

**The Effects of a Morphological
Intervention on Children's Spelling
Performance and Understanding: Toward a
Relational Approach**

by

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Abstract

Spelling is a very complex process, yet mastering the intricacies and inconsistencies of English spelling is considered a basic skill children must learn from the earliest years at school. Throughout their education, however, many children struggle with spelling, a struggle that can continue into adulthood.

In response to the apparently insurmountable challenge spelling poses to so many children, this study proposes a re-conceptualization of children's spelling development incorporating both a cognitive and a linguistic perspective. To this end, a multifaceted methodology was used in the study, first, to investigate children's reasoning about spelling, the cognitive view, and, second, to track the development of spelling performance, the linguistic view.

The study findings have emerged from an intervention undertaken in ten classrooms involving ten teachers and 318 children in Year 3, Year 4 and Year 5. The intervention was based on an approach to the teaching of spelling that recognised knowledge about sounds (phonemes) and knowledge about meaningful forms (morphemes) as equally significant predictors of spelling success. This approach, which I have called a *relational* approach, differs significantly from the *additive* approaches commonly used in the upper years of primary school, approaches in which the focus of spelling instruction is primarily phoneme to grapheme correspondences supported by little, if any, morphological instruction. Children are often left to work out, on their own, the relationship between phonemes, morphemes and spelling patterns. In contrast, the relational approach addresses the need to focus children's

attention early in literacy learning, on the link between phonemes and morphemes in the process of spelling, using active, interesting and effective teaching strategies.

The mixed method study reported in this thesis incorporates quantitative data which provides both baseline and impact information and which include a teacher language knowledge questionnaire, children's standardized spelling tests and a specifically designed morphological spelling test. Qualitative data, collected simultaneously, included teacher interviews and reflections, spelling lesson observations and children's individual verbal reasoning and justification of spelling choices.

The relational approach used in the intervention also encouraged children to be actively engaged in the construction of theories and ideas about spelling through classroom discussions. Children's verbal responses during these discussions were analysed using a framework derived from Karmiloff-Smith's (1992) general cognitive model. This analysis provided important insights into the development of spelling knowledge as it changed, and was transformed, through the learning process. The analysis highlighted the importance of tracking children's spelling knowledge as it transitions from implicit, mechanically memorized spelling, to increasingly explicit, conscious knowledge about spelling patterns and their meanings, as well as recognizing the impact of this shift, linguistically, on children's spelling performance and, cognitively, on children's understandings about the relation between spelling and meaning-making. The findings of this study suggest it is possible to improve the performance of children's spelling by teaching children explicitly about the relationship between phonemes and morphemes, together. These findings also offer teachers and teacher educators some strategies for teaching not merely *what* children

should know about spelling, but also *how* children might use knowledge about language to spell more accurately, efficiently and effectively.

Candidate's certification

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis and all sources used have been acknowledged in this thesis.

Signature:

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the candidate's signature.

Michele Herrington

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