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Parental Attitudes Toward Using Inventive Spelling with Kindergarten Age
Children

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Introduction

Across the United States millions of children are reciting spelling lists, participating in Spelling Bee s, and taking spelling tests. In fact, a significant portion of an elementary child's school day is devoted to learning to spell words traditionally or correctly. With such an emphasis being placed on spelling, it is logical to assume spelling traditionally is valued in our society. However, a different philosophy, Whole Language, takes an opposite approach on how writing and spelling should be incorporated in the classroom. Whole Language focuses on children learning to write and read at the same time. The focus is not on the child using correct spelling, but simply letting the child express himself/herself in writing using the best spelling he/she can. This idea has been termed inventive spelling.

Allowing students to write without being concerned with correct spelling seems to be a positive approach to fostering creativity and enthusiasm in a child's early writing. Why then are so few teachers using inventive spelling in early childhood classrooms? As mentioned earlier, traditional spelling seems to be deemed important by society for a child to function and write acceptably in the American culture. A teacher is in the position of trying to prepare students for tasks they will face when

they leave the school system, and join the work force. If parents, employers, citizens, etc., expect individuals to leave school knowing how to spell correctly and see inventive spelling as an inhibitor to this end, it is logical to see why teachers are reluctant to teach spelling any other way but traditionally. Although several articles were found which suggested the importance of educating parents and others of the benefits of using inventive spelling, no study was located in which researchers asked parents whether they supported the idea of using inventive spelling with young children. The purpose of this study was to determine the attitudes of parents of kindergarten age children toward using inventive spelling in the classroom.

Review of Related Literature

Inventive spelling may be a term new to both educators and parents. The idea of using inventive spelling as opposed to traditional or correct spelling is a fairly new concept. The research on inventive spelling started with work done by Chomsky and Read in 1971 (Clark, 1988). Since then it has become a topic of increasing interest among educational researchers. Inventive spelling has been defined by Lutz (1986) as a young child's attempt to use his or her best judgement about

spelling. Clark (1988) further explains inventive spelling as "pre-readers and beginners' spelling of words using symbols they associate with the sounds they hear in words they wish to write." Several books and articles have been written since 1971 suggesting inventive spelling is the most appropriate way for children to learn to write and express themselves (Hoffman & Knipping, 1988; Strickland & Morrow, 1989).

Most children enter kindergarten viewing themselves as writers (Graves, 1983). Researchers have found that students who view themselves as writers, and are allowed the opportunity to write and experiment with language are more likely to write (Graves, 1983; Gentry, 1987). The more a child writes the more he or she learns about language, print, and spelling (Gentry, 1987). A child who is engaged in inventive spelling is thinking about sounds and spellings even if he or she is not technically correct in the finished product (Gentry, 1987). Children encouraged to use inventive spelling from the start of their writing have been shown to gradually adopt appropriate symbols for sounds and do progress to traditional spelling as they become more aware of conventional written language (Gentry, 1987; Read, 1971; Henderson, 1981).

Many whole language advocates have also suggested children using

inventive spelling tend to write more because they feel less restricted to use words they do not have correct spellings for (Chomsky, 1979; Graves, 1983). This may not be the case. Clark (1988) conducted an important study comparing writing done by first grade children in two traditional spelling classrooms against writing done by first grade children in two inventive spelling classrooms. She found that children in these classrooms did not differ in using words they did not know how to spell. However, she did find children using inventive spelling developed an area of strength. Clark states that the inventive spellers had developed "superior spelling and phonic analysis skill..and benefited from the practice of matching sound segments of words to letters as they wrote from using their own sound sequence analysis" (pp. 307). Clark's study which was conducted over a period of five months also found that the text length for inventive spellers increased significantly more than that of the traditional spellers, over the period of the study. Clark acknowledges that the children in her study were from middle-class backgrounds, and results for children from other backgrounds may not show the same results. However, she suggests that, "...the effects of invented spelling in the writing process itself--on independence, confidence, and on sheer amount of writing--would persist under a variety of conditions and would

pay dividends" (pp. 307).

Learning to Spell

In the process of learning to spell correctly one goes through several stages. Gentry (1987) describes five stages of spelling development: precommunicative, semiphonetic; phonetic, transitional, and correct. The precommunicative stage involves children using symbols from the alphabet, but showing no knowledge of letter-sound correspondence. The semiphonetic stage is where the child begins to recognize the connection between letters and sounds. Children in the phonetic stage use a letter or group of letters to represent the sounds they hear in a word. The transitional stage involves the child beginning to rely on visual cues from previous reading and writing experience, instead of relying on sounds for spelling. The last stage correct, is where the speller recognizes the basic rules of spelling. The speller can deal with prefixes, suffixes, silent letters, etc. (Lutz, 1986).

According to Graves (1983), children who are allowed to progress through the stages of spelling just as they are allowed to progress through the stages of oral language will become proficient spellers, just as they become proficient users of oral language. Eventually with experimentation and time every child learns to talk. Support, and

encouragement, time and experimentation will also eventually lead the child to becoming a correct speller (Fields, 1988).

In Clark's (1988) study those children using inventive spelling did progress toward correct spelling by showing increases in Gentry's transitional and phonetic stages. However, only traditional spellers in her study increased in the correct stage. Clark suggests this could be because the study was only conducted over a five month period and therefore it was too short of a time to see an increase in the correct stage for inventive spellers. Clark also suggests that teachers using inventive spelling in their classrooms do not stress correct spelling because of their personal teaching philosophy, and this could explain why only traditional spellers increased in the correct stage.

Attitudes Toward Inventive Spelling

Many teachers are seeing the benefit of allowing children to experiment with writing and spelling. They see their students are excited about writing and consequently write more (Clark, 1988). However, some teachers still feel inclined to teach children how to spell at an early age because correct spelling is expected by other teachers and parents (Woods, 1982). Many articles have been written telling teachers to inform parents about inventive spelling and the benefits it offers children

(Fields, 1988; Sulzby & Teale, 1985; Clay, 1975). However, research and articles were lacking on how parents actually feel toward the use of inventive spelling. When teachers more fully understand how parents see their children's use of invented spelling more effective efforts to educate parents as to the benefits of inventive spelling can be made.

Inventive spelling is attracting a great deal of attention among researchers and teachers. Research has shown that children using inventive spelling progress toward using correct spelling, while developing excellent phonic analysis skills. Inventive spellers also produce longer texts than traditional spellers do. These findings strongly suggest that inventive spelling is beneficial to children and would enhance reading, writing, and spelling skills. Therefore, it is imperative parental attitudes toward inventive spelling are assessed, so concerns can be addressed.

Purpose and Objectives

The general purpose of this study was to determine whether parents of kindergarten age children supported the use of inventive spelling in their child's writing.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How familiar are kindergartners' parents with the philosophy behind inventive (temporary, creative) spellings?
2. How supportive are kindergartners' parents of a teacher's encouragement of inventive spellings at school?
3. What concerns, if any, do parents have about the use of inventive spellings?
4. How do parents respond to inventive spellings in their children's work?
5. Are there differences in responses between parents whose children are in a whole language writing program and those parents whose children are in a more traditional kindergarten writing program?

Methods

Subjects

The parents surveyed in this study were parents of children in two different kindergarten classrooms. One teacher used whole language writing approach (inventive spelling), and the other teacher did not. Both groups of parents live in middle class neighborhoods in small cities in Northern Utah, with one group having a slightly lower socio-economic status than the other. The two groups were similar in ethnic

composition. In both classrooms approximately 90% of the students were EuroAmerican, and 10% of the students were members of ethnic or racial minority groups. There were 26 students in one classroom, and 27 students in the other classroom, making a total of 53 students whose parents were surveyed. Forty-three of the 53 surveys were returned. The return rate was high, 81%. Slightly more parents in the whole language classroom (N=24) returned their surveys than in the traditional spelling classroom (N=19).

Design

Each child's parents were sent a survey on their views toward inventive spelling with an introductory letter (See appendix A). The surveys were sent home with the kindergarten children and a self-addressed stamped envelope was provided for returning the survey to the researcher. The survey consisted of 12 questions. The survey was intended to get a feeling for parents' attitudes on using inventive spelling in the classroom, and answer the five research questions. Each survey was numbered and a corresponding number was assigned to each set of parents participating in the survey. Parents were informed that there was a number on their survey, and that this number would be used only for identifying which surveys had been received. Parents were assured

of the confidentiality of their responses. Surveys were distributed twice since the first distribution had a return ratio that was less than 75%.

Analysis

Descriptive statistics were generated about the subjects' attitudes toward the use of inventive spelling with young children. A contingency table analysis was done to analyze the difference between the parents' view in a traditional classroom and whole language classroom.

Findings

As stated earlier this project was guided by five research questions. This section will report the findings of the survey as they relate to the five research questions. Tables 1 and 2 show the frequencies of responses to each of the 12 questions on the parent survey.

Insert Table 1 and 2 about here

Philosophy of Inventive Spelling

The first research question dealt with how familiar parents of kindergarten age children are with the philosophy behind inventive spelling. Research data collected showed parents were familiar with the philosophy behind inventive spelling (See Table 1). Ninety-Eight percent of those parents surveyed disagreed with the statement that most kindergarten age children were too young to write (See question 4). Only 2% of the parents were uncertain. None agreed with the statement. Sixty-Seven percent of those surveyed disagreed with the statement that children should learn how to read before time is spent on writing (question 6). Only 28% were uncertain and 5% agreed with the

statement. The majority of parents (70%) agreed with the statement that encouraging inventive spelling is important because it gives a child the chance to write without being concerned about spelling every word correctly (question 7). Fourteen percent disagreed and 16% were uncertain. In response to the question about inventive spelling being an important step in learning how to spell words correctly (question 8); sixty percent agreed with this statement, 14% disagreed, and 26% were uncertain. Finally, as shown in Table 1, parents in both groups agreed with the statement that inventive spelling is acceptable in kindergarten but should not be encouraged beyond that (question 9). Overall, 51% of the parents agreed, 26% disagreed, and 23% of the parents were uncertain.

The overall findings regarding parents understanding the philosophy behind inventive spelling suggested most parents were familiar with the philosophy and accepting of their children using inventive spelling. However, 51% of the parents surveyed agreed with the statement that inventive spelling was acceptable in kindergarten but not beyond that. This suggests that most parents are supportive of inventive spelling at the kindergarten level, but many feel it should not be encouraged as children move into first grade and beyond.

Support for Teachers

Research question two was how supportive are kindergartners' parents of a teacher's encouragement of inventive spellings at school? This question was answered by two items on the survey. Table 1 shows that parents overall disagreed with the statement that kindergarten teachers should discourage their students from using inventive spellings (question 2). Seventy percent of the parents surveyed disagreed with the statement, 18% agreed with the statement, and 12% were uncertain. Table 2 shows most parents would be supportive of a teacher using inventive spelling and would encourage and accept inventive spellings at home (question 12). Seventy percent said they would support the teacher; 20% indicated they would support the teacher, but encourage correct spelling in the home; and 10% said they would disagree with the teacher. Overall, it can be said that the majority of parents would support a kindergarten teacher using inventive spelling in the classroom, however, about one third of the parents indicated they would use correct spellings with their child at home.

Concerns about Inventive Spelling

Research question three addressed what concerns, if any, parents have about the use of inventive spelling. Table 1 shows parents disagree

with the statement that children who are encouraged to use inventive spelling in kindergarten will be at a disadvantage in later grades (question 1). Fifty-One percent of the parents disagreed with the statement, 28% of the parents agreed with the statement, and 21% of the parents were uncertain. Table 1 shows how parents felt in regards to the statement that children should be discouraged from using inventive spelling because it is difficult to understand what they have written (question 3). Seventy-Two percent of the parents disagreed with this statement, 19% agreed, and 9% were uncertain. Parents overall disagreed with the statement children will lose the motivation to spell correctly if their inventive spellings are encouraged and accepted (question 5), as shown in Table 1. Sixty percent of the parents surveyed disagreed with the statement, 23% agreed with the statement, and 16% were uncertain. Although the majority of parents did not express concerns about the use of inventive spelling, about one quarter to one fifth of the parents did have concerns.

Response to Inventive Spelling in Child's Work

The fourth research question asked how parents would respond to inventive spellings in their children's work. Table 2 shows parents would generally respond positively if their child used inventive spellings in a

message they wrote at home (question 10). Sixty percent of the parents would accept the inventive spellings, 35% would show the child how the message should be spelled correctly, and 5% would not correct the spelling, but would be concerned. Finally, Table 2 shows parents would generally be accepting of a paper a child had brought home from school with misspelled words on it (question 11). Seventy-four percent said they would accept the paper without concern, no parents felt the teacher should have corrected the words, and 26% of the parents would talk with the child about the importance of correct spelling. The majority of parents on these two questions indicated they would accept a child's inventive spelling. There was, however, about one fourth to one third of the parents who felt they should emphasize correct spelling.

Differences between Classes

Research question five was intended to see if there was any significant differences between the attitudes of parents from the whole language classroom, and the traditional classroom. A chi-square analysis was run to determine if any statistically significant differences ($p \leq .05$) existed between the two groups. There were no statistically significant differences between the whole language group and the traditional group. Although none of the differences were statistically

significant there were some interesting trends indicated in the responses of these two groups (See Appendix B, Figures 1-12). Trends for question 7 and 8 were in the expected direction. Parents of children in the whole language classroom were more likely than parents of children in the traditional classroom to agree that inventive spelling was an important process in writing and learning to spell correctly. Interestingly, however, on questions 10 and 11 parents of children in the traditional classroom were more likely to ignore incorrect spellings in their child's work at home and at school than were parents from the whole language classroom.

Discussion

Overall the parents of children in both classrooms seemed supportive of having their children use inventive spelling in kindergarten. This finding is important for teachers who are reluctant to use inventive spelling in the classroom because they assume parents are not supportive of inventive spelling. This study showed that parents from both the whole language classroom and the traditional classroom felt their children should be encouraged to write in kindergarten. The majority of parents also indicated they would support teachers who encouraged their children to use inventive spelling in the classroom. Although the sample size in this study was very small, and results might not hold true for parents from different socio-economic or ethnic backgrounds, for this study the response for inventive spelling was positive. This finding should reassure educators now using inventive spelling, and those considering using inventive spelling.

Although the majority of parents were supportive of using inventive spelling with kindergarten age children, Table 1 shows 26% of the parents felt that it should not be used beyond kindergarten (question 9). This finding is important to note. Even though parents seem to support the idea for their young kindergarten child, they are worried about the

use of inventive spelling beyond kindergarten. In the comments section several responses indicate why parents might be reluctant for their children to use inventive spelling beyond kindergarten. Some said they had previous children use inventive spelling and are struggling in traditional spelling classrooms now. Other parents suggested they are terrible spellers and hope their children will be better spellers than they were. The concerns expressed by parents are important to note, and address if inventive spelling is used in the classroom.

Educators who wish to use inventive spelling with children older than kindergarten age might face problems or concerns parents have about inventive spelling that were not expressed in the data collected for this research project. Further study might deal with these concerns.

Finally, a surprising trend was noted in this study that was the opposite of what would be expected. On two questions, parents surveyed in the traditional classroom showed slightly more support for inventive spelling than parents from the whole language classroom. Figures 10 and 11 in Appendix B show that parents of children in the traditional classroom were slightly more accepting of inventive spelling (i.e., less concerned with correcting spelling) than those whose children were using inventive spelling every day in their classroom. This finding

was not significant and might be explained by the small sample size. It also could be that the parents in the traditional classroom reported what they think they might do if their child was using inventive spelling, but because they had never dealt with it as the whole language group had, perhaps the answers were not realistic. Further research should be done in this area with a larger sample size before this finding can be fully explained.

Overall, the parents surveyed from both classrooms seemed supportive of inventive spelling and the opportunity it affords their child to write and experiment with language. This study suggests inventive spelling could be used with kindergarten age children. Teachers, in this study, would also have the support of parents. This study found some parents had concerns that would need to be addressed by teachers, especially if the teacher were to use inventive spelling with older children. Finally, this study showed parents with children in a traditional classroom, were generally as supportive of inventive spelling as parents of children in the whole language classroom. Because of the small sample size, the results of this study may not indicate what would happen in a different setting with a larger sample size. Further research in this area would be helpful to teachers who are considering implementing or have already

implemented whole language programs.

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Table 1

Parental Attitudes Toward Using Inventive Spelling with
Kindergarten Age Children

	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Uncertain</u>
Question 1	28%	51%	21%
Question 2	18	70	12
Question 3	19	72	9
Question 4	--	98	2
Question 5	23	61	16
Question 6	5	67	28
Question 7	70	14	16
Question 8	60	14	26
Question 9	51	26	23

N= 43

Table 2

Frequencies of Response to Parents Attitudes on Teaching Correct
Spelling in Kindergarten Classrooms

Question 10	If your kindergarten child wrote the following message to you at home, how would you respond? i lik mi scol
60%	I would ignore the incorrect spellings and be pleased that the child was writing.
35	I would read the message and then show the child how the words should be spelled and written correctly.
5	I wouldn't correct the spelling but I would be concerned about his/her spelling ability.
Question 11	If your kindergarten child brought home a paper from school on which he or she had misspelled words, how would you respond?
74%	I would accept such a paper without concern because I feel correct spelling is not important at this age.
--	I would feel that the teacher should have corrected the child's misspelled words.
26	I would talk with the child about the importance of correct spelling and we would correct the errors together.
Question 12	At a parent teacher meeting, your child's kindergarten teacher shares that she/he believes that even very young children can write if we are willing to accept their inventive spellings. How would you respond?
70%	I would agree with the teacher and be supportive of the child's writing by encouraging inventive spelling at home.
20	I would support the teacher but I would stress correct spelling in my child's writing at home.
10	I would disagree with the teacher. If children are old enough to write they should be taught to use correct spellings.

N=43

Appendix A

February 20, 1992

Dear Parent,

I am a Senior in Elementary Education at Utah State University and I will be graduating this Spring. In connection with my graduation I am completing a Senior Thesis Project. This project involves doing research on an educational topic. I have chosen to complete a project that addresses parents' concerns and attitudes about the use of inventive spelling in kindergarten classrooms. Inventive spelling is when children use their knowledge of print to spell words the best they can. An example might be a young child spelling the word "grass" as "gs", "grs", or "grss". I am interested in finding out what you think about inventive spelling and how you feel about your child using inventive spelling.

The enclosed survey asks several questions about inventive spelling. Please fill out the survey and answer the questions honestly. A number has been written on your survey so that I can identify who has returned a survey. However, your responses will be kept confidential. Only a summary of the results will be given to your child's teacher. Individual responses and surveys will not be shared.

After you have completed the survey please use the stamped self-addressed envelope provided to return the survey. I appreciate your taking the time to complete the survey and assisting me in my project for graduation.

Sincerely,

Sue A. Dearden

Survey on Inventive Spelling

The term "inventive spelling" refers to children spelling words the best they can given their knowledge of sounds and letters. (For example, a young child might write "dn" for "down" or "sed" for "said.")

Part I: Please read the following items and circle whether you agree "A" or disagree "D" with the statement. If you are not sure, circle "U" for uncertain.

Agree Disagree Uncertain

- 1) A D U Children who are encouraged to use inventive spelling in kindergarten will be at a disadvantage in later grades when words must be spelled correctly.
- 2) A D U Kindergarten teachers should discourage their students from using inventive spellings.
- 3) A D U When a young child uses inventive spelling it is difficult to understand what the child has written so inventive spelling should be discouraged.
- 4) A D U Most kindergartners are too young to write and should not be encouraged to do so.
- 5) A D U Children will lose the motivation to spell correctly if their inventive spellings are encouraged and accepted.
- 6) A D U Children should learn how to read before time is spent on writing.
- 7) A D U Encouraging inventive spelling is important because it gives a child the chance to write without being concerned about spelling every word correctly.
- 8) A D U Using inventive spelling is an important step in learning how to spell words correctly.
- 9) A D U Inventive spelling is acceptable in kindergarten but should not be encouraged beyond that.

PART II: For the following items put an X by the statement that comes closest to how you would respond.

10) If your kindergarten child wrote the following message to you at home, how would you respond?

i lik mi scol (I like my school.)

- a. I would ignore the incorrect spellings and be pleased that the child was writing.
- b. I would read the message and then show the child how the words should be spelled and written correctly.
- c. I wouldn't correct the spelling but I would be concerned about his/her spelling ability.

11) If your kindergarten child brought home a paper from school on which he or she had misspelled words, how would you respond?

- a. I would accept such a paper without concern because I feel correct spelling is not important at this age.
- b. I would feel that the teacher should have corrected the child's misspelled words.
- c. I would talk with the child about the importance of correct spelling and we would correct the errors together.

12) At a parent teacher meeting, your child's kindergarten teacher shares that she/he believes that even very young children can write if we are willing to accept their inventive spellings. How would you respond?

- a. I would agree with the teacher and be supportive of the child's writing by encouraging inventive spellings at home.
- b. I would support the teacher but I would stress correct spelling in my child's writing at home.
- c. I would disagree with the teacher. If children are old enough to write they should be taught to use correct spellings.

Comments:

Thank you again for taking time to fill out this survey. Your answers will be kept confidential.

Appendix B

Figure B-1.

Children who are encouraged to use inventive spelling in kindergarten will be at a disadvantage in later grades when words must be spelled correctly.

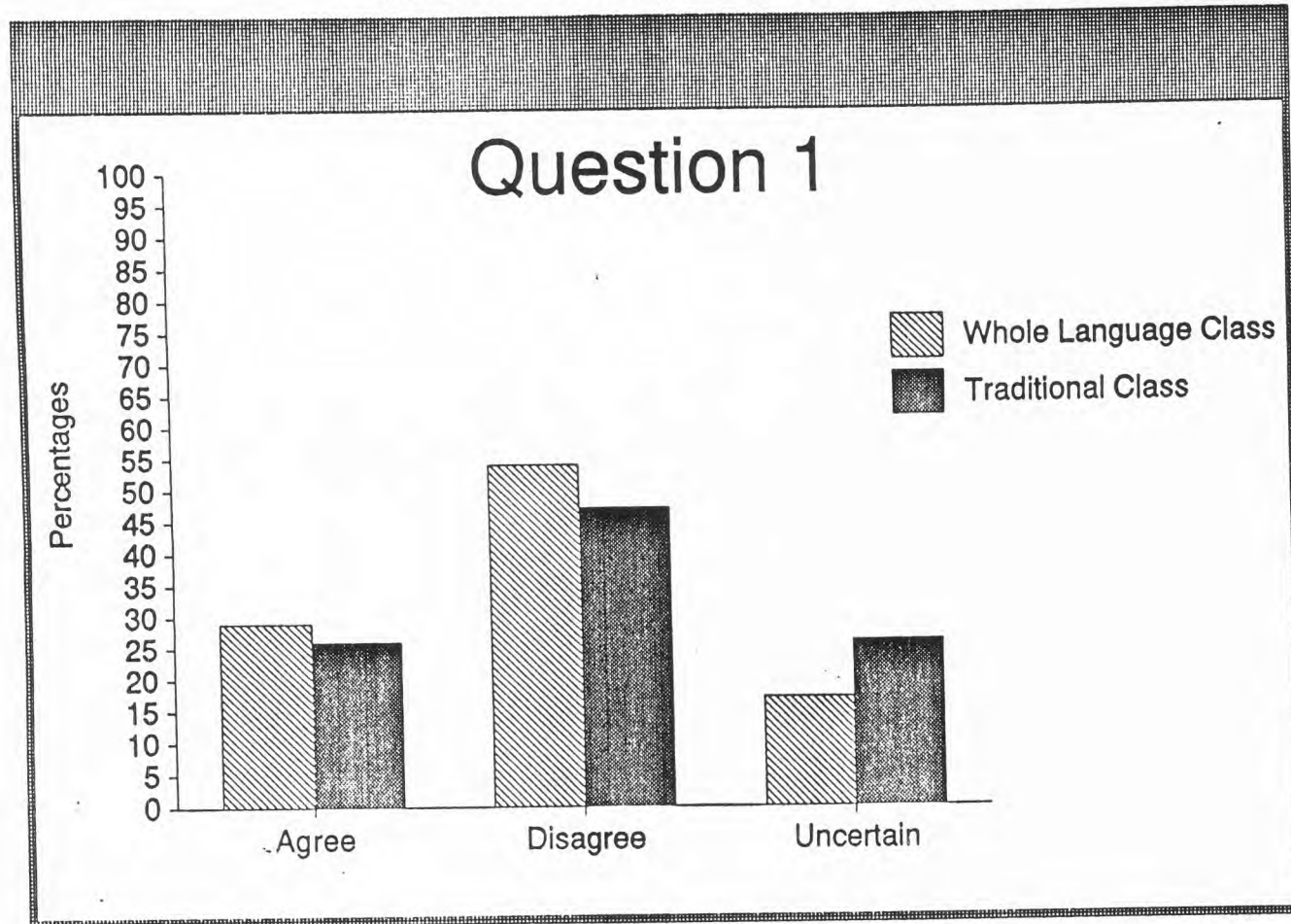


Figure B-2.

Kindergarten teachers should discourage their students from using inventive spellings.

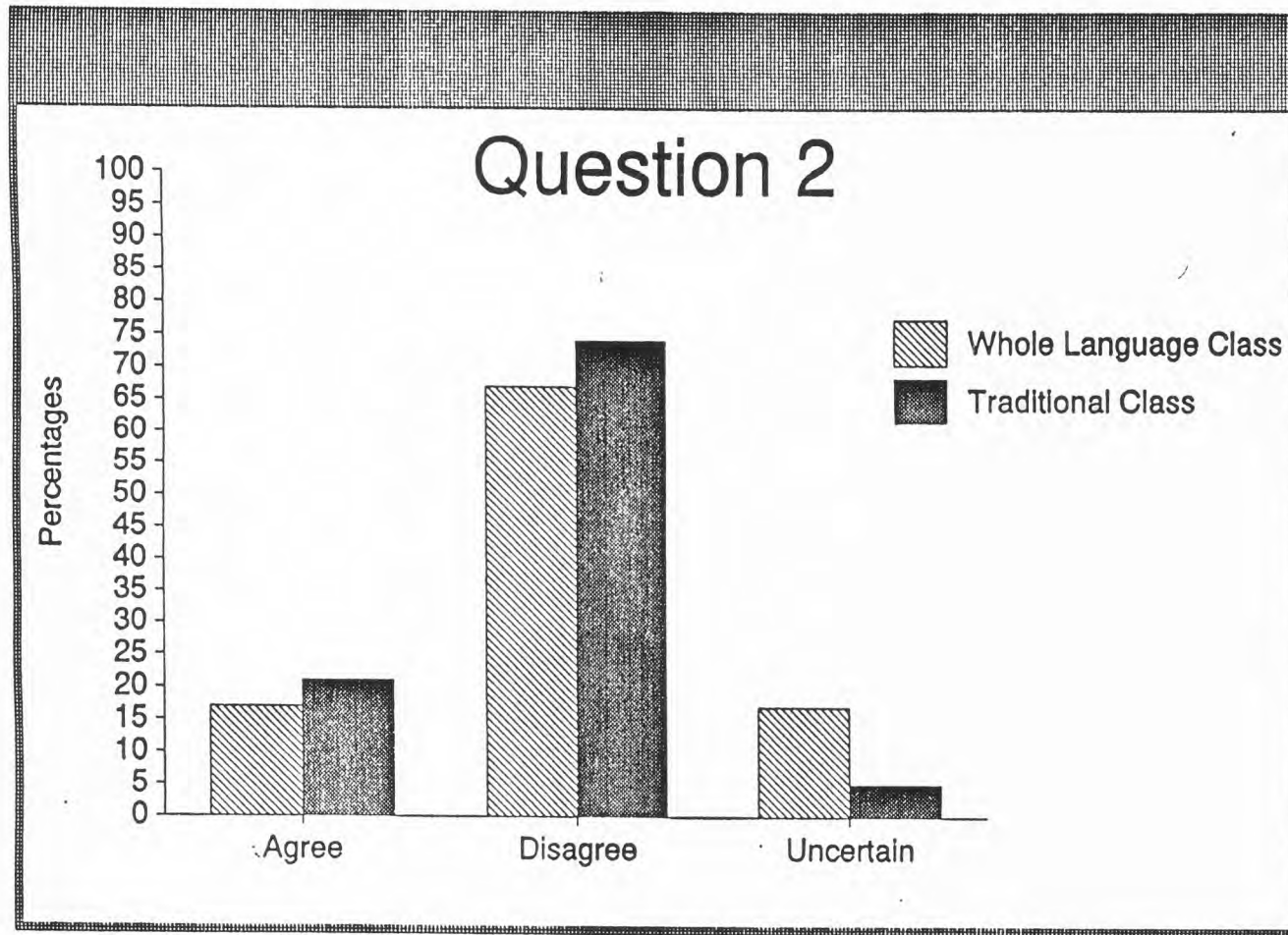


Figure B-3.

When a young child uses inventive spelling it is difficult to understand what the child has written so inventive spelling should be discouraged.

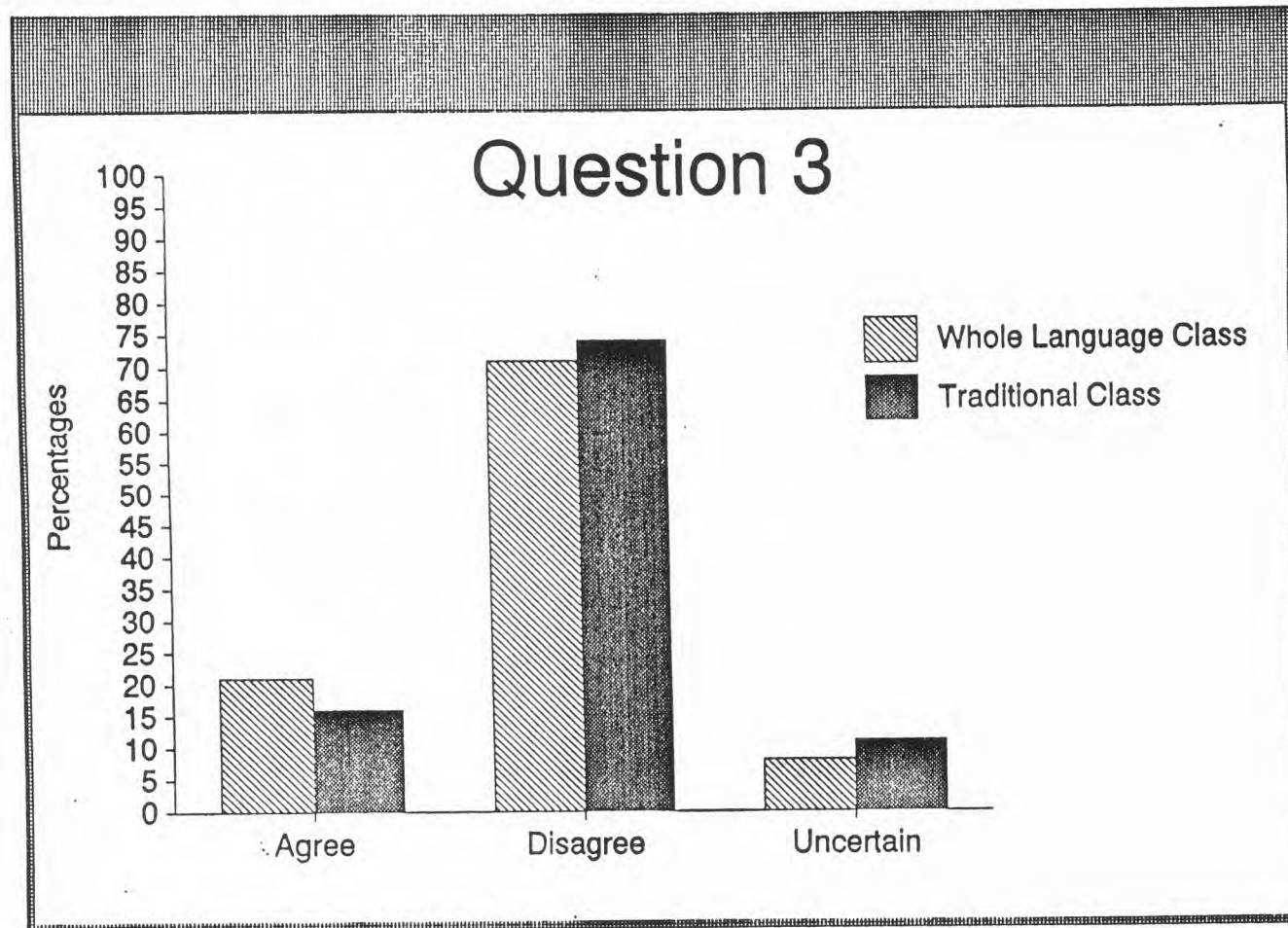


Figure B-4.

Most kindergartners are too young to write and should not be encouraged to do so.

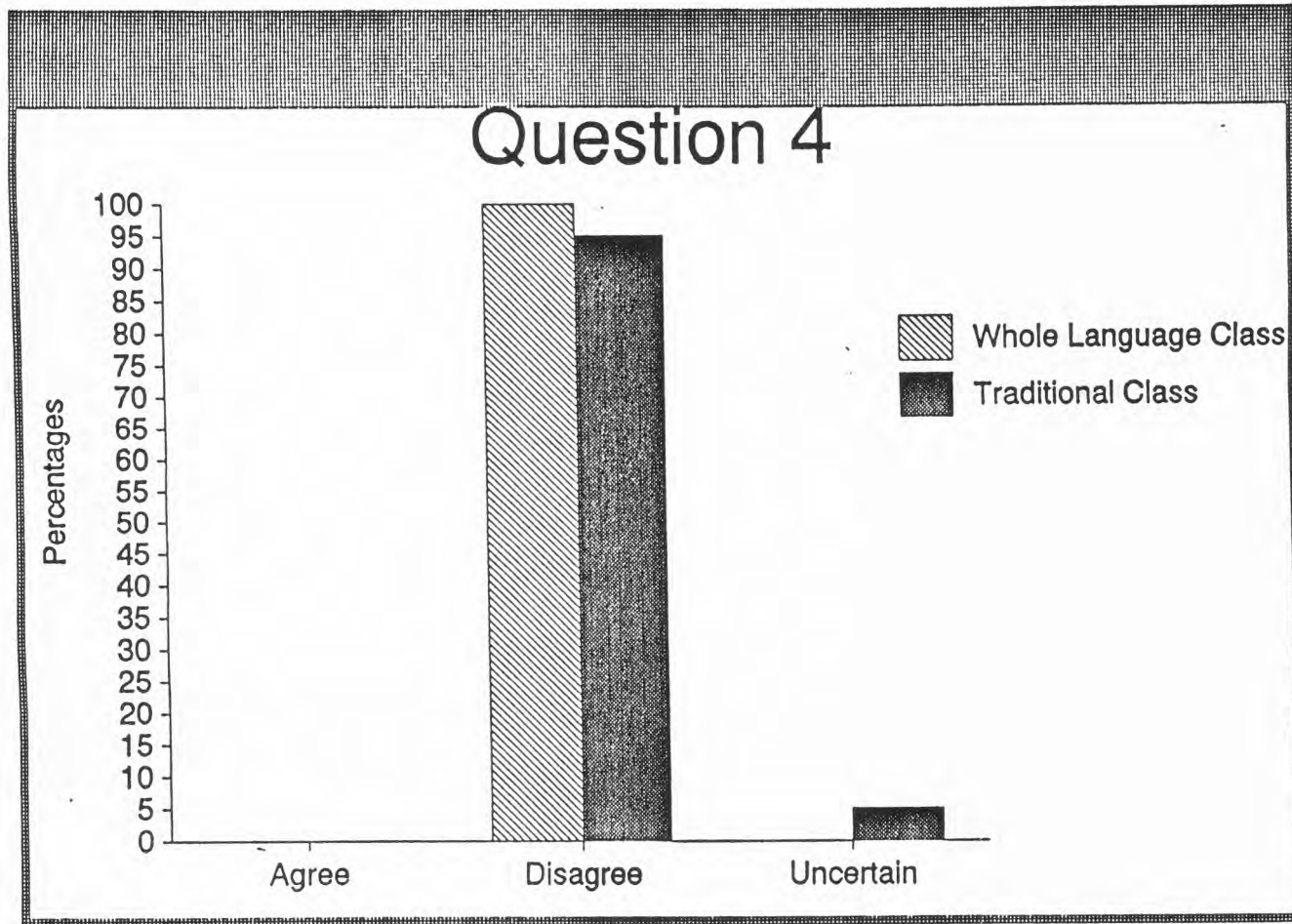


Figure B-5.

Children will lose the motivation to spell correctly if their inventive spellings are encouraged and accepted.

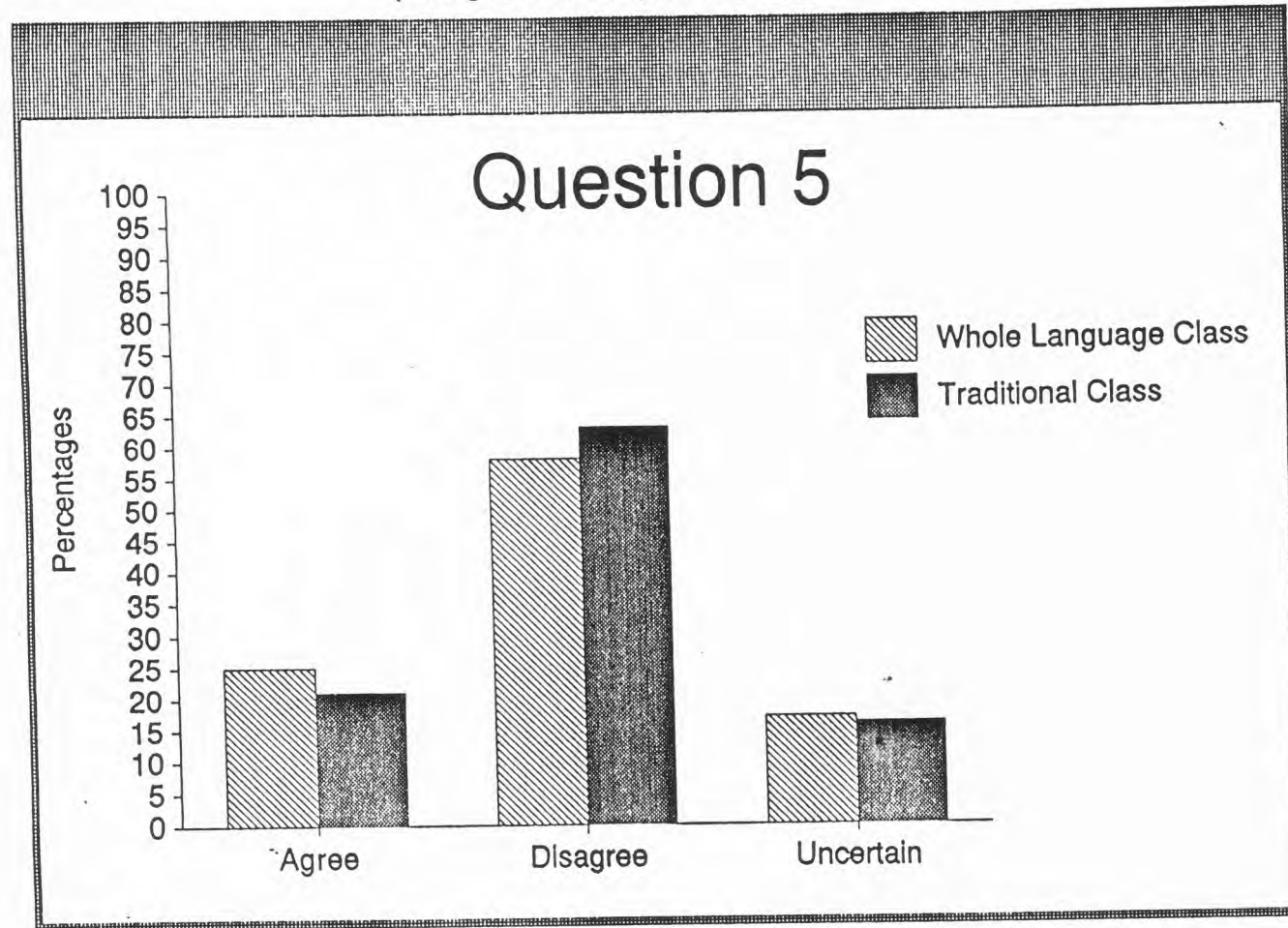


Figure B-6.

Children should learn how to read before time is spent on writing.

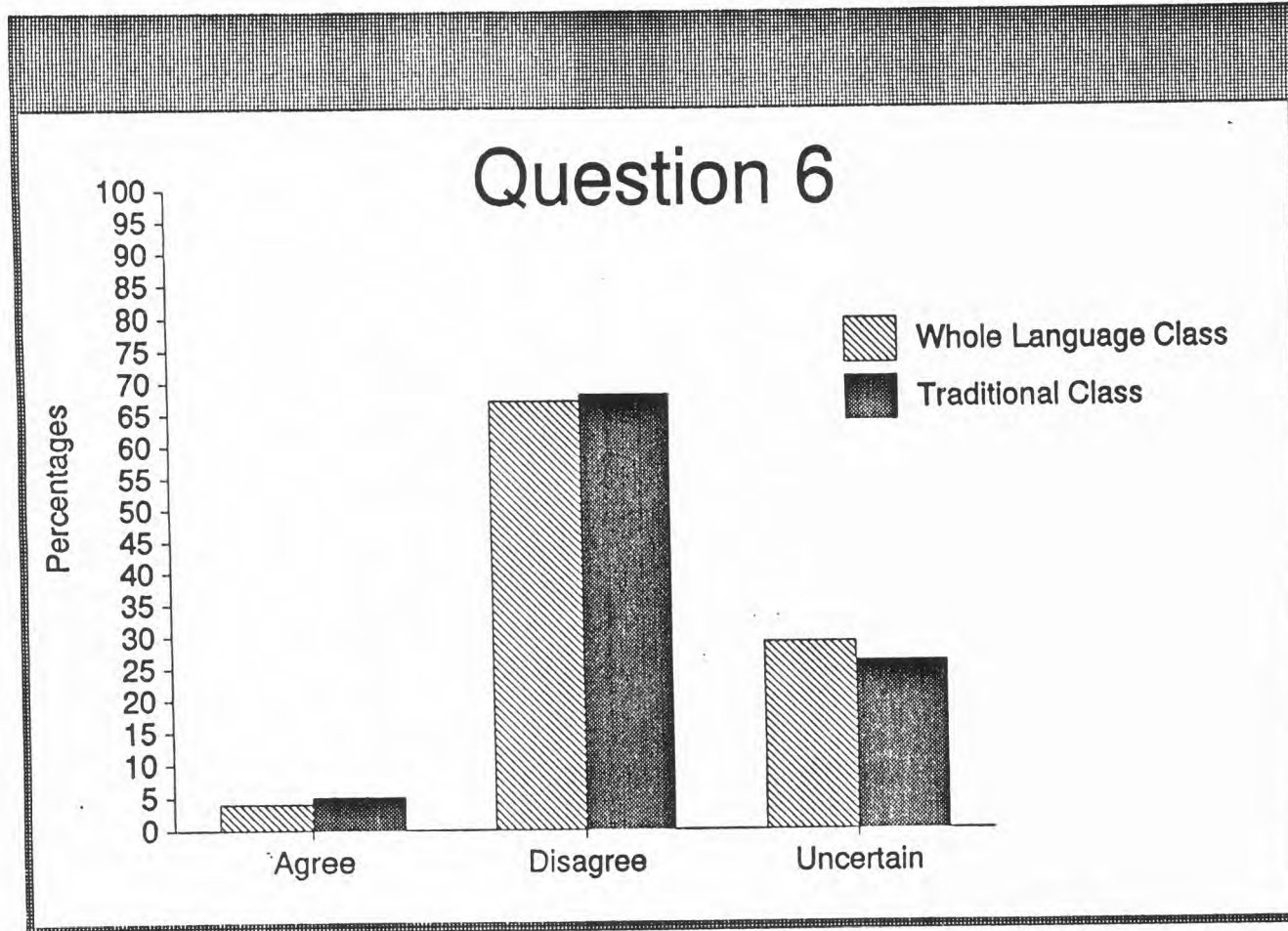


Figure B-7.

Encouraging inventive spelling is important because it gives a child the chance to write without being concerned about spelling every word correctly.

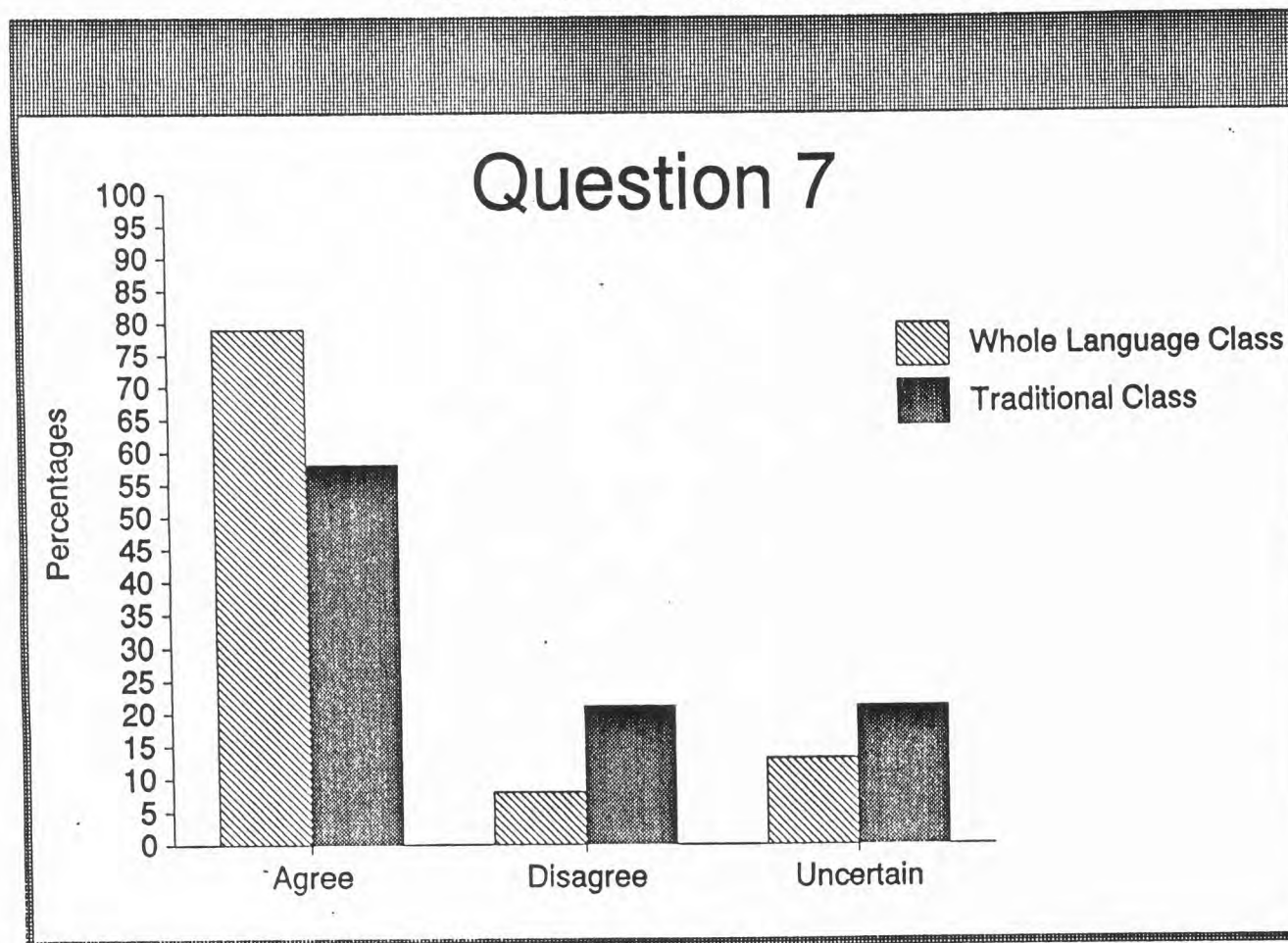


Figure B-8.

Using inventive spelling is an important step in learning how to spell words correctly.

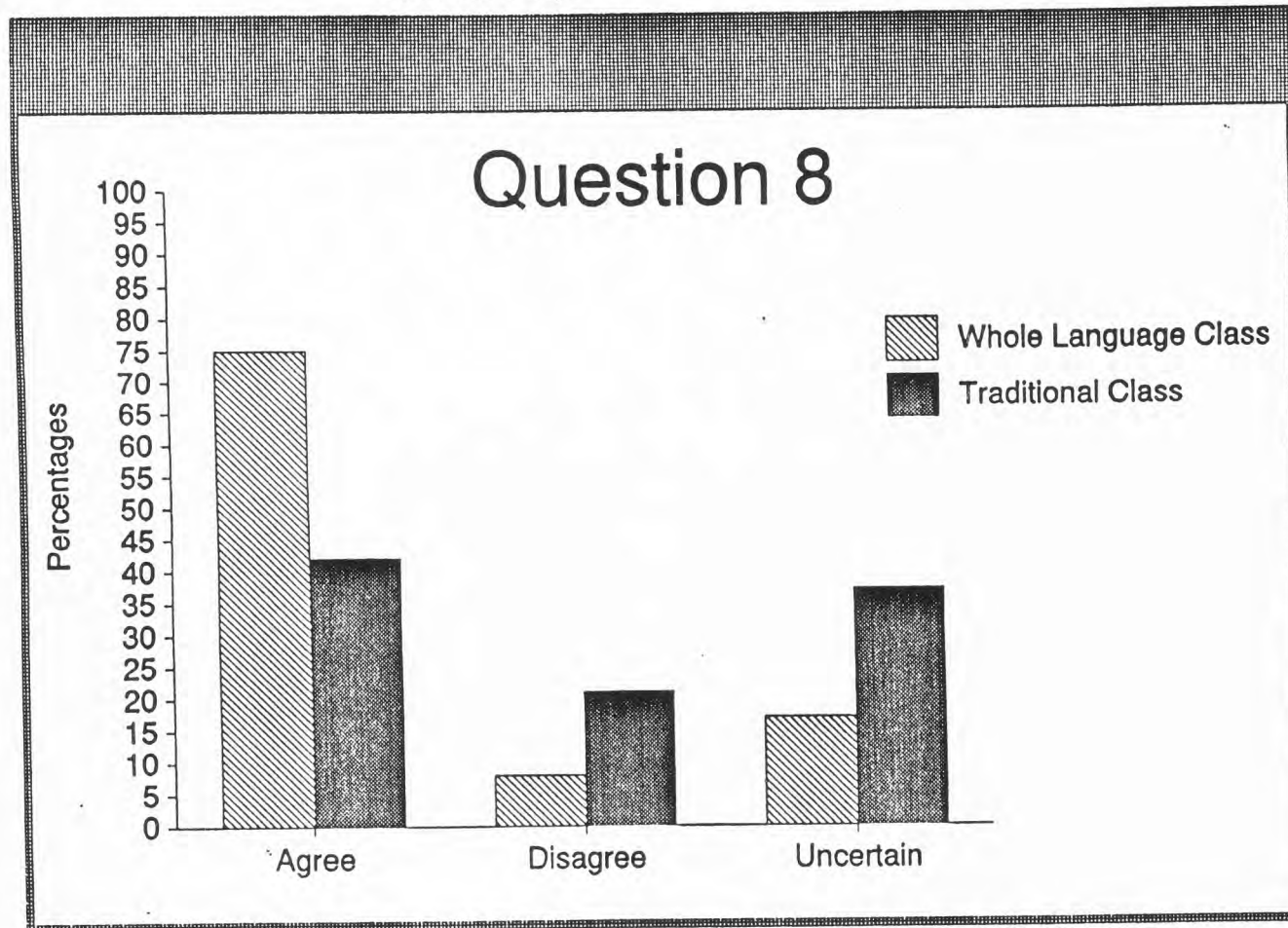


Figure B-9.

Inventive spelling is acceptable in kindergarten but should not be encouraged beyond that.

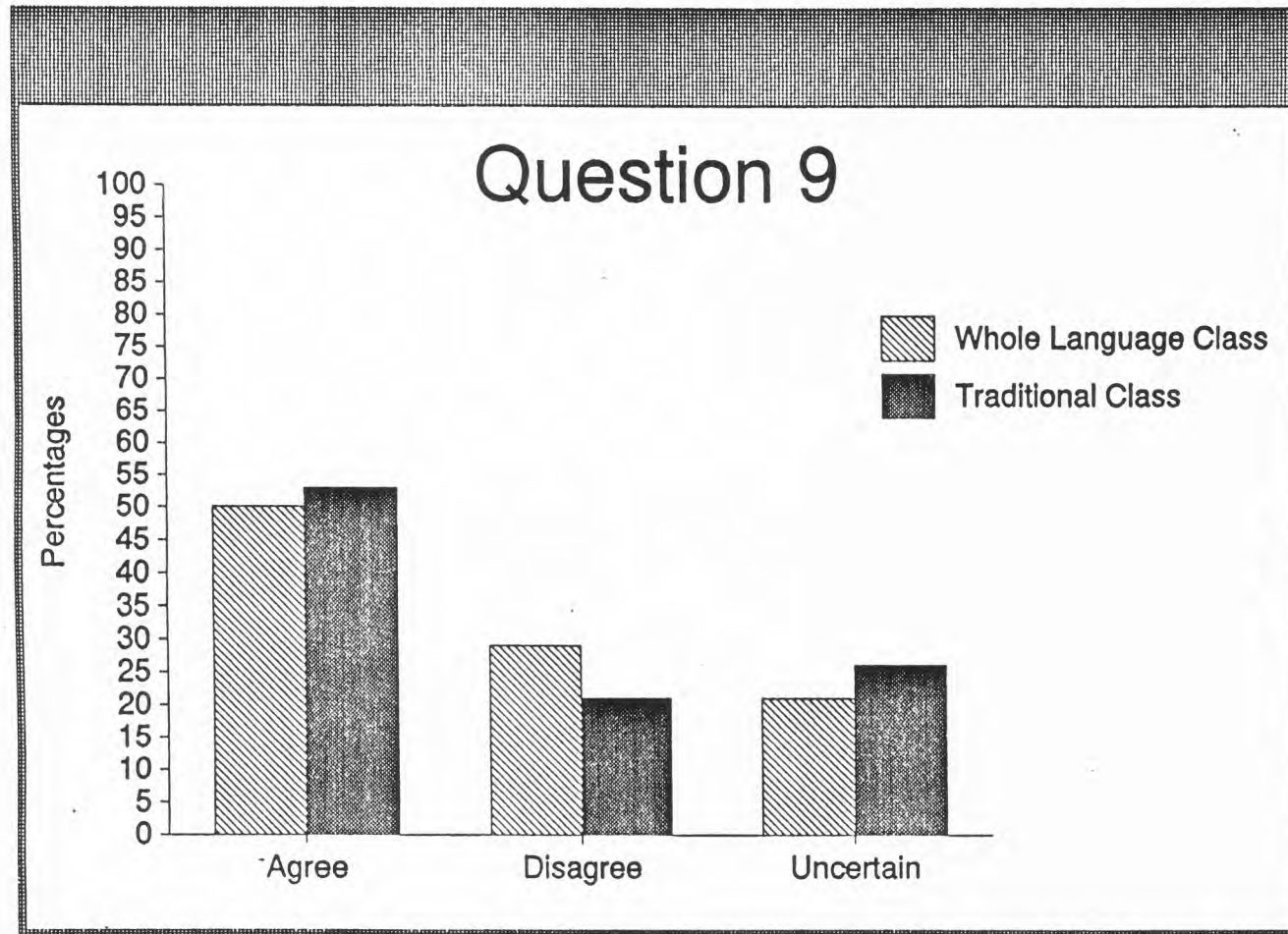


Figure B-10.

If your kindergarten child wrote the following message to you at home, how would you respond? i lik mi scol (I like my school.)

- a. Ignore the incorrect spellings and be pleased the child was writing.
- b. Read the message and then show the child how the words should be spelled correctly.
- c. I wouldn't correct the spelling but I would be concerned about his/her spelling.

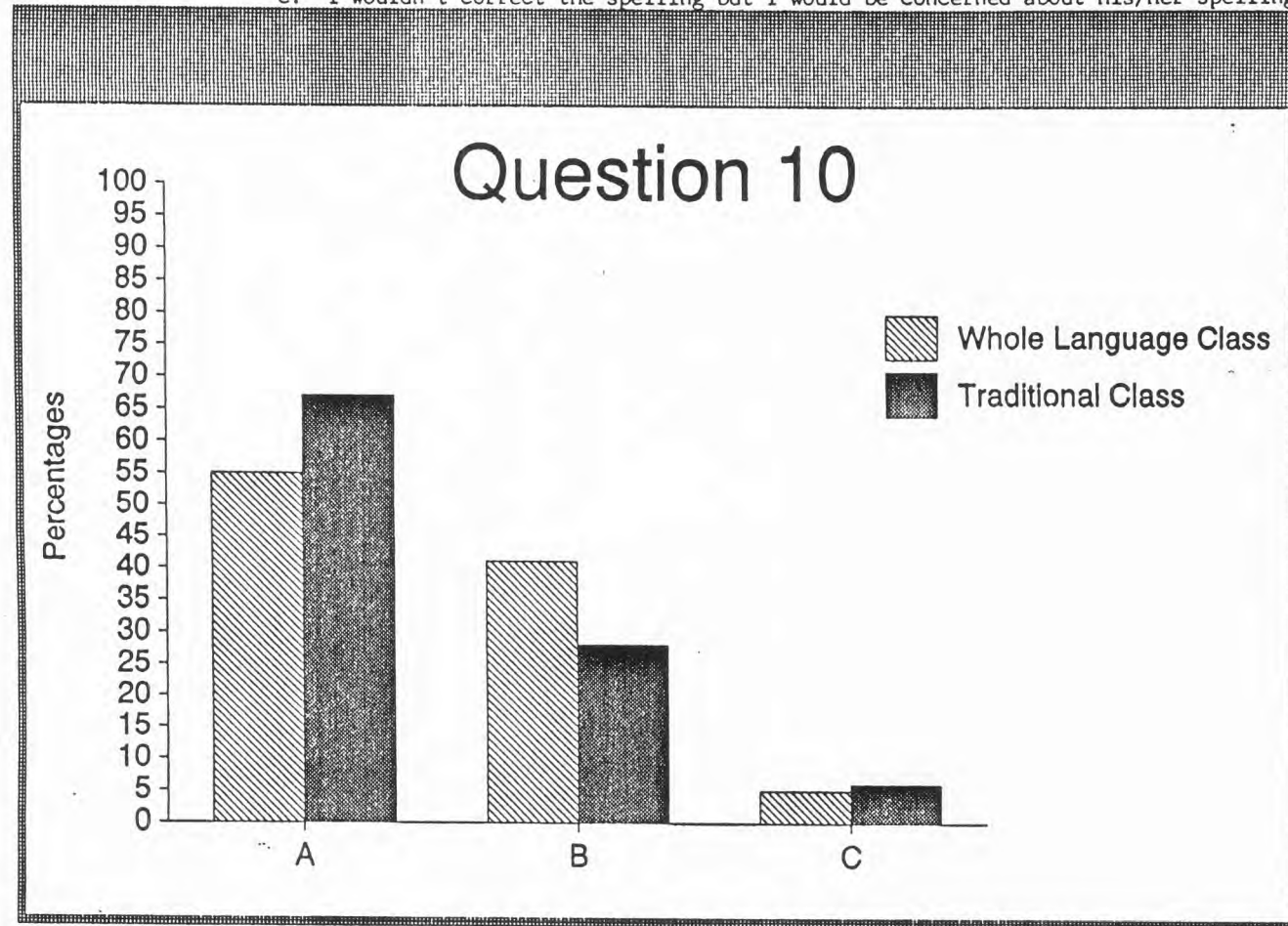


Figure B-11.

If your kindergarten child brought home a paper from school on which he or she had misspelled words, how would you respond?

- a. Accept the paper without concern.
- b. Feel the teacher should have corrected the child's misspelled words.
- c. Talk with the child about the importance of correct spelling.

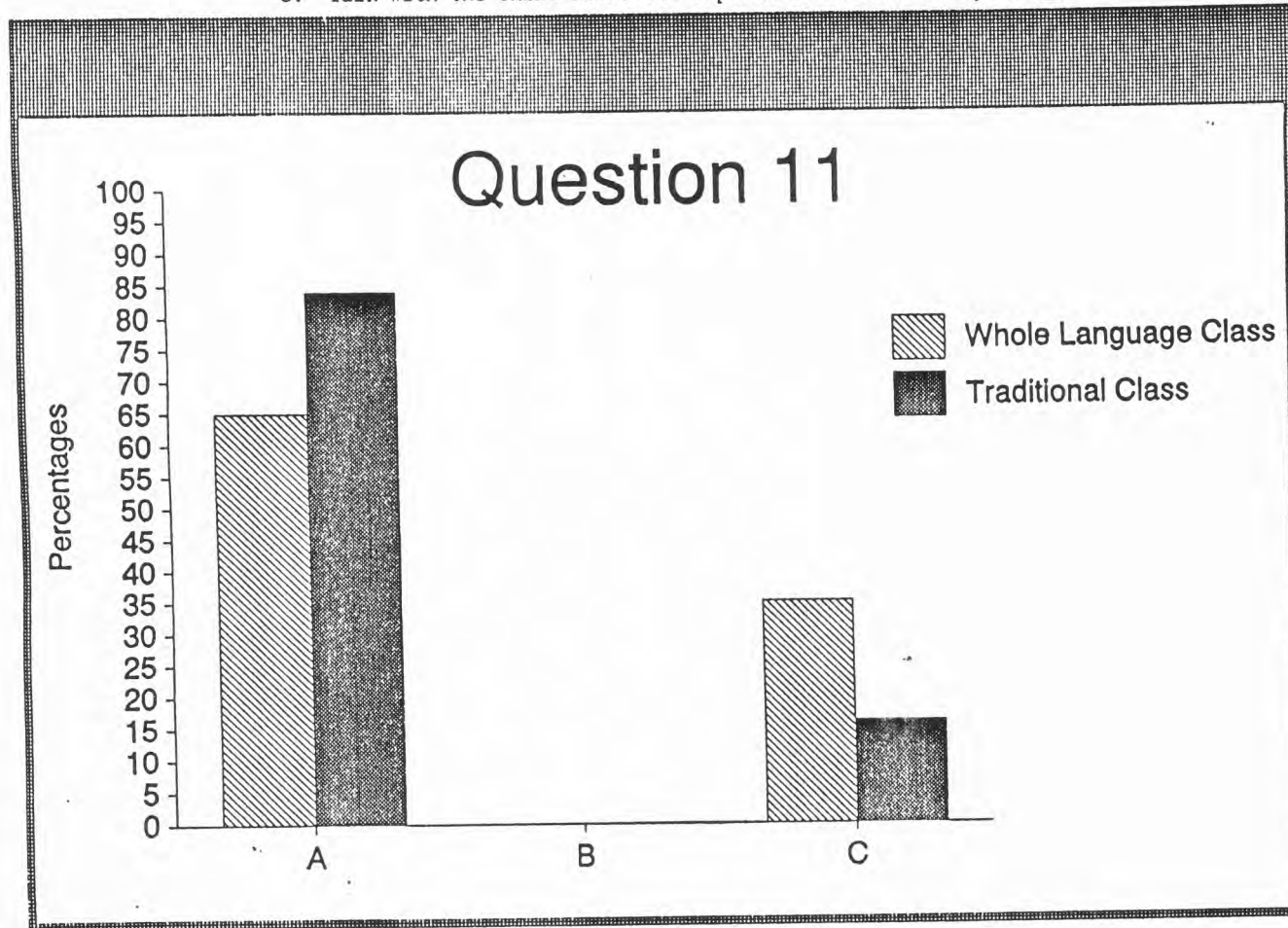


Figure B-12.

At a parent teacher meeting, your child's kindergarten teacher shares that he/she believes that even young children can write if we accept inventive spellings. How would you respond?

- a. Agree and be supportive by encouraging inventive spelling at home.
- b. Support the teacher, but encourage correct spelling at home.
- c. Disagree.

