

Understanding Spelling – Research summary.

This three year project (1995 – 98) on children’s spelling development was funded by the Mercers’ Company and conducted by Olivia O’Sullivan and Anne Thomas of the Centre for Language in Primary Education. A book ([Understanding Spelling](#)) giving a full account of the project and its implications for schools was published by CLPE in 2000.

Three London primary schools took part in the project, the aim of which was to examine how children learn to spell, and how teachers can work most effectively to support their progress in spelling. The project studied the teaching and learning of spelling from Reception to Year 6. In addition a special study looked at the progress of a small number of case study children in Years 4, 5 and 6 who read competently but had difficulties with spelling.

Schools were visited several times a term, and researchers collected reading and writing samples, conducted interviews with teachers and children, observed in classrooms and provided INSET. Staff meetings or INSET days were held at least once a term to discuss issues in spelling and the progress of the project.

Initially the teachers participating in the project identified 31 case study children from across the whole primary age range. Twelve of these children were selected for closer study, but writing samples were collected from all the children. This enabled evidence about children’s spelling development to be collected on a longitudinal basis.

At the beginning of the project it became apparent that many teachers felt unsure about how to teach spelling in a constructive way. They tended to see teaching spelling mainly as a question of correcting errors rather than of developing an attention to words and their structures. Children’s learning to spell is closely related to their learning to read and to their understandings about how spoken language is written down. It is likely that ‘phonemic awareness’ develops through spelling rather than through reading. The work of several scholars and researchers influenced the project team; they included Uta Frith, Linnea Ehri, Charles Cripps and Usha Goswami.

The findings of the project team were:

1. In learning spelling children need to be helped from the outset to draw on multiple sources of knowledge (e.g. known words, common letter strings, word structures and meanings). Teaching strategies to develop all the relevant competences at both KS1 and KS2 were collected and classified and appear as Chapter 5 in *Understanding Spelling*. This chapter details a) classroom contexts and resources, b) major classroom teaching routines, and c) routines for establishing children’s independence as learners of spelling at every stage of the primary school.

2. It is helpful for teachers to analyse children's miscues as spellers. The research team developed a CLPE Spelling Assessment Framework to map the development of the case study children. This enabled teachers to note the percentage of standard spellings in children's work, and analyse their miscues into predominantly phonetic or predominantly visual miscues.

3. Case studies collected by the researchers clearly showed that children take different routes into the spelling system, some favouring phonetic spellings and some visually based spellings. They do not follow a linear stage-based route. All need to integrate different sources of knowledge – phonetic, visual, structural and semantic – to develop effectively as spellers.

4. Good readers who are poor spellers do not draw from their reading sufficient awareness of the patterning of words. They appear to use partial visual cues when reading unfamiliar words. In spelling they rely more heavily on phonetic strategies; they do not make links between reading and spelling.

5. One of the main ways in which children learn to spell is by analogy-making. Making analogies between words they already know and new words develops children's awareness of spelling as a system.

6. Children's interest in words, developed through their reading and through their writing, was the best foundation for their development as competent spellers.

7. The active teaching of spelling plays a decisive role in children's spelling development. The effective teaching observed in the project took many forms, from shared writing and editing, to word study, and included the analysis of children's spelling. Word study was the least widely recognised means of teaching spelling at the outset of the project, though it proved one of the most effective teaching approaches.

The book which resulted from this project, [Understanding Spelling](#), is a complete guide to the teaching and learning of spelling in the primary school. The Times Educational Supplement review by Charles Cripps said 'The Centre for Language in Primary Education is well known for the excellence of its publications. They are readable and informative, and Understanding Spelling is no exception....This book should be essential reading for all NQTs, literacy coordinators and teachers who are concerned about the spelling attainment of children in their classrooms.'