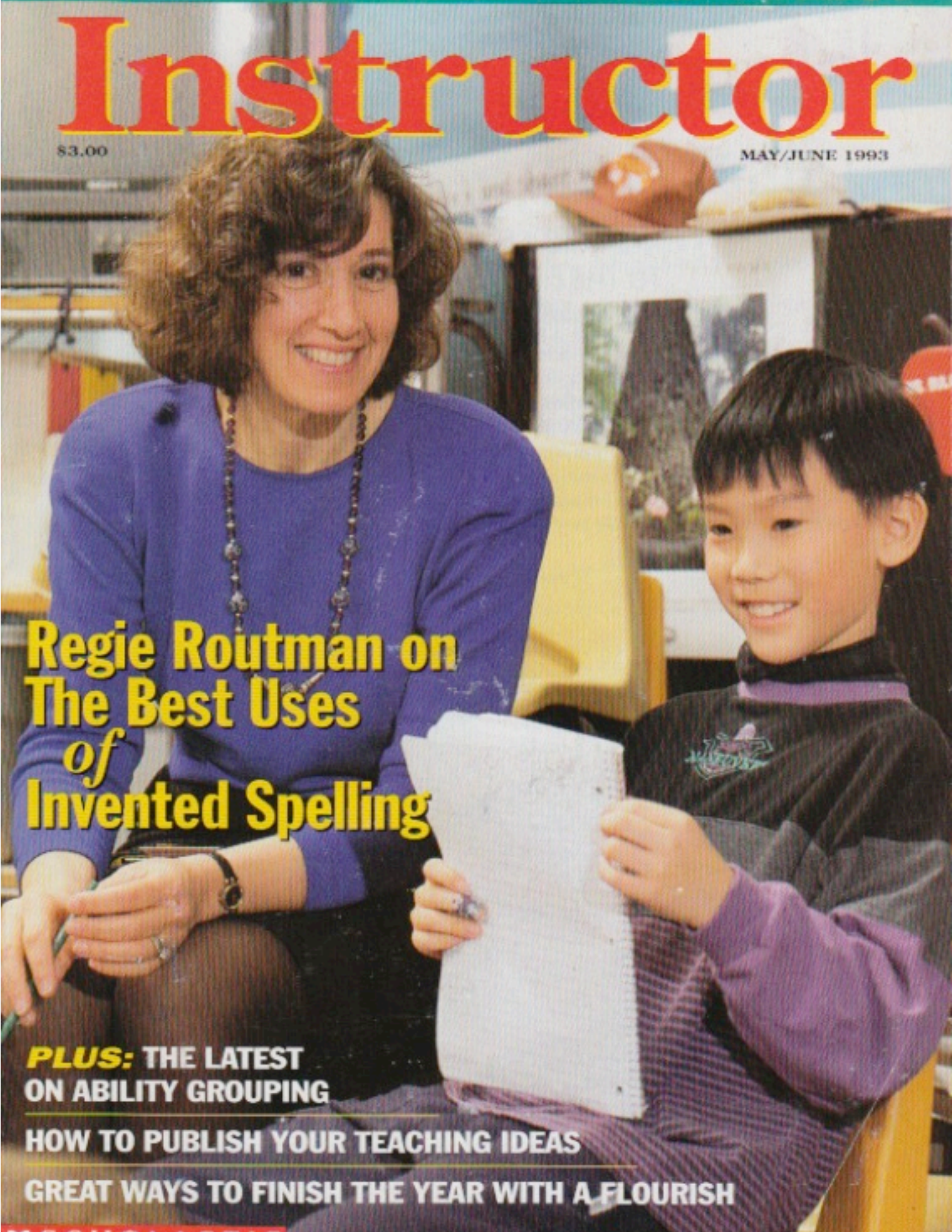


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**Regie Routman on
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sk teachers what they struggle with most in their whole language classrooms, and spelling is sure to come up. Should spelling actually be taught? How much direct instruction do children need?

Is invented spelling really a powerful tool for language learning—or can it be overused?

These are just some of the questions that teacher, author, and whole language expert Regie Routman regularly helps teachers address. And so, when planning this issue's special focus on language arts, it only seemed logical to ask her for advice.

Regie did us one better by agreeing to write an article on invented spelling, exclusively for our readers. Her simple suggestions are sure to help you clear a path toward better spelling in your classroom.

Regie also introduced us to Jim Henry, the exceptional first-grade teacher you'll meet on page 40. As Jim readily admits, it took years for him to develop his successful approach to teaching spelling. We think you'll find inspiration and support in his story.



Regie Routman in conference with a third grader at Lomond Elementary School in Shaker Heights, Ohio.

The Uses and Abuses *of* Invented Spelling

By REGIE ROUTMAN

Invented spelling does not mean “anything goes,” says teacher, author, and nationally recognized expert on whole language Regie Routman.

In this article, she shows how you can get the best results from invented spelling in your own classroom.



Regie Routman models conferencing for third-grade teacher Dana Bulan. Regie prefers to write conference notes on Post-it notes, which she later gives to the student. This simple technique keeps the child's draft clean of teacher markings.

Invented spelling has gotten a bad name in many classrooms—mainly, I think, because of certain misconceptions surrounding its use. Too many well-intentioned teachers have been operating under the assumption that in a whole language classroom, they are not *allowed* to interfere with children's writing. As a result, students may be writing more and writing more often, but much of their work is illegible, sloppy, and filled with misspellings of basic words. Teachers are growing increasingly frustrated, while some parents have been left to wonder if we are teaching spelling at all. How did all this happen?

In the early stages of the whole language movement, as educators and parents were beginning to understand the developmental nature of all language learning, many believed that kids would learn to spell through immersion in reading and writing with lots of opportunities for practice and experimentation. As with reading, this approach worked fine for some kids—but not for all. Many students still needed strategies to be made explicit for them. When teachers didn't continually model reading and writing processes, provide lots of opportunities for guided practice, and help kids discover and notice features of words, some kids had trouble with reading and spelling despite the use of real literature and the writing process.

As I see it, invented spelling was never meant to be "anything goes." Its purpose was to free kids up to write. In a class of 25 to 30 students, children who are dependent on the teacher to spell every word correctly are unable to freely express themselves. Invented spelling (and with it, the teacher saying, "Do the best you can. That's fine for now. Spell it like it sounds.") allows

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kids to concentrate on their messages without overconcern for correctness. That has allowed even kindergarten children to see themselves as writers early in the school year—and that's a wonderful thing.

But I also believe that we must hold kids accountable for basic standards so they can take pride in their work. Even in daily journal writing, we should have expectations such as legible handwriting, skipping every other line (at least for primary grade children), spelling high-frequency words correctly, and rereading to check for meaning, spelling, and punctuation.

When I am in a classroom in which writing looks a mess and the teacher accepts all invented spellings (even basic words), the students usually do not take writing seriously. The good news, of course, is that it doesn't have to be this way. It is possible to teach spelling and still remain true to the philosophy of whole language. The following strategies and ideas may help you rethink your use of invented spelling.

Use Core Word Lists

Invented spelling recognizes that learning to spell, like learning to talk, is developmental. Children are not expected to get it right immediately. Promotion of invented spelling recognizes and respects that language develops gradually and that learners need lots of time and practice to take risks, make mistakes, and do plenty of reading and writing.

At the same time, while it is unrealistic to expect a first grader to spell all words correctly, it is realistic to expect *some* words to be spelled correctly all

Yesterday we had a snowday. First I went to breakfast, then I got dressed. We watched a movie called Annie. She was an orfine and the owner said at the end I got your number you want to romber. it was funny. And at the real real end some bad guys said they were her parints. But the resley went. And at the real real real end someone adopted her. And the badguys were put in

Typical journal writing from a first-grade class in which children write daily, expectations are high, and spelling strategies are taught in context of reading and writing.

It is possible to teach spelling and still remain true to the philosophy of whole language.

the time. Even most kindergarten children can be expected to spell a very small group of often-used words by the end of the school year (words such as *I, me, my,* and *to*). Older children should be inventing only new vocabulary words, uncommon words, and words we wouldn't expect them to be able to spell correctly



Regie saved all of her drafts of this article for instructor and brought them to school so kids could see the many stages that precede a published piece of writing.

at their age or grade level.

In the K-4 elementary building where I am based, teachers in grades 1-4 have worked together to develop core lists of words that we expect students to be able to spell by the time they leave each grade. We developed these core lists because we were concerned about children's misspellings of common words. The lists include words culled from our students' daily writing in addition to days of the week, months, the name of our school and city, and other common words such as *social studies, science, because, enough, through, two, too, and to*.

Many words are on more than one grade-level list. We make these core lists available to all parents and students.

Don't Accept Sloppy Drafts

I place the same expectations on children as writers that I place on myself as a writer. I would never expect a colleague to respond to my writing draft without first making sure it was in good form—and that includes legibility, standard spelling, and neatness. Out of respect for the reader, whom I want to focus on the content of the piece, I make sure the draft is easily readable. We should expect no less from our students.

That's one reason why I no longer use the term "sloppy copy" to refer to a draft. Some students have taken the term too literally and use "sloppy copy" as an invitation to turn in messy work with numerous misspellings.

I will not conference with a child until he or she has reread the paper and checked it for basic spelling and punctuation. Also, the paper must be legible, even in the first draft; that is, the writer must be able to read it easily, which brings me to the next strategy.

Make Conferences Count

Recently, I was in a third-grade classroom during writing workshop, modeling conferencing for the teacher. This teacher was exhausted by conferencing because she was assuming most of the responsibility for improving her students' writing. When Damien came up for his conference, I began as I always do. "How can I help you? What would you like out of this conference?"

"Spelling," he said without hesitation. "I want to work on my spelling." (His teacher had already told me he was the poorest writer in the classroom.)

Usually, in a first conference on a piece of writing, students want feedback on content. They might say something like, "I want to know if the beginning brings the reader in," or "I want to know if there are any confusing parts." But Damien was only interested in improving his spelling.

"Read me your piece," I said, while I wondered to myself how he could possibly read it. It was a mess—illegible, very few letters in many words, no punctuation. He began and stumbled along. When he came to the word *president*, he had written only *pt*.

"Damien," I said, "say the word *presi-*

dent slowly. What sound do you hear after the *p*? Good. That's right. Now what do you hear next? Say it slowly."

With continued modeling and questioning, Damien was able to write "prsd-nt." Now we could both read it easily. I told Damien I would be glad to help him with his spelling, but first he needed to go back to his seat, reread, and make sure his spelling was his reasonable best and that he had punctuation at the end of his sentences. Even though he was a poor speller, not enough had been expected of him. He knew his teacher would correct his misspellings, so there was no need for him to put forth his best effort.

After the conference, his teacher was relieved. "I thought I had to do it all. It would have taken me 30 minutes to go through his piece, and then I wouldn't have seen any other students. I see that by placing the responsibility on Damien, I will be able to help him more effectively and have more time for other conferences."

Don't Be Afraid To Teach Spelling

While whole language teachers may choose not to teach spelling formally as a separate subject, they *do* teach spelling. They expect their students to spell high-frequency words correctly, to utilize reliable rules and patterns, and to apply spelling strategies in their daily writing. A classroom environment that encourages children to be good spellers provides:

- ◆ lots of opportunities to write and talk about words;
- ◆ lots of opportunities to read and talk about words;
- ◆ lots of spelling references for children (wall charts, personal dictionaries, other children to talk to, classroom dictionaries, print around the classroom, word walls, and so on);
- ◆ daily writing time, usually as part of writing workshop or journal writing;
- ◆ a posted core list of words that children and parents know must be spelled correctly;
- ◆ lots of mini-lessons to see word patterns, develop rules, notice unusual features of words (these lessons arise from what the teacher notices the children need);
- ◆ lots of playing around with language

and noticing special features of words, for example, noticing and commenting on surprising letters found in a word; and

- ◆ opportunities to share and publish writing.

Underlying all of this is a teacher whose philosophy of how children learn to spell is consistent with the principles of language learning, and who takes the time to effectively communicate the research on learning to spell to parents.

Strive for Balance

Several years ago, most of the K-4 buildings in our school district used a common writing prompt in an attempt to get a handle on what constituted "good" writing across the grades. In an informal look at the invented spelling of students in grades 1-4, I noticed that by the beginning of fourth grade, almost all students were spelling a core of high-frequency words correctly. The message is clear: While students should use invented spelling freely during the primary years, we need to expect most words to be spelled correctly as they get older.

We need to strive for a balance. By over-attending to spelling, students may feel too constrained to write. But by accepting all spelling, even when we know the student can do better, we give the message that spelling is not important.

I believe that everything in writing matters. Of course, we want to emphasize content first, but spelling, handwriting, and general legibility are also important. We need to let our students and their parents know that and keep our expectations for students reasonable and high. Invented spelling is a marvelous tool, as long as we use it appropriately.

I place the same expectations on children as writers that I place on myself as a writer.



Your Chance To Win!

Here's your chance to win a

set of Regie Routman's books,

Transitions and *Invitations*. Just print your name, address, and telephone number on a postcard and send it to INSTRUCTOR, Dept. RR, 730 Broadway, New York, NY 10003. Also tell us what you find most difficult about whole language teaching. Five winners will be selected at random.

Deadline for entries is May 30, 1993.