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# SPELLING: THE BEGINNINGS OF LITERACY

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There is a growing realization that very young children are aware of the print in their environment. The opportunities for developing this awareness prior to formal education are numerous. Being read to, interacting with print on signs, advertisements, packages and games, naming the letters, and watching Sesame Street and other television shows are just a few of the ways that children's attention becomes directed to the print in our society. Researchers and educators are beginning to explore the nature of the child's interest and knowledge of print prior to instruction.

Recently research in written language has focused on what has become known as "invented spelling." It has been reported that many children express an awareness of print in the form of writing before they know how to read (Chomsky, 1976). Chomsky has suggested that their ability to write is a developmental precedent to reading. In any case, observation has demonstrated that young children use their knowledge of letter names and sometimes letter sounds to accurately and consistently represent sounds (Read, 1971).

Both Read (1971) and Chomsky (1976) report that when writing is allowed to develop without interference from formal instruction, children's spelling attempts are not haphazard nor random. Children between the ages of four and six years old will begin to compose words and messages using their own invented spellings. These spellings are different from traditional spelling but surprisingly there appears to be some patterns of spelling that are systematic and uniform from child to child.

Read (1971) has described the nature of these spellings in depth. He has noted several features that seem to occur uniformly in children's writing. Children will use a letter name to represent certain phonemes. For example, the letter "H" might represent a "sh" or "ch" sound so that branch might be spelled BRENH and fishing would be spelled FEHEG. This particular feature occurs early in spelling development and will persist until the child is introduced and becomes familiar with the standard spellings of (c) and (s). Another feature of invented spelling is omission of nasal sounds before a consonant. Therefore, sing might be spelled SEG or finger could be represented as FEGR. Children may also use one letter to represent an entire syllable as when CMIN might be written for the word coming. Children will also spell long vowels by matching the sound which is heard as when (ey), (e), and (ae) are all

represented with an (a). Therefore, bait, bat, and bet would all be spelled BAT.

In his dissertation Read (1970) discusses the characteristics of the homes of these children. He noted that the main similarity of these varied and diversified children was that parents were generally responsive, interested and expressed enjoyment in the child's activity.

Often children are inventing spelling before they can read. Sometimes they cannot read their messages back. Their enjoyment seems to come in creating the messages and not in interpretation. Children do not seem to confuse this activity with reading. They may write TRN for turn and still read "turn" when meeting it in print.

Transition from invented spelling to standard forms of spelling does not seem to offer problems for the child. As they become more experienced in reading they seem to abandon their earlier forms of writing. Some children change rapidly from one spelling to the other, others use standard spelling from the beginning of their writing experience, while still others use a combination of the two types of spelling before developing a more standard form of spelling.

Paul (1976) has used Read's word to establish the following sequence of invented spelling. Invented spelling begins with the first letter or phoneme of a word representing the entire word. For example, one child represented the word mouse with "M" as he labeled a drawing he had created. The spellings will then progress to the addition of the final phoneme to represent the entire word so the word pen, might be spelled PN. As a child continues to develop in spelling ability the use of some vowel sound to stand for a vowel will begin to appear. And finally, spelling moves to a more standard form.

The early writing and spelling of young children is unkempt and may be hard for adults to decipher. But the message may be found with careful questioning and understanding. Children will often place words over an entire page and not combine them in sentence form. Many times children may place dots between the words to separate the writing. And the division of words may occur at any point. Reversals in early writing are not uncommon and children who are experimenting with writing may break out into the familiar act of picture drawing without warning.

Early writing and invented spelling comes from a spontaneous effort by the children. However as children develop their own spellings they also accomplish a great deal toward their acquisition of literacy. When children construct their own words their attention is directed naturally to letters, letter sequence and the spatial concepts of writing. The children are providing themselves with experience in phonetics, word analysis and letter/sound correspondence as well as practice in composing words and messages. This provides the children with activities that will contribute to their reading behavior.

An obvious educational implication arising from what we know about a child's early writing attempts suggests that many children will

come to school with an organized knowledge of phonological categories and relationships. In the classroom, the teacher must be aware that unique spellings may be due to the child's system of organizing and categorizing speech sounds. The teacher may further recognize the child's abilities by providing opportunities with freedom of expression. In addition, the teacher must feel free to enjoy the child's creations.

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