Spelling: A consideration of one school's curriculum

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Spelling: A consideration of one school's curriculum

Abstract
Spelling is “the foundation of reading and the greatest ornament of writing,” according to Noah Webster in 1783 (Venezky, 1980, p. 26). The interest of scholars and educators in spelling has risen and fallen over the years, but the public perception of its importance has remained strikingly constant. Americans sometimes perceive spelling to be the very soul and fiber of education and even society. According to Templeton (1992), spelling has been the bedrock of literacy, the barometer of intelligence, the measure of our school’s successes.
Spelling: A Consideration of One School’s Curriculum

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Introduction

Spelling is "... the foundation of reading and the greatest ornament of writing," according to Noah Webster in 1783 (Venezky, 1980, p. 26). The interest of scholars and educators in spelling has risen and fallen over the years, but the public perception of its importance has remained strikingly constant. Americans sometimes perceive spelling to be the very soul and fiber of education and even society. According to Templeton (1992), spelling has been the bedrock of literacy, the barometer of intelligence, the measure of our school's successes.

To the public, the ability to spell correctly is an important part of academic success. Good spelling ability says something about one's overall academic achievement, but poor spelling skills may even be considered as an indicator of one's intelligence or education (Bos & Vaughn, 1991; Mercer & Mercer, 1989). Some researchers and educators have emphatically decreed that a profound knowledge of spelling enables fluent decoding during reading and accurate spelling in writing (O'Flahaven & Blassberg, 1992).

Problems in spelling often interfere with the student's proficiency, fluency, and self-confidence as a writer and may distract students from content by focusing their attention on spelling. Most poor spellers go through life assuming that their
inability to spell also makes them poor writers (Bos & Vaughn, 1991).

In the not too distant past, educators looked at the English spelling system as arbitrary and unpredictable; it was regarded as only a small step away from a nightmare for many students. From that point of view, if children were to learn to spell, they had to depend upon rote memory, or learning words one at a time by serial association. Consequently, spelling had to be a deliberate, rigorous and sustained task. Spelling errors could not be allowed to pass uncorrected so that bad habits did not form.

In no other area in the language arts is there such a discrepancy between what is known about language and the instructional programs, even though over the past 70 years, spelling has been one of the most frequently investigated subjects. Today, most elementary schools still use published spelling programs and treat spelling as a subject apart from the other language arts. These published programs dictate what words to teach irrespective of the individual child's literacy level and background of experiences (Di Stefano & Hagerty, 1985; Lutz, 1986).

The recent research into the system of English spelling and the ways that children learn to spell has provided a very different view of both the system and the learner. Spelling is
more recently viewed as a complex developmental process. Once these stages of development are identified, teachers can help students develop strategies for learning standard English spelling (Lutz, 1986). The ability to read words and to represent them in writing evolve together. Spelling instruction then cannot be isolated from the rest of the language arts program (Ehri & Wilce, 1989).

In this paper, the spelling program in a Midwestern (Mason City, Iowa) school system is described. Following this description, a review of spelling research is offered. Finally, a section of analysis and discussion is presented from which some conclusions and recommendations for the spelling curriculum are presented. The question considered in this paper is whether or not the Mason City spelling curriculum is effective in the teaching of spelling to its elementary students.

Mason City Spelling Program

The Mason City, Iowa school system has adopted the Kendall-Hunt spelling program Improving Spelling Performance (1986). The publisher maintains that its program for spelling improvement is based upon solid research in the teaching and learning of spelling. It promotes the concept that spelling should be taught in list form. These lists of words are based on Greene's list of the 5,507 words that are commonly used in writing. In selecting these words for each list, no special consideration was given to
spelling patterns, phonic rules, spelling rules, or variations in meaning. The publisher promotes the idea that learning these words should ensure that students should know the 1,000 words making up 90% of writing and the 2,000 most common words that account for 95.3% of all writing.

The program recommends that words from other curricular areas should be taught in classes other than spelling. Words from other subject areas are of little value for increasing spelling proficiency.

The Improving Spelling Performance spelling program suggests that the most important factor in learning to spell is allowing the child to correct his or her paper under the direction of the teacher. The publishers also contend that students should be familiar with the meaning of most of the words if they are expected to use the words in their writing. The program emphasizes study of the entire word rather than learning the words by syllables, stating that most attempts to teach spelling with word analysis instruction is unsuccessful.

The "test-study-test" method is touted by this program as being superior to the "study-test-study" method for most students. The publishers propose that the "test-study-test" method ensures fast, independent learning and that self-correction provides students with an immediate opportunity to identify problem words, correct errors, and measure growth. The
publishers say that spelling games stimulate interest, but they should be played outside of the regular instructional spelling period. They also discourage the pointing out of difficult parts of words because they believe that what is difficult for one student may not be difficult for another.

The program includes leveling tests, reportedly designed to make certain that each student is placed at the appropriate level, assuring success and progress. As soon as students show proficiency at a designated level, they are to be moved to a higher-level list.

During the first week of the program, each student takes a "Leveling Test," consisting of 60 words. These tests help classify students in groups according to individual needs. During the test, the teacher pronounces the word, reads the word in the provided sentence, and repeats the word. The teacher, not the student, must correct the Leveling Tests. When letters are crossed out, written over, or are illegible, the word is considered wrong. If a student makes an error and wishes to make an immediate correction, the word should be marked through with a single line and then rewritten, indicating that the student recognized the error and made an immediate correction.

The Improving Spelling Performance series suggests a weekly plan for instruction: On Monday, students take a pretest, pronounced by the teacher. After each word is pronounced, it is
used in a short, well-constructed sentence and then said again. After this procedure, students may write the word. The teacher is to proceed to the next word when approximately 90% of the students are finished writing. No more than 15 seconds per word is to be allowed. Words are not to be repeated after the test is finished unless environmental conditions merit it. Students are not to erase, mark over letters, or cross out words with more than one line. If they do, the word is to be considered an error. Upon completion of the pretest, the teacher hands out the word lists from the spelling program and the students check their own papers for errors. During this time, the teacher emphasizes proofreading skills. They are to circle the number of each word missed on the pretest. Errors include erasures, marked over letters, words crossed out with more than one line. After recording the number of correct words on the pretest, students put the pretest and the weekly word list in a spelling folder for safekeeping until the next day.

On Tuesday and Wednesday, the words that were missed on the pretest are studied using the approved study method. According to the publishers, the student is to first look at the word and say it and then cover the word and write it. After checking to see if it is written correctly, the student looks at the word and says it again before covering it and writing it a second time. Students are to write the word four times following this
procedure. If no mistakes are made, the student may proceed to the next word. During this practice time, the teacher may provide personalized instruction and encourage proofreading. After allowing 15 minutes of intensive practice, the teacher collects all of the papers and checks all errors students have made as they practiced writing the words. The papers, again, are stored in a spelling folder until the next day.

On Thursday, students are to review for no more than 10 minutes the words spelled incorrectly on the pretest. The teacher may hold individual conferences with students during this period.

The post test is given on Friday. During this, the teacher says the word, uses the word in a short well-constructed sentence, and pronounces the word again. Then, the student may write the word. The words are not repeated after the test is completed. As in the pretest, errors include erasures, marked out letters, words crossed out more than once, and all omissions or substitutions. Students correct their own papers using the weekly word list and record their scores on their own papers. These post tests are collected by the teacher and rechecked for words missed on the post test but spelled correctly on the pretest and new errors.
Methodology

The professional literature reviewed for this paper was selected mainly from an extensive ERIC search utilizing these descriptors: elementary education, spelling, spelling instruction, word lists, writing, writing skills, elementary school students, primary education, and instructional effectiveness. Reference lists from several textbooks, authored by educators in the field of language arts, were also surveyed in extending the list of publications that discussed spelling in the elementary school. Emphasis in selecting references to be reviewed in the paper was placed upon discussions of research-based findings rather than opinion or speculation.

These research studies were not analyzed and evaluated for their research merits but for what information they offered regarding the teaching and learning of spelling. The focus here was not to evaluate individual research projects but to collect and synthesize information about ways that students learn to spell and which methods or strategies for teaching spelling are most sound.

Analysis and Discussion

First of all in this section, a description of the process of spelling and a history of spelling will be presented. Then, many findings and conclusions from professional literature will be reviewed. This section is divided into several sub-topics
from which conclusions and suggestions will be offered at the culmination of the paper.

Description of Spelling

Spelling is much more than the accumulated knowledge of a set of words. It is a process that involves predicting the order of letters in a word based on phonics (letter/sound relationships), orthographies (the ways letters are grouped into words), and sight (memories of what the word looks like). Spelling involves the "ability to recognize, recall, reproduce, or obtain orally or in written form the correct sequence of letters in words" (Graham & Miller, 1979, p. 2). As writers use visual symbols, they confirm that the words are spelled correctly or incorrectly. Frequently, writers ask themselves if a word being spelled "looks right." As people engage in the process of writing, they integrate the spelling of words into their storehouse of knowledge. Therefore, spelling is very much a part of the language processes (reading, writing, speaking, and listening). It should be an integral part of the language arts program.

Learning to spell is not easy. There are 26 letters that represent 44 sounds, silent letter, variant and invariant sounds, and 300 different letter combinations for 17 vowel sounds. Additionally, the English language has the largest vocabulary in the world (Allerd, 1977).
Children give evidence of learning to spell by advancing through a sequence of increasingly complex intuitions about the organizational pattern of words. Although memory is involved, children learn by progressively inferring the principles by which English words are spelled (Hodges, 1981). It means coming to an understanding of the structure of words at progressively more abstract levels (Templeton, 1986).

Learning to spell is not a matter of memorizing words but a developmental process that culminates in a much greater understanding of English spelling than simple relationships between speech sounds and their graphic representations (Read, 1975).

History of Spelling

In the Old English period (450-1066 A.D.), spelling was primarily alphabetic, matching sounds with individual letters in a left-to-right direction. Words did not have standard spellings; this must have been a time when our spelling was "beautifully vague", when individuals could spell as they wished (Mencken, 1936). Influence from the French in the Middle English period (1066-1500) changed this straightforward letter/sound correspondence. The match ups became much more complex--two vowel letters for a single vowel sound, different letters representing the same sound, and different sounds represented by a single letter. Now, mainly due to the French influence, a
group of letters, or a pattern, correspond to a single sound (the letters "eau" pronounced as a long "o", for example) (Templeton, 1992).

Vallins (1965) says that it is ironic that spelling is the one area of our language that is fixed. There is variability and license in sentence structure, word choice, punctuation, and pronunciation but not in spelling. The publishing business is greatly facilitated by the standardization of spelling.

The invented spellers of centuries ago would become increasingly judged according to a printed standard. Interestingly enough, Richard Mulcaster published The First Part of the Elementaire in 1582 which called for more consistency and suggested standard spellings for hundreds of high-frequency words. After that, schools began exerting considerable influence toward a standard spelling. Standardized spelling has resulted in making reading and writing more automatic and allows modern readers to think more while encountering written language (Brengelman, 1980).

Spelling did not become so controversial until the system became standardized. Noah Webster tried to make a number of changes so that there would be a distinctively American spelling, but his efforts mostly failed. However, he succeeded in imposing enough standards that he helped build momentum to simplify the
spelling system and bring it more in line with the way the words sounded or were pronounced (Venezky, 1980).

Much of the research on spelling conducted decades ago was done by educators and a few psychologists. The focus then was primarily on the speller, methods of teaching spelling, and the words, not on how spelling is learned (Cahen, Craun, & Johnson, 1971). Concern was centered on what words should be studied and what makes a word hard to spell. Methodological studies attempted to find the best way to learn to spell words, most of which included the study of lists of words. Constant in these studies was the "test/study/test" routine for mastering the lists (E. Horn, 1960). This research has led to workbook activities that included rote practice and did not involve self-discovery. The proofreading exercises included in this instruction were dull and not related to the students' own writing (Bartch, 1992).

Instructional studies in early spelling research focused on the level of sound-to-spelling correspondence rather than spelling-to-meaning units. Kottmeyer (1952) was an exception to this emphasis as he suggested that knowledge of certain elements, such as suffixes, could make spelling easier.

Overall, studies from decades ago addressed the phonetic function--alphabetic and syllable-based pattern levels of the spelling system and were mainly concerned with teaching correct spelling. There was little awareness of the semantic function,
later to be called the morphemic level of spelling (Venezky, 1970).

Until approximately the last 100 years, spelling and reading instruction were closely linked in the primary grades (Balmuth, 1981; Mathews, 1966; Vallins, 1965). Then, the reading and spelling programs were divided. Spelling programs were centered on lists and fill-in-the-blank exercises. Practice of these words was devoid of meaningful context. However, in the 1970s, the ideas that spelling and vocabulary are linked, and spelling should include more attention to morphemic elements were gaining attention (Dale, O'Rourke, & Bramman, 1971).

**Current Views of Spelling and Instructional Programs**

Advocates of the whole language approach have research to support their views of spelling. During the past 35 years, educators and researchers have rediscovered the semantic aspect of the spelling system. Chomsky (1970a) and Read (1971) produced landmark studies of invented spellings in the 1960s that resurrected Henry Bradley’s ideas about the role of meaning in spelling. Studies concluded that words related in meaning are often related in spelling in spite of their changes in sound (Templeton, 1983).

Much has been learned about spelling from studies, but the knowledge has not been used. The problem in spelling is the lack of application of what is known. Johnson, Langford, & Quorn
Emerging literacy and spelling. The recent research of children's emerging literacy concludes that children have a need to express themselves through writing long before they come to school. These findings offer a different perspective of spelling. During the preschool and early years in school, children will use much invented spelling. This concept embraces the idea that children learn to write the way they learn to speak. For most children, writing means encoding sounds into words. If children have never seen the word they try to write, they rely on their ears for the sounds they hear and try to duplicate those sounds with letters. Throughout daily writing, high frequency words appear (Calkins, 1983). Soon, students will begin to recognize the conventional spelling of words as they begin reading (Graves, 1983). The whole language viewpoint recognizes that first and foremost, spelling is learned and taught in the context of writing and that competence develops over time (Routman, 1991).

As children grow and learn, their writing will be characterized by several stages before they are consistently using conventional spelling. These stages are not fixed or discrete. In fact, one piece of writing may show attempted
spellings that include aspects of more than one stage (Parry, 1985). The most extensive discussion of these stages is offered by Gentry (1982):

Precommunicative stage. At this stage, the writing is illegible to others and there may be random strings of symbols. The letters may be in upper and lower case and used indiscriminately. There is no indication of letter-sound correspondence.

Semiphonetic stage. Spelling at this stage is characterized by first attempts at letter-sound correspondence. It may be abbreviated with only one or two letters (usually consonants) to represent a word, e.g., WK (walk), PO (piano), and S (saw). At this stage, children have great difficulty with vowels, e.g., FESH (fish). The writing may also display spaces between words.

Phonetic stage. At this stage, the spelling is not standard, but the writing is meaningful and can usually be read by others. All essential sounds may be represented by letters, e.g., STIK (stick), TABL (table), and FLOR (floor). There may be substitutions of incorrect letters with similar (or even the same) pronunciation which actually make common sense, e.g., JRINK (drink) and CHRAIN (train). Nasal consonants may be omitted, e.g., STAP (stamp) and WET (went). Past tense may be represented in different ways, according to the sounds heard, e.g., PILD
(peeled), LOOKT (looked), and TRADID (traded). Word segmentation and spatial orientation are clearly evident.

Transitional spelling stage. During this stage, visual and morphemic strategies become more important. Vowels appear in every syllable, e.g., ELAFUNT (elephant). Nasals appear before consonants, e.g., COMBD (combed). A vowel is inserted before a final "r", e.g., RUNNUR instead of RUNNR. Common English letter sequences are used, e.g., YOUNITED (united). Vowel digraphs often appear, e.g., MAIK and MAYK (make). Inflectional endings (s, 's, ing, ed, est) are spelled conventionally. Correct letters may be used but in the incorrect sequence, e.g., BECUASE and PLIAN (plain). Learned words (those spelled correctly) generally appear more often.

Correct spelling stage. At this stage, knowledge of the English orthographic system is firmly established. Most of the words the speller wants to write are spelled correctly. The speller can often recognize when a word is not spelled correctly and can experiment with alternatives. A large reservoir of words is spelled automatically.

Characteristics of good spellers and poor spellers. Though it may be more useful to think of learners as spread along a continuum of spelling knowledge than as divided into two groups, several statements about how good and poor spellers differ can be made (Wilde, 1992):
1. Good spellers have moved beyond phonetic spelling. As spellers mature, they eventually must move beyond a phonetic strategy to spell more conventionally. In fact, students’ misspellings tend to be phonetically acceptable so that more phonics instruction is not the way to improve it. In the same light, Chomsky (1970b) stated that children must abandon their early phonetic hypothesis to become successful spellers.

2. Good spellers have a good visual sense of words. This visual/orthographic strategy that consists of an internalized word list is especially valuable for irregularly spelled words. He found that poor readers tended to use phonetic more than visual strategies for spelling so that much of the reason they spelled more poorly than good readers was because of phonetically accurate spellings of irregular words, including three times as many silent letter omissions as good readers. A visual sense, or seeing if a word "looks right," is especially useful for checking spellings.

3. Good spellers have integrated different kinds of knowledge about words. Good spellers rely on a knowledge of orthographic regularity (common patterns) more than less successful spellers. Poor spellers tended to sound out spellings phoneme by phoneme (Beers & Henderson, 1977).

4. Poor spellers probably do not have a spelling disability. Gerber (1984) described the spellings of students
who had been defined as learning disabled as being like those of normal students three to four years younger with similar developmental progressions. Those students categorized as dyslexic had spelling profiles similar to those of nondyslexic students a few years younger.

5. Good spellers can spell more words automatically. Becoming a good speller involves two processes: the ability to use all of the information contained in the spelling system and the internalization of a large number of spellings (Beers & Henderson, 1977).

Concepts of spelling instruction. Today, the skill-oriented concept of spelling instruction, much researched by Ernest Horn and others, prevails in many commercially-prepared programs. On the other hand, the whole language concept embraces spelling as a part of the writing process to create meaning. A summary of the research that views spelling as a skill will be presented first, and then the references supporting the whole language concept will be offered.

From a skills point of view of spelling, the single most important factor in spelling success is the self-corrected test as measured by a final weekly test. The corrected test alone will contribute 90-95% of the achievement resulting from the combined effect of the pronunciation exercise, corrected test, and study (T. Horn, 1946). The correct test, rather than the
conventional spelling-teaching method, is the most significant single factor contributing to spelling achievement. Fitzsimmons and Loomer (1980) report that field research on the self-corrected test indicates that children correcting their own spelling tests, under the direction of the teacher, is the most important factor in learning to spell. Twice as many studies favor the test-study-test method over the study-test method. The pretest is valuable in building positive attitudes toward spelling instruction and in improving spelling achievement.

The most common 1,000 words and their repetitions that comprise 90% of the words used most frequently in child and adult writing should be included in every spelling curriculum. The most common 2,000 words account for 95.3%, and the most common 3,000 words account for 97.6% of all writing of children and adults. The most common 1,000 words are used nine times as often as all other words. For everyday writing, the ability to spell a core of approximately 2,800 to 3,000 words by the end of the sixth grade is generally a desirable spelling goal for the elementary school child (Fitzsimmons & Loomer, 1980). Research has since been conducted to determine if E. Horn's list was still valuable. Results agreed with the known research that there has been very little change over the years in the words commonly used by children in their writing.
Some educators have been concerned that they could better serve the individual student by preparing a locally devised list of words. T. Horn (1946) says that these people will be disillusioned with this decision, recommending that school districts can better employ staff time in other ways than in developing a local list of spelling words. There is no field-tested substitute for direct instruction on the basic core of high-frequency words needed in child and adult writing.

The only spelling rules that should be taught are those that apply to a large number of words and have few exceptions (E. Horn, 1967). Fitzsimmons and Loomer (1980) related that there are a few rules that will provide the student with concrete spelling directions. Teachers should put their emphasis on teaching children to learn the ways that words are spelled and not to depend on any one approach to spell a speech sound.

From the research of the skill-oriented advocates, the whole word presentation of spelling has advantages over the syllable approach. For some students, dividing words produces negative results (T. Horn, 1946). Fitzsimmons and Loomer (1980) also report that students who learn words by the undivided, or the whole word, method have more success than those who learn by syllables. They maintain that learning to spell a word should involve forming a correct visual image of the whole word.
Some spelling series have attempted to improve spelling ability by drawing attention to so-called "hard spots" within a word. Some of these programs print these "hard spots" in color to draw students' attention. Research consistently shows this technique to be of little value (Fitzsimmons & Loomer, 1980).

Students should employ a systematic approach to learning to spell words. Most children follow a sequence of steps in learning how to spell (Fitzsimmons & Loomer, 1980). These study procedures should include auditory, visual, and kinesthetic involvement with words, according to E. Horn (1967).

Green (1977) advises that children should not be required to make repeated writings of words because having a child copy a word five or ten times encourages poor habits and attitudes. Fitzsimmons and Loomer (1980) agree saying that having children correct misspelled words by writing them over and over is of little value.

According to Bos and Vaughn (1991), most spelling programs place little or no emphasis on maintenance of previously learned words. In these programs, once students have taken the weekly spelling post test, those words are often not presented again for review. They advise a systematic maintenance system.

Pupil interest in spelling is crucial and developing positive attitudes toward spelling is the key to improvement though mere pride in spelling is no substitute for efficient and
meaningful practice periods (Fitzsimmons & Loomer, 1980). Games sometimes increase interest in words, and some word/spelling games may be of some benefit. They should supplement, rather than supplant, systematic instruction (Fitzsimmons & Loomer, 1980; E. Horn, 1967).

In grouping spelling words, spelling programs generally follow one or two approaches: One approach uses a predetermined list of frequently written words, stressing proper habits of study. The other emphasizes sound and letter associations (phonics and phonetics). According to Fitzsimmons and Loomer (1980), there is much greater emphasis on grouping words in phonemic families. However, no evidence has been reported in the classroom concerning the effectiveness of word selection based on linguistic principles (E. Horn, 1967). Also, phonics, relating sounds to letters, is a less valuable tool as children's vocabularies become more sophisticated and begin to include words that often do not fit the traditional phonetic structure or are not spelled the way they sound (Gentry, 1982).

Many students benefit from studying word families. When studying the word honor, for example, students also discuss honorable, honoring, honored, and honorary, adding five new and correctly spelled words to their writing repertoire. According to Johnson et al. (1981), it is a mistake to present word families together, such as "book, look, hook and rook." They say
that teachers should become familiar with spelling patterns and draw the children's attention to them as they occur. But, it is a mistake to teach generalizations; children should always work with whole words. In the case of the examples given above, the phonogram "ook" will receive a minimal amount of the child's attention because it is repeated in every word. Words that exemplify generalizations should not be clustered too closely together in time or space.

Johnson et al. (1981) go on to outline the three factors that should be considered when grouping words:

1. Only high-frequency words should be taught; they should be grouped by grade level according to frequency.
2. There is little value in grouping words to call attention to their individual parts. Children learn words as whole units. Learning to spell a word should involve the child's forming a correct visual image of the whole word.
3. A very large number of common words do not conform to any generalized grouping, either phonetic or orthographic.

The proponents of the whole language instructional concept view spelling as being learned in the context of writing and reading and that it is developed gradually over time (Routman, 1991). Words targeted for spelling instruction in prescribed
programs are usually out of context and often unfamiliar to students. Little emphasis is placed on the transfer of spelling words; students are not required to use these words in context outside of the activities for a given spelling lesson (Bos & Vaughn, 1991). Proponents of whole language view the skills-oriented concept of spelling as a top-down approach. They believe that it results in artificial skill sequences and lessons that do not relate to what the students think and do. Supporters of whole language emphasize that spelling words should be selected from ones that are used for real purposes in everyday writing (Goodman, 1986). Unconventional spellings should be highlighted as well as words the students ask for, words the teacher knows they will need, and words relevant to a topic or theme being studied (Routman, 1991).

Spelling gains importance when students write. Therefore, students need opportunities to write for a variety of audiences (Moffett & Wagner, 1992). When children write, they learn about spelling patterns, phonics, and meaning relationships among words. For example, they may notice that "took" is much like "book." This information helps them as spellers.

Spelling texts offer a set pattern of instruction that rarely accounts for individual differences among students (Dieterich, 1973). In fact, studies by Cohen (1969) and Graves (1976) have revealed that spelling texts often contain a large
proportion of inappropriate activities that sometimes even deter learning while others were ineffective. Students have different skills and needs. They do not all learn at the same rate and do not encounter the same difficulties in learning to spell (Guiler & Lease, 1942).

Many students who are taught spelling through lists do not necessarily transfer the correct spelling of the words they have memorized into their own writing (Parry & Hornsby, 1988; Wilde, 1990). When children are exposed only to lists of words for spelling instruction, they see spelling as a separate subject having little to do with writing. They think of spelling as nothing more than the memorization of words, and they think of themselves as good spellers if they get a high grade on a spelling test regardless of how well they spell words in written work. Graves (1983) urges teachers to leave the isolated tests behind and work with spelling in the midst of the many other language processes with which it belongs. Spelling instruction is more meaningful to children if it is integrated into reading and writing instruction. Then, spelling becomes a meaningful part of writing, and children begin to realize its importance in conveying their message.

Writing the conventional spelling of words repeatedly in meaningful context produces up to five times more transfer. The purpose for learning to spell is to be able to write fluently and
correctly. Spelling is an integral part of the composing process and not a discrete, separate skill. It is a means to an end, not an end unto itself. Correct spelling can enable students to deploy more of their conscious attention to higher order processes, such as purpose, content, or organization (Graham & Miller, 1979). Spelling is important, but knowing that students can put it behind them in early drafts can allow them to focus on meaning. When spelling dominates, words do not flow automatically and content suffers. The effort to write may become too great if the early focus is on correct spelling. The student writer should be freed to concentrate on information, sequence, meaning and voice in early drafts (Graves, 1983). Much practice in application, or authentic writing, is an essential part of any good spelling program. Therefore, children should have frequent opportunities to use spelling words in writing that will contribute greatly to the maintenance of spelling ability.

The most important feature of spelling is that it is functional; it is for writing. Until writers need to use it, spelling has no value (McPherson, 1984). Invented spelling is acceptable in early drafts because it allows the student to do any sort of writing and not be constrained by correct spelling. The whole language concept promotes risk-taking. Then, students should be encouraged to experiment with language in early drafts
and delay conventional spelling until final drafts (Graves, 1983).

Whole language proponents emphasize that there are certain conditions that lead to success in spelling. Students need to be immersed in an environment that promotes learning to spell. They should be surrounded by a multitude of examples of correct spelling. There must be numerous and frequent demonstrations of standard spelling. These demonstrations can include artifacts such as books, magazines, posters, signs and examples of students' own writings (Cambourne, 1988).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Finally, this paper offers some closing comments about the current spelling program in Mason City and how it might be adapted if a whole language approach to spelling instruction was implemented.

**Spelling Program in the Mason City Elementary Schools**

The Mason City spelling program is clearly right in line with the skills-oriented research cited in this paper. The adopted program, *Improving Spelling Performance*, published by Kendall-Hunt, is based on the research conducted by advocates of a skills approach. The Mason City program follows closely the findings by Graham and Miller (1979) by centering on the students' abilities to recognize, recall and reproduce the correct sequence of letters in words from weekly lists.
Implementation of the Whole Language Instructional Concept

The implementation of this instructional concept is ongoing. As a rich print learning environment is developed, many aspects of the whole language concept can be implemented. For example, spelling becomes an integral part of reading and writing, so there are many encounters with visual language and many reasons for children to spell as they respond through writing.

Teachers can provide a rich learning environment through many means.

Learning Centers. Literature-based centers can provide many experiences with print and opportunities to respond through writing, thus promoting conventional spelling. Two types of centers can be presented: Sustaining centers are permanent throughout the school year with their contents changing to support the study of themes and units. The Listening/Reading Center includes literature and accompanying tapes for auditory-visual experiences. In this center, students are exposed to the vocabulary and its conventional spelling related to the themes or units being studied.

The Poetry Center, with posters of individual poems large enough to promote whole class chanting can demonstrate the conventional spelling of words. The Author/Illustrator Center, featuring particular authors/illustrators and their works with
accompanying tapes can expose children to interesting and important words and their correct spellings.

The other type of learning center, specific to a theme or unit, can also offer many experiences with visual language. Conventional spelling is learned in the context of meaningful listening/reading and writing experiences.

Reference Resources. Students can be encouraged to develop individual word books that can replace the commercially-prepared spelling program. The words placed in these books develop out of the study of all curricular areas and will include standard spellings of words the students want to know for their own writing. These word books can be supplemented by dictionaries.

Group discussion about vocabulary and its conventional spelling can take place according to the needs of the students. Vocabulary lists on chart pads can be developed and displayed demonstrating conventional spellings of new words encountered by students during studies across the curriculum.

Word walls can be developed representing important concepts and themes encountered by the students. Displaying these words around the top of the classroom on cards can surround the students with the standard spellings of words that have particular importance to them.

Teacher and peer assistance. Conferencing focused on writing, especially the revising and publishing aspects of the
process, can support an awareness of conventional spelling.

Also, as students write in journals, make posters, and compose stories of all kinds, they can confer with each other and the teacher to assist with the spellings of frequently used words. As stories go to editing for publication, "editing services" can be offered by groups of students. The whole class could develop and prepare classroom newsletters that could be subjected to editing before being sent home and throughout the school community.

**Assessment.** The progress of each child in using conventional spelling while engaged in the writing process needs to be described over time. Examples can be collected in portfolios with dated explanations developed in teacher-student conferences. The students' journals are another means of observing growth and instructional needs in spelling. The word books developed by the students are also a source for assessment. These means of assessment offer parents concrete examples of their children's progress in using conventional spelling in writing experiences.
References


