

Grocery Lists, Shopping, and a Child's Writing and Spelling Development

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The last thing parents want to hear from a teacher is that their child is not succeeding in school. The situation becomes even more difficult if the parents question a teacher's observation of their child and then are left wondering what to do next. Consider the following scenario in which Sharon, the parent of a daughter in second grade, is faced with this situation.

Sharon Tells Her Story

Academic learning has always been important in our family. However, it has not been easy for me to help my daughter Njima learn to read better. I assumed that Njima would

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learn to read independently just as her brother had. I read to her, but it was always a laborious task. I'd prefer to give her a book and let her go and use her own creative abilities and imagination. She was able to create detailed stories in her head with adventures and events that involved both family members and a whole range of imaginary family, friends, and playmates; however, she

was starting to lose interest in all academics. She frequently refused to go to school. She would put her head down in class and cry when she was asked to complete some assignments.

I enrolled Njima in an after-school literacy program offered at Wayne State University (WSU), and she appeared to be reading at the same level as her classmates. She did not mind being in the program, even though she frequently used the weather or illness as an excuse for missing regular school. Njima's regular grade-two teacher

was aware and somewhat familiar with the after-school program, but she did not appear to be interested in the reading strategies that Njima was learning. Njima did not want me to let her teacher know that she was still attending the program. One day her teacher approached me and asked if Njima was still in the program. The teacher felt that the creative writing concepts used there promoted poor habits and had perhaps led to Njima's poor writing ability. She grew more critical of the program as the year went on, because she thought that the class should focus on writing and penmanship.

Approximately three weeks had passed when she approached me and urged me to have someone at WSU evaluate Njima's reading abilities. She casually stated that she felt Njima was dyslexic and walked away. This caused me concern because I knew it was too late in the school year to have any meaningful evaluations done. However, it was my responsibility to find a supportive method to evaluate her abilities without her feeling that this was a major crisis. I did not want to create a situation where Njima would develop more negative feelings about her abilities.

Gerry Speaks: Sharon as a Parent-Learner

Parents whose children attend the literacy program have access to the teachers on a regular basis. Twice a year they attend student-led conferences where they view their child's portfolio. If they have questions or concerns they are provided with background information on learning and strategies for them to use at home. In Sharon's case it was suggested that she review Njima's portfolio from the literacy program. Following that experience, Sharon felt better about Njima's work and decided not to take any action on the suggestions made by her regular teacher. However, she did

want to help Njima with her spelling. A teacher suggested that Sharon involve Njima in writing weekly grocery lists at home, so Sharon placed a piece of paper on the refrigerator door and invited Njima to write down things that the family needed. Sharon made the following observations about Njima's writing over a four-week period.

Sharon's Observations of Njima

Njima likes to draw, write, and help out in the kitchen. In the first week I was surprised when she rebelled against making the grocery list. For her first attempt she wrote large letters across the entire sheet (see Figure 1). Later that day she wanted to make another list. This time she used drawings to go with her writing (see Figure 2). To make this process more meaningful, I took Njima to the grocery store. When we located an item on the list, I pointed out the letters of the name of the item, and then we moved on to the next aisle.

The second week, Njima showed less resistance. This time she went into the kitchen to locate items for the list. I told her not to worry about misspelled words. Njima's desire to search for words and read them was evident (see Figure 3). Njima felt good about herself, and in week three she numbered her words on the list (see Figure 4). By the fourth week Njima was doing much better. She commented that "now I do not need to go to the store since you can read my list" (see Figure 5). She was proud of her list and her ability to find words in the kitchen.

What Can We Learn from Njima?

Njima's writing and spelling tell us a lot about her development (Oglaan, 1997; Wilde, 1991; Bean & Bouffler, 1987). An analysis of her grocery-item spellings reveals that she used the following strategies (Oglaan, 1997):

Spelling Strategies Used by Learners

[1.] Letter name

Each letter of a word says the name of the letter. Vowels are usually absent, e.g., *first/first*, *letter/ltr*.

[2.] Spelling as it sounds

Students rely on the sounds they hear that are close to the actual sound, e.g., *uncle/uncul*, *feather/fethir*.

[3.] Placeholder

When spelling words with vowels, students will replace one vowel with another that is similar in sound, e.g., *went/wont*, *video/vedio*.

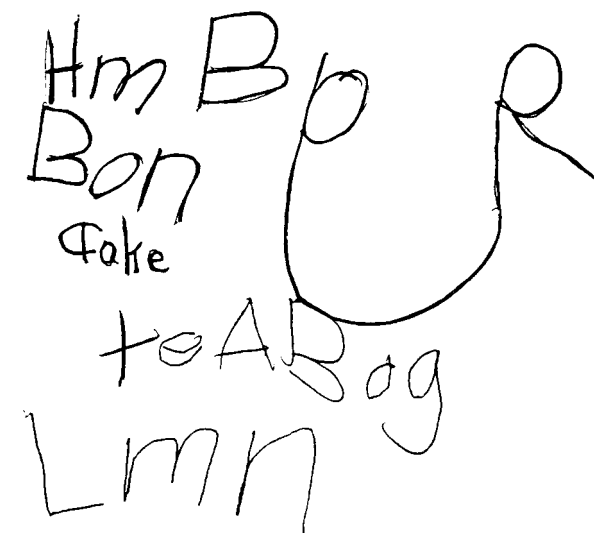


Figure 1. Njima's first grocery list.

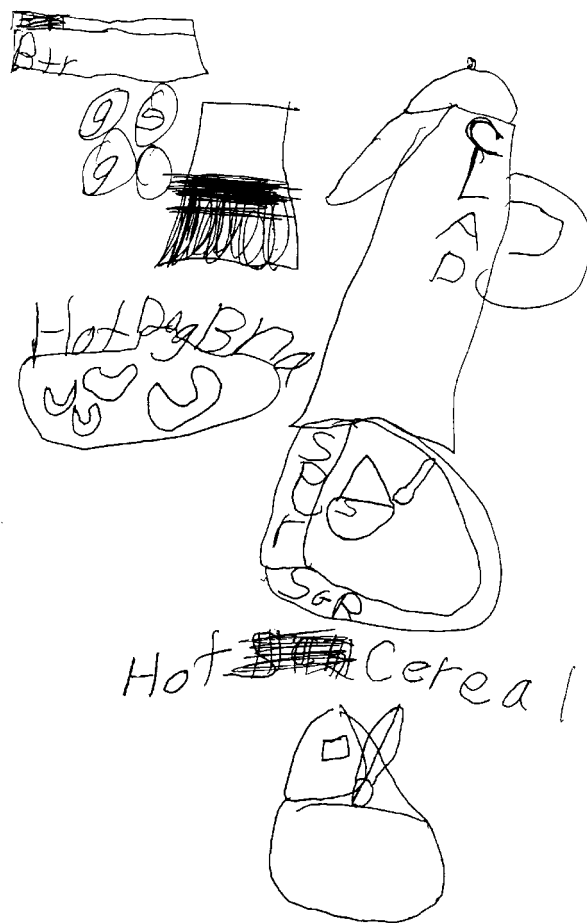


Figure 2. Njima's illustrated grocery list.

000 trt
 salt
 toys
 cake's
 oilx Oli
 fish
 Lemon

Figure 3. Njima's week-two list.

[4.] Representations

Students sometimes know that a vowel is needed but insert a random vowel, e.g., *misory/maziry, sometime/semtim*.

[5.] Overgeneralizations

When students discover a new structure such as the silent *e* at the end of words, they use it exclusively, e.g., *won/wone, from/frome*.

[6.] Transpositional

Words are spelled using all of the correct letters but in the wrong order, e.g., *tried/tride, watch/wacht*.

1 Honey
 2 Lemon
 3 Chicken
 4 Batter
 5 green peas
 6 red pepper
 7 black pepper
 8 popcorn

Figure 4. Njima's grocery list from week three.

[7.] Visual

Words have a visual likeness to the conventional form, e.g., *school/scool, teacher/techer*.

[8.] Articulation

Vowels and consonants are close in sound and are usually used interchangeably, e.g., *combat/kombat, graphics/grafics*.

[9.] One-letter misses

The word is close to the conventional form with the exception of a letter, e.g., *snowed/snowd, waiting/wating*.

[10.] Multiple strategies

Combinations of the strategies, e.g., *neighborhood/nebrhode, retirement/ritearment*.

Across the four weeks of Njima's list-making, we can identify examples of developmentally appropriate spelling strategies. She used letter name strategies on *hamburger/hmbgr, lemon/lmn, butter/btr, sugar/sgr, tart/trt, and white/wt*. She employed the placeholder strategy on *bun/bon* and *pizza/pezza*, and had one-letter misses on *lemon/lmon, black/blak, bread/bred*. In words like *pepper/pepr*, with a

1. e g g s
2. l e m o n
3. p e z z a
4. Hotcake
5. B t o l w a t e r
6. P a p r
7. P a p r c a p
8. B l a u e p l a e t
9. p o p c o r n g r a z z z e e d
10. w t B r e a d
11. t o y s
12. B l a k B e r r s

Figure 5. Njima's fourth-week list.

double consonant, often one consonant will be left out because only one is heard. The vocalic "r" blends in *pepper/pepr* and *paper/papr* are initially represented with only the *r* since it is the only sound heard. Other strategies Njima used include a one-letter miss on *olive/oliv*; transpositional strategy on *oil/oli*; sounding out on *bottle/btol*, *plate/plaet*, *cool aid/clad*; and an articulation strategy on *fish/fshe*. It is interesting to note that the word *lemon* was spelled using a letter-name strategy in week one (*lmm*), using a one-letter miss in week two, and finally spelled conventionally in week four.

Njima's regular teacher told Sharon that she should have Njima checked for dyslexia. Perhaps the regular teacher was concerned by the reversals in Njima's writing.

In Figure 2 we see a reversal on the *g* in *sugar* and the *e* in the word *egg*. In Figure 5 reversals appear on the *rin* *grass* and the *s* in *seed*. Learning to write letters and numbers correctly involves three components: knowing the configuration (shape) of the character, knowing that directionality (left to right, top to bottom) matters, and knowing the direction a particular character faces (Wilde, 1992). Njima has a grasp of the first two of these, and only the third remains to be firmly established. However, we see in other words (Figure 5) that direction is established on the letter *s* in the word *eggs* and *r* in the word *bread*. The reversals may have occurred simply because Njima was concentrating on other things while writing. The reversals should not be taken as a sign of dyslexia but as a sign that Njima is using what she knows about spelling and writing in an attempt to write her list.

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Teacher Beliefs

When parents and teachers hold conflicting beliefs, the parents face a dilemma. The advice from Njima's classroom teacher was rooted in her beliefs about learning and effective teaching (Mills & Clyde, 1991). Harste and Burke (1980) found, by looking at the literacy experiences provided by teachers, that theory underpins a teacher's curricular decisions. Deford and Harste (1982) found that children from classrooms where basal readers were used produce written text similar in content and form to the published materials. Even though the decisions made reflect teachers' best intentions, not all belief systems are of equal benefit to learners (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984).

Summary

Sharon's story is not unusual. When parents are concerned about their children's learning, they often turn to teachers for guidance and advice. In Njima's case Sharon refused to follow-up on the suggestion that her child be tested for dyslexia. Instead she took it upon herself to learn more about her daughter and about strategies that could help her at home. The WSU Literacy Center supported Sharon by allowing her to view Njima's work in the center and by

working with her on strategies she could try at home. This was a risk for Sharon. She indicated in her story at the beginning that she found it difficult to incorporate the learning strategies into their home life. Sharon had to work through her own fears while at the same time finding a way to help her daughter feel more comfortable about reading, writing, and spelling. Ideally, schools should take the initiative by providing opportunities for parents to engage in their own learning (Oglaan, 1997). In doing so, schools and parents can work together within a collaborative model to address the literacy needs of both parents and their children. ●

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G e r r y O g l a n is the current president of WLU.

Tyler

Glasses and kindness, squirrely to a fault.
 What makes Tyler struggle so to write?
 Has two desks 'cause stuff is too distracting.
 What makes Tyler struggle so to write?
 Fought with Nick.
 Argued with Austin.
 Now he starts with Dustin.
 What makes Tyler struggle so to write?
 Eager with a hug.
 First to find a job.
 Truly aims to please.
 What makes Tyler struggle so to write?
 His handwriting is atrocious.
 Says his hand hurts when he writes.
 Maybe that's why Tyler struggles so to write.
 Got him a keyboard to keep his hands from hurting
 Ohhnnno, Tyler's got a new toy. . .
 Why does Tyler struggle so to write?

—Sharon Floyd

Sharon Floyd teaches at Union Ridge Elementary School in Ridgefield, WA.