“The Miracle Worker”

Why was Annie Sullivan more successful in reaching through to Helen Keller than Helen’s family?

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the life of Helen Keller, who lost her sight, hearing and the ability to speak due to severe illness at the age of 19 months. The basis of the paper is from the 1979 film “The Miracle Worker”. Johanna “Annie” Sullivan was sent by the Perkins School of Boston as a teacher to help the Kellers with Helen. Why was Annie Sullivan more successful in reaching through to Helen Keller than Helen’s family? Annie was with Hellen for just one month when she had a breakthrough with her. Annie could be more objective and did not have the emotional ties the family had to Helen. The film centers around this short time, and the interaction that both Helen and Annie had with the family. There are interpersonal relationships, language and listening skills that are developed throughout the film that changed the communication climate. Then, Helen finally discovered the ability to use sign language, and thus reach others. The family could only connect with Helen via touch and smell, prior to this breakthrough. The paper reflects on how important the different aspects of communication are in a family. Language is a key element, for people to be understood. This too was proven in the research of literature that was done, to which this paper refers.

In the Effective Communication class (603), in Education, the final paper was to select a film from a list provided by Dr. Daniels, and then relate the film to at least three aspects of the class textbook, “Understanding Human Communication by Ronald Adler, George Rodman and Athena du Pre. The chosen film for this project is the 1979 version of “The Miracle Worker” written by the same gentleman who wrote the original story in 1962, Mr. William Gibson. The major communication aspects that are covered within the film are interpersonal relationships, language, listening, and communication climate. The Keller family and Annie Sullivan relied on Helen’s other senses of smell, touch and taste to communicate with her, until the break through about a month after Annie arrived. Why do the Kellers not succeed in controlling Helen? Why does it seem that only the mother, Kate, shows Helen some affection through touch? The thesis of the paper is to examine: Why was Annie Sullivan more successful in reaching through to Helen Keller, than Helen’s family?

This film is only a small segment of Helen Keller’s life. Yet, with the help of Annie Sullivan, who was her teacher for many years, Annie finally broke through the darkness to reach Helen. It was this turning point that allowed Helen Keller to achieve greatness. There is a biography entitled “Helen Keller, A Life”, written by Dorothy Herrmann about 30 years after Helen’s death. Yet, that is not what this paper is about, but some information will be used from it to clarify points the film misses. In this book, are discoveries of the backstory to understand more about how Annie and Helen came together, and where things went after the movie ended. Dorothy Herrmann explains, “In February 1882, when Helen was nineteen months old, she developed a severe congestion of the stomach and brain. The nature of her ailment, which is called ‘brain fever’ by the doctors of the period, remain a mystery to this day” (p. 9). Herrmann also explains how Annie became known as the miracle worker, kindness of Mark Twain who wrote to Annie in 1902, when he sent a photograph stating, “Mrs. John Sullivan Macy with warm regard and with limitless admiration of the wonders she has performed as a miracle worker” (p. 103). Samuel Clemens also had admired Helen Keller.

Johanna “Annie” Sullivan was chosen to be sent to the Keller’s by Mr. Michael Anagnos, the director of the Perkins Institution and the Massachusetts School for the Blind, where Annie had just graduated, top of her class. Initially, Annie and her brother Jimmy as young children were abandoned by their father, and lived in the poorhouse. After Jimmy died, Annie begged for an education at the age of 14. She was chosen to go to Perkins. While there, she had nine operations on her eyes, to improve her near blindness. Herrmann states, “Keller wrote again to Anagnos, this time asking to send a teacher to Tuscumbia who was versed in the techniques that Dr. Howe had used to bring Laura Bridgman in contact with the outside world” (p. 26). Within the film, Annie explains to Mrs. Keller that she has three advantages to being Helen’s instructor: 1) she has Dr. Howe’s book; 2) being young (not a teenager); and 3) having been blind herself. Annie also says she must teach Helen language, so she will understand the world around her. Basically, the film only covers a month in time. Yet, what is accomplished in that month transformed Helen into a civilized human being. Then, comes the break through to understanding her environment. One advantage that finally surfaced was that prior to Helen’s illness, she was learning to talk, and comprehend as a toddler. At the end of the story, Annie got the idea of water back into Helen’s brain, everything exploded, because the pieces now fell into place, and Helen wanted to learn as much as possible, as fast as she could. Here is where touch transitioned into meaning with the physical things connected to the words being spelled into Helen’s hand. The interpersonal relationships also took on deeper meanings for Helen with family members, and Annie, because she now could communicate with them.

To communicate with Helen, Annie used the American Sign Language by spelling out each word. Helen felt the letters being spelled in her hand. Prior to her breakthrough Helen was grasping the concept of spelling, because Helen was even doing it in her sleep. She just had not connected the words, and their meanings at that point. Kate asked Annie to teach her how to sign, so she too could communicate with Helen.

Helen’s family displayed a variety of relationships among themselves, and with Helen. Consider the era this film was set in, and the location. The year was 1887 in Alabama. Back then, most men had the final say within their homes. In this film, Captain Arthur Henley Keller is in his 40s, and married Kate Adams who was about 20 years younger. There was James, a son, from the Captain’s first marriage, who also was in his early 20s. The Captain was forever telling James to stop talking. He also was impatient when his wife spoke to him about Helen. So, most of the time Kate and James acquiesced to the Captain. James always seemed rather unhappy. Annie Sullivan came to live with the Kellers, and spoke her mind whenever necessary, even though she had been warned about this trait by Mr. Anagnos. As the textbook states: “The term communication climate refers to the emotional tone of a relationship. A climate doesn’t involve specific activities as much as the way people feel about one another as they carry out those activities” (p. 239). Throughout the movie, it was the Captain’s opinion that usually counted. Finally, James did speak back to his father with force, which helped to open the Captain’s eyes to the fact he may be wrong sometimes (1:30:27-40). As per the textbook Adler et al state: “Although we can’t listen effectively all the time, most people possess one or more habits that keep them from understanding truly important messages” (p. 138). Annie also, spoke up, when she was discussing her ideas about Helen, and what successes she felt could be accomplished. For an individual who lacks much formal training, Annie had great insight, and many natural abilities to resolve issues. She observed, and then understood where problems were within the family unit. She realized that to reach Helen, she needed total control of the situation. To achieve this, Annie knew she needed to isolate Helen from the familiar, so Helen could concentrate, and learn to trust and obey Annie. In the short two weeks that Annie had this arrangement, Helen was transformed from a wild child, to one who was civilized. As Annie reminded the Kellers in the dining room, after returning home, when Helen had another tantrum, “I treat her like a seeing child, because I ask her to see. I expect her to see” (1:30:08-15). Annie again takes charge of an unruly Helen and leads her outside. It is shortly after this point in the movie, where Helen has her realization of words having meaning via touch with the water and the water pump, communication was open, personal interaction occurred, and the film ends.

Annie was correct when she told Mrs. Keller that language was what will open the world to Helen. As per Adler et al, language is defined as: “a collection of symbols governed by rules and used to convey messages between individuals” (p. 103). “Sign language, as ‘spoken’ by most deaf people, is symbolic in nature and not the pantomime it might seem to nonsigners” (p. 103). Helen when she connected the physical water, from the outside pump, with the spelled word, she then understood what Annie was trying to teach her, for weeks. As Annie knew, it is also stated in research by Landers (2012) “Those who are simultaneously deaf and blind must rely on their tactile senses to communicate” (p. 958).

Even in Helen Keller’s youth, she was not the only individual who was deaf and blind. The Perkins Institute where Annie studied, Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe had done research earlier on how to communicate with the deaf and blind, when he was in charge. The statistics were not as well documented as they are today. Through recent research, statistic show us:

“The World Health Organization estimates that there are 278 million people with

moderate or profound hearing impairments and 284 million with vision impairments,

39 million of whom are blind. The number of people who are deaf-blind is small, with

about 45-50 thousand in the United States” (Landers, 2012).

One word that Helen immediately learned after understanding water, and acknowledging her parents, was calling Annie “Teacher”. This title remained between them throughout their years together, until Annie’s death. Those two had a very interpersonal relationship. As per the textbook Adler et al said, “Qualitative interpersonal communication occurs when people treat one another as unique individuals, regardless of the context in which the interaction occurs or the number of people involved” (p. 203). Annie and Helen had a strong interpersonal relationship, from stormy to loving over the decades that they were together.

Helen and her family communicated prior to Annie’s arrival, through touch and smell. Helen created her own version of a few select signs to convey what she wanted. The family interpreted these, and gave into Helen’s demands and tantrums. Bruce and Borders said: “Communication and language delays often result in frustration that may lead to problem behaviors” (p. 374). This was shown true in the movie. In the article *Language and Play in Students with Multiple Disabilities and Visual Impairments or Deaf-Blindness* the opening statement says it all. “**L**anguage is a complex and multifaceted aspect of human development that is mediated by many factors, including sensory perception, cognition, and physical ability” (p. 287). The family use smell to convey food to Helen. Annie also used touch, and incorporated discipline, to teach Helen how to behave. Annie taught Helen happy versus sad, with enlarged facial expressions as well as the shaking or nodding of her head. Helen was good at mimicking these, and finally realized when she made Annie happy or sad. As the textbook says “Physical touch can ‘speak’ volumes” (p. 185). Initially, Helen ran to her mother for tender love and support via touch. Kate would calm Helen down by stroking her to show she cared. The Captain would intervene when things were more out of control. He did not strike Helen, but he would dismiss her, or pass her on to her mother. Annie observed this, and challenged him, as to whether he loved Helen. He did not respond, but again it was an eye-opening moment for him, and he realized he needed to acquiesce himself.

Today there are many more advantages for the deaf, blind, and deaf/blind individuals, than when Helen Keller was first being taught about the environment where she lived. Many of the people who were impaired, back then, were sent away to asylums. Annie and her brother, Jimmy, had been at one of those places, so Annie fought to help Helen, rather than to send her to that fate. There was a very small study conducted in 2010, with only 11 students who were impaired students. The researchers Pizzo and Bruce wrote:

“Given the challenge of language development for students with visual impairments

or deaf-blindness, the value of play in promoting many facets of child development,

and the limited research on the development of play in students with disabilities, it is

important to examine the relationship between the development of play and the

development of communication in students with disabilities” (p. 288).

What is hard is that the testers do not appear to be physically challenged. It might improve their perspective, if they too handicapped themselves, even short term, and ran the same experiments. Those who do not face the daily challenges that these 11 students face do not have a clue what these students must contend with, just to make it through a single day. Sighted and good hearing are so natural, that most of the population takes them for granted, and do not even think about not having these senses. Most people are born with the five senses of sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste. People adapt when they lose one or more of these senses. The remaining senses then become more acute, to make up for the loss of the missing or impaired ones.

Even today, people who are interested in communication, learn techniques to cross barriers to help others. A second-year nursing student, Helen Astle, was trying to help a deaf/blind patient, and did not know how to communicate with her, nor did her nursing colleagues. The patient’s family said “drawing letters on the palm of her hand, was the best approach” (p. 29). Helen Astle learned this valuable lesson: “Crossing communication barriers, however difficult, must always be a priority” (p. 29).

Since the movie was set in time, 140 years ago, there have been many advancements to aid the deaf, blind and deaf/blind individuals today. Teaching techniques and advanced technology have gone beyond the basic use of sign language, and incorporating the unimpaired senses of touch and smell to reach especially the deaf/blind people that was viewed in “The Miracle Worker”. Bruce and Borders wrote: “Social-interactionism theory recognizes that children actively process information during interactions with communication partners who shape their development“ (p. 371). This could very much describe the interpersonal relationship that Helen and Annie had, once the communication channel was established.

In conclusion, the answers to the original question, “why was Annie Sullivan more successful in reaching through to Helen Keller, than Helen’s family?” are as follows: 1) Annie initially had no emotional ties to the Kellers--it was a job to her, 2) She had some insight to Helen’s world, because she had suffered from extremely weak eye sight herself, 3) Annie understood the consequences of being sent to an asylum, and did not want Helen anywhere near places like that, because Annie had first-hand knowledge of how horrible they were, 4) Annie saw intelligence in Helen, and knew it was possible to teach her—and, Annie just needed to discover the key to unlock Helen’s dark world. Annie had the Irish stubbornness that allowed her to gain the upper hand, and tackle the problems, her way. She had to prove her capabilities, and Helen had to demonstrate her accomplishments to the family, 5) It was a meeting of many strong-willed people, who had to finally believe in one another, and set aside their personal feelings, listen, rather than just talk. Whereas, the Kellers had not discipline Helen, who was out of control, when Annie arrived. The Captain showed minor tolerance toward Helen, but not much love. Kate showed tenderness and love toward Helen, yet, weakness toward her husband, 6) When Helen understood, and could communicate, the whole communication climate changed at the Keller home, in Tuscumbia, Alabama, 7) Communication transitioned to sign language, not just touch and smell. Helen had learned to be obedient and respectful of others. Adler et al says “…language reflects our attitudes. Feelings of control, attraction, commitment, responsibility—all these and more are reflected in the way we use language” (p. 110). And, as Annie told Mrs. Keller on the initial buggy ride to their home, she wanted to teach Helen language, so she would be able to communicate—this she did.

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