



The Most Important Words

Lists of “special” words spark preschoolers' interest in reading.

Jane Katch

One day in December, 4-year-old Caleb realized that his favorite word, “Christmas,” and his own name began with a similar sound. He understood that the circular letter, until then part of a mysterious jumble of lines and curves, had a consistent connection with a sound, and it suddenly made sense that these two key words in his life —“Caleb” and “Christmas”—began with the same letter. Later that morning, he took a long card with the letters *C-A-L-E-B* out of his drawer and proudly copied his own *C* onto a list of students waiting to tell a story. Print was beginning to make sense.



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Caleb's excitement over his discovery mirrored my own delight at finding a new way to connect print and meaning for the 4- and 5-year-olds in my class. I had been searching for a context that would integrate consistent information about letter-sound relationships within a framework that would stress the connection between print and meaning. I had read research (Juel, Biancarosa, Coker, & Deffes, 2003) indicating that teaching phonics in a vacuum does not improve reading ability in 1st grade and that a multifaceted approach incorporating instruction in decoding, vocabulary, and comprehension appears to be more effective. In addition, I wanted to fully integrate the lessons about print into a classroom that valued play, stories, and drama.

Recently, however, the increasing pressure on educators to teach students reading skills at a younger age has resulted in teachers presenting more isolated phonics information at a time when many students are unable to absorb it. Kindergartners are being asked to master the phonics skills and the fine motor skills that used to be reserved for 1st grade. The widening gap between boys' and girls' school achievement may be one result of trying to teach skills to students—especially many boys—who may not be developmentally ready.

I remember sitting with my mother as a child while she read me a book. I wanted to know how the print conveyed the meaning of the story. “Where does it tell you ‘The dog came?’” I asked. She did not understand. “It doesn't say that, it says . . .,” she corrected. “But if it *did* say it, where would it be?” I pursued. I wanted to know how the print correlated with the spoken word, but I did not yet have the language to explain my question. Years later, in my classroom, I wanted to answer that question for my students, and I was experimenting with developmentally appropriate ways to connect print with words that students found important.

As a young teacher, I had been inspired by Sylvia Ashton-Warner's work with Maori students in New Zealand. In her book, *Teacher* (1963), Ashton-Warner described the lack of connection between her passionate, impulsive “little ones” and the reading primers she was supposed to

use to teach them. She discovered that students who were stuck on "Come John come. Look John look," quickly learned "Mummy," "Daddy," "kiss," "frightened," and "ghost." Every morning, she asked each student to choose a word that he or she found important and meaningful, and she wrote the word on a piece of cardboard, which then went into a box containing all of the words chosen by that student. The student then reviewed all of his or her words, discarded the unimportant ones, and referred to the remaining "key vocabulary" for reading and writing later in the day.

Over the years, I had tried to replicate Ashton-Warner's methods in my classes. But cards disappeared, I rarely had time for individual discussions with students, and I eventually gave up.

Years later, during a meeting that took place in a classroom, I noticed several lists of words on the wall: short and long vowels, words beginning with "th" and "sh." I had a sudden image of a different kind of list, one that would contain key vocabulary words for the entire class. The next morning, I wrote each student's name on a 3×5 card and taped the names in a horizontal row along the top of my large whiteboard. At our morning meeting, I asked Anna, the day's line leader, to think of a special word for me to write on a blank card and tape underneath her name. I explained that it could be something she loved, hated, or feared.

Anna, a young 4, knew just what I meant. Hugging Happy Kitty, the white stuffed animal she held each morning as she waved goodbye to her mother, she said softly, "Kitty. I love my kitty."

About to write on her card, I paused with a new thought. "K-k-k." I repeated the beginning sound. "What letter could that be?" I asked.

"C!" some students called out.

"K!" others shouted out eagerly. I explained that C and K often have the same sound, and we made lists of words beginning with each letter in two rows on the board.

"Dog!" Caleb offered enthusiastically.

I wrote "dog" in a separate row, not wanting to discourage him. "Dog" is an important word, too," I said, clarifying the connection between his word and our discussion.

The next day, the new line leader had a turn. By the end of the month, each student had chosen a special word. Every morning, we read the growing list together while I pointed with my yardstick to each student's name and the important word below.

We began a second row. "Mommy," Anna told us, pausing only briefly. "I love my mommy."

"Do you want to read both of your important words?" I asked. She knew them both and proudly read, "Kitty, Mommy," to the class.

One day I was sitting at a small lunch table with four 5-year-old girls. I was facing the word lists, but Hannah had her back to them when she started quietly reciting the entire list, in order, to herself.

"How do you know that?" I asked, startled.

"I just do," she shrugged.

I realized that our words had become important to Hannah. I had discovered the elusive link that would make print meaningful for students who had not yet begun to read.

Soon we had a routine. The day's line leader chose a word, told us why it was important, and read his or her vertical list of special words. Because the entire list was now too large to read

every day, the leader chose a horizontal row, which included one word from each student, for us to read in unison. Most students recognized their own words, and several seemed to know the other words as well. Then I presented a quick mini-lesson on some aspect of the new word; usually the students thought of other words beginning with the same sound, and I made a list on the board. I could see their understanding of the connections between the alphabet and the sounds growing quickly.

William's list was all animals: "dog," "tiger," "puppy," and "husky." On his next turn, he suggested the word "dogs," and I pointed out the similarity to the first word that he chose—"dog"—showing how the *S* at the end made it plural.

Some students had a clear theme to their words: Donald's list—"fireman," "fire engine," "fire truck," "ladder truck," "water truck," and "fire"—reflected the same interest as the stories he dictated. Acting out these dictated stories each day was an important activity in the class, and I was glad to see the overlap between Donald's growing word list and the play and stories that occupied his imagination (see *Wally's Stories* [1981], by Vivian Paley, for more information about dictating and acting out stories in the classroom). Others, like Sandra, had a more varied list: "dolphin," "crown," "birthday cake," "ballerina star." I pointed out the space between "birthday" and "cake" and between "ballerina" and "star" to demonstrate spacing between two words.

It was beginning to look as though we were addressing most of the items on my list of reading readiness skills. The special words fascinated students. They would pick up my yardstick and tap the words one by one, just as I did when we read the list each morning, and they copied their words on their pictures when they drew an object from the list.

Students approached the key words differently. "The," Matthew announced when he was line leader. I was pleased to have such a frequently used word on the board but wondered why he chose it. The next time he was line leader, Matthew selected "most." When he chose "important" as his next word, I realized that he was giving us a sentence. After several months, we learned his secret: "The most important thing in the world is atoms and molecules."

One piece of the process eluded me: I wanted the students' key words to connect to the rest of their classroom life. I had hoped the words would come out of their dictated stories, which we acted out each morning. To my surprise, line leaders rarely chose an important word from one of their dictated stories. They seemed to have separate categories for the two activities. So I decided to have the students act out stories using their key words. Each day at quiet time, I wrote the student's key word of the day on the cover of a blank book and asked the student to tell me a story about the word. I wrote the story down, one sentence to a page, in a four-page book that I had constructed. Students could choose to illustrate the book, if they wished, and when they completed it, often the next day, we would act it out.

The importance of the key words immediately increased with the addition of this new activity. "Fairy" was already an interesting word, but after seeing both the illustrations and the dramatization of Kayla's fairy with a broken wing, gently healed after a night's rest, we did not forget it.

Linda's first word was "kitten," and her story, "The Kitten That Came to My Door," was also vivid and memorable:

One of my kittens died. And it was very sad for my mom. And then she got a new one! He came to the front door and my daddy found him. And my daddy loved that kitten.

After we acted out the story, with Linda choosing the role of the dad who discovered the kitten, we had no difficulty remembering the word. The whole group now shared her images about her important word.

Each day after we acted out or read a student's new book, the author proudly put it on our bookshelf. Because students could participate in and enjoy this activity at varying levels of understanding, no one was left out because of a lack of skills. Everyone learned about print and meaning at a level that was appropriate for them. Some learned beginning sounds; others learned to read.

Sharing one another's images of key words and demonstrating the link between the images and the print that represented them was a powerful connection. Atoms and molecules were Matthew's most important things, but being able to share such significant ideas—in print—was important for all of us.

References

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