

# At the Well: The Miracle of Special Learning Moments

*Jo Anne Noble, Reading Recovery Teacher Leader, Charleston, South Carolina*



*Author Jo Anne Noble works with a student, looking for one of those at-the-well learning moments.*

This year marks my 15th year as a Reading Recovery teacher leader. As I look back over these years, I consider myself most fortunate to have been associated with the Reading Recovery network of university trainers, fellow teacher leaders, and Reading Recovery teachers. I have learned much from these teachers as we have puzzled over the confusions of particular children. Over the years, I often have used one particular analogy to describe the breakthroughs we make so commonly with Reading Recovery children. With Noel Jones's permission to use "my own experience with various paths that children may take in the process of becoming literate" (Jones, 2000), I will share a personal theory I call *at-the-well experiences*.

Those of us old enough to remember the movie *The Miracle Worker* starring Ann Bancroft as the teacher Anne Sullivan and Patty Duke as her young student Helen Keller, will surely recall the powerful scene at the well. (If you are not old enough to remember, go to the classics section of the video store and get it soon.) In the scene at the well, Anne Sullivan spelled *water* into Helen's palm one letter at a time, and Helen made the cognitive connection between the refreshing water flowing over her hands and the signs being spelled in her hand, motions she had previously only mimicked without linking them to the world about her. At that moment, the door that blocked Helen's communication with a dark and silent world was opened. Helen ran frantically around the yard and house demanding that

her teacher demonstrate again the motions to represent her doll, herself, her family, and her dog. Anne Sullivan was moved to tears (as we were) by the knowledge that she had succeeded in giving Helen the key to that door. Helen's grateful mother, who initially had opposed the teacher's techniques, realized Anne Sullivan had given her daughter the language needed to communicate with her world. That world would be different for Helen from that time forward. She still had an incredible amount to learn, but Helen had made that all-important link—that first step.

Later, Helen Keller (1954) would write of the experience

We walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word *water*; first slowly and then rapidly... *w-a-t-e-r*. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that "*w-a-t-e-r*" meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That liv-

ing word awakened my soul,  
gave it light, hope, joy, set it  
free! There were barriers still, it  
is true, but barriers that could  
in time be swept away (p. 36).

This quote reveals that Helen possessed a level of understanding about literacy that escapes many people today. Her literacy learning began with just mimicking letters and words. She realized the importance of those words and letters and became interested in learning more only when the word *w-a-t-e-r* held meaning and allowed her to communicate.

What teacher among us does not long for such a moment? I believe that, in fact, Reading Recovery teachers experience such moments as we teach to unblock confusions about print and open the door of literacy for our students. Hollywood may not recognize those moments, but we should. We must recognize the at-the-well experiences our students need in order to be strategic readers and writers. Like Helen, our students must learn that reading is more than mimicking (or memorizing) and must learn how to use the words and letters we teach in order to make sense of their world, to get their needs met, and to communicate with family, friends, and the outside world.

Early last school year, I made a school visit to a teacher-in-training. The teacher expressed concern about one student's writing. The student's writing vocabulary was lower than the teacher's other students, and his letter formation was poor. As we looked over the child's writing book, I could see that he was recording messages using some high-frequency words, recording sounds in unknown words, and leaving spaces between words. As I turned back to his results on the

Observation Survey, I reminded the teacher that at the beginning of the year on the Hearing Sounds in Words task of the Observation Survey, the student had simply strung letters together to record words. While there was more learning to be done, the child had made tremendous leaps in his knowledge. The teacher realized the little miracles that had taken place. I shared my at-the-well theory—the mystery of printed language had been revealed. In just 3 weeks, this young student had three important revelations about printed language. The child had learned that

- print is speech written down,
- words are written in consistent ways, and
- sounds of spoken words are represented by letters.

As the student's Reading Recovery sessions continued, he would experience another important moment at the well. He would learn that

- others' speech, therefore their writing, may be different from your own.

In this article, I discuss more about these four learning experiences and highlight early Reading Recovery procedures that bring children to the well of literacy. I begin with learning about words and letters, but this does not indicate that this learning should come first or hold greater importance. Experiences leading students to these four understandings should be occurring simultaneously in early Reading Recovery sessions and need to begin with the first sessions.

At-the-well experiences are likely to occur during the period called Roaming Around the Known sessions as teachers and students share literacy events. Clay (1993) suggests that

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**Early in the process of acquiring literacy, the student must discover that words are written in consistent ways. The student must discover for example, that the letters *t-h-e* are always the word *the*, in any location, any context.**

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Reading Recovery teachers not introduce new items of learning but encourage flexibility, asking the child to use “the same knowledge in different ways” (p. 13). In this unpressured situation, the child may “discover responses that he did not think he knew” and “observe new relationships” (p. 13). These early literacy activities centered on known items allow at-the-well experiences that set the stage for strategic learning. Having an intention of what the child needs to learn, Reading Recovery teachers make plans to achieve the goal (Jones, 2000). Using the Observation Survey, I plan roaming activities to foster well experiences.

Early in the process of acquiring literacy, the student must discover that words are written in consistent ways. The student must discover, for example, that the letters *t-h-e* are always the word *the*, in any location, any context. Therefore, I select books containing simple high-frequency words I expect to be easy for a student to learn—words made up of some known letters or sounds—and I arrange for repetitive experiences with the word. One former student recognized only seven letters on the Letter Identification task and most were of little help—*Oo, Xx,*

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*I, e, and R.* Clay suggests that the child who knows few letters has probably taken a passive approach to print. As this student entered first grade, it was time to take a more active approach. I began with books with the structure, “I see...” and would ask her to find the word with *ee*. This was an easy task for her. We wrote books following the “I see...” pattern and the word *see* was soon known. Then I chose other books with the word *see*—books with “See the...” and “I can see...” patterns—asking her to locate the known word. With that humble beginning my student learned the concept of a word, the constancy of words, and more.

Next, I planned literacy activities to enable the student to use the knowledge of that single word *see* flexibly and strategically. I asked her to build the word *see* with magnetic letters, and she learned the concept of letter and word. I encouraged the student to write texts using the word, and she learned that what she knew in reading could be used in writing and vice versa. I prompted her to point and to locate *see* as she read, to establish a foothold in print for self-monitoring. I made sure that I chose books with

good spacing, and I made sure appropriate space was left between words in texts we wrote together. This aided in her visual location of words. Locating words with the eye is critical. Clay (1991) states, “As long as the child cannot locate the word he is saying in the line of print he will remain a non-reader” (p. 166).

All this learning took place before I introduced new items of learning. For this student, the first new item I chose was the letter-sound association for the letter *s*. Clay suggests that to make learning easy, we should start with letters the child can already identify, then add easy-to-see letters. Although children sometimes confuse the sound of *s* with *c*, I chose *s* because it is easy to see, and it is part of the word *see* that had become known. Further, the student could form the letter easily in her last name, and it was the initial letter of her older sister’s name. So, in the letter identification part of early lessons, I introduced the letter book for *s*, reminding the student that these words began like *see*. I selected new books with words beginning with *s* and asked her to predict what she heard at the beginning and then locate the word. The letter-sound correspondence was easy to learn. It was only one letter, but it allowed her to discover that letters represent sounds and the same sounds occur in different words. She would learn to use this knowledge to monitor her reading and attempt to write unknown words. It was another at-the-well experience.

While working with our most challenging students, we should not overlook the importance of learning these first words and letters. Clay (1991) suggests that this early learning will be slow, but it is this foundation that makes acceleration possible:

The first networks of related information that cluster around a printed word—the spoken word, some of its letters, how you say it, what it looks like in capital or small letters—these networks form slowly but that is because, as well as learning the word, the brain is also learning how to build such information systems in print (p. 100).

The child’s earliest attempts at writing must begin from the known. Clay (1998) states, “The very foundation of literacy learning lies in the language the child has already constructed” (p. 2). When we allow students to record their own language in their early attempts to write, they will discover early that print is speech written down, that what they know about speaking will help them to predict text, and that they can monitor their reading by using language cues. Teachers are frequently hesitant to allow students to record their non-standard language and are tempted to edit a child’s message. While it must be our ultimate goal for our students to read and write standard English, we need to recognize that we cannot teach everything the child eventually must learn immediately, and so we need to set learning priorities. Clay (1993) counsels that during the acquisition stage of writing, a child’s composing is “at a delicate stage of formation and is thrown by interference of any kind” (p. 29).

I witnessed an example of this on a school visit. A child offered a sentence which began with “I been...”. His teacher corrected, “You can’t say ‘I been.’” He seemed quite confused. Not only had he just said, “I been,” but he had probably heard it said many times by others. The student must have wondered how his teacher,

who was supposed to be teaching him, did not know that. After several attempts, the teacher got a sentence that was acceptable grammatically, but that sentence was very simple and offered fewer opportunities for learning about composing a message and recording it with words and letters.

Set your priorities. First, it is hard to explain to a 6-year-old why you consider your wording of his message superior to his! Secondly, you do not want to discourage his efforts to write. Ferreiro and Tebersky (1979) caution, "Our efforts should never make him reluctant to offer up his ungrammatical but expressive attempts to construct sentences" (p. 261). Like Helen, we need to realize that while there is still an incredible amount to be learned, we must not overlook the miracle of these first steps. Clay (2001) asserts, "If we harness the established power of children's oral language to literacy learning from the beginning, so that literacy knowledge and oral language processing power move forward together, linked and patterned from the start, that will surely be more powerful" (p. 95).

Every Reading Recovery student—from the student learning English as a second language, to the speaker of nonstandard English, and even the standard English speaker—has much more to learn about the structure of language. As Reading Recovery teachers introduce books, we give the students opportunities to hear new words and structures, adding to their knowledge of how meaning is expressed in various ways using alternative language structures. As they read, our students learn that some people say "tidy up" instead of "clean up" and that some books use *replied* instead of *said*. They learn about pogo sticks and

vintage cars, giant wetas and fantails, about life in the country or city, life in other countries, or fantasy worlds. We promote our students' development towards mature language as we engage in conversation about books.

I recall a former African-American student who encountered an unusual language structure while reading. I explained what it meant using words I expected the student might use. The student asked, "Is that how White people say that?" The question revealed that the child had the at-the-well experience that others' speech, and therefore their language, may be different from hers. I answered that it was the way that these White people (the characters in the book) said it, but that I did not use that expression, that I was likely to use the same one the student used. Maybe my answer revealed more about language to the student: that all of us express ourselves in different ways. Maybe in a small way, it encouraged the student to continue seeking to add to knowledge about people, language, and books.

I offer my theory to encourage you to plan for, watch for, and celebrate these at-the-well discoveries for the children you teach. And if Hollywood should recognize the miracles I have witnessed with teachers and students and decide to tell the story, I want Meg Ryan to play me.

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## About the Author



**Jo Anne Noble** is a teacher leader in Charleston, South Carolina. She has served as secretary of RRCNA and as a representative on the South Carolina Reading Recovery Advisory Council, and she has presented at numerous conferences. She can be contacted at Mitchell Elementary, 2 Perry Street, Charleston, SC 29403 or at (843) 724-7262.

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