

Invented Spelling: What It Is and Why It's Important

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The idea that young children can write at the earliest stages of their literacy development was a radical idea that took hold in the 1960s and 70s. Before then, writing was ordinarily delayed until third or fourth grade, after students had learned to spell a large number of words correctly. Then scholars like Moffett (1968) and Britton (1970) brought new insights to literacy learning, asserting that classroom activities needed to be more meaningful and engaging, to be based on children's own experiences, and to reflect greater attention to how writing, reading, speaking, and listening were mutually reinforcing. Stauffer and Hammond (1969), as part of their contribution to the First Grade Studies, looked at the effects on reading performance of youngsters spelling as best they could when they wrote. Charles Read (1971, 1975) and Carol Chomsky (1970, 1976) studied children's early spelling approximations and noted their value as evidence of what children had learned about language. The use of approximations came to be known as invented spelling, and its widespread acceptance unleashed opportunities for children to write at greater length, liberally using words that they knew orally but had not yet learned to spell. Invented spelling was recognized as an early stage in the development of writing competence that also had a positive effect on children's growing reading competence.

Invented spelling is similar to what children do when they are learning to talk. When young children hear *dog* and *dogs*, *bird* and *birds*, *snake* and *snakes*, they are likely to conclude that the plural of *mouse* is *mouses*. This phenomenon is a familiar, accepted aspect of language development that is usually greeted with good-natured, informal parental guidance on the order of "It's one *mouse* but two or more *mice*." Parents don't see these spoken anomalies as errors that they should be concerned about but simply as understandable attempts, often endearing, that will soon be replaced with conventional usage. Experts in language development agree, seeing the attempts as evidence of children applying their active intelligence to the process of learning language, making inferences and drawing conclusions from what they hear (e.g., Wood, 1982). Children are eager to learn the language conventions of the adults around them and readily abandon *mouses* when they realize the accepted plural is *mice*.

When children begin to explore writing, often before they begin reading, their typical output is also unconventional. In fact, their encoding of language goes through predictable stages that reveal what they've noticed about written language as well as the thoughts they want to communicate. (e.g., Henderson, 1981; Temple, Nathan, and Burris, 1982). Children start by making scribbly marks on the page and progress to writing individual letters to combining letters in various ways to writing recognizable words. Just as their speech reflects the inferences they've made about oral language, their writing reflects the inferences they've made about written language. We need to acknowledge the thinking that's involved, analyze what the children have learned so far, and provide guidance that builds on their strengths.

The best outcome for children encourages invented spelling while providing appropriate instruction in conventional spelling, and that instruction is most effective when it's tailored to the students' needs as revealed in their invented spelling. One approach is described by Invernizzi, Abouzeid, and Gill (1994). A detailed instructional program that incorporates

invented spelling and other aspects of word study is presented by Bear, et al. (1996). Recent commentary shows renewed interest in the practice (e.g., Loewus, 2017; Shubitz, 2017).

Here's one example of how a first grader's writing progressed over time when encouraged to approximate spellings.* Ann's teacher scheduled time for students to write every day with the understanding that they could write what they wanted to say, spelling as best they could. The children kept their writing in folders and often read their favorite pieces aloud to one another or took them home to read to their parents. Here are four of Ann's first drafts:

There is the hos
On the hal.
RAMABR it is a big
heos.

Ann wrote this in early November.
It reads: *There is the house on the hill. Remember it is a big house.*

We are getting a
new dop and cat
to Day or Sunby. It is wiat
the Cat fell in to The well
Sunday. He all most dide.

Ann wrote this at the end of
January. It reads: *We are getting a new dog and cat today or Sunday. It is white. The cat fell into the well Sunday. He almost died.*

Batrfiys
I like batrfiys because They are
Mene difft calrs. Batrfiys can
fy in The skie. The calrson
the batrfiys are red and yeaw.
You can see the batrfiys
fying in the skiee.

Ann wrote this piece in March. It
reads: *I like butterflies because they are many different colors. Butterflies can fly in the sky. The colors on the butterflies are red and yellow. You can see the butterflies flying in the sky.*

My Mother
Me and My Mothre We did a pusl.
it was fun. We did it in One day
there are three lost. My Daddy
can't put a pusl to gether. My
Daddy said We are the Best
pusling girls. We wer Very happy.
And Went to see are Cusin he is
a baby. I Culdent go in decause
I Was kallfing and maybe I wud
give the baby a Cald. thats wise
I didt see The baby.

Ann wrote this in May, a few weeks
before the school year was over. It
reads: *Me and my mother we did a puzzle. It was fun. We did it in one day. There are three lost. My daddy can't put a puzzle together My daddy says we are the best puzzling girls. We were very happy and went to see our cousin. He is a baby. I couldn't go in because I was coughing and maybe I would give the baby a cold. That's why I didn't see the baby.*

* These examples were originally published in Nessel and Jones (1981).

During first grade, Ann's compositions increased in length and complexity as she became more confident with writing. Her written expression always sounded natural, reflecting the words and phrasing she used orally. As the samples show, she also steadily gained greater command over spelling. Her teacher engaged the class in regular word study and spelling instruction that Ann applied to her writing. She was eager to spell correctly but readily used invented spelling when she wanted to write words that she didn't know how to spell. As the year progressed, the teacher introduced the concept of editing, and the children periodically chose pieces of writing to revise for spelling and other mechanics, but the emphasis was on the process of re-examining the work, not necessarily correcting every error. That is, children learned to revise but didn't feel pressured to achieve perfection. In later grades, Ann's writing was invariably interesting, reflective of her voice, and marked by accuracy in spelling and other mechanics.

Here's why it makes sense to support invented spelling:

1. *Allowing invented spelling encourages writing.* A kindergartner loved horses and was learning quite a bit about them from regular visits to a family who had horses. One day, she drew a picture of a horse and wrote on the paper *Hrs lik Cruts* (Horses like carrots). Her parents and her teacher accepted this attempt with delight and encouraged her to write more. Their positive response helped her develop confidence as a writer, and that led her to write often. Because she enjoyed writing and received praise for her attempts, she wanted to do it as well as she could and became very interested in learning more about letters and words.

2. *Allowing invented spelling encourages thinking.* Children who approximate spellings must think about how to encode the words they want to write. Thinking through the sounds they hear and choosing the letters that best represent those sounds helps to build a disposition for thinking carefully about they are doing when they write and read, a disposition that becomes the foundation of later critical and creative thinking.

3. *Children who employ invented spelling use a greater variety of words.* When adults focus on correct spelling, children tend to write only words that they know how to spell. This often leads to stilted expression: *My dog is fun. My dog is nice. I like my dog.* When adults encourage children to use whatever words they want to use, the writing is more natural, reflecting the words and phrases the child uses orally: *My dog is a trir. She likes to chas brds but she nvr ctchs thm.* (My dog is a terrier. She likes to chase birds but she never catches them.)

4. *Children's phonics knowledge informs their spelling.* Phonics instruction is as useful to children when they write as when they read, sometimes more so. Once they understand the basic principle that letters and letter combinations stand for sounds, they apply it to their own encoding if they are encouraged to do so. The girl who wrote *Hrs lik Cruts* reproduced what she heard when she said the word aloud. Her response showed that she heard the initial, medial, and ending consonant sounds of all three words and that she was aware of vowel sounds but was uncertain about how to represent them. Her teacher used that valuable diagnostic information to plan further instruction.

Although some are concerned that allowing invented spelling impedes children from learning to spell correctly, evidence shows the opposite (e.g., Oullette and Sénéchal, 2008). As many effective teachers have observed, when children gain more experience with written language through reading and writing, they readily abandon their invented spellings. As readers, they become familiar with a certain number of words because they see them repeatedly. The kindergartner knew that *hrs* wasn't the correct spelling of *horses*, saying after she wrote it "That doesn't look right." She had seen the word enough to know it wasn't right, but her parents and teachers had assured her that she could correct her spelling after she put her ideas down. Writing *hrs* helped her concentrate on what she wanted to say, knowing she could go back and revise later.

Children are keen to develop competence. Long before they enter school, they want to do things correctly. They are eager to become good at tying their shoes, throwing a ball, putting puzzles together, and doing many other things. Their early awkward performances become skilled partly because they strive to do better, and they carry that motivation into school, where they are just as eager to do well with reading and writing.

Being able to use invented spelling leads youngsters to write about what is most meaningful and interesting to them, using the words that they most want to use to express the ideas that they most want to share with others. The strategy is best used in conjunction with spelling instruction that makes children aware of common spelling patterns and helps them apply what they are learning about letter-sound associations. In fact, it's useful to see decoding and encoding as two sides of the phonics coin that are mutually reinforcing and equally valuable for young children.

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