

Developing Conventional Spelling: Temporary Spelling and the Transition Point

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This article explains the place of temporary (invented) spelling in the sequence through which children become conventional spellers. Temporary spelling contributes to auditory sequencing, which is a necessary factor in becoming a good speller. The other necessary factor is visual memory. Activities to develop these factors are presented. How to recognize when a child has reached the transition point is explained, along with procedures for a transition point conference between teacher and child and suggestions for managing an individual spelling transition program. Activities to support sound/symbol connections are suggested for children who are still working on temporary spelling.

Invented spelling has been encouraged in schools with beginning writers in order to free them to express their ideas and communicate in writing. This practice is one that concerns many parents and some teachers. It is important that parents and teachers understand the place of invented spelling in the sequence of becoming conventional spellers. It is a temporary device, and, as used in the classroom, it has never been intended to take the place of conventional spelling. The term "temporary spelling" is more descriptive and more positive and hereafter will be used in this article in place of the term "invented spelling." The purpose of this article is to explain the positive function of temporary spelling and to provide some instructional guidance for teachers working with emergent writers.

Stages of Invented Spelling

Many studies have documented the sequential nature of

temporary spelling (Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983; Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984; McGee & Richgels, 1989). Initial consonant sounds are the first heard and represented, with final and medial consonant sounds following. The child then gradually becomes aware of vowel sounds and tries to represent them in some way. Graves (1983) identified these stages of spelling development in this way:

Pre-alphabetic stages: Random scribbling, controlled scribbling, circular scribbling, mock letters.

Sound/Symbol stages: (Word represented is GRASS)

- Stage One:* Initial consonant
Child writes G
- Stage Two:* Final consonant
is added - GS
- Stage Three:* Medial consonant
is added
GRS

Stage Four: Vowel is used as
a place holder
GRES

Stage Five: Conventional
spelling -
GRASS

(pp. 184-185)

The use of temporary spelling at stages I-IV is important for two major reasons: (1) it allows the child to communicate his or her ideas in writing, and (2) it provides meaningful practice in the representation of sequences of sounds. This practice leads to the gradual mastery of auditory sequencing, which is one of the necessary factors in becoming a good speller.

THE NECESSARY FACTORS IN BECOMING A GOOD SPELLER

Auditory Sequencing

Temporary spelling helps the emergent writer to focus on one of the important factors in learning to spell—auditory sequencing. The child is practicing auditory sequencing when listening for the sounds of the word in sequence and gradually discovering which of the symbols called letters can be used to represent the sounds.

In the beginning, the child is learning that sounds can be represented by letters, and the symbols the child writes may not match the sounds heard. As the child learns the consonant sounds, the words heard are represented by the initial sound of each word or a letter that represents a dominant sound such as

R for the word "are." As the child is focusing on the sequence of these sounds and the letters that represent them, auditory sequencing is constantly practiced and refined. If a traditional spelling program, with lists of words to be tested each Friday, is introduced before the child masters this use of representing sounds with letters in sequence, auditory sequencing is lost as the focus, and the child moves into a memorization mode in order to learn the assigned spelling words.

One of the most important responsibilities of the teacher of emergent writers is to observe the children carefully to see when they are using their auditory sequencing skills to represent most (or all) of the sounds in words. If the child's writing can be read phonetically, with initial, medial and final consonant sounds included and some vowels used, either correctly or as place holders, the teacher knows that the child is nearing the "transition point".

Another clue, however, is found in the second necessary factor in becoming a good speller, visual memory. Elaboration of this factor follows next.

Visual Memory

During the time that children are being encouraged to write using temporary spelling, the teacher and significant others are constantly modeling the use of conventional spelling. The children are surrounded by charts, bulletin boards, books and chalkboards filled with

conventional spellings. As the children dictate sentences in Language Experience lessons, the teacher is writing conventional spellings, and soon these spellings begin to appear in the children's own writings. The appearance of a number of conventional spellings within the text of a child's own writing is the second indicator that the child has reached the transition point.

THE INDIVIDUAL NATURE OF THE TRANSITION POINT

It is important to realize that not all children in the class will reach the transition point at the same time. For this reason, the teacher must be observing the children's writing carefully, looking for signs that the child is:

1. representing most or all sounds in temporary spellings.
2. beginning to use some conventional spellings.

These children have reached the transition point, and the teacher then begins spelling transitions with these individuals. The other children in the class are encouraged to continue the use of temporary spelling while still being surrounded with conventional spelling models. (Some additional experiences which may help support the development of sound/symbol relationships and auditory sequencing will be described later.) The spelling transition begins with a student/teacher conference.

A TRANSITION POINT CONFERENCE

When a child displays both the indicators of having reached the transition point, the teacher should sit down and confer with the child with two purposes in mind. First, the progress the child has made should be celebrated. The second purpose is to introduce the child to the steps in making the transition to conventional spelling. Elaboration of these steps follows.

1. *Identifying and celebrating the words the child already knows how to spell conventionally.* This is done by examining a sample of the child's writing and making a list of the conventional spelling used consistently throughout the sample.
2. *Identifying words (not more than three, to start) the child is using frequently in the writing sample which are close to conventional spellings.* The minor adjustments needed to make these words conventional are discussed with the child, and the words are added to the child's list of conventional spellings. The child is instructed to check this list while revising and editing to make sure all the words on this list are spelled correctly in the writing sample. This list is kept in the child's writing folder, and he or she is responsible for checking this "proofreading list".

3. Adding words to the "proofreading list" when new writing samples are added to the child's writing folder. These words may be entitled "Mary's Words" or something similar that indicates that the words on the list are Mary's responsibility. The child may decide that he or she wants to add more than three words each time, if the process is working well.

The following six-year-old girl's writing sample will serve to demonstrate this process. This sample was the result of a first grade lesson in which the book *The Song and Dance Man* (Ackerman, 1988) was read to a first grade class and then a discussion was held in which the children talked about special things they did with their grandparents or aunts and uncles.

I Whant to Shchool whith her I
Whant to the musamey with my
grandma I like to go to the mool
whith my grandma She is nice
gos like you and kat I like her
vare motch She taks me to siz-
zire when She camse to my
howse She whal lat me sho her
fore sho and tale.

This child is representing most sounds in the words she writes, which, along with her use of conventional spellings, makes the writing fairly readable. After reading the piece together, the teacher begins the celebration by saying something like, "Look at all the words you already know how to spell!" The teacher and the child go through the piece together, making a list of all

the conventional spellings: *I, to, her, the, my, like, go, she, is, nice, you, and*. The teacher then looks to see if there are any words the child is using regularly that approximate conventional spelling. In this case, "with" is spelled conventionally at one point and is spelled "whith" at another point. The teacher might say, "You have spelled 'with' correctly here and are very close here. I think you are ready to learn to spell that word." The teacher and the child together identify a few words that the child will become responsible for checking. These words are added to the list of conventional spellings the child has already mastered. This list is kept in the child's writing folder, and she becomes responsible for proofreading her writing for these spellings before she asks anyone else to read her writing.

It is important to remind the child not to be overly concerned with spelling and proofing during the writing of the initial drafts--ideas are still most important at that point. The focus on spelling should always remain the same: conventional spelling is important so that other people can read your writing more easily.

A variation on this approach involves using a list of high utility words and circling the words for which the child is responsible. An advantage of using such a list is that children frequently proofread for more words with the use of a list. Any high utility word list should be supplemented with words that the individual child uses frequently in writing. For example, one child who

wrote frequently about horses had to add several "horse words" to her list, for example; *mane, canter, jodhpurs*, etc.

MANAGING AN INDIVIDUAL SPELLING TRANSITION PROGRAM

The teacher must monitor student progress closely because not all children reach the transition point at the same time. Regular conferences should be a part of the writing program. These can be very brief interactions between the child and the teacher, but these interactions serve several important functions in the child's progress toward becoming an author (Dyson, 1989).

Dyson found that student-to-student interactions and student-to-teacher interactions functioned as validating experiences for the students, serving to build a social community in the classroom. The students in her studies actively supported one another in writing and spelling as they talked among themselves during the writing process. The students worked collaboratively and helped each other solve problems they encountered in their writing and spelling. The discussions among the students and the teacher validated the students as authors in charge of their own writing and established a community of learners.

The conference process can become automatic if conferring about writing is built into the classroom routine. Some strategies for establishing this routine include:

- scheduling children on a rotating basis, some on each day of the week so that the teacher confers with each child once a week or once every two weeks.
- having children sign up for conferences as they complete a first draft.
- using before and after school, recess and lunch time appointments for children to spend focused one on one time in conference with the teacher.
- having the children all prepare for brief conferences and then the teacher confers with each child during the period.

These conferences not only enable the teacher to monitor individual progress but they also inform the teacher as to needed related activities and/or direct instruction for groups of children. Instructional strategies, in order to be effective, must be based on the children's individual skill levels.

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES TO SUPPORT SOUND/SYMBOL CONNECTIONS

The children who are still working on temporary spelling and sound/symbol relationships may need additional activities to help them make these connections. The logical first place to start is with the child's own name (McGee & Richgels, 1989). Cubbies, desks and belongings should be labeled with the child's name. Activities such as taking roll and dismissing children

to learning centers can be accomplished using name cards, which help the children focus on the sound/symbol relationships in their names. For example, at the end of circle time the teacher can dismiss children to centers by holding up one name card at a time. Focusing on the initial sounds at this time helps the children make connections. For example, if, after holding up the card "Jack," Jamie and Jack both stand up, the teacher should acknowledge the reason for the confusion by saying, "Yes, Jamie, your name starts just like Jack's. J-J-J for Jack and J-J-J for Jamie."

The use of non-writing materials to help build sound/symbol relationships can be fun and instructional. Magnetic letters used on the side of a filing cabinet can give children practice in building words in a non-stressful way. Using pictures of familiar items or animals and building the words with magnetic letters helps the children listen for the sounds and represent the sounds with letters without having to actually form the letters each time. Play dough, finger paint, and liquid glue sprinkled with glitter or confetti are all good materials for practice in forming letters.

Teacher modeling of conventional spellings and sound/symbol relationships are a very important part of this program of temporary to transition to conventional spelling. By sounding out the words as they are written on the chalkboard and eliciting the help of the children in spelling familiar words, the teacher provides a model of sound/symbol

relationships. As the teacher calls attention to frequently used words on class charts, the visual memory of those words is added to the repertoire of the children's conventional spelling.

Other resources to support children's transition to conventional spellings should be a part of the classroom environment. An alphabetical list of the children's names can be the beginning of a class dictionary that can be supplemented as children learn new words. This class dictionary or "word wall" can be displayed on a bulletin board in the classroom. The words generated by a topic of study can be written on cards, displayed in a pocket chart, and then kept on rings that are available to the children as they write. The children should all be actively involved in adding new words to the class dictionary or word wall.

DIRECT INSTRUCTION

There are certain techniques of direct instruction that are helpful in making children aware of patterns in our language. In using these techniques, it is very important to keep them in perspective. The foremost rule is that lessons should be short and functional.

If a child wants to know how to spell a word that follows a pattern, teach the word in relation to the pattern. For example, a child is struggling with writing "hen". Say, "Oh that word is like 'ten', you just change the /t/ to /h/." Instead of presenting the children with ditto

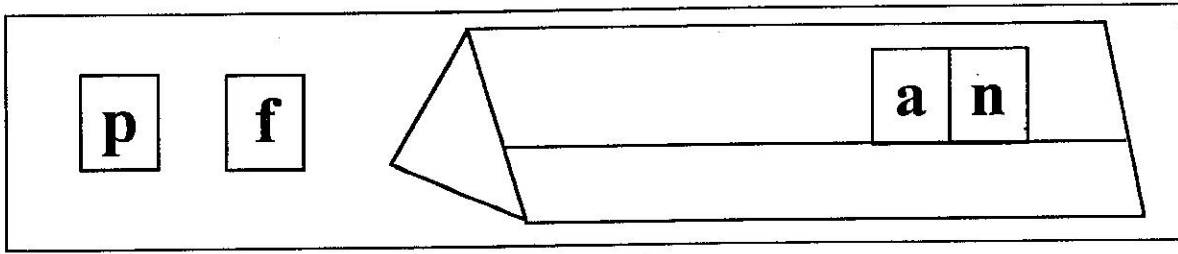


Figure 1. Example of Show-Me Letter Cards

drill on families of words like *ten* and *hen*, set up a learning center where they can make family word books. The instructions might be, "Take a little word like 'an' and see how many words you can build." The children can then take the base word and see how many different words they can build by simply changing the initial sound. Be sure to model the process for the children before asking them to do it independently.

Direct instruction is most appropriately done with individual children or in small groups of children who, as the teacher knows by having observed their writing, are ready to learn a technique or strategy. The strategy should be presented with an explanation of how it will make writing easier, and the children should be given a chance to use the strategy in relation to their own writing—not in a drill and practice mode. For example, children who are having trouble seeing the relationship between word family words (*an, can, fan, man, pan, ran, tan*) should be gathered together in a small group. The children are given show-me cards and small letter cards (See Figure 1). Begin by helping the children build the word "an". The teacher then gives clues such as "I am thinking of

a word for something that you use to keep yourself cool. Sometimes it is on the ceiling and sometimes it sits on a shelf. It has blades that go round and round and move the air to cool you off. You only have to add one letter to the word in your show-me card." The children then add the letter "f" to the word "an" to build the word "fan." The teacher may then say, "Now I want you to change only one letter to make a word that means something your mother uses to cook food." The children change the "f" to a "p" to make the new word. Because the children are building the words, the teacher can monitor each child's responses and determine which children need more support in learning to sequence sounds in word families.

After the children have practiced building words, they go back to their own writing and are asked to find any "an" words they have used. The children report any "an" words they used by building a chart or list, which helps them remember to focus on that particular word family as they reread their own writing.

The most important part of direct instruction in small groups is being aware of the needs of the children. Children who are already freely using word families to help

them spell unknown words do not have to spend time practicing something they are already using easily. The teacher has to be aware of what the children can do in order to convene a group that will benefit from a particular instruction at a particular time. Those children who are still struggling with beginning sounds would probably not benefit from a lesson on word families. Without careful observation and monitoring of progress, the teacher will be subjecting the children to frustration or unproductive use of their time.

An exciting extension of language experience lessons and a natural support for the child moving into conventional spelling is the Interactive Writing Lesson (Button, Johnson & Furgerson, 1996). In an Interactive Writing Lesson, the children begin to "share the pen". A sentence is negotiated among the children who experienced an activity. For example, if the activity was baking a birthday cake, the children might begin with the sentence, "We made a cake". The teacher uses her fingers to demonstrate that the sentence consists of four words. She points to a finger at a time as she says, "We made a cake. We have four words in this sentence. What is the first word?" After the children reply "we", the teacher has them stretch the word - W-W-W - E-E-E. She then invites a child to come to the chart or chalkboard and write the word "We". As she hands the pen or chalk to the volunteer, she asks, "What kind of a 'w' will you make?" The point of this question is,

of course, to focus on the word as the first in the sentence and needing a capital letter. The teacher and the children work their way through the sentence, taking turns writing the words in conventional spelling. The volunteers are supported in sounding out the words. If the words do not follow the phonetic rules, the teacher simply says, "This is one of those rule breakers," and spells the part of the word needed for the child who holds the pen. Conventions of print are taught as the sentences are written, and, if the child makes a mistake, correction tape is used to cover the mistake and it is corrected. This activity is a direct teaching activity that encourages children to use their knowledge of words, rules and phonics to move into conventional spelling with the support of the teacher and other children who are also ready to make the transition (Button, Johnson & Furgerson, 1996).

CONCLUSION

No matter where the child is functioning in emergent writing the focus should always be on communication. If the child is just beginning to write initial letters to represent sounds, the teacher should enthusiastically celebrate the *D* written to represent the dog drawn. As the child progresses, each subsequent addition of strategies and skills should be noted and celebrated. The teacher should always focus on all the new things the child is learning but in relation to writing as communication. For example, one first grade class had just returned from a

field trip to a local hospital. The children were drawing pictures and writing about what they had seen. One child had drawn a picture and written DKTR. The teacher went to the chalkboard and wrote DKTR. She said, "Look what Jonathan saw at the hospital!" The children read, "Doctor!" The teacher said, "Is that the way your mother and dad would spell 'doctor'?" The children all chorused, "NO!" The teacher reminded them, "We can read it, and we'll all learn to spell it like grown-ups when we get bigger. But, we know what Jonathan saw at the hospital. We can read what he wrote!"

This teacher is celebrating Jonathan's ability to communicate in writing. She is aware that children move through stages in learning to read and write. She is confident that Jonathan will make the transition into conventional spelling when he masters sound/symbol relationships and is supported in learning the rules of conventional spelling. To help him progress through these stages, she is modeling conventional spelling throughout the day every time she writes on a chart or chalkboard. Her room is full of charts and big books that give Jonathan and all his classmates resources for learning conventional spelling. She is observing the children carefully as they practice reading and writing, and she is planning activities daily that support the children's progress in auditory sequencing, visual memory, and communication in writing.

It is easy to talk about focusing on communication and ideas, but children will not learn to communicate and share ideas in writing

unless they are given the tools with which to communicate those ideas. For many children a barrier to this communication can be spelling. Understanding the role of temporary spelling, celebrating children's written communications and growing knowledge of sound/symbol relationships, and knowing what to do to help children make the transition to conventional spelling give teachers the tools to support children as they grow into competent written communicators.

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