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# The role of invented spelling in early literacy

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# The role of invented spelling in early literacy

## **Abstract**

An awareness and understanding of invented spelling in early literacy were presented in this research paper. The developmental stages and guidelines associated with invented spelling were discussed. Advantages and problems of invented spelling were examined. Conclusions were drawn from the literature review and recommendations were stated for future research concerning invented spelling.

THE ROLE OF INVENTED SPELLING  
IN EARLY LITERACY

A Graduate Research Paper

Submitted to the

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

In Partial Fulfillment

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Master of Arts in Early Childhood Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

By

Nancy Carper

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This research paper by: Nancy Carper

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has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the  
Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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An awareness and understanding of invented spelling in early literacy were presented in this research paper. The developmental stages and guidelines associated with invented spelling were discussed. Advantages and problems of invented spelling were examined. Conclusions were drawn from the literature review and recommendations were stated for future research concerning invented spelling.

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## CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

## Background of Study

In the 1960s, Piaget recognized that children grow and learn in developmental stages. This could be described by children constructing knowledge by modifying their previous ideas. Oral language acquisition and the development of language were studied. Charles Read is acknowledged as the father of the invented spelling revolution (Fountas & Pinnell, 1999). During the early 1970s, he pioneered a study of young children's early spelling development. Read (1970) observed children attempting to spell words by using their knowledge of letter names and letter sounds. In 1970, Read noticed their spelling errors; a pattern of developmental similarities began to emerge. Carol Chomsky (1971), author of Write First, Read Later, noted that children have an enormous phonetic acuity and ability to analyze words into their component sounds. Young children are able to construct their own representations of written language. The concept of invented spelling was developed to describe how young children express themselves in written form prior to formal alphabetic instruction (Chomsky, 1971). Children's success in learning to write by inventing their own spelling produced more interest in the development of spelling.



Glenda Bissex (1980) did a case study of spelling development, *GYNS AT WRK*, describing her son's written language development from four to ten years of age. Henderson and Beers (1980) developed a theory of developmental spelling in the early 1980s. This theory explains how children's orthographic knowledge develops from alphabetic, to patterns of letters, to syllable patterns, to meaning elements, as they become skilled readers and spellers (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 1996). A study in 1977 by J. Richard Gentry also revealed the developmental stages in children's early spellings and writings. In 1988, Linda Clarke did a study to compare the progress of children who used invented spelling with those who used traditional spelling in their creative writings. The results indicated children using invented spelling had significantly greater skill in spelling and were able to write independently at an earlier age. Ehri (1987) did additional research on this topic because she believed that much of a child's orthographic information was induced as a consequence of experiences with print. Consequently, she did a study showing a strong relationship between learning to read and learning to spell. Marcia Invernizzi and others used students' invented spellings as a guide for spelling instruction that emphasized word study (Invernizzi, Abouzeid, & Gill, 1994).

By classifying invented spellings as experimentations with word pattern, or meaning, a zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1962) can be identified. Such a zone would be a level of English orthography in which the child's spelling reveals experimentation.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the development of invented spelling in early literacy and to develop guidelines for use in conducting an invented spelling program. In order to achieve this purpose, the following questions will be addressed.

1. What is invented spelling?
2. What are the advantages of invented spelling?
3. What are the problems of invented spelling?
4. What are the guidelines that should be used with invented spelling?

#### Need for the Study

A movement towards increased emphasis on writing in language arts has led educators to encourage children to use invented spelling (Clarke, 1988). The understanding and awareness of invented spelling enables educators to provide instruction that is appropriate for a child's development. Modifications can be made to meet individual needs. Purposeful writing is an important key to learning to spell. It unlocks children's thinking about spelling, by engaging them in the process (Gentry, 1987).

## Limitations of the Study

The terminology of invented spelling stages has changed throughout the years. A limitation of this literature review was the lack of availability of certain resources.

## Definitions of Terms

In the literature reviewed for this study, researchers used the term invented spelling synonymously with developmental spelling, phonetic spelling, creative spelling and estimated spelling. The following terms will be defined for clarity and understanding.

Developmental Spelling Test: It is a simple and easy to administer assessment tool that provides information about young children's growing ability to analyze words (Pinnell, Fountas, & Jacobbe, 1998).

Emergent Literacy: A developmental construct. If, before children enter school and receive formal instruction, they are immersed in an environment rich in print, they soon discover that writing conveys meaning, has function and is an aspect of everyday activities (Fountas & Pinnell, 1999).

Graphemes: Letters we use to construct words or graphic signs (Fountas & Pinnell, 1999).

Invented Spelling: Beginning writers' ability to write words by attending to their sound units and associating letters with them in a systematic, though unconventional way (Richgels, 1987).

Phonemes: A single sound or a category of speech sounds (Pinnell et al., 1998).

Phonemic Awareness: The ability to hear sounds in words and to identify particular sounds (Pinnell et al., 1998).

Phonological Awareness: The ability to recognize that a spoken word consists of smaller components such as syllables and phonemes and that these units can be manipulated (Lombardino, Bedford, Fortier, & Brandi, 1997).

Word Study: The body of knowledge that includes phonics and spelling. It involves a range of instructional activities and experiences that a teacher designs to support children's development of word solving skills (Pinnell et al., 1998).

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD): The distance between what children can do unassisted and what they can do assisted by an adult (Fountas & Pinnell, 1999).

## CHAPTER 2

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

## Characteristics of Invented Spelling

Spelling is dynamic and complex. When children invent spelling, they think about words and generate new knowledge. Emerging spellers need to invent because inventing makes them think and learn. Purposeful writing is an important key to learning to spell. It unlocks children's thinking about spelling by engaging them in the process. Invented spelling is a constructive developmental procedure. Children internalize information about spoken and written words, organize that information, construct rules based on that information and apply these rules to spelling of words (Henderson, 1980). The ability to focus on a word's phonemic structure gets children started in using inventing spellings. Then, as they write, their skill at focusing on phonemes in words increases (Griffith, 1991).

Gentry (1987) compared learning to spell to learning to speak. When learning to speak, one babbles, then produces first words, then two word utterances, and finally mature speech. These are the developmental stages in learning to speak. This structure is similar to the pattern of learning to spell. In learning to spell one ". . . begins with low level strategies, followed by more complex productions, as children learn to self-correct and refine their language" (Gentry, 1987, p. 19). To

learn to spell requires more than the habit of associating sounds directly to letters. According to Henderson (1980), English spelling is dominated by underlying sound segments, which convey meaning. Learning to spell is a matter of acquiring knowledge rather than habits - in this case knowledge of how the alphabet reflects meaningful language.

### Stages of Invented Spelling

Researchers have described different stages of developmental spelling. Ehri (1989) listed four steps: precommunicative, semiphonetic, phonetic, and morphemic or traditional. Beers and Henderson (1977) included six stages: Preliterate, prephonetic, letter name, within-word pattern, syllable juncture, and derivational constancy. Weiner (1994), in a study describing how first graders spell, acknowledged that-

Despite the variation and description, developmental stage theorists believe that students move through a series of linguistically hierarchic stages in which students eventually manipulate (1) symbols without sound/symbol correspondence, (2) symbols with sound correspondence, (3) within-word letter patterns, and (4) across-word meaning patterns. The ultimate stage in spelling development is presumed to be standard, or accurate, spelling. (p. 316)

Gentry (1982) suggested five stages: precommunicative, prephonetic or semi-phonetic, phonetic, transitional, and correct. Gentry's stages more directly clarified and highlighted the various aspects of spelling development than those presented by the other researchers. The following is a description of Gentry's five stages of spelling development,

which most children experience. Gentry described these stages as the following:

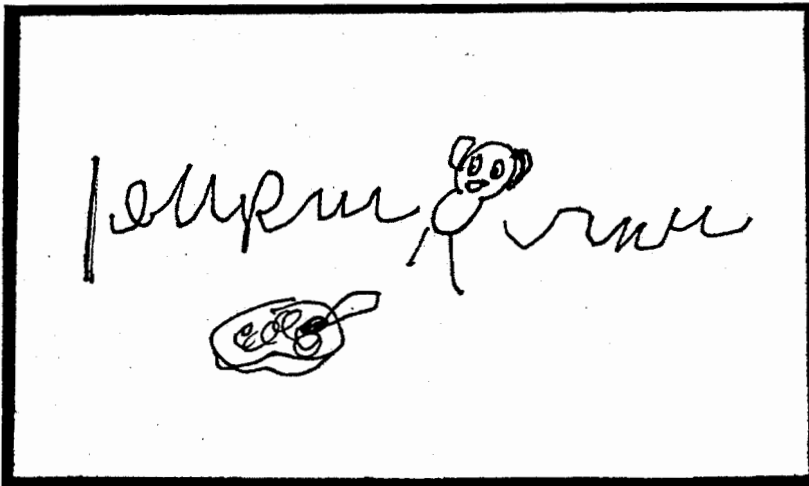
The first stage is precommunicative. At this early level of spelling development, a child first uses symbols from the alphabet to represent words. This stage does not represent a child's first attempt at writing. Children, at a very early age, practice pencil handling and scribbling. Gentry (1982) believed that children are at a precommunicative stage of spelling when they do the following:

- A. The speller demonstrates some knowledge of the alphabet.
- B. The speller does not show only knowledge of letter-sound correspondence.
- C. The speller may write bottom-top, right to left, left to right or randomly on a given page.
- D. The spelling may include number symbols.
- E. The speller may use a few letters over and over again.
- F. There is a frequent mixing of upper and lower case letters. Upper case letters are usually preferred.

Children are operating without the understanding of letter-sound correspondence at this stage. Thus, it is often difficult to understand their spelling. More and more, children in kindergarten and first grade are being encouraged to engage in

writing with invented spelling, in part at least, to help develop their decoding ability in reading (Cunningham & Cunningham, 1992). Although this early spelling deviates greatly from standard spelling, it is not to be seen as deviant. An example might look like the following:

Figure 1 Precommunicative Stage



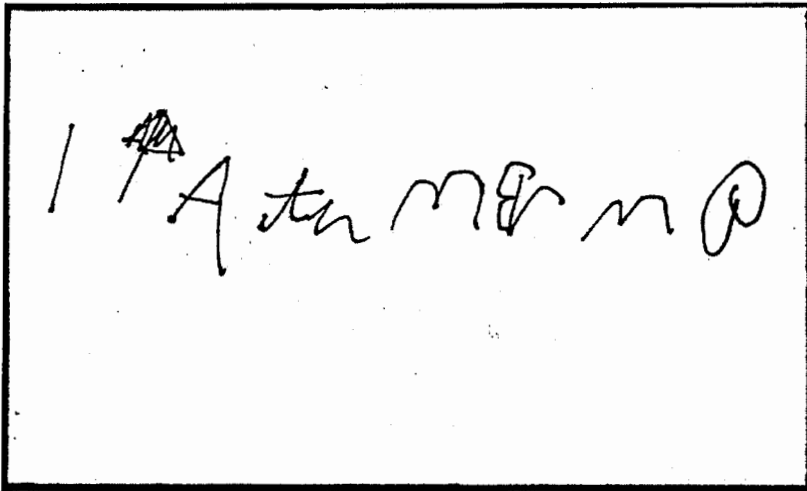
The second stage is called semi-phonetic. At this stage of spelling development, letters represent sounds, but only some of the sounds are represented. Characteristics of a semi-phonetic speller are the following:

- A. The speller begins to understand that letters have sounds that are used to represent the sounds in words.
- B. The speller uses a letter-name strategy to spell words. (Examples: R for are, U for you)



- C. The speller begins to use the left-to-right arrangement of letters.
- D. Alphabet knowledge and letter formations are more complete.

Figure 2 Semi-phonetic Stage



The third stage is the phonetic stage. At this stage words are spelled the way they sound. The speller represents all phonemes in a word, though spelling may be unconventional. The choices that children make for spelling are systematic and perceptually correct (Gentry, 1987). Characteristics of the speller at this stage are the following:

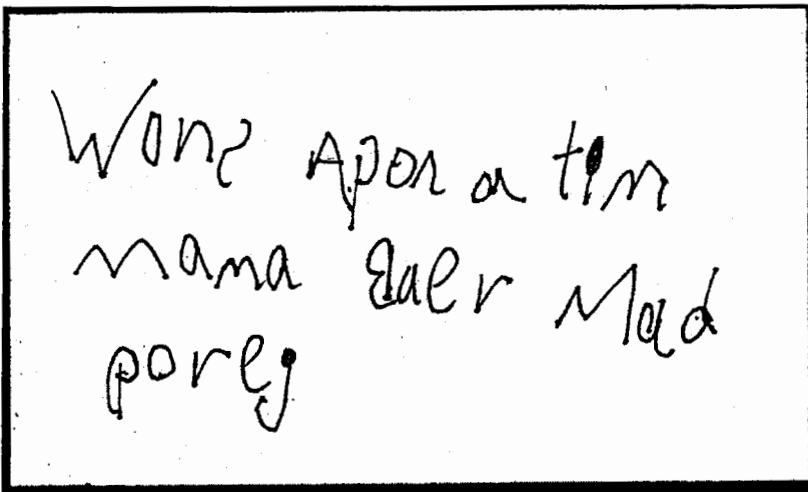
- A. The speller represents all essential sound features of a word in spelling.
- B. The speller develops particular spellings for long and short vowels, plural and past tense

markers and other aspects of spelling.

C. The speller chooses on the basis of sound without regard for English letter sequences or other conventions.

D. The speller shows an understanding of word segmentation.

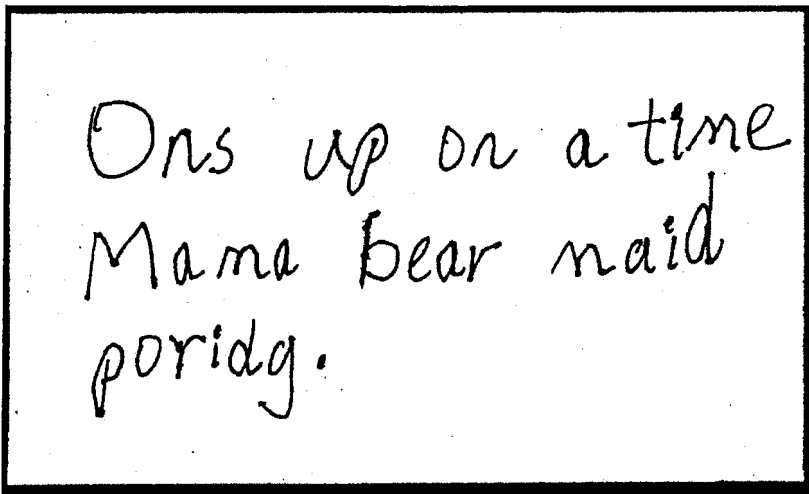
Figure 3 Phonetic Stage



The fourth stage is transitional spelling. It is during this stage that the child makes a major move towards Standard English orthography. The child uses more than phonetic information to spell a word. The speller puts a greater reliance on visual and morphological representations. Transitional spellers often spell many words correctly, but still misspell words that have irregularities. Some characteristics of spelling at this stage are the following:

- A. The speller usually follows the basic rules of English orthography.
- B. All appropriate letters are represented but some letters may be reversed. Not all visual strategies are mastered yet. (Example: HUOSE for house, or ABUL for able)
- C. The speller uses learned words more in their writing.

Figure 4 Transitional Spelling Stage



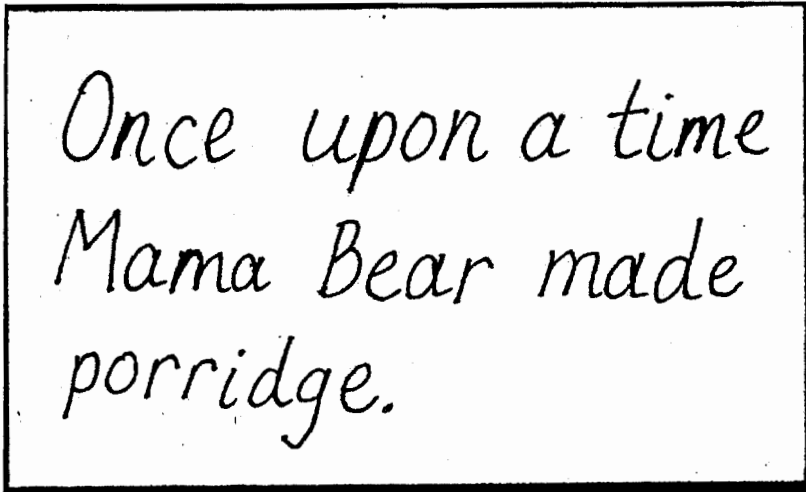
The fifth stage is correct spelling. This stage of spelling is when the child can spell most words correctly. The characteristics at this stage are the following:

- A. The speller can understand the spelling system and its rules.
- B. The speller uses accurate spelling of prefixes,

suffixes, and the ability to distinguish homonyms.

- C. The speller can recognize when a word does not look correct and is able to use a visual strategy to self-correct.

Figure 5 Correct Spelling Stage



The speller can learn irregular spelling patterns. The developmental stages have gained more and more credibility in recent years as researchers and teachers have validated these stages. The idea that spelling is a right or wrong concept has been disputed. Teachers must be aware of the stages the children are going through and be sensitive to their needs at that time. Children in the class will be at different stages of development. Therefore, spelling instruction should be individualized or addressed in small groups.

#### Advantages of Invented Spelling

The major advantage of invented spelling is the opportunity

for young children to write independently. Most educators now agree that invented spelling is a valuable tool for first draft writing, particularly for younger children who would barely be able to express themselves in writing without it (Wilde, 1996). In this respect, Chomsky (1971) suggested that preschoolers could begin to write with invented spelling even before they started reading. Clarke (1988) compared the effectiveness of invented spelling versus an emphasis on correct spelling in first grade classrooms. The children who had used invented spelling were superior to the others on measures of word decoding at the end of the year. Having young students engage in invented spelling during writing not only helps them become better spellers, but also facilitates the development of their decoding ability (Chomsky, 1971; Richgels, 1987). When children attempt to represent their speech with letters, they are applying phonics in a truly authentic context (Templeton & Morris, 1999). As further support, Clarke (1988) looked at first graders across a variety of measures and found that, those who were encouraged to use invented spelling not only wrote more, but they also spelled better. Research has shown that as young children engage in invented spelling, they can become better spellers (Clarke, 1988; Richgels, 1987). Invented spelling allows children to concentrate on their messages without over concern for correctness. That attitude has allowed

kindergarten children to see themselves as writers early in the school year (Routman, 1993).

Another research finding related invented spelling and reading progress. More and more children in kindergarten and first grade are being encouraged to engage in writing with invented spelling, in part at least, to help develop their decoding ability in reading (Cunningham, 1992). The words children encounter in reading texts often exceed the limits of their orthographic understanding because their spelling encounters deal with fewer words (Invernizzi et al., 1994).

#### Problems of Invented Spelling

Many children will benefit from using invented spelling, but some researchers have expressed concerns about the use of invented spelling. Weiner (1994) stated further investigation of the ways in which children spell words is needed in order to broaden the applicability of theories about spelling knowledge. Templeton and Morris (1999) wondered how long invented spelling should be allowed before addressing conventional spelling. The demands of spelling are intensified when inventive spellers realize that spellings must account not only for how words sound but also for how they look. Gentry and Gillet (1993) thought inventive spellers must ultimately disassociate written language from spoken language in order to spell correctly.

The greatest argument against invented spelling comes from

parents. They remember spelling as they were taught, through rote memorization and drills. They believe that, unless children are taught like this, they will never learn to spell correctly. Among many parents and some state legislators, reaction against invented spelling has been strong and often vehement (Templeton & Morris 1999). Some teachers have felt so much pressure from parents about the use of invented spelling that they have returned to a weekly spelling test, even though they do not believe in it (Wilde, 1996).

The blame for poor spelling has been put squarely on the shoulders of teachers, as they are the ones who are encouraging children to use invented spelling. The whole language movement has encouraged writing as one of its central components. Many teachers developed negative attitudes toward invented spelling because they felt they were not allowed to correct the students' writing (Routman, 1993).

Another problem is that at-risk children often lack the knowledge to use phonemic awareness and letter-sound relationships. At-risk children need a more direct approach to develop their invented spelling skills (Cunningham, 1992).

## CHAPTER 3

## GUIDELINES FOR INVENTED SPELLING

## Developing Guidelines

A set of guidelines is necessary for invented spelling in early literacy. The following suggestions can be utilized to ensure success in invented spelling for children.

1. An environment for invented spelling should be created.

The proper place for spelling instruction is within the writing program. Spelling is critical in the writing process. Children should value spelling as a tool for writing. When children are surrounded by the alphabet, a word wall, vowel phrases, and other available writing materials, they are encouraged to express themselves in writing. Children must read and write daily in a language-rich environment to develop properly as spellers. Active daily writing is necessary for spelling development in all grades. Invented spelling frees the spirit to write things that otherwise might not be expressed. Spelling enables the writer to communicate.

2. Implementation of invented spelling requires specific strategies.

Henderson and Beers (1980) identified three steps for becoming a better teacher of spelling, along with reading and writing. The first step was to encourage creative writing.



Children need opportunities to write independently so they can discover how to spell words on their own. The second step for teaching beginning readers to spell is to de-emphasize standard spelling. Children should be allowed to spell the best that they can, instead of being expected to spell words correctly all the time. The third step is for the teacher to learn how to respond appropriately to students' nonstandard spelling. The teacher must recognize when a child transitions from one developmental stage to the next.

Students should write daily. It should be a natural part of the classroom routine. The frequency of applying spelling knowledge while writing moves spelling forward developmentally. The focus of spelling should be on the student's self selected words.

An effective way to teach spelling in the classroom would be to implement a spelling workshop. Students would be able to study words in a variety of ways that are appropriate to their developmental level. Spelling should be considered a part of the literacy program.

3. Teachers need to observe students as they use invented spelling.

A close look at children's spelling inventions provides a glimpse of the major principles of the writing system they are trying to master. Understanding the developmental stages would

indicate to a teacher when to teach certain skills. By analyzing a child's invented spellings, teachers can design word activities that are appropriate to the child's current written language competence. Children who are encouraged to invent spellings will refine those spellings and progress developmentally toward correctness.

The carefully researched scoring guidelines for the developmental spelling assessments make clear the kinds of linguistic sensitivities that young children exhibit. This measure of invented spelling may be used both by classroom teachers and researchers as a tool for understanding young children's conceptualizations of letter-sound correspondences (McBride-Chang, 1998).

#### 4. Feedback should be given for invented spelling.

Teachers should observe and assess students' efforts and progress. The teacher should analyze the writing, note the changes in spelling strategies, apply skills taught, and acknowledge progress toward spelling competency. By determining the stages of spelling development, the teacher would be able to provide clues for instruction. According to Gentry and Gillet (1993), emphasizing correct spelling should occur only after the writer has crafted the content to his or her satisfaction. Teachers should choose only a few errors to point out to the writer. It is important to praise as well as correct.

Recognize the hard words that are spelled correctly, or recognize parts of a misspelled word that are correct. Gentry and Gillet (1993) noted that response to effort, as well as achievement, is encouraging.

Positive feedback is critically important in developing positive attitudes about spelling (Gentry & Gillet, 1993). Mini-lessons in word study offer ideal opportunities to provide guided instruction within a process-oriented reading and writing classroom (Invernizzi et al., 1994). While *Making Words* has only been investigated as one component of multimethod, multilevel reading instruction, initial results of this combination are very encouraging (Cunningham, 1992).

Students who share their writings are able to get peer interaction. Children are encouraged to respond to each others' written word. When struggling with spelling, students may also feel less embarrassment in asking for help from their peers. Poor spellers in particular may feel shy about letting the teacher see how many errors they have made, but they may be less concerned about getting help from classmates. Students must develop a desire and concern for spelling words correctly.

## CHAPTER 4

## SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine the development of invented spelling in early literacy. The paper addressed four questions to accomplish this purpose:

1. What is invented spelling?

Invented spelling is intuitive spellings that students create before being introduced to conventional spelling. It is a process of learning to spell. Chomsky (1971) said the concept of invented spelling was developed to describe how young children express themselves in written form prior to formal alphabetic instruction. Gentry (1982) described five stages of spelling development.

2. What are the advantages of invented spelling?

The major advantage of invented spelling is the opportunity for young children to write independently. Invented spelling is a valuable tool (Wilde, 1996). It allows children at an early age to express themselves in writing. When children attempt to represent their speech with letters, they are applying phonics in a truly authentic context (Templeton & Morris, 1999). Children engaged in writing with invented spelling, in part, also develop their decoding ability in

reading (Cunningham, 1992). They can become better spellers (Clarke, 1988; Richgels, 1987).

### 3. What are the problems of invented spelling?

One of the problems of invented spelling is the pressure teachers receive from parents about using it, rather than having weekly spelling tests. Many teachers developed negative attitudes toward invented spelling because they felt they were not allowed to correct the students' writing (Routman, 1993). At-risk children need a more direct approach to spelling.

### 4. What are the guidelines that should be used with invented spelling?

One of the most important guidelines educators should use to develop children's invented spelling is to provide daily opportunities for children to write in a language rich environment. Teachers should understand the developmental spelling stages. The teacher should analyze the writing, note the changes in spelling strategies, and provide clues for instruction. The students' efforts and progress should be acknowledged.

## Conclusions

The following conclusions were drawn from this study:

1. Invented spelling is a predictable developmental process in young children's writings.
2. Using invented spelling allows children to concentrate

on the content or meaning of their writing, instead of worrying about correct spellings.

3. There are sequential, developmental stages of invented spelling in early literacy. They consist of scribbles, symbols, letters, sounds, phonics, and words.
4. Children who use invented spellings are usually better able to decode words in reading.
5. Spellers need feedback on their invented spelling efforts in order to progress.

#### Recommendations

Based on a review of the literature, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. Children need to be provided opportunities to read and write daily.
2. Teachers and parents need to be educated in the developmental stages of spelling so they can better understand the process of children's writings.
3. Teachers need to recognize children's effort, as well as achievement, in their invented spellings.

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