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BY MOLLY NESS

## Out with rote in spelling instruction

Spelling is often overlooked in English language arts instruction for kindergarten through grade 5. Though almost all primary teachers self-reported including spelling in their routine classroom instruction, direct classroom observations revealed otherwise. Researchers in 2008 observed first- and second-grade English language arts instruction and noted that only 4 percent of instructional time was devoted to spelling or spelling-related activities.

Some may argue that spelling is an antiquated concept. After all, students today rely on their computer's spellcheck and autocomplete features of smartphones. If "cuz" is a commonly accepted in texting, do students really need to learn the proper spelling of "because?"

Indeed, spelling holds an important role in a child's language and literacy development. Students who are better spellers are better readers and writers. Accurate spelling reflects more advanced linguistic knowledge. Teaching spelling has a strong effect on reading fluency, the ability to read text with appropriate pace, expression and automaticity. There is synchrony among reading, writing and spelling development; the way in which a student spells a word provides important information about how the student reads words.

Though spelling instruction is by no means antiquated, our current instructional approaches are. Walk into any elementary school classroom today and you will find that the spelling instruction is largely similar to the spelling instruction of previous decades.

The most common spelling instruction in classrooms today is a rote memorization approach. Here students are given a list of words at the beginning of the week. The culminating event is the weekly spelling test, in which the teacher dictates the words, students regurgitate them and are evaluated on their accuracy. Other common approaches include teaching the rules of spelling, like the common "I before e except after c."

These multifaceted approaches are one-size-fits-all. In other words, all third graders take home the same list of words. Research shows that in third-grade classrooms, there is a huge range of spelling abilities. Yet in today's most common spelling approaches, there is no room for differentiation.

Spelling instruction should be a central component in K-5 classrooms today, but

there are far more effective approaches. Instead of rote memorization, our instructional time is far better spent with "word study," an approach that integrates phonics, spelling and vocabulary instruction. It teaches students to closely examine words to discover patterns, regularities and conventions of our language. Word study promotes active engagement.

Moreover, word study integrates more than spelling alone; in this approach, students explore words by their spelling, meaning and grammar connections to improve their vocabularies and orthographic knowledge. A critical component of word study is that it is highly differentiated. Teachers assess students to determine their level and tailor their instruction based on the individual levels of each child.

In word sorting activities, students compare, contrast and classify words as they compare words that do fit a pattern with those that don't. Over a week of instruction, students have ample opportunities to write words, sort words and say the words – pronouncing words helps to cement the word's phonology in our brains. An added incentive is sorting for speed, as students race their classmates or their teachers.

An essential component of word study instruction is making meaningful connections to authentic texts. Students should peruse their independent reading for words that fit their spelling patterns. Gone are memorized lists, instead replaced by critical examination of words and patterns that meet the diverse needs of each student.

Of equal importance to improving spelling instruction in today's classroom is the professional development and coaching provided to teachers. Teachers need and deserve intensive time and support to explore word study curriculum and approaches with experts in the field. Meaningful learning does not happen in a mere two-hour workshop, but requires ongoing modeling, coaching, feedback and observation. As we commit to effective spelling instruction for our children and meaningful teacher training, our spelling instruction becomes a beneficial model of progressive, developmentally appropriate, active learning.

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