Transitioning to online teaching:

A phenomenological analysis of social work educator perspectives

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Abstract

Online education in social work has been proliferating and is now ubiquitous due to COVID-19. To optimize instructor pedagogical wisdom and ensure student benefit, critical reflection is needed on the transition to online education. Prior to the pandemic, 17 social work educators were interviewed about their perspectives on the transition from teaching on-the-ground classes to online. This interpretative phenomenological study identified three themes that influenced the educator's experience: personal qualities, pedagogical beliefs, and macro and institutional factors. It is this unique mix of each participants' pedagogical beliefs, personal qualities, and macro or institutional factors which influenced the individual educator's experience of satisfaction. Each educator's perspective of online teaching is arrived at through calculations of costs and benefits as they balance their own and their students' needs within the demands and supports of their respective institutions. These perspectives can be characterized by one of four standpoints: mutual benefit, compromised learning, instructor reservations, and incompatibility. Implications include enhancing social work educators' critical reflexivity while navigating the evolving technological context and providing administrators with points of intervention to support instructors and develop online delivery modes.

Keywords: Social work education, online education, instructor perspective, interpretive phenomenological analysis, pedagogy, instructor satisfaction

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Technological advances are forging a revolutionary shift in the delivery of social work education. Prior to COVID-19, approximately 46% of Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and 65% of Master of Social Work (MSW) programs accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) were fully or partially online (CSWE, 2018). The pandemic expedited this online delivery expansion across the US and globally. Despite the ubiquity of online social work education, questions persist about its pedagogical efficacy. The effect of this paradigmatic pivot to online delivery on social work instructors has been mostly unexamined. The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was to illuminate the lived experiences of social work educators, including their motivations, satisfactions, and challenges, as they navigate transitioning to online teaching.

Defining Online Social Work Education Delivery

Online social work education occurs in a variety of ways. Exclusively online delivery methods include asynchronous, synchronous, and a blended combination of these approaches. Alternatively, hybrid approaches include both on-the-ground and online aspects in the same course. We use the term "on-the-ground" (OTG) when referring to social work education delivery that occurs in a physical classroom. We conceptualize online delivery as a synchronous or asynchronous pedagogical exchange that occurs through a web-based medium, which might include hybrid approaches.

Faculty Perceptions about Online Teaching

The role of the course instructor is central to ensuring quality online social work education (Alston et al., 2016). Some scholars have asserted that the success of online education is predicated on faculty acceptance of this burgeoning delivery modality (Wingo et al., 2017).

While technology continues to transform social work education, there remains a dearth of scholarly insight into how this shift affects social work educators (Smith, 2015). The body of scholarship that has examined online educator perceptions reveals that faculty do not view online education with the same optimism as administrators (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Betts & Heaston, 2014). Social work educators remain skeptical about the efficacy of online social work education (Forgey & Ortega-Williams, 2016; Reamer, 2013).

Building on Moore's (2005) seminal work on the perceived effectiveness of online social work education, Levin and colleagues (2018) conducted a study with 376 faculty from US schools of social work comparing levels of perceived effectiveness of online compared to OTG across nine social work competencies. Their findings reveal that despite the growing body of research that reports the effectiveness of online education (Cummings et al., 2015; Forgey & Ortega-Williams, 2016; Phelan, 2015; Wretman et al., 2016), faculty continue to perceive online education as being less effective than an OTG modality. These findings raise questions about why these perceptions remain unchanged over the last two decades and correspond to the body of research that suggests faculty perceptions are shaped by institutional resources needed to support online delivery (Maguire, 2009; Wickersham & McElhany, 2010; Wingo et al., 2017), pedagogical alignment with social work practice (East et al, 2014), and translation of 'self' through technology-mediated relationships (Smith, 2015; Spitz, 2019).

East et al. (2014) conducted a national study with US social work deans and directors (n=121) regarding the administrative aspects of expanding online education. The administrators who were surveyed indicated that faculty engagement in transitioning to online social work delivery was a significant barrier in the transformation process and a central consideration for advancing online delivery. These leaders asserted that the technological innovation required for

online delivery demands a complex organizational transformation process that includes attention to shifts in professional identity of teaching faculty.

Besides considering pedagogical efficacy, organizational change, and faculty engagement associated with online education, questions persist as to whether the virtual modality risks being oppressive. Using a critical theory lens, Reyes and Segal (2019) contend that online delivery, with a focus on maximizing revenue, has the potential to become a colonizing force that reflects our broader neoliberal socio-political and economic context. Many scholars remain vigilant to the implications of a technocratic shift toward business models of education and the hegemonic positivist approaches that could propagate amid standardized curricula delivery (Rexhepi & Torres, 2011). This commoditization of online learning threatens to diminish social work educators' freedom and creativity related to curricular content and discourse (Reyes & Segal, 2019).

The pace at which the current pandemic is accelerating the acceptance of online education may result in it becoming the default pedagogical modality (McLaughlin et al., 2020). The pandemic is emphasizing the need to perfect online pedagogical practice in higher education (Toquero, 2020) and some argue that greater utilization of online education in necessary in this era even beyond the demands of the pandemic (Gallagher & Palmer, 2020). Understanding online social work education's benefits, as well as its limitations, is of paramount concern at this juncture, and faculty are key informants for this appraisal. While instructors are central in the teaching and learning exchange, there remains a dearth of scholarship investigating educators' perceptions of the ways technology is reconstituting social work education. In light of the pandemic crisis necessitating virtual learning approaches and the enduring implications of this

shift, it is critical that we advance online delivery in a way that reflectively and reflexively includes an array of educator perspectives (Sawrikar et al., 2015).

Research Aim

The research aim was to explore the experiences of social work educators as they transition from OTG to online teaching. An interpretative phenomenological analysis was conducted with 17 social work educators in Spring and Summer 2019, prior to the abrupt migration to online delivery necessitated by COVID-19. The results from the data generated two sets of findings; those presented here focus on the pressures faculty experience and how they made sense of the transition to online teaching.

Methods

Participants

Prospective social work educator participants were contacted through a social work educator listserv and through networking with colleagues. This study protocol #1901058558 was given exempt status by the Indiana University Human Subjects and Institutional Review Board. Twenty-six educators from across the US responded to the listserv invitation by completing a Qualtrics survey where they reviewed and agreed to the informed consent. Seventeen agreed to be interviewed, representing 16 different schools, including a mix of public, private, and totally online universities. Participation in the study required having taught two online social work courses and five OTG social work courses in order to reflect on previous experiences. Participants were primarily Caucasian (88.2%), 35.3% were tenured, and 70.5% had a PhD or DSW. Instructors described a substantive range of experience with developing original content or implementing standardized online courses. Over 70% indicated informal conversations with other instructors, professional development, and ongoing technical support as supporting their

transition to online teaching, but less than 50% had access to an online course designer or formal mentoring.

See Table 1 for demographics and Table 2 for experience.

[Table 1]

[Table 2]

Data Collection

Participants were interviewed via zoom, phone, or in person. The semi-structured interview included a variety of questions to discern the participants' experiences including, "What's your experience with transitioning from face-to-face teaching in the classroom to delivering online instruction?", "Did your perception of your role as an educator shift when you started teaching online. If so, how?", "What feelings emerged for you during your transition from face-to-face to online teaching?", "What has helped your transition to online teaching?", "What has made your transition more difficult?", and "What do you wish you have known before transitioning into online teaching?" Appropriate prompts and reflections were used to better understand the educators' experiences. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.

Analysis

We designed the study and analyzed the data using an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) oriented in a social constructivist (Moustakas, 1994) and critical theory (Habermas, 1986 [1971]) lens. IPA, as described by Smith et al. (2009), is concerned with a "detailed examination of lived experience" and its focus is on "the interpretation of meaning" (pp. 46-47). As three social work faculty and researchers, we conceived of the study based upon our experiences teaching both OTG and online courses and the transitions we encountered. We followed the six-step process outlined by IPA (Smith et al., 2009) in our analysis. Initially we each read and reviewed every interview (Step 1), performed line-by-line coding of each

interview (Step 2), and identified emerging themes (Step 3).Collaboratively, we examined

connections between the emerging themes (Step 4). Several themes were prominent from the

start and others became more salient through discussion. We then repeated this process with each

interview (Step 5), and then across interviews in order to identify the presence of the pervasive

and resonant themes. Sometimes this required re-reading previous interviews for newly

understood concepts. With each meeting the depth of exploration of the themes increased.

Overlaps were often present and kept adding richness and detail to the larger code structure. We

developed summaries of each interview around the specific themes identified. Finally, we

established linkages between interview themes and developed concept maps, drawings, and

charts to make sense of the different experiences of the interviewees (Step 6).

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Numerous steps were taken to strengthen the trustworthiness of these qualitative findings.

We memoed our reactions to individual interviews and processed them with each other, which

helped us to de-center our perspective in favor of participant experience. We sent a summary of

the main findings to all 17 participants with an invitation to respond via email or with a meeting

to serve as a member check (Drisko, 2005). Ten participants responded, usually affirming the

results or asking a question that helped the researchers know what to clarify in the findings. No

participants indicated disagreement with the findings.

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Results

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These educators' experience transitioning to online teaching was influenced by

three categories of factors which contributed to their current standpoint on teaching online:

personal qualities, pedagogical beliefs, and macro and institutional factors. The nexus of these

three factors is a calculus each educator made in terms of how these factors serve their needs as well as those of their students. See Figure 1.

[Figure 1]

Personal Qualities

Instructors bring their own personality, values, and comfort with technology to the online teaching experience. These internal factors and perceived efficacy profoundly affect the transition process. Each of these qualities will be explored as a theme illustrated with participant comments.

The personality of instructors played a role in their transition to online education. Some educators self-described as highly curious, open, and motivated to be involved in the online education movement. "It did start with my own curiosity–if you don't have curiosity, you'll never be convinced of it online" [Participant 9]. This personal enthusiasm for new learning could be highly motivating. One explained:

> Yes, so I was excited at the beginning, I still am. I think part of the excitement was learning something new, expanding my own toolbox, staying current, wanting to explore this whole movement of online education, and as I said before really trying to create a sense of a connected learning environment for students that I am teaching. [Participant 16]

Conversely, one instructor expressed a degree of resignation. "Well, I actually asked to teach online because that's what's coming - you can't avoid it" [Participant 2].

Instructors' values also influenced their online teaching experience. A common theme threaded throughout the data was the participants' acceptance of online delivery as a way to increase student access, especially for those most marginalized. As one instructor said, "I see it

as a social justice model...there's access to advanced education that was not available to people" [Participant 9]. Another described pride in furthering students' goals:

> ...We felt like there was a market for non-traditional students, and people just came out of the woodwork. They'd tell us their stories how they had always wanted to be a social worker, but they got pregnant in high school, or they couldn't finish college because of this or that, but they'd had this dream all these years and now at 30, 40, or 50, they saw an opportunity to come back. So, we were all about trying to help these students realize their dream. [Participant 2]

An instructor's comfort level with technology could affect their mindset about teaching online. Several instructors described active interest in using technology, previous history employing technology to facilitate education, or embracing the learning curve in figuring out new learning platforms and ways of communicating with students. "I'm excited about technology, I think there's a lot of capacity building that it offers us" [Participant 12]. Instructors described hesitancy or a strong degree of concern about making use of technology, "I think I was mostly scared, because I didn't know how to do this technology. It took a lot of hand-holding for me to understand this and feel comfortable with it" [Participant 1].

Pedagogical Beliefs

Values and beliefs involved in teaching and learning were at the forefront of the participant conversations. Four central ideas about pedagogy were particularly salient: Beliefs about quality teaching, the role of the educator, cultivating social work values, and paradigmatic flexibility.

Quality Teaching

The continuum of educator perspectives ranged from those who felt that online education was of excellent quality and promoted higher-level learning to those who felt online learning is sub-par by nature. Several noted specific ways the online courses were particularly effective. Educators stated students cannot hide in online classrooms and must contribute to discussions, so there is more equality in terms of participation. One educator said, "In the online world, you have to participate... it really is a major improvement in scholarly learning. [Students] provide excellent commentary and criticism to their colleagues… it's nothing like I've seen in using the same assignment face to face" [Participant 13]. Another commented that students have access to the material so they can take advantage of listening to lectures or videos multiple times if needed [Participant1]. Some educators felt online provides a rich learning environment, "I don't think that people always realize that we can still have active learning online, so I've taken a lot of the approaches of active learning and I've integrated them into my online courses" [Participant 17] . Another said that quality was reflected in student responses: "if they sound different at the end of a course, then I know they've integrated. … if they find a way to support what they're saying... I think 'aha – we've arrived'" [Participant 16].

Conversely, educators expressed doubts about online social work education, believing the quality of student learning was diminished One professor said that she felt students were largely teaching themselves and she was struggling with her lack of influence. Another said,

Yeah, it feels more superficial in what I can accomplish in terms of impacting students' perceptions about policy or the importance of policy....I don't have a clue of how to get students to think about and really talk about those things in any kind of depth online....[Participant 2]

A frequent concern of the participants was doubting whether or not students can experience transformative learning in an online environment:

> ...I felt like when I'm in my seated classes, you know, we're grabbing three hours of rich discussion where they get the benefit of all of my clinical experience...and my research knowledge, right? But now, it's just like – this is what the book said. (Participant 10).

Educators struggled with creating online spaces that nurtured in-depth dialogue "[in OTG classroom] I'm able to create a space for people to be free to say where they're at so they can really explore it. I don't feel like I can do that in the online environment" [Participant 11].

Educator Role in the Online Environment

Most of the participants had some concerns about translating themselves through online means. Many stated that they felt the online modality limited opportunities for instructor authenticity, creating a barrier to the student-instructor relationship.

> "I get a lot of energy from my students….online learning to me feels more like I spit out a whole bunch of information and then they spit out information back at me and then I grade their stuff. I'm trying hard to figure out how to get that energy from the student so that I can give them that energy back in a meaningful way." [Participant 6].

Translating oneself is difficult in a medium that restricts many of the face-to-face aspects of communication. The challenge is to be able to communicate your personality through your course content and emails. As one instructor said:

> Now there are always students that will misinterpret regardless of how plain-spoken, direct, and unambiguous you are. But, for me, the focus has been how do I in my written communication minimize as much as possible the possibility that I will be misinterpreted in a negative way. So I've done a lot more apologizing… [Participant 8]

On the other hand, some educators understood that engagement will just look different online. "The way I look at it is definitely moved from the stereotypic sage on the stage to actually being much more of a mentor, much more of a consultant" [Participant 13]. Others did not miss the sage on the stage aspect of teaching as they felt the focus of the learning was now more on the students rather than themselves, and they made peace with that.

Along with translating self into an online environment, educators identified that they have experienced a shift in their personal identity as an educator. One educator said that they have shifted to become a "facilitator in teaching – fostering a team effort to learn" [Participant 17]. Another expressed some frustration:

My role has definitely changed…I'm not able to add nonverbals to that, which are so valuable and such an important part of myself, right? We're not able to share our true selves with them [Participant 12].

A few others felt there was not a change in their professional identity, "It is how I do it that has changed" [Participant 16].

Cultivating Social Work Values

Several participants expressed concern that students who do not embrace social work values may be more difficult to identify since students may self-censor ideas that contradict social work values and present a curated version of themselves online:

The other thing that I would say is that it's very hard to spot impairment this way. Like for people who think that gay is wrong...it's hard to judge that because they can titrate what they say in a discussion board. [Participant 10]

Educators wondered how they would be able to help students understand social work values in the online environment where the feedback loop is often not closed. They worried that if the

student is not challenged to grow past these biases, they may not be able to adhere to social work standards. "A lot of our students, particularly our online students, come from very conservative backgrounds, and they just haven't really been pushed out of that comfort zone of certain beliefs" [Participant 6].

Paradigmatic Flexibility

Educators' perception of the flexibility of educational paradigms influenced how they made sense of online teaching. Educators with more flexible paradigms viewed online teaching as "just a new toybox, new toys to play with" [Participant 13] where they had to learn new methods but not a new role. Another educator echoed this, "I want to educate students and meet their learning needs the best way I can. But the skill set had to be altered." [Participant 14]. While some educators understood online education as an alternate teaching paradigm, other educators struggled to shift paradigms, experiencing frustration that the OTG methods they were confident in could not be directly translated online. "My first class, I developed it online exactly the way it is in the classroom. …We realized very quickly that our expectations for the online courses had to be different." [Participant 6]. All instructors recognized that paradigms had to shift and grow in the online education world but were not always content with how this played out. "I think online, you have to be much more aware and creative and always changing. You can't just go over what [apply] what you did last semester because things change." [Participant 3]

Macro and Institutional Factors

Participants described macro and institutional factors that influenced their transition to online teaching. Four themes revealed how these contextual features interplayed with

participants' transition processes. These themes are (1) market-based forces; (2) spectrum of supports; (3) workload capacity; and (4) institutional power.

Market-based Forces

Economic considerations were highlighted as an engine for the proliferation of online education delivery. Participants reported how the increased demand for online delivery catalyzed structural changes within institutions and social work programs as a way to remain competitive within the shifting market for social work education. This notion was captured with one educator's response, "It's a very competitive environment…. There's a ton of competition." [Participant 8] One participant noted the lucrative return on investment that occurred, "…It took us a million bucks to do it. Now the program is netting about 2 million bucks a year, period." [Participant 13]

Participants also described how their institutional settings, responding to the swiftly changing markets, required the shift to online delivery with little preparation. Two participant statements exemplified this: "Yeah, we were forced to do this….We found out that we had to do it We were told in January, you will do this, and we had to develop the program and offer our first two classes in the fall" [Participant 6], and "...this is the way the institution is going, and we have to do it. We don't have any options. Just figure it out" [Participant 12]. Several participants explained how their transition to online teaching was motivated by the need to remain relevant in a changing social work education market. One veteran educator forecasted that "any school that fails to address online learning does so at their own peril" [Participant 13].

Spectrum of Supports

A pervasive theme that underpinned participants' perspectives of their transition experience was the level of support and resources that were available to them. Access to

instructional designers, mentors, trainings, and other key resources facilitated a smoother transition. One participant noted, "We have support to do anything we want to do; we just have to be able to do it" [Participant 6]. Participants with fewer resources reported challenges with bridging the paradigmatic shift, as indicated by the following response.

> I've been kind of feeling through this by myself, and that's not saying people [don't] offer to help, but it's the time….the piece that is missing is getting that kind of intensive feedback with how to do this rather than just trying to figure it out by myself. [Participant 4].

Scarcity of funding mechanisms to support online teaching was also an issue that shaped educators' experiences. One participant emphasized, "Yeah, there's no budget; there's no money, so you have to use the free version of everything." [Participant 12]

Workload Capacity

Participants indicated that the transition to online teaching required additional workload capacity. While a few reported compensation for developing courses, almost all of the participants indicated that online skill development required an investment of time that exceeded their typical workload capacity. "Another challenge I've found is the time it takes to respond to discussion questions, beyond cookie cutter, to give a good response and to get feedback on those responses." [Participant 4]. One educator emphasized, "So it's a lot of work to set a course up for online teaching, that's for sure. It takes twice as much time, I think, as you would prepare for a face-to-face class." [Participant 7]. Several educators reported pulling from their personal time to facilitate their transition to online teaching. Exemplifying this point, one educator/administrator stated, "...it does require a lot more time. I'll come in here from 8 am - 6 pm, and then I go home and I work until midnight doing my online course stuff" [Participant 7].

Institutional Power

Participant perspectives were shaped by their relationship to institutional power, including having tenure. Some participants conveyed concerns about how online delivery could affect student evaluations, citing implications for promotion and tenure. Some educators resisted online teaching until they felt secure in their positions, "...that's something you can do once you have the benefit of tenure, because before that, you're just so scared…." [Participant 10]. Another educator articulated how those facilitating the transition are primarily non-tenure track faculty, noting, "there's one tenure track...and the rest of us are lecturers or coordinators or field people." [Participant 9]

Participants also noted issues with power related to who owns course content. There were questions about whether an instructor could claim ownership of their creative property or whether the university owned the online content produced by the instructor. One participant reported the following frustration:

> The department decided to start taking that content and all of my work in developing these courses and giving them to other instructors….it just felt like I had invested so much energy, time, money, and an additional master's degree to get to this point….every quiz I developed, every announcement I developed, they would just do one large dump into the next person's course….Do they own this? Is this my intellectual property? Is it theirs? [Participant 12]

One participant conveyed a situation where the instructor had no control over content. "So, where I am right now...there's no customization of courses. The courses are locked and loaded. There's no freedom whatsoever." [Participant 8]

With many institutions standardizing courses, educators have limited control over content. Participants were divided as to how they felt this was good for teaching and learning. Some instructors applauded the standards and oversight, "It's not that anyone can just create their own online class, I'm submitting objectives, I'm submitting course maps, I'm submitting assignments and rubrics to make sure that I've got accountability." [Participant 15]. However, another professor described requesting changes to poorly aligned assignments to no effect. She described her limited scope in improving the course as "disempowering." [Participant 10]

Online Educator Trade-off Calculations

In summary, social work educators' lived experiences with transitioning to online teaching were shaped by personal factors, views of pedagogy, and macro and institutional factors. However, it is the intersection of these factors and their assessment of the benefits or drawbacks for themselves and students which determines their current standpoint on online education. Educators varied greatly in the emphasis they put on personal satisfaction versus their assessment of student learning, landing in one of four tradeoff quadrants (See Table 3). While the educators' locations in these quadrants can be fluid, the box they landed in for this study represents their assessment of teaching at a particular moment in time and may change over time. For example, one instructor described "I've had my lows when I'm sad about it and then there's times when I do say 'I miss the students' and I have those highs at the end where I say 'as long as they're learning and they're getting it, it's all worth it and I can find those needs to be met in other ways'" [Participant 15].

[Table 3]

Participants in the Mutual Benefit quadrant (7/17 educators) valued online education because they felt it provided a quality experience for social work students and satisfied their own

needs. They felt content with their role, convinced of the effectiveness, and their values aligned with the process. They felt online social work education met social justice demands for accessibility in a pedagogically sound manner. Participants in the Compromised Learning quadrant (2/17) appreciated how online teaching provided them a healthier work/life balance, but they also experienced doubts about the quality of education delivered or concerns about the future of the profession. Those participants in the Instructor Reservations quadrant (4/17) calculated that students benefited in some ways, but they felt personally dissatisfied in the role of online instructor. For those in the Incompatibility quadrant (4/17), participants felt that online teaching was not personally satisfying or of sufficient quality and expressed concern that the students were not getting what they needed to become capable social workers. The current perspective on online teaching of each educator in the quadrants reflects their trade-off calculations and highlights the interplay between personal, pedagogical, and macro/institutional factors. **Discussion**

This study complements the literature recognizing that online instructors' satisfaction is related to student factors (connection, accessibility), instructor factors (personal gratification, professional development, challenges around technology), and institutional factors (workload issues, compensation, intellectual property) (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009). Findings from the data analysis reveal a wide range of social work educator perspectives that generally correspond to these factors. It is this unique mix of each participants' pedagogical beliefs, personal qualities, and macro or institutional factors which influences their tradeoff calculations and perspectives on online teaching. As Bolliger et al. (2014) indicate, instructors' satisfaction is linked to their beliefs about the online environment being "efficient, effective, and beneficial for the individual" (p. 184). Those in Quadrant One are able to fully accept the online teaching role because of this

strong alignment, while educators in Quadrant Four experience an incongruity between their experience of online teaching and their values. Those educators in Quadrants Two and Three can appreciate online teaching while also experiencing concerns and reservations.

Educator Perceptions of Student Learning

Educators generally recognize the opportunities online modalities offered. The participants conveyed how their lingering questions about the efficacy of online pedagogy were balanced with the benefits of increasing student access. They described providing social work education to working parents, students with diverse needs, and in rural communities, as being fundamental to their mission.

Several educators were concerned that the online environment was not meeting students' educational needs. They worried that online students may be less challenged to internalize social work values, less exposed to the professional dialogue and socialization, and could censor value conflicts and not respond to corrective feedback. This sentiment resembles scholars' concern that limited dialogue in online courses may translate into reduced critical thinking related to ethics or differences (Jacobsen, 2019; Reyes & Segal, 2019; Richter, 2019) and that online students may make little time for deep learning while on a "fast-track to a degree" (Spitz, 2019, p. 404). Social work educators have identified the use of self as being a cornerstone of social work practice, and that students have to refine their personal qualities (such as emotional maturity or attunement to others) to align with this focus (Liechty, 2018). These educators recognized that if students are not effectively prompted to do their own personal work, their effectiveness may be limited.

A study examining MSW admission chairs and agency administrators' perspectives on characteristics most central to social work practice underscored the need for a greater focus on developing students' interpersonal skills and character in social work classrooms (Seipel et al.,

2011). If this is true for OTG classrooms, it should not be overlooked in online classrooms and may reflect the concerns held by our participants. Additionally, online learning privileges students who are well-organized, highly skilled, and self-motivated, potentially limiting the benefit for others (Kurzman, 2019; Spitz, 2019). Consequently, online modalities may not be ideal for all types of learners.

Instructor Factors: Personal Satisfaction and Connection with Students

Instructors' online transition was also influenced by personal experience of well-being. The greatest personal satisfaction expressed by educators in both Quadrants One and Two was flexibility in maintaining work/life balance since they could teach at home on their schedule. McCann and Holt (2009) identified online instructors experiencing less stress than OTG instructors and hypothesized that this was due to more standardization of courses and less commuting time. Our participants enjoyed the additional financial opportunities provided by online teaching and the development of new technological, creative, and pedagogical skills. Many others felt that the workload demands of teaching online were extraordinarily high and came at the expense of their free time, often without adequate compensation.

While educators often described moments of connections with students online as highly gratifying, all of them recognized that the online relationships were different than OTG relationships. Relationships with students have long been associated with college instructor satisfaction in both OTG (DiClemente et al., 2013; Wininger & Birkholz, 2013) and online modalities (Spitz, 2019). Educators had to negotiate the alteration to their identity demanded online. Faculty in Quadrant One have mostly made peace with not being the "sage on the stage" but rather the "guide on the side" (Kurzman, 2019, p. 289). Several educators expressed that online versus OTG was not a good versus bad proposition, but just a different paradigm, as

expressed by Kurzman (2019). Sometimes they reminded themselves to assess success based on student achievement, even with less personal satisfaction. A common tradeoff was that the educator either had to adjust their style to try to reach students differently or accept the loss of some personal satisfaction. Hansen and Gray (2018) illustrate how online educators must pragmatically institute different boundaries and limits around managing time and interacting with students in order to manage new workload demands.

While most prominent for educators in Quadrants Three and Four, themes of loss were frequently described by educators in each category, usually reflecting decreased personal connection. Educators missed the energizing in-person interactions with students including opportunities to share their true selves through personal stories. Willmet et al. (2005) reported that instructors of online education and social work classes had their sense of self and confidence challenged. Haley (2010) said that some students can see faculty as "little more than a higher education vending machine" (p. 62). This dehumanization demonstrates the risk for online education becoming a transaction rather than an inroad to deep learning (Reyes & Segal, 2019). Social presence has long been established as vital to effective online learning (Garrison, et al., 2010). Students perform better and enjoy their course more when they feel their instructors like them (Wilson, 2008), and feel connected to their instructors (Okech et al., 2014) so it is vital to find ways to support the instructor-student relationship in online courses. Opportunities to informally mentor or share social work anecdotes and role model social work behavior in real time were rarer in the virtual world. The instructors also mourned the changed sense of community. Facilitating engaging classroom environments seemed more challenging or impossible in the online classroom, and they worried it could limit student professional

development. One educator likened the difference in the relationship online to OTG as watching a movie versus being immersed in live theater.

Institutional Factors: Instructor-Institution Relationship

The power dynamics experienced between participants and their institutions also contributed to their view of online social work education. Educators felt more content when they described substantive institutional support, which has been associated with online instructor satisfaction (Bolliger et al., 2014), such as training, access to departmental mentors, appropriate compensation, recognition, instructional design assistance, and quality control feedback loops in standardized course development. This is not surprising considering that practicing social workers experience more job satisfaction when they have more secure financial compensation (Schweitzer et al., 2013), and when the organizational culture promotes both connection and workload flexibility (Shier & Graham, 2011). Instructors struggled more in transitions when feeling overwhelmed or disempowered by their institutions.

Consistent with concerns about the commoditization of online learning, neo-liberalism, and threats to academic freedom and creativity (Reyes & Segal, 2018), participants described diminished power in relation to their institutions. Some instructors struggled with losing autonomy over the courses they designed, putting their own additional time and expense into this process while having no authority over how the courses were utilized. Others struggled with the limited freedom they had in the standardized courses they were delivering. Frequently it was the adjunct instructors or non-tenure track instructors who had reported being required to create courses with little support or options. There was also concern about decisions around education (i.e., course size and online modality) being made based on financial expediency rather than pedagogical excellence. While these implications of neo-liberalism and power differentials in

online delivery were present in the data, participants identified benefits to themselves and students which could ameliorate those concerns.

Online Social Work Education during COVID-19

Due to the pandemic, social work educators had to become online instructors regardless of concerns or objections. Because this research was completed prior to the pandemic, it is difficult to know how educator perceptions of the tradeoffs involved shifted to accommodate this rapid and forced change. We can speculate that most social work educators were glad to be able to continue teaching, despite the challenges, for their own personal security and for the continued of student learning.

In summary, each educator had a stance toward online education that is reflective of their negotiation of multiple factors: student learning, personal satisfaction, and institutional support. The Quadrants represent their current view about efficacious online teaching balanced with their own personal and institutional variables.

Limitations

These findings present valuable insights into how transitioning to online teaching was experienced by social work educators pre-COVID-19. While we suspect these findings will help explain educators' experiences during COVID-19 where personal and external pressures to switch online in order to secure personal, family, and student health likely overrode concerns over pedagogical efficacy, it is possible that some aspects do not translate. The views primarily reflected white, female social work educators in the United States which limits the transferability of the results. This study focuses on educator perspectives of online teaching rather than measures of online teaching effectiveness. This study did not explore the student experience of online social work education. Our faculty members' views about the efficacy of online learning

may or may not be consonant with the actual experience of students and their views about the benefits and challenges of online learning.

Implications and Areas for Further Research

This research highlights the wide variability of educator views on online social work teaching and the various factors that shape those viewpoints. This research is beneficial in two ways: 1) enhancing social work educators' critical reflexivity while navigating the evolving technological context of online education, and 2) providing administrators with points of intervention to support online instructors and develop online delivery modes.

We have explored the educator perspective, but the implications for administrators emphasize the power dynamics that underlie online education - who teaches, who learns, and what supports are available. To support the faculty transitions, administrators must be sensitive to faculty mindsets about online teaching in light of their pedagogical stances and personal needs, and must also recognize that teaching online requires new workload demands that alter faculty expectations of relationships and boundaries. This consideration is more pressing in light of the pandemic requiring online pedagogical expertise of many social work educators, some of whom may have trepidations and reluctance due to concerns about student learning and their own satisfaction. Research validates educators' concerns about additional time and effort needed to develop and deliver online courses (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Freeman, 2015) and indicates increased workload requirements are a primary barrier to transitioning to online teaching (Lloyd et al., 2012). When developing the capacity to teach well online there is much to learn in a short time (Creswell Báez et al., 2019), and this process requires training that addresses instructional design and technology and integrates online pedagogy and theory (Dawson & Fenster, 2015). Administrators should provide financial resources and workload time to help faculty learn

effective online pedagogy. Our participants who had extensive support at their institutions described easier transitions and adjustments to their new roles. Future research might also consider concerns faculty mentioned about the future of social work education, including the value and limitations of course standardization, privileging profit over quality, and ethical concerns around assuming rights to an online course developed by individual instructors. Future research might also compare faculty perspectives of online teaching with their OTG teaching effectiveness, as well as explore student perspectives about online learning. Because of the universality of online social work education in the pandemic, future research might also explore the experiences of faculty who had previously avoided teaching online.

Conclusion

As the pandemic is facilitating a permanent reconstitution of social work education (McLaughlin et al., 2020), the profession has an obligation to consider how these educational delivery systems further or impair the mandated mission to best prepare future social workers. Social work educators transitioning to online teaching experience both joys and challenges along the way. This wide range of perspectives shows that there are multiple factors which influence how educators view online education. Some educators were forced to teach online and were overwhelmed and discouraged; for others, it was an exhilarating opportunity. Some social work educators grieved the OTG connections they had enjoyed with students; others felt that online education is superior in its pedagogical efficacy.

Critically examining how social work values align with online educational delivery systems, and how to protect this mission from areas of dissonance, is of paramount importance to the future of the social work profession. The tradeoffs instructors are making as they shift to online teaching may inspire educators and administrators to evolve into modern online

pedagogies in a way that protects what is most central to the mission of social work while growing beyond traditions that may be at best, unnecessary and, at worst, problematic. Social work literature has emphasized the goal should be to provide excellent education regardless of modality (Crisp, 2018). By understanding how faculty perceive this experience, what they value, what concerns them, and how they ensure quality education for their students, administrators can proactively take steps to support smoother transitions that benefit student learning (and eventually their work with clients).

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Table 1

Interviewee Demographics

Age

Mean	55	
Range	32-75	

Race

African American	1	5.8%
Biracial	1	5.8%
Caucasian	15	88.2%

Faculty position

Tenured	6	35.3%
Tenure-track	2	11.7%
Non-tenure track	7	41.2%
Adjunct faculty	2	11.7%

Highest degree earned

DSW	2	11.7%
MSW	5	29.4%
PhD	10	58.8%

Table 2

Interviewee experience

Education levels taught
	BSW	16	94.1%

Education levels taught
      BSW   16   94.1%
      MSW   13   76.4%
      PhD or DSW   2   11.7%
Number of on the ground classes taught
      20+   14   82.4%
      15-20   1   5.8%
      5-9   2   11.7%
Number of online classes taught
      15+   8   47.1%
      10-14   1   5.8%
      5-9   4   23.5%
   2-4   4   23.5%
Number of hybrid classes taught
      15+   3   17.6%
      5-9   2   11.7%
      1-4   3   17.6%
      0   9   52.9%

Table 3

Online Social Work Educators' Tradeoff Calculations

	Works for the Students	**Does Not Work for the Students**
Works for the Educator	#1 Mutual Benefit (7/17): Both educators and students benefit from online education.	#2 Compromised Learning (2/17): While educators feel online education meets their needs, they do not feel it fully benefits students.
Does Not Work for the Educator	#3 Instructor Reservations (4/17): Students get accessible education, but not as satisfying for the educators.	#4 Incompatibility (4/17): Educators feel online does not work for them nor for students.

Figure 1

Factors Influencing Social Work Educators' Online Teaching Experience
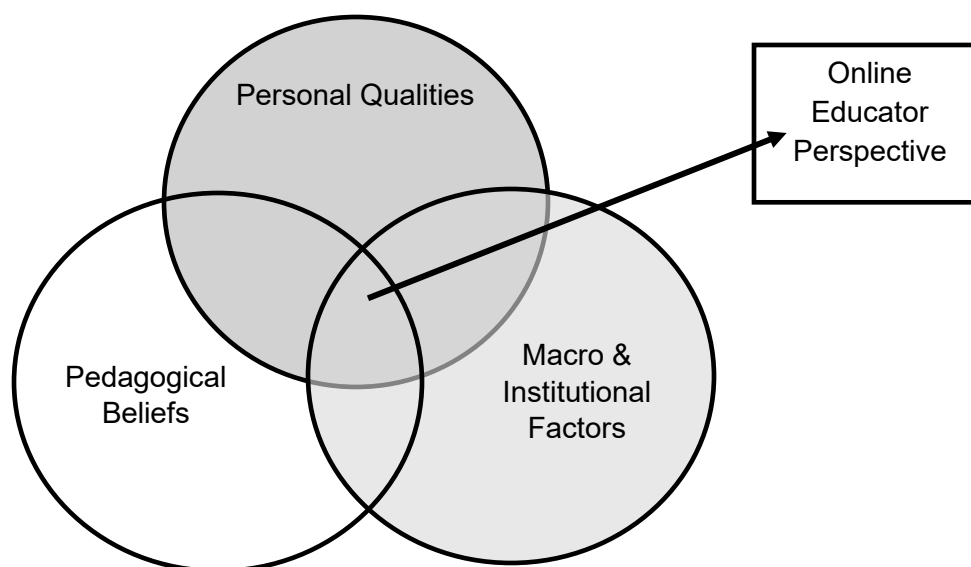
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