



2012 Certificate Course for Teachers of Students with SLDs

Research Paper by Jacki Anderson

The purpose of this paper is to discuss and recommend the best strategies for spelling instruction.

As speech is seamless and does not ordinarily require instruction (Castiglioni-Spalten & Ehri 2003; Groff 1997), spelling can be a difficult skill to learn and master (Wanzek, Vaughn, Wexler, Swanson, Edmonds & Kim 2006). One of the main difficulties in addressing the needs of spellers is determining each child's stage of development and analysing their mistakes to ascertain where and if intervention is required (Bissaker & Westwood 2006). Successful spellers draw on a variety of strategies (O'Sullivan 2000). The strategies and knowledge that a child draws upon are exhibited in their spelling. Before any spelling instruction strategies can be implemented formal and informal testing must be performed (Bear & Templeton 1998; O'Sullivan 2000). Analysis of errors gives teachers helpful information so that they can plan spelling instruction effectively (Bissaker & Westwood 2006; O'Sullivan 2000).

Spelling instruction is a highly debated topic among teachers, educators, schools and governments. The major debate has been between two very different approaches to spelling instruction: Whole Language and Phonics based instruction. Apart from the actual instructional approaches, it is important to note the significant role that each teacher plays in providing effective instruction. While it will not be discussed in great detail here, it is interesting to mention the relationship, connection and likely bidirectional nature of spelling and reading. Effective spelling instruction is particularly crucial when teaching children with spelling and/or learning difficulties. Intervention and appropriate spelling instruction is vital for these children to become successful, independent spellers.

What does Whole Language look like in the classroom? Whole Language is a holistic and integrated approach to reading, writing and spelling. In contrast to Phonics based instruction, spelling instruction is not taught specifically or separately but rather within the context of 'authentic' class set writing tasks (Westwood 1999). Teaching spelling as a separate subject or breaking language into bits and pieces is seen to be an abstract way for children to learn (Goodman 2005; Westwood 1999). As sound is not a good clue to many words in spelling (Bear & Templeton 1998), immersion in writing, with regular constructive teacher feedback, is how children will acquire proficiency. Goodman (2005) advocates that whole language classrooms build on the language development and experiences children have attained and experienced before they start school. He suggests that children write about what happens to them and share these experiences with others. By being 'immersed' in the written language children can learn to spell (and read) by directly associating whole printed words with spoken words (Maley 2008). If this is the natural way for children to acquire the skills and knowledge for spelling, how does the whole language approach cater



to those children who struggle with spelling or who are at risk of (or indeed have) learning difficulties? Maley (2008) suggests that whole language limits opportunities for struggling students. Whole language does not allow for children to learn about words that share common letter sequences or develop generalisation in regards to spelling (Westwood 1999). For the child that struggles with spelling, Whole Language will only provide incidental and random learning of spelling rather than developing skills and knowledge that they require to become independent and confident spellers (Westwood 1999).

What does Phonics based instruction look like in the classroom? Phonics based instruction encompasses direct and explicit teacher directed lessons as opposed to the Whole Language approach. In the early years, children are taught obviously and unambiguously phoneme awareness and letter-sound knowledge. As children progress they are introduced systematically to phoneme-grapheme correspondences, irregular words, multi-syllable words, compounds, schwa and common prefixes and suffixes (Moats 2005/2006). Once children have achieved mastery of skills and strategies it is important that they are given opportunities to generalise information (Kohnen, Nickels, & Coltheart 2010). Phonics based instruction teaches non-words or pseudo-words to help encourage generalisation of skills (Castiglioni-Spalten & Ehri 2003), whereas Whole Language considers 'nonsense' words to be abstract and irrelevant (Goodman 2005).

Not all students are able to infer intuitively in relation to spelling so conspicuous instruction, teacher modelling and using instructional scaffolding are imperative for many students to gain effective and efficient strategies to improve spelling (Santoro, Coyne & Simmons 2006). From the phonemic awareness studies carried out by Castiglioni-Spalten & Ehri (2003) and Santoro, Coyne & Simmons (2006), explicit and systematic teaching approaches resulted in high effect sizes especially in regard to spelling results. Both of the studies also indicated that the children involved in the phonemic awareness interventions improved their reading as well. O'Sullivan (2000) has observed that it is likely that phonemic understanding is gained more readily through spelling.

When comparing Whole Language to Phonics based instruction research has shown that adopting Phonics offers the best strategies, especially in regards to intervention for children with spelling and/or learning difficulties, for spelling instruction. The role of the teacher to effectively provide and implement suitable spelling instruction is paramount to the success of any spelling instruction. Enthusiasm, training and time to plan is just a starting point for teachers to implement an effective spelling programme. If spelling instruction is to be effective then it must include formal and informal testing, thorough teacher planning, be clearly scripted, have obvious direct and explicit instruction, be consistent and systematic, use appropriate resources, immediate corrective feedback and provide opportunities for practise, revision and generalisation. Children need to be explicitly and systematically taught specific strategies, (for example letter-sound relationships, identifying speech sounds and blending and segmenting), so that they can decide which strategy, or combination of strategies, is the best spelling choice.



References

- Bear, D. & Templeton, S. 1998. Explorations in developmental spelling: Foundations for learning and teaching phonics, spelling, and vocabulary. *The Reading Teacher*. 52:222-242.
- Bissaker, K. & Westwood, P. 2006. Diagnostic uses of the South Australian spelling test. *Australian Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 11:1, 25-33.
- Castiglioni-Spalten, M. & Ehri, L.C. 2003. Phonemic awareness instruction: Contribution of articulatory segmentation to novice beginners' reading and spelling. *Scientific Studies of Reading*. 7.1, 25-52.
- Goodman, K. 2005. *What's Whole in Whole Language*. Berkeley CA: RDR Books, pp.3-7. <http://newlearningonline.com/literacies/chapter-4-authentic-literacy-pedagogy/ken-goodman-on-whole-language/>
- Groff, P. 1997. The Rise and Fall of 'Whole Language' and the Return to Phonics. *Journal of the Simplified Spelling Society*. 22:2, 11-15. <http://www.spellingsociety.org/journals/j22/wholelang.php>
- Kohnen, S., Nickels, L. & Coltheart, M. 2010. Skill generalization in teaching spelling to children with learning difficulties. *Australian Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 15:2, 115-129
- Maley, N. 2008. A whole new language. *Bulletin – Learning Difficulties Australia*. 40:2, 9-11.
- Moats, L. C. 2005-2006. How spelling supports reading: And why it is more regular and predictable than you think. *American Educator*. 12-22, 42-43. [http://www.dyslexia-hawaii.org/images/uploads/Spelling Instruction Excerpt by Louisa Moats.pdf](http://www.dyslexia-hawaii.org/images/uploads/Spelling_Instruction_Excerpt_by_Louisa_Moats.pdf)
- O'Sullivan, O. 2000. Understanding Spelling. *Reading*, April 2000. 9-16.
- Ouellete, G. & Senechal, M. 2008. A window into early literacy: Exploring the cognitive and linguistic underpinnings of invented spelling. *Scientific Studies of Reading*. 12.2, 195-219.
- Santoro, L., Coyne, M. & Simmons, D. 2006. The reading-spelling connection: Developing and evaluating a beginning spelling intervention for children at risk of reading disability. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 21.2, 122-133.
- Wanzek, J., Vaughn, S., Wexler, J., Swanson, E., Edmonds, M. & Kim, A-H. 2006. A Synthesis of Spelling and Reading Interventions and Their Effects on the spelling Outcomes of Students With LD. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*. 39:6, 528-543.
- Westwood, P. 1999. *Spelling: approaches to teaching and assessment*. Australia: The Australian Council for Educational Research Ltd

***Originally printed in the SPELD NSW SEPTEMBER 2012 E-NEWS*