

## Exploring Classroom Teachers' Spelling Practices and Beliefs

By: Francine R. Johnston

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### **Abstract:**

Using three perspectives on spelling instruction (i.e., memorization, generalizations, and developmental) as a framework, teachers in grades 2 to 5 were interviewed to investigate the practices and beliefs about spelling instruction which exist in a school system which has de-emphasized formal spelling instruction. An analysis of the response to open-ended questions suggests that the classroom teachers in this sample ( $n=42$ ) persist in the use of weekly lists and testing. About half create their own lists and half rely on a published speller to some extent. While there is a range of activities associated with spelling, many traditional activities are still employed such as writing words multiple times and using words in sentences. Many of the teachers questioned such practices as invented spelling and do not appear to take a developmental view of spelling. The interviewed teachers were largely dissatisfied with the spelling ability of their students and current spelling instruction, but appeared to lack the knowledge and resources needed to teach spelling more effectively,

### **Article:**

The state of spelling instruction appears to be characterized by a lack of agreement on a number of issues. Classroom teachers are offered suggestions that range from assurances that children who read and write extensively will become capable spellers (Bean & Bouffler, 1987; Wilde, 1990) to calls for systematic instruction about generalizable features of spelling (Henderson, 1990; Templeton, 1991). Some researchers who have investigated classroom practices maintain that traditional instruction and the use of published spelling series remain the norm (Scharer, 1992; Wilde, 1990), while others report a decreased emphasis upon spelling as a formal school topic (Fresch, 2000; Hall, Cunningham, & Cunningham, 1994; Schlagal & Schlagal, 1992).

Even proponents of systematic formal instruction differ in the orientation taken toward learning how to spell, the words chosen for study, and the activities developed to master spelling. In this regard three perspectives have been identified: (a) rote visual memory, (b) generalization, and (c) developmental (Nelson, 1989). The perspective that spelling is a matter of *rote visual memory* is based upon the belief that English orthography is irregular and each word stands alone as a memory task. This perspective has led to the development of word lists that feature high frequency words needed for reading and writing (Hillerich, 1987; Horn, 1957) and activities which involve repeated practice and memorization of assigned words. The *generalization* perspective recognizes that English spelling has an underlying logic, or system, and therefore, the words students study should share similar sounds or orthographic patterns (Hanna, Hodges, & Hanna, 1971). Most current published spelling series reflect this perspective to some extent (Morris, Blanton, Blanton, & Perney, 1995; Scharer, 1992), organizing the most commonly used words in weekly lists which share generalizable features (e.g., flat, trap, lamp; make, late, place). Activities developed for this perspective focus children's attention upon the common features and rules of spelling. Research of the last 20 years overlays the generalization perspective with a developmental perspective. That is, words and orthographic features selected for study should reflect where students are on a continuum of *developmental* word knowledge. Students' spelling errors can be used as a way to determine the most appropriate generalizations to study or to place them at appropriate levels in published spelling materials (Henderson, 1990).

The variety of theories and perspectives is reflected in the pedagogical literature for preservice teachers. If one flips through five or six language arts textbooks, he/ she will find that spelling may command a chapter all of its own (Rubin, 1995) or it may be treated merely as a convention of writing and command only a small subsection of a chapter (Cox, 1996; Moffett & Wagner, 1992; Tompkins, 1997). One may even have to go to the index to find scattered references to spelling instruction (Froese, 1996).

In view of such diverse claims and theories about spelling instruction, it seems important to find out what, in fact, classroom teachers currently believe and practice. Recent surveys or observational studies have described the spelling-related practices of only small samples of classroom teachers (Gill & Scharer, 1996; Morris, Blanton, Blanton, & Perney, 1995), leaving the field with little information about what is really happening in classrooms. Professors in schools of education who are responsible for preparing teachers may know little about the current spelling practices in the elementary schools where their students will teach. Faced with this situation myself, I developed an inquiry project in which preservice teachers (university students) interviewed inservice teachers about spelling practices in the large school system where my students are trained and often hired. The results of that project are reported here and offer some tentative insights into current practices.

It is important to note that the state where this project took place had not reviewed or made funds available for published spelling programs in over a decade. When this study was conducted, the state language arts curriculum guidelines reflected a holistic philosophy, and it was suggested that teachers consider spelling primarily as a function of editing. According to central office administrators in our local school system, the directives had been nonprescriptive, leaving decisions about how to implement spelling up to individual schools. Aside from past announcements discouraging teachers from using spelling textbooks and not making any funds available to buy new textbooks, there were no formal central office policies. This lack of administrative directives and a de-emphasis upon published materials left spelling instruction very much up to teachers and individual schools. This setting provided an opportunity to explore the nature of instruction that has either survived or developed under such conditions.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

Preservice education students were assigned the task of interviewing classroom teachers at the different schools where they were placed for a ten-hour-a-week practicum. The survey included data from 42 teachers representing grades two through five (10 in second, 11 in third, 13 in fourth, and 8 in fifth) at 12 different schools. Years of teaching experience ranged from two to 35 with an average of 15 years. It should be noted that cooperating teachers for these placements are usually selected because of experience, reputation, and willingness to work with preservice teachers, so the teachers in this sample can be considered average or above average in terms of their knowledge, teaching ability, and commitment to professional growth.

The particular schools where the students are placed are Professional Development Schools (PDS) where university faculty interact with the school staff as supervisors of preservice teachers and occasionally as consultants. The 12 schools serve populations that range from middle to low socioeconomic status (SES), although most serve the lower end of the SES spectrum. The PDS school sites are chosen for a variety of reasons, but not because they have exemplary literacy programs. They can be considered representative of the 59 elementary schools in a large mid-Atlantic consolidated school system serving rural, suburban, and city residents.

### *Measures*

Open-ended questions were used to probe a variety of issues related to spelling. Teachers were asked about: instructional directives they have received, whether they use a published spelling program and to what extent, how they select words if they create their own lists, what teaching routines and activities they employ, and how instruction is modified for students with differing abilities. They were also asked their opinions about how well students spell today in comparison with the past, whether they felt spelling instruction is adequately addressed in the elementary curriculum, and how they felt about invented spelling.

Teacher beliefs were addressed directly in some questions such as their opinion of invented spelling, and indirectly as a result of inferences drawn from their practice. For example, one can infer that a teacher holds the visual memory perspective if the lists she creates consist primarily of words from content areas and reading materials, which are unlikely to share any common spelling features. If the word lists consist of words related by sounds and/or orthographic patterns, then the teacher probably holds a generalization perspective. If the teacher gives "easier" word lists for less able students, then one can infer that he or she is influenced by a developmental perspective.

#### *Procedures*

The university students were prepared for the interviewing process in their Language Arts methods classes by either the author or another instructor. This course is taken about half way through the two years of methods course work required in their junior and senior year. Some were shown a video tape of an interview session. All were given directions about how to record teacher responses in writing and to probe for clarity. In most cases the university students interviewed the teachers to whom they were assigned, unless that teacher did not teach spelling. The university students were told to find a mutually convenient time of about 15 minutes in which to ask the questions. They were also encouraged to observe a spelling lesson and attach a copy of a weekly spelling list if it was available. Because these latter sources of information were not provided in all cases they are not formally reported here. Interviews were completed prior to any discussion of spelling in the language arts course so that students would have no preconceptions of what might be considered desirable beliefs and practices by the instructors giving the interview assignment.

## **RESULTS**

The answers to the survey questions were discussed informally in my Language Arts class as a way to introduce the topic of spelling and the range of possible practices. The results were then analyzed by myself and a student assistant. We worked independently to categorize the open-ended responses and then compared and discussed those categories to combine and refine them further. For most questions this was a fairly straightforward process of counting responses in the categories which emerged. The few disagreements were resolved via discussion. Table 1 summarizes the percentages of responses to each question.

#### *Directives*

About half of the 42 teachers in grades two to five reported that they had received no directives as to how spelling should be taught (52%). Seven of these teachers made it clear that they had gotten the message indirectly that "teachers can do whatever they wish" or that they were "on their own." The other half of those surveyed reported a variety of suggestions and directives they had received. For example, four teachers mentioned that they had been told, directly or indirectly, that spelling books were not to be used. Nine teachers were directed to "integrate spelling into current topics of study," although less than half of them followed through on this instruction and were instead using a published series regularly. Of the total 42 teachers, five teachers said they had been told to encourage or accept invented spellings, one teacher reported that she had been told that "spelling should be taught by giving the children opportunities to write," and two teachers reported that they had been told to employ a particular approach. Overall, this group of teachers appear to have been offered either no direction for spelling instruction in recent years or a range of directives open to interpretation.

#### *Instructional practices*

Results showed that, despite a lack of specific guidelines, nearly all the teachers (93%) employed a formal spelling program that involved the traditional practice of testing children weekly on an assigned list of words. Most of the teachers (85%) averaged those test results into a single language arts grade. Three categories of formal instruction emerged: (a) the use of a published series, (b) a combination approach, and (c) an alternative approach.

**Table 1** Questions and Summary of Results

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|--|
| 1. What directives have you gotten from your principal or other supervisors about spelling instruction?  |
| No directives 52%      Integrate spelling 21%      Other 37%   |
| 2. Do you use a published spelling series on a regular basis?  |
| Published Spelling Book 29%      Combination 21%      Alternative 50%  |
| 3. What activities do you use to facilitate the learning of spelling? (Published Series and Combined Approaches)   |
| Complete exercises in the book or worksheets 57%<br>Pretest 52%<br>Use in sentence or story 33%<br>Put in ABC order 29%<br>Write words three to five times 29%<br>Look up definitions or match to meanings 24%   |
| 4. If you <u>don't</u> use a series, how do you select the words children are expected to learn?   |
| Children choose their own 25%<br>Words misspelled in writing 29%<br>Content areas and themes of study 67%<br>Reading materials 19%<br>Lists of high frequency words such as Dolch words 19%<br>Words that share common spelling sounds or patterns 29% |
| 5. What activities do you use to facilitate the learning of spelling? (Alternative Approach)   |
| Use in sentence or story 62%<br>Put in ABC order 38%<br>Focus on word features 33%<br>Look up definitions or match to meanings 29%<br>Pretest 19%<br>Write words three to five times 19%   |
| 6. Do you modify instruction or expectations for individual children in your class?  |
| Yes 95%  |
| 7. How do you do this?   |
| Assign fewer words to less able spellers 33%<br>Give easier words to less able spellers 28%<br>Make adaptations for children with IEPs 31%<br>Give individualized lists 14%<br>Give bonus words to better spellers 14%                                 |
| 8. In general, do you think children of today spell better, worse, or about the same?  |
| Worse 74%      About the same 18%      Better 5%      Other 3%   |
| 9. Do you think spelling instruction is adequately addressed in the elementary curriculum?   |
| No 73%      Yes 27%  |
| 10. What is your opinion of "invented" spellings?  |
| Disapprove 30%      Acceptable under certain conditions 53%      Approve 17%   |

Published Series. Exactly half of the teachers (50%) used a published spelling series to some extent. The teachers who used textbooks almost exclusively (29% of the total) clustered at four schools where a published series was used by the entire faculty. At one of these schools the teachers had approached the principal and asked her to find money to order new spelling books. They made it clear in the initial question about directives that this was a decision they had made for themselves. In some cases teachers did not have spelling books for student use and relied on copies of wordlists that came from a published series.

Published series present words in lists that share common spelling features that reflect a generalization perspective, and some teachers were clear in their statements that this was important to them. One teacher specifically said she had her students "do all the activities in the book to know the rules and phonics rather than just how to spell them." Ten of the teachers using a published series mentioned the need for students to develop phonics skills, and several said they had returned to the use of a series for this reason.

Combination Approach. Of the 21 teachers who used a published series, nine of them (21% of the total number surveyed) used what is better categorized as a combination approach. For example, two teachers used the spelling series one week, and then used words drawn from content areas and reading materials the next. Another

teacher used the spelling series weekly but also added five new Word Wall words which were high frequency words needed for writing (Cunningham, 1995). These teachers appeared to see the value in teaching both generalizations as well as specific words students need to memorize for reading and writing.

Alternative Approach. The remaining 21 teachers (50%) used an alternative approach to spelling; that is, they did not use a published series in any way. Most of these teachers created a weekly word list for the entire class. Five teachers allowed students to choose words for themselves from a list brainstormed by the class. Two teachers allowed children to choose words to replace words known on the weekly pretest. One respondent reported creating individualized lists for each child based upon errors made in writing. Only two of the 42 teachers relied entirely upon incidental spelling instruction and created no weekly lists. The weekly spelling lists were derived from a variety of sources: (a) words from content areas or themes (67% of those who used an alternative approach); (b) words misspelled in writing (29%); (c) words from current reading materials (19%); (d) common high frequency words such as Dolch words (19%); and (e) words that share common letter combinations or spelling patterns (29%). Many teachers relied on various combinations of these sources but all, except the last, reflect the memorization perspective because the resulting word lists were unlikely to share any common spelling features.

#### *Weekly Routines and Activities*

The weekly routines and activities that teachers reported also offer insights into the perspective they take on spelling instruction. Survey responses revealed a great variety of activities. Many responses (e.g. "games") were hard to interpret due to lack of information, but the activities which were listed most often are familiar ones, as shown in the Table 1. The most commonly mentioned student activities employed by the teachers using published programs and a combination approach included: completing exercises in the textbook (57%); taking pretests (52%); using words to write sentences or stories (33%); putting words in alphabetical order (29%); writing words 3 to 5 times (29%); looking up definitions or matching words to definitions (24%); and participating in games and puzzles like hangman, crosswords, word searches, bingo, etc.(19%). Many teachers assigned a combination of these activities across the week, usually for homework. Often they reported using a standard weekly routine such as: Monday, write each word three times; Tuesday, put words in ABC order; Wednesday, write a sentence for each word; Thursday, study for test; and Friday, take spelling test.

The weekly routines and activities reported by the teachers using an alternative approach are similar in nature to those used by the teachers who relied on a published program. In the alternative approach, children were asked to: use words to write sentences or stories (62%); put words in alphabetical order (38%); take pretests (19%); write words 3 to 5 times (19%); and look up definitions or matching words to definitions (29%). Again, the teachers often assigned a combination of these activities for homework or independent work. Seven of the teachers using the alternative approach (33%) made up activities highlighting the generalizable features of the weekly spelling words in activities such as finding rhyming words, underlining prefixes, and brainstorming words that had certain letter combinations.

#### *Modifications for individual students*

Whether or not teachers take a developmental perspective is revealed best in their response to the question of how they modify spelling instruction for students of varying ability. Six of the 42 teachers (14%) already used lists that were individualized to some extent, so no special modifications were needed. Nearly all the teachers in the sample (95%) reported making some changes. The most common modification (33%) was simply to give less able spellers fewer words from the class assigned list. Since this accommodation only reduces the memory load and not the difficulty of the words, it reflects a rote memorization rather than a developmental perspective.

Only twelve teachers (28%) gave less able spellers easier words to address their developmental needs, and this was done in three ways: (a) students selected easier words from within the class list; (b) they were given words from the first or easier part of the list; or (c) they were given totally different words from an easier level. Thirteen teachers (31%) reported making modifications for students who had been labeled Learning Disabled, ESL, "special needs" or "slow learner." Often these modifications involved using easier word lists provided by a

resource teacher as specified in the child's Individual Education Plan (IEP). Regarding lower-ability spellers, a few teachers described modifications for assessment such as testing the child individually, giving the student a multiple-choice version of the test, or giving students partial credit for each correct letter.

Only six teachers in the entire sample (14%) reported that they made any modifications for advanced spellers. These rare adjustments were in the form of "bonus words" or "extra credit words". It appears that teachers are more likely to make modifications for their less-able spellers than for advanced spellers.

### *Teacher Beliefs*

Most of the 42 teachers (73%) reported that spelling was not adequately addressed in the elementary curriculum. This perception was attributed to factors such as the lack of emphasis on spelling instruction, lowered expectations for correct spelling, the lack of phonics instruction in the lower grades, the fact that teachers had no directives or curricular guidelines, the lack of resources such as spelling books, and the lack of time in the school day. One teacher described spelling instruction as a "hit or miss" subject.

On the other hand, the remaining 27% of the teachers believed that spelling was adequately addressed. A few complimented teachers in the lower grades. One said, "They are doing a great job of stressing spelling." Others seemed to feel good about what was happening in their own classes but did not comment on the general curriculum. Four teachers believed that the increased emphasis on writing and editing played an important role in improving spelling instruction.

Most teachers (74%) expressed the belief that students today spell worse than students did in the past. Some attributed this decline to a lack of emphasis on systematic spelling and phonics instruction (24%). Some blamed the use of invented spelling (26%) and others cited a lack of accountability (12%), which may also relate to the use of invented spelling. Some also mentioned societal or family problems such as lack of preschool experiences and parental support (10%).

Seven teachers (18%) expressed the belief that children spell about the same as they did in the past. One teacher explained, "Children spell about the same, however, society thinks they spell worse because in the olden days creative spelling was not allowed at all and now it is encouraged, at least when the students are young." Another teacher put it this way, "I think children write more elaborately now than they used to, so there are more spelling errors but the words are more sophisticated." Only two teachers (5%) believed that children spell better today, and they attributed this perception to the increase in reading and the integrated approach to language arts.

About a third of the teachers (30%) clearly disapproved of invented spelling. One fourth grade teacher explained, "I disagree with invented spelling. It allows children to believe wrong concepts about spelling." Another one said, "Invented spelling is difficult to get away from." A second grade teacher didn't understand why "it had been put into the curriculum." A slight majority of the teachers (53%) appeared to accept invented spelling under certain circumstances such as journal writing, first drafts, or for students in Kindergarten or First grade. Only seven teachers (17%) truly regarded the practice in a positive light, and these teachers were all in grades two and three. One second grade teacher explained that "it allows children to develop their own learning about words and encourages problem solving." Only two teachers reported using invented spellings as an assessment tool. One of these explained, "It gives teachers a lot of insight into where students are developmentally."

## **DISCUSSION**

### *Strengths and Limitations of the Survey*

Oral face-to-face surveys have the advantage of a high rate of cooperation (Jaeger, 1984) and, in this case, there were no reported cases of refusal. Thus, the return rate was 100%. At the same time, using students as interviewers does reduce the reliability of the findings since some almost certainly did a better job of recording responses and probing for clarity than others.

Surveys are subject to bias when the participants suspect that particular opinions are more welcome than others, but in this case, there was no reason to think that any such bias existed in the minds of the teachers. Frankly, spelling practices and beliefs are just too diverse for either the students or the teachers to second-guess the position of the designer of the survey. The use of open-ended questions, rather than a multiple choice instrument, made it possible to capture this range of responses.

The sample in this survey was limited to one school system, but an advantage was, as stated earlier, the known lack of specific spelling-related directives or resources from central office. This context created an opportunity to discover the range of practices employed by classroom teachers when spelling was left up to them. Although the present sample was restricted, similar findings have been reported in other surveys (Gill & Scharer, 1996) as well as anecdotal reports (French, 2000; Routman, 1996). Gill and Scharer surveyed nine teachers at two schools who were also using a mixture of published spelling programs and teacher-selected word lists, relying upon largely traditional activities for weekly word study routines, and who "expressed discomfort about their current spelling instruction" (p. 89).

### *Findings*

Despite suggestions at the state and district level that de-emphasized formal spelling instruction, the teachers interviewed in this study were, for the most part, using the traditional format of weekly word lists and graded spelling tests. While several of them utilized alternative sources of words, many familiar and longstanding routines and weekly activities survived. In this regard, four issues seem particularly worthy of further discussion: (a) the nature of the words selected for study, (b) the nature of the weekly activities chosen to support learning, (c) the lack of a developmental perspective, and (d) the general dissatisfaction with current spelling instruction.

**Word selection.** Teachers appeared to draw from both traditional perspectives (rote visual memory and generalization) in terms of the words that were considered appropriate for study. Teachers who relied entirely upon an alternative approach or those who used a combination approach sometimes chose words that reflected generalizations, but most chose words that have no common orthographic features. These words from literature, content areas, children's' writing, or high frequency word lists can only be memorized one-by-one for mastery on a weekly test, reflecting a rote visual memory perspective.

Words chosen for study in the combination or alternative approaches sometimes showed more concern for vocabulary growth than spelling development. A sample list from one 2nd grade teacher included "Washington" in February and "leprechaun" in March. In a third grade class, words like "hypothesis" and "experiment" were listed as spelling words because they were terms the students would need to know the meaning of on an end-of-the-year science test. The use of such content words on the weekly spelling list does not seem to reflect any of the traditional spelling perspectives. The words are not high frequency, they are unrelated to any other words in the list in terms of generalizations, and they do not reflect the developmental spelling needs of primary-grade students. What they do seem to represent is an attempt by the teachers to integrate spelling with themes and topics of study, a directive that many of them recall. However, there does not appear to be any research to support the use of such words as the basis for a spelling curriculum. The practice has been criticized even by Routman (1996), a noted proponent of whole language and a respected spokesperson for classroom teachers. She has written that:

When we teachers do give up the published spelling series, a first step has often been taking words from the literature, just as some of the literature-based published reading programs do. This is contrived, time-consuming, and doesn't work — as we soon found out. Some teachers I know tried this approach after their principal declared that spelling workbooks would no longer be allowed. Expected to plan their own spelling programs without being trained to do so, many teachers floundered and did the best they could. (p. 111)

Published spelling series present words in lists that highlight important generalizations; however, as explained in the next section, many of the activities assigned over the week to support the learning of these words do not. For example, the common practice of having students write their words three to five times seems to reflect the rote visual memory perspective. This way of operating raises doubts about whether students were actually learning much about generalizations even when the weekly word list was designed for this purpose.

Weekly learning activities and routines. Many activities used weekly by all three groups of teachers (i.e., spelling book, combination or alternative approach) seem to focus more upon using the words to meet general language arts objectives than spelling objectives. These activities include alphabetizing the words, looking words up in the dictionary, and using the words to write complete sentences or stories. It is not obvious how these activities help children either memorize the spellings or develop generalizations about how words are spelled except through the repeated use of the words in different contexts. None of these activities have any research to support their use for the purpose of learning to spell words. By contrast, pretests have been shown to be an effective learning activity (Horn, 1947) and were reportedly used by 33% of the respondents.

Those who relied on a published series have lists of words that can be used to develop generalizations and, indeed, some teachers reported going back to the textbook for this reason. However, aside from completing textbook exercises, most of the activities described by these teachers do not appear to reinforce those generalizations. Even those textbook exercises are suspect according to Wilde (1990). After surveying a number of published spelling series, she concluded that the exercises in textbooks primarily supported memorization of the words.

Evidence for a developmental perspective. There was very little indication of the developmental perspective as shown in the responses to several questions. Answers to the spelling-list modification question seem very telling with regard to perspectives since many teachers just assign less-able spellers fewer words as though memory load was the issue, not understanding. Although some teachers use "easier" words when students are obviously below grade level, this practice was most likely to happen when students had specific IEPs written by special educators. Word lists created to integrate spelling and other subject areas seem especially prone to the inclusion of words (such as "leprechaun") which are not appropriate in terms of spelling difficulty. Although giving children small numbers of interesting and challenging words can sometimes be appropriate, it would seem best to allow them to select such words or to make such challenges voluntary, rather than assigning these words to everyone. Teachers who use a published series do have lists that reflect words ordered in terms of what is known about spelling development (Morris, Blanton, Blanton, & Perney, 1995), but if all the students in the class are given the same word lists, the words will only be appropriate for some - the students who are working on grade level.

Other evidence for a lack of a developmental perspective is the finding that invented spellings are generally tolerated at best until conventional spellings are learned. Only two teachers mentioned using invented spelling as a means of assessing students' developmental word knowledge. Routman (1996) has addressed the lack of a developmental perspective when she writes, "The notion of attending to students' instructional levels in spelling (as we do in reading) has been all but ignored in practice" (p 111).

Dissatisfaction. Questions of students' current spelling ability and how well spelling is addressed in the curriculum generated the most agreement. In both cases about three-fourths of the respondents indicated concern and dissatisfaction. The lack of directives, as well as resources, seem to offer the best explanation for these concerns. To cite Routman (1996) once more:

Used to relying on scripted spelling programs and weekly tests, most of us lack the knowledge to teach spelling "on our own." Several teachers I know tried to create their own spelling programs one year but went back to the spelling basal the next because they realized they didn't know enough to do an adequate job. (p. 111)

### *Implications*

Teachers need knowledge and resources to teach spelling effectively. In systems where resources and training have not been forthcoming, teachers do indeed appear to be foundering and reverting to traditional, albeit questionable, practices. Although this dilemma might be addressed through inservice such as that described by Gill and Scharer (1995), our best avenue may be to give preservice teachers a thorough preparation in the area of spelling, a preparation which may be lacking if language arts textbooks are any indication.

An important topic that should be covered by preservice and inservice educators is not only how students develop as spellers, but also how to use assessment to plan instruction (Invemizzi, Abouzeid, & Gill, 1994), and to place students at their instructional level in published spelling programs (Morris, Blanton, Blanton, Noweck, & Pemey, 1995). The topic of research-based spelling instruction should cover long-standing pretesting and self-study techniques as well as promising new approaches such as word walls (Cunningham, 1995) and word sorting (Bear, Invemizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2000). A good summary of current issues related to spelling can be found in an article by Templeton and Morris (1999).

Certainly there is need for further inquiry in the area of spelling practices. Questions worthy of attention include: what are preservice teachers being taught about spelling? What is the knowledge base inservice teachers bring to the task? What resources and training will best prepare teachers? Do current published spelling books offer teachers a resource that can be used effectively and modified for the needs of students who might be above or below grade level? What are teachers' beliefs and specific practices in regard to invented spelling? These and many more questions will need to be addressed before we can adequately understand the state of spelling instruction in classrooms around the United States.

### *Conclusions*

It appears that teachers "on the front-line" continue to see a need for systematic spelling instruction throughout the elementary grades as reflected in their practices and in their concerns about the inadequacy of current spelling instruction. They recognize the need for instruction, but appear to lack confidence and a cohesive theoretical basis for what they and their fellow teachers are doing. While classroom teachers, like other educators and researchers, will probably never reach consensus about the best way to teach spelling, they do need clear understandings of how children develop as spellers and information about how to create and/or implement spelling programs that meet the wide range of student needs. Hopefully, the present exploratory survey offers some insight into existing beliefs and practices, the first step in the work educators face in affecting change in spelling instruction.

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