



Between the Ideal and the Real World of Teaching

Ideas for the Classroom from the NCTE Elementary Section

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Spelling Today



Spelling: What We Still **Worry** About

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Writing, the “second R,” has been a central part of the elementary school curriculum for more than twenty years. In 1978, in a study for the Ford Foundation, Donald Graves reported on how little writing children were doing; his 1983 book, *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*, gave teachers reasons and resources for helping children write often and well. After this point, teachers began to think of spelling not as a separate subject but as knowledge and strategies that are an integral part of the writing process.

But today, due to the No Child Left Behind Act and other federal and state mandates, spelling may be on teachers’ minds more than usual. The increased emphasis on testing has drawn attention to the smaller elements of written language. What hasn’t changed are the demands from parents, who have always been concerned about spelling, often to the point of wanting to dictate what the spelling program should be.

So where do we stand with spelling today? What do we still worry about? Let’s take a look at some questions often heard from teachers and parents, and try to make sense of the issues.

What do I need to know about research into how children learn to spell?

The most important research about spelling comes from the many studies that examine children’s development as spellers as they gain increasing experience with written language. You can find a detailed recap of this work in the book *You Can Red This!* (Wilde, 1991), but here are some general findings:

- Young children, even before starting school, develop an awareness of written language. They’re fascinated with the alphabet. Once they’ve learned the names of the letters, they’re able, with a little adult coaching, to relate the sounds in words to the names of the letters, and they begin inventing spellings.
- By first grade, if not sooner, almost all children can write with invented spelling. As they begin to read, children extend their knowledge of letters and sounds with a sense of more complex spelling patterns, as well as knowledge of what particular words look like.

These patterns of development take place primarily through reading—seeing words in print—although instruction can certainly enhance the process.

What about studies showing “what works” in spelling instruction?

Most such research shows at best small differences between methods, but Dahl and Freppon (1995) and Clark (1988) showed results that suggested there are benefits to invented spelling.

I’d like to suggest that, instead of asking what works, it is more useful for teachers to ask how we can best ensure that all kids learn to spell.

How can we help all kids learn to spell?

In a writing-oriented classroom, spelling development can and should be supported in a variety of ways. Specifics will vary based on students’ ages and developmental levels, but the underlying principles are the same. They include the following:

Lots of reading. This is the single most important factor in spelling development, since kids need to see words in print to know how to spell them; English is only partially phonetic.

Lots of writing. Students can invent spellings for words not yet known, thus trying out their developing knowledge of written language.

Strategies for transitioning to standard spelling. This obviously becomes very important in the upper elementary grades, but can begin in primary grades. For example, if first graders have a copy of the 200 most common words in their writing folders, they can often get them right in first drafts.

Exploration of spelling patterns. For example, if kids realize that *ee* and *ea* are two of the more common spellings for long *e*, they can narrow the possibilities for how a particular word might be spelled.

What should kids' spellings look like at different grade levels?

Be aware, first of all, that students vary. Within any single classroom, you'll find a range of developmental levels. The following statements are very general, because they depend on so many variables, including the kinds of support that teachers give to spelling.

- In kindergarten, some children will be ready to write in "true" invented spelling (representing sounds with letters) and some won't. But they can all "pretend" to write, which can include both scribbling and using strings of letters that aren't intended to represent sounds.
- In first grade, most children (if they know the names of the letters) can write with invented spelling, which may start at a simple level with just beginning sounds.
- In second grade, invented spellings start to get more sophisticated; you'll see two letters used to spell long vowels, and double consonants will appear. Second-graders also start to pick up the spellings of a lot of common words, although memorizing words may not transfer very well to writing.
- By third grade, many students will use more standard spelling than invented, and by fourth grade, as shown by the National Assessment of Educational Progress Writing Report Card, the average child will spell about 92 percent of words correctly.

- From this point onward, a large percentage of children are able to produce final drafts with most words spelled correctly, although for a subset of them (perhaps 20 percent), spelling will continue to be more challenging.

What can we do to help students struggling with spelling?

Every teacher realizes that some students just aren't going to spell as well as others even with all the same opportunities and instruction.

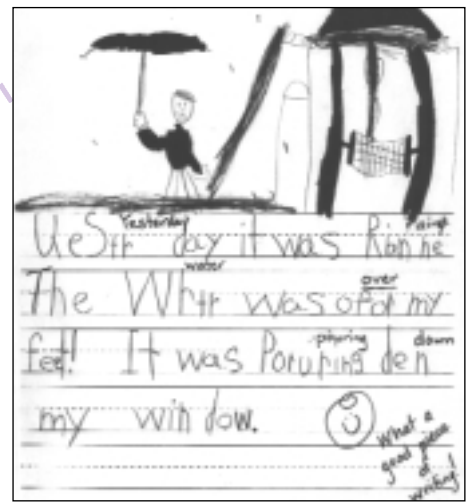
We need to realize that there appears to be a natural spelling ability that some people possess more than others. Even a voracious reader can be a relatively weak speller without this natural ability. So perhaps the first important step in working with weaker spellers is to take away the stigma; it's just harder for them no matter how much they work at it.

Given that, they need what everybody else does, particularly experience with lots of reading. In addition, they may need extra work on proofreading strategies. Not everyone can spot a misspelled word instantly, but we can all learn the craft of searching for words that might be spelled wrong and strategies for finding the correct spelling.

We also need to have reasonable expectations so that students don't spend as long proofreading a paper as they did writing it. If they can learn how to edit for spelling, it's not so important that they do so with all twenty words they've missed; the teacher can be the final editor before publication.

Parents and the public: What do we tell them?

In the last several years, invented spelling has become an easy target for those who want to attack public education. (Bob Dole dissed it in the 1996 presidential campaign.) This can only exacerbate the concerns that parents have always had about spelling. I think that the most valuable approach we can take is to reassure parents that we care about spelling, too, and then to share our knowledge.



Invented spellings in a kindergarten student's writing

Although many parents may have done a lot of writing when they were in elementary school, chances are good that they still think of spelling instruction as memorizing lists of words. If they don't see this happening, they may assume that spelling isn't being taught at all. But memorizing lists has little benefit: it takes a lot of time, and there's often no transfer to writing. Formal memorization is useful for working on each child's frequently missed words, but never more than one or two per week.

However, parents can help kids to see words in print through lots of reading, to use their entire vocabulary in their writing even when they don't know how to spell all the words, to think with the teacher about how spelling patterns work, and to learn how to fix spellings in final drafts.

A letter home or a parents' night presentation early in the school year about the range of strategies represented in the spelling curriculum can go a long way toward allaying concerns. I've found that parents are particularly interested in seeing how children's invented spellings reflect their developing knowledge of language and how we can help them progress further. The parents of weaker spellers (who may also be embarrassed about their own lack of spelling prowess, since there may be a genetic component to spelling ability) can be reassured both that their child isn't stupid or lazy and that there are ways to help him or her.

Children's spelling can provide us with an exciting window on their literacy development. Our teaching is informed and enhanced when we look at what children are able to do when figuring out words, rather than focusing on what they can't do. ▲