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Introduction

Are you a confident and accurate speller? Do you spell every word correctly when you write a birthday note or compose a letter home to parents? Do you write in ink because you have no anxiety about misspelled words? Or are you, like me, an anxious speller who prints in pencil and gives thanks for his spell-check option every time he sits down at the computer?

As a kid, I aced my weekly spelling tests. But the writing I did in stories and book reports was always peppered with spelling mistakes. Although I no longer write book reports, spelling is still a problem for me. Occasionally, my lack of ability causes me embarrassment. Once, at a teachers' professional development workshop, I was part of a group that was told to make a poster on intervention programs. The group elected me to be their scribe. I have "writing-in-public-phobia" so I have no idea how I allowed this to happen, but nonetheless, there I was, Sharpie in hand and poster paper in front of me. At one point I carefully printed "excellerate progress". When a team member politely asked if I had meant to spell the word *accelerate*, I tried to cover my embarrassment with a bit of wit. "No," I replied, "I meant *excellerate*. It means picking up the pace in a most excellent way."

Unlike my wife, who, like most accomplished spellers, simply knows what words look like, I can't seem to easily see words in my head, and when I write them down, I don't know if they "look right" or not. *Rhythmical* never looks correct to me, and I'm just as likely to write *hesitent* as *hesitant*. As for *silhouette*, forget it. Spell checker, here I come.

Through my mid-twenties, I never thought much about my spelling weakness. And I certainly never thought about how others spell. But that changed when, at age twenty-seven, I became a teacher. In my first year, I began to wonder why some children made a perfect score on their spelling test every week but misspelled many words on their authentic writing. Later, I began to wonder if my spelling instruction was ultimately helping or hurting my students' achievement. The children in my special education classroom came to me at least a year behind in reading and writing, and many of them didn't like to read and write. If

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these students were going to reach critical year-level benchmarks and develop the ability to enjoy reading a book and writing a story, then every aspect of my instruction, from spelling and phonics to grammar and vocabulary, needed to go toward boosting their reading and writing skills. If my spelling instruction wasn't doing anything to steadily improve students' ability to read and write or, heaven forbid, if my instruction was holding them back, then why bother to do it at all?



To set the stage for this book, I'm going to jump back in time for a moment. Travel with me to the year 1991, when the United States was joining a coalition of countries to push Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait, Kentucky Fried Chicken was changing its name to KFC, and I was a first-year teacher with a ponytail running a self-contained learning support classroom for year four and fives.

Like many teachers, I can clearly remember all the children I taught in my first year of teaching. What a crew! Each of my sixteen students was identified as having a specific learning disability or an emotional disturbance. Some of my kids did quite well on their weekly twenty-word spelling tests. I remember Randy and Jessica in particular. Week after week, on Friday afternoons when I handed back the tests, those two would grin like Cheshire cats. Another A+! But for all their spelling "ability", Randy and Jessica were unable to read beyond a year-one level, and they rarely spelled words accurately while writing. This perplexed me. How could they do so well on their spelling tests yet struggle so much with their reading and writing?

Meanwhile, other students consistently bombed their weekly spelling tests. Jaclyn comes to mind. She was a kind-hearted child and a worker bee who always concentrated and completed assignments, even when my classroom was chaotic. Jaclyn's parents were supportive and helped her practise her spelling at home. Yet week after week, Jaclyn failed to spell more than thirteen or fourteen words correctly on her twenty-word list. She made random and seemingly careless mistakes, slipping in an extra vowel, failing to use the digraph *-ck* for the *k* sound in *black* or spelling in a nonsensical way (*creature* spelled *craechr*). I saw the disappointment in Jaclyn's eyes each time I handed back her spelling tests, and it broke my heart. This child was studying, practising with her parents and working hard in school. Why was she doing so poorly on her spelling tests?

By the end of my second year, I knew I couldn't in good conscience allow some children to suffer the humiliation of consistently awful scores. I also realised that the basal spelling program, which sucked up a fair amount of my time, did little

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to improve student achievement in either reading or writing. So I began to create my own program, using Nina Traub's book *Recipe for Reading* as the foundation. I taught fewer sounds and patterns every week, I made sure I used the same weekly patterns to teach spelling and phonics, and I got better at showing the kids how the two were connected. I also began to teach to mastery, repeating the spelling patterns for a second or third week if students hadn't fully learned them. By the end of my first six years of classroom teaching, I still didn't know much about how spelling developed, or how reading, writing and spelling were connected, but I was regularly offering two and sometimes three spelling lists to my students, reteaching lessons when I thought I needed to, and using a writing-workshop approach that emphasised spelling while writing.

What did I learn from teaching spelling to students with individualised education plans? I learned that they experienced more spelling success when their lessons focused on fewer sounds and patterns, when their lists were differentiated, and when their instruction didn't proceed at a one-size-fits-all pace. I also learned that teaching children to pay attention to spelling in writing, and giving them strategies to first find and then fix their spelling mistakes, made them more independent in their writing and lowered their number of misspellings. But I still had much more to learn.

Fast forward to 2010. After working as an educational consultant for a number of years, I went back to teaching. My assignment as a reading specialist was to co-teach in year three, five and six classrooms, run pull-out intervention groups and sit on data analysis teams. Whenever I sat and looked at reading scores, I was intrigued by the patterns I saw. Roughly 90 to 95 per cent of our school's foundation-year children were reaching the relevant benchmarks by the end of the year. A smaller percentage of year ones made the benchmarks. This decline continued in year two. By October of any given year, 55 to 70 per cent of all year threes were at benchmark level. Many of the lowest-achieving year threes ended up in my co-taught "corrective reading" classroom. Of these children, at least half were reading on a year-one level, many struggled with the basal program's year-three spelling lists, and most produced authentic writing that showed confusion about basic sounds, patterns and conventions. Thus, I saw *gam* for *game*, *techr* for *teacher* and *iceing* for *icing*.

During my first year back in the classroom, my cooperating teacher and I closely followed the basal reading curriculum. We read the anthology stories out loud, played the stories on the CD, assigned workbook and practice book pages, gave writing prompts from the teacher's manual and followed the basal's scope

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and sequence of weekly spelling words. By the end of the year, the majority of our students had grown by a half-year or less, which was the same growth pattern that the year one and two corrective reading classrooms experienced.

The following year, we broke free of our basal series and created an alternative program that, among other things, taught spelling and phonics using syllable types, used more direct and explicit instruction during spelling lessons, used word study activities and emphasised spelling in writing. Lo and behold, our students showed strong gains in their reading scores! For three years in a row, 80 to 90 per cent of the children in our classroom made *at least* a year's worth of growth on their reading benchmark scores. Some grew by as much as a year and a half and even two years. Another year-three teacher, one who knew a great deal about reading and writing, decided to deviate from the basal, too. By the end of the year, the children in her "low average" group were also making strong gains. Meanwhile, the scores from the corrective reading groups in year one and two, which had made fewer changes to their spelling, reading or writing instruction, continued to experience lower growth rates.

What I took away from these classroom experiences was the passion to want to do something about traditional but ineffective approaches to reading, writing and spelling instruction. I am convinced that when you trade traditional spelling instruction for an approach that is developmental, mastery based, and closely tied to reading and writing, you greatly increase the chances that your students will become not only better spellers, but also better readers and writers.

Spelling is not the only key to reading and writing success, but it is an important one. Why? During spelling instruction, you build your students' ability to recognise words. Word recognition, in turn, leads to reading and writing fluency. When reading and writing fluency improve to automaticity, students have a greater capacity to concentrate on and be successful with reading comprehension and written expression. In other words, when children effortlessly and automatically decode words while reading or encode words while writing, they are able to devote their full attention to making meaning. All of this leads to deeper comprehension and more thorough written expression.

The type of spelling instruction you engage in can make a world of difference to students, especially for children who struggle to read and write. So let's do something about spelling! I spent the bulk of my classroom-teaching career working with low-achieving students, and I saw them fail when my instruction was ineffective and flourish when my instruction was based on best practice.

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Because I know that excellent teaching is the number-one school-based factor in creating student success, I am especially excited about helping teachers transform any spelling instruction that relies on worksheets, inflexible content sequences and less-than-effective instructional techniques.

How to Use This Book

The first goal of this book is to give you, the teacher, information that you can reflect upon and then apply in your classroom. But this book's ultimate goal is to enable children in primary schools to become better spellers, and thereby better readers and writers, through a process that has less to do with the acquisition of facts and more to do with the acquisition of knowledge.

If you feel stuck within the confines of an ineffective spelling sequence from a basal (core-reading) program, this book provides a transformative path, one that will move you from weekly “memorise-and-move-on” word lists and teacher-directed “one-size-fits-all” instruction to a differentiated and developmental instructional approach that gives students the tools they need to become metacognitive, strategic spellers.

If you are teaching in a balanced literacy or reading and writing workshop classroom but still see some students struggle with spelling, then this book will give you a fresh look at the developmental aspects of spelling. Even more, it will give you new ideas on spelling assessment, explicit and direct instruction, and word-study strategies and activities that can be easily woven into the reading and writing that's already happening in your classroom.

Finally, if your school uses a stand-alone spelling program, such as *Words Their Way* or *Spelling Connections*, this book will give ways to address some of the things you know aren't working in your current program. It will also provide new and different ideas for organising and presenting words and using activities that bolster instruction and lead to greater student learning.

Research has revealed (and continues to point to) ways to teach spelling that are more effective than those offered in many traditional programs. The most effective spelling instruction is

- **direct and explicit** (Levin and Aram 2013; Rosenshine 2012),
- **systematic and sequential** (Gentry and Graham 2010),
- **focused** (Rosenshine 2012),
- **differentiated** (Invernizzi and Hayes 2004; Morris et al. 1995a),
- **strategy based** (Adams 2011),

- **mastery based** (Dewitz and Jones 2013; Invernizzi and Hayes 2004),
- **centred on sound, pattern and meaning** (McCandliss, Wise and Yoncheva 2015; Moats 2005/2006; Perfetti 1997; Graham 1998),
- **based on the theory that spelling is developmental** (Henderson 1990; Treiman and Bourassa 2000; Levin and Aram 2013), and
- **intimately linked to reading and writing** (Adams 2011; Gentry and Graham 2010; McCandliss, Wise and Yoncheva 2015; Reed 2012).

In *Super Spellers*, you will have the opportunity to look at each of these concepts, as well as consider materials, types of instruction and assessments that speak to them all.

A Note to Teachers Using Basal (Core-Reading) Programs

The section above lists the components that make for the most effective spelling instruction. To be clear, basal spelling programs contain many of these elements. They are often systematic and explicit. They are rooted in the conventions of English spelling. They have plans for teaching strategies and activities. And they have ties to reading and writing.

However, basal spelling programs lack vigour, depth and flexibility. They may not be systematic enough. The scope of what they cover is often too big, which means they introduce too many sound spellings, patterns or conventions in their lessons. Their instructional sequences go by too quickly and may not be in an order that makes sense, especially when compared with your sequence of grammar and reading skills. Sometimes the sequences and the scope of what they cover duplicate what is covered in grammar lessons (and vice versa). And many traditional spelling programs are not based on the philosophy of mastery learning.

There are other problems. Basal-based spelling programs may lack explicit links to reading and writing. Also, these programs present “everything under the sun” but fail to explicitly point out what concepts and activities are most important. When the expectation is that everything presented in the manual will be taught and completed (because your system expects fidelity to the basal program), then instruction is diluted and academic gains may be diminished. More becomes less. Additionally, the teacher’s manuals of basal spelling programs may fail to emphasise or even mention easy-to-implement and highly effective instructional practices, such as the consistent use of direct and explicit instruction or having foundation-year and year-one children look at and then say the teacher-provided correct spelling of their invented spelling (Levin and Aram 2013). Finally,

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traditional programs may under-emphasise student self-monitoring and the utilisation of spelling strategies, as well as the adoption of a developmental stance in which strategies are taught to children if and when they need them.

Super Spellers begins to rectify these failings, and it does so without asking you to eliminate your basal program, ditch your scope and sequence, or insert an entirely new program into your already very busy day. But if you are stuck with an ineffective basal-based spelling program, this book gives you a way to transform your program into instruction that explicitly ties together encoding, decoding, reading and writing. This process won't take place overnight. Rome wasn't built in a day, right? But with a bit of determination, you can make it happen, over many months and even a few years, step by step by step.

Seven Steps to Super Spelling

In literature and lore, seven is a magic number. There are seven dwarves, seven seals, seven deadly sins, Seven Wonders of the World and so on. Although some might claim it takes magic to help our kids become better spellers, readers and writers, I've found that it really just takes a bit of time and effort. But the results may seem magical! Thus, I present the overview of how to transform spelling instruction as seven "magical" steps:

- 1. Understand Theory and Practice.** The first step asks us to understand that spelling is developmental, that specific types of instruction lead to greater amounts of growth, and that teaching children how to spell includes teaching them to be strategy users. We must also understand that sounds, patterns and meanings lie at the heart of spelling instruction, that poor spelling and poor reading are connected, and that because spelling is at the heart of the reading process, the most effective spelling instruction teaches children to read.
- 2. Assess Spelling Knowledge.** Assessing spelling knowledge starts at the beginning of the year with spelling inventories, writing sample analyses and reading assessments. It continues through the year with weekly spelling quizzes and tests, notes on word study activities and the regular examination of writing samples. Assessment is essential for understanding where students are developmentally as well as for differentiating instruction. When instruction and assessment work together, such as during test-study-test cycles, retrieval practice and instant error correction, greater learning occurs.

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3. **Focus Scope and Sequence.** A focused scope and sequence helps students achieve spelling and reading mastery. To focus, slow the rate of movement through your spelling sequence, narrow the scope of what you teach and reteach information as necessary, especially for students in the early stages of spelling development who must master the essential skill of matching letters to sounds. Focus also means creating word lists that support instruction by taking previously published lists and modifying them to create new ones.
4. **Bring More Words.** To create more effective instruction, bring many words to your lessons. These words are built from the sounds, patterns, affixes, roots or conventions that you picked for your refocused lessons and spelling lists. Bringing in more words enables you to teach a wider variety of word-study activities, use a wider variety of assessment techniques and more easily differentiate for two or three groups of students.
5. **Teach Strategies.** Spelling strategies are crucial if children are to learn how to spell rather than what to spell. Thus, teach children how to self-monitor and be metacognitive, as well as how to use strategies while writing, reading and taking a test. The strategies you teach can include using sounds and letters, using mnemonics, using meaning, using visualising and using patterns (analogy), including the seven syllable types.
6. **Teach Activities.** Teach spelling through activities that show how sound, pattern and meaning are at the heart of spelling, as well as activities that can incorporate a variety of developmental stages, from sound-letter matching to etymology and morphology.
7. **Build Opportunities.** Finally, build opportunities to connect spelling to reading, from presenting decodable sentences to giving students the chance to read in as many places and in as many ways as possible. Also, build opportunities to connect spelling to writing, especially in authentic writing situations, from journal writing to digital platforms, such as writing apps and online blogs.

This is a lot to consider, I know. But we'll take it one step at a time. The transformation from so-so to super doesn't happen in an instant, like mild-mannered Clark Kent dashing into the nearest phone booth to emerge seconds later as Superman. Rather, think of it more like Clark Kent and a couple of friends purposefully strolling into the nearest library and sitting down for a few hours to learn, think and expand upon their already impressive powers.