherently equitable. For example, one survey respondent answered Q11, *has equity been considered/discussed in your school in the transition to online learning and if so how*, with simply "our school delivered 200 Chromebooks out to families without access to a device". This response was indicative of many similar results that reduced equity in education to the ability to provide goods and services equally.

Alternatively, the storyline of equity as technology was framed as though it was the missing piece for achieving equity in online learning. If students could not have equal access to technology, then online learning would never be equitable. As one educator shared in the survey, "Yes, to a degree. Many bilingual low-income students use paper as opposed to technology [vduecto] unaffordability and issues with housing". Educators assert that online learning requires multiple reliable modes of access to be implemented well, however, an equitable educational system requires far more than just technological resources and having access to technology does not mean it is always well implemented or equitable.

4.1.2 *Equity as parental responsibility*

Another common storyline among educators was equity as parental responsibility, implying that a student's success with online learning was directly related to parental involvement. Many of these narratives were framed empathetically towards caregivers who were struggling. For instance, one survey respondent shared:

It has cast the inequities in the US social system and the educational system in stark contrast. Many families in our school neighborhood are struggling to make ends meet. We have meal pick up five days a week for families, our social worker and psychologist are working to connect families in need with services, and our first goal as teachers of our students is to remain connected with students and families and check in to make sure everyone is safe. Learning is on top of that.

While the sentiment behind the educator's response is undeniable, it highlights the real concern of inequity, and the role schools play in providing social services this perspective also reflects a limited definition of what learning can be in online learning. Although the statement comes from a place of empathy and compassion, it ultimately limits "learning" and lowers expectations. Recognizing the power of language, lower expectations often lead to lower outcomes. During her interview, "Jamie" described a similar narrative:

• Jamie: …But and then I actually went to their houses, the end of May, beginning of June, kind of like an end of year awards or whatever, just basically like knocked on the door and they came to the door and I just like laid their, um, certificate on their doorstep, right? And just kind of like waved from afar. And I remember seeing those ones who I didn't hear anything from. Right? I got to see everybody that day. It like took me five hours-

• Jamie: …to go see, I think I had 19 kids last year, to 19 of their houses and just talk with them and it just broke my heart. Right? Of just the ones no wonder, like I see your house, I see who's inside of it. What's inside of it. No wonder I didn't get to you, you know. And it just, oh, broke my heart. But yeah, I would say three quarters were engaged. And then, I mean, I had one who lived in a trailer, in a campground. I had one who lived or lived, her parents worked like swing shift and double shifts and her grandpa who with Parkinson's stayed with her during the day. So of

course, I didn't get to see them, you know, it's like, they were just surviving. Yeah.

Jamie's response is especially interesting as an example of equity as parental responsibility because it is clear in the beginning, she had high expectations for all her students, and it wasn't until being directly confronted with the discrepancies of their home lives she began to lower her expectations.

Other responses echoed overtly deficit discourses, like those first described by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994, 2007) over thirty years ago which placed the burden of children's academic success in their caregivers' hands. Educator discourse posited that while technology can make things equitable, if parents or caregivers cannot support students in the same ways, equity will never be fully achieved. To illustrate this storyline, one educator, when asked if they believed all their students had the tools to succeed and stated, "No. Many of my students lacked the executive functioning skills to prioritize their work or to complete it by deadlines. Many also lacked an involved adult at home. I know several of my older students were responsible for their siblings' work instead of completing their own. We may have gotten most of the materials to students, but not having that adult there believing in them, is what caused a lot of students to struggle". Another survey responded shared, "many parents didn't reinforce the importance of connecting every day. They often made excuses for their child" and "they have the technology; we are providing instruction they can be independently successful. Reading is at their level teachers are assessable and screencastify to trouble shoot errors on assignments etc. Parent support not equitable". Most depressingly one survey respondent shared, "The biggest obstacle is the difficulty in equity with home/parenting environments. You can supply the devices, etc but if a parent can't or won't ensure the kids access and perform the posted lessons, how do you address or remedy that? Ideal situation ... every parent loving, responsible, invested and participating".

Assuming that children are not successful due to their parents' schedules, finances, or love for their children places the responsibility for equity disproportionately on traditionally marginalized and underserved groups who have been systemically oppressed and have been systematically denied the same access. These deficit-based storylines influence our perceptions of students, which in turn affects their opportunities and ability to thrive in schools. Instead of building online learning systems that rely on constant caregiver support, what if systems were designed universally with the intention to teach even young students to participate independently?

4.1.3 *Equity as personal responsibility*

Another prevalent equity storyline was the notion of equity as personal responsibility, where the success or failure in online learning is attributed to a students' individual characteristics. This narrative encompasses assumptions about students' motivation and abilities, often framed with the best intentions by educators. For instance, one respondent noted "higher achieving" students didn't "want to try" when it wasn't a style of activity they enjoyed or that if a student couldn't participate without parent support it was because they "lacked self-motivation". Other educators implied that students were lying about technical difficulties. By focusing solely on individual shortcomings rather than systemic opportunities for change, this deficit narrative creates barriers to progress. Such narratives, which place the onus of learning on children by attributing their successes or failures to personal traits, limit broader thinking and ultimately hinders student support.
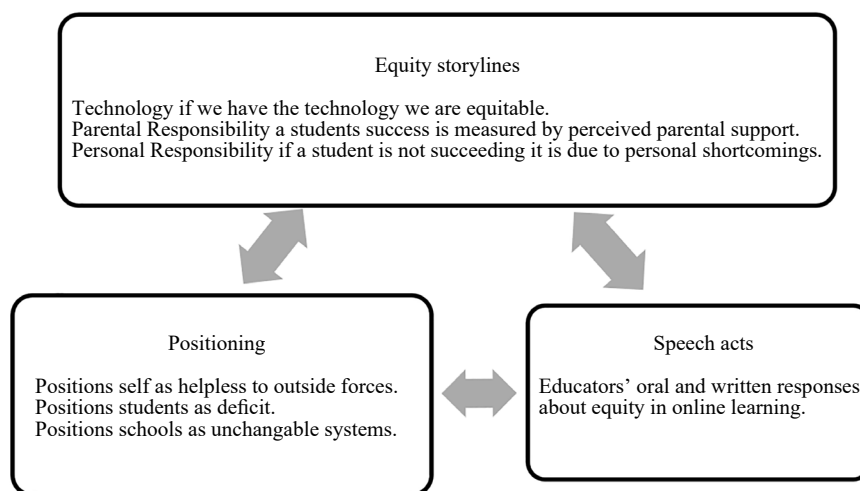
4.2 *A bootstraps theory of equity*

In the 1800s, the expression "pull oneself up by your bootstraps" was a joke, describing an impossible task (Kristof, 2020). Today, it has transformed into a neoliberal, capitalistic mantra advocating for self-improvement without external assistance, reflecting the American ideal that anyone can become a self-made billionaire through sheer hard work and determination. Equity storylines which shift the responsibility for equity in online learning from school systems and structures to individuals, echoes this bootstraps narrative of neoliberal self-reliance.

To understand the implications of institutionalizing these equity storylines into our classrooms and cultural narrative, this section examines the positionality (Davies & Harre, 1999; Harre & Moghaddam, 2003) of educators' selves within the survey and interview data. Positionality is relational and fundamentally rooted in power dynamics. As Harre and Moghaddam (2003) note, "positioning someone, even if it is oneself, affects the repertoire of acts one has access to" (p. 5). Further, as in the case of education, the power inherent in how educators position themselves and students can impact how students view themselves. In education, the power inherent in how educators position

themselves and students can significantly impact students' self-perception. When educators are positioned as the brokers of knowledge, speech they have the opportunity wield power to position students both explicitly and implicitly in a way which is not true for students towards educators (Calabrese Barton & Yang, 2000).

Beyond classrooms, this dynamic impacts communities and can either serve as an equalizing force or exacerbate inequity. As Calabrese Barton and Yang (2000) assert, "how and why communities enact and sustain various networks of power is important for understanding learning because it shapes how communities develop a history of privileging particular discourses, identities, and forms of participation over others" (p. 190). Analyzing positionality in the context of equity storylines reveals a bootstraps theory of equity that disempowers both educators and students. Much like the American colloquialism, under this theory (Figure 1), educators are positioned as helpless to outside forces, students are seen as either victim or responsible for their own shortcomings, and schools are viewed as unchangeable systems.

Figure 1. Positionality triad: A bootstraps theory of equity

This overwhelming sense of external inequity, positioned outside of educators' control, permeates the data. It is crucial to recognize the complexity of this issue. The pressure from teaching in a complicated and messy social environment can be overwhelming. However, focusing on what we cannot do often obscures what we can achieve.

4.2.1 *Teaching in a perfect storm*

Discussions about learned helplessness in education often speaks of students who are repeatedly exposed to situations beyond their control (McCarter, 2013). Permeance of this phenomenon in students is linked to teacher burnout (Greer & Wethered, 1984) but as this data illustrates further research on its prevalence and affects with educators deserves further study. As Gloria Ladson-Billings (2021a) highlights the impact of intersectional pandemics has opened the door to a form of 'climate change' in education. Teacher shortages have escalated to levels previously thought unimaginable (Dabrowski, 2021; Wething, 2024). Despite initial overwhelming support for educators at the beginning of 2020, these feelings shifted abruptly in many areas, leading to continuing demonization of teachers (Ladson-Billings, 2021b). Since then, many classroom teachers have found themselves in the path of a perfect storm. It is unsurprising, given the context, that many educators in the survey and interviews expressed a loss of control and a sense of overwhelming responsibility with a lack of real support.

Throughout the survey, and perhaps due to the anonymity it provided, teachers spoke openly about this sense of powerlessness, often positioning themselves as helpless in the face of numerous barriers to equitable education. One survey respondent, when asked whether their school considers and discusses equity, shared, "Absolutely. [Equity] has been paramount in our discussions (after physical safety, health, and food security), and it is devastating staff. We don't know how to overcome the inequities". Another respondent shared, "Equity does not seem possible in any

circumstance. Students all come from such a variety of home lives that at home learning will not be equitable, no matter how hard schools try ... same as a normal school year".

Beyond the numerous external pressures on online educators, increasing internal political, legal, and administrative pressures caused confusion and added stress about what online learning should look like with programs expanding in many states with limited guidance or explicit preparation in online learning in teacher education programs. Educators were uncertain how to approach services online, as "Thelma", a special educator, shared:

• Thelma: Um, I think that the, the Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL) component and, and not just SEL for the kids. Um, I'm blessed that I get to work on a campus where we get and get to do SEL that's like our thing. And so our kids, we got it but my staff, the people that I work with, um, the, the traumas of, so we don't know whether or not we have to keep the IEP, this, that or the other thing. Um, some, some lifting of provisions, waivers, those kinds of things. I, um, while I understand the like compensatory services and the, the backlash that is happening elsewhere in other places. There have been legal, uh, situations occurring because of whether or not the Individual Education Plan (IEP) was administered or X, Y and Z.

• Thelma: I think if there could have been more, and I honestly think that it's probably a federal level at the federal level guidance on lifting provisions then-there would have been an ability for people to tackle what was happening in, in the forefront and then what was happening and then go figure out how to, now that we're in the spring, you know, maybe even it's just for the spring, like we've all been ordered a shelter in place. That means our IEPs are sheltered in place too except for, you know, this very specific group or, you know, there wasn't that and there was still all of the expectation, at least what we were understanding. Because there wasn't the, nope, you don't have to do it. So, we were still having the expectation that we were having to provide those IEP services as written. And then we had the, the prior written notice and the IEP meetings, we were able to say, okay, the modalities different. But it was, uh, like, especially in the, just the special Ed world. It was-

• Researcher: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

• Thelma: ... insult to injury trying to have educators wrap their brains around so many things with such big guidance. So I think just having more transparency or very clear guidance. But then I don't know, they're humans at the upper levels too, you know (laughs) they were all going through the same thing and so I have a level of grace that I, I understand. Um, and I very much hear and see and don't even know I have a neuro-typical three-year-old and that was hard enough for me. I can really empathize and understand what our parents and families were going through. So, um, there is no right way to do this but I do think that a level of some waiver or some sort of understanding of how IEPs would be legal but understood in COVID times probably would have behooved more people.

While many of these crises affect educators broadly and not just online educators, the rise of online learning with limited formal training available to online educators enhanced these internal and external crises. Ideally, educators are prepared to handle these stresses, but both pre-service and experienced teachers often feel they lack the knowledge or skills to proactively address sensitive issues, emotional concerns, and trauma (Cahill, 2005; Ciarrochi et al., 2002; Graham et al., 2011; Mazzar & Rickwood, 2013). Building equitable classrooms requires teachers to be empowered to make changes, but as this data illustrates, this seems infeasible for many online educators. The expectation that teachers carry the burden of increasing social inequity while feeling helpless in an unchanging and unsupportive system should serve as a warning of its unsustainable nature.

4.2.2 *Learning in crisis*

How an educator positions students, whether in an asset-based or deficit-based manner, can significantly influence their ability to develop linguistic and cultural autonomy (Turner et al., 2011), collective systemic agency (York & Kirshner, 2015), personal identity development (Hazari et al., 2014), and reinforce or dismantle white supremacy (Freeman & Staley, 2018). While only 47% of Americas' K-12 aged school children are White, nearly eight in ten public school teachers in America identified as White in the 2017-18 school year with a mere 9% Hispanic, 7% Black, 2% Asian American, and less than 2% Indigenous or multi-racial peoples in the teaching force (Schaeffer, 2021). Educators often draw from their own experiences of youth as the norm. Unfortunately, with a significant portion of the teaching force, particularly in elementary education, represented by White women from predominantly English-speaking, middle-class families, this cultural storyline becomes the standard against which teachers compare their students (Kim, 2017; Lortie, 1975). When teachers rely on these figurative worlds of their own youth, they tend to adhere to dominant

cultural narratives: that race is not a narrative, English is the lingua franca, and differences from these cis-gendered, White, English-speaking, heterosexual, middle-class, American narratives are deficits (Mitchell, 2013). This limits students' ability to develop fundamental psychological needs such as competence, autonomy, and relatedness, which support adaptive motivation in class (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Consequently, when educators compare students from different backgrounds to their own, they often view them, even with the best intentions, as disadvantaged or deficient, furthering this narrative and negatively impacting their ability to succeed in school.

Table 3. Selection of educator survey transcripts

	Positioning of students as a deficit
Intrinsic	I prefer to be physically at school, my students are very young to have the attention for on line learning. I also struggle with providing special education services via Zoom. Pk students need social interaction.
	A few of my students did not have parents around and lacked self motivation and others had parents who took their child's word as truth and the child played more than studied on the computer. I saw a lack of accuracy overall and a decline in accuracy in my capable students. Students often "forgot" how to do things like log into their computer. There were students whose internet worked suspiciously well for certain activities and not others.
	Some of our students did not have access to the internet for some/all of the time we were out of school and communicating with them was difficult and unreliable. I also had two students who chose not to complete work despite having the needed materials. It felt unfair to other students to assign group work when not everyone was able/willing to participate.
Extrinsic	I think it's important to recognize that not providing instruction because not everybody will be able to access it is more inequitable than offering instruction is in this situation. Beyond the measures that our district has already taken, there is no real way to ensure equitable access to instruction right now. Families are still working-they're not all able to sit with their children and assist them with school each day. Older siblings are taking care of their younger siblings and trying to manage school at the same time. Multiple people are using the internet in very demanding ways at the same time. We are aware of all of these situations-and many more-and we can't fix them. We cannot control what goes on in someone else's home. We can provide access within our limits, we can provide quality instruction and content, and we can try to reach out and provide support, but at the end of the day, there will be inequities and lack of access. That doesn't mean that we shouldn't try though-it's not an excuse to just do nothing. I don't have an ideal situation for this.
	… People are gentler with each other, check in about each other's well-being, and are ready to help if a teacher needs help using a new technology or problem solving around student engagement. The economic impact on families has been very sad. Many of our families were already struggling to make ends meet, and now they are unable to work because their employer has closed down. Students feel that stress at home and are less engaged with virtual learning
	No. Not all of my students have internet, a quiet space, or an adult to help them. Kindergarteners cannot do much independently. Many of our families have non set work schedules and the students often complete school working their parents' phones when they get home from work late at night.

Unfortunately, as Table 3 illustrates, these deficit-based narratives permeated the data, positioning students as deficient due to intrinsic or extrinsic forces. For example, when asked what an ideal, equitable situation would look like for their schools, one educator in the survey stated, "all students have access to devices, internet and also have parents/families who can provide other enrichment activities. Our students of color, our immigrant families don't have that privilege". In this statement, students are positioned as deficient due to the assumed privilege of a family's ability to provide "enrichment", yet the concept of what counts as enrichment is based on the educator's own cultural storylines of what should count as enriching, educational experiences. Furthermore, it specifically positions students of color and students from immigrant families as deficient compared to White, established families, rather than viewing being multicultural and multilingual as an asset. When educators positioned students at fault, it was often due to a "lack of executive function", insufficient "attention", lack of "motivation", inadequate English language proficiency, or poor "self-regulation". As one educator responded in the survey, "I prefer to be physically at school, my students are very young to have the attention for online learning". While this is a valid preference, it frames students as incapable of success. Cultural expectations vary widely; for instance, children in America are expected to read by the

end of kindergarten, whereas children in Sweden and the Gambia don't begin primary education until age seven. In Japan, children are expected to help with household errands by ages 2 to 3, whereas most American parents would be concerned about potential mishaps. The issue is not the preference for modes of learning but rather that it stems from a perspective that places students at a deficit.

While acknowledging privilege through self-reflection is an important step for pre-service and experienced educators alike (Friere, 1970; Ladson-Billings, 1994), stopping at that step can unconsciously further systemic inequity by limiting students› opportunities and abilities to succeed in school. In contrast, "Thelma", a long-time special educator on the rural west coast, faced numerous challenges, including devastating wildfires and students with histories of severe trauma. Despite these challenges, Thelma positioned her students as capable of growth and focused on their successes, no matter how small. As she shared in her interview (edited for anonymity):

… You know, you're, we're working with a population where 80% of our students and I would even argue probably more, um, have like diagnosed mental health issues. Um, and we work with a large population of, you know, foster students ... I'm just thinking of one kid we had his IEP yesterday, uh, he's matured and grown so much. And (laughs) then the foster parent was a huge and ferocious advocate for like, he needs to get to a less restrictive environment. We have another family where our student walked into find his father deceased … and then mom lost her living situation after that ... And they were the ones that, they didn't have internet in the house that they were in already. And then they didn't, super didn't have internet in the place that they were at. So, we worked really hard to get him a hotspot and to get him reconnected with us. Not that he's super loved school or anything but we did have, we felt like good relationships with him, and he has been engaging a lot more and that's been nice to see ..."

While Thelma acknowledges the clear challenges many of her students need to overcome, she does not stop there, and by doing so positions her students as capable of growth despite the challenges.

5. Discussion

Critical education scholars have long understood that one of the most important practices a teacher can engage in is critical self-reflection (Friere, 1970; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994). However, it is crucial that acknowledging privilege and difference does not become institutionalizing deficit. The informal and formal ways in which educators speak about their students, particularly historically marginalized and underserved students, both in this study and in other research (Calabrese Barton & Yang, 2000; Dee, 2005; Gollub & Sloan, 1978; Hancock et al., 2021; Hazari et al., 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Rolison & Medway, 1985) demonstrates the need to shift informal educator discourse and thus storylines. When educators view students' racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds as assets rather than deficits, students are positioned as capable, and storylines of possibilities in their education manifest.

These storylines and positioning also speak to the futility and lack of trust and respect that many online educators felt in online learning. Despite the equity storylines and the positioning within them, research has consistently demonstrated that school and teacher leaders can be forces of systemic change towards equity within their classrooms, schools, and in shaping policy (Jacobs, et al., 2020; Van & Diamond, 2019). When teaching adults in online environments can be enhanced and humanized through asset-based, culturally relevant practices, and intentional online community building allowing for deeper participation (Smith Budhai, 2023). Frameworks for implementing culturally responsive online learning in elementary education have been developed (Mueller, 2023). Yet this hasn't quite made its way down to elementary education and especially not with the speed needed with sudden influx of online learning circa 2020 which has been expanding since. What might the opposite of a bootstraps theory of equity look like in discourse and our collective cultural storylines? What if the burden of providing technology and ensuring equitable access to the internet was placed on the federal government, making it a collective problem rather than relying on already overburdened, property tax-funded schools? If educators had been supported by administrators and legislators, would they have felt so hopeless? What if educators were trusted as the professionals, we demand them to be and given a chance to try something new and different in their classrooms, which they earnestly believed would benefit their students?

The positioning of educators in the data calls for future research into learned helplessness in educators and its potential contribution to teacher burnout and the broader teacher shortage. Not as a permanent state, but one which is

affected by outside systems and stakeholders, and which can be prevented and worked through with support and self-empowerment in the case it arises. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing strategies to empower educators and create more equitable educational environments.

5.1 *Limitations*

This article is based on the results of a widespread survey that represented a variety of geographic and demographic backgrounds. While socioeconomic status was more openly discussed, race was less frequently included in survey responses and was not specifically asked about in the survey, which is a design flaw. Specifically targeting those who identify as people of color would have provided additional insight into the diverse experiences of online educators.

While presentation does not always indicate a person's racial and/or ethnic background, all but one of the interview participants were visibly white or self-identified as white, and without ignoring the other complicated issues of cultural erasure, microaggressions, and other pervasive forms of racism that the complex situation entails, the lack of racial diversity among the interview participants limits the generalizability of the findings to all online educators, particularly those from marginalized racial and ethnic backgrounds. There is no doubt that a neoliberal bootstraps theory harkens to a white Anglo-Saxon protestant American cultural view and by obtaining more perspectives from educators of different racial backgrounds and ethnicities may have revealed entirely different discourses. Future research should specifically target self-identified online educators of color to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their unique experiences during online learning as well as ensure that participant demographic data is collected in the survey. This would help to refine and expand upon the findings presented in this article. Additionally, the survey did not account for other intersecting identities such as gender, sexual orientation, and disability status, which can also influence educators' experiences and perspectives. Including these dimensions in future research would provide a more nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by diverse groups of educators.

In conclusion, while this study provides valuable insights into the collective storylines and positioning of educators during online learning, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. Future research should aim to address these gaps by incorporating a more diverse range of participants and considering additional intersecting identities to build a more comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand.

6. Conclusion

The discourses educators use have significant power as they position students and themselves, building storylines through their speech acts. Ascribing to a bootstrap's theory of equity in online education only serves to further entrench inequities. Understanding the storylines and positioning within the speech acts of elementary educators' sheds light on the cultural narratives we have ascribed to both online learning and current teaching practices. This knowledge can be used to make shifts in policy, design professional development, and create preservice teacher opportunities that support asset-based discourse and specific training in online education.

Moreover, the storylines and positioning of educators illustrate another known crisis in education: the disempowerment and deprofessionalization of educators. Unless educators are empowered and treated as professionals, the teacher shortage will become a national crisis of its own. Empowering educators involves recognizing their expertise, providing adequate support, and fostering an environment where they can innovate and address the diverse needs of their students.

In conclusion, the narratives and positioning within educator discourse have profound implications for equity in online education. By shifting towards asset-based discourse and empowering educators, we can work towards a more equitable and effective educational system. This requires a collective effort from policymakers, administrators, and educators themselves to create a supportive and inclusive environment that values the contributions of all students and teachers.

Conflict of interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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Appendix A
Educator survey questions

Start of Block: Educator Questions:

Q8 The following questions are geared toward educators. They are designed to give us a better understanding of your experience during the sudden shift to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Please answer them openly and honestly when possible. You may skip questions you would prefer not to answer.

Q4 What grade level(s) do you teach?

Q6 In which state do you teach?

Q7 Describe your community and school. (For example: What are the demographics of your school? What is your community like? How would you describe your school to a friend?)

Q9 How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your teaching practice?

Q54 How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your school?

Q10 Are you expected to grade your students based on their online schoolwork? How do these online assignments impact their overall grade? How does this make you feel?

Q11 Has equity been considered/discussed in your school in the transition to online learning? If so, how?

Q12 What does equity during this transition look like to you in an ideal situation? How does your ideal situation compare to your current situation?

Q19 Is access to the internet, devices that can access the internet, and support for learning being managed by your school? If so, how?

Q22 Do you feel that all your students have the tools and support to succeed at online learning?

Q47 Approximately how many hours a week are you working?

Q46 How is your online workload compared to your regular in-person teaching workload?

Q20 Have you adapted your materials for online learning? If so, in what ways?

Q49 Has the transition to online learning impacted your productivity (in work, in other household responsibilities/ tasks, or personal commitments)? If so, how?

Q23 Do you feel that you have been adequately supported in the transition to online learning?

Q24 Is there anything else you would like to share?

Q26 Would you be willing to participate in an online call (through Zoom, Google Hangouts, Skype, BBCollaborate or another platform of your choice) to share more of your story with the research team?

End of Block: Educator Questions.