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### **A Tale of Words**

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The kindergarten teachers participating in the phonics and spelling workshop professional development were seated around several tables. This group of 12 veteran White teachers, who worked with over 200 students of Color, gathered from across the district.

We started the day reflecting on our views of spelling. I asked, “Can you share your experiences with spelling?”

“I gave my students a list of words each week.” One teacher shared.

Another stated, “Kindergarteners need a lot of scaffolding in order to write well!”

“What prevents kindergarteners from learning about words and how they work?”

“Good question!” I said.

The teachers shared how they felt students had difficulty pronouncing words and many failed to speak using complete sentences. Seeking further clarification, I learned that the approach to language, spelling and phonics for White teachers working with children of Color needed to be enlightened.

For two years beginning in fall of 2011, the professional development I conducted explored the principles of spelling (Wilde, 1991) and word study (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, and Johnston, 2012). We looked at sorting words, determining their generalizations, understanding instructional supports such as assessment, and

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implementation of a word study program. We collected writing samples, created inquiry questions and examined samples I brought. We pondered questions such as: *What is the relationship between the speller, reader, and writer? What is the impact of spelling on writing? What is important for spellers to know?* At the same time we explored ways to connect culture and language to writing. What teachers did in response was to spend more time reading books that matched readers culturally and linguistically. They made explicit oral connections to letters, sounds, and writing during whole group and small group instruction. They worked with the same small group for spelling, reading, and writing across weeks, analyzing data they collected on students' progress in spelling and writing.

The aim of this tale is to show how White teachers can work successfully on spelling and phonics with students from diverse backgrounds. The teachers needed to understand that students with language variety do have a harder time with spelling due to home language but that this is not a deficit. The teachers accomplished this critical task through reflection and inquiry into data.

Two years later, in our 2014 final session, I asked teachers to bring samples of student writing to share. The teachers selected writing pieces their graduating kindergarten students had written for the incoming kindergarteners. One teacher brought writing samples from two different students from the spring of 2011 (Figure 1) and the spring of 2014 (Figure 2).

“Let’s see,” I said. As we looked at the writing pieces, I could not help but notice the writing of Student A and Student B (see below). And I thought, “What a story!”

As the comparison to the 2011 example (Figure 1) shows, the student in Figure 2 writes with greater volume, word knowledge use, and content.

“Oh my!” said one teacher.

“I’m impressed! Exclaimed another.

“I know,” said I.

What a difference a few years of reflective inquiry has made on the lives of our students!

### *The End*

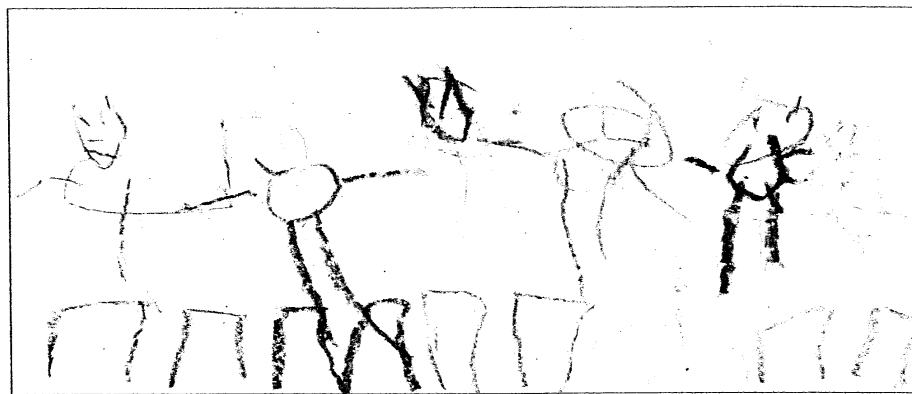
### **Postscript**

The controversy about teaching phonics and spelling is not new. What is provocative is the shift in story between a group of seasoned teachers and their children. How? These literacy teachers learned “race matters, and that inequities are often based on beliefs about the superiority and inferiority related to issues of race and economics” (Wepner, Strickland, & Quatroche, 2014, p. 175). This reflection on teaching practice within a culturally diverse learning community shows how teachers investigated teaching by slowing down their thinking, “so that they can attend to what is rather than what they wish were so” (Rodgers, 2002, p. 231). Through data analysis and questioning, the teachers learned to question themselves (Cooper and McNab, 2002, p. 56) and explored instructional strategies that impacted student learning as they sought to investigate what is at the heart of phonics and spelling instruction. This tale of words is a testament to the power of educational inquiry and the use of data to empower practitioners to construct the process of change through a non-critical lens to impact the lives of young learners.

## References

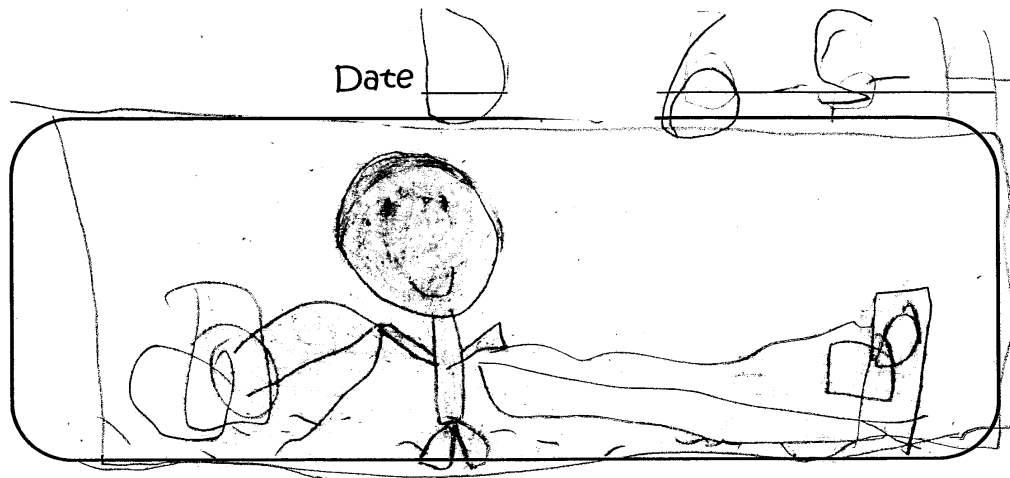
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**Figure 1.** Student A – End of kindergarten, 2011; “Make lots of new friends. Love, M”



Make Lots of  
New Friends  
Love, M

**Figure 2.** Student B – End of kindergarten, 2014; “Kindergarten is fun and we go to gym. We learn how to do projects. We learn to read books. Love, D.”



Dear Future Kindergartener,  
 Kindergarten is  
 fun and we go to  
 gym. we learn how to  
 do projects we learn to  
 read books.  
 Love, D.

