

# Capturing variations in how spelling is taught in primary school classrooms in England

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## Abstract

Mastering spelling is important for children to progress in writing. The National Curriculum in England details spelling lists linked to each year group in primary education. Assessment practices also emphasise the importance of teaching spelling. However, to date, little is known about how teachers feel about teaching spelling nor the instructional methods that they use in primary schools in England. This study addresses this gap by investigating approaches to teaching spelling. An online survey was distributed to primary-based teaching staff with roles in supporting teaching and learning. The survey asked for information about the respondents' teaching experience and school setting, and about their attitudes and approach to teaching spelling. The survey was completed in full by 158 respondents. Approaches to teaching spelling were varied and over two-thirds of the sample highlighted that their school did not have a spelling policy. The importance of explicit teaching of spelling was supported by the majority of teachers. This judgement was more frequent and rated more highly by teachers supporting younger children. Teachers largely reported devising their own spelling resources, highlighted that the curriculum spelling lists lack guidance for teaching spelling strategies

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and questioned their suitability for pupils of varying abilities. A range of spelling programmes and strategies were recorded. The findings provide insight into universal instructional approaches. Practical implications for teacher training and professional development are discussed.

#### KEYWORDS

National Curriculum, primary education, spelling, spelling policy, teaching spelling

### Key insights

#### What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

This paper addresses the gaps in our current understanding of how spelling is taught in primary schools in England and examines whether year group and teaching role influence the instructional approaches adopted in the classroom.

#### What are the main insights that the paper provides?

The paper provides an insight into the variations and inconsistencies in the instructional methods and resources used to teach spelling in primary schools in England. Evidence-informed approaches for teaching spelling and effective models of continuing professional development do not sufficiently underpin pedagogical practices across the primary years.

## INTRODUCTION

Assessment practices throughout education largely rely on children and young people being able to demonstrate their knowledge through writing. Learning to spell is an important part of learning to write. Writing frameworks situate spelling alongside handwriting as a 'transcription' skill and suggest that over time spelling must become automatic in order to free resources to be devoted to higher-level composition processes, such as generating text and self-regulating planning and reviewing behaviour (Berninger & Amtmann, 2003). Here, spelling is viewed as a foundational skill that is cognitively challenging in the early years of education but one that children must master to be able to progress in writing (Kim et al., 2011; Wagner et al., 2011). Indeed, spelling ability has been consistently shown to relate to writing outcomes. Better spellers produce longer written narratives, use more diverse written vocabulary and write texts that are graded as higher quality than those that present with spelling difficulties (Sumner et al., 2013). Research has also demonstrated the negative biases that occur in teacher assessment when scoring written texts that contain a high proportion of spelling errors, leading to misjudgement of compositional quality (Graham et al., 2011). Thus, it is imperative that spelling is taught effectively in primary school.

The National Curriculum in England statutory appendices identify key word lists that children are expected to work on across different year groups in primary school (Department for Education, 2013). Moreover, the introduction of the formal English, Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling (EGPS) test in 2013 signalled the importance of both teaching and assessing

spelling ability. However, in comparison with a wealth of research and policy guidance provided to ensure schools take an evidence-informed approach to developing reading standards (Castles et al., 2018; National Reading Panel, 2000; Rose, 2006), spelling remains rather the 'poor relative'. Evidence-informed guidance for teaching spelling remains less visible on the policy agenda and spelling is not covered in any depth in Initial Teacher Training (ITT) content in England (Department for Education, 2019a). Spelling intervention research is limited in comparison with reading interventions (Brooks, 2016) and we have little data on what spelling instruction actually looks like in schools. Greater awareness of teachers' pedagogical approaches to spelling could inform future classroom practice, identify where further research is required and highlight best practice approaches to intervention. The present study aimed to capture how spelling is currently being taught in primary schools in England.

## Why focus on spelling?

National data from English primary schools continue to raise concerns about children's achievement in spelling and writing (Department for Education, 2019a). In 2019, Teacher Assessment of writing at the end of Key Stage 1 showed just 69% of children meeting the required standard in writing. At the end of Key Stage 2, 78% of children met the required standards in both the EGPS test and Teacher Assessment of writing. A number of children are known to struggle with spelling and research demonstrates that spelling difficulties persist through to adulthood (Bernstein, 2009; Connelly et al., 2006). Definitions of dyslexia reflect difficulties with accurate spelling (Lyon et al., 2003; Rose, 2009). Children with developmental language difficulties have also been shown to struggle with spelling (Joye et al., 2019). Furthermore, it is clear that spelling difficulties extend to broader problems with writing. Research has demonstrated how children with dyslexia pause more frequently within words to decipher spellings, and this pausing behaviour has been shown to predict how much they write, and the quality of writing produced (Sumner et al., 2013). Thus, there is the argument that mastering spelling can free working memory resources and assist children in becoming both accurate and fluent writers (Graham et al., 2002; Graham et al., 2018). Limiting vocabulary choices in writing to words that are easier to spell has also been demonstrated by children with dyslexia, leading to less diverse written vocabulary, which again has consequences for ratings of text quality (Berninger et al., 2008; Sumner et al., 2016). It is, therefore, important that children are receiving high-quality instruction to support the development of spelling.

Spelling is indeed a complex process. In comparison with transparent orthographies with consistent phoneme-to-grapheme mappings, learning to spell in English is particularly challenging because it has an opaque orthography (Caravolas, 2004). One phoneme can be represented by many alternative graphemes. For instance, the phoneme /ā:/ can be written as <a>, <a\_e>, <ay>, <ai>, <ey>, <eigh> and <ei>. Further, a number of English spellings do not follow direct phoneme-to-grapheme mappings and the approach to spelling may rely on using a 'whole-word' or lexical strategy (Stuart, 2004). Stage and phase theories of spelling development suggest that children first rely on their phonological skills when spelling but, with experience and exposure to written texts, will gradually incorporate their knowledge of orthographic conventions to spell the target word (Ehri, 2000; Frith, 1985). A number of studies, however, question the idea of a linear approach to acquiring spelling skills (i.e. phonology then orthography), as empirical research has demonstrated that children in the first year of schooling in fact make use of both phonological and orthographic awareness when spelling (see Bourassa & Treiman, 2009). Furthermore, the contribution of morphological representations for spelling should be recognised (Treiman & Bourassa, 2000). Here the Triple Word Form theory (Berninger et al., 2010), which takes a non-linear stance, offers teachers a useful framework to support children by recognising that being able to spell an

unknown word can require drawing on phonological, orthographic and morphological knowledge (Critten et al., 2016). Moreover, the complex relationship between these three sources of linguistic knowledge develops early on (McMurray, 2006) and further over time (Bahr et al., 2012; Daffern, 2017). Research in this respect highlights skills that may be covered in teaching and consideration of how they compatibly interact should be reflected in instructional practices and priorities.

## Spelling instruction

The language used in existing spelling schemes to describe words that do not have direct phoneme-grapheme mapping is 'irregular' or 'exception' words (e.g. Letters and Sounds, 2007; Read Write Inc, Miskin, 2011), suggesting that children must learn to master these spellings by memorisation because phonics knowledge alone will not be sufficient. However, English is a morpho-phonemic language and new directions in the literature acknowledge that considering etymology and morphology will help to further support the teaching of spelling (Bowers & Bowers, 2017). Identifying strategies that teachers use to support spelling will provide an understanding of pedagogical knowledge and may make it possible to draw inferences about their theoretical approaches to conceptualising spelling.

Despite the more recent push towards considering etymology and morphology when teaching spelling, it is predominantly the stage and phase theories of spelling development (Ehri, 2000; Frith, 1985) that inform spelling instruction in the early primary years. The English National Curriculum spelling lists (DfE, 2013) are based on the view that children move through a series of linear stages or phases when learning to spell, with an initial emphasis on phonics and then moving towards a morphological approach in Years 3 and 4 (ages 7–9). Spelling lists are presented as a guide of what to focus on for Key Stage 1 (Years 1–2 of formal schooling in England; children aged 5–7), and in a combined section for lower Key Stage 2 (Years 3–4; aged 7–9) and upper Key Stage 2 (Years 5–6; aged 9–11). At the end of each key stage, spelling achievement is tested via the EGPS national test. Test framework documents (Department for Education, 2016) for the EGPS test detail information about content, while stating that the purpose is not to provide guidance on teaching (Department for Education, 2016, p. 5). In this sense, schools can use their own judgement to decide how to interpret and apply the content. This places the onus on the teacher and relies on them having received adequate training to enable them to feel confident in their ability to support spelling development. Teacher training and views related to spelling are yet to be explored in English schools, as is the actual use of the prescribed spelling lists within the English curriculum.

Another strand to consider are the instructional practices taken, such as the frequency of teaching and whether this differs across year groups, and the resources/approaches used. Graham (2000) refers to two sides of the spelling debate, with some arguing that spelling is 'caught' or naturally acquired if children are exposed to literacy-rich environments, and others arguing that spelling is a skill which must be directly and explicitly 'taught'. Research has shown that explicit spelling instruction extends to improvements in writing quality (Berninger et al., 2002) and that when spelling is taught it has a positive impact on student attainment (Graham & Santangelo, 2014). Of the few studies that have surveyed instructional spelling practices, it was found that virtually all primary grade teachers in the USA reported explicitly teaching spelling, but that the approaches/resources used varied widely (Cutler & Graham, 2008; Graham et al., 2003). A study based on writing practices in England also reported that primary school teachers spent time teaching spelling weekly, but there was large variability across teachers (Dockrell et al., 2016). Information was limited on the specific resources used by teachers, but the study found statistically significant differences in the focus of spelling instruction across year groups. Teachers in the early years of primary

school reported an almost daily focus on phoneme-level work, but this focus was not maintained as children progressed through the school. Interestingly, interviews with primary school teachers in Australia suggested that despite spelling being a key component in the curriculum, teachers still lacked confidence in teaching spelling, which has impacted on instructional practices. Teachers who expressed low confidence demonstrated a reduced repertoire of strategies to teach spelling, often relying on rote learning or a 'sounding out' (phonology) approach (Daffern & Critten, 2019; Daffern & Mackenzie, 2020a). This finding suggests that variability in practice may in part relate to teacher perceptions of their ability to support spelling. Further exploration of classroom practice is warranted.

## The present study

Despite a consensus that spelling makes a crucial contribution to literacy development, little is known about how spelling is taught in England. While the National Curriculum provides guidance on the skills and knowledge a child must learn at each stage in primary school, the methods used to approach the teaching of spelling are unknown. Exploration of whether schools have a spelling policy that provides structure and expectations as to how the development and mastery of this skill is supported was also deemed important. Likewise, information related to 'if and how' spelling is incorporated with other literacy-related activities and the programmes or strategies children are exposed to for learning spellings would be useful. To be able to inform the development of future policies and practices, a better understanding of how spelling is currently taught is warranted. The purpose of the present study, therefore, was two-fold: (1) to explore primary school teachers' views of teaching spelling; and (2) to capture current instructional practices.

Comparisons related to practice are first explored across different year groups and teaching roles. The primary year groups were grouped by Key Stage 1 (Years 1–2) and then splitting Key Stage 2 into the lower (Years 3–4) and upper year groups (Years 5–6) as per the National Curriculum Programme of Study. Three key respondent group categories were created (class teachers, specialist literacy teachers and Special Educational Needs Coordinators, SENCOs), as these reflected the different roles within schools that support literacy and ensured a representative view. Participants were grouped in this way to assess whether the role and year group influenced confidence in teaching spelling, the frequency of spelling teaching and the methods used. It was hypothesised that spelling may be taught more frequently by teachers in the year groups involved in national testing (e.g. Year 1 phonics screening check; Years 2 and 6 Teacher Assessment and SATs). The focus of teaching was also predicted to vary with teachers of younger age groups expected to use more phonology-based strategies, in line with the National Curriculum spelling lists and the findings of Dockrell et al. (2016); yet we might expect a wider range of strategies to be employed for the older age groups. Furthermore, it was hypothesised that, given their specialist literacy training, specialist teachers would teach spelling more frequently and confidently, and drawing on a broader range of evidence-informed strategies than class teachers and SENCOs.

## METHOD

### Participants

Populations of interest (primary-based teachers, specialist teachers and SENCOs) were targeted by asking teaching-related course providers to distribute information about the survey to qualified professionals, using related forums, and advertising the study through social

media channels (i.e. Twitter). This combined approach elicited 213 responses in the first instance. Questions posed at the beginning of the survey asked respondents to provide informed consent and to confirm that they were currently working in a primary school in England (Years 1–6). The focus here was only on these year groups in which the National Curriculum is statutory (thus, excluding Reception classes). Thirty-seven respondents did not confirm these points and are excluded from the reporting. Sixteen respondents completed the background information questions but did not progress to the subsequent section in the survey which focused specifically on spelling. The decision was also taken to exclude these responses, given the focus of the study. Two respondents were excluded because they had sole leadership roles with no teaching responsibility. Thus, the final sample comprised 158 respondents who accessed all sections of the survey.

The majority of the respondents were female ( $n = 131$ , 82.9% of the sample) and reported their ethnicity as White ( $n = 134$ , 84.8%), which aligns with national data on the primary school workforce (i.e. 82.4% female and 92.9% White; Department for Education, 2019b). All respondents reported having a teaching qualification: Postgraduate Certificate in Education,  $n = 97$ , 61.4%; Bachelor in Education,  $n = 51$ , 32.3%; Graduate Teacher Programme (including School Direct and Teach First),  $n = 10$ , 6.3%. A range of teaching experience was recorded (98.7% of the sample had taught for more than 1 year, with 48.5% reporting teaching for more than 11 years). Three groups were identified from the reported roles of the respondents: class teachers ( $n = 98$ , 62.0%), specialist teachers ( $n = 31$ , 18.4%) and SENCOs ( $n = 29$ , 18.4%). Additional leadership roles were reported by some: 27 class teachers had additional senior roles within their school, as did three of the SENCO group. Respondents covered the range of year groups: Years 1–2 ( $n = 41$ , 25.9%), Years 3–4, ( $n = 34$ , 21.6%) and Years 5–6 ( $n = 44$ , 27.8%). This grouping allowed for consideration of year group changes and also ensured that the groups were large enough for subsequent comparisons. In addition, a number of respondents identified that they work across year groups (1–6). Therefore, they formed a ‘mixed year’ group ( $n = 39$ , 24.7%). Of note this group comprised four class teachers, 15 SENCOs and 20 specialist teachers.

School characteristics of the respondents were collected. The highest number of responses were based in Inner and Outer London ( $n = 67$ , 42.4% and  $n = 41$ , 25.9%, respectively), although responses were gathered from each region in England. Twenty respondents (12.7%) worked at schools with fewer than 199 pupils, with 69 (43.7%) working at schools with 200–400 pupils, and the remaining 60 respondents (43.6%) in large schools of 401 pupils or more. Respondents largely appeared to be working in schools that were above the national average for pupils with English as an Additional Language (EAL;  $n = 89$ , 56.3%) and those accessing Free School Meals (FSM;  $n = 82$ , 51.9%). Twenty-four respondents (15.2%) were based in schools in line with the national average for pupils with EAL, and 50 (31.6%) were below the average. Thirty respondents (19.0%) were based in schools in line with the average for FSM and 36 (22.8%) were below the national average.

## Materials

The survey was administered online using Qualtrics and organised as follows (see the Supplementary Material for the questions in full):

### Background information

Respondents were asked questions related to demographic information (age, gender and ethnicity) and their teaching experience (qualifications, training, years of experience, role and year group[s] currently teaching).

## Information about the school

To determine how representative the sample was, questions were asked about the school characteristics (type and size of school, location and data related to the proportion of children receiving FSM and identified as having EAL).

## Teaching spelling

The final section of the survey focused on (1) respondents' attitudes to teaching spelling (e.g. rating confidence and recognised importance of teaching spelling, as well as the usefulness of the curriculum spelling lists on a five-point Likert scale), (2) whether respondents were aware of existing spelling policies in their school, (3) their approach to teaching spelling, such as how often and spelling lists set and (4) what strategies and resources were being used in practice.

## Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from UCL Institute of Education research ethics committee. Survey questions were piloted with primary-based teachers to determine the suitability of wording and for feedback on whether the questions captured the research objectives. Respondents received information relating to the purpose of the study and were asked to give consent to taking part in the study before proceeding to the survey questions. Responses were collected anonymously.

## Data analysis

Data relating to training, approaches taken within school and strategies used are presented descriptively. Data that related to Likert scale responses were analysed statistically using SPSS. Tests of normality and homogeneity were checked and led to the use of parametric statistics. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests were used to compare the difference in responses across groups (year groups and roles). The reported  $p$ -value represents the significance level (with  $p < 0.05$  being significant) and effect sizes are reported using partial eta squared (abbreviated as  $\eta_p^2$ ; 0.01 indicating a small effect, 0.06 a medium effect and 0.14 indicating a large effect; Lakens, 2013). Year group and teaching role comparisons were computed on the questions which explored views and approaches to teaching practice. Resources shared are presented descriptively from the whole sample.

## RESULTS

### School policy and training

Of the whole sample, just 50 respondents (31.64%) reported having a formal spelling policy at the school that they work in. Respondents were asked if they had received any training in the last 5 years on how to teach and support spelling. Over a third ( $n = 57$ , 36.1%) reported having no training on spelling during this period. The remaining ( $n = 101$ , 63.9%) identified a number of training opportunities, the majority delivered during in-service training (INSET;  $n = 70$ ) or through attendance on postgraduate courses ( $n = 28$ ). Other reported training

was through independent online sessions ( $n = 14$ ) or CPD attended outside of the school ( $n = 2$ ).

## Views on teaching spelling

Table 1 reports respondents' views on the importance of teaching spelling, per year group categories and roles (teacher, SENCO, specialist). Of note, no respondents felt that the teaching of spelling was not important. A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant difference across the teaching year group responses,  $F(3, 154) = 2.83, p = 0.04, \eta_p^2 = 0.05$ . Post hoc tests demonstrated only significant differences between ratings from teachers in Years 1–2 and those in Years 5–6 ( $p = 0.04$ ): teachers of the younger age group rated spelling as more important. The other groups were comparable in their responses ( $p > 0.19$ ). The responses across different roles were also examined but revealed no group difference for ratings of the importance of teaching spelling,  $F(2, 155) = 1.12, p = 0.32, \eta_p^2 = 0.01$ .

Confidence in teaching spelling was also explored (Table 2). Looking at the year group breakdowns, significant group differences were observed for reported confidence,  $F(3, 154) = 2.69, p = 0.04, \eta_p^2 = 0.05$ . Post hoc analyses revealed that teachers working across the whole school rated themselves as more confident at teaching spelling than teachers based in Years 5–6 ( $p = 0.04$ ). No differences were revealed across the remaining year group comparisons ( $p > 0.28$ ). Comparing teacher roles, statistically significant differences were observed for reported confidence,  $F(2, 155) = 3.84, p = 0.02, \eta_p^2 = 0.05$ . Post hoc tests revealed that specialist teachers rated their level of confidence significantly higher than class teachers ( $p = 0.02$ ), but responses from SENCOs were comparable with those from class teachers ( $p = 0.73$ ) and also between SENCOs and specialist teachers ( $p = 0.68$ ).

## Approaches to teaching spelling

Respondents were asked how many times a week they explicitly teach spelling (Table 3). A statistically significant difference in frequency of teaching was found across the year groups,  $F(3, 153) = 7.75, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.13$ . Post hoc analyses revealed that teachers in Years 1–2 reported teaching spelling more often than those in Years 3–4 ( $p = 0.003$ ) and Years 5–6 ( $p < 0.001$ ). Teachers who taught in Years 3–4, 5–6 and across the whole school were comparable in this respect ( $p > 0.12$ ).

TABLE 1 Means (SD) and distribution of teachers' responses about the importance of teaching spelling

	Mean (SD)	Not at all (%)	Slightly (%)	Moderately (%)	Very (%)	Extremely (%)
Years 1–2 ( $n = 41$ )	4.21 (0.65)	0%	0%	12.2%	53.7%	34.1%
Years 3–4 ( $n = 34$ )	3.88 (0.68)	0%	0%	29.4%	52.9%	17.6%
Years 5–6 ( $n = 44$ )	3.79 (0.85)	0%	4.5%	34.1%	38.6%	22.7%
Mixed ( $n = 39$ )	4.05 (0.57)	0%	2.6%	20.5%	64.1%	12.8%
Class teacher ( $n = 98$ )	4.00 (0.77)	0%	2.0%	23.5%	46.9%	27.6%
Specialist ( $n = 31$ )	3.77 (0.76)	0%	3.2%	32.3%	48.4%	16.1%
SENCO ( $n = 29$ )	3.93 (0.53)	0%	0%	17.2%	72.4%	10.3%

Note: Coding related to means: 1 = not at all important; 2 = slightly; 3 = moderately; 4 = very; 5 = extremely important.

**TABLE 2** Means (SD) and distribution of teachers' responses about their confidence in teaching spelling

	Mean (SD)	Not at all (%)	Slightly (%)	Moderately (%)	Very (%)	Extremely (%)
Years 1–2 ( <i>n</i> = 41)	3.46 (84)	2.4%	4.9%	46.3%	36.6%	9.8%
Years 3–4 ( <i>n</i> = 34)	3.44 (0.74)	0%	5.9%	52.9%	32.4%	8.8%
Years 5–6 ( <i>n</i> = 44)	3.34 (0.88)	2.3%	11.4%	45.5%	31.8%	9.1%
Mixed ( <i>n</i> = 39)	3.89 (0.68)	0%	2.6%	28.2%	53.8%	15.4%
Class teacher ( <i>n</i> = 98)	3.38 (0.78)	1.0%	7.1%	52.0%	31.6%	8.2%
Specialist ( <i>n</i> = 31)	3.83 (0.77)	0%	6.5%	19.4%	58.1%	16.1%
SENCO ( <i>n</i> = 29)	3.58 (0.91)	3.4%	3.4%	37.9%	41.4%	13.8%

Note: Coding related to means: 1 = not at all important; 2 = slightly; 3 = moderately; 4 = very; 5 = extremely important.

A significant difference for frequency of teaching spelling was also observed across teaching roles,  $F(2, 154) = 4.14$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.05$ . Specialist teachers reported teaching spelling more frequently than class teachers ( $p = 0.02$ ) and SENCOs ( $p = 0.04$ ). Class teachers and SENCOs responded similarly ( $p = 0.93$ ).

Respondents were asked if they use the same spelling lists with the whole class or groups that they teach. Ninety-six respondents from the total sample (60.7%) answered that they differentiated the spelling items given to children in some way (Years 1–2,  $n = 34.1\%$ , Years 3–4,  $n = 20.6\%$ , Years 5–6,  $n = 43.2\%$ , mixed year groups,  $n = 20.5\%$ ). Fourteen respondents provided further information in the open text box linked to this question. All stated that differentiation was based on the ability of the child, setting easier word lists for those presenting with spelling difficulties or who have EAL.

Respondents were also asked if they set spelling tests (Table 4). A significant difference was found for how spelling tests were set across year groups,  $F(3, 154) = 3.06$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.05$ . Further exploration revealed that only differences were found between teachers in Years 3–4 and those teaching across the whole school ( $p = 0.03$ ), with those in Years 3–4 setting tests more frequently. No group differences were found in this respect across the teaching roles,  $F(2, 155) = 2.29$ ,  $p = 0.10$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$ .

## Resources and strategies used

The remaining results are reported as a whole sample for ease of reporting, as no differences or distinct patterns were observed across groups. Respondents were asked what resources they used to support their teaching of spelling. Table 5 depicts the 10 resources that were mentioned most frequently. The most common response was that they devise their own spelling resources (reported by 81 respondents, 51.2%). No-nonsense spelling and ReadWrite Inc. were also schemes that were reported highly ( $n = 28$ , 17.7%;  $n = 20$ , 12.6%, respectively).

When asked specifically whether the Department for Education (DfE) spelling lists are a useful resource to inform their teaching, 13 (8.2%) respondents selected 'not at all' useful and at the other end of the scale six (3.8%) reported them to be extremely useful. The largest response was for the moderately useful rating, which 69 (43.7%) of respondents selected, and the remaining values were 30 (19.0%) for slightly useful and 38 (24.1%) selecting very useful. An open text box was linked to this question to allow respondents to comment on the usefulness of the DfE spelling lists when planning teaching and yielded 82 responses. Twenty-six respondents suggested that the DfE spelling lists were useful as a guide of what

**TABLE 3** Means (SD) and frequency distributions of how often spelling is taught

	Mean (SD)	Never (%)	1–2 times a week (%)	3–4 times a week (%)	Daily (%)
Years 1–2 ( <i>n</i> = 41)	3.07 (0.95)	7.3%	19.5%	31.7%	41.5%
Years 3–4 ( <i>n</i> = 34)	2.35 (0.84)	8.8%	61.8%	14.7%	14.7%
Years 5–6 ( <i>n</i> = 44)	2.27 (0.82)	13.6%	54.5%	22.7%	9.1%
Mixed ( <i>n</i> = 39)	2.84 (0.89)	2.6%	38.5%	30.8%	28.2%
Class teacher ( <i>n</i> = 98)	2.55 (0.96)	11.7%	44.7%	21.3%	22.3%
Specialist teacher ( <i>n</i> = 31)	3.07 (0.83)	0%	29.0%	35.5%	35.5%
SENCO ( <i>n</i> = 29)	2.48 (0.83)	7.7%	50.0%	30.8%	11.5%

Note: Coding related to means: 1 = never; 2 = 1–2 times a week; 3 = 3–4 times a week; 4 = daily.

**TABLE 4** Means (SD) and frequency distributions of setting spelling tests

	Mean (SD)	Never (%)	Monthly (%)	Fortnightly (%)	Weekly (%)
Years 1–2 ( <i>n</i> = 41)	2.80 (1.38)	34.1%	2.4%	12.2%	51.2%
Years 3–4 ( <i>n</i> = 34)	3.41 (1.15)	14.8%	0%	3.6%	81.5%
Years 5–6 ( <i>n</i> = 44)	3.07 (1.30)	25.0%	4.5%	9.1%	61.4%
Mixed ( <i>n</i> = 39)	2.51 (1.43)	43.6%	5.1%	7.7%	43.6%
Class teacher ( <i>n</i> = 98)	3.11 (1.28)	23.4%	3.2%	8.5%	64.9%
Specialist teacher ( <i>n</i> = 31)	3.07 (0.83)	41.9%	3.2%	9.7%	45.2%
SENCO ( <i>n</i> = 29)	2.72 (0.83)	42.3%	3.8%	7.7%	46.2%

Note: Coding related to means: 1 = never; 2 = monthly; 3 = fortnightly; 4 = weekly.

to teach and the level expected, while a further seven respondents suggested that they aligned with assessments within the school. On the other hand, 15 respondents felt that the DfE spelling lists were not suitable for children with Special Educational Needs, 12 felt that a limitation of the word lists was that there was no guidance on how to actually teach the words (e.g. how they relate to spelling rules), eight felt that the word lists were limited and reported developing them with additional resources, eight felt that the words lacked context because they do not relate to what children would be using in their writing and six suggested that there was no clear order for teaching.

In terms of *how* spelling is being taught in primary school, teaching spelling as an isolated activity was reported most frequently by the sample (*n* = 93, 58.8%). More than one strategy could be selected by respondents. The second most popular strategy to teach spelling was to combine it with phonics instruction (*n* = 87, 55.1%), followed by combining it with a writing lesson (*n* = 84, 53.1%) and linking it to a reading activity (*n* = 59, 37.3%). The least reported strategy was to link spelling activities with vocabulary-building activities (*n* = 54, 34.1%). Further, specific questions were asked about strategies that are being used to teach spelling. A series of strategies were suggested to respondents who could select as many as they use in their practice. There was also an opportunity to add to these strategies in an open text box. All respondents reported using at least one strategy. Table 6 reports the strategies in order of popularity.

Additional strategies that were low in frequency were a structured word inquiry/etymology approach (reported by *n* = 4 respondents), pyramid spelling (*n* = 2) and using metacognitive strategies (*n* = 2).

TABLE 5 Resources used to teach spelling

Resources	Frequency of use (percentage of sample)
Teachers devise their own	81 (51.2%)
No nonsense spelling	28 (17.7%)
Read Write Inc.	20 (12.6%)
Twinkl spelling packs	18 (11.4%)
Spelling shed	13 (8.2%)
Department for Education spelling lists	9 (5.7%)
Letters and sounds	9 (5.7%)
Nessy	7 (4.4%)
Wordshark	5 (3.2%)
SoundsWrite	5 (3.2%)

TABLE 6 Strategies used to teach spelling

Strategies	Frequency of use (percentage of sample)
Look–Say–Cover–Write–Check	122 (77.2%)
Mnemonics	91 (57.5%)
Morphology	90 (56.9%)
Multisensory teaching	75 (47.4%)
Simultaneous oral spelling	51 (32.2%)
Rote memorisation	49 (31.0%)
Cued spelling	26 (16.4%)

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present study was to capture the nature of spelling instruction in primary schools in England. Comparisons were made across the primary year groups to determine whether there were significant age-related differences in how spelling is approached and also across different roles to try and unpick whether different practices exist depending on expertise.

Considering first how well equipped teaching staff are in supporting the teaching and learning of spelling, an interesting finding was that two-thirds of the sample reported that their school does not have a spelling policy. Here opportunities may be missed to provide a coordinated approach to support the consistency of teaching and assessment across the school. In addition, one-third of respondents had not received any training in spelling over the last 5 years and those who had received training reported that this was largely via INSET or from undertaking their own further postgraduate studies. It has been suggested that training best practice approaches should involve deep collaborative enquiry over a sustained period of time (Cordingley et al., 2003; Nelson et al., 2015), as opposed to the more familiar after school staff meetings and isolated INSET days more common in practice (Cordingley, 2015).

A lack of focus on spelling in school training may be attributed to the focus on phonics and reading which is often observed in classrooms in England and has been more of a focus in government policy (Ofsted, 2019; Rose, 2006). That said, all respondents recognised the

importance of teaching spelling. Teachers of children in Key Stage 1 (Years 1–2) rated the importance of spelling as significantly higher than those teaching the older age group (Years 5–6). This shift for teachers working with upper primary school children may be due to the idea that most children will become fairly automatic spellers by this point (Berninger, 1999) and are typically moving on to working on other aspects of writing such as planning and shaping written texts. No differences were observed across the teaching roles—all regarding spelling as important. However, when asked about their confidence in teaching spelling, the majority of respondents identified that they were just ‘moderately confident’ and, perhaps unsurprisingly, specialist teachers expressed higher confidence than class teachers. Together these findings suggest that schools may wish to consider ways in which to develop expertise and confidence in teaching spelling.

The next set of findings relate to instructional practices. A range of practices exist. Nearly all respondents see spelling as a taught skill. There was, however, variation in frequency. Teaching spelling was more frequent in the younger age groups (41.5% reporting daily teaching in Years 1–2), but the highest proportion reporting not explicitly teaching spelling was in Years 5–6. Specialist teachers were found to focus more on teaching spelling than class teachers and SENCOs, which is probably due to the children that they work with having literacy difficulties and thus needing targeted spelling support. Linked to teaching, there was the expectation generally that children will master a list of spelling words each week, although it is unclear what other measures were used by teachers to monitor spelling attainment and progress or which informal or formal assessments of spelling and writing were used. However, there was a significant proportion of teachers across year groups that do not set spelling tests.

Although the DfE provides spelling lists for each year group, it was interesting to note that primary teachers in England reported largely devising their own resources for teaching spelling, with very few drawing upon existing schemes. Many teachers reported using resources which are free to download from web-based educational resource providers (e.g. Twinkl). The accessibility of free internet resources offers a ‘quick fix’ for busy teachers, but this in turn can limit the search for evidence-based instructional methods and strategies, which is a concern. The use of the DfE spelling lists was suggested by respondents to be useful as a guide but many commented that they were not suitable for children with special educational needs and felt that a key limitation of the lists was the lack of guidance of *how* to teach these words (e.g. using spelling rules). The way in which spelling was reported to be taught perhaps also demonstrates a lack of access to current research evidence and the research to practice gaps (Slavin, 2002). Spelling was reported to be taught as an isolated activity a lot of the time, with very few respondents identifying spelling as an activity that would be paired with vocabulary work.

Although the Triple Word Form theory identifies that phonological, orthographic and morphological knowledge develops concurrently and is important throughout all stages of learning to spell (Berninger et al., 2010), just half of the sample reported teaching morphological rules as a strategy to support spelling and only four respondents reported recognising structured word inquiry, whereby children are encouraged to explore language through the generation and testing of hypotheses into how the writing system operates. The Education Endowment Foundation (2017) guidance report for improving literacy promotes the use of systematic phonics schemes to teach decoding and encoding, yet recognises the lack of studies related to the teaching of spelling. Interestingly, the most popular strategy demonstrated to children was the ‘Look–Say–Cover–Write–Check’ method. Research on this strategy has been shown to be less effective in supporting spelling than teaching rule-based strategies, such as word study approaches (Dymock & Nicholson, 2017; Fisher et al., 2007). The ‘Look–Say–Cover–Write–Check’ strategy incorporates visual memorisation strategies and teachers may be constrained in shifting instructional methods from the

memorisation model owing to gaps in their own understanding of the English Language (Fresch, 2007). The explicit instruction that children require is dependent on teachers' own knowledge and understanding of how linguistic processes shape written language (Apel et al., 2004). Memorisation as a learning strategy can be effective (McArthur et al., 2015), but in the context of spelling it is most effective when situated within orthographical instruction alongside phonological and morphological approaches. The findings of the present study suggest that many teachers in England over-rely on a limited range of strategies. This may also be linked to the reported lack of confidence amongst teachers (as suggested in Daffern & Critten, 2019), which reduces the application of a broader range of pedagogical approaches to teaching spelling in response to individual need. This in turn is further constrained by the guidance provided in the National Curriculum.

Research suggests that reading and spelling are closely related and can work symbiotically to support learners to become successfully literate (e.g. Ehri, 2000; Graham & Santangelo, 2014). The Triple Word Form theory provides the basis for suggesting that greater links should be made between reading and vocabulary teaching as a means of supporting spelling development given the role of the phonological and orthographic lexicon and semantic system (e.g. developing knowledge of morphemes) for encoding unknown words. Focusing on the relationship between spelling and semantic skills may help to increase the likelihood of a clearer mental picture of the word, leading to the correct spelling of the word (Al Otaiba & Hosp, 2010). Moreover, direct teaching of morphological relationships can be effective with primary-aged children when combined with explicit teaching of how this knowledge can be applied (Bowers et al., 2010; Devonshire & Fluck, 2010).

Morphological strategies have been shown to be beneficial for children with a range of special educational needs such as dyslexia and language impairment, in contrast to memorisation strategies which did not demonstrate a significant effect on spelling performance (Galuschka et al., 2020). Bowers and Bowers (2017) argue there is an overemphasis on phonics teaching, and literacy instruction should involve structured word inquiry which can support children to make sense of spelling patterns by directly teaching them how the inter-relationship between phonology, morphology and etymology informs the organisation of the spelling system. Fresch (2000) also argues for a word study approach, providing opportunities for problem solving and opportunities to observe the relationships between words. Exploring how this can be translated to use in the classroom would be beneficial.

## Implications for practice

Teachers' knowledge and attitudes about how spelling instruction should be implemented may determine the quality of instruction and its impact on pupil learning. Daffern and Mackenzie (2020b) note that teachers in many English-speaking countries feel insufficiently prepared and lack confidence in teaching spelling and that in relying on programmes based on synthetic phonics, as were many of the resources used by teachers in the present study, teachers' use of a broader range of strategies may be further constrained. Given that the majority of teachers reported themselves as being just moderately confident at teaching spelling, ways to better prepare them to teach spelling and an examination of the clarity of national guidance available should be considered. Daffern and Critten (2019) argue that the teaching of spelling in schools should focus on the development of instructional approaches to spelling that are consistent across schools. The finding that less than one-third of teachers in the present study reported having a spelling policy in their schools and over 50% reported devising their own resources is therefore notable in highlighting the impact of a lack of strategic direction of evidence-informed pedagogical approaches on the consistency of approaches and resources used by teachers. The ITT framework in England recognises

the crucial link between quality of teaching and pupil outcomes; however, spelling is mentioned just once when suggesting that trainees observe how skilled teachers use systematic synthetic phonics to support the development of reading and spelling (Department for Education, 2019a). Of note, these concerns about lack of preparation to teach spelling are not limited to England and are observed internationally, suggesting that the implications for practice below may be relevant in other countries, for instance, in the responses of teachers to surveys in New Zealand (McNeill & Kirk, 2014) and Australia (Oakley, 2018). Two key points stand out when reflecting on teacher training around spelling: (1) the lack of a significant evidence base for existing programmes/schemes; and (2) the approach to supporting Continuing Professional Development (CPD).

Supporting the first point here, Brooks' (2016) review analysing the effectiveness of approaches to supporting children with literacy difficulties examines spelling interventions. However, of the 32 considered only three were specifically focused on spelling and the reported studies were not based on randomised controlled trials, therefore lacking reliable evidence. The Education Endowment Foundation is also lacking evaluations of spelling approaches and suggests teachers use knowledge of strategies that skilled spellers use to guide teaching (including phonics, analogy, identifying and using salient and visual features of words). Although word study approaches to teaching spelling are gathering widespread support (Goodwin & Ahn, 2010; Westwood, 2018), research is in its infancy and accessible materials for teachers to use and adapt to their practice are scarce. Teachers may require support to redesign their approach to spelling instruction in the classroom.

The second point relates to effective models of CPD that are most likely to influence improvements in content knowledge and instructional practices. At both the ITT phase and throughout their teaching careers, teachers need training in evidence-based approaches to teaching spelling both to the children who 'catch' spelling and to those who require additional, personalised instruction. Professional development for teachers can have a positive impact on instructional practices, but the model of one-off training courses seldom leads to significant changes in how teachers practise in the classroom and requires a more sustained and comprehensive approach (Carroll et al., 2012). Westwood (2018) supports this drive for a more sustained model, arguing that there is an increasing body of research that proposes that the effectiveness of professional development in leading to enduring changes in practice requires programmes to be ongoing over time and to incorporate follow-up and support through mentoring. Importantly, in relation to spelling, training needs to extend its focus from simply *what* must be taught to support with *how* to teach spelling and the particular strategies that are effective (McNeill & Kirk, 2014). Improvements in metalinguistic knowledge of the phonemic, orthographic and morphemic elements of the English language may produce positive results in both confidence and instructional competency (Ehri & Flugman, 2018).

Our findings demonstrated that greater confidence was shown by specialist teachers and perhaps now a timely revision of the Rose (2009) recommendations, regarding access to specialist teachers and support in England, is warranted. Specialist teachers could use their additional expertise to support CPD in the use of evidence-informed practices related to the teaching of spelling. Professional Development frameworks should seek to support teachers from ITT, through Early Career to Leadership by providing high-quality, effective training that draws on both current spelling research and current evidence for effective CPD.

## Limitations and future directions

While the present study tackled the views of teachers and instructional practices around spelling in detail, limitations can be acknowledged. The survey design may attract those with

an interest in spelling and thus not all views and practices are represented. Linked to this, although each region in England was represented by the respondents, the majority of the participants were based in inner and outer London. A more accurate picture of variations in instructional practices for spelling in England would be afforded by targeting teachers in all regions across the country. School staff with Qualified Teacher Status were invited to participate and were asked to indicate their stage of career and role in school. Further research could be undertaken with specific groups at different stages of their careers. Assessing the preparedness of Early Careers Teachers could then be used to identify gaps in the primary ITT curriculum on how to teach spelling and used to inform improvements to the ITT programmes of study. The use of a survey also limits the depth of the responses. Future research could triangulate this descriptive data with classroom observation or interviews with teachers to further explore what informs instructional practices for spelling. Moreover, interviews with children to examine their own views on spelling and understanding of particular strategies alongside spelling assessments would facilitate greater insight into the impact of the instructional approaches reported by the teachers in this study on children's spelling performance.

Further research is also required on spelling approaches, programmes and interventions to be able to better advise on evidence-informed approaches. Research should aim to create practical support for teachers. Strategies that can be easily incorporated into teaching are more likely to reduce the research to practice gap (Stoiber & Gettinger, 2016) and mean that teachers will be less reliant on 'quick fix' solutions which have not been evaluated.

## CONCLUSIONS

The present study provides insight into teachers' beliefs around spelling and current practices. The English curriculum provides guidance for teachers on the standards and expectations for children at different stages of development; however there are gaps between expectations and how these can be achieved (i.e. successful strategies for teaching spelling), resulting in variations and inconsistencies in instructional practices. Few schools have an explicit spelling policy to support the consistency of teaching spelling. Spelling is taught more frequently in the younger primary grades and specialist literacy teachers who typically work with those with special educational needs feel more confident in supporting spelling than class teachers. Teachers are lacking confidence in their ability to teach spelling and notably teaching staff report creating their own spelling resources or relying on resources and strategies that we do not yet have evidence for their effectiveness. Detailed information about the content of these resources was beyond the scope of this study. Of note, at present, there is a dissociation between theories of spelling development, which highlight the importance of phonology, orthography and morphology (Berninger et al., 2010), and classroom instructional practices, which focus largely on phonics and memorisation approaches. Future studies should examine the content of teacher-created resources and evaluate the extent to which they are informed by research evidence. Reflections on professional development have also been made. The importance of developing a consistent dialogue between teachers and researchers in narrowing the research to practice gap and encouraging a knowledge-exchange process is acknowledged, as greater awareness of teacher pedagogical approaches to spelling will in turn inform future practice in classrooms (Nutley et al., 2003; Shucksmith, 2016).

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Nothing to disclose.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## ETHICS APPROVAL

Ethical approval was obtained from the UCL Institute of Education research ethics committee.

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## APPENDIX A

### Section A: About you

1. What is your age?
  - Under 25
  - 25–34 years old
  - 35–44 years old
  - 45–54 years old
  - 55–64 years old
  - 65+
2. What is your gender?
  - Male
  - Female
  - Non-binary
  - Prefer not to say
3. How would you describe your ethnic origin? (Tick one box only)
  - Asian (Asian British, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese, Japanese)
  - Black (Black British, African, Caribbean)
  - Middle Eastern/Arab
  - Mixed/Multiple heritage
  - White British (English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British)
  - White (Irish, European, traveller, Gypsy, other)
4. What teaching qualification did you obtain?
  - PGCE
  - BEd
  - Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
5. Do you have any additional qualifications?
  - Post-graduate (Masters) degree
  - Doctoral degree
  - Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
6. Have you received training in the last 5 years on how to teach spelling?
  - Yes (if ticked, please specify \_\_\_\_\_)
  - No

7. In your current role, are you (tick all that apply):

- A class teacher
- A specialist literacy teacher
- A SENCo
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

8. Including this school year, how long have you been a teacher for?

- Less than 1 year
- 1–3 years
- 4–10 years
- 11–20 years
- 21–30 years
- 30+ years

9. What year group are you currently based in?

- Year 1
- Year 2
- Year 3
- Year 4
- Year 5
- Year 6
- Other (please explain role) \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX B

### Section B: About your school

10. In which region do you currently teach?

- Inner London
- Outer London
- South East
- South West
- West Midlands
- North West
- North East
- Yorkshire and the Humber
- East Midlands
- East of England

11. What type of school are you currently based in? (tick all that apply)

- State-funded mainstream
- State-funded specialist
- Academy
- Pupil Referral Unit
- Independent mainstream
- Grammar school
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

12. The national average of EAL pupils in primary schools is 21.2%. To the best of your knowledge, how would you classify your current school's percentage of EAL pupils?

- Above the national average
- In line with the national average

- Below the national average
- Unable to answer

13. The national average of pupils eligible for Free School Meals in primary schools is 15.8%. To the best of your knowledge, how would you classify your current school's percentage of pupil FSMs?

- Above the national average
- In line with the national average
- Below the national average
- Unable to answer

14. Approximately how many pupils are currently on roll in your school?

- Less than 199
- 200–250
- 251–300
- 301–350
- 351–400
- 401–450
- 451–500
- 501–550
- 551–600
- 600+
- Unable to answer

## APPENDIX C

### Section C: How spelling is taught

The final section focuses on how you currently teach spelling. If you have more than one role, please answer these questions based on your principal role ...

15. How confident do you feel in teaching spelling?

- Extremely confident
- Very confident
- Moderately confident
- Slightly confident
- Not at all confident

16. How important do you think it is to teach spelling?

- Extremely important
- Very important
- Moderately important
- Slightly important
- Not at all importantt

18. Does your school have a spelling policy?

- Yes
- No

18a. If you answered yes to this, please explain (open text box): \_\_\_\_\_

19. How useful do you find the DfE National Curriculum spelling lists to inform your teaching?
- Extremely useful
  - Very useful
  - Moderately useful
  - Slightly useful
  - Not at all useful
- 19a. Please explain your response to the previous question (open text box)
- 
20. How do you usually teach spelling?
- Whole class
  - Small groups
  - One to one
  - Other (please explain) \_\_\_\_\_
21. How often per week do you spend directly teaching spelling?
- Daily
  - 3–4 times a week
  - 1–2 times a week
  - Not at all
22. How do you usually teaching spelling? (tick all that apply)
- In isolation—a lesson focusing just on spellings
  - Linked to SPaG
  - Combined with writing
  - Combined with phonics
  - Combined with reading
  - Combined with vocabulary instruction
  - Other (please clarify) \_\_\_\_\_
23. What resources do you use to teach spelling? (tick all that apply)
- Published resources (please clarify in open text box): \_\_\_\_\_
  - Spelling books (please clarify in open text box): \_\_\_\_\_
  - Spelling schemes (please clarify in open text box): \_\_\_\_\_
  - Online resources and apps (please clarify in open text box): \_\_\_\_\_
  - Devise my own
  - Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
24. Which strategies do you use to teach spelling? (tick all that apply)
- Multisensory
  - Look–Cover–Write–Check
  - Simultaneous oral spelling
  - Cued spelling
  - Mnemonics
  - Links to morphology
  - Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
25. Are all children in the same class given the same spelling list to learn?
- Yes
  - No (if they respond 'No' then they will go to Q25a)

25a. How do you differentiate spelling lists for pupils in your class? (*open text response box*)

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26. Do you set spelling tests?

- Yes, weekly
- Yes, fortnightly
- Yes, monthly
- No (if they respond 'No' then they will go to Q27)

Do you have any additional comments that you would like to add?

*End of survey*