

Promising Practices and Collaborative Discussions: Supporting Children's Letter Knowledge and Literacy Success

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All names are pseudonyms.

In many school districts, Reading Recovery® teacher leaders and teachers serve as curriculum leaders and literacy coaches. These leadership roles consist of serving on school literacy teams, collaboratively reviewing data, monitoring the progress of children who may be at risk for literacy failure, and serving as a resource to classroom teachers (Askew, Pinnell, & Scharer, 2014). In this comprehensive approach to literacy, Reading Recovery professionals and classroom teachers are perfectly poised to observe individual children's progress and adjust their teaching in response to each learner and as informed by Clay's literacy processing theory (Stouffer, 2016). Likewise, Reading Recovery educators can learn more from classroom teachers about grade-level expectations and appropriately support children's successful experiences in the classroom before, during, and following Reading Recovery. The ultimate goal is to promise a successful literacy outcome for every young learner.

One approach is to begin by carefully examining the Observation Survey (Clay, 2019) results for groups of children. As part of the school team, Reading Recovery and classroom educators can work together to discern what items of knowledge children control and which of these items may need more focused attention to support children's overall growth in literacy. Children's letter knowledge is one of those items worth examining and presents a useful starting point for this collaborative work. This can be a particularly powerful approach to the prevention of later literacy difficulties if begun early when Reading Recovery teachers and teachers of young children plan for children's earliest experiences with reading and writing.

Control over letter knowledge, or identifying letters and linking them with their corresponding sounds, is an important achievement for young learners. Yet, letter knowledge must also be applied effectively while reading and writing for real purposes (Byington & Kim, 2017).

The following brief scenario shows several kindergarten children as they enter the classroom, hang up their coats, and sign in. They gather around the posted cafeteria menu, eagerly discussing their lunch options.

Lana: Oh, good. I'm having tacos for lunch today.

Peyton: You can't have tacos today. It's pizza day!

Lana: Nuh-ah, tacos.

Peyton: See, it says *pizza*—*P* (pointing to the first letter of "pizza")

Paul: That's right. It's a *P* for pizza, just like my name.

Lana: Oh, yeah. *Paul* and *pizza* start with *P* (glancing at the names chart). Oh, and *Peyton* too!

Notice how the children in this setting make links among letters, sounds, and words and consider how this kind of informal observation can inform teachers' awareness of each child's current control of letter knowledge and help them plan literacy activities that foster their development as readers and writers. Building on children's strengths early can go a long way toward advancing literacy learning and preventing potential learning difficulties.

In this article we look at strong literacy teaching and learning practices in a kindergarten classroom that highlight how Reading Recovery teachers and classroom teachers can work collaboratively to optimize children's letter knowledge as they engage joyfully with authentic texts in writing and reading. We provide an overview of the research on the critical nature of letter knowledge and the complexities of letter learning. We also include suggestions for documenting children's accumulating letter knowledge and practical ideas for teaching letters that build on each child's unique stores of knowledge and support their independent use of letters. These suggestions include identifying, naming, and writing letters; discriminating among visually similar letters; linking sounds to letters; and using letter knowledge to read and write texts.

Examples from Ms. Comer's child-centered kindergarten classroom reveal how a teacher can appropriately support and advance young children's letter knowledge and overall literacy development both in individual and group contexts. Although the scenarios presented in this article are from a kindergarten classroom, many of the promising practices and collaborative discussions among educators can also apply to pre-K and first-grade settings. Opportunities to "Pause and Discuss" are embedded throughout this article to foster discussion among Reading Recovery and classroom teachers in support of their collaborative efforts to enhance letter learning on behalf of their young literacy learners.

The Importance of Letter Knowledge: What the Research Tells Us

Researchers have determined letter knowledge is essential to developing children's reading and writing skills. To advance their literacy skills, children need to recognize, name, and form letters (52 in English with 40 distinct shapes), understand the concept of *letter*, distinguish letters from other symbols, and link sounds with letters and letter patterns, all while scanning print from left to right (Clay, 2015).

Children's letter knowledge develops at different rates during early childhood, and this is expected. Variations in knowledge of letters (names, formations, and sounds) are due to each individual child's distinctive experiences with letters and literacy, and unique opportunities to learn (Doyle, 2014). Because knowledge of letters and sounds is quite varied upon entry to school, teachers must accommodate for this diversity and capitalize on the strengths each child brings to letter learning. However, some developmental patterns have been observed. Most young children learn the uppercase letters before the lowercase letters with A, B, O, and X known by many 4-year olds (Justice, Pence, Bowles, & Wiggins, 2006). Also, most children recognize letters at the beginning and end of the alphabet before those occurring in the middle (McBride-Chang, 1999). According to Jones and Reutzel (2012), other influences on children's letter learning include

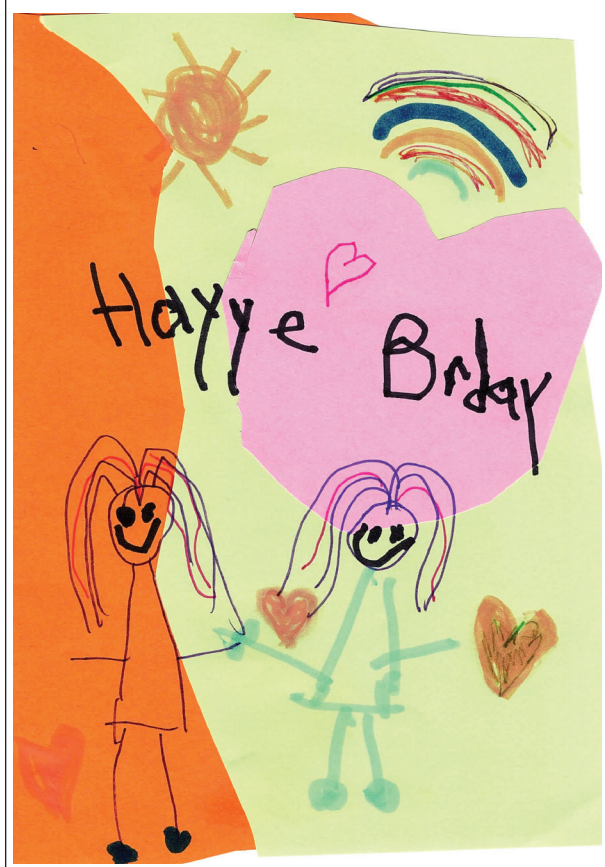
- the presence of the letter in the child's name,
- the frequency of the letter's appearance in print,

- the presence of the letter sound in the letter name (/t/ in the letter name Tt), and
- the points in time at which children typically learn to pronounce the sound represented by a certain letter.

Letter learning has many facets, yet most children discover a great deal about letters through their everyday explorations of print. Letter learning includes recognizing the letter-forms with attention to each letter's shape and orientation (e.g., b/d, u/n, M/W) and distinguishing between the small traits that differentiate visually similar letters (e.g., h/n, f/t, w/v, E/F) (Clay, 1975, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2015; Gibson & Levin, 1985). Writing letters may challenge some children (Clay, 2016), and other children may incorrectly link some letter names and their sounds e.g., Q has the sound /k/, W has the sound /d/ (Block & Duke, 2015). When teachers teach about letters, children do indeed learn letters; however, much less is known about *how* the teaching should effectively and efficiently proceed (Piasta & Wagner, 2010).

Unfortunately, some approaches to teaching letters can result in children spending inordinate amounts of time on letters they already know. Other approaches expose children to letters in isolation slowly, week by week, disconnected from opportunities to apply their letter knowledge in the context of authentic reading and writing. Additionally, sometimes the teaching results in children forgetting the letters they had learned previously. Teaching and learning about the alphabet, although it seems straightforward to laypersons, is actually quite complex (Reutzel, 2015).

Though very little is known about the particular teaching approaches that are most effective in supporting young children's letter knowledge, we do know that one-size-fits-all, scripted, fixed-sequence approaches limit letter-learning (McKay & Teale, 2015). In contrast, working deliberately in meaningful ways that account for children's existing letter knowledge can optimally support their literacy development (Kaye & Lose 2015, 2019; McKay & Teale, 2015; Pinnell & Fountas, 2011; Scharer, 2019; Stahl, 2014). In this way, children can extend their letter knowledge while reading and writing engaging texts with teacher support.

Figure 1. Amna's Birthday Card for Peyton

Amna: I said it really slow like hhhaaaaapy (smoothly articulating *happy*, sweeping her finger under the word, left to right).

Ms. Comer: (puzzled) Listen while I say it slowly and run my finger under the letters (sweeping her finger left-to-right as she says /hap/, forcefully enunciating /p/ with her finger paused under the two y's). Can you hear /p/? Happy.

Amna: Yes, and I put *two p's* (pointing to the two y's) because I seen how it looks before. Hap-pee-eee. Then I put *e* at the end.

Ms. Comer recognizes some strengths in Amna's writing in addition to the unusual substitution of y for p. She quickly jots some notes to document Amna's knowledge and skills (see Figure 2).

The readers may have noted that Amna is developing several ways to work out new words in writing: She can say a word slowly to analyze the sounds; she can use the class names chart as a resource; and she is developing a visual memory for how words look. She has also learned to write her name and a few high-frequency words independently. Amna demonstrates good spatial and directional concepts, is using mostly lowercase letters in her writing, and is beginning to use punctuation appropriately.

Learning About Letters During Writing

Ms. Comer provides her kindergarteners many opportunities for independent writing on self-selected topics across the school day. As Ms. Comer walks past the table at which Amna is working, she notices Amna has pieced together some brightly colored paper scraps to fashion a card (see Figure 1). Amna waves her over, whispering excitedly, "Ms. Comer, I'm making a birthday card for Peyton! It's a surprise!"

Ms. Comer: Oh, Amna! You're such a thoughtful friend. I know Peyton will love getting your card. Will you read it to me?

Amna: (pointing under the words) Happy birthday, Peyton. I love you. Love your friend Amna. Guess what? I found Peyton's name on our Names Chart, and I wrote it here (pointing to *Peyton*).

Ms. Comer: That was a good idea. How did you figure out *happy birthday*? (wondering about the unusual spelling of *happy*)

Figure 2. Ms. Comer's Documentation About Amna's Writing

Amna 3/25

- message of 3 sentences (card)
- punctuation (!)
- used Names Chart as resource
- says words slowly & records consonants, some vowels
- memory for how words look (hayye for happy)
- Writes y for p. Work on name & formation: y, p

Amna's substitution of *y* for *p* is intriguing. She clearly articulated /p/ in *happy*, and she *said* she wrote 2 *p*'s; however, she actually wrote two *y*'s. Ms. Comer hypothesizes that Amna knows the sound /p/ is represented with the letter *named* *P* but that she confuses the *symbol* for *p*, representing it as *y*. Writing the *P* in Peyton was easier because it was copied. Perhaps Peyton's *P* will be a good link to help Amna identify and write the letter *P* in the future.

Because this is personal correspondence between two friends, Ms. Comer appropriately decides not to direct Amna to use conventional spelling. She wants to honor Amna's efforts and send the message that meaningful communication is valued above accuracy.

Pause and Discuss

- What do you see as Amna's strengths?
- How might you use or adapt Ms. Comer's note taking method to make it useful in your classroom?
- Pull recent writing samples for children who exhibit unconventional or puzzling writing patterns. Take a few minutes to discuss the students' strengths as well as the unusual patterns. What do these writing patterns reveal, and how might you begin to address them in the kindergarten classroom? In the first-grade classroom?

Learning How to Form a Letter

The next day, Ms. Comer spends a few minutes helping Amna learn the letter *p*. She gathers several magnetic letters including *P* and *p*, a tray of sand, a chart with known color words *pink* and *purple*, name cards for *Peyton* and *Paul*, and a small slate. She puts the materials on a table by the white board and asks Amna to join her.

Ms. Comer: Yesterday you made that lovely card for Peyton and wrote her name on it. Do you see Peyton's name on the table?

Amna: Here it is. (selecting the name card)

Ms. Comer: Let's say Peyton's name a couple of times and listen carefully to the first sound.

Amna and Ms. Comer:
(in unison) Peyton, Peyton

Ms. Comer: Watch my lips as I say it, Peyton (emphasizing /p/). What do you hear at the beginning?

Amna: /p/. It's a *P*.

Ms. Comer: Yes, and *here* is the letter *P* in her name. (pointing to the *P*)

Amna: That's the *P*? /p/, /p/ Peyton. (as if checking)

Ms. Comer: And here is Paul's name. Say it slowly and listen for the sound of *P*.

Amna: Paul /p/, /p/, Paul. *Paul* starts like *Peyton*. And *pink* and *purple* too!

Ms. Comer: Yes, do you hear /p/ at the beginning?

Amna: Pink, purple, yep.

Ms. Comer: Look, *here* is the letter *p* at the beginning of *pink* and *purple*. (pointing to the *p* at the beginning of each word)

Amna: And, *Paul* and *Peyton* start with *P*.

Ms. Comer: I'll show you how to make a *p*. Watch me. (slowly writes a large *p*, modulating her voice in coordination with the movements that describe how to form the letter *p*)
Dooowwn, uuup, around. That's *p*.

Amna: That's *p*.

Ms. Comer: Let's write *p* together. (prepares to guide Amna's hand)

Amna and Ms. Comer:
Dooowwwwn, uuup, around (coordinating the movement with the words)

Amna continues writing *p* using a variety of media and surfaces (e.g., sand tray, white board, chalk on the slate), working toward fluent formation. As she practices, Ms. Comer fades her verbal directions and lets Amna's words guide her own movements.

Learning to Rapidly Differentiate Letters

With the experience of forming and naming *p* fresh in Amna's mind, Ms. Comer and Amna proceed to the magnetic white board for a letter sorting activity. She wants to ensure that Amna can easily and quickly differentiate *p* from other letters, just as she would need to do when reading connected text.

Approximately 20 colorful lowercase magnetic letters are arranged at Amna's eye level on the white board (see Figure 3). In addition to the *p*'s, which are newly learned, are the letters *m*, *o*, *l*, *c*, and *n*, which she knows quite well. Ms. Comer purposely avoids letters that might be confused with *p* at this point in Amna's learning, such as *b*, *d*, *q*, and *y*.

Ms. Comer invites Amna to look at the letters on the board (see Figure 4). Amna begins to name the letters, "m, n, l." Ms. Comer interjects, "Yes, you're saying their names. Now, how could you sort them into two groups?" (She knows that Amna has previously sorted her known letters by features such as short/tall, curves/straight lines, humps/no humps, etc.) Amna quickly arranges the letters into two groups: *p*, *l*, *m*, and *n* in the first group; *o* and *c* in the second group and explains, "See, these have sticks, and the other ones just have curves."

Figure 3. Ms. Comer's Arrangement of Letters on White Board



Figure 4. Amna's Arrangement of Letters on White Board



This and additional brief activities for working with letters in isolation help expand children's letter knowledge and support them in rapidly discriminating among easily confused letters. Ultimately, increasing one's knowledge about letters, letter formation, and links to sound is useful to all young learners as they advance their overall literacy development.

Pause and Discuss

- Do you have any students who have difficulty forming letters or discriminating among visually similar letters?
- Role-play teaching one of the letters, incorporating the verbal directions, visual model, and movement to enhance letter formation. For specific directions, see Clay (2016) *Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals* (2nd ed.), pp. 64–65.
- Discuss the importance of fostering rapid visual discrimination of letters. Work together to plan a letter sort for a child whose discrimination of letters is slow.

Learning About Letters During the Introduction to a New Story

Ms. Comer invites Lana, Samir, Isaac, and Andre to a small table and begins a guided reading lesson by introducing them to their new book, *Danny and the Big Race* (Coulton, 2012). "In this story, four dogs including Danny run in a race. Each dog wears a different color scarf around its neck. I wonder who will win the race?"

Together, they look at the cover and the photos that show each dog wearing a different colored scarf. The students browse the book's pictures, share animated comments about the characters, and predict which dog will win. Ms. Comer invites the children to rehearse the language structure that is repeated on several pages and asks them to identify the initial letter heard first in two new words.

Ms. Comer: (directing students to page 4) On each page they tell us about a dog, a runner.
Here comes the red runner. You say it.

All: Here comes the red runner.

Ms. Comer: And what letter would you see first in *comes*?

All but Samir: (responding simultaneously) *C*.

Samir: (at the same time as the others) *S*. (pauses)
I mean *C*.

Ms. Comer: Yes, *c*. Put your finger under *comes*.

All: (pointing beneath *comes*)

Ms. Comer: Well done. You found *comes*. (notes Samir's *S* response)

Isaac: He's got a red scarf on his neck.

Ms. Comer: That's because he's the red runner. And what letter would we see first in *runner*? (emphasizing /r/)

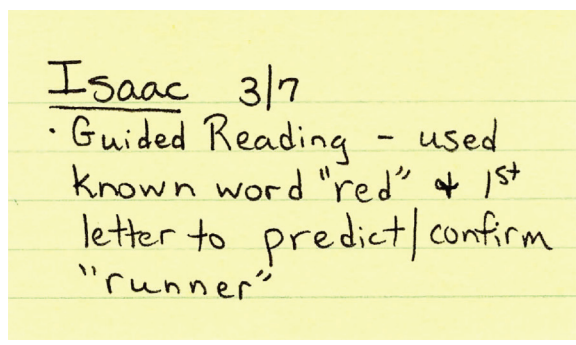
All: *R*.

Ms. Comer: Yes. Put your finger under *runner*.

Isaac: This one says *red*, so this must be *runner*. (pointing beneath each word to make the distinction)

Ms. Comer notes Isaac's attention to the initial letter in *red* and *runner* and his ingenuity in using a known word (*red*) to confirm that the new word in the text was indeed *runner* (see Figure 5). She refrains from commenting on Samir's response, aware that he has not yet related either the hard sound of *c* (*comes*) or the soft sound of *c* (*city*) to the letter *c*. Ms. Comer wonders: Does Samir's first response, "*S*," indicate a confusion between the letter name *C* and the initial sound /s/ heard when pronouncing the letter's name? Or, is it possible that he attended to the *final* sound in *comes* rather than the *initial* sound in the word? Ms. Comer tentatively concludes that the answer

Figure 5. Ms. Comer's Notes About Isaac's Reading



Isaac 3/7

- Guided Reading - used known word "red" + 1st letter to predict/confirm "runner"

to the first question is yes, because Samir previously has not displayed any problem with confusing first and last sounds.

As the story introduction continues, children shift their focus back to the plot and enthusiastically predict the story's outcome. Concurrently, Ms. Comer resolves to build on Isaac's discovery and further explore Samir's understandings about letter names and their links to sounds in words as opportunities arise in the next few days.

Attending to Letter Knowledge During Story Reading

As Ms. Comer listens to the children independently read the text, she wants them to make sense of the story, use their strengths in oral language, and draw on their emerging understandings of letters and sounds. For the learners in this group, attending to the initial sound of words is an appropriate starting point. Ms. Comer knows it is important not to confuse the child with a prompt that is too open ended. Importantly, she must clearly show the child what is meant by her prompting. Her comments and prompts foster children's use of multiple knowledge sources (Clay, 2016):

- *Did your reading make sense?* (meaning-making/ comprehending)
- *Does the word you said begin like the one in the story?* (using the first sound/s and initial letter/s to check on oneself or confirm)
- *Does it look right at the beginning* (pointing to the first letter) *and sound right* (considering oral language and syntax) *to you?*

Ms. Comer focuses on Samir's reading, aware that he has previously shown some *p/b* confusions. On page 6 he reads: "Here comes the yellow runner and here comes the *purple* runner." Responding to his meaningful substitution of *purple* for *blue*, she also asks Samir to check on himself with attention to the visually similar letters:

Ms. Comer: Were you right?

Samir: (without looking at the text) Yes.

Ms. Comer: Not exactly. Your reading *made sense* but something didn't look right at the beginning. (offering encouragement) I think you can fix it. Try reading this again and make sure it also *looks right*.

Samir: (rereads and self-corrects) Here comes the yellow runner and here comes the /b/ *blue* runner.

Ms. Comer decides to highlight Samir's solving process rather than focusing only on the accurate outcome. "Yes, this word (pointing to *blue*) starts like a word you know how to read and write" (showing him *boy*, in the familiar story that the group just read). Samir locates *blue* and observes, "Yep, they both start with *b*." To reinforce his noticing, Ms. Comer writes *boy* and *blue* on a small whiteboard, covering the ends of each word to draw attention to their beginning letters and reminds, "So, when you're

reading, remember to look closely at the words and make everything look right."

Considering Samir's meaningful substitution (*purple/blue*) and noting his possible *p/b* confusion, Ms. Comer plans to revisit Samir's letter chart, recent running records, and her notes to plan additional instruction for discriminating between these two letters (see Figures 6 and 7). Her concise teaching is based on connecting a known word and its initial letter to solve an unknown word. Additionally, her summation reminds Samir that he can always use letter knowledge to check on himself as he reads.

Pause and Discuss

- Notice how the teacher attends to the meaning of the story and the language structures, freeing up the children's ability to attend to visual information as they construct their understanding of the text.
- How do the teacher's introduction to the story and subsequent teaching interactions support children's attention to initial letters and sounds in words?
- Schedule a time to work together to plan a book introduction that will help children draw on meaning, language structure, and visual information (especially the initial letter in the earliest reading levels) as they attempt to read a new book.

Figure 6. Ms. Comer's Notes About Samir's Guided Reading

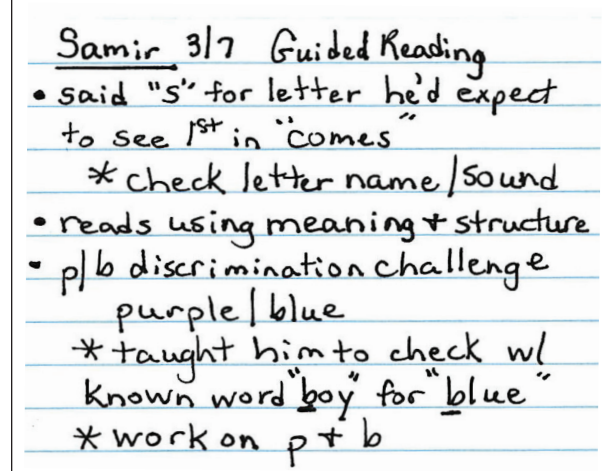


Figure 7. Samir's Letter Chart

Letter Knowledge Record: Samir

Knows Names						
A a	B b	C c	D d	E e	F f	G g
H h	I i	J j	K k	L l	M m	N n
O o	P p	Q q	R r	S s	T t	U u
V v	W w	X x	Y y	Z z		

Associates Letter and Sound						
a	b	c	d	e	f	g
h	i	j	k	l	m	n
o	p	q	r	s	t	u
v	w	x	y	z		

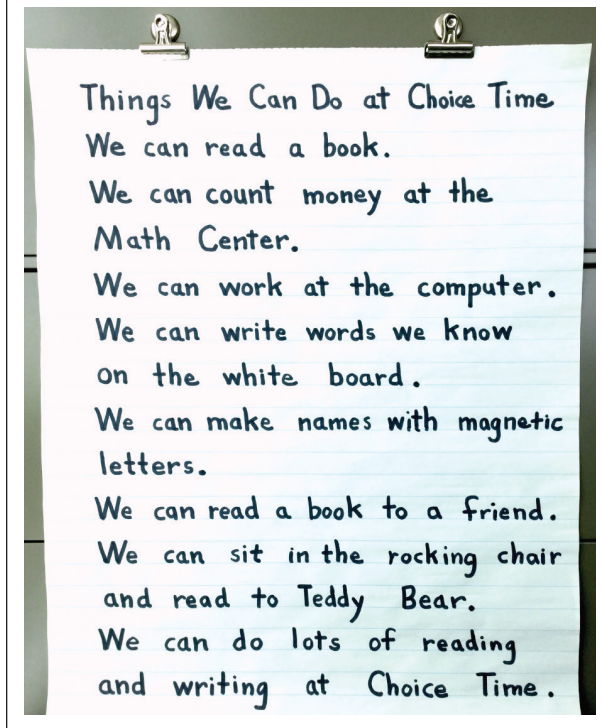
Writes Form						
A a	B b	C c	D d	E e	F f	G g
H h	I i	J j	K k	L l	M m	N n
O o	P p	Q q	R r	S s	T t	U u
V v	W w	X x	Y y	Z z		

Documenting a Child's Emerging Letter Knowledge

Children in this classroom participated in a wide range of daily self-selected reading and writing activities, including rereading familiar texts. Ms. Comer knows that children gravitate toward texts they have composed individually and during interactive writing (Hall, 2014). She makes a point to have many of these texts available for children to revisit across the school day.

In this scenario, Samir and Isaac stand in front of a chart displaying a class-composed text and take turns reading it using a large pointer (see Figure 8).

Figure 8. Class-Composed Text



Samir: Okay, let's read! I'll start. (reading the title)
Things *you*, I mean *we* (correcting his error)
could do at Choice Time. (neglecting to notice his could/can error)

As the children continue reading, Samir substitutes *count* for *can* (line three), corrects his error, and confirms his choice by checking the word wall.

Ms. Comer is pleased that Samir notices the discrepancy between *you* and *we* and that he self-corrects *we*, likely using some letter or word knowledge. She notices that his substitution of *could* for *can* uses meaning, syntax, and the initial letter *c*, which he previously had not linked to its sound /k/. Furthermore, he uses the word wall to confirm his self-correction of *count* for *can*. She believes now may be a good time to capitalize on his emerging knowledge of the letter-sound correspondence for *Cc*. Ms. Comer quickly records her observations of Samir's reading on a sticky note (see Figure 9). She knows that careful record keeping can help her create opportunities that maximize each child's learning.

Linking Words, Letters, and Corresponding Sounds

The next day, Ms. Comer decides to capitalize on Samir's emerging understanding of sound and letter correspondences linked to some known words (*can*, *cat*, /k/, *Cc*). She chooses not to address the soft *c* sound that is less familiar to him at this time. She invites him to add his personal link to the *C* page in his alphabet book (see Figure 10).

Ms. Comer: Let's add a picture to your *C* page. You know several words that start with the sound for the letter *C*. *Cat*, *can*. (pausing to invite additional responses)

Figure 9. Ms. Comer's Notes About Samir's Rereading of Class-Composed Text

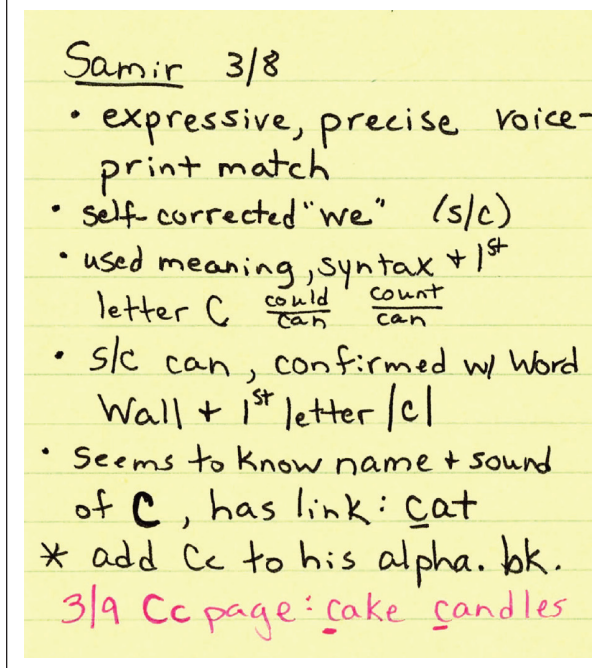
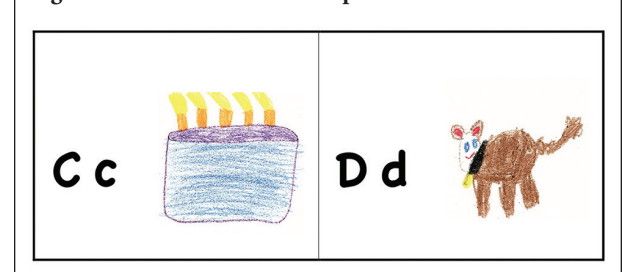


Figure 10. Samir's Personal Alphabet Book



- Samir: I want *candles*! On a birthday cake!
- Ms. Comer: Ok, I'll make the cake, and you can draw the candles.
- Samir: They both start with /c/! *Candles, cake* (proudly adding candles to Ms. Comer's drawing of a cake)

The personal alphabet book becomes a unique record of each child's discoveries about letters, words, and sounds and a valuable resource for learning how to use this knowledge strategically for reading and writing.

Pause and Discuss

- What opportunities do children have in your classroom for learning about words and letters by rereading familiar texts (teacher made, class made, published, etc.)?
- What resources do children have for confirming their letter and word knowledge (word wall, personal alphabet book, class-made dictionary, etc.)?
- In general, how can the Reading Recovery teacher, working as a member of the school team, help prepare students for independence in the classroom, particularly in terms of letter knowledge?

Learning Letters, and So Much More!

Ms. Comer's ultimate goal is to engage, support, and guide her young learners in meaningful literacy experiences to facilitate their development as confident readers and writers. To that end, she seamlessly addresses *all* elements that contribute to successful literacy learning including naming, identifying, and forming letters; making connections among letters, sounds, and words; and engaging with published stories and children's own compositions. The key is to know students as individuals: Understand what they know and how they make connections, and know their interests — both within and beyond traditional literacy activities. This requires observing, documenting, and reflecting on children's learning in a variety of classroom activities to ensure their continued learning.

Within child-centered classrooms that build on children's unique strengths, Ms. Comer and countless numbers of early childhood educators intentionally support and advance children's use of a range of knowledge sources, including letters, for reading and writing development. Classroom teachers working in collaboration with Reading Recovery educators can find inspiration in creating joyful opportunities that advance letter learning and support the goal of literacy for *all* young children.

Authors' note

Practical application of the information presented in this article, selected resources, and relevant artifacts to support Reading Recovery and classroom teachers' collaborative efforts can be found in additional articles by Kaye and Lose (2015, 2019).

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