

What Can We Do About Spelling? A Progress Report

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When a faculty's attention is turned to a particular area of need, positive results may well be expected. One school staff, for example, is trying to improve instruction in spelling.

SPRINGFIELD teachers are concerned about the spelling efficiency of their pupils. Why is there such poor carry-over of spelling instruction? Why do pupils, in writing situations, pay so little attention to spelling? What can we do about it? These are some of the questions Springfield teachers have asked when approached by representatives of a committee earnestly trying to identify problems that need attention in our program of instruction. This concern about spelling achievement is reinforced by the results of standardized tests which have been given over a period of years. The Language Arts Curriculum Committee, which is one of six voluntary general curriculum committees, decided to see what could be done about the problem.

What factors have brought about the inadequacy in our spelling instruction? Some of the following were mentioned as possible contributing causes: (a) poor and inadequate formal spelling program, (b) the routinized use of a formal spelling program, (c) insufficient time for teaching spell-

ing, (d) not enough attention to spelling in everyday writing situations, and (e) words taught are of no immediate use to pupils.

In attacking the spelling problem the committee determined to try a number of approaches. In one case, four different formal spelling programs were selected for study and comparison, in grades two through eight in ten different schools. Through representatives in each major school all teachers participated in the selection of the programs for study. A rating sheet prepared by the committee was used by each teacher as a guide for evaluation.

A second plan was based on the belief that the program for spelling at the seventh and eighth grade levels should be a "capping" program rather than simply a continuation of the elementary program, except for more difficult words. A number of seventh and eighth grade teachers are using a published program which applies problem solving methods or the thought approach to spelling. The word list in the text consists of the most commonly misspelled words.

The third plan involves twenty-two teachers, grades two through seven, who do not use a formal program, but

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are exploring different approaches to the teaching of spelling. This preliminary report is directed primarily to this particular phase of the study program. For the most part these teachers were invited to participate in the study in order to secure representation from various schools and grade levels. The teachers were assured they would be given some assistance in the form of suggestions and materials, and that they would have an opportunity through meetings to share their problems and experiences.

Materials and Resources

In planning this project the committee was faced with many problems. Among these were the following:

1. Where can we get the kind of help needed in setting up a study program that will really help us answer some of our questions?
2. What materials and helps will the teachers who are going to carry on the study, need and want?
3. How can we help teachers try out specific hypotheses as to things which will improve spelling achievement?
4. How can changes that may occur as a result of different methods be evaluated?

Consultant help was secured. Services of the principal and the fourth grade teacher of the Laboratory School of Illinois State Normal University were engaged. In subsequent meetings various approaches and procedures that teachers might use in teaching spelling without a text were considered. Two suggestive outlines were prepared, one for the primary level and the other for grades four and above. These out-

lines contained suggestions for improving spelling. It was upon these suggestions that the proposed plans were based.

Plans called for the giving of standardized spelling tests in the latter part of September to all elementary pupils grades three through eight. Additional tests were given about midyear and a final test will be given at the close of the school year. These data should prove helpful not only as a measure for the special study program but also in evaluating the other spelling materials that are being tried out.

Early in September a meeting of all the participants was held. At this time the suggested plans outlined by the consultants were distributed and discussed. Various possible hypotheses as to what steps might improve spelling efficiency were explored. Each teacher agreed to do the following:

1. "Formulate in writing the hypotheses for improving spelling upon which you plan to base and carry out your program.
2. "Describe the general procedure, or the instructional plan for carrying out your program in keeping with the hypotheses you have formulated.
3. "Propose suggestions for evaluating and testing the hypotheses.
4. "Suggest the types of records and procedures needed for collecting such data."

Teachers Report

At a subsequent meeting each teacher reported on the above items. In order to help each teacher to design his investigation more clearly, a summary was made of all the hypotheses sug-

gested. While more than twenty-five projects were suggested the most frequently mentioned ones towards which the teachers are directing their efforts are the following:

1. The teaching of meaningful and useful words.
2. The teaching of basic word lists such as the Dolch Basic Sight vocabulary and the Dale Check List for Gray-Leary.
3. Emphasizing the phonetic analysis of words and analyzing and studying word structure.
4. Creating the desire to learn to spell correctly.
5. Teaching words that are timely, seasonal, and words that are peculiar to subjects or units of work.
6. Stressing learning of words in sentences rather than as isolated words.
7. Emphasizing correct spelling in all writing.

Each teacher, then, has selected a distinct problem upon which his program is based. He has also worked out specific ways of attacking the problems day-by-day.

The most difficult problem is that of evaluating the effectiveness of the various approaches and methods that are being used. Teachers have been encouraged to try out any ideas they might have for evaluating results. In an attempt to measure changes in spelling consciousness and functional spelling some teachers have asked children to write stories on a topic like "What I Did After School Yesterday." Records are kept as the story is written of

words the children ask to have spelled or words that they look up in the dictionary. The percentage of misspelled words for each paper is determined. This kind of test is given periodically to determine whether spelling consciousness and functional spelling improve. All teachers are also analyzing sets of papers done in various subject-matter fields noting the percentage of misspelled words. Later in the year teachers will compare similar sets of papers.

In almost every case each teacher has secured the cooperation of another teacher in his building at the same grade level who is using the usual formal program. These cooperating teachers are giving similar tests. In this way some comparison can be made between results in a more formal program and those in a program designed by the teacher to meet the needs of the child from day to day.

Since this is being written in January, it is much too early to make any assertions as to the real value of the study. Sincere attempts are being made to keep the entire staff informed about what is taking place. Teachers who are participating seem interested and enthusiastic. One experienced teacher said, "I have never had the interest and enthusiasm for spelling that my group shows this year. I believe our plans are really working." About the only thing of which we are certain at the moment is that the children of the teachers who are participating in this particular phase of the study are extremely happy and enthusiastic as far as spelling is concerned.

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