Review of literature pertaining to individualized spelling studies

Mary Ancille Horgan

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A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

PERTAINING TO

INDIVIDUALIZED SPELLING STUDIES

by

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A RESEARCH PAPER

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE

REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS IN EDUCATION (READING SPECIALIST)

AT THE CARDINAL STRITCH COLLEGE

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

1970
This research paper has been approved for the Graduate Committee of the Cardinal Stritch College by

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Date July 31, 1968
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CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

Most authorities in the field of spelling agree that an effective instructional program in that field must employ at least the basic principle of individualization, which is that all skill areas of the curriculum, such as the teaching of spelling, must be taught on an individual student basis. This, of course, does not rule out group instruction. It simply presupposes that successful teachers must recognize a unique responsibility towards each student and his particular needs.

Having adopted an individualized spelling program for the coming school year, it was evident to the writer that a personal review of literature in the area of individualized spelling would be beneficial in helping to make the program a success. Since there was to be no experimental study involved in this research, it was seen by the writer merely as an essential guide for successful use of the individualization technique.

The Problem

The purpose of this study, therefore, was to capsule the findings of the experimenters and researchers in the recent past, with regard to the effects which an individualized program in spelling has upon the success of participating students. In the light of this information, it was hoped that
the S.R.A. spelling kit materials to be used in the planned program could be partially evaluated before use, in order to avoid unnecessary errors in procedure once the project was under way.

Some of the major questions basic to this study were:

1. What is individualization as a teaching method?
2. What are some of the ways in which spelling has been individualized?
3. What are some of the advantages of an individualized program, as opposed to a traditional workbook approach?

It is often found that a program which has proven successful under experimental circumstances shows inherent weaknesses when adopted on a more universal scale. This is expected, and therefore an adaptation of individualization techniques was not seen by the writer as a cure-all for difficulties in meeting the spelling needs of all pupils. Yet it was hoped that this study would reveal reasons for some degree of confidence on the part of teachers who seek to adapt these principles in their teaching of spelling, and particularly for the writer, who was most eager to make the proposed program successful from its very inception.

**Limitations of the Problem**

Since it would have been impossible to study adequately all the attempts at individualization made within a certain time period, there was no chronological limit set to the investigation. The research was seen by the writer to encompass pertinent studies sufficient in number to provide conclusive evidence for the purpose already set.

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CHAPTER II

A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There have been many studies conducted to evaluate individualization as a spelling technique. It was the writer's purpose to summarize some of these related efforts and, thus, to show what is meant by individualized spelling as a teaching method, as well as to elaborate on some of the ways in which spelling has been individualized.

Individualized Spelling as a Teaching Method

Schools are continuing their search for methods of providing for individual differences which will more effectively satisfy society's expectations that each child achieve his greatest potential. One of the most basic ways in which this has been achieved is through curricular changes. However, there is skepticism regarding this method, since it is quite vague, too broad, and most curricular modifications have been for groups of pupils, rather than for individuals. Often the individual is neglected in the very attempt.2

There are, however, some concrete forms of curricular change which may enable a student to work at his own level of achievement. These were summarized by Sister M. Edwin Frerichs3 as:

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1. The student is engaged in "independent study" without teacher
direction.

2. Each child compiles his own individual list for his personal writ-
ing needs.

3. The student is placed on his own individual level for both instruc-
tion and study.

4. Each student is simply helped to acquire better study habits.

Errors of the pupil are pointed out, certain study techniques are
advised, and the student is guided in choosing the most effective
method for achieving spelling success.

The "independent study" method seems to provide the greatest number of
pitfalls, perhaps because of the expansiveness of its scope. Studies by
Pearson, Fulton, and Winch indicated that, when comparison between a group
and an independent study technique were made, the former had more favorable
results. The reasons for this included the obvious value of more pronounced
auditory and visual factors and greater emphasis given to developmental progress.

The results of those who considered the possession of individual lists
essential to a student in an individualized spelling program showed some dis-
crepancy as to list content. Some, such as Deacon and Blitz, found that stu-

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dents whose lists were based on standardized age needs achieved greater success than those whose lists were based on particular needs alone. The consensus was that, even though a child's peculiar vocabulary needs were being met, he was often deprived of the basic spelling vocabulary mastery which he should have acquired at a certain level.

Themman, on the other hand, suggested that each student make his own list of spelling words, since he must meet his own spelling needs.

Some investigators of the problem of individualization in spelling instruction recommended that students be assigned spellers on the basis of spelling age rather than simple grade placement. The use of the informal spelling inventory, such as the one by Betts, the Buckingham Extension of the Ayers Spelling Scale, the Morrison McCall Spelling Tests, and most achievement test batteries were suggested as modes for determining spelling grade level.

The most generalized approach to individualization incorporates all the ideals of a good teacher. Students are tested to determine their level of difficulty. They are given instruction at grade placement level, as well as the ingenious type of individualized attention in which a trained teacher should


10Emmett A. Betts, Betts Informal Spelling Inventory, Haverford, Pennsylvania: The Betts Reading Clinic, 1955.


Having identified some of the basic approaches taken by those who wished to use individualization in the teaching of spelling, it was then appropriate to examine some of the studies which had been made in these areas.

**Studies in Individualized Spelling**

One of the first school-wide programs for individualized spelling was developed by Washburne and his associates in the Winnetka, Illinois, public schools in 1923. The chief features of this system were as follows:

Review tests were given at the beginning of each semester. This required the dictation of all the words studied during the past term, which were not eliminated as already known. Partners dictated to each other. This often took several days. Words in this list correctly spelled were checked off and not given again to the pupil during the term.

Directions were given to the pupils for daily practice. At spelling practice time the children took out their spelling notebooks and each pupil dictated to his partner the list of words studied the day before. The children then checked their own papers and rewrote the words that were incorrectly spelled.

On Monday, the partners dictated to each other all the words studied during the past week. These papers were checked by the teacher. Unless the partners were well matched, one pupil might not have been able to read the words to his partner. In the pupil's spelling notebook were recorded the words he needed to study for the week. These were words missed on spelling.

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tests or in the pupil's written work.

After correcting their papers, the pupils studied the words they had missed and were ready for another check test on the following day. This process was repeated on the following day. During the daily spelling practice period, the teacher circulated about the room overseeing the work. According to Washburne's plan, after the pupil had completed all the words in his speller for the term, he did nothing more with spelling lessons until the next term. Instead, he spent his released spelling time on other skills.

Washburne noted better results and a great saving in time by organizing spelling practice largely on an individual basis. Teachers who have tried similar plans in the upper grades have also reported that pupils' growth is far superior to that obtained with formal teaching. They do find, however, that training the pupils to work independently or with partners is the chief problem.

Salisbury of the Los Angeles Public Schools outlined an individual study plan which had many good features, some of which resembled the Winnetka Plan. The method met the problem of directing the pupil toward the words he needed to practice, and no others were considered. Elaborate pre-tests were avoided. Instead, the pupil's spelling time was spent on word study and study tests.

The first step was to help the child select the words he needed to study. Words misspelled in written work were copied in the pupil's individual spelling list. These words, with new ones continually added, constituted the pupil's basic spelling study list throughout the year. The next step was to check the words against a word frequency list to see whether or not the words were commonly used by children in writing. Older pupils could do this for themselves.

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The child did his word study by writing the words in a practice notebook which was used for one school term only. At the back of the workbook was a section of several pages where the pupil at any time during the day recorded words he needed to learn to spell but was not yet ready to include in the week's study list. This section constituted a reservoir from which the pupil could draw words when making up his study lists. The pupils were instructed how to use the notebook. They were also taught how to study words.

On Monday, the pupil selected for his study list of the week as many words as he thought he could learn. He included words he misspelled on the test of the previous week, words drawn from the back of his workbook, words from the alphabetized list, and any words he had found that he often needed because they were important locally.

When a child prepared his word study list for the week, he put a paper clip on the page and passed the book to the teacher for checking. This checking was essential in most cases because children were apt to make errors in copying the word lists.

On Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, the pupil studied the words he had selected. On Friday, he was tested on the words he had been studying, his buddy pronouncing the words, the two paired pupils taking turns dictating to each other. If spelling practice was limited to four days a week, the pupil was tested on his words on Thursday instead of Friday.

Each child was tested daily by his partner on the words he had studied, and he corrected his own work. He was tested weekly on the list, the teacher correcting the words this time. The pupil marked each word as correct or incorrect. Any words misspelled were included later in a weekly study list, so that the individual pupil could review the words that he specifically needed to review.
A record sheet was also kept by the teacher of the words she had taught. The success of the method depended largely on the skill of the teacher in organizing the work program, interesting the pupils in the method, training them for it, and checking up on results. This plan has been used successfully in all levels from third grade up, but Salisbury found that pupils in the lower grades would need more supervision and checking until habits of self-help and working with partners were thoroughly established.

Parke experimented successfully with an adaptation of the Salisbury plan in the New York City schools. After the initial survey test used for locating words to study, the pupils checked their own papers, indicated their errors, found the correct spelling of the misspelled words, copied the correct spelling of misspelled words into their notebooks and marked the words they missed on the class tally sheet. Each pupil was supplied with both an alphabetized notebook and practice study sheets ruled in three columns with space for a word list.

Each child worked with a "buddy." Together they studied, pronounced words and checked on results. The pupils tested each other on notebook words once a week. After correct spelling of a word three weeks in succession, it was checked as learned. Cooperation in helping each other was developed with this arrangement. The spelling period became a study period.

Achievement tests based on the pupil's study lists were given, and tests of the dictation and proofreading types were used. Parke recommended that this notebook be divided into columned pages — one side for words missed on survey and inventory tests, the other for words missed in daily writing. Each child made up his own study list after each test in his notebook.

A method devised by Peterson for linking spelling with writing is as follows: When the time came in the daily program for studying spelling, each child worked on his own word list. Frequently members of the group worked together for a part of the period, studying words that were common to most of them. In addition, they analyzed words. As the words were studied, the children found examples on their own individual lists. They kept their written work in individual folders. 17

Ritter and Shepherd have described a spelling notebook and study method which the teacher can easily adapt to any word list. 18 The pages of the notebook were ruled in seven columns. On Monday, new words to be studied were written in Column I. Words misspelled were written correctly in the Tuesday column. Review words from one month before were written in the Wednesday column. Words misspelled in the Tuesday and Wednesday columns were written in the Thursday column. Incorrect spellings from the Friday test, new and review words, were written in the last study column. These were then considered part of the word list to be formulated for the following week.

In 1953-1954, an individualized program was drawn up in the Berkeley, California, public elementary school system. 19 Words were taken from those misspelled by individual students and a list of common words, "A Core Vocabulary in the Language Arts," by Kyte. The study techniques consisted in the Horn-

17 Helen Petersen, "Spelling in Writing," The Instructor News, (Denver Public Schools, 1947).


Ashbaugh procedure, in which the student sees the word, pronounces it to himself, sees the letters, imagines that he is writing the letters of the word, and says the letters to himself. Kinesthetic techniques were used when necessary. A variety of written exercises preceded the final written test for each student. Once a week, a selection of words from the Kyte list was dictated as a group test, in order to make the procedure more objective. Words misspelled were added to the following week's list of words to be studied.

In 1961-1962, the Weston, Massachusetts, public schools inaugurated a programmed course of study for the teaching of spelling in third grade classrooms.20 The purpose of this experiment was fourfold: (1) to allow each child to work on his own level at his own rate, (2) to give each pupil a greater feeling of independence, (3) to increase the probability of success in order that each student could enjoy learning to spell, (4) to allow teachers to devote the time saved to more complex subjects.

The type of machine used was a simple box with slots for feeding the papers. Immediate reinforcement was provided by turning a knob. The words used were compiled from lists prepared by Rinsland, Dolch and Fitzgerald. A linguistic, categorical approach to the words was used. An average unit was composed of fifteen to twenty words, with some fifty to sixty frames. In the latter part of the procedure, sentences were written from dictations received via tape recorder.

Gains were measured by the Buckingham Extension of the Ayers Spelling Scale,21 by making a comparison from September to June. The results showed a


mean gain of thirteen months for the pilot group, fourteen months for the experimental group and nine months for the control group. Success was evident in other ways, too, such as the increased enjoyment of classes, better employment of time and use of extra time for enrichment activities.

Teachers who participated in this study agreed with Skinner who said:

In assigning certain mechanizable functions to machines, the teacher emerges in his proper role as an indispensable human being. He may teach more pupils hereafter. This is probably inevitable if the world's demand for education is to be satisfied, but he will do so in fewer hours and with fewer burdensome chores.

In 1960, the Bassett School District in California set up an experimental program for children of average or above average ability and compared them to a group spelling program composed of children of the same ability range. In the individualized program, there were sixteen children of 100 I.Q. and above. In the group program, there were fifteen children within the same range. The group program adopted the state of California's approved spelling series, consisting of a weekly list of words which was provided for an entire class and a substitute list for the slow learners.

In the individualized program, the same word lists were used, but they were alphabetized and graded one through ten according to difficulty. Each child selected the words he wanted to study, making his individual weekly list from this total list, according to his level. He selected as many words as he felt he could learn in a week. Any words not mastered in that week were transferred to the following week's list. As he met requirements for one level, the student advanced to the next one.

The results of the California Achievement Test showed that the children

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in the individualized program were working on the average 1.5 grades higher than those in the group program.

A second experiment of the same type during the next school year of 1961-1962 was used with middle grade students. It showed that the children in the individualized program were working on the average from .8 to 1.5 grades higher in spelling than children in the group program.

One specific technique intended to focus attention on parts of words and set the individual student and his spelling difficulties apart from the class as a whole was the Letter Mark-Out Corrected Test.\textsuperscript{23} It was used in the Killeen independent school system of Killeen, Texas, with the following procedure:

1. Mark out the letter missed in the given word.
2. Write the correct letters above the marked word.
3. Write the complete, correct word to the side of the original one.

Many authorities agree that the preliminary test is an essential part of efficient teaching of spelling. When the student corrects his own paper and results are used properly, both student and teacher are informed of the student's needs, and, for that reason, the procedure has great significance.

Recent research has revealed that the corrected test alone will contribute from ninety to ninety-five per cent of the achievement resulting from the combined effect of pronunciation exercises, corrected test and study, whether done cooperatively or independently.\textsuperscript{24}


\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
The above experiments in individualized spelling techniques were inaugurated for the same basic purpose; that is, to show that through provision of equal learning opportunities and by stressing individual identification and correction of errors, improved instruction may be possible.

In 1961, Sr. Mary Suzanne Dessert made a study comparing the individualized and workbook approaches to spelling instruction. She cited a joint study by Horn and Otto to show that provision for individual differences is one of nine effective techniques for helping children to spell efficiently.

In an article published in 1960, Blake also stressed this need in spelling instruction:

Spelling research for the past half century has shown that few children learn to spell words by the same method. We also know from the field of child development that all children are different and that the older children become, the greater the range of difference among children in a particular group. Our knowledge of children and spelling, then, would indicate that considerable emphasis be placed upon independent spelling study. Yet, in most of today's elementary school classrooms, group instruction is the prevalent method.

Parke was even more emphatic in her denunciation of present techniques:

In teaching children to read, much emphasis has been placed on grouping children according to their needs and on individualizing instruction. Nevertheless, in schools where this practice is accepted for reading, it is not uncommon to find an entire class of children with a wide range of reading abilities working from a speller or workbook designed for children of approximately equal ability in spelling. In extreme situations, it is even possible to find an occasional eighth grade child who reads on a second grade level to be the owner of an eighth grade spelling book. In situations of this kind, individualization of instruc-

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tion is ignored.\textsuperscript{28}

This same need for individualized approaches to spelling instruction had already been verified by Cooper in his 1951 report.\textsuperscript{29} He maintained that the two significant ways of attending to individual differences in spelling ability were providing help for each student to advance in every capacity and every skill, and giving each student a chance to express his personality and interests.

He claimed that even more attention to individual vocabulary differences can be included in a spelling program than in a reading program. In reading, a child learns certain words to read them, whereas in spelling he learns them in order to produce them more personally in written form. If spelling can be taught without word lists and books, grouping can be avoided, and spelling can be correlated with writing skills. In this way, Cooper explained, one can be sure to teach those words which the students need to know to express themselves in writing. Thus, it was felt that the process of teaching should be concerned with such media as letters and records of knowledge and information, as well as more creative forms of composition. A development of word consciousness, to the extent that it inhibits reading ability, is certainly not one of the goals in spelling instruction.

Cooper also maintained that spelling experience gained by creative story writing with individual vocabularies assures that the words being learned are important to the individual child.


Studies by Cook\textsuperscript{30}, Little\textsuperscript{31}, and Steinberg\textsuperscript{32} also revealed that students who were taught via individualized techniques learned more words on the average, even though gains were not statistically significant.

Another aspect of the comparison of individualized versus grouped spelling instruction is the controversy concerning the test-study and the study-test methods. The former is also known as the pre-test and individual method.

According to the study-test method, all words are presented and studied by the pupils, who are then tested for the mastery of the words. The test-study method utilizes an initial test which is given before the assignment is begun. Each pupil then studies the words that he misspelled. A pupil who spelled a word correctly that was misspelled by all other members of the class would not have to study the word.

Each method is subject to various modifications in practice, such as having two or three tests weekly in the test-study method. Because of such modifications, there is a definite difference between the two methods, and their evaluation is important.

Many experimental studies of the relative value of the test-study and the study-test methods have been made. Five of these studies have been considered important enough by the writer to be described somewhat fully.


\textsuperscript{31}Margaret Little, "Individual Versus Class Method of Instruction of Seventh Grade Spelling," (unpublished Master's thesis, Department of Education, Marquette University, 1938).

Kingsley's data were obtained from grades five to eight in two schools in which the methods were in use for one year.\(^3\) Kingsley records that, on the pre-test, fifty-five per cent of the pupils were able to spell all of the words and twenty-five per cent missed only one word. Kingsley's argument was that much time would be saved by teaching only the words that needed to be taught, rather than treating all words as equally unknown or difficult.

Keener's study\(^4\) led to some inconclusive results, but some of the more pertinent findings were:

1. For all grades combined, individual instruction is slightly superior to group instruction.

2. There are some indications that the group method secures better results than the individual method in grades two and three.

3. Excluding pupils in grades two and three, all pupils profit more from the individual method than from the group method.

4. The majority of teachers who tried individualization in spelling favored it after a certain trial period for the following reasons:
   a. It saved pupils' time.
   b. It increased spelling interest.
   c. It provided teachers with opportunities to give special help.

5. On the average, about twelve per cent of the pupils were excused from the study of spelling because their initial score on the week's work was perfect.


Woody's study, which was conducted in grades six to eight, led him to conclude that the time saved by the test-study method is an advantage which renders it superior to the study-test method, even with no differences in actual accomplishment in spelling. Such time may be devoted to other subjects in which pupils need assistance.

Distinct superiority was observed in the test-study method, through Kilzer's study conducted with ninth grade students in thirty-four schools. However, no detailed statement of results was furnished.

No grade levels were included in Steinberg's study, from which he concluded that there was no definite advantage peculiar to either the study-test or test-study method.

The most comprehensive study of this problem was that of Gates. The plan of his experiment closely resembled those of Kingsley, Keener, Woody and Kilzer, who were mentioned previously.

In Gates' study, the experimental period lasted eighteen weeks, nine of which were devoted to each method, with the classes alternating in the method followed. Differences noted between the two groups were more or less consistently in favor of the test-study method from the fourth grade to the eighth. In the low third and in the second grades, the slight advantage seemed to lie

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with the study-test method. 38

These several studies agreed that the difference in achievement of pupils taught by the two methods was small. However, there are values and objectives which are not expressed as gains in spelling ability. These are necessary criteria in judging the worth of a method. The quantitative data that the writer has examined suggest that, for young pupils who have not acquired independent methods of study in spelling, the study-test plan is better. For all other pupils, the pre-test plan yields greater gains.

The relationship between the original problem of whether or not individualization is a desirable technique to be employed in spelling instruction and the test-study question seemed obvious to the writer. One of the basic approaches to individualization stressed that the student be placed on his own level for both instruction and study. It would seem that a usable technique for continuing adaptation of the individual study maxim might be the regular employment of the test-study procedure. Following this method, the study would easily be enabled to advance from week to week with spelling words which would be a challenge to him.

Summary of Studies

This review of literature considered material pertinent to individualization techniques in spelling instruction, with emphasis being given to an evaluation of the individualized program versus the traditional workbook approach.

1. The individual study plans of Washburne, Salisbury, Parke, Ritter, and Shepherd stressed adaptations of individualization procedures to be used in a structured classroom program.

2. A program used by the Berkeley, California, public elementary school system enabled students to study and learn on an independent basis.

3. A programmed course of study in Weston, Massachusetts, employed Skinner's immediate reinforcement principle of educational psychology to again provide the basis for an independently structured learning procedure.

4. The Bassett school district in California organized its spelling program around the independently derived student word list, and showed slight statistical evidence for preference being given to the experimental method over the traditional one.

5. The need for individualization in spelling instruction was emphasized by Sr. Mary Suzanne Dessert, Blake, Parke, Cook, Little and Steinberg.

6. The relatively greater success of the test-study method, when compared to the study-test method, was shown by the studies of Kingsley, Keener, Woody, Kilzer and Gates. A variation of this technique was seen in the Letter Mark-Out Corrected Test, which was tried successfully in the Killeen independent school system of Killeen, Texas.
CHAPTER III

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The major purpose of this study was to review the findings of experimenters and researchers in the recent past, with regard to the effects which an individualized spelling program has upon the success of participating students.

The study proved to be of definite value to the writer in the sense that it supplied valuable insights on the part of many authoritative educators such as Blair, Horn, Gates and Fitzgerald. Their classic studies supplied information as to successful techniques and methods for one who hoped to avoid most of the pitfalls entailed by experimental procedures.

It was the plan of the writer to use the S.R.A. Spelling Word Power Laboratories from grades four to eight in a small four-room elementary school in northern Wisconsin during the school year of 1968-1969.

The recommended procedure involved a single fifty-five minute study session a week, during which the students were to be helped to work and study independently. The starting level guide, a roughly standardized test, would provide for initial placement at one of the ten grade levels. Fifteen cards would be given for each level in order that sufficient practice be present for development and reinforcement of skills at each level.

It was suggested that, for convenience in handling materials, five or six students be appointed as work-group leaders. It would be their responsibility to give the materials out to the students in their rows or table groups and
to get them back into the laboratory at the close of the session.

Each student was to receive a record book in which there would be a chart with a space for each of the booklets in the kit. As individual work progressed, the student would find the key card which corresponded to the level and card at which he was working in order to check and evaluate his own work.

Since the accompanying manual suggested no follow-up activity for the remaining four days of the week, it was left to teacher discretion. Tentatively, the supplementary activities would consist in the formulation and study of word lists on these days. It was thought that the difficult words encountered by each student during the weekly study session could be listed in a notebook for individual study during these days. Students could then be engaged in further activities such as alphabetizing, syllabication, accent, word building and sentence formulation, at the direction of the teacher.

If the arrangement should be feasible, a partner system would then be set up. Students would work in groups of two in order to provide written spelling practice when necessary. The teacher would also be free at this time to assist the individual students in various ways and make periodic checks on each student's progress.

The use of the *Morrison McCall Spelling Scale* on a monthly basis would provide adequate and systematic measurement of spelling progress. The annual diocesan-wide administration of the *Stanford Achievement Tests* in the Spring would give further information with regard to percentile and grade equivalent scores.

The plan of procedure was not as complete as would have been desired at the start. However, the writer believed that the success of the program would depend greatly upon the degree to which the materials proved adaptable to the
school set-up. It was her intention to evaluate the S.R.A. program at the end of the school year, so that further and more definite plans could then develop for the following years.

The studies discussed in this paper have provided the basis for the experimental procedure briefly described. It was the writer's contention that there are broad aspects of skill instruction which can only be reached through an individualized approach. It was, therefore, hoped that a school-wide adoption of a completely individualized approach to teaching spelling would help the students themselves to reach those very aspects.
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Materials


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Spelling Test Materials

