**Disaster Strikes When Schools Use HMH *Into Reading* (2020) for Spelling Instruction**

A Critique by J. Richard Gentry Ph.D.

HMH publishers describe the 2020 edition as a balanced-reading approach. The welcome on the first page of each grade-level volume states “HMH Into Reading TM combines the best practices of balanced literacy with comprehensive coverage of English Language Arts curriculum standards. In the promotional material the publisher pitches the 2020 edition as “structured literacy” and dresses the 2020 edition up with buzzwords from structured literacy—but it can’t be both balanced literacy and structured literacy unless part of the program delivers resources and allows for time in the language arts block for teaching explicit and systematic spelling and foundational skills.

To understand this egregious mishandling of spelling instruction which is part of foundational skills instruction at every grade level, this critique will give you a close look at three weeks of third-grade spelling lessons that are the exact template of the spelling lessons at *every* grade level in the 2020 edition. Shockingly *Into Reading* (2020) only gives teachers resources for one 30-minute lesson each week. This fact alone—a lack of time and intensity of explicit spelling Instruction—requires that the program be supplemented with a research-based spelling curriculum.

It doesn’t take a reading scientist to see that one spelling lesson offered each week can cause many readers to struggle and account for poor reading scores in many districts where it is currently being used. Evidence-based spelling instruction underpins phonics, phonological awareness, and automatic word reading. Throughout the program no real phoneme-grapheme correspondence is explicitly taught. Without time and resources for learning English spelling, struggling students and English learners will continue to struggle and fail.

**Three Weeks of Spelling Instruction in Houghton Mifflin Harcourt *Into Reading* (2020)**

The three lessons that follow include quoted teacher-guide scripts from six weeks of *Into Reading Grade 3 Teacher’s Guide Volume 4.* For opinion-piece brevity I only include three of the six lessons for the six weeks here. The other three spelling lessons for this six-weeks volume are constructed just like these and are equally problematic. (I will provide them for you upon request.)

*HMH Into Reading* (2020) is a mammoth program that comes with five teacher guides and student volumes for each grade level. Much of the obfuscation of the program’s lack of spelling instruction is due to the size of the program and the way the publisher developed only a relatively tiny number of phonics and spelling lessons which get lost in a sea of lessons for balanced literacy. In this critique we investigate and clarify how three weeks of the grade-three spelling lessons work with a deep dive into the spelling lessons in *Volume 4,* one of five volumes the third-grade teacher will use for the year.

Volume 4 is a thick heavy spiral bound volume 380 pages long*.* Looking at the content of the teacher guide with special attention to the spelling lessons will show you how *HMH Into Reading* (2020) fails to deliver explicit and systematic English spelling instruction.

In a nutshell, here’s the problem:

1. There is only **one spelling lesson for each week**. Beyond that, English word study is teacher-optional, glossed over by the publisher, and as described below buried in hundreds of pages of Reading Workshop guidelines. Not only are the spelling lessons haphazard, they are poorly designed. The publisher tacked on a one-page spelling wordlist each week but it’s only window dressing. This one-page spelling lesson is one of 50-plus teacher-guide pages for the same week.

2. Time for teaching spelling is not built into the program. In “Suggested Daily Times” on a “Week at a Glance” page at the beginning of each weekly lesson, the recommended time for delivering foundational skills including spelling, phonological awareness, and phonics is **30 minutes each week**. Current psychology and neuroscience research supports **20 minutes each day** for spelling lessons as recommended by spelling researcher Dr. Louisa Moats and many others. Teachers using *Into Reading* (2020) who understand the importance of teaching spelling explicitly need another resource.

3. Step 1 of each weekly lesson, “Introduce the Spelling Words,” is work intensive as the teacher is instructed **“to cut out and display the spelling word cards from Printable Word Cards for each weekly lesson.”** This additional time required for the teacher to prepare for a spelling lesson would dissuade many teachers from choosing to do spelling lessons.

4. *Into Reading* depends on the teacher to differentiate instruction but provides for **no weekly pretest, no teacher guidance for student self-testing, no recommendations or guidelines for daily spelling practice, and no posttest assessment for monitoring spelling mastery**.

5. Rather than spelling word sorts most of what *Into Reading* labels as a “spelling lesson” has students counting syllables which is not a bona fide spelling lesson. Many of the sorts provided in the *Into Reading* (2020) teacher guide fail to call attention to the stated spelling lesson pattern or rule. As you will see, some of the word sorts contrast spelling patterns or rules that are developmentally too advanced for third grade. You will see other word sorts that are incorrect and nonsensical for calling attention to the lesson pattern or rule.

As demonstrated below, the developers of these syllable sort lessons were not familiar with appropriate use of word sorting for learning to spell words or how to provide the right words at the right time for third graders. Note again there are only six spelling lessons for six weeks and the recommended time for each of the six lessons is **only 30-minutes** each week. Here are three sample third grade lessons for the six weeks of Volume 4.

**#1) The Spelling Lesson for Week 1 Volume 4**

**Spelling Lesson 1 “Compound Words and Abbreviations”** (Page T38 Module 7 Lesson 1)

[The first three bullets direct teachers to cut and display the word cards and model a sort. Next the teacher tells the students *“a compound word is made of two smaller words and an abbreviation is a shortened version of a longer word*.” Students are told they will sort the words based on whether they are *“a compound word or an abbreviation and on the number of syllables each word has.”* The teacher models with the word *grandmother* and concludes “*Grandmother has three syllables like the word anyone, so I’ll place it in that column.”*

“**Sort the Words**

* Ask students to help you sort the remaining word cards. Lead students to count the syllables in an abbreviation based on the word it stands for. Ask: *How many syllables are in the abbreviation Mr?* (two}
* After sorting, read each list together to check that the words are sorted correctly. Ask: *How can you recognize a compound word?* (It is made of two smaller words.) *How can you recognize an abbreviation?* (It is a shortened version of a word that begins with a capital letter and ends with a period.”

**Critique:** To sort compound words versus abbreviations, a student might logically put the words with capitals and a period in one column and words without a period in the other column. Syllable sorts for abbreviations make no sense since a spelling abbreviation has nothing to do with the number of syllables in the word they represent. Likewise, spelling compounds words has nothing to do with sorting them into syllables. In this lesson *Mister* abbreviated Mr. has two syllables and *Avenue* abbreviated Ave. has three syllables. Each abbreviation is capitalized and ends with a period because it represents a proper noun. The lesson should call attention to the fact that most third graders would already be expected to know that a person’s name or title of a city, street, and state are capitalized. This proper noun capitalization rule should be taught to third grade students who might not know the proper noun spelling rule for abbreviations.

A research-based compound word sort would show that compounds may be spelled in three ways: as a one-word compound as in *birthday*, as a two-word compound as in *post office*, or as a hyphenated compound word as in *twenty-one*. The spellings must be explicitly taught and practiced to become brain words committed to long-term use for automatic recognition for reading or retrieval from long-term memory for composing. The syllable sorts in Lesson 1 Volume 4 make no sense regarding the spelling of English compounds. Spelling Lesson 1 in *Into Reading* would be confusing for students, an egregious waste of time, and therefore harmful to children.

**#2) The Spelling Lesson for Week 3 Volume 4**

**Spelling Lesson 11 “Words with /ŏŏ/ and /ōō/”** (Page T154 Module 7 lesson 11)

**Introduce the Spelling Words**

[This lesson follows the same script and routine as do all of the spelling lessons beginning with cutting out the words. The teacher is told to *“Hold up a word containing* ***the*** */ōō/ sound in chew and model your thinking: The word is chew. Is the vowel sound in chew /ŏŏ/ or /ōō/? I see the letters ew. And I see the column head drew, which also has the /ōō/ sound spelled ew. So I’ll place the word in that column.”*]

**“Sort the Words**

* Ask the students to help you sort the remaining word cards. For two-syllable words such as *wooden*, emphasize the vowel sound as you read the word aloud.
* After sorting, have students read down each list with you to make sure the words have been sorted correctly.
* Guide students to recognize the spelling pattern in the columns. Ask: *Do the word in this column all have the /ŏŏ/ sound? Do they have the same spelling? What spelling pattern do the words in this column share?*
* Guide students to recognize the different spelling patterns for */ōō/* and */ŏŏ/.* Ask: *What are the different spelling patterns for the /ōō/ sound? (oo, ue, ew)*

**Critique:** Words with the /ŏŏ/ and /ōō/ *sounds present* an advanced very complex English spelling pattern. These two sounds can be spelled with too many different English letter patterns to lump them all together in one third-grade weekly spelling lesson and expect students to learn to spell them simply by sorting them into two sound-based columns. These words would better be studied in grade 3 beginning with two-letter digraph patterns such as **ew** and **oo** that map to sounds. Even after devoting the grade 3 lesson to only two patterns, they would need to be studied and engaged with throughout the week, practiced in various multisensory activities, and checked for mastery with a posttest.

To demonstrate the complexity and inadequacy of the lesson entitled “Words with /ŏŏ/ and /ōō/” in Volume 4, note that the lessons skips over the frequently used /yōō/ sound spelled **you** as in *you* and *youth*. In fact, **there are ten letter-to-sound matchings** for this lesson. The /ōō/sound may be spelled **ui** as in *suit*, **o-consonant-e** as in *prove*, **u-consonant-e** as in *include*, **o** as in w*ho,* **you** *as* in *youth*, **u-consonant-e** as in *amuse*, **ue** as in *rescue*, or as **eau** as in *beauty* along with alternative spellings for the /ŏŏ/ sound. Sorting words with these various letter-to-sound matchings would be appropriate for a spelling lesson in fifth grade (see for example Gentry, *Spelling Connections*, 2022, Teacher Guide Grade 5 pages 14-25 with engagement activities for each day of the week). The “Words with the /ŏŏ/ and /ōō” lesson in Volume 4 which includes seven different spelling patterns is inappropriate for grade 3.

A research-based grade-three spelling sort might have a weekly unit such as **Vowel Digraphs: ew, oo** and teach third grade students that when a base word ends in the /ōō/ sound, it can be spelled **ew** as in *chew* and *news.*  When the /ōō/ sound is in the middle of the word it’s usually spelled **oo** as in *tooth* and sm*ooth* and sometimes with **oo** at the end of the word as in *boo, and zoo*.

**# 3) The Spelling Lesson for Week 2 Volume 8**

**Spelling Lesson 6 “Prefixes re-, un-, and suffixes -less, -ness”** (Page T288 Module 8 lesson 6)

[This lesson follows the same script and routine as the all other weekly lessons with the teacher cutting out the words and modeling a syllable sort. In “Introduce the Spelling Words” the teacher will hold up the word card *unfair* and say “This word is unfair. It has the prefix un-. I’ll sort this under *unfold*.]

**“Sort the Words**

* Ask the students to help you sort the remaining word cards.
* After sorting, read each list together to check that the words are sorted correctly. Ask: *What is the prefix? What is the suffix?*
* Then point out the VCCCV pattern in *helpless*. Point out that the word is divided into syllables after the second consonant: help/less. Have students find and sort the other spelling words with the CVVVC syllable pattern. (Kindness, softness, darkness)]

**Critique**: In a science-based spelling book there would have been one full week for studying third-grade level prefixes and normally two full weeks for studying third-grade level suffixes. Third graders would learn **Adding a prefix changes the word’s meaning and often its part of speech (new, renew).** **A prefix is always treated as a separate syllable, but adding a prefix does not change the spelling of the base word (unfair, preview).**

An evidence-based third grade spelling program would likely include **two full weeks of studying suffixes such as a week for Suffixes -er, -est and a week for Suffix -ly.** Third graders would learn **For words ending in silent e, drop the e when adding -er and -est** (close, closer, closest**). For words ending in a consonant and y, change the y to I (**funny, funnier, funniest)**, and for one-syllable words ending in a vowel followed by a consonant, double the consonant** (hot, hotter, hottest)**.** These aren’t easy English spelling rules for third graders and many struggling students would find the CVVVC syllable sorting lesson for spelling in Lesson 6 of Volume 4 especially baffling.

The complexity of spelling patterns and rules in English cannot be learned simply by sorting words by counting syllables, with an option of typing them on a keyboard and reading down the list. This type of syllable sort is neither effective nor validated by research.

To fix this problem teachers would need additional curricular resources along with 20 minutes a day in the literacy block with more intensity of focus to provide the grade-by-grade foundational skills instruction supported by current psychology and neuroscience. A research-based spelling curriculum Is critical for teaching elementary school children and saving struggling readers and English learners from the prospect of academic failure.

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