Alternative Step. You may prefer to begin by sharing the results of the study reported in this article. Just get some of those announcements taken care of by bulletin and use a staff meeting for discussion of the observations. Such sharing can motivate a good exchange, including assertions that "It couldn't be happening here!"

Alternative Two. Perhaps you prefer to share the results reported here, along with the request that each teacher log his or her activities during spelling periods for a week. While their logs may remain their confidential property, discussion at a staff meeting can lead to group suggestions about how the teaching of spelling might be improved.

Refinement. If you want to mount a serious effort to improve the teaching of spelling in your school, you may want to share or have your teachers share the evidence on how spelling should be taught. Two more helpful references are Fitzsimmons and Loomer (1974) and Hillerich (1981).

References


Teaching Spelling: A Response to Hillerich

RICHARD E. HODGES

Spelling as a school subject is somewhat of a paradox. It is perceived on the one hand by society as an important social value and symbol of literacy, and on the other hand by many educators as a subject warranting mod-

est priority in the curriculum. Thus, Professor Hillerich's reminder to principals of their roles as instructional leaders and of their opportunity to extend that role to spelling deserves special commendation.

The research Hillerich reported and the implications he drew from that research are a welcome addition to the professional literature on spelling and underscore the critical part that teachers play in helping students gain understanding of and competence in the subjects they study. However, I wish to take issue with the mode of spelling instruction that he proposes. He infers that, for the most part, the "truth is all in" about spelling content and method. In fact, it is not.

Hillerich's concept of spelling instruction has its roots in late 19th and early 20th century views of spelling and in the scores of scholarly inquiries into spelling content and method carried out mainly in the first half of the present century. These views stemmed primarily from two sources: an emerging "science of education" in which instructional efficiency was a major goal; and a behaviorist orientation toward learning that was prevalent during this period (Hodges, 1977). Indeed, much of the evidence Hillerich cites parishes Horn's statement on the "Principles of Method in Teaching Spelling, as Derived from Scientific Investigation" published in 1919. In that statement, Horn noted that

Efficiency in teaching spelling is to be increased by a specific attack on the individual words to be learned. [This approach] is in line with the whole tendency in modern experimental education, a tendency which has been well outlined by Thordike in his discussion of education as the formation of specific bonds (Horn, 1919, p. 56).

Others, in addition to Hillerich, have since reiterated this viewpoint (see, for example, the Fitzsimmons and Loomer reference in Hillerich's article. See also Alfred, 1977). Namely, learning to spell is mainly a visual memory task; there are few reliable spelling generalizations; and drill is an effective teaching device in spelling. In sum, spelling study should, as Hillerich comments, "facilitate memorization of the spelling of [words]."

Other concepts of spelling, however, warrant study. They are rooted in current and emerging insights about the development of intellect generally and about the development of language in particular. These insights reveal that learning is generally a developmental process in which learners actively participate in their own learning by searching for and constructing generalizations about entities and events in the world around them. Nowhere is this insight more revealing than in language development in which children's "errors" reveal their growing understanding of the structural relationships of language.

So it is with spelling. Truly significant research into the development of spelling ability by Read (1975), and more recently by Henderson and his associates (1980), demonstrates that learning to spell is integrally related to learning underlying concepts about words and their structural and semantic relationships, of which sound-letter relationships are only a part. Furthermore, these concepts grow more sophisticated over time in conjunction with developmental changes in cognition and with interaction with written language both in and out of school. What these researchers and others are showing is that there are underlying cognitive processes involved in learning to spell which are developmental in nature (Frith, 1980; Hodges, 1981a; Hodges, 1981b.)

Much more needs to be done in detailing the applications of these insights to instructional practice (Read and Hodges, in press). But as gaps are filled in our understanding of the nature and growth of spelling ability, we will be better able to design curricula and devise instructional methods that go far beyond the memorization of word lists and weekly testing, and engage students in active explorations of the nature of English spelling and its place in written communication.

Hillerich concludes his article with the justifiable advice that spelling programs can be refined when principals and supervisors make available to their staffs existing knowledge about spelling. I fully agree, but must add that this knowledge is far more extensive than he has indicated and that curricular refinement will need to take into account the emerging insights into both the nature of English spelling and of the learner. The references I have noted in this brief response are useful resources for putting into context the current state of knowledge concerning learning to spell.

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continued on p. 635
A Response to Robert Hillerich
(continued from p. 617)

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Ill.: National Council of Teachers of
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ed., New York: The Macmillan Company, in
press.

Hillerich Replies:

I'm surprised that Professor Hodges
didn't discuss the omission of two con-
cerns we both share: (1) the need for
exploration of language—for pupils
themselves to become "linguists" as
they manipulate their language phono-
logically, morphologically, semanti-
cally, and syntactically; and (2) the role
of poor letter formation as a contributor to
"spelling errors."

Instead, his critique was based on two
points. First, he implied that evidence
from the turn of the century is outdated,
even though it continues to mount and
be supported today. He did not elabo-
rate on the "other conceptions of spell-
ing" (Hanna and others, 1971; Groff,
1979; most spelling programs of the
past half century), which were, how-
ever, addressed in one of his own cita-
tions (Frith, 1980): "One might say that
whilst average spellers spell by rule,
good spellers spell by rote." (p. 247).

Hodges explains "other conceptions"
terms of current research on
the development of spelling ability.
Such research, though significant,
seemed irrelevant in an article dealing
with instructional method. Such find-
ing are important in suggesting levels
of development, from random spelling
to the consideration of sounds in words.
While these findings offer little guid-
ance in terms of diagnostic value for
skills instruction, they do reaffirm that
"sound" spelling is not necessarily
"correct" spelling (Hillerich, in press).
Certainly, we'll probably never be
able to say "the truth is all in," yet
practitioners must be guided by what-
ever "truth" is in to date.

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Be Diagnosed?" The Elementary School
Journal, in press.

Book Reviews (continued from p.
623)

Handbook of Teacher
Evaluation.

Jason Millman, editor.
Beverly Hills, California:

—Reviewed by John C. Daresh, University of
Cincinnati, Cincinnati, Ohio.

It is refreshing to pick up a "hand-
book" that does not insult the reader
with a series of exhortations concerning
"how to do" something in all schools.
This is particularly true when the sub-
ject is an issue as complex and sensitive
as teacher evaluation.

Millman examines numerous aspects
of teacher evaluation, from the use of
student and peer assessment to the polit-
ical context of formal evaluation strate-
gies. Something remarkable in the indi-
idual chapters (featuring such

Don't Blame the Kids: The
Trouble With America's Public
Schools.

Gene I. Maeroff.
New York:

—Reviewed by Arthur Stiegl, Shaker
Heights City School District, Shaker
Heights, Ohio.

Most critics of public schools wrap
up educational problems in neat pack-
ages with ribbons of blame. Children
have now become the latest scapegoats
in the packages, and Gene Maeroff, an
education writer for The New York
Times, says that is akin to charging the
victim with culpability. According to
Maeroff, "The quality of schools de-
deps on adults, not kids." In that state-
ment he includes judges, politicians,
parents, taxpayers, and many others.

Besides dispelling the notion that the
trouble with America's public schools
lies with the kids, Maeroff warns
against the emergence of a "rationale
failure." He says our efforts should be
directed, instead, toward studying and
cloning schools that have overcome the
odds. Maeroff's book should be among
this year's more popular works on edu-
cation.

Available from McGraw-Hill Book
Company, 1221 Ave. of the Americas,
New York, NY 10020 for $14.95.