Supporting Young Students’ Word Study During the COVID-19 Quarantine: ABC Scavenger Hunt

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, an ABC scavenger hunt can be a great activity to support young students’ word study while bridging home and school and fostering a positive learning environment.

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically affected U.S. schools since March 2020. As of May 15, 2020, nearly every state in the country either ordered or recommended school closures through the end of the 2019–2020 school year (Education Week, 2020). Although significant uncertainty continues, school reopening plans varied by school district for the 2020–2021 academic year as hybrid, completely remote, or a combination of both. In trying times like these, young students face unique, unprecedented challenges. How can teachers work with young students and their parents/guardians to ensure high-quality and equitable instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic? More specifically, how can teachers support young students’ word study during these trying times? In this teaching tip, we share how a first-grade teacher used ABC scavenger hunts to engage students in word study during remote learning.

Word Study and ABC Scavenger Hunt

Word study is an approach that focuses on alphabet (letter–sound relations), pattern, and meaning (Benedict, Brownell, Bettini, & Sohn, 2020; Williams, Phillips-Birdsong, Hufnagel, Hungler, & Lundstrom, 2009) to develop students’ abilities in phonemic awareness, phonics, word recognition, vocabulary, and spelling (Baker, Dreher, & Guthrie, 2000; McCormick & Zutell, 2015; Park & Lombardino, 2013). Bear and Templeton (1998) suggested a variety of instructional strategies to help students develop word study skills, such as writing sorts, word hunts, and word study notebooks. Similarly, Williams et al. (2009) emphasized hands-on activities or word work to develop young students’ word knowledge.

ABC scavenger hunts, an interactive hands-on activity in nature, combine these formats together. Students may hunt for words that fit the ABC pattern, may keep a word study notebook to record the known patterns and the words, or may play games and activities to apply their word knowledge (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2000). Miss G used an ABC scavenger hunt to have her first graders hunt for items that start with each letter, spell them out on a recording sheet, and read each word while demonstrating the object represented. Parents provided help when needed, but students did the final presentation independently. Students thus practiced alphabet knowledge, phonemic awareness when understanding letter–sound relations, phonics when applying patterns in spelling and word recognition, and vocabulary. In remote learning during the quarantine, Miss G believed that an ABC scavenger hunt at home involving her students and their family members was a perfect activity to build the bridge between home and school, foster a positive learning environment, and engage students, all while building literacy skills.
Teacher–Family Partnerships During Remote Learning

Research has repeatedly demonstrated that parents/guardians’ engagement in their children’s education positively impacts students’ learning (e.g., Lusse, Notten, & Engbersen, 2019; Pushor, 2012). Effective teachers tend to strategically align the guidance of students at home and at school while facilitating parents to support and guide their children’s learning at home (Lusse et al., 2019). Keis (2006) pointed out the importance of family literacy when “working with culturally diverse populations whose forms of literacy and ‘funds of knowledge’ are often ignored by traditional schooling” (p. 17).

School has been anything but traditional lately due to the restrictions of COVID-19. As teachers are reinventing strategies to reach online learners, they must take students’ funds of knowledge into consideration. Teachers are relying on younger students’ parents to assist in educational practices at home, and building the bridge between home and school becomes a necessity during a national pandemic.

ABC Scavenger Hunt in Action

Miss G teaches first grade in a public school in the U.S. Northeast. This Title I school has 44.3% of students classified as economically disadvantaged and 1% as homeless (NJ Department of Education, 2017). In spring 2020, Miss G had 13 first graders: eight White students, four African American, and one Hispanic. Two students had an Individualized Education Plan, and two were English learners. The class started remote learning in March 2020. When planning remote instruction, after months of in-class support, Miss G’s goal was to keep her students practicing their skills while engaging family members in the process. In this section, we provide the tips she summarized in the ABC scavenger hunt implementation process, during which students applied their Fundations phonics skills to a real-life situation with the assistance of their families.

Developing Rapport With Parents

Young students need caregivers’ supervision during remote learning from home. Miss G explained to parents in a video that she understood that balancing home and school was not always easy. She recognized that each family had a unique background, dynamic, schedules, and at-home resources. She assured parents that she was on their side and willing to work with them to create engaging activities that their child would want to complete.

Illustrating the Importance of the Activity

Miss G made sure to tell parents why the ABC scavenger hunt activity was important and how it would support their children with alphabet knowledge, phonemic awareness, phonics, spelling, word recognition, and vocabulary. Children and their parents were thus able to understand why she was assigning the work. Miss G also emphasized how the activity allows parents to witness their children’s literacy strengths and weaknesses. Parents then understood how it would help their children achieve grade-level benchmarks. Consequently, parents appreciated this project: “We had a fun time looking for items to match the alphabet, and it was very nice to have the family involved.”

Considering Family Dynamics and Backgrounds

When families get involved in the ABC hunt, it is important to consider various dynamics in each household. Miss G’s students came from a variety of backgrounds culturally, linguistically, and economically. When communicating with families, she considered how they would interpret the directions of the activity. She kept the language simple, steered clear of educational jargon, and sent directions both translated and in English to make it easier on English learners’ parents. Students might find items highlighting their diverse backgrounds. Miss G made sure to highlight student identities, cultures, and interests through classroom discussion. After presenting their recording sheet and items (see Figures 1–3), students were encouraged to share five items that connected to their funds of knowledge. Students shared items such as pans because they like to cook with their family, arts and crafts completed with grandparents, and their pets, siblings, and favorite stuffed animals. All of these items gave Miss G and the class a glimpse into each student’s life. One parent commented, “Miss G, I liked this activity because it was fun working together as a family finding objects that represent our family.”

Encouraging Phonetic Spelling

Miss G supplied students with a recording sheet to write down the items they found. She explained
that it was OK if they did not spell every word correctly, but they would need to do their best to write the sounds that they heard. Students put their most current phonics lesson into practice by identifying sounds they heard in the words and phonetically spelling the scavenger hunt items. The student work demonstrated that all students were able to identify initial sounds and that over half the class was able to phonetically spell the items found. Some student work demonstrated that parents assisted their children with the spelling.

Acknowledging All Learners and Their Home Support

Because learning is taking place in the home, teachers need to consider that the level of support students receive varies. Some parents may work from home or the office, so students may need to complete a portion of the activity independently. Depending on students’ levels, teachers should differentiate this activity. For students who were not ready to spell yet, Miss G allowed them to draw pictures of the items they found. For more advanced students, she made the activity more challenging by increasing the number of items they needed to find for each letter of the alphabet. She offered choices when assigning student work, as students could submit their work online or submit an oral response through video submission.

Comparing Household Items

Social distancing can limit student interaction, so it is important to plan valuable activities that encourage student discussion. Miss G invited her students to show their at-home learning space through the items they found in the ABC scavenger hunt. On a video call, students read through their lists and displayed the found items to compare things they had in common, letters difficult to represent, and so forth. Students took turns explaining why they chose the items for each category. It helped build a classroom community by engaging in conversation about students’ homes, hobbies, and learning activities. One student mentioned, “I had no idea all of my friends had stuffed animals they love.”

As students read their lists aloud, Miss G assessed whether students were able to identify letter sounds and the word lists they created. In her class, 90% of students were able to properly pronounce their letter sounds, but students still had trouble with the letters
q, x, g, j, and z. The first graders also learned new vocabulary words and practiced phonics and spelling.

Creating Step-by-Step Tutorials
When students need parents’ technological help, many parents tend to lack the technological skills necessary to aid their children (Borup, West, Graham, & Davies, 2014). For this ABC scavenger hunt activity, Miss G created a step-by-step tutorial to demonstrate how to upload the assignment, as well as to leave a model of student expectations. Parents shared that they appreciated the example to model their children’s work after. Miss G noticed that students found similar items as in her example, such as common kitchen items. Half of the students created their video response using the same wording as Miss G. Students modeled their oral response by sharing the letter, the Fundations picture cue, the sound the letter makes, and the item they found.

Practicing Digital Literacy
Because online learning requires students to use many facets of technology, Miss G also had her students create a list of items that start with each letter, then find images online to match the items. This allowed students to learn how to use Google and copy and paste functions. Students could also take pictures of the tangible items in their home. This enabled students to use the camera on a device, upload images into a document, and organize the images on their recording sheet.

Having a Growth Mind-Set and Being Creative
Miss G used the pandemic as a time to challenge herself to learn new skills as a teacher. Instead of simply assigning an online assessment, she integrated student interests in digital literacy. For example, one student had his mom film him running around the backyard to find his items. He found them in alphabetical order, but when he thought garage began with j, his mom instructed him to sound out the word, and he was then able to correct himself. In videos, Miss G observed how students were applying their phonics skills to the activity. Scavenger hunts do not need to be finding tangible items; Miss G also encouraged students to look in a book to find words that start with each letter of the alphabet. Searching through a text could focus on character traits, finding adjectives or other parts of speech, and so forth.

Documenting Student Experience
Miss G invited students to write about their experience in completing the scavenger hunt, including who helped, complications they encountered, and funny moments. One student shared, “I liked the activity because I liked the things I found around the house.” Students could also video record themselves finding the items to show their thinking process as they sorted through their ideas of what should represent each letter and why they chose those items. When looking at her dinosaur toy, one little girl shared, “This toy reminds me that me and my sister play together, so I have to put it on my list.” This is a good opportunity to help students expand their vocabulary by building on personal experiences and choosing descriptive words for items.
Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed how we teach and how students learn. Without many choices or much time to adjust, teachers had to be creative to work with parents in support of their young children's literacy learning. An ABC scavenger hunt evidently helps engage students in studying word knowledge and other literacy skills while bridging home and school. Parents appreciated the interactive ABC scavenger hunt because it allowed their children to step away from technology: "I think this activity was beneficial because it takes away from all the screen time during Cyber School and doing something hands-on but away from the computer.” As Pushor (2012) stated, “When educators...attend to parent engagement off the school landscape as well, there is the possibility to create a new script of school” (p. 471).

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