Teachers are often confronted with parents’ concern of their children’s use of invented spelling. Research has found that if educators inform parents of the positive benefits associated with invented spelling, their attitudes towards its use will become more favorable. Consequently, these favorable attitudes will encourage parents to be more accepting of their children’s use of invented spelling. Because of the benefits associated with its use, the end result will be increased academic achievement for the children. This practical article provides specific guidelines to assist educators in informing parents about young children’s use of invented spelling and its positive effects on academic achievement in reading, writing, and spelling.

Suppose that it was Valentine’s Day, and your child gave you this card (Figure 1); how would you respond?

Let us look at two hypothetical mothers to see their different responses to their children’s Valentines. The first mother, Mary, hugs her child and exclaims that the card is beautiful. She then asks, “Would you like me to help you spell the words correctly?” Mary helps her child erase the words and provides the correct spelling for each. Alternatively, the second mother, Susan, simply hugs her child, says that the card is beautiful, and then hangs it on the refrigerator.

Although both of these parents reacted positively to their children’s valentines, they have differing perspectives regarding the misspelled words. Mary eagerly helps her child correct all of the misspelled words, but Susan seems to completely ignore the plethora of misspelled words in her child’s card. Researchers (Burns and Casbergue, 1992) have compared parents such as Mary and Susan in their interactions with their children during a shared writing experience. Parents similar to Mary
who exhibited a high level of control of their children’s writing tended to focus on spelling, rather than on the content of the writing. Parents similar to Susan exhibited a low level of focus on their children’s spelling, and their children used more words and wrote in a variety of forms, which allowed them to explore various forms of writing. Ultimately, children who engage in the writing process in an environment with fewer constraints become more successful as writers because of their ability to independently explore and experiment with language (Gunning, 2003; Lutz, 2004; Vacca, et al., 2003). Particularly in these days of standards-based education and No Child Left Behind mandates, inaccuracies in spelling can add further parental discomfort and concern. As noted by Yopp (1999), “Inventive, or temporary spellings, have been under a great deal of fire in the last few years. Yet, it is widely acknowledged by reading researchers and reading experts that inventive spellings are a very powerful way of supporting literacy development.”

An Evolving View of Spelling

Mary’s focus on the correct spelling of words has strong roots in our American culture and education. During early Colonial times, spelling was the core of the school curriculum, and several reasons account for this strong emphasis. At that time, the spelling book was the sole textbook, and it also served as the major resource for all curricular areas (Carpenter, 1963). It was thought that the mental exercise of memorization and the drill of spelling words were critical processes to develop the intellectual faculty of the brain. Consequently, spelling was a routine and significant component of educational programs.

Views towards spelling shifted in the late 1800’s with the advent of developmental psychology and pragmatism. Developmental psychologists realized that intensive spelling of difficult words may not be developmentally appropriate for young children, and pragmatists advocated that words for spelling programs should be chosen based on their usefulness rather than on their difficulty (Ahmed & Lombardino, 2000; Ediger, 2001, 2002; Johnston, 2001; Schlagal, 2001, 2002; Templeton & Morris, 1999). The most profound change of spelling philosophy was prompted by a study conducted by Charles Read (1971) in which he found that young children’s spelling attempts were developmentally based. Several researchers (Aubrey, 1987; Beers and Henderson, 1977; Bissex, 1979; Paul, 1976) verified his findings, and J. Richard Gentry (1978, 1981, 1982, 1987, 2000) identified and described the following five stages in the development of spelling (see Figure 2):

1. **Prephonetic Stage:** Symbols, letters, and scribbles are used to represent text. As its name implies, however, there is no phonetic basis to the representations of graphemes (letters or letter combinations). In addition, directionality of print is flawed or nonexistent.

2. **Semi-Phonetic Stage:** Graphemes represent some of the phonemes (sounds) in words due to the child’s conceptualization of the alphabetic principle (the relationship of letters to sounds). Beginning and ending sounds are most
commonly represented, whereas vowels are rarely indicated. Additionally, the letter-name stage is evident in children's spellings of words (are = "R" and you = "U").

3. **Phonetic Stage:** Each phoneme is delineated with its accurate or approximate grapheme. Although not always accu-

**Figure 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage &amp; Primary Characteristic</th>
<th>Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prephonetic:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters do not represent sounds.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(The bunny likes to jump.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Semi-phonetic:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters represent some of the sounds in words.</td>
<td>(Mom made a turkey.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Here is some fun colors. When you're around, you make the world go around.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phonetic:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Words are spelled the way they sound.</td>
<td>(Correct spelling.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(The week before the geography fair, we will get ready.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transitional:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling patterns are evident.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Correct spelling.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conventional:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The majority of words are spelled correctly.</td>
<td>(Correct spelling.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
rate, vowel sounds are represented. The concept of a word becomes firmly established, and spaces are placed between each word.

4. ** Transitional Stage:** Spelling patterns are discovered and applied. Overgeneralization, the application of spelling patterns in erroneous placements, is typical.

5. **Conventional Stage:** All, or almost all, words are spelled correctly.

Similar to Gentry, Henderson (1980, 1985) has described five developmental stages of spelling. As illustrated in Figure 3, Henderson's stages are somewhat comparable to Gentry's stages. Several researchers, have confirmed Gentry's and Henderson's identification of developmental spelling stages (Beers & Henderson, 1977; Chapman, 1996; Kirkpatrick, 1986; Leir, 1991; Swisher, 1991; Templeton, 1983).

Based on this developmental view of spelling, not all young children are ready to consistently use conventional spellings. However, the overwhelming majority of professionals in the field of education believes that children can and should begin writing earlier than this (Clay, 1991; Graves, 1983, 2001; Gunning, 2003; Morrow, 1993; Sipe, 2001). The theory is that because spelling is a developmental process, children will gradually progress from being nonspellers to being conventional spellers. This progression may be eased along from frequent repeated practice with reading and writing using invented spelling (Invernizzi, Abouzeid, & Gill, 1994). Invented spelling, also termed developmental spelling, transitional spelling, and temporary spelling is the use of letters and/or symbols to represent text.

**A Different Perspective for Parents**

Based on classroom experiences, students' parents commonly express concerns regarding their young children's misspellings. Like Mary, many parents think that even very young children should spell every word correct at all times; parents and teachers should supply the children with those correct spellings when necessary. Many parents have negative attitudes about invented spelling and convey these attitudes to their children by insisting that only correctly spelled words be used in their writing. Similarly, several authors (Aubrey, 1987; Bruneau, Rasinski, & Ambrose, 1989; Templeton & Morris, 1999; Tompkins, 2003) noted that parents were uncomfortable with invented spelling.

Research (Aubrey, 1987; Beers and Henderson, 1977; Bissex, 1979; Paul, 1976) has shown that not only is a young child's use of invented spelling developmental, but various benefits are associated with its use. As will be discussed later in this article, a positive relationship has been found to exist between a child's use of invented spelling and the child's academic achievement in spelling, reading, and writing. Therefore, experts in the field of literacy advocate a young child's use of invented spelling (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2004; Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement, 2001; Chomsky, 1971; Clay, 1991; Cunningham & Cunningham, 2002; Graves, 2001; Gunning, 2003; Kolodziej, 2001; Lutz, 2004; Savage, n.d.).

Additionally, "the collaborative partnership necessary between home and
### Figure 3

**Stages of Invented Spelling**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gentry's Stages</th>
<th>Henderson's Stages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prephonetic</strong></td>
<td><strong>Emergent</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• No focus on the alphabetic principle.</td>
<td>• Letter names may be used.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Letters and/or marks are random.</td>
<td>• Invented alphabet systems and scribbles are used.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Semiphonetic</strong></td>
<td><strong>Letter-Name Spelling</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Mostly consonants are used.</td>
<td>• Words are spelled phonetically.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• One to three letters are typically used to spell entire words.</td>
<td>• Vowels are used, but often incorrectly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phonetic</strong></td>
<td><strong>Within Word Pattern</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• All phonemes are represented with letters.</td>
<td>• Silent marking vowels are used.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The child understands the concept of a word.</td>
<td>• Most one-syllable, short vowel words are spelled correctly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transitional</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Many spelling patterns are incorporated, but not always correctly.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mature

• Most words are spelled correctly.

Syllable and Affixes

• Begins to apply consonant doubling rules between syllable junctures.

Derivational Principles

• Develops competency at spelling words derived from Latin and Greek roots.

When parents are more knowledgeable and accepting of a particular educational approach, they are more likely to endorse it (Bruneau et al., 1989; Burns & Casbergue, 1992; Dodd, 1996; Fields, 1988). As a result of positive parental attitudes and encouragement, children will feel free to write using invented spelling and gain the benefits associated with its use.

Invented Spelling: Fundamentals for Parents

1. Spelling is developmental.

Parents fondly recall the day that their child spoke his/her first word. When the child said “ba-ba,” did the parent say, “No, honey, it is pronounced “bottle?” Parents treasure this developmental step their child took towards conventional speaking by lavishly praising the child and offering the bottle. Parents intuitively recognize that the purpose of their child’s spoken attempt is to communicate. The children will not call school is essential if all children are to reap the benefits of literacy training” (Fredericks, 2002, p. 169). In their position statement, *Family School Partnerships: Essential Elements of Literacy Instruction in the United States* (2002), the International Reading Association stresses the importance of family involvement on children’s literacy development, and researchers’ findings have supported this assertion (Morningstar, 1999; Morrow & Young, 1997). In order to facilitate this collaborative partnership, researchers (Aubrey, 1987, Bruneau et al., 1989, & Gentry, 2000) have stated that educators should inform parents about invented spelling. Kolodziej (2001) found that parents who were provided with information regarding both the rationale behind children’s use of invented spelling and benefits associated with its use had more favorable attitudes of its use than did parents who were not provided with the information.
the item a "ba-ba" for the rest of his/her life; rather, when the child is developmentally ready, he/she will be able to say "bottle."

Similarly, a young child's written words are an attempt to communicate. A typical child that spells the word horse as hrs will not spell it that way for the rest of his/her life: rather, the child will develop as a speller to eventually be able to spell it correctly. These initial attempts at spelling should be celebrated with enthusiasm that equates that expressed upon the child's first utterances.

It is important that educators make this analogy between speech development and spelling development explicit to parents. Parents can then take pride in their children's spelling attempts (even if they are incorrectly spelled) because they understand that their children are on their way towards becoming conventional spellers. The educator can clearly show parents the developmental growth of their children by saving samples of students' writing to document the growth (Lenski & Nierstheimer, 2004).

2. By using invented spelling, a child actually improves his conventional spelling.

Continuing with the analogy between learning to speak and learning to spell, children's speech develops until they are able to speak conventionally. Similarly, children's spelling develops until they are able to spell conventionally. Children will progress through the stages of developmental spelling until they reach the conventional stage (Lincoln Elementary, 2001; Tompkins, 2003). Does this mean that all individuals will be able to spell with 100% accuracy at all times? No, but it does mean that typical individuals will not continue to spell horse as hrs for their entire lives. Children do not internalize the incorrect spelling; instead, through the use of invented spelling, children actively engage in a problem-solving experience.

Researchers (Bode, 1988; Busch, 1990; Gettinger, 1993) have found that a children's use of invented spelling actually helps children transition to conventional spelling. By using the processes involved in invented spelling, children will actively construct and internalize rules of spelling. Children will demonstrate knowledge of these rules as they gain independence and proficiency in conventional spelling. Often, a child will overgeneralize a spelling pattern, applying the pattern to all words that seem to fit. For example, after children learn that a silent e added to the end of word can change a vowel sound from a short sound to a long sound, they may spell many long vowel words with an extra e at the end (for example, play becomes playe and sign becomes sine).

3. The use of invented spelling improves both writing and reading achievement.

As advocated by experts in the field of literacy (Bear, et al., 2004; Chomsky, 1971; Kolodziej, 2001; Roe, Smith, & Burns, 2005; Sampson, Rasinski, & Sampson, 2003), children's literacy development has been found to be enhanced through their use of writing experiences that incorporate invented spelling, and positive relationships have also been found to exist between the use of invented spelling and achievement in both reading and writing. Proponents of the use of invented spelling
Invented Spelling & Parents...

declare that its use allows children to write freely, without the need for each word to be spelled conventionally. In fact, Graves (1983) has found that the predominant challenge of young writers is spelling. When the focus of a young child’s writing is on the message rather than on spelling, writing achievement is positively affected (Aubrey, 1987; Bode, 1988; Gettinger, 1993; Nicholson, 1996). The use of invented spelling allows young writers the opportunity and the means to write without strict adherence to spelling errors. According to Bear, et al., “A hesitant writer who labors over spelling words will lose the reward of expressing new ideas. Students who are willing to risk being wrong by inventing their spelling have an easier time getting their ideas down” (p. 39). As a result, these writings tend to be rated higher (Bode, 1988; Gettinger, 1993) and be longer in length (Clarke, 1988; Nicholson, 1996) than the writings that were written using conventional spelling. The phonological knowledge required of the task of invented spelling correlates with beginning readers’ success (Burns & Richgels, 1989; Winsor, 1990). Not only do children develop skill in phonological awareness, but young writers also build background knowledge in various concepts of print (Clay, 1991). Concepts of print include the knowledge of what constitutes a word and a sentence, the directionality of print, and the purpose of spaces and periods. Clay (1979) has found that students’ knowledge of concepts of print correlates with children’s reading acquisition. The use of invented spelling allows young children the freedom to write independently, while gaining phonological and conceptual knowledge that will support their reading development.

**Questions Parents Frequently Ask about Invented Spelling**

1. **Why do you teach a child to spell words the wrong way?**

   Teachers do not teach children to spell words incorrectly; the invented spellings are the result of the children’s spelling development. Rather than simply providing children with the correct spelling of a word, the teacher encourages children to use “best guess” spelling. The goal is to have children work through phoneme/grapheme relationships and internalize spelling patterns. Children will then be able to apply this knowledge to other words. Note that the teacher does not encourage children to simply make up the spelling; instead, the teacher guides children to use knowledge and experience to spell the word to approximate the correct spelling. In addition to simply guiding natural spelling development, teachers have strategic plans for teaching their children to become confident spellers (Templeton & Morris, 1999). A few of these strategies include the following: a) making words (Cunningham & Cunningham, 1992), b) word sorts (Bear, et al., 2004), and c) mini-lessons within the context of writers’ workshop (Dahl, et al., 2004).

2. **When should I help my child correct a misspelled word?**

   This is a difficult question to answer because many variables come into consideration. Much of this decision is based
on knowing the developmental level of the child's spelling. For instance, a child in the phonetic stage of spelling development should not be expected to spell irregularly spelled words (such as through or could) correctly. However, that child should be expected to correctly spell words such as cat or mop, in which each phoneme represents a distinct grapheme.

A parent could also help guide a child to more closely approximate an incorrect spelling to the conventional one. Looking at Susan’s Valentine, we see that her son omitted the “1” in the words flowers. Because this sound is somewhat distinct, a parent may choose to help the child determine this missing letter. However, because of the nature of this written piece, a Valentine’s Day card for his mother, the best recommendation would be to follow Susan’s actions and simply disregard the misspellings. To honor and encourage the child’s writing attempt is more important than it is to correct the misspellings, as Mary did.

3. Will my child continue to misspell words the wrong way if errors are not corrected?

Typically, children are aware that misspellings exist in their written pieces, and teachers talk to children about “kid spelling” and “adult spelling.” Children understand that their writing is acceptable at times, but that “adult spelling” is warranted at other times. Generally, if the written piece is meant to be read by an audience, the teacher helps the child spell all words conventionally.

Conclusion

Educators should inform parents about both the rationale and the benefits associated with the use of invented spelling. As evidenced by the knowledge base of research, invented spelling is developmentally based and children who use invented spelling will eventually become conventional spellers. In addition, children's use of invented spelling has been found to increase academic achievement in the areas of spelling, writing, and reading.

However, due to the unconventional appearance of invented spelling, many parents are uncomfortable with it and dissuade their children from its use. But if parents are informed about invented spelling they will have more positive attitudes towards its use, and their children will feel more at ease in using invented spelling. Therefore, the ultimate consequence of informing parents about invented spelling is increased academic achievement for their children.

References


