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## WRITING CAN BE DONE BY YOUNG CHILDREN: THE USE OF INVENTED SPELLING

Gail Parshall

- Kelli October 30, 1988

mfv+kstn  
eeAmc  
IYtoBAmKHLX  
to  
mhz

Can you read this? What does it say? Kelli, a beginning first grade girl, wrote this. It may not be meaningful to her readers since it does not have conventional spelling, but the story is meaningful to Kelli. She is in the first phase of using invented spelling in her writing. Kelli is beginning to use writing as a way to communicate and is using this writing to express herself to others.

Children are exposed to writing at a very young age. They see it on cereal boxes, signs, billboards, television, and books that are read to them. Children pick up pencils and crayons to experiment with writing long before they go to school. They attempt to express themselves in what they feel is writing, even though it may be just scribbly lines. Children believe that they are writing words like they see every day. However, since young children's attempts at spelling are not conventional, they often are not appreciated as actual writing. We, as adults, should learn to accept children's unconventional writings so they are encouraged to use writing to express their thoughts as well as grow in their interest in writing. Children learn to talk by talking; therefore, it seems logical that they will learn to write by writing

(Calkins 47). If children are encouraged to write in their school classrooms as well as at home, even at a young age, they will improve and become better writers— and even begin to use standard spelling.

This article is written for early elementary teachers and elementary administrators. It will explain what invented spelling is and why it is important to the writing process, how to ease parents' concerns about invented spelling, what the developmental stages of invented spelling are, and how to help young children write by using invented spelling. Examples of children's writings are provided to show how students' invented spellings develop into standard spelling. Further, strategies are provided to show how I, a first grade teacher, help my students become aware of their writing.

The only way we can help children become fluent writers is by allowing them to write. Writing can be done for many different purposes, on topics the children choose and for audiences they know (Newman 81). Young children have little trouble writing if they use invented spelling. Invented spelling allows them to sound out words for themselves without the concern for standard spelling (Hunt 36). Some people refer to it as phonetic spelling.

Children enter school able to express themselves freely when they speak. By using invented spelling in writing and eliminating the concern for standard spelling, children are also able to express thoughts freely in writing. Students who worry about spelling too early tend to use only very familiar words and compose simple, dull pieces of writing. When using invented spelling, however, the children begin to write longer and more interesting stories (Temple 115).

Still, for some readers, especially parents, the lack of correct spelling often masks the quality of the writing. The main concern for parents of a child who uses invented spelling is that their child will not be able to make the transition to correct or standard spelling. It is the teacher's task to inform the parents, through a letter and a possible meeting, about the significance of invented spelling. Some of the things that parents need to be told are:

1. When children continually interrupt themselves during writing to worry about correct spelling, they often lose track of what they want to say.
2. Unless children take risks and are willing to make

errors, their progress not only as spellers but also as writers will be slow and inhibited.

3. Children will not have as great a delight in putting their own thoughts into use if they are stifled by spelling concerns.
4. Children who are willing to use invented spelling usually become correct spellers in a reasonably short time, and they also become fluent writers in the process (Temple 115).

Making parents aware of this information will help alleviate some of their anxieties about allowing the use of invented spelling.

Parents should also be informed about the different developmental patterns that occur with young children who use invented spelling so that, along with us they can help young children grow as writers. Richgels has identified the major stages a young writer goes through when developing spelling skills.

Stage 1: In the first stage of using invented spelling, the children use initial consonants to represent the entire word.

Stage 2: They use the first and final consonants of a word.

Stage 3: Attempts are made by the children to include the vowel sounds in their spelling.

Stage 4: As they begin to read and are exposed to more correct spelling, they will spell more conventionally.

As the children go through these stages, the consonants become more fixed in position and more automatic. Children begin to hear hidden letters that previously had been obliterated by more dominant features in the words (Graves 188). When children are encouraged to use their own judgements about spelling, most move comfortably from stage to stage.

I have chosen several of Kelli's writings that were done throughout her first grade year to illustrate the different stages of invented spelling.

- Kelli October 30, 1986

m f v + k s m  
e e a m c  
I y + o b a m k e h l x  
to ~~h~~  
m h z

In her first stage, shown at the beginning of this article and again here, Kelli is using initial consonants. At the time she wrote this story it was very meaningful to her. She is writing about Halloween and what she wants to be for Halloween. Even though this is hard for people other than Kelli to read, the important thing is that Kelli is confident enough that she put down the letters she needed for the words of her story. Taking these risks enabled her to grow as a better writer, as you can see in these next examples.

Kelli  
January 22, 1987  
the soisw is fn be Ks  
ILK + o BA en et  
I LK + o Mk a Soisw  
Man  
the end

**Translation:** "The snow is fun because I like to play in it. I like to make a snowman. The end"

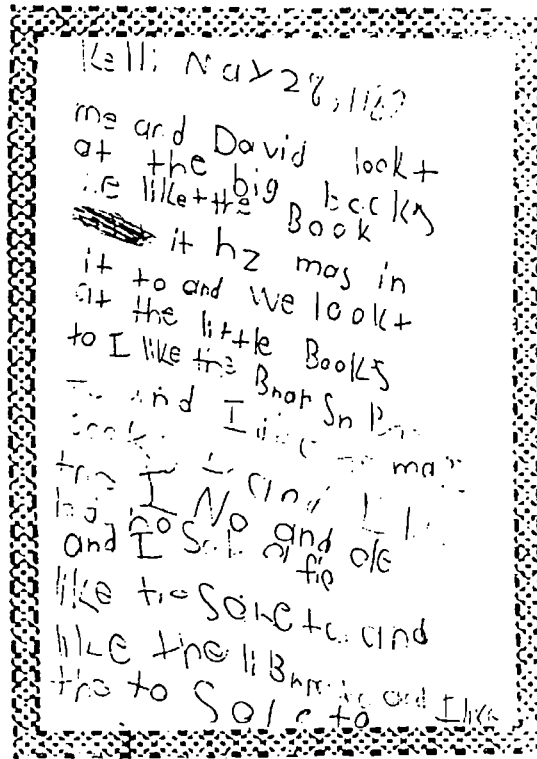
This example illustrates the second stage of writing, where Kelli is using the first and final consonants in many of her words. She is using the first and final consonants in the words "fun," "cause," "like," and "make." Notice that she has already learned to write "the," "is," and "to" correctly—from frequent exposure to words in storybooks and on charts and labels in the classrooms.

March 16, 1987  
 To Da I'm gon to Tosuns.  
 I'm gon to get a Jup, rop  
 it is prlp and Wit  
 It glo, in P the Dkr  
 I'm bris, gn to H will  
 ged a Jup rop to just.  
 Like I'm to Bt  
 H will got, belo and Wit.  
 In the Unknow, is gon  
 to ged One to and  
 She gon to ged One, Bt  
 Hne will by H and Wit.

**Translation:** "Today I am going to Toys R Us. I am going to get a jump rope. It is purple and white. It glows in the dark. My brother is going too. He will get get a jump rope too just like I am too. But he will get blue and white. My mom is going to get one too and she going to get one but hers will be red and white."

This story shows that Kelli is able and anxious to write more and more ideas. She is beginning to use more vowels and the sounds of letters within words. In this third illustration Kelli is using vowels in "going," "jump," "rope," "get," "white," and "red." From her use of "prlp" we can see that she is hearing several of the sounds inside "purple." She also wrote "glo" for "glow" and "dkr" for "dark." Notice that she is now spelling many important common words correctly: "I'm," "to," "it," "is," "and," "will," "just," "like," "mom," "she," "one," and "red."

As the year progressed, Kelli became a better reader and started to notice more standard spellings. The influence of reading is evident in the following story she wrote about a visit to the library.



**Translation:** "Me and David looked at the big books. We liked the book. It has maps in it too and we looked at the little books too. I like the Berenstain Bear too and I like the mystery books too and I like the I Know An Old Lady Who Swallowed A Fly. And I like the story too and like the library too and I like the two stories too."

Kelli progressed by risk-taking in her writing; her stories became longer. Even though she still used invented spellings in this story, she spelled many words correctly. Kelli made amazing growth in her writing this year because she was encouraged to use invented spelling and she was given many opportunities to write and read for a variety of purposes.

Kelli's pattern of growth helps us understand the developmental stages of children's writing. As teachers we can use this understanding to check students' advancement in spelling by asking the children periodically to write from memory the words to a familiar song, a nursery rhyme, or a

simple folk song. In Beth's class the boys and girls wrote down the words to "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" during the first week of school. They wrote the words again in November and at the end of the school year. Beth's three writings show her progress.

August

BETH A DREAM 28 1987 <sup>row, row</sup>  
row row row your boat getley down the  
stream marly marly marly marly  
Life is but a dream.

November

NOVEMBER 21 1987  
row row row your boat getley down the  
stream marly marly marly marly  
Life is ~~but~~ **BOAT** a dream



May

Beth May 31, 1988  
row row row your  
boat getley down  
the stream marly  
marly marly marly  
Life is but a  
dream.



Although Beth was a good risk-taker in her writing at the beginning of the year, you can see improvement and progress toward standard spelling in each succeeding writing. At the end of the year, she correctly spelled "row," "your," "boat," "down," "the," "life," "is," "but," and "dream." In each of the other words she uses more of the correct letters; the "g" is used in "gently" instead of "j," and the "y" is used in "merrily" instead of "e."

Both Kelli and Beth showed their development in spelling and writing as their year in first grade progressed. As Olga Scibior has said, "Children's spelling development does proceed naturally if they are allowed to write a great deal and are permitted to spell functionally" (Scibior 88). The main reason for encouraging invented spelling during these formative years is to help children become fluent writers, so that their thoughts will not be interrupted with the worry of how each word is spelled (Newman 81). When children in my classroom ask me how to spell a word, I suggest that they repeat the word and think about the sounds they hear in that word. Quite often their eyes will light up as they quickly put the sounds of the letters they hear on the paper. I always praise them for any effort and tell them that I knew they could do it. Before long they write the letters on their own without asking me. After I have encouraged this kind of independence a number of times, most boys and girls only rarely ask for my help. They know that I will, in turn, ask them to "take a risk" and sound out the word. They learn that any effort on their part will receive praise.

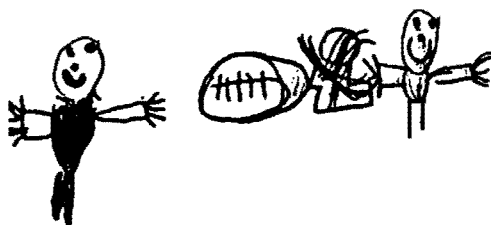
A very important part of encouraging writing that uses invented spelling is having the children read their stories to the teacher or to another child. Even though the children may have used only beginning consonants in their writing, they use the letters to help them remember what has been written.

The more children write— and read their writing to others— the more they become aware of letters within words (Calkins 55). There are ways to help children become more aware of the letters within words as they write. I help children develop their words by listening to their stories and referring back to one of the words that has an obvious sound that was not written down. I point to the word and ask the child to say the word again, requesting the child to listen to the sound at the end or middle, depending upon at which stage in the use of invented spelling he or she seems to be. Usually the child will be aware of the letter that is needed. I will then ask the child to write in that letter. I do not mark on the children's stories.

Throughout the year I also want the children to become aware of some of the differences between invented spelling and standard spelling. Learning about correct spelling serves to alleviate the burden of inventing everything and often makes children's writing more fluent (Temple 118). I use the students' own writings to help them become aware of standard spelling. When I use a student's paper as an example for the class, I always ask the permission of that child. I then display that paper on an overhead projector. As the class sits around me viewing the projection, I ask the author to read the story. We then discuss it as a group. I guide the children to make constructive comments about content and form so that they can ask questions of the author. I may point out a skill element such as the "th" sound, or perhaps a punctuation mark, so that the children will become aware of skills that can be used in their own papers. After the first time or two I did this with my class, I found out that the children were eager for me to use their papers as examples. They were proud that the other boys and girls could see what they had written.

Lance's story below illustrates the type of things that can be talked about with the children. I would not point out to the class all the errors in his story, only one or two. I might also use the story again on another occasion when I have another skill I want to stress.

LANCE  
 NOVEMBER 3 1986  
 I like to play football  
 I like to play football with my friends



**Translation:** " I like to play football. I like to play football with my friends.

The following are activities that might be part of a class discussion of Lance's piece.

1. I would ask Lance to read this.
2. I would ask for any questions about this story from the class.
3. I would point out how Lance added letters to make his story more readable as he re-read it
  - adding the “l” to “play”
  - adding the “f” for “football”
  - adding the word “play,” which he had forgotten.
  - adding the “l” to “ball.”
4. I would show how he remembered to use a capital “l” for his name.
5. I would point out how he heard the “l” and “i” and “k” sounds in the word “like.”
6. I would note how he heard the “f” and “t” in “foot” and that he did a good job attempting the vowel sound.
7. I would ask the children how Lance could have made his story more readable. I might expect the answer, “Putting a space between each word.”
8. We would talk about how many sentences Lance had written and ask, “What should be placed at the end of each sentence?”
9. I would ask what two letters we hear at the end of the word “with” that Lance could have used instead of “ll.”
10. We could discuss the word “my” and ask how Lance could have made the word more readable. I would accept either “my” or “mi,” because that is what they hear.
11. We could discuss the word “friends.” I would comment on how he heard the “f” at the beginning, had the idea of the vowel, and hears a “z” at the end. I could point out that we not only hear the “f,” but also can hear another sound that blends with the beginning sound.

As I said before, only a few of these numbered items would be pointed out on one day. But this illustration shows a variety of options teachers have when they use the children's own stories as learning tools for the whole class. I have realized that, by using children's papers, I teach writing and spelling—as well as reading—through writing.

Writing can be done by young children. Writing is a highly social act and children at this age are able to express themselves. They are fascinated by words. Therefore, when children use invented spelling, they are able to put their thoughts into writing. Children learn by their writing and through the writing process. Children's reading is enhanced by all the reading done while they are writing. Writing and reading constantly reinforce each other. Finally, writing certainly does help children become better learners, especially if teachers allow and even encourage their young writers to use invented spelling.

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