

Spelling K–8

PLANNING AND TEACHING

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Contents

List of Terms v

Acknowledgments ix

Chapter 1 Introduction 1

Part One

Chapter 2 Principles and Practices 5

Chapter 3 Planning a School Spelling Program 17

Part Two

Chapter 4 Letters 27

Chapter 5 Phonological Awareness 47

Chapter 6 Onsets and Rimes 66

Chapter 7 Sounds 79

Chapter 8 Spelling Patterns 100

Chapter 9 Contractions 119

Chapter 10 Compound Words 130

Chapter 11 Homophones 141

Chapter 12 Plurals 155

Chapter 13 Prefixes and Suffixes 162

Chapter 14 Derivatives and Origins of English Words 184

Chapter 15 Apostrophes for Possessives and Plurals 196

Part Three

Chapter 16 Proofreading 203

Chapter 17 High-Frequency Words 208

Chapter 18 Personal Words to Learn 226

Part Four

Chapter 19 Sample Schedules for a School Spelling Program 239

Appendix A: Student Checklists 253

Appendix B: Questions Parents Ask 255

Appendix C: Class Words 260

Appendix D: Personal Words 262

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Principles and Practices

A

worthwhile spelling program guides children to recognize and develop the strategies and habits of competent spellers. It best occurs in an environment where both the teacher and the students recognize the students' spelling strengths and needs, where there are specific plans to work on the needs, and where there is a real-life purpose for learning about spelling. The overall goals should be for children to:

- understand that the primary purpose for learning about spelling is so that others can read their writing;
- know that their writing is valued regardless of the stage of development of their spelling;
- develop an interest in words and spelling and want to do their best;
- learn how to apply spelling strategies that will help them to write or learn any word;
- learn specific words that they use frequently and so become able to correctly spell these words automatically; and
- know how to use a variety of resources to help with spelling.

It's interesting to ask children why they think it is worthwhile to become a better speller. If their responses include "to pass the spelling test" or "to get a good report" or "to go to the next grade," but do not include "so that other people can read my writing," then for some reason they are getting a distorted message or misinterpreting teachers' intentions. Similarly, children can misinterpret statements such as "Spelling doesn't matter; just get your ideas down" and think that there is no need to be doing their best in spelling. To help children with

spelling and to avoid such misinterpretations there are some essential principles and practices that need to be in place. These include the following.

Frequent Purposeful Writing

Children must be given many opportunities to write for various purposes and audiences and in different genres. This gives them the chance to try out unknown words, figuring out ways to spell them and how to use various resources for finding words and checking spelling, and to practice new spelling strategies that they have learned. If the type of writing is limited then the range of learning is also limited. For example, the common practice of having beginning writers write on one page in a journal every day limits the amount and kind of writing that they do and therefore the range of words they will try or practice. Beginning writers who mostly write in a journal tend to write only about personal experiences, and often the same experiences are repeated many times. Constant journal writing frequently causes children to think that writing begins with the thought “What will I write about today?” rather than “What kind of writing will I do today?” or “Who will I write something for?” When these children can’t think of anything to write about in their journal, they may manage to write only one sentence, or even suffer from writer’s block. But when children are encouraged to do a variety of kinds of writing—letters or postcards, stories, nonfiction pieces about things they know about or want to research, instructions, signs or messages—they learn much more about all aspects of writing, including spelling. To enable this to happen, different kinds of writing paper and tools need to be available so that children may choose material to suit the purpose of their writing, and supportive environments, including class mailboxes or access to e-mail, need to be established.

Opportunities for Children to Read Each Other’s Writing

When children have an audience for their writing, they have a reason for learning about spelling and for doing the best they can. Although writers may read their own writing to others, it is a different experience for children to try to read what others have written. Readers are still encouraged to make constructive comments about the content, but they are also likely to query the writer if the handwriting is illegible or if they find it hard to figure out a word because of the spelling. This gives writers the sense that learning about spelling is useful and that proofreading and editing have value.

Teachers should allow time for children to read each other’s writing in all curriculum areas, even if the writing will not be published. One way to encourage this is to provide a basket labeled “unedited writing” where children could place their pieces of writing; another way is to have children exchange such things as science notebooks or literature response journals. This gives the chil-

dren's writing a genuine audience other than the writers themselves or the teacher.

Children also need to frequently select writing to publish, so that they have a purpose for learning how to proofread, take responsibility for correcting whatever they can, and come to understand the function of an editor or peer proofreader, who will assist with the writing before it is published. The classroom library should have many examples of children's published work. Beginning writers' work may be published with both their version of the print and the editor's version. This allows children's writing to be used as reading material for other children, while also making clear that their own attempts are highly valued.

Many Opportunities to See and Read Print

Through seeing print in the environment and being involved in shared and independent reading, children can notice and recall what words look like. If the reading material includes nonfiction as well as fiction and does not have limited vocabulary, the opportunities are much richer. Many children will form their own hypotheses about words, such as that all words have a vowel, that some words are spelled with the same patterns as other words, that there are various ways to represent each sound, and that there are generalizations to be made about how prefixes or suffixes are added to words. You can guide children to form these sorts of hypotheses by pointing out examples in material that the children are reading. Because children see the same words in most material they read, many will start to spell these high-frequency words correctly in their writing. You can help children notice and learn these words. When exploring any aspect of spelling it's important to use material that the children can read so that spelling lists can be built from words they know the meaning of.

Beginning readers and writers also need to be involved in many kinds of reading experiences, such as being read to, joining in shared reading, and reading independently, in order to learn about the conventions of books and print. They need to know what a word is, to understand one-to-one correspondence between spoken and written words, and to know what a letter is before they can learn about the relationship between letters and sounds. Adams (1990) claims that children need many hours of experience with written texts before being taught phonics in any formal way, and Weaver (1998) points out that it is essential for children who have not been read to at home to be given extensive, intensive experiences with print of all kinds at school. When children are read to, they understand the many purposes of written language and hear the way language works. Shared reading allows you to demonstrate concepts about print and later show children how to use analogy to go from a familiar word to an unfamiliar word (such as from *and* to *land* or from *day* to *lay*) and how to use word structure to figure out longer words (such as *playing* being made up of *play* + *ing* or *misunderstanding* being made up of *mis* + *under* + *stand* + *ing*); you can also explain how this strategy helps with writing as well as reading.

The only way that writers could possibly know how to spell all of the words they know is because of the amount of reading they do. Reading enables writers

to recall what words look like and helps them select from two or more possible spellings that they have tried. Growth in children’s spelling is greatly influenced by the amount and range of reading they do. Daily sustained, independent reading is absolutely essential for literacy development, including development in spelling.

Assessing Children’s Writing to Inform Teaching

Children’s writing provides the best indication of class, group, and individual needs. Although you may have a school plan or a set of standards to guide you, it is essential to analyze your students’ writing to observe what each of them knows about spelling and the particular types of mistakes they may be making. The unfamiliar words that children attempt reveal much about the strategies being used or not for spelling. It’s helpful to look for patterns that emerge in the type of errors students make so you can focus your teaching on what will help the most children with the greatest number of words. For example,

- If the misspellings or approximations are words such as *lrn* (learn), *mite* (mighty), *icsidide* (excited), or *tud* (turned), they indicate that children are working at hearing sounds in words and how those sounds are represented. At this stage, it’s useful to help children explore the sounds of English and the various ways to represent each sound (see Chapter 7).
- If the misspellings are words such as *wlord* (world), *relly* (really), *coleful* (colorful), *beacuse* (because), *sum* (some), or *snak* (snake), they indicate that children are aware of the letters in words, but may not be sure of all of them or the correct order. These children may also be focusing on the sounds in a word without thinking about what the word looks like. In this case, it’s useful to help children explore spelling patterns and develop visual strategies (see Chapter 8).
- If the misspellings are words such as *favrite* (favorite), *learing* (learning), *remberd* (remembered), *useing* (using), or *geting* (getting), they indicate that children are not aware of the concept of base words with prefixes and suffixes and the rules related to this concept. Here you should focus on this aspect of spelling (see Chapter 13).

It’s not useful for anyone—you, the child, or the parent—when assessments such as a letter grade or numerical score are given, or when a child is said to be a “good” or “poor” speller, without being more specific. By looking at your students’ spelling habits and attitudes, and at their use of phonic, visual, and meaning-based strategies, your teaching could be more purposeful. With the children, build a picture of all of the strategies that competent spellers use, relevant to the children’s stages of development. You and the children can then use this as an assessment tool and as a guide for teaching and learning. Appendix A is a spelling checklist that may be used as a guide; the school plan outlined in Chapter 3 provides more detail.

Basing assessment of children’s spelling on the results of a spelling test can

be misleading and may give children the impression that the test is the main reason for learning about spelling. In one class, where children were mainly choosing their own words to learn and testing each other in pairs, with the teacher recording each child's weekly mark, the children admitted they were only choosing words they already knew so that they would score highly on the test.

Modeling Spelling Strategies

During modeled writing (where you, the teacher, are responsible for the content and the actual writing), shared writing (where you and the children construct the content together but you do the actual writing, perhaps with suggestions from children about spelling and punctuation), or interactive writing (where both you and the children actually write the words) there should be demonstrations of ways to work out how to spell words, how to use various resources to help with spelling, and how to proofread to check spelling. The focus will vary according to the stages of spelling development your students are in and what you are currently helping them to learn about. Demonstrating spelling strategies should be done with all kinds of writing so that the students are simultaneously getting different models for the writing they could do. If modeling of spelling strategies is always done with just one kind of writing, such as a morning message to the class, then children are not provided with models representing the diverse functions and forms of print.

In modeled and shared writing you have many opportunities to demonstrate specific spelling strategies that you have noticed the children need to learn more about; but in interactive writing the children's existing knowledge is used, so that the class or individuals tell you how to spell or attempt a word and you focus the children's attention on what they are currently learning about. The focus for beginning writers includes strategies such as understanding the concept of a word, remembering the spelling of high-frequency words, using onset and rime analogy to figure out how to spell a word, listening for sounds in words, and thinking about what words look like. For more experienced writers the focus shifts to strategies such as working from the base word to build compound words and using generalizations for adding prefixes and suffixes, knowledge of derivatives, and knowledge about homophones and apostrophes. Some of the children's spelling in interactive writing may be approximations, but because the writing is going to be used for reading, the conventional spelling is finally arrived at through your questioning and demonstration. Published pieces are spelled correctly.

Children should also be given insights into the spelling strategies you are using when you write. This varies with different age groups, but includes writing words several ways to see which one looks right, using knowledge of similar words, listening for sounds in words, using a variety of resources to check spelling, and admitting that you do not know how to spell all words but are still striving to learn more about spelling. (For more information about shared and interactive writing, see Snowball et al. 1995, 1996, Dorn et al. 1998, Button et al. 1996, and Pinnell and Fountas 1998.)