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## Spelling and whole language

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## Spelling and whole language

### Abstract

A current trend in language arts programs in elementary schools is the shift from skills-based instruction to a focus on emergent literacy and whole language (Watson, 1988). Teachers are setting aside textbooks and are involving children in language activities that are functional and purposeful to them (Goodman, 1986). Nowhere is this instructional trend more obvious than in the area of writing. It is viewed as a recursive process in creating meaning (Graves & Stuart, 1985; Calkins, 1986).

Spelling and Whole Language

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A current trend in language arts programs in elementary schools is the shift from skills-based instruction to a focus on emergent literacy and whole language (Watson, 1988). Teachers are setting aside textbooks and are involving children in language activities that are functional and purposeful to them (Goodman, 1986). Nowhere is this instructional trend more obvious than in the area of writing. It is viewed as a recursive process in creating meaning (Graves & Stuart, 1985; Calkins, 1986).

Form in writing is considered a natural extension of process. For example, children's attempts at spelling are accepted and even encouraged (Strickland & Morrow, 1989). Considering the place of spelling in the writing process, it is surprising that many language arts programs still cling to a traditional program that is isolated from the rest of the curriculum (Wilde, 1989). Three possible explanations for this view of spelling instructional programs can be given: (a) Parents and administrators assess the quality of children's writing from examining their spelling ability (Taylor & Kidder, 1988). (b) Administrators or school boards have mandated the use of textbooks (Wilde, 1989). (c) Teachers are hesitant to change without empirical evidence (DiStefano & Hagerty, 1985).

### Purpose

This paper will examine the research on learning to spell. Based on this research, suggestions will be given for appropriate spelling instruction designed to support young writers and for methods of assessing their progress.

Early research that forms the basis for the developmental spelling theory along with the stages of spelling development will be discussed. Traditional approaches to spelling instruction will be examined in light of the current research on emerging literacy. Guidelines will be given for implementing the developmental theory into a spelling program.

### Developmental View of Spelling

Read's study of preschool children's invented spelling has provided the basis of much current spelling reform. By examining children's errors, Read discovered that children applied knowledge in a systematic manner in spelling. Omissions and substitutions of certain letters were not random accidents but were based on knowledge of how speech sounds were made and the underlying concept of language structure. The results of this study have influenced a shift from a "right-wrong" view of spelling to a developmental perspective. Children's spelling is examined to see why and how children use their knowledge to create words (1971).

Beers and Henderson (1977) took this approach to spelling and studied first-grade students, finding that children's spelling patterns suggest a highly developed knowledge of English phonology. Children progress along a continuum of spelling development as they assimilate new information about words. They, too, concluded that position of articulation (the way sounds are produced) play a major role in these spelling patterns.

Zutell's study (1979) of children in grades one to four also supports the developmental view of spelling. The study explored the relationship between spelling strategies and cognitive development. It centered on the transition from the preoperational stage to the concrete operational stage, as described by Piaget. This growth typically occurs between the ages of five and eight. At these stages, children are generally expected to begin to read and write. In the study, students' achievement on a spelling test was compared with their performance on cognitive ability tasks. From the data, it was concluded that spelling strategy and cognitive development are significantly related. Learning to spell is not a matter of drill and memorization but of a cognitive and linguistic development.

Building on this research, Henderson (1985) identified five stages that children pass through as they learn to spell.

The identification of these stages is significant to spelling instruction. By analyzing children's spelling errors, a teacher can discover their stages of functioning. Instruction can then be based on the children's levels of cognition.

Several researchers have offered interpretations of these stages (Schlagel, 1986; Bear & Barone, 1989; Morris & Perney, 1984). Gillet and Temple's (1990) interpretation has been chosen for a brief overview.

Stage 1. Spelling is nonreadable and random. Strings of letters, numbers, and symbols are used. There is an awareness that words are made of letters and print is horizontal. Most four to five year olds are in this stage.

Stage 2. The concept that letters represent sounds is beginning to emerge. Consonants are used for beginning sounds. Single letters may represent a whole word. There may be evidence of ending consonants and some significant middle consonants.

Stage 3. A firm understanding has developed that letters represent sounds. Long vowels are used, but they are not marked: "Hats" may be written for "hates." Nasal sounds are not included, such as "m" in "lump" will be omitted. Plurals and verb tense endings are spelled as they sound. The sounds "tr" and "dr" may be written as "jr", "gr", or "chr".



Stage 4. Long vowels are marked in this stage and are generally spelled correctly. Rules are not consistent and may be applied to the wrong word, such as "hop" is changed to "hoping" and "make" is changed to "makking." The ending "ed" is spelled as it sounds in the word.

Stage 5. Most rules are learned and used consistently. Problems may come from a lack of awareness of patterns among words such as "magic" and "magician." This stage is typical of students in the upper elementary grades while the previously described stages are more representative of preschool and primary students.

#### Traditional Approach to Spelling

Spelling strategies used in many classrooms today are similar to those presented three generations ago (Gentry, 1987). The traditional spelling approach offers whole group instruction based on a textbook or a prescribed list of words. Students spend 15 to 30 minutes daily on spelling and are expected to learn 10 to 20 words each week. A weekly routine usually involves a Monday pretest, a Wednesday midweek test, and a Friday posttest. The other two days are spent completing workbook drills or practicing words spelled incorrectly on the pretest and midweek tests. Spelling rules may be a part of instruction, but students are tested on memorization of given

words, not on their ability to apply rules to new words (Wilde, 1989; Nelson, 1989).

In examining the research on developmental spelling, it is apparent that the traditional approach has limitations. The latter treats spelling as a subject separate from the other language arts, and the words used have no meaningful connection to the child's background (DiStefano & Hagerty, 1985). In requiring students to memorize words that are of little interest to them, spelling becomes an end to itself, not a means of writing growth (Frymier, 1987).

Traditional spelling instruction does not take into account spelling stages nor individual differences within those stages. In any class, individuals will naturally differ in ability along a continuum (Nelson, 1989). Children at either end of this continuum miss out on quality spelling instruction. The less capable spellers will end up having more words to learn, and they will lack the conceptual base needed to learn those words (Morris, Nelson & Perney, 1986). The more capable spellers will be bored with instructional time spent on words already learned.

#### Implications for a Spelling Program Based on Process

DiStefano and Hagerty (1985) believe that in no other area of the language arts is there such a discrepancy between what is known and what is taught as in spelling. Recent studies call

for a change in spelling instruction: Rather than demanding mastery of weekly word lists, teachers need to allow children to learn to spell naturally within the context of writing (Buchanan, 1989).

The prospect of eliminating traditional spelling instruction based on weekly word lists raises two concerns among teachers. The first concern is that of evaluation. If weekly tests are abandoned some teachers are not aware of other methods of assessment (Wilde, 1989). The second concern involves instructional planning. Teachers need to be informed of alternatives to existing traditional spelling programs (Nelson, 1989). The next sections of this paper will address these two concerns.

#### Connecting Instruction and Assessment

Instruction in writing and the assessment of spelling are closely related because both are part of the composition process. The assessment method that best fits what is known about children and their language development is that of naturalistic assessment, or process evaluation. It is based on observing children's responses while engaged in the functions of language during the school day. This information is collected through checklists, anecdotal records, conferences with the children, and work samples.

Often assessment and instruction occur at the same time. First, the teacher assesses the student's stage of spelling development. Then instruction, matched to the stage of development, is provided. Second, the teacher determines what strategies the students use. If necessary, the students can be taught appropriate strategies. A final step is to teach the students to monitor and to control their use of the strategies (Wittrock, 1987). In this way, teachers are working to achieve a goal of the spelling curriculum that is to produce competent, independent spellers (Wilde, 1989).

#### Connecting Learning, Writing, and Spelling

Even in the absence of a formal spelling instructional program, children who have regular opportunities to write will improve as spellers. However, this learning can not be left to chance. Teachers need to design a classroom that will support the writer and offer the teacher opportunities to assess and present appropriate instruction (Wilde, 1989).

The major objective of spelling is to provide ease and clarity in written communication. Instruction matched to this purpose would involve daily writing. Children learn to spell by testing their theories of how the alphabet works to form words and then checking their attempts with standard spelling. The strategies of predicting and testing are important in

learning to spell and are obtained mainly through writing experiences (Heying, 1979).

Daily writing also supports spelling growth in other ways. Allowing children to write will help them develop an understanding that writing is the only reason to spell (Norton, 1989). If children are truly writing to communicate, their desire to spell correctly will increase as they attempt to make meaning clear to readers (Kamii & Randazzo, 1985). Writing also reinforces words that are becoming part of children's "automatic" security list--words that children know without consciously thinking about them (Norton, 1989). In the middle elementary grades, most spelling growth will involve new words the children bring to their own writing (Wilde, 1989).

Children are continuously learning; therefore, a classroom needs to provide an environment that offers constant exposure to writing for real purposes (Smith, 1983; Jenkins, 1986). A classroom set up for writers will offer a variety of experiences that invite active participation on the part of the learners. This participation will encourage risk-taking but at the same time will support children as they take those risks. In such an environment children can examine words, generate, test, and evaluate their own spelling strategies. A print-rich environment offers support to young writers. The children need to be surrounded by quality books, newspapers, magazines,

wall charts, and resource books. A publishing center stocked with a variety of writing materials needs to be available to the children at all times. Equally important is a teacher that models writing and takes a genuine interest in spelling (Anderson, 1985).

### Matching Spelling Instruction to Stages of Cognitive Development

Effective teaching involves an understanding of when the individual child is ready for specific kinds of instruction (Morris & Perney, 1984). By comparing children's spelling miscues to the characteristics of the stages discussed earlier, teachers can plan instruction designed to match the conceptual level of the child.

One way to evaluate children's stages of spelling development is to look at the words misspelled in daily writing. For each child the teacher can make a list of these misspelled words. The list can be analyzed for the characteristics of the spelling stages. However, it is vital to remember that children will not operate from just one stage at a time. Often before moving on to a more difficult stage, the child will revert to an earlier stage. Once the stage is determined, the following suggestions can be used for instruction:

Stage 1. This stage usually involves preschool and kindergarten children. They need to be encouraged to write by providing a variety of writing materials and uninterrupted times

to write. The environment should be labeled with names, and children should be encouraged to use the labels in their writing. Through experience charts and story dictation, the teacher should model writing and the thought processes used in spelling. Children should be read to daily from a chart or a Big Book so they can see the words and pictures as the story is read. Also children can follow along in books as they listen to the taped stories.

Stage 2. Instruction at this stage expands what was presented in the first stage. The same activities continue, but children are instructed in sound-letter correspondence in the context of literature and writing. Before offering to help spell a word, the teacher can encourage the children to put down the letters they think are in the word.

Attention also is given to the alphabet in a variety of ways: Children can play with alphabet blocks, cards, and magnetic letters. They can view several alphabet books and then make their own alphabet book.

By following the line of print on a chart or in a Big Book as the story is read, the teacher can draw attention to the fact that there are more letters in a word than there are sounds. In writing group stories, the teacher needs to ask the children how words begin and end, and if the children can hear any other letters that should be written.

Stage 3. Daily writing and reading need to continue.

Instruction can include short vowel patterns carried out in context, one vowel at a time. Poems, nursery rhymes, and songs provide fun experiences for children at this stage. Children can find rhyming words and then can generate their own words that rhyme with a given word.

Stage 4. At this point, long vowel patterns are studied within experiences with poems and songs, but the focus now is on how the same sound can be represented by different letters or groups of letters. Words that rhyme, but use different spelling patterns, for example, "say" and "weigh", are discussed.

Children can experiment with language through the use of spoonerisms, for example, the phrase "planter of gardens" can be changed to "ganter of plardens". This activity helps children become conscious of sound elements in words.

Words should be categorized by sound elements. Teachers and students can develop charts with words containing different consonant-vowel patterns, such as the CVC pattern and CVCe pattern.

In discussing their writing with teachers, students can come to realize that there is a standard spelling. They need to determine when it is important to use conventional spelling and when they can approximate spellings (Kamij & Randazzo, 1985).



Children in this stage are ready to learn words through visual and auditory memory (Buchanan, 1989).

Stage 5. Instruction in this stage, which occurs in the upper elementary grades, should take into account the meaning units in words. Study can include roots and affixes, compound words, contractions, homophones, and acronyms. Students are able to work with word derivations and foreign contributions to English words (Bear & Barone, 1989).

Children should be editing daily and are now able to discuss spelling strategies in conferences. As students gain more control over their writing and spelling, they can keep spelling notebooks. In these notebooks, they can note difficult words that cause problems and suggestions from conferences.

#### Observing Responses to Promote Spelling Ability

In addition to noting stages, the teacher needs to assess strategies children use when they are attempting to spell a word. Children use a variety of strategies when they produce words for their writing. Wilde (1989) observed five major spelling strategies. These strategies can suggest patterns to look for in students' approach to spelling.

Placeholder spellings. These are deliberate invented spellings. The child chooses to invent a misspelling in order to concentrate on the expression of ideas. In assessing a child it is important to keep in mind that this strategy is not a full

representation of the child's ability. By observing a child write and by conferencing with the child, a teacher can determine if this strategy is being used.

Human resources. When children are not sure of a word, they often ask another person for help, either a classmate or the teacher. Often the result of asking for help is that the spelling of the word is supplied to the child. The overdependence on others for the spellings of words soon needs to emerge into resourcefulness, using dictionaries and developing and referring to one's own word book.

Textual resources. A much more refined strategy than human resources is textual resources which signifies a greater independence and initiative as it involves knowing where to look and whether or not the correct word has been found. Samples of textual resources are wall charts, dictionaries, calendars, books, personal word books, and any printed material in the classroom.

Generation, monitoring, and revision. This strategy involves an attempt to spell a word conventionally and do it independently. It differs from the placeholder strategy in that the child will try to use different types of knowledge to produce the word. Then the child will check to see if the word looks right, and if not, will revise the spelling. By observing

children using this strategy, the teacher can gain valuable knowledge about children's spelling knowledge.

Ownership. This final goal of spelling involves knowing how to spell a word and knowing that one knows. This most advanced strategy allows children to write more freely and take control of the language. As children progress in spelling, they are able to exercise this ownership over a greater number of words, and they still have the other strategies to fall back on.

#### Fostering Ownership of Spelling and Writing

Students need to be taught to monitor and control their writing. Graves and Stuart (1985) outline a method of allowing children to edit their own writing and take responsibility for their spelling. First, the writers circle any words they believe are misspelled. These may be words they know are approximations or words they think do not look right. Next, the writer conferences with peers. The peers can underline any words they find that are misspelled. Finally, the writer uses some of the many resources available in the classroom to locate the correct spelling. When the correct spelling is found, it is recorded in the writer's own word book. This book provides a source of words, not only for a reference, but in planning instruction for each child.

### Recording Growth in Spelling

In establishing a spelling program as a part of daily writing, the teacher has a rich source of information for assessment. By using developmental spelling assessment, the teacher is able to discern patterns of growth in the children (Morris & Perney, 1984). Daily writing offers many clues as to what knowledge base the children are working from and about their internalization of the orthographic system (Wilde, 1989). This information needs to be kept in a form that can be shared with parents and administrators. There are several choices for the teacher to use.

Writing folder. One way to track progress is to collect samples of children's work throughout the year. These samples can be kept in a folder. Samples should include writing at all stages of the process from first draft to published copy. These folders can be shared with parents to demonstrate the child's increasing ability to use correct spelling as well as to indicate the child's stage of spelling development. Included in the folder should be the word book that the child has compiled throughout the year. This individualized reference can be used to show parents the number and types of words the child is learning.

Anecdotal records. Children can be assessed by observing them in the process of writing. Observations can take place

with individuals, small groups, or the whole class (Wilde, 1989). By taking notes, a teacher can record what strategies are being used by children and can observe the children's attitude and approaches toward the writing process. These written records can be kept in a notebook or folder for each child. The notes can be used when communicating with parents about a child's progress.

Checklists. Checklists can structure information for the child, the teacher, and parents. The checklist should be designed to go along with the goals of the classroom spelling curriculum. They can be used to record stages of spelling development and spelling strategies. As the teacher sees evidence of a skill, stage, or strategy used, the date can be recorded along with a copy of the written product. Checklists can be used during writing conferences and also in classroom observations.

### Conclusions

With an emphasis on process in the writing program, there is a need for a change in spelling instruction. Learning to spell is not a routine involving the memorization of lists of words and rules. Instead, learning to spell is a developmental process of internalizing the concepts of written language.

When looking at spelling, perhaps teachers need to consider Gentry's advice: Put the children first. Let children

experiment with written language and let them guide instruction by showing their needs and abilities. Spelling is not a body of words to be learned but a "gift of literacy passed on by elders" (1987, pg. 47). From the recent research in spelling, hopefully teachers will help children open and use that gift.

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