The first-graders entered the room quietly and with purpose. They rummaged in their desks, pulled out writing logs, each uniquely “loved up” with frayed, worn covers and turned-back pages, and began writing. Soon a timer bell sounded. They pushed their logs into their desks, walked to a miniature wooden house tucked in the corner of the room, and lifted its roof. The house held books. Each child chose one, found a comfortable place, and began reading. When the timer rang again, the students returned the books and took their places, cross-legged, on a wonderfully inviting carpet in the front of the room. Because we were so absorbed with kidwatching (to use Yetta Goodman’s term), we were moderately startled when the teacher appeared, book in hand, to take her place on the wooden rocker positioned on the carpet’s edge.

Sharon Chamberlain begins school with fifteen minutes of uninterrupted sustained silent writing followed by fifteen minutes of uninterrupted sustained silent reading, we entered into our field notes.

Sharon held Sylvester and the Magic Pebble by William Steig for all the children to see. The students, enthralled, made comments and observations about the book’s cover. If they strayed from the point, she gentled them back into reexamining details. She invited predictions, descriptions, and associations.

After this book talk, Sharon wrote three words from the story on the board: perplexed, puzzled, and bewildered. “These will be our spelling words, boys and girls. Listen for these big words when I read.” The students, delighted with the challenge, readied themselves for close listening.

Sharon read Sylvester with all the verve associated with a first reading, although we suspected she had read it dozens of times. The students intervened, quipped, and questioned, demonstrating their involvement. When she finished, Sharon engaged the students in the spelling and meaning of the “big” words, after which they evaluated their predictions, and discussed the story. Moving to the writing activity, Sharon produced an intriguing brown pouch from her pocket that contained colored glass pebbles. Giving one pebble to each child, she said, “This is your special pebble. It will help you write something wonderful when you return to your seat.” Over and over she repeated those sentences like an incantation.

Then the children moved into more talk, this time to generate writing. Among ideas about the colors, shapes, and things they themselves could be changed into, the children decided they could make up how they got their pebbles, because, as one child offered, “If we all say ‘teacher,’ it will be bor-r-ring.”

She’s doing appropriate things to prepare these diverse students for a rich language experience, we wrote. These students are so happy you can tell they think they are having fun. She is allowing them to learn through exposure and discovery to reading and writing. Mostly, though, she is there with kind suggestions and few corrections. She is giving these students ample time to be actively creative, inventive, and discoverers.

So they wrote, filling long pages with writing about how they “found” their pebbles, what their pebbles looked like, and what happened because of their pebble’s “specialness.” Then they shared.
Sitting on the author’s chair, Michael read his two and one-quarter pages. This was his opener:

Fig. P.1. Michael’s Lead.

I found my pebble in the flowers in spring. It is shiny yellow and orange. I found it because of the sun shining. I picked it up for my pebble collection, and I said I wish I had lots of pebbles like this for my pebble collection. And in a flash of lightning I had lots of pebbles like the one I found. They glittered in the sun as if they were the sun themselves.

I put them in a bag and took them home. When I got home

Michael’s writing proved that by January of first grade he had internalized a sense of narrative and descriptive detail, at least partly due to the print-rich environment Sharon had created. After this opener, Michael developed a clear plot line, one obviously based on the original story.
I put them in a bag and took them home. When I got home I realised it was magic. One day it got mixed up with the other pebbles so I was real scared that I'd never find it again but then I remembered that I wished for lots of pebbles and said I wish I knew if this pebble works, and something said that it works. I was overjoyed. I wished that my family would live in a castle, and in a flash of lightening we were in a castle. I was maid king. When I was maid king I put my pebbles in the royal treasury and I never forgot them. The end.

[I put them in a bag and took them home. When I got home I realized it was magic. One day it got mixed up with the other pebbles so I was real scared that I'd never find it again but then I remembered that I wished for lots of pebbles and said I wish I knew if this pebble works, and something said that it works. I was overjoyed. I wished that my family would live in a castle, and in a flash of lightening we were in a castle. I was made king. When I was made king I put my pebbles in the royal treasury and I never forgot them. The end]
Kyle’s writing also showed the benefits of much reading and writing.

It all started when I was outside playing soccer with my brother. My mom just called my brother and I in and I found a little pebble. It was clear and you could see through it. It is chipped a little and it is really squiggly. And it can do powers and wonders.

[It all started when I was outside playing soccer with my brother. My mom just called my brother and I in and I found a little pebble. It was clear and you could see through it. It is chipped a little and it is really squiggly. And it can do powers and wonders.]

The powers and wonders occurring in this classroom weren’t coming from any pebbles. Sharon Chamberlain had created a nonthreatening environment that allowed students to connect and take risks.

The next time we visited Sharon’s class, the students entered; again they wrote, read, and gathered on the carpet. This time Sharon introduced Amelia Bedelia, but this time she only wrote one word on the board—idiom.

Idiom! Idiom? We questioned in our notes. Why, we taught some college freshmen who thought Idiom was their roommate’s name!

“This is your vocabulary word today, boys and girls. Where do we usually find the words we use for our vocabulary and spelling words?” They knew, of course, that those words come from the books they read.

“Yes that is true, but today you must listen with different ears. Today you will not hear me read the word idiom. Instead, if you listen with those different ears, you will know by what Amelia