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A GOOD WAY TO TEACH SPELLING

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Like most teachers, I started my career using the old method of teaching spelling. Each week I would make up or find in a book a list of spelling words to be learnt by the class or group. Each day a different learning activity would be employed and on Friday the children would be tested. There are lots of difficulties with teaching by this method - so many, in fact, that like most teachers I gave it up after a while and for a long time didn't really work on spelling at all. Probably the main problem was the wasted effort. Despite the teacher's efforts selecting appropriate words for the class, it was usually uncomfortably clear that the words which each individual needed to learn to spell were seldom included at the right time. It seems that for every ten words a child had in his list, four of them he already knew, four he didn't know and didn't need to know, one he learnt and forgot during the weekend, and only one survived. This is a perfect example of something being almost impossible to teach when it is divorced from the meaningful situation.

So it became clear to me that, although it was important to teach spelling, the traditional formal methods seemed not to work very well. Another more serious problem that I noticed, especially with Aboriginal children, was their inability or unwillingness to make a reasonable attempt at spelling words they didn't know. If they wanted to spell a word, most of them had efficient ways of finding it - looking at yesterday's stories, asking friends or the teacher - but few of them would actually sit down and think about the problem themselves. It never seemed to occur to them that spelling could be worked out with a bit of thought; to them the answer was always out there somewhere and had to be located. Even traditional methods of teaching spelling do little to help children use their own imagination and thinking power in spelling because the words to be learnt are still provided from an external source, the teacher.

What I was looking for was a method that -

- 1) taught children to consciously use their own abilities in working out spelling rather than to look for an external source of spelling,

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- 2) taught them words that they needed to learn, and
- 3) taught them spelling in a meaningful situation (i.e. when they were actually writing a story) rather than in a separate spelling lesson.

In the end the trycard method solved all these problems at once. Every child had a piece of thin cardboard about two inches wide and eight inches long called his trycard. Each trycard had the owner's name on the top and was used like a bookmark in his exercise book. When the children were writing, and they wanted to spell a word they were not sure of, they had to try it first on the trycard. Then they would bring the card to me, ask "Is this girl?", and I would help them with it. "Yes, that's right", or "No, you've got grill. It should be gi..r..l." Between the two of us, while the other children continued working, we would discuss the word for a moment. I would explain spelling rules if I thought they were useful, but work towards getting the word spelt correctly as quickly as possible. This way the children were learning that their heads could be the source of correct spelling, they were learning the words they needed to learn in a meaningful situation, and they were having fifteen-second individualized instruction spelling lessons five or six times a day.

Some of the children took to the idea quite well, but most of them reacted with horror to the suggestion that they could work spelling out for themselves. To us it seems quite natural, but for many of them to stop looking around outside themselves for answers and to start looking for answers inside their heads requires a great leap of imagination. For months the children continued to come to me asking for words without having tried them first, and I would feign shock: "But where is it? You haven't tried it!" Some children, the slowest ones who really didn't have much experience consciously manipulating the symbols and structures inside their heads, were really at a loss when told to try something. They would stare blankly out the window or scan the walls and blackboards hoping to spot their word. From these kids, all I really expected was for them somehow to think up the first letter of the word. Most of them could come up with at least that much after much thinking and gazing around, and we would finish it together.

For the brighter children, knowing that I wasn't going to give out words on demand made them use their dictionaries more, and encouraged them to consult each other. It was a constant battle encouraging children in their writing efforts, so any word which was

wrong when it finally made its way into the finished article was left uncorrected if the passage could be read meaningfully as it was.

The children would all, then, have a trycard with a list of words on it that they had tried to spell and, with a bit of help where needed, had spelt correctly. I tried several times to develop extra learning activities based on these lists, but never with much success. The only activity that seemed useful and could be organized without too much disturbance was getting the children to test each other's words in pairs. We did this every few days when there were a few minutes to spare. When a child's trycard was full and he needed a new one, I would get him to read his old list of words out loud to me, and test him on a few if there was time. Apart from that, the trycards were private property and the children used them as they wished.

I found with my class that many of the children didn't know the names of the letters and this was really holding them up. Things like letter names, I think, most white children pick up at home or school, but many Aboriginal children, especially the non-English speakers, need to be taught. That was not a difficult job once we had made flash cards and invented some teaching games.

One final thing that is necessary to teach good spelling is the teacher's patience and energy. Possibly the main reason why so many children fail to learn to spell properly is that it is so much easier for a tired teacher to tell a child how to spell a word than it is to encourage him to work it out for himself. But it is important to remember that two lines of a child's own thinking and writing is worth far more in terms of education and fulfillment than two pages of tidy work faithfully copied from the blackboard.

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