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Spelling Bees for Children—Why?

Wendy Curtis

A spelling bee has long been thought of as an important part of a child's school experience, a familiar and expected part of school. I have my own unfortunate memories of spelling bee time.

I never lasted in the contest very long, maybe once around if I was lucky. I was not a good speller, and I got very flustered when I had to "perform" in front of others. Even the words I did know how to spell, I often misspelled in a spelling bee format. The experience always left me with a sense of failure, even when it was "just for fun." In my elementary years, we often picked teams and did spelling contests in class to practice our words. It was deflating to be one of the last picked because everyone knew I was not a good speller. These experiences did not improve my self-image or improve my spelling skills.

During my student teaching, I was again involved in the annual spelling bee at school where it was viewed as a big event. The teachers received the spelling lists months ahead of time and consistently drilled the children. It was prestigious for the teachers to have the "winner" in their class—a validation that they were indeed good teachers! My own head teacher sent the words home for parents to drill and in her classroom spent at least 15 minutes or more a day in spelling drills or games to prepare for the big day.

The spelling bee was held in the auditorium, and many parents came to see how their child would spell. It was a very intimidating situation.

The children's faces were nervous and tense. As the children spelled or misspelled their words, I noticed something I will never forget. More students than I care to remember misspelled their words and heard the dreaded words, "I'm sorry. That is incorrect." As the students would trudge back to their seats, more often than not, tears would be streaming down their little faces.

It was very difficult for me to understand why it was necessary to put a child through this. I saw no real academic growth through the activity and all too much self-esteem crushed. I remembered how I had always felt in this situation. I wiped away the tears, gave hugs, and passed out what little encouragement I could give. That day really left an impression on me. I have never supported a spelling bee since, and I hope I am never in a situation where its use is mandatory. I do not feel spelling bees improve a student's education.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to provide students with encouraging, confidence-building activities instead? Learning is best achieved when the student is not intimidated and is secure in the knowledge that she will not be judged by her "performance." I believe writing provides the perfect balance in language learning activities. In responding to student writing, the teacher can always find something positive to comment on to build the child's self-esteem, and it is always possible for the student to change or improve the writing. It is also the perfect time to help the

student become more aware of language and its purpose. Spelling will become more important to the student, and he will naturally take the initiative to learn and remember words that are important to him. Our children are already bombarded with too many negative images. Shouldn't we as

teachers be looking for the most positive ways to boost our students while helping them learn the most important lessons? Winning isn't everything, especially in terms of the dreaded SPELLING BEE!