

The CLPE/Mercers Spelling Project

Outline of the project and main findings

Introduction

The research project, carried out by Olivia O'Sullivan and Anne Thomas, investigated the teaching and learning of spelling in three inner London primary schools.

The project looked at children who were developing competently as spellers and also at a group of children who were fluent readers but who had difficulties with spelling. The project was based in classrooms and looked at children's development in spelling as part of their development as readers and writers. The project took place over three years (although it was not full time). A further two years were spent analysing data and writing up the research in the form of a book for teachers, *Understanding Spelling*. Although the research took before the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy in schools in England and Wales it is anticipated that the book will help teachers by establishing a clear rationale for many of the approaches outlined in the strategy for teaching spelling.

The research

At the core of the project were thirty-one case study children who were tracked over 3 years - starting at different points from Reception to Year 4. Conferences were held with each child twice per term; several pieces of writing were collected each term from each child and analysed. At the end of the first year of the project, the case study group of children was narrowed down to a core group of twelve, while continuing to collect data from the rest.

Research methods used were based on case studies, structured analysis of children's writing samples and analysis of their spelling errors using a Spelling Assessment Framework developed in the project. The framework was developed and tested out with teachers throughout the project and took as its starting point the error analysis approach of Peters and Smith (1993). The following headings were used to analyse children's spellings:

Words spelled in standard form	Errors associated with visual, structural or semantic aspects	Phonetic	Early phonetic Early visual	Words which show little understanding of the spelling system
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This framework allowed us to analyse the variety of children's spelling errors at the early stages of spelling.

Children learning to spell

The project found that:

- Many different kinds of knowledge influenced development in spelling, even at the early stages: children needed to integrate different kinds of knowledge - phonetic, visual, structural and semantic in order to develop effectively as spellers
- Children took different routes into the spelling system and developed as spellers in different ways. Our research also established that children approached spelling in different ways at the early stages - some preferring a visual approach and others an auditory route. Both of these findings have implications for teaching and for the role of the teacher.

- Writing played a key role in promoting spelling development: in all the case studies, spelling development was supported by a wide range of writing experiences. As the children wrote widely and at increasing length, their spelling noticeably developed. In the case of all children the experience of writing in different genres widened their written vocabulary and therefore the words they were attempting to spell. Where children's writing experiences were limited for various reasons, their spelling development did not proceed.
- The teacher's role is crucial in children's progress as spellers: in all the case studies the role of the teacher was paramount, both in a general sense (eg planning a range of writing activities) and more particularly in terms of their intervention and support for children's spelling development at individual, group and class level.

All of these findings have implications for the teaching of spelling.

Spelling, reading and writing

Psychologists and educators have been concerned to establish whether decoding (reading) and encoding (writing/spelling) are two sides of the same process or two distinct processes. Because of the enormous current interest in and debate over children's developing phonological awareness (Goswami Bryant, 1991; Goswami, 1995; Goswami, 1999) and the implications this has both for reading and spelling (Bradley and Huxford 1994), this became a concern of the project. A further aspect of our interest was our involvement at the Centre for Language in Primary Education in the writing of *Whole-to-Part Phonics* (CLPE, 1999). Two central ideas from the discussion which led to *Whole to part phonics* were influential in our thinking: the first was Frith's model which explores the relationship of children's reading and writing development (Frith, 1984); the second was the role that analogy might play in children's spelling development (Goswami and Bryant, 1994).

In brief there were four main findings from our case studies in the area of spelling and reading: they can only be presented here in brief.

1. Frith's model (Frith, 1985) describes three stages in children's developing understanding. She suggests that children progress through logographic (whole word), alphabetic (analytical) and orthographic stages as both readers and spellers, but that reading and spelling development tend to proceed out of step and that at each phase learning in one area leads and informs development in the other. Frith's argument was certainly confirmed by the spelling and reading development of the case study children. While clearly the knowledge involved in reading and spelling is reciprocal, nonetheless the case study children - once they had gone beyond the early 'analytic' stage of making links between sounds and letters - were invariably able to read many more words accurately, earlier, than they could spell them, in some cases, very much earlier. In terms of Frith's model, whilst their writing continued at an alphabetic/analytic stage their reading had moved on and was much more 'orthographic' in character, with children reading in chunks and using a growing knowledge of common letter strings, as well as drawing on other cueing systems.

2. Secondly we attempted to explore the role of analogy-making in relation to children's spelling, as opposed to their reading development. Firstly, it seemed that analogy-making was a strategy used spontaneously by children who were successful spellers - they used their knowledge of one word to attempt the spelling of unfamiliar words. In other words they made links between words. Secondly, they made analogies in many different ways - rhyming patterns, visual letter patterns, grammatical hypotheses such as use of 'ed'. This is a wider interpretation of analogy making than Goswami and Bryant's exploration of analogy theory in relation to onset and rime. Onset and rime

however has a major contribution to make in the early teaching of spelling and in helping children to understand the patterning of the system.

3. In many cases we found that the earliest strategies used by many children were often phonemic ones. It seems likely that children's phonemic understanding occurs first in spelling - in terms of their ability to analyse the predominant sounds in words - before it does in reading. (Goswami and Bryant, 1991; Bradley and Huxford, 1994). It seems likely therefore that understanding in reading proceeds from whole to part while in spelling it proceeds from part to whole

4. Our study of the group of children who were fluent readers but had spelling difficulties indicated that despite the reciprocal nature of reading and spelling, different processes were taking place. These children did not make the links between their reading and their

Teaching spelling

It seemed, at the beginning of our project, that there was a continuum on which teachers could be placed, according to their approach to teaching spelling. At one end were teachers who took a concerned yet 'non-interventionist' approach to teaching spelling and on the other hand there were those teachers whose formal approaches had not moved on much further than spelling tests and Schonell's graded lists of words. In between, as well as outstanding examples of good practice, there was sometimes uncertainty about what constituted the teaching of spelling. From observations and discussions with teachers our research began to discover that effective teaching of spelling was multifaceted, even from the early stages of children's development.

Observation of teachers and discussions with them and the case study children during the project resulted in the compilation of teaching approaches for Key Stages and 1 and 2. The following aspects of teaching and provision were observed in the project to play a significant role in children's spelling progress:

- The role of the teacher in encouraging children to draw on many sources of knowledge in their spellings - including phonological knowledge, knowledge of visual patterns, word structures and meanings
- The role of the teacher in giving children a variety of ways to learn new words
- The role of the teacher in creating a climate where children felt they could attempt unknown spellings
- Shared writing and teacher demonstrations
- Frequent opportunities to write
- Writing workshop approaches where all aspects of the writing process, including spelling, could be addressed
- The promotion by teachers of self-awareness and self-monitoring in spelling
- The value of approaches such as Look-Say-Cover-Write-Check and spelling partners when adopted by the whole class
- The value of certain kinds of teacher interventions in children's writing, in order to support children's individual spelling development
- The value of word study, particularly in Key Stage 2
- The use of spelling journals
- A wide range of classroom resources and the promotion of their use.

Teaching approaches for Key Stages 1 and 2 are presented in detail in [Understanding Spelling](#), (link) (Olivia O'Sullivan and Anne Thomas, CLPE).