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SPELLING FOR LIFE

Eleanor L. Wollett

In my quest to guide students toward learning to spell for life, rather than for just the Friday spelling test, I decided to conduct a research project with my fifth-graders to test the following question:

Will students demonstrate growth in editing for spelling as a result of whole language activities, including mini-lessons and time on task with reading and writing?

My reasons for conducting this spelling research project were twofold. First, parents understand and expect correctness of spelling in student writing. They have all experienced the traditional weekly spelling list approach and feel it worked for them; why not use the same teaching technique for their children? I wished to gain further information using the alternative method of learning to spell by writing so that I would be better qualified to discuss and defend this teaching strategy with parents and fellow educators.

Second, over the last twenty-three years I have tried several approaches to spelling with my students, including the traditional spelling list, individualized spelling programs, and peer spelling programs. However, I have not seen the transfer of spelling strategies into other subject areas that I anticipated. As a result of this research project, I hoped to have ammunition to support the idea that by learning to spell through writing, spelling may become a lifetime skill, rather than preparation for the weekly spelling test.

Current research was on my side. In his *Learning to Spell*, Richard Hodges explains that spelling is a developmental process similar to learning to speak: "Just as one learns to speak by speaking and to read by reading, one learns to spell by spelling" (12). Since spelling is a developmental process, mastery is not something that should be expected in the elementary

grades. In teaching students to write, teachers avoid overemphasizing correctness and inhibiting developmental growth. The teacher does not abandon correctness but through frequent purposeful writing, nurtures pupils' spelling development.

Unfortunately, in the past, spelling was often taught as a separate discipline where memorization was the key to mastery. In her ERIC publication, "Invented Spelling and Spelling Development," Elaine Lutz emphasizes that teachers should "provide opportunities for frequent writing, which, integrated with all aspects of the curriculum, should be a natural part of the daily classroom routine. Frequent application of spelling knowledge while writing encourages spelling competency" (1986, p.3). Similarly, Ethel Buchanan's *Spelling For Whole Language Classrooms* (1989) describes skill in spelling as being developed in the same way as any other aspect of language, "always in a context, always as a tool to achieve some meaningful purpose, but not as an end in itself; and always by allowing the learner to generate spellings based on his or her prior knowledge and stage of development" (1).

Buchanan then describes five stages of spelling development. First, there is the pre-phonetic stage, when things are represented on paper by symbols that are not pictures. Secondly, there is the phonetic stage, in which a connection is made between the number of letters needed to spell a word and the number of syllables. The advanced phonetic stage comes next. In this stage each sound produced in a word is represented in the spelling of the word. The fourth stage is the phonic stage, where sound becomes even more important to spelling. At this stage students often overgeneralize about sound-syllable relationships and substitute reasonable alternatives. The final stage is the syntactic-semantic stage. Here the meaning and syntax provide important cues as to the spelling of words and, oftentimes, take precedence over sound cues.

For my research, I was particularly interested in the last two stages, the phonic and the syntactic-semantic. In working with upper elementary students I have found that the majority of students fall in these two categories. Also, my past experience in teaching spelling had shown that instruction which emphasizes the drilling of words out of context allows student success on the Friday spelling test but does not enhance transfer into daily writing. Instead, according to Buchanan, a classroom where students are immersed in all aspects of language in use is the ideal. Spelling should

not be separate but, rather, a part of a student's total experience with language: "Students do not write in order to learn to spell, but by writing and receiving feedback they learn to spell. By writing, students discover conventions about spellings" (143).

With this in mind, I went forward with my research project. For the purpose of describing my research, I will use the following framework. First, I will explain the pre-assessment activities I used to arrive at an idea of the students' prior knowledge in the area of spelling as well as their attitudes toward spelling. Secondly, I will outline my intervention program using reading workshop, writing workshop, and mini-lessons. Next, I will describe the way I assessed student outcomes, taking a closer look at particular outcomes that were observed for certain students. Finally, I will consider the implications for future needs for the class.

The site for my research, which was conducted over a two-month period from January through March of 1992, was my fifth grade classroom located in the Lincoln Elementary School in Hudson, Michigan. The research subjects were 24 fifth grade students. Before beginning, I discussed the project with my students so they were aware that I would be monitoring their spelling progress for my research.

As one form of pre-assessment, each student completed an inventory based on Routman's spelling questionnaire (237). To assess their attitudes toward spelling, each student was asked the following questions:

1. Are you a good speller?_____ Why do you think so?
2. What makes someone a good speller?
3. What do you do when you don't know how to spell a word?
4. If someone is having trouble spelling a word how could you help that person?
5. When is it important to use correct spelling?

Also, a fifty word spelling test was administered. This list (see Appendix A) consisted of words used in daily writing by the group of fifth grade students along with selected content words used in student research projects and writing-related activities. Fifteen words were chosen from the areas of science, social studies, and math; the remaining thirty-five came from words commonly used, and often misspelled, in student writings.

Each student also completed a fifteen-minute draft of a writing about the beginning of the United States, which we had been studying in social studies. They were then asked to edit the first hundred words of their drafts for spelling errors using references they could find in the classroom—with the exception of other students.

As an intervention plan I used reading workshop, writing workshop, and mini-lessons. During reading workshop, students were exposed daily to correct use of language through periods of sustained silent reading of a wide variety of literature, including both fiction and nonfiction. The workshop also included discussions about the literature, therefore building the students' reading and speaking vocabularies. We used reading response logs so that the students had an opportunity to write about their readings. In this way they gained further experience in spelling the words they were reading.

Writing workshop provided the students with numerous opportunities to write and explore spelling in context of daily writing. They composed purposeful writing such as messages, lists, plans, signs, letters, stories, dramas, songs, and poems, integrated with all aspects of the curriculum. During a portion of the workshop time, students were given the opportunity to work cooperatively so that they could both share their writing and do peer editing. As a part of the editing process, students worked with peers to locate and correct spelling errors.

Mini-lessons provided direct instruction through modeling as well as an opportunity for students to practice spelling strategies. The lessons were based on the needs of the children whenever it became evident that a particular strategy would be helpful in the students' writing. For example, if a number of students were having difficulty determining when to use "there," "their," or "they're," I would present a mini-lesson and follow-up activities such as the following:

1. Class discussion of various meanings for the words.
2. Each student divides a piece of paper into thirds and writes one of the three possible spellings on each.
3. Teacher dictates sentences using one of the three forms and students hold up correct spelling.
4. Students present oral sentences to class as others hold correct spelling.

5. Students peruse literature books they are presently reading and locate examples of authors' uses of the three forms.
6. Students look through their own writing folders to see how they have used the words and make revisions in spellings where needed.

The lessons were whole group, small group, or one-to-one. Mini-lessons also included topics such as homophones, plurals, capitalization, and use of the dictionary.

After a period of three months I administered three types of post-assessments as a means of determining the outcomes of my spelling research. The first form was a spelling test using the same fifty words as the pre-assessment. Twenty-two students completed both tests, and the results were as follows:

Scores improved	+10	1 student
	+8	2 students
	+7	3 students
	+5	2 students
	+4	2 students
	+3	2 students
	+2	4 students
	+1	1 student
Scores remained same	+0	3 students
Scores decreased	-1	1 student
	-7	1 student

Out of the twenty-two students completing both tests, seventeen scores showed improvement, three remained the same, and two decreased. Even though we did not directly practice these words during the period between tests, a clear majority of students showed significant growth.

The students then completed a second draft of a writing about the beginnings of the United States, after which they were given time to edit for spelling errors. Twenty-four students completed both writings, and the results were as follows:

Scores improved	+22	1 student
	+11	1 student
	+9	1 student
	+7	1 student
	+3	4 students
	+2	5 students
	+1	3 students
Scores remained same	+0	5 students
Scores decreased	-4	1 student
	-6	1 student
	-8	1 student

Out of the twenty-four students completing both writings, sixteen showed spelling improvement, five remained the same, and three made a greater number of errors. As I perused the drafts of the second writings done by the three students missing more words on the second edit, I observed that most of the words were misspelled due to errors in capitalization. With this information I now realize that I need to teach a mini-lesson on capitals and work with these students on capitalization. Also, one of the students who missed more on the second draft had become more daring and used more difficult words in her second writing. This informs me that her writing vocabulary is growing, and she is becoming more willing to take risks in her writing.

As a tool for affective post-assessment, I had students write a self-evaluation of their progress in spelling. These results were the most exciting for me! The following are quotes taken from students' evaluations:

I have been able to edit better with others and help them edit too (Sarah).

Now I know that you don't have to capitalize everything (Mike).

I think I have a lot of self confidence in spelling. Therefore when I look at a word that might be misspelled I just presume that it's spelled right (Jacob).

On the last few writings I've been spelling easy words wrong (Amy).

I know how to spell more words than I did (Lacey).

I feel that I am improving in editing stories, because I edited a story from the beginning of the year that I found in my desk. I found a lot of places that needed endmarks, etc. It's real fun editing stories that I've wrote (Justin).

I am not a good speller. That menes I am not sher if a word is spelled rong or not (Meghan).

So far I've started to enjoy writing a little more than what I did last year during HEAT [a gifted and talented program]. Last year I took writing. None of those writings have been edited but I think I will try to edit one before the year's through (Matt).

Maybe I've been improving in correcting spelling. I know that I've been trying harder than I was before (John).

On spelling it used to be every word I circle is misspelled but now I have quite a few words that didn't need to be circled. I think just editing a lot has helped me. When we edit our responses it helps me because some of the words that I use in most of my responses. I think editing them helped me to be able to spell those words easier (Megan).

Yes, I think I'm improving. The things on the overhead
[modeling] that we checked together helped (Beau).

As I reflect on the outcomes of this research and consider the implications for future needs of my students, I have an even stronger conviction that learning to spell through "time on task" both in reading and writing is the most effective approach for preparing students to become lifetime spellers. If for no other reason, the student responses themselves let me know that the spelling-through-writing program is working. This final response, written by Kevin, says it all.

I feel that I am improving a lot because I have worked a lot harder and a lot more this year. I put more effort into my writing and spelling skills, so I have done exceptionally good in writing.

Through this project I have a research-based alternative to the traditional spelling list to discuss with parents and fellow educators. I am excited and I know my students will be too as they use writing to learn to spell for life!

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APPENDIX A

FIFTY-WORD SPELLING TEST

1. earth	22. especially	43. I've
2. said	23. guess	44. Michigan
3. believe	24. mathematics	45. families
4. United States	25. southern	46. separate
5. again	26. social studies	47. field
6. weather	27. half	48. afraid
7. choice	28. very	49. strength
8. their	29. girl	50. experiment
9. once	30. choose	
10. nation	31. receive	
11. government	32. Hudson	
12. beautiful	33. writing	
13. they	34. surprise	
14. science	35. too	
15. Lincoln School	36. sentence	
16. everywhere	37. through	
17. your	38. straight	
18. important	39. health	
19. right	40. often	
20. business	41. wouldn't	
21. report	42. American	