

A case for inventive spelling

By Jean Sumiyé

Writing is one of the most exciting avenues by which children's creativity and language uniqueness can be captured. In the early years, however, young writers are often plagued with the notion of "I can't spell," therefore, "I can't write."

My classroom experiences with writing instruction has led me to explore children's generation of their own spelling in order to facilitate fluency and ease in writing. Current research recognizes this method as inventive spelling, a process which enables children to use their knowledge of oral language and sounds to invent their own spellings as they transcribe words into print.

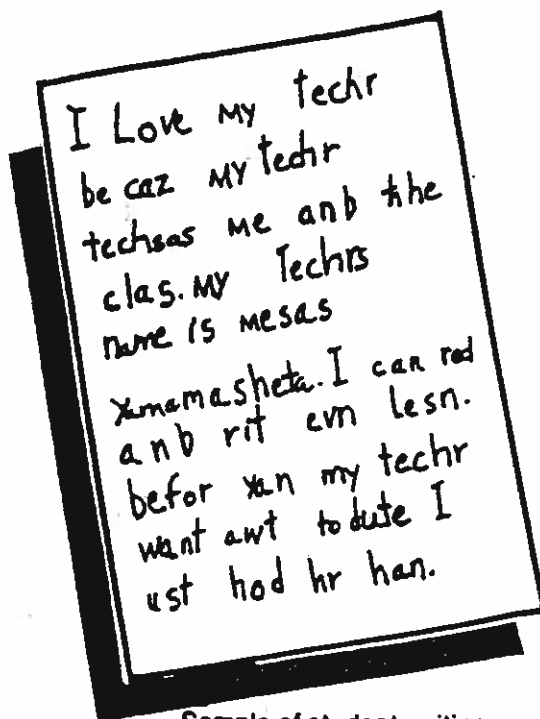
Inventive spelling is an instructional process which allows children to create their own spelling of words, relying on auditory skills to generate sound associations, and to transcribe these sounds into tentative visual forms.

Emphasis is placed upon the process by which children make these associations rather than on the correctness of the spelling outcome. Through experimentation, children become aware of and thus discover the rules and conventions of the English language.

As a teacher looking at each child, I find that inventive spelling provides me with an assessment of where my children are in the developmental stages of learning to spell.

Richard J. Gentry identifies five developmental stages: 1 — precommunicative or babbling, 2 — semiphonetic, 3 — phonetic, 4 — transitional, and 5 — correct/conventional ("You can analyze developmental spelling and here's how to do it," *Early Years*, 1985). The purpose of introducing children to the concept of stages is to help them understand the developmental nature of spelling and to free them to invent at whatever stage they are comfortable.

In addition to providing me with valuable insights into children's learning of the writing process, inventive spelling



Sample of student writing

serves as a good diagnostic tool for children's phonic skill application and use. Children are given concrete evidence of their growth as well as direction toward where they are heading within the stages. What pride is manifested in the discovery of being able to write "monstur" when a week ago it looked like "mtr!"

One of the critical implications of the stages of inventive spelling is its reference to when children are ready for formal spelling. Once developmental spellers move into the transitional and correct stages they have the competency to acquire more formal spelling forms. Studying of word lists and patterns of written language can only be relevant to children who are already making the connections through their own inventive experiences.

How do we assist children in moving through the stages toward spelling confidence and competence? The function of spelling in the composing process is to facilitate the audience's reading of a written piece; thus, the teaching of spelling should take place as an

integral part of this writing process.

During the composing phase, children are continually encouraged to write words as they sound, rather than to rely on words they know how to spell. This emphasis ensures that creativity and expression take dominance over the correctness of form.

In the post-writing conference, an awareness of spelling stages and levels of correctness can be shared. As children reread their words, they can begin to spot missing letters and guess on additional inventions. This experimentation with words helps children to apply and expand their knowledge of phonic rules to new words.

The developmental nature of inventive spelling requires daily practice and use. Frequent free writing opportunities enable children to experiment with English rules and conventions, and subsequently, discover the correctness of spelling.

Four major outcomes result from this invaluable instructional tool:

- fluent and powerful writing
- early control and responsibility
- independence
- efficient instruction.

As I review the value of inventive spelling, it is evident to me that its instructional worth goes far beyond learning to spell. It provides me with a special perspective on how children learn. Inventive spelling has taught me how children take control of their own learning and how to let go of perfection and build upon children's emerging competence.

Lastly, inventive spelling has taught me an avenue to enjoy and appreciate the creativity and uniqueness of children's language expression. A "froskus dobrmn pensr" is refreshingly inventive compared to a well-designed, but uninspired "bad dog."

Jean Sumiyé is the 1986-87 winner of the Betty K. Uehara Award. She is a resource teacher with the DOE Central District Office.

Developmental Spelling

Beginnings

Translation:
My Mom took us to the store to get some tomato juice.

F S U O R P T K N G B L Y A H O I O.
M B P
E G N H K O T H K Y I L e W h H I G A S.
I H N I L R.
I H N Y O O U | W I.



Consonants

One letter, usually the first one heard, is used to represent the word.

Translation:
I went out in a boat and caught a fish this big.

I w t n a b
k a r s b

Initial and Final Consonants

The first and last sounds are represented.

Translation:
The next day some more flowers grew.

T h e n s D e
S m M r F l o s
g r o

Vowel/Consonant Combinations

Consonants and vowels start to appear in the middle of words.

Translation:
Me and my best friend sledding downhill with my friends' Dad. His [Dad] made a jump for us.

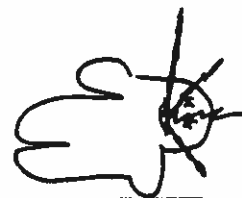
M e a n m b e s f r d
S l e d d n d n h i l l w m
f r n s d a d . H i s
M a d a m p f o r s .

Words

All syllables in the words are represented.

Translation:
Chris,
You were sleeping. You woke up when everybody left.
You are clumsy. You were snoring. Zzzz.

C h r i s
Y o u a r e S l e e p i n g
Y o u w o o k
u p w e n
e v e r y o n e B u t
l e f t .
Y o u a r e
c l u m s y
Y o u w e r e
s n o r i n g .
h o n s h e w



Standard Spelling

Children begin to build a repertoire of spelling patterns, and add to their store of sight words.

Translation:
Once upon a time, there was an old old woman who had a dog. The woman's name was Polly. The dog's name was Sally. Sally was a quiet dog, except for when she was hungry. So Polly knew what Sally wanted when Sally barked.

O n c e u p o n a t i m e ,
T h e r e w a s a n o l d o l d
w o m e n , w h o h a d a d o g s .
T h e w o m a n ' s n a m e w a s P o l l y .
S a l l y w a s a q u i e t d o g s .
s h e w a s e x c e p t f o r h u n g r y , s o P o l l y
n e w w h a t S a l l y w a n t e d
w h e n S a l l y b a r k e d .