

**Children's Invented Spelling**  
What Have We Learned in 40 Years?

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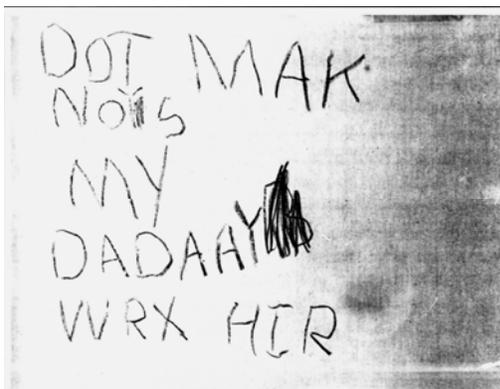
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**This presentation**

- Initial explanations of invented spelling
- How well have these held up?
- What else can we learn?
- Early spellings in writing development more generally
- Classroom implications

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But letter names don't always help



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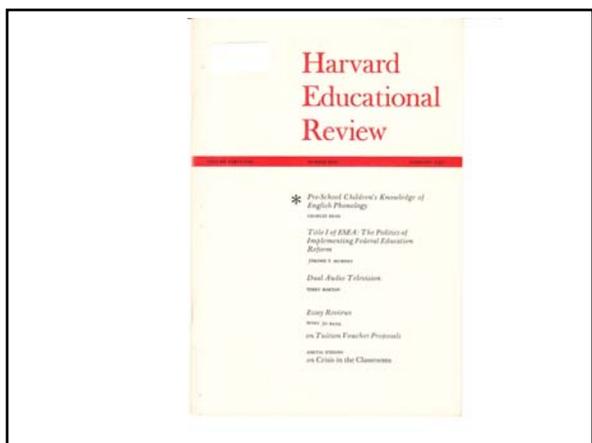
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### Spellings of vowels

Letter names	Related to letter names
MAK	
FEL	ALLS
TIM	LETL
KOK	BICS
HUMIN	

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### Nasals before obstruents

BOPY	THAKQ
STAPS	SEK
GRAPO	THEKCE
NUBRS	AGRE
MOSTR	
PLAT	
WOTET	
AD	

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### Intervocalic taps

LADR	<i>letter</i>
BODOM	<i>bottom</i>
AODOV	<i>out of</i>
WOODR	<i>water</i>

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### Syllabic sonorants

LITL	KITN
PESL	SATNS
GOBL	OPN
SPESHL	WAGN

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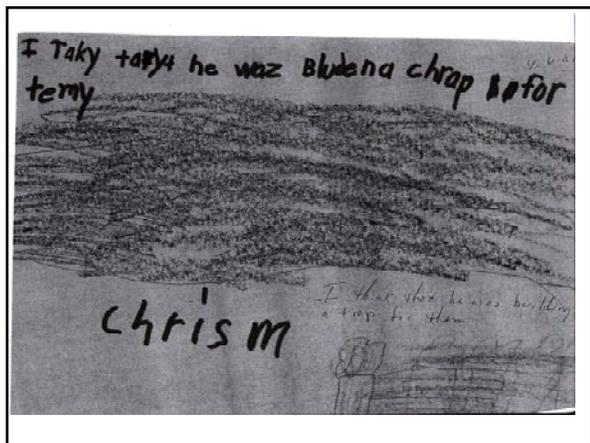
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### Initial /tr/ and /dr/

AS CHRAY	JRAGIN
CHRIBLS	GRADL
CHRIE	
CHRAE	

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### What do these children know?

Crucially, the alphabetic principle  
(Rozin & Gleitman, 1977)

At least some letter names

At least some standard sound-spelling  
correspondences

Beyond that, they are willing to invent

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### Instructional implications?

Carol Chomsky argued

“Write first, read later”

The opportunity to write is empowering

What children create for themselves is what  
they truly learn

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### Quoting Piaget

“Children have real understanding only of  
that which they invent themselves, and  
each time we try to teach them  
something too quickly, we keep them  
from reinventing it themselves.”

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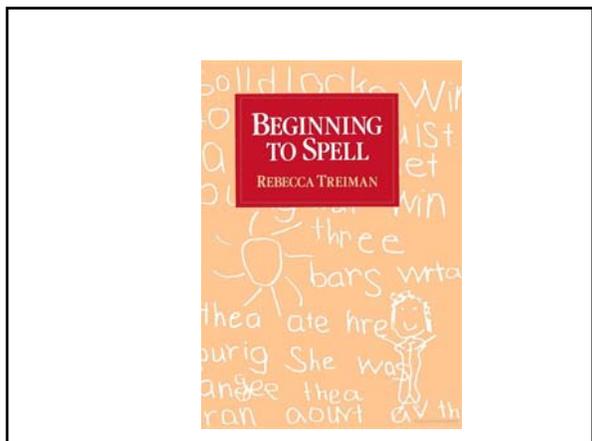
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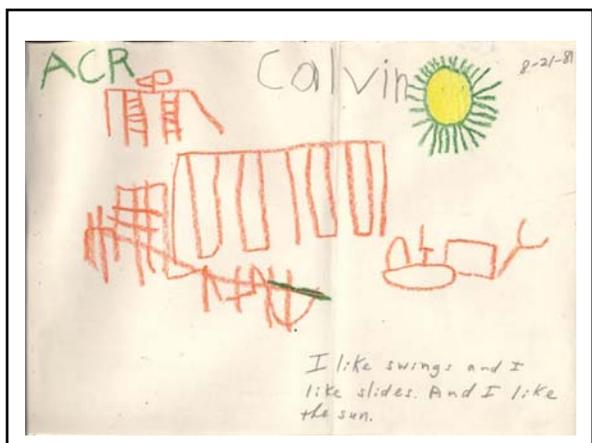
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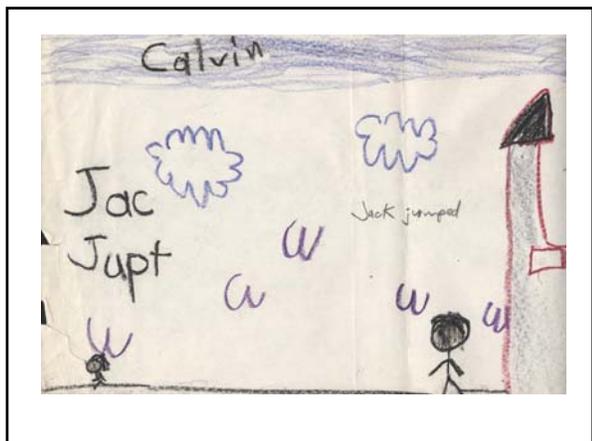
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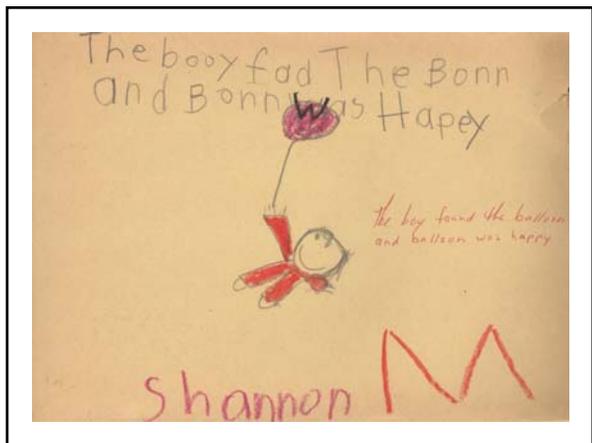
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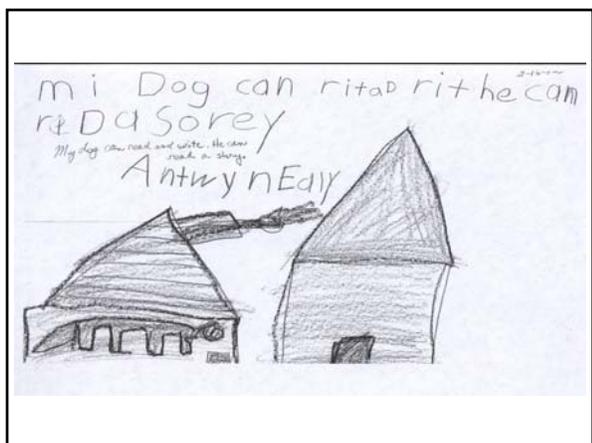
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### Replications of 1970s work

- Letter name effects, as in MI for *my*
- Omissions of nasals before obstruents, as in AD for *and*
- Use of D as well as T to spell taps
- Single consonants for syllabic sonorants
- Unconventional spellings of /t/ and /d/ before /r/

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### Extensions and new interpretations

- Omissions of consonant in clusters are not restricted to nasals in final clusters
- Omissions of other consonants in initial positions of syllable-final clusters: OD for *old*, HOS for *horse*, FUOS for *fox*
- Omissions of consonants in the second (and third) positions of syllable-initial clusters: SOREY for *story*, BO for *blow*, SET for *street*, AFAD for *afraid*

Role of syllable structure

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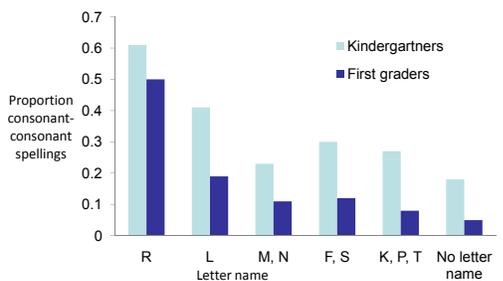
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### Letter name effects are more limited than earlier work implied



Treiman, 1994

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New cases in which children's classifications of sounds appear to differ from those of the standard writing system

SGIE for *sky*, TKN for *chicken*

Choices are not always straightforward

Children's early spellings are influenced not only by phonology and phonetics but also by morphology and graphotactics

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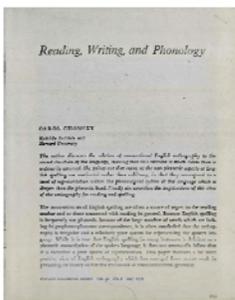
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### Morphology



*shoot*  
*chute*  
*magician*

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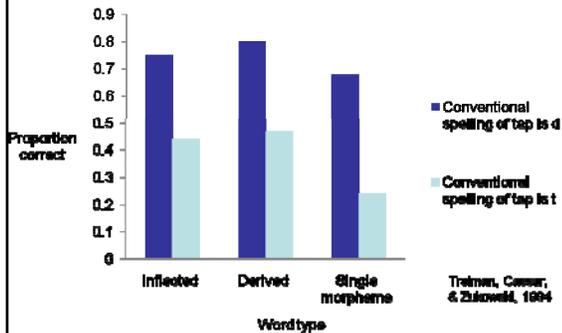
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### First graders' spellings of taps




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## Graphotactics

### Conventional English spelling

very few words like *llama* with initial consonant doublet, many words like *pillow* and *ball*

### First graders' classroom spellings

few like MMNE, more like SUPRMORRKIT and FASS

### Experiments (e.g., Cassar & Treiman, 1997)

Which looks more like a word, *baff* or *bbaf*?

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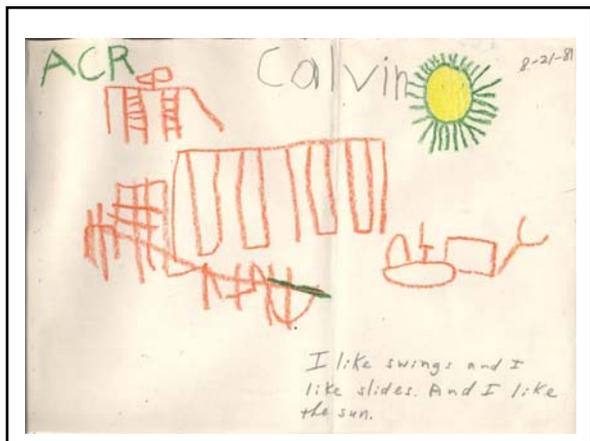
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## Early "random letter" spellings are not purely random (Pollo, Kessler, & Treiman, 2009)

Frequency of individual letters

Frequency of letter pairs

Letters from own name

Letters in alphabetic sequence

Early "random" spellings of children exposed to English differ in some ways from those of children exposed to Portuguese

Statistical learning

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### Varied evidence

Naturalistic, unsystematic samples

More systematic sampling, in schools

Experiments to elicit spellings and other indications of children's judgments

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### Toward conventional spelling

"We can at least respect [invented spelling] and attempt to work with it, if only intuitively. A child who wants to spell 'truck' with a CH will not be enlightened by being told that *ch* spells 'chuh,' as in *chicken*. [She] already knows that."

Read, 1975, p. 77

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### Carol Chomsky, with a child who wants to spell *karate*

"What comes first?"

A [kə]. (He picked a C out of a pile.)

"Then what?"

[kərr] R! (He found an R.)

"Then what?"

[kəraaa...] (He picked an I.)

"He got stuck, so I pronounced the word slowly for him ... He picked the T ...."

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Thank you!

Carol Chomsky  
Wayne O'Neil  
Israel Scheffler  
Brett Kessler  
Tatiana Pollo  
Marie Cassar  
Andrea Zukowski

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