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Invented Spelling in Kindergarten

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Invented Spelling in Kindergarten

Children's spontaneously invented spellings provide them with opportunities for independence in enhancing their written communication skills. The strategies children employ reflect their developing language abilities.

Children in kindergarten often display more interest in seeing their own words in print than in attempting to read someone else's. Many of us who work with young children encourage this interest by taking down their words and using these experience stories as an introduction to reading. I became interested in the idea of allowing children to create their own spellings for words they wished to write as a way of giving them even more independence in expressing their thoughts at this early stage.

Linguists Chomsky (1971) and Read (1971) have done preliminary studies of spontaneous spelling by preschoolers and have suggested that writing is an appropriate and engrossing prereading activity for children. I was curious to learn if children in my kindergarten classroom might produce results similar to those Chomsky and Read found. If allowing children to spell words the way they sounded to them would not impair their later ability to spell correctly, the idea seemed to be a fine way of making writing available to children long before they were ready for formal reading or spelling instruction.

The children in my class had had lots of experience dictating stories and labels for pictures. They had worked with many of the manipulative alphabets common to kindergarten classes: felt board letters, sandpaper letters, interlocking wooden letters, letter ink stamps, etc. Most of the children recognized many letters and were familiar with most consistent consonant sounds. I wanted to have every child who had some knowledge of letters try inventing spellings to see how children at different levels of reading readiness responded to the task. I also wanted to find out if "ordinary" children (i.e., not the children of linguists and college professors like some of those in Read's study) would enjoy writing words in their own special way.

In order to introduce the idea of creating spelling, groups of three or four children were formed during activity time and asked to draw a picture and think of a name or label they would like to write on it. The special box of 64 different colored, skinny crayons available for the occasion was a great motivation for drawing. When the children were ready to title their pictures, they were asked to listen very carefully to the sounds they heard in the words they wanted, so they could figure out what letters they needed to write. It was explained that their spellings would probably be different from other people's, but that the spellings would represent the way those words sounded to the children now.

Features of Invented Spelling

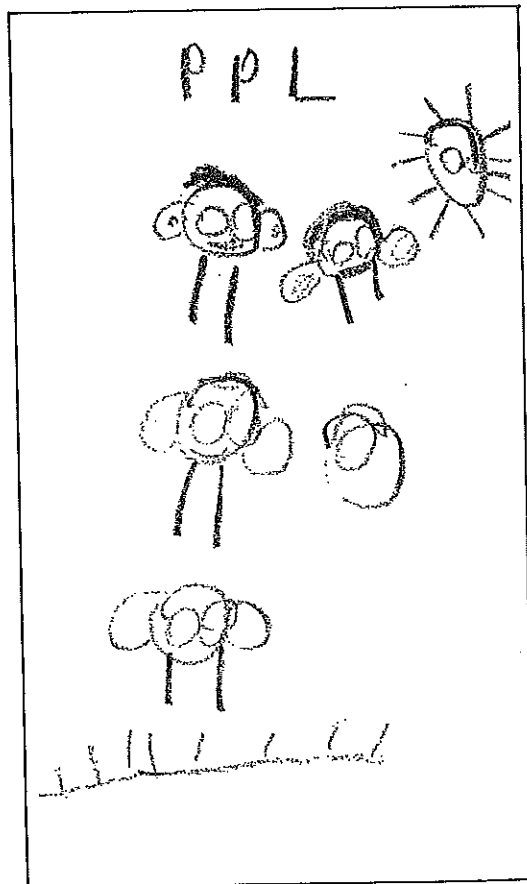
Read (1971) described a number of features he had observed in children's early writing. As the students created their spellings, I was especially interested to see whether they would display some of the strategies that Read had observed:

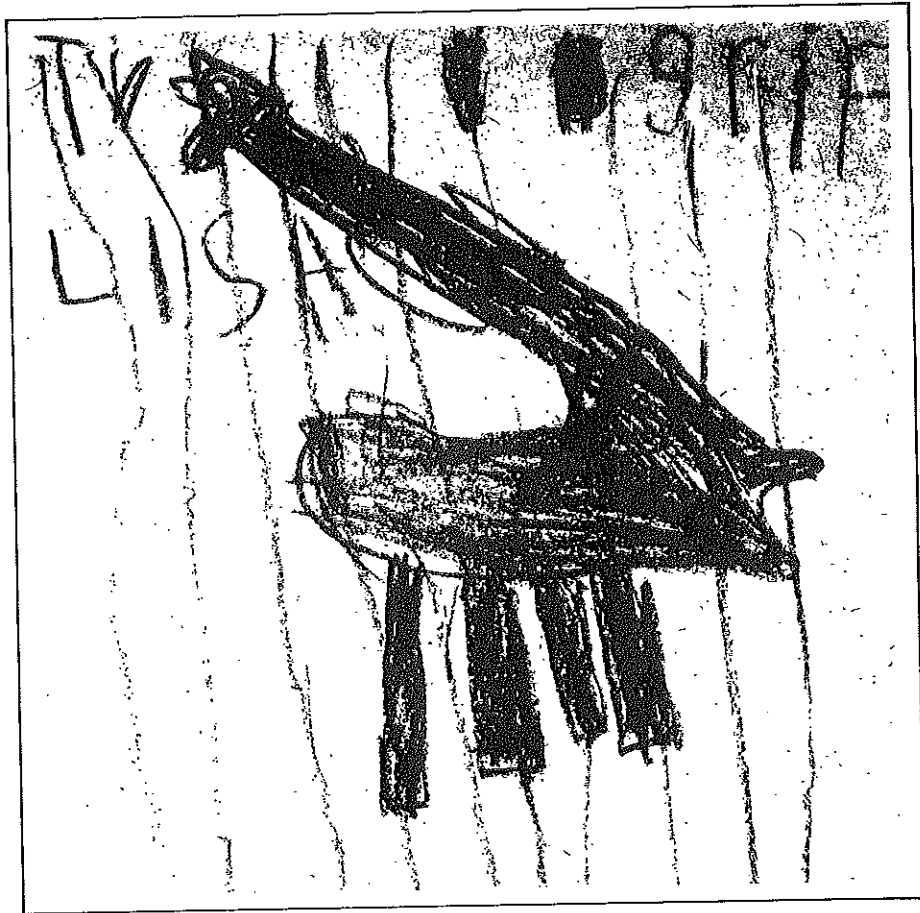
1. The use of single letters to represent the sound of the full letter name (Read 1971, Chomsky 1973). I found frequent examples of this spelling strategy including: *PPL* for *people*, *MAD* for *made*, *BOT* for *boat*, *BCAZ*

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for *because*, *FRN* for *friend*, *HOL* for *hole*, *NIT* for *night*, *LIK* for *like*, *MI* for *my*, *NHr* for *nature*, *LFNT* for *elephant*, and *FL* for *fell*.

2. The omission of nasal sounds before consonants (the *m* in *bumpy*, the *n* in *pen* and *ring*) in children's spelling. My students did not seem to use words containing nasals very often, but Read (1971, p. 18) gives several examples including: *MOSTR* for *monster*, *DOT* for *don't*, *NUBRS* for *numbers*, *PLAT* for *plant*, *SIC* for *sink*, and *ED* for *end*.





3. The use of one letter, particularly L, R, M, or N, to stand for a whole syllable (Read 1971). I was able to observe this several times in words such as: TABL for *table*, GRIF for *giraffe*, and NHR for *nature*.

4. The use of a rather sophisticated set of linguistic criteria for deciding which vowel letter to use when the child had not yet learned the spelling of the short vowel sounds. Read's (1971) article describes this strategy in some detail. He explains that adults are accustomed to the long-short relationships found in spelling, such as the relationship between the vowels in *extreme*—*extremity*, *nation*—*national*, *divine*—*divinity*, etc.

Children, on the other hand, are sensitive to phonetic relationships between vowel sounds, that is, to how those sounds are made in the mouth. It is these phonetic relationships that they represent in their own spelling, so that, for children the sounds in *feel* and *fill* are related, and might both be spelled FEL. *Fail* and *fell* are also related in that the vowel sounds are formed similarly in the mouth. *Like* and *lock* have this relationship, too. They might both be spelled LIK. The relationships between the vowel pairs in these examples consist of the fact that the "long" or "letter name" sound of the vowel is actually a diphthong. Phonetically, long *e* is made up of *i* + *y*, long *a* contains *ě* + *y*, and long *i* is

formed from "ah" + y. The children Read studied heard this first part of the diphthong and used the letter it is associated with in their spelling. In their system:

- e* stood for *ĭ* (as in *bit*)
- a* stood for *ě* (as in *pet*)
- i* stood for "ah" (as in *clock*)

Read found that the children used this system quite consistently.

In addition to looking for confirmation of Read's observations, I was also curious to learn how the children's immature speech patterns would affect their spelling. Since they were basing their spelling on how they heard themselves pronounce words, it wasn't really very surprising when they spelled *with* WF.

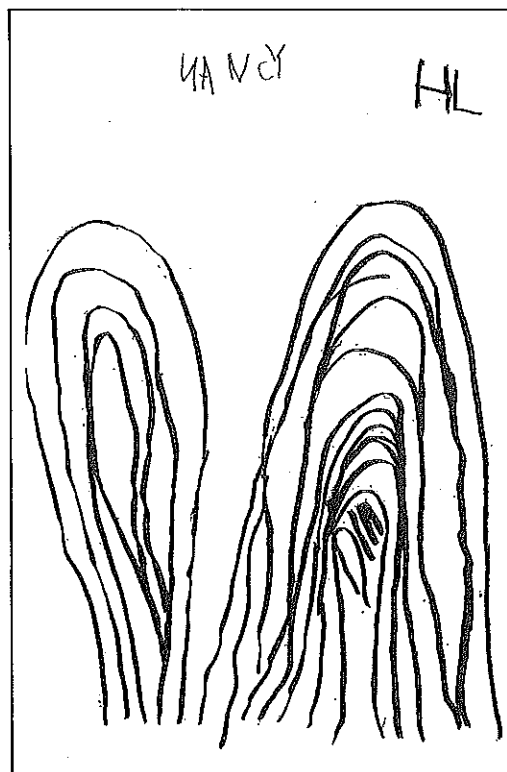
Stages in Invented Spelling

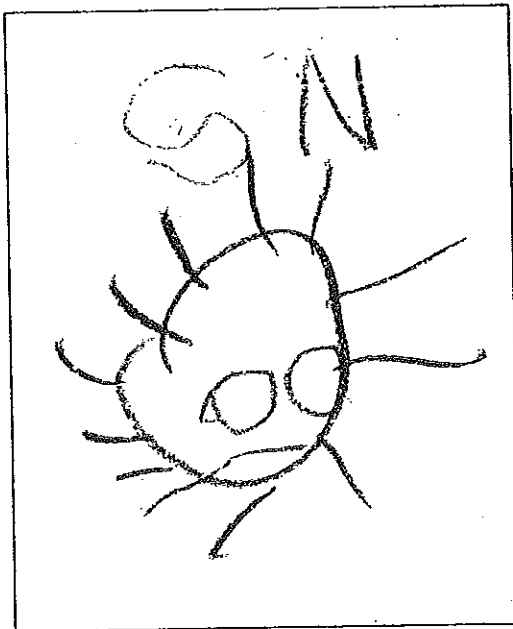
I was also interested in observing the ways children at different levels of reading readiness would spell differently. In studying the children's spelling I was able to construct four basic stages to which their spelling seemed to conform. These stages seem to form a logical sequence for spelling development. This sequence, however, is based only on preliminary observations, and does not imply any strict classification system. Children very skilled in reading readiness were not necessarily the best or most interested spellers. The stages are presented as a very tentative scheme that other teachers might find helpful when looking at their own students' spelling. Only as more examples of invented spelling are studied can these stages be more firmly delineated.

The most elementary stage of spell-

ing seemed to involve writing the first letter or phoneme of each word or syllable. For a child at this stage, TB would be a satisfactory way of spelling *toybox*. F would do very well for *Friday*. This child wouldn't feel it necessary to segment the word any further.

The second stage child would add the final phoneme of the word or syllable, while still omitting the short vowel sounds, as in HL for *hill*, GRS for *grass*, RT for *rabbit*, or WZ for *was*. At this stage vowels that "say their own name," such as TE for *tea* or BOT for *boat* are likely to appear. Chomsky's (1971) article also contains examples of this stage.





It was in the third stage, when children began to separate short vowel sounds from surrounding consonants and attempted to represent them in spelling, that the most interesting results appeared. Read had predicted that children would use consistent, though nonstandard, spellings for short vowel sounds. But my observations indicate that when the children wanted to spell a short vowel sound, they seemed to give the vowels that were formed similarly in the mouth equal value and to use them interchangeably as a sort of marker. They might use the same vowel to represent several different sounds in the same sentence, such as DORRDY WOTAR for *dirty water*. As a group, they used a variety of vowels to represent each vowel sound. It was difficult to discover very much consistency in their choices, except that they always chose some vowel letter to stand for a vowel sound. I felt this was extremely significant. Even at this early stage when there had been no formal teaching of

vowel sounds, and in fact the word "vowel" had not yet been mentioned in school, the children already seemed to recognize that vowel letters functioned differently from consonants and used them in a different way.

In the fourth stage of spelling, exhibited mostly by children who were reading, spelling moved closer to the standard forms. Sight vocabulary words such as *was*, *saw*, and *house* were spelled correctly. Digraphs such as *sh*, *ch*, and *th* began to appear, and the stories tended to be a little longer because each word did not have to be laboriously encoded. These children already had some words in their spelling vocabulary.

Advantages of the Method

Watching these kindergarten children confirmed another assertion made by Chomsky and Read. I was concerned that wrong spelling might develop into a bad habit, that the children might remember their own spellings rather than learning correct ones. But during the several months I was able to observe these children, they seldom invented the same spelling twice! They seemed to attack each word as a new problem, often coming up with a different solution than they had found before. Sometimes they would ask me to spell a word they had spelled themselves only a few minutes earlier. They often spelled one word several ways in the same story. They would diligently encode a word they had written just a few lines above. In short, the process of inventing spelling seems to work like many other activities in which young children involve themselves. Just as at first they often are more concerned with spreading

the paint or smearing the paste than with what the final picture looks like, it is the act of figuring a word out that intrigues them far more than the conclusion they come to. The final spelling often goes almost unnoticed, and they may write one letter several times in succession simply because they continue saying the sound to themselves and forget that they have already written it down. In many cases the children cannot read back what they have just written and almost none can read it back the next day. The product—the way they actually decide to spell the word—appears to be greatly subordinate to the thinking process that leads to the decision. I also observed that as soon as children learned the standard spelling for a word, they would spontaneously substitute it for their own. So one girl wrote, IT TRND INTO CRUMS, spelling all words phonetically except *into*, which she had picked up from reading.

Although most children were willing to participate, not all were really interested in writing on their own. Some found it too frustrating, especially when they had a long story they wanted to write, and preferred to dictate. When this was the case, they were encouraged to do so. But several have picked up on the idea and keenly enjoy being able to write whatever they like without a teacher's help.

The greatest advantage of the technique seems to be that it gives children the opportunity to write independently long before they are ready for a formal

reading or spelling program. Although writing a long story is too frustrating for many, invented spelling gives some children the chance to express themselves without needing to ask for help from anyone. It also involves children in listening carefully and thinking about sounds in a very purposeful way. The children's writing was exciting to me in that I had a chance to glimpse the almost intuitive knowledge the children seem to possess about the sound-symbol relationships of the English language. I found they used extremely good thinking and sound judgment in choosing their spellings. My observations of the process of invented spelling lead me to believe that rather than inhibiting later development of good spelling, allowing children to write on their own in the early stages encourages active involvement and careful thinking about spelling which they spontaneously refine as their knowledge of reading grows. ☒

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