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Spelling practices in school districts and regions across the United States and state spelling standards

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ABSTRACT

The authors sent a survey during the 1996-97 school year to 670 school districts in 41 states requesting information on spelling instructional practices to ascertain whether spelling texts are still widely used in the United States given the current emphasis on developmental spelling in the primary grades and the March, 1996 publication of the NCTE/IRA standards. In addition, a search of the reading/language arts standards in 50 states in 1998 revealed that most states do have spelling standards, but only a few coincide with the NCTE/IRA Standard 6 which mentions spelling.

INTRODUCTION

The International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English (1996) published a document called *Standards for the English Language Arts*. Although the birth of the Standards began in 1992, the effort was almost aborted in 1994 by the lack of funding (Salinger, 1996). Both associations continued the work, however, and finally published the list of the 12 content standards in March, 1996. *Standards for the English Language Arts* (National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association, 1996) encompass reading, writing, speaking, listening and viewing and are meant to describe what a student should learn in each of these areas. Spelling,

addressed in Standard 6, characterizes the student's use of spelling as a language convention that can be used to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts. In this context, spelling is seen as a key function in the language process and as integrated into a larger whole of knowledge application (Buswinka et al., 1996).

There is debate about whether the content standards truly can be integrated within the English Language Arts curriculum and whether school districts, communities and teachers can understand how the standards will appear in the teaching and learning process (Fleischer, Koch, Lewis and Roop, 1996). Some current English Language Arts publications ignore the integrated curriculum or talk about the English Language Arts skills in isolation (Wixson, Peters, and Potter, 1996).

One continuing concern of educators today is that spelling instruction emphasizes the memorization of words with no relationship to the process of reading and writing. Teachers discover that students perform well on weekly tests, forget how to spell the words soon afterward, and aren't using the words in journals or writings (Gill and Scharer, 1996; Barch, 1992; Teale, 1992).

DIFFERENT METHODS OF TEACHING SPELLING

Weiner (1997) describes four basic methods of teaching spelling being used in the classroom today:

1. Published spelling text: word lists are used with associated activities. Students are measured by formal weekly assessment.
2. Individualized spelling: sequenced word lists are given on an individualized basis. Placement tests are administered to the student and the student proceeds at his/her own rate. Formal assessment is then administered.
3. Developmental spelling with direct instruction: words are taught in context. Students are evaluated in individual conferences and given direction as to the appropriate strategies which can be used for spelling the word.
4. Developmental spelling without direct instruction: the child has been immersed in many and various reading and writing experiences. Teaching reflects and builds upon the developmental spelling stages. Evaluation can reveal where the child is located in the developmental stages.

Published spelling texts and word lists

The history of spelling instructional practices shows that from the eighteenth to the latter half of the twentieth century, spelling has been taught in U.S. schools through the use of word lists generally published in spelling textbooks which students were asked to memorize (Venezky, 1987). Zutell (1978) reports that memorization and drills caused boredom, frustration and a lack of carryover from memorizing the words to using them in written products. Henderson and Temple (1986) indicate that memory alone does not aid spelling competence, but that the memorization of words must be accompanied by an internalization of the phonetic relationship to meaning patterns.

Individualized spelling

A more recent method used to teach spelling is individualized spelling. Sequenced word lists are given to the students on an individualized basis after the administration of placement tests (Weiner, 1997). Students then proceed at their own rate. Hennings (1994) reports that individualized spelling has an advantage over a formalized spelling approach because individualized word lists can be modified by having the child create a list of similarly patterned words and compile his/her own list to study. Thus, the child is memorizing lists that are meaningful.

Developmental spelling

With the advent of whole language instruction in the United States in the last decade, there has been an emphasis on less direct instruction and a more personalized type of instruction in spelling. Read's (1971) analysis of the invented spellings of preschoolers shows that children use similar types of spellings. Gentry's (1981) account of developmental levels for children's spellings has also been based on study of young children's similar patterns in spelling. According to May (1994) invented spelling (one of the stages of developmental spelling) has been practiced in many primary classrooms since the 1980's. The employment of invented spelling in writing, however, has been one of the controversial topics linked to the whole language-literacy movement.

The literature concerning developmental spelling either extols the virtues of permitting children to use invented spelling or denounces the effects of its use in children's writings. Gunderson (1991) states that many whole language instructors do not believe in directly teaching early spelling or reading skills. The research of Huxford, Terrell, and Bradley

(1991) indicates that children have the ability to bring some phonological knowledge to the spelling task before they can do this in the reading task. Further work by Melling, Parkinson, and McLaughlin-Cook (1994) reports that children's spellings of personal words versus words from a traditional spelling program were retained better. Vacca, Vacca, and Gove (1995) suggest that children's spelling inventions should be regarded as signs of growth. In whole language instruction, errors are welcomed and not frowned upon.

In addition, Vacca, Vacca, and Gove state that skill-based and whole language perspectives are directly oppositional. Research that supports a more traditional manner of direct instruction in spelling indicates that children in whole language instruction have a tendency to increase their phonological errors as they develop (Oerlemans and Dodd, 1993). Immersion in texts, as whole language advocates would propose, may not be the answer to correction of spelling mistakes for some children.

However, Manning (1990) indicates that students in the whole language group versus a traditional writing group were better writers, viewed themselves as writers of real texts, had confidence in themselves as writers, and outperformed the skills-oriented students on measures of spelling achievement. Manning's findings suggest that whole language should be considered an alternative to skills-oriented instruction in inner city schools.

Direct instruction and indirection instruction

Farris (1993) states that although a majority of students in grades 2 through 6 learn spelling via a spelling textbook series, first graders usually receive little or no formal spelling instruction. Ehri and Wilce (1987) maintain that writing activities with direct teacher instruction is an effective approach for teaching reading, writing and spelling in first grade. Studies have shown that no formal instruction is just as effective as a formal program for teaching students beyond the fourth grade (Hammill, Larsen, and McNutt, 1977; Manolakes, 1975). Students at this grade level should focus mainly on understanding how meaning and form are related in English spelling. They can practice and play with those words that have related forms and roots, especially in the content areas.

Stewig and Nordberg (1995) report that many curricular changes occurring today are reflected in spelling instruction. However, Stewig and Nordberg (1995) state that teachers are still wondering about the role of phonetics, the need for spelling word lists, rules learning, and about giving children freedom to write with or without spelling standards. In the whole language approach to teaching, developmental spelling is encouraged with the notion that the student given frequent opportunities to read and write, will eventually develop into a proficient speller without much direct instruction. Students who use developmental spelling appear to produce more fluent writing and learn to spell words without using word lists (Jewell and Zintz, 1990; Lamme, 1984). Teachers, then, are faced with the problem of desiring to retain the fluent writing that supports developmental spelling and also the realization that there is need for some skill instruction. The question that they appear to be struggling with is whether skill instruction will reduce spontaneity and fluency in writing. Since questions are being raised concerning spelling approaches, it is possible that the state of spelling instruction is presently not well defined. Therefore, the purposes of this study were threefold: 1) to ascertain if the published spelling text is still widely used across the country since the advent of the whole language movement and the newly published NCTE/IRA *Standards* (1996); 2) to determine if school district size effects the type of spelling program which occurs and; 3) to determine the type of spelling instruction that is most prevalent across regions in the United States. A comparison of the spelling standards in the state documents with Standard 6 of the NCTE/IRA *Standards* was also conducted to determine if the state standards are influenced by this publication

METHOD

Survey participants

The researchers designed a survey (see Appendix A) to correspond to the four basic methods of spelling instruction mentioned by Weiner (1997) and distributed it to approximately 670 school districts with a population of 20 or more teachers in 41 different states. We obtained a list of the school districts with a population of 20 or more teachers from the Directory of Public Elementary and Secondary Agencies (1988) published by the United States Department of Education and Improvement.

The number of classroom teachers in each district was used to establish the stratified random sample. According to, Hinkle, Wiersma and Jurs (1994), a stratified random sample is a homogeneous population which may have several sub populations called strata. All of the school districts which contained 2,000 or more full time classroom teachers were included in the sample. The remaining school districts were grouped according to the number of full time classroom teachers into four more size strata: 600-1999, 250-599, 120-249, and 20-119.

The school districts were also grouped into 8 regions for the purposes of this study: 1) New England — Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maryland, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont; 2) Middle East — District of Columbia, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania; 3) Southeast — Arkansas, Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, West Virginia; 4) Great Lakes — Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin; 5) Great Plains — Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, North Dakota, Nebraska, South Dakota; 6) Southwest — Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma; 7) Rocky Mountains — Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Utah, Wyoming; 8) Far West — California, Nevada, Oregon, Washington.

We sent a survey to the curriculum director of 670 school districts in the sample in November, 1996. A second copy of the survey was sent in February, 1997, to those districts that did not respond to the first copy. The total number of respondents after both distributions of the survey was 313 or 47%. The returns were as follows:

- School districts employing over 2,000 full time teachers returned 34 surveys.
- School districts employing 600-1,999 returned 44 surveys.
- School districts employing 250-599 returned 78 surveys
- School districts employing 120-249 returned 76 surveys
- School districts employing 20-119 returned 81 surveys. (see Table 1).

We conducted a search of the Internet in the spring of 1998 through <http://putwest.boces.org/standards.html> to determine which of the fifty states have content standards for spelling instruction. The standards were generally listed under the subject area of Reading/Language Arts. In addition, we followed up with an Internet search of the remaining states not listed at the previous address.

RESULTS

Question A (part one): Do you use a published spelling series?

Responses organized by school district size. Participants reported using spelling texts in 166 school districts and 147 districts replied that they did not use a published text (see Table 1). In districts which employed 250-599 teachers, there were 44 “no” responses to Question A and 34 “yes” responses. In all other district size categories, generally half of the districts are using a published text.

Table 1.

Distribution of Spelling Survey Responses Across School District Strata for Questions A-D

| <i>Number of full-time teachers in district</i> | <i>Published spelling text</i> | | <i>Individualized instruction</i> | | <i>Developmental with direct instruction</i> | | <i>Developmental without direct instruction</i> | |
|---|--------------------------------|-----------|-----------------------------------|-----------|--|-----------|---|-----------|
| | <i>Yes</i> | <i>No</i> | <i>Yes</i> | <i>No</i> | <i>Yes</i> | <i>No</i> | <i>Yes</i> | <i>No</i> |
| 20-119 | 44 | 37 | 31 | 50 | 23 | 58 | 5 | 76 |
| 120-249 | 42 | 34 | 37 | 39 | 22 | 54 | 1 | 75 |
| 250-599 | 34 | 44 | 37 | 41 | 26 | 52 | 2 | 76 |
| 600-1999 | 26 | 18 | 22 | 22 | 17 | 27 | 1 | 42 |
| 2000+ | 20 | 14 | 18 | 16 | 13 | 21 | 4 | 300 |
| Total | 166 | 147 | 145 | 168 | 101 | 212 | 13 | 300 |

Responses organized by regions. Of the eight regions across the US, three regions showed a different result than the general trend of nearly 50% of the districts using a published spelling text (see Table 2). In the Far West Region, 36 school districts replied that they did not use a basal text versus 10 districts who answered that they did use a basal text. In the Rocky Mountain Region, there were 9 school districts which answered “no” and 6 districts answered “yes”. The Middle East Region results were 24 “no” replies and 23 “yes” replies.

Question A (part two): Please indicate which series you use

There were 188 respondents who did not list any publishing company. The remaining 125 school districts specified that they used 11 different publishing companies. The largest number of school districts using one particular publishing company was 25.

Question B: Do you use an individualized spelling program?

Responses organized by school district size. Eighteen school districts which employed 2000+ teachers reported using an individualized spelling series and 16 reported that they did not use an individualized series (see Table 1). School districts which employed 600 – 1999 teachers were equal in the number of districts which used individualized spelling and districts which did not. More districts replied “no” in the three other district size categories than replied “yes” to Question B. Again, the distribution was nearly split between negative responses and positive responses.

Table 2.

Distribution of Spelling Survey Responses Across Regions for Questions A-D

| <i>Region</i> | <i>Published spelling series</i> | | <i>Individualized spelling series</i> | | <i>Developmental spelling with direct instruction</i> | | <i>Developmental spelling without direct instruction</i> | |
|---------------|----------------------------------|------------|---------------------------------------|------------|---|------------|--|------------|
| | <i>Yes</i> | <i>No</i> | <i>Yes</i> | <i>No</i> | <i>Yes</i> | <i>No</i> | <i>Yes</i> | <i>No</i> |
| New East | 13 | 11 | 12 | 12 | 8 | 16 | 2 | 22 |
| Middle East | 23 | 24 | 19 | 28 | 18 | 29 | 2 | 45 |
| Southeast | 27 | 17 | 20 | 24 | 17 | 27 | 2 | 42 |
| Great Lakes | 52 | 29 | 31 | 50 | 22 | 59 | 1 | 80 |
| Great Plains | 21 | 15 | 16 | 20 | 15 | 21 | 0 | 36 |
| Southwest | 15 | 6 | 5 | 16 | 2 | 19 | 0 | 21 |
| Rocky Mts. | 6 | 9 | 11 | 4 | 8 | 7 | 2 | 13 |
| Far West | 10 | 36 | 31 | 15 | 11 | 35 | 4 | 42 |
| Total | 167 | 147 | 145 | 169 | 101 | 213 | 13 | 301 |

Responses organized by regions. In the Middle East, Southeast, Great Lakes, Great Plains and Southwest regions, more school districts answered “no” to Question B than answered “yes”. (See Table 2). Eleven school districts in the Rocky Mountain region indicated that they used an individualized spelling program versus 4 districts which indicated that they did not. The Far West region reported using individualized spelling in 31 districts and 15 other districts replied that they did not use an individualized spelling program.

Question C: Do you exclusively use developmental spelling (invented spelling) with direct instruction?

Responses organized by school district size. Every district size category showed that there were more districts which reported “no” to the question concerning developmental or invented spelling with direct instruction than answered “yes”. (See Table 1). The three smallest school district size categories submitted approximately twice as many “no” answers as “yes” answers.

Responses organized by regions. The Rocky Mountain area was the only region which had more positive responses than negative responses to Question C. (See Table 2).

Question D: Do you exclusively use developmental spelling (invented spelling) without direct instruction?

Responses organized by school district size. The overwhelming majority of responses (300) in all district size categories was “no” to using developmental spelling without direct instruction. (See Table 1). There were only 13 districts by contrast which reported “yes” to using developmental spelling without direct instruction in Question D.

Responses organized by regions. In all of the regions, developmental spelling without direct instruction was an approach that was clearly in the minority. (See Table 2).

Question E: If you use a combination of spelling approaches, please indicate which ones:

1) Individualized and developmental; 2) Individualized and published series; 3) Individualized with direct instruction; 4) Developmental (invented) and published spelling text.

Responses organized by school district size. The last survey question involved asking the districts about the use of a combination of methods for spelling instruction. When asked about combination one, individualized spelling and developmental approaches, the school district strata results indicated that there were 238 districts which replied “yes” versus 76 which replied “no”. (See Table 3). The districts who marked “no” to combination two, individualized spelling and published spelling text, numbered twice as many as marked “yes”. The majority of answers were “no” to combination three, individualized spelling with direct instruction. Finally, the number of school districts who used combination four, developmental instruction and published spelling text, was almost equal to those districts which did not.

Responses organized by regions. In the Far West region, there were 15 school districts which reported using combination one, individual spelling and developmental spelling. (See Table 4). In the Great Lakes region, 35 districts reported using combination two, individualized spelling and a published spelling series. In the Southeast there were 12 district schools which used this combination. There were more regions who checked “no” to using combination three, individualized spelling with direct instruction, than checked “yes”. Only in two regions were there more school districts which reported using combination four, developmental spelling and a published text than did not.

Table 3.

Distribution of Combination Approaches to Teaching Spelling Across District Size Strata for Question E

| | <i>Number of Individualized full-time teachers in district</i> | | <i>Individualized spelling and developmental spelling</i> | | <i>Individualized spelling and published spelling text</i> | | <i>Individualized spelling with direct instruction</i> | | <i>Developmental spelling and published spelling text</i> | |
|----------|--|-----------|---|-----------|--|-----------|--|-----------|---|-----------|
| | <i>Yes</i> | <i>No</i> | <i>Yes</i> | <i>No</i> | <i>Yes</i> | <i>No</i> | <i>Yes</i> | <i>No</i> | <i>Yes</i> | <i>No</i> |
| 20-119 | 21 | 60 | 27 | 54 | 17 | 64 | 26 | 55 | 39 | 38 |
| 120-249 | 14 | 63 | 30 | 48 | 21 | 57 | 40 | 38 | 19 | 25 |
| 250-599 | 16 | 62 | 16 | 28 | 12 | 32 | 19 | 25 | 19 | 15 |
| 600-1999 | 31 | 13 | 10 | 24 | 11 | 23 | | | | |
| 2000+ | 12 | 22 | | | | | | | | |
| Total | 76 | 238 | 101 | 213 | 73 | 241 | 143 | 171 | | |

State standards

We conducted a search of fifty state departments of education in the spring of 1998 on the Internet. An Internet search of 50 state departments of education in spring of 1998, indicated that 37 states publish their general curriculum guides on the Internet: <http://putwest.boces.org/standards.html>. After examining the language arts curriculum guides, we discovered that twenty-five out of 37 states do have a standard or standards for spelling (see Table 5). The majority of these standards are divided into primary grade standards and middle school standards. In seventeen states the standards are categorized as one or more for the primary grades and one or more for the middle school. There were four states which itemized specific standards at each individual grade level. Four state documents mentioned a spelling

guideline which would coincide with Standard 6 of the NCTE/IRA *Standards* (1996). Eight states listed no spelling standards and two states were revising their standards.

An additional Internet search of the remaining 13 states not listed on the Internet address revealed that ten of those states that had standards had no information available concerning Reading/Language Arts standards. The three other states did not have an accessible web page.

Table 4.

Distribution of Combination Approaches to Teaching Spelling Across Regions for Question E

| Region | Individualized spelling and developmental spelling | | Individualized spelling and published spelling text | | Individualized spelling with direct instruction | | Developmental spelling and published spelling text | |
|--------------|--|-----|---|-----|---|-----|--|-----|
| | Yes | No | Yes | No | Yes | No | Yes | No |
| New East | 4 | 20 | 9 | 15 | 5 | 19 | 15 | 9 |
| Middle East | 8 | 39 | 8 | 39 | 10 | 37 | 29 | 18 |
| Southeast | 14 | 30 | 16 | 28 | 13 | 31 | 22 | 22 |
| Great Lakes | 17 | 64 | 35 | 46 | 14 | 67 | 30 | 51 |
| Great Plains | 6 | 30 | 7 | 29 | 5 | 31 | 11 | 25 |
| Southwest | 5 | 16 | 12 | 9 | 5 | 16 | 9 | 12 |
| Rocky Mts. | 7 | 8 | 4 | 11 | 4 | 11 | 7 | 8 |
| Far West | 15 | 31 | 10 | 36 | 17 | 29 | 20 | 26 |
| Total | 76 | 238 | 101 | 213 | 73 | 241 | 143 | 171 |

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

There appears to be no general trend across school district size strata or across regions in the United States. The status of spelling instruction seems unclear.

Across the United States, 53% of the school districts in this study are using a basal spelling series and the remaining 47% are not. Clearly, the spelling text is still being used in the United States, but not in the overwhelming majority of districts.

In five of the eight regions across the United States, 50% or more school districts are using a published spelling series or basal spelling texts, but there is no distinct pattern. The remaining three regions also

show no consistent pattern in the number of districts which are using a published spelling text and those which are not.

Examination of school district strata in Table 3 reveals that some districts are using a combination of approaches such as individualized spelling and the developmental spelling (76); individualized spelling and a published spelling text (101); individualized spelling with direct instruction (73); and developmental spelling and a published spelling text (143).

Although the largest response to a combination of methods being used by school districts is developmental with a published text, there were 171 of the districts that reported that they did not use this combination. School district size does not seem to determine the type of spelling instruction which occurs. In all of the regions, a combination of methods is used. Since districts are using a combination of instructional methods, the basal text is not exclusively being used in the classroom.

A current search in the spring of 1998 of 37 state departments of education which publish their curriculum guides on the Internet, reveals that only four documents mention a spelling guideline which would coincide with Standard 6 of the English/language arts. It would seem that the state standards have not been influenced by the NCTE/IRA *Standards*. If the individual state departments have knowledge of the professional NCTE/IRA *Standards*, they apparently are not considering them when designing language arts curriculum guides.

Since the NCTE/IRA *Standards* were just recently published during distribution of this survey in the 1996-1997 school year, it would be reasoned that many school districts did not have the opportunity to examine and implement them at that time. As our survey in the spring of 1998 indicated, however, there were only four out of 37 state departments that did incorporate a spelling guideline which coincides with Standard 6. It is also apparent that the change in spelling methods will not come quickly from the state department to the districts, since only two states mentioned that they were revising their standards.

The results of this study indicate that spelling instruction is in a state of flux. Clearly, state departments of education have not yet implemented the new NCTE/IRA *Standards* and are not aware of the status of spelling instruction in their state as a whole or in particular school districts.

Table 5.

Spelling Standards in 37 States

| <i>State</i> | <i>Generic standard for all grades K-8</i> | <i>Standards for individual grades, K-8</i> | <i>Standards for primary grades</i> | <i>Standards for middle grades</i> | <i>No spelling standards</i> | <i>Standards in revision</i> |
|------------------|--|---|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| AK | X | | | | | |
| AZ | | | X | X | | |
| AR | | | X | | | |
| CA | | X | | | | |
| CO | | | X | X | | |
| DE | X | | | | | |
| FL | | | X | X | | |
| IL | | | X | X | | |
| IN | | | | | X | |
| IA | | | | | X | |
| KS | | | X | X | | |
| LA | | | X | X | | |
| ME | | | X | X | | |
| MD | | | | | | X |
| MA | | | X | X | | |
| MI | | | X | X | | |
| MN | | | X | X | | |
| MO | X | | | | | |
| MT | | | X | X | | |
| NE | | | | X | | |
| NH | | | X | X | | |
| NJ | | | X | | | |
| NM | | | X | X | | |
| NY | X | | | | | |
| ND | | | | | X | |
| OH | | | | | | X |
| OK | | | | X | | |
| PA | | | X | X | | |
| RI | | | | | X | |
| SC | | | | | X | |
| SD | | | | | X | |
| TX | | | | | X | |
| UT | | X | | | | |
| VT | | | | | X | |
| VA | | X | | | | |
| WV | | X | | | | |
| WI | | | X | X | | |
| TOTAL NO. STATES | 4 | 4 | 17 | 17 | 8 | 2 |

Salinger (1996) reports that bringing about curriculum changes based on the new standards will cost much time and money. Another reason for the delay in implementation of the NCTE/IRA *Standards* is that states may be spending their time and money on other curricular areas such as technology.

Cooney (1992) believes that standards are not “packages to be accumulated, but terrain to be explored” (p. 64). Since spelling is only mentioned in one of the 12 IRA/NCTE *Standards*, as shown in this study, this terrain may not fully be explored in the United States. Teale (1992) states that educators are still debating about coherent spelling instruction which integrates a functional and holistic approach and recognizes the importance of the study of orthographic patterns of words in terms of application to the reading and writing processes. Debate about the philosophy of teaching spelling may be an additional reason that a combination of methods are being used and that no trend will evolve in the near future.

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Appendix
Spelling Survey

Please read the entire questionnaire before you answer the questions.
Circle Y for yes or N for n.

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|----|--|---|---|
| A. | Do you use a published spelling series? Please indicate which series_____ | Y | N |
| B. | Do you use an individualized spelling program? | Y | N |
| • | Do you exclusively use developmental spelling (invented spelling) with direct instruction? | Y | N |
| • | Do you exclusively use developmental spelling (invented spelling) without direct instruction? | Y | N |
| • | If you use a combination of approaches, please indicate which one: | | |
| | 1. individualized and developmental | Y | N |
| | 2. individualized and published series | Y | N |
| | 3. individualized with direct instruction | Y | N |
| | 4. developmental (inventive) and published spelling text | Y | N |
| | 5. other _____ | | |