

October 2020

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Kristin M. Scherkenbach

Cross Creek Charter Academy, 11.kscherkenbach@nhaschools.com

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Recommended Citation

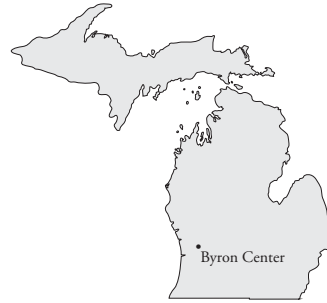
Scherkenbach, Kristin M. (2020) "An Educator's Response to Michigan's Stay at Home Order," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 53: Iss. 1, Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol53/iss1/8>

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An Educator's Response to Michigan's Stay at Home Order

by Kristin Scherkenbach



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Abstract

This article examines the educational impact of the stay-at-home order issued in the spring of 2020. It explores methods the author used to connect with students during this time, such as YouTube videos, book drop offs, parent education PowerPoints, and online teaching. It concludes with the understanding that a passion for literacy can be ignited in students even in challenging situations.

Keywords: Virtual learning, Reading instruction, Parent Education

The Beginning of it All

We still had so much planned. We were in the middle of March book madness, we were eagerly planning our first ever literacy night, and we were looking forward to upcoming authors' visits. I was spending my days working with my first, second, and third graders, hoping and praying that their reading would improve so they would be ready for the following grade. We had so much work yet to do.

Thursday night, March 12, I was lying in bed trying to sleep while my husband was watching the news. Several times he nudged me, trying to inform me of our governor's announcements. I grumpily told him not to bother me and rolled over back to sleep. I need my sleep,

I thought. The next day was Friday the 13th, a full moon, and heavens knows what kind of mayhem that would bring. I was awoken to a text message the next morning informing me that we were off school for the next 3 weeks.

Fast forward to today, several weeks after the governor announced that we will not be returning to our school buildings this school year. My heart is heavy. I am disappointed about missed field trips and concerts for my own two children and about all the other events we were eagerly anticipating. Suddenly our spring calendar has been swiped clean. But mostly I am worried for my students. I am worried for their emotional health and their physical well-being. And I am worried about their growth as readers.

My mind has been spinning, trying to think of ways to reach my students. How can I enter their world? How can I connect with them when I cannot physically interact with them? Is there any way to motivate them to continue their work as readers when we are no longer meeting face-to-face?

YouTube Videos

My attempt to connect with my students began when I created a YouTube channel titled "At Home with Mrs. Scherkenbach." I have written blogs in the past, and have

posted pictures on Facebook, but a YouTube channel? It felt so vulnerable. I mustered up the courage to record an introduction to my first and second graders and clicked “share.” Then I recorded a couple of videos to help students practice reading high frequency words. I started receiving feedback from parents, even parents of students I did not work with, who were loving the videos. They gave me the boost to continue. Now, several weeks later, I have recorded numerous word videos, phonics videos, and comprehension videos. Yes, there have been some bloopers along the way. I played one video back and discovered that my son had snuck up behind me and entertained the viewers with his rendition of the floss. And there was the time when a student told me she could not stop laughing when my husband, shirtless, kept appearing in the background. I still feel vulnerable, but teaching children to read while bringing them into my world as a wife and mother has created a new level of authenticity that I could not achieve in the classroom.

Book Drop Offs

The creation of the YouTube channel began very early into our time of quarantine. At the time, I thought we would be back in school once April arrived. When it became clear that would not be the case, I started to think more about my students. I knew that many of them came from homes without many books, or at least without books that were accessible to them as beginning readers. So, I began collecting books. I sent out a plea to my neighbors for book donations. I scrounged my own children's bookshelves for books they had outgrown. And then, to my delight, our principal said we could have a half hour to go into our classrooms and gather what we might need for the weeks ahead. As the building's reading specialist, my classroom is packed to the brim with books. On the day I could reenter the building for that short time, I came with a plan. I listed all the students needing books and started pulling books from my cabinets at a feverish pace. Hundreds of books were piled into the back of my van. I worked quickly because I knew my time was limited, but mostly because I did not want anyone to see me. You guessed it—I did not ask permission to take these books out of my classroom. Many were purchased with school money, so I was just betting on the hope that students would return the

school-owned books in the fall. I told myself that I could always ask for forgiveness later.

Dividing up all those books, packing them into bags, writing notes to all the children, and then driving many miles all around greater Grand Rapids was a ton of work. But it brought me so much joy. The happiness I felt when I saw those sweet faces smiling at me through living room windows, when I read the thank you notes, and when I saw pictures and videos of the children reading the books, made it all worth it.

Parent Education

Many of my students were now equipped with a large library of books to use, and they had my practice videos to watch, but what about parents? I was attempting to homeschool my own children and was quickly realizing what a struggle that can be, especially when also trying to juggle the demands of a job. I am a teacher with over 20 years in education and have children who are typical learners. What about the parents of my students—loving parents who want what is best for their children but who have been suddenly thrown into the role of teacher, trying to teach a child who is not reading at grade level. How are they going to know what to prioritize in order to help their child progress in reading? Are these children going to be able to complete the reading assignments their teachers are giving them, or will parents have to figure out how to adapt the work? All these questions kept swirling around in my mind. I held one live Zoom meeting with a small number of parents, but I knew I needed to reach more. I thought through all I had learned during my study of how children learn to read, thought about resources that may be available to parents at home, and gave special consideration to the reality of trying to juggle working from home with homeschooling several children. And from all this thinking, my PowerPoint presentation was born.

I created a PowerPoint to educate parents on how to best help their young children progress as readers. I narrated the PowerPoint and then shared it with all the parents in the school. Like the videos, the PowerPoint was not perfect. I heard some dishes clanking around in the background. I stumbled over some words. And even

after it was shared with all parents, the feedback was negligible. But the thinking that went into the creation of that PowerPoint—thinking about what is essential for children when learning to read—will be with me forever. Never have I sat down and thought about all the components that go into a child's reading growth in such depth. Never before had I stripped down the process of learning to read to its bare essentials. All that thinking will help me become a better reading teacher when we return to our building again.

Online Lessons

As the weeks passed, I fought the idea of conducting virtual reading lessons. I did not think it could work. I could not imagine trying to teach a small group of young readers who were not directly in front of me. And the biggest wild card of all was my own children. I was worried they would come running up in the middle of a lesson with some urgent problem that needed immediate attention. It all seemed impossible. But as the weeks passed, I slowly accepted that I needed to give it a try. How could I know how my students were progressing without hearing them read? How could I record more YouTube videos if I did not know what my students currently needed? And the biggest reason, of course, was that I missed seeing those precious faces. The day for the first lesson arrived and I felt very prepared. My own children were sufficiently threatened to not interrupt, my lesson was well thought out and planned, and all of my materials were close at hand. I was ready. I sent out the link, waited for the children to join, and watched my screen fill up with those sweet faces. But then my chat box started to fill with messages from parents: "We can't hear you," "Your face is frozen," "We hate Google Meet. Just switch to Zoom!" My worst nightmare had come true. I was talking, louder and louder all the time, but no one could hear me. Everyone started talking to each other, but no one paid any attention to me. I finally ended the call, emailed my apologies to the parents, and burst into tears. In that moment, I hated the quarantine more than I ever had. I wanted everything to just go back to normal. I was sick of being stuck at home. Sick of not seeing my students. Sick of trying to figure out new technology. Sick of homeschooling my children. Just sick of it all.

Conclusion

Thankfully, that is not the end of the story. I figured out a way to make virtual teaching work. Using my husband's office when I was teaching was a lifesaver, along with doing more teaching in the form of videos. Students began setting up appointments with me, joining sessions early, and staying on sessions longer just to be able to read to me. I was opened up to the lives of my students in a way that had never been possible before. Watching a child proudly read a well-loved book to me in the comfort of his living room with his favorite stuffed animal and blanket by his side created a warm, intimate experience that could never be replicated in the classroom. Hearing a mother lovingly help her child figure out a challenging word from her book touched my heart in a way that no parent-teacher conference has ever done. And I learned some important lessons along the way. Human beings are resilient creatures. I love my job. And when the passion and desire are strong enough, it is never impossible to open a child up to the joy and wonder of reading.

Author Biography

Kristin Scherkenbach is an Academic Specialist at Cross Creek Charter Academy in Byron Center, Michigan. She works as a reading interventionist for students in grades K-5 and also spends part of her time as a literacy coach.

