

TEACHING Primary Spelling

by Esther Geva

Research has shown that there is a correlation between young children's reading and writing. An emphasis on writing has positive effects not only on writing but also on reading. For this reason, some educators and researchers have promoted the idea of encouraging "invented spelling."

Many educators and researchers believe that children should be encouraged to focus on meaning-based writing activities such as story writing. They think that when children focus on composing text they should not be distracted by concerns about how to spell the words correctly. During story-writing activities, teachers often tell the children to "sound out the word and spell it the way the word sounds." It has been found that a strong emphasis on correct spelling **during** such writing activities results in shorter stories and fewer attempts to include in the stories difficult-to-spell words that are part of the spoken vocabulary of the child.

Parents may be concerned when their child brings home a story in which the spelling errors have not been corrected by the teacher. They may perceive this as bad teaching practice or negligence. They may also be concerned that their children will not learn how to spell correctly. Research on beginning spelling has shown, however, that most children benefit from inventing their own spelling system because this forces them to pay attention to the sounds in words. Such efforts do not impede progress in learning how to spell correctly: it is important to remember that spelling development is gradual.

The research suggests that encouraging invented spelling and independent writing from the start is a promising approach for developing literacy skills. The benefits of such activities are that the children are encouraged to write imaginative stories while learning how to organize their ideas and express themselves in print. At the same time, they learn to pay attention to the phonemic and orthographic structure of words.

It is important to remember, however, that writing stories is not sufficient for the development of good reading and writing skills. The work of Treiman and others shows that direct instruction in word analysis and consonant blending is a necessary (though not sufficient) component, and spelling instruction should be an **explicit** component of any literacy program. Learning about spelling helps children to refine their knowledge of the relationships between different spelling patterns and their pronunciation, a knowledge that in turn helps children also to read and spell words they have never encountered before. This knowledge also helps children to pay attention to the correct pronunciation of words, as well as understand such things as prefixes and suffixes. It also helps to develop the skills needed to read and spell the multi-syllabic words which are encountered in middle school.

Instead of assuming that there is a "magic bullet" for enhancing literacy skills, a "scatter-gun" approach should be adopted. Not all children respond and think in the same manner, and children vary in the amount of reading and writing experiences they have had before coming to school and in the rate at which their reading and writing skills develop. While some children are better at learning and using letter-sound relationships, others find it interesting to express their own ideas. Some like the structure and support of basal readers, while others like to read

stories. A **combined** approach to literacy should reach all these different children.

One component of such a combined approach should be the explicit teaching of spelling. In order to read and write with ease, children need first to learn to recognize and spell **automatically** the most common words in English. The spelling of many of these very frequent words is irregular; so children need explicit help in remembering how to recognize and spell them.

The teacher should spend time on teaching word families, morphological analysis, drilling similar orthographic patterns and so on, in a manner that takes into account the child's age, developmental level, what he or she can already read and spell, and so on. All good readers and writers learn gradually the different spelling patterns which are permissible in English and can come up with pronunciations and spellings for words they have never read or written before. Many poor readers find it difficult. P. Cunningham proposes different activities to ensure that children develop the automatic ability to read and write high-frequency words and learn to spell unfamiliar words with activities such as comparing and contrasting the new words to words they already know.

Augmenting the literacy program with instruction geared towards developing a bigger store of words children can read and spell automatically will enhance their comprehension of text and ease their ability to express themselves in writing.

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