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Differentiated Spelling: Using Small Group Instruction

Sara Broughton

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Abstract

Spelling instruction is often overlooked by many teachers during reading and language arts. The purpose of this study was to implement a manageable differentiated word study instruction program, drawn from the *Words Their Way (WTW)* program, to determine how it affected students' spelling accuracy and how the participants perceived its effect on students' daily journal writing time in a fourth-grade self-contained classroom. Students were placed into small groups based on their spelling pre-test scores. Data was collected through field notes, student and teacher interviews, a pre- and post-test, and a survey. Qualitative data was analyzed using the constant comparative method, and quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics. Four major themes emerged including benefits and drawbacks of the *WTW* program, *WTW* program's perceived impact on students' journal writing, and *WTW* program helping improve students' spelling accuracy. The researcher also found that most of the participants showed growth on the post-assessment.

Differentiated Spelling: Using Small Group Instruction

While walking around the classroom, I was enjoying the sound of a quiet classroom during our daily journal writing time when the peaceful moment was abruptly interrupted by a persistent line of questioning from students. “How do you spell the word us? How do you spell the word cute? How do you spell the word because?” By the time I had finished trying to answer everyone’s questions, our daily journal writing time had ended. I then began telling students to be “brave” spellers and to try to spell words as best as they could. This led to students either sulking at their desks or causing a scene due to their frustration and lack of spelling confidence. How frustrating is it for students to imagine so many creative ideas, but are unable and unwilling to communicate these thoughts and ideas in writing? The ability to read and write gives students freedom and power, and spelling helps students gain the confidence to better read and write.

Purpose

There is currently no consensus on how to most effectively teach spelling in elementary classrooms (Schlagal, 2002). This is concerning because spelling strongly correlates with students’ reading and writing skills (Joshi, Treiman, Carreker, & Moats, 2008). The traditional spelling instruction method, consisting of one word list for the entire class and testing the students on the list at the end of the week, has its limitations (Dew, 2012). My study, however, draws from Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, and Johnston’s (2003) *Words Their Way (WTW)* program. This program focuses on a student-centered and developmental approach to spelling instruction where students explore patterns in words and studying them in a hands-on and engaging way. My study answered the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What impact did the differentiated small group spelling instruction have on students' spelling accuracy?

Research Question 2: What are the students' and teacher's perceptions of the differentiated small group spelling instruction time and the impact it had on their engagement in and motivation towards journal writing?

When I conducted this study, I was a graduate student fulfilling a year-long student teaching placement. My placement was in a self-contained fourth-grade classroom at Daisy Elementary School (all names are pseudonyms). Daisy Elementary is a Title 1 school located in West Texas. The city in West Texas had a population of about 120,000 people. The school district, of which Daisy Elementary School was a part of, consisted of about 16,000 students. Daisy Elementary School includes grades kindergarten through fifth grade. There are about 400 students that attend this school. At Daisy Elementary School about 20% of the students were African American, about 50% of students were Hispanic, about 30% of the students were White, about 5% of the students were two or more races, and about 2% of the students were Asian. About 90% of the school's families were considered economically disadvantaged, and about 3% of the students were enrolled in the English Language Learner program. Daisy Elementary also has a high mobility rate of about 25%.

Literature Review

Instead of focusing on memorization, word study instruction provides hands-on opportunities for students to gain a deeper understanding of written words. Word study instruction allows students to participate in active exploration to discover the “regularities, patterns, and conventions of English orthography” necessary to read and spell (Bear et al., 2003, p. 4). Word study instruction also increases students' knowledge about the spelling and meaning of specific words (Bear et al., 2003; Henderson, 1990).

Differentiated word study instruction for students has been shown to be beneficial and enjoyable for students. Many students prefer the *WTW* program compared to the traditional method of teaching spelling (Dew, 2012; Fresch, 2007). Fresch (2007) conducted a survey with over 350 random teachers across the United States about how teachers felt about the effectiveness of their spelling program. Fresch (2007) found that teachers were concerned that the spelling instruction was not meeting students' needs, students were not retaining spelling information from week to week, and students were not proofreading properly. Many students also enjoy the hands-on word sorting activities in a word study instruction program (Dettling, 2010; Dew, 2012; Klich, 2011; Radke, 2017). Some of the students claimed they enjoyed the word sorting activities as well as the word study instruction program because of its repetitive nature (Eddy, Ruitman, Hankel, Matelski, & Schmalstig, 2011). Through the word study instruction program, students were also able to gain more knowledge about the structure of words (Bear et al., 2003; Radke, 2017).

One type of differentiated word study instruction is the *WTW* program. Researchers have found many positive effects of the *WTW* program. The *WTW* program has helped increase students' spelling accuracy (Schaefer, 2013). A survey conducted by Burkhart (2009) showed that many teachers believe that the *WTW* program has helped their students become better spellers. Other research studies conducted implementing the *WTW* program found that the program has been successful in improving students' spelling abilities (Dew, 2012; Eddy et al., 2011; Freeman, Dearnley, Gulick, & Neri, 2002; Klich, 2011; Radke, 2017; Schaefer, 2013). Schaefer (2013) conducted an action research study in a fourth-grade classroom using the *WTW* program. Based on the weekly spelling assessments, surveys, and pre- and post-assessments,

Schaefer (2013) found that all but two students moved up at least one spelling level during the six-week data collection period.

The *WTW* program is unique because it helps differentiate spelling instruction for students (Bear et al., 2003; Burkhart, 2009; Dettling, 2010; Invernizzi & Hayes, 2004; Klich, 2011; Williams & Lundstrom, 2007). Klich (2011) conducted a research study with 16 struggling readers in grades five through eight using the *WTW* program during a pull-out intervention. After four months of small group instruction, Klich (2012) found that students enjoyed the small group instruction using the *WTW* program because they were able to study words on their instructional level. This differentiation aligns with Vygotsky's zone of proximal development because students are able to work at their instructional spelling level with a teacher in a small group of other students that of a similar spelling ability (Vygotsky, 1978). Lastly, teachers have reported seeing positive effects in students' reading and writing skills as a result of using the *WTW* program (Fresch, 2007; Williams & Lundstrom, 2007; Williams & Phillips-Birdsong, 2006).

Although there are many benefits to using a word study instruction program such as the *WTW* program, there are also some limitations. Many teachers have felt that the *WTW* program is difficult to implement because they do not have a lot of administrative support, the time to properly implement it, or the time to organize its many facets (Burkhart, 2009; Klich, 2011). Teachers have also complained that it can be difficult to assign grades using a word study instruction program (Burkhart, 2009). Despite these drawbacks, Klich (2011) believes that the rewards heavily outweigh any negative aspects and will continue to use the *WTW* program in the classroom.

My study is necessary in the research field for numerous reasons. Many of the research studies conducted using the *WTW* program are unpublished teacher action research studies

(Burkhart, 2009; Dettling, 2010; Dew, 2012; Freeman et al., 2002; Radke, 2017). Also, many of the research studies that have been published were published over six years ago (Bear et al., 2003; Invernizzi & Hayes, 2004; Klich, 2011; Schaefer, 2013; Williams & Lundstrom, 2007; Williams & Phillips-Birdsong, 2006). Many of the previous research studies using the *WTW* program were also conducted with students in grades third grade and younger or only with students struggling in reading (Dew, 2012; Eddy et al., 2011; Freeman et al., 2002; Klich, 2011; Williams & Phillips-Birdsong, 2006). Schaefer (2013) conducted a research study using the *WTW* program with fourth-grade students. However, Schaefer (2013) required her students to complete extra word sorting activities as homework assignments. In my study, students only completed word sorting activities during reading class time. Lastly, many teachers feel unprepared to teach spelling in today's classrooms with the time constraints in reading and language arts class (Fresch, 2007; Johnston, 2001). My study will demonstrate that a differentiated small-group word study instruction is possible as well as manageable in a classroom setting.

Methods

The following sections describe my action research study conducted in a self-contained fourth-grade classroom. I implemented the differentiated spelling instruction by drawing from the *WTW* program and gathered data from a variety of sources over a five-week data collection period. I administered the elementary *WTW* pre-assessment (see Appendix A) and used the elementary *WTW* classroom composite (see Appendix B) to organize students' pre-assessment scores and determine their spelling stage. Then, I used the *WTW* classroom organizational chart (see Appendix C) to create four groups of students based on similar spelling stages. At the beginning of each week, I met with each group of students to discuss their list of about 20 words

for the week that aligned with their spelling category. I had the students sort the words and explain to me what they all had in common and what they thought the pattern was. Then, I had the students brainstorm other words that could fit in the pattern, and they would glue their words into their word work journal. The students were only tested on 12 of their 20 words. During the week, students were given a choice of various hands-on activities including writing their 12 words in alphabetical order, writing their words in sentences, writing their words and drawing a picture for each word, writing their words using code symbols, using their words in a short story, learning their words using sign language, and pretending to type their words on a printed keyboard. They would work on their word sorting activities for fifteen minutes during their word work station. At the end of the week, students completed an online differentiated spelling assessment. Because I conducted this study during my yearlong clinical teaching placement, I had already built a relationship with the participants, and they felt comfortable with me as a teacher and as a researcher.

Participant Selection

The participants in my study consisted of a single, self-contained classroom of fourth-grade students and one classroom teacher. I sent home a parent information letter and consent form with information about the study, and the students were asked to sign an assent form. Out of 14 students that were in the class, eight of the students received parent permission and assented to be participants in my study. The class consisted of nine girls and six boys. Three of the students were Caucasian, four were African American, and eight were Hispanic. The classroom teacher was a Caucasian female and also signed a consent form to participate in the study.

Data Collection

I gathered data from a variety of sources over the five-week data collection period. I kept a journal of anecdotal notes. I took brief headnotes each day about my observations of independent writing time and small group spelling instruction. I elaborated on my headnotes at the end of each day, and I fully fleshed out my notes once a week for five weeks (Hendricks, 2017). I conducted a Likert scale survey with all students that consisted of eight total questions with three open-ended questions at the end of the second week of the data collection period (see Appendix D). The survey included questions about how students perceived the effectiveness of differentiated small group spelling instruction and the impact it had on their engagement in and motivation towards journal writing. I also administered the *WTW* (2003) assessment on the first day of the five-week data collection period. I administered the same assessment during the last week of the data collection period.

I interviewed the students as well as the classroom teacher (see Appendix E). I used purposive sampling according to the survey results to determine what students I interviewed (Patton, 1990). I interviewed three students on the second to last week during the five-week data collection period (one that favored differentiated small group spelling instruction, one that was indifferent towards differentiated small group spelling instruction, and one that did not like differentiated small group spelling instruction). If more than one student fell into those three categories, I randomly selected a student within those categories to interview. I also conducted a focus group with students that I did not plan on interviewing (two that favored differentiated small group spelling instruction, one that was indifferent towards differentiated small group spelling instruction, and two that did not like differentiated small group spelling instruction). If more than one or two students fell into those three categories, I randomly selected students

within those categories to participate in the focus group. Each student interview lasted about 15 minutes. The focus group lasted about 20 minutes. The teacher interview lasted about 30 minutes. All of the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

I used a mixed-methods approach using both qualitative and quantitative data analysis methods. I analyzed my qualitative data using the constant comparative method by creating initial codes and supporting codes to identify recurring themes (Hubbard & Power, 2003). My qualitative data included the observational notes, the interview transcriptions, three open-ended questions on the survey, and the focus group transcription. I began by downloading my qualitative data into NVivo, a computer-based program, and created 15-20 level 1 codes with the first 20% percent of my data (Tracy, 2013). Level 1 codes are descriptive codes that are based on what is present in the data (Tracy, 2013). I only created the level 1 codes with the first 20% of my data so that I would not have an overwhelming amount of codes to analyze. I coded the other 80% of my qualitative data using my initial 15-20 level 1 codes (Tracy, 2013). Then, I created three-five level 2 codes, codes that synthesize and explain the data, by grouping together major themes that arose from my level 1 codes (Tracy, 2013).

Next, I used indexing to determine what information from the data was selected for each level 2 code (Hubbard & Power, 2003). NVivo made indexing simple by automatically displaying my coding information in a table of contents format so that I could easily identify what information was associated with each code and where the information came from. I then wrote analytic memos for each level 2 code by writing the name of the code, a summary about the code, and the significance of the code in relation to my study (Tracy, 2013). I color-coded my level 1 and 2 codes and displayed them in a codebook (see Appendix F). The codebook helps

organize information about each code including the name of the code, the color assigned to each code, the level of the code, a brief definition of the code, and an example of the code from the data.

I analyzed my quantitative data from the Likert scale questions in the survey and the percent correct on the *WTW* pre-assessment and post-assessment using descriptive statistics (Hendricks, 2017). The frequency counts for the survey questions were displayed using a bar graph (see Appendix G), and the pre- and post-assessment percent correct scores were displayed in a bar graph. Lastly, I triangulated the data I collected to build the credibility of my findings.

Findings

After analyzing my data, I noticed four major themes: benefits of the *WTW* program, drawbacks of the *WTW* program, the *WTW* program's perceived impact on students' journal writing, and the *WTW* program helping improve students' spelling accuracy. In this section, I have included a poetic transcription composed of words from the qualitative data collected from my nine participants including my classroom teacher (Glesne, 1997). Then, I have expanded on each major theme found and how they relate to my research questions. These themes were developed from my pre- and post-assessments, my survey, and my interviews.

How do you spell...? Oh.

Since about second grade,

I couldn't really spell.

My scores weren't great,

and I couldn't read the words very well.

Now that we're in small groups,

I'm spelling words like shovel.

I can focus more amidst the hustle, and

I find patterns in my words like a puzzle.

The activities are fun,

sign language,
short stories,
sentences.

My scores will stun.
I'm really doing swell!
I can't wait to learn more words tomorrow as well!

This poetic transcription begins by describing the spelling difficulties and challenges students faced. In the middle of the poem, students describe how they felt when the *WTW* spelling program was implemented. The poem concludes with students' thoughts and feelings about themselves as spellers after using the *WTW* program for five weeks.

Benefits of the *Words Their Way* Program

The differentiated small-group word study instruction has many advantages in a classroom setting. Through my implementation of the *WTW* program, students were able to complete an online spelling test, groups were differentiated based on students' spelling abilities, students enjoyed completing spelling practice activities, students enjoyed the student-led sorting, students expanded their vocabulary, students had many choices, and I was able to provide spelling support in small groups. The *WTW* program was also flexible to best fit the needs of the classroom.

From my survey, observation notes, and interviews, most students stated that they enjoyed completing their spelling test online. During my interview with the classroom teacher, she stated that in the past, she had differentiated spelling lists for her students and called out one list at a time. She recognized the importance of differentiating word lists for her students, but she did not want to take up that much class time. I utilized a website called Spelling City. On this website, I was able to create a list of 12 words for each of my spelling groups. Then, I posted a link to the lists in Google Classroom. Students were then able to click the link and take the online spelling test. This test read each word aloud and read each word in a sentence. The

students could also review and edit their answers at the end of the test. For example, Jenny would look at her words and say, “Oh, I need to go back and fix that one.” Lastly, it immediately graded students’ spelling tests and gave them a report of which words were spelled incorrectly. If students scored less than a 70, they were able to retake the test one more time. If they still did not receive a 70, students had to write their words three times each to receive a 70. Then, students would upload their reports to Google Classroom. This allowed students to take accountability for their own grades. Students also reported liking the online spelling test because “it was quiet, and they were able to focus more.” Students were also excited because they were receiving higher scores on their spelling tests than on their previous spelling tests.

At the beginning of the school year, some of my fourth-grade students were asking my teacher and I how to spell simple sight words, colors, and numbers. Because of this, my teacher and I used words from a list of second and third-grade sight words during the fall semester. There were some students who “already knew how to spell all of the words, and there were some students who had trouble even reading the words on their spelling lists.” My classroom teacher stated that she loved the differentiation because she thinks it is “really good for students to have things at their level...to work on.” After students completed the *WTW* pre-assessment, I used the *WTW* Elementary Spelling Inventory Feature Guide to pinpoint students’ spelling weaknesses. Then, I created four spelling groups based on similar spelling abilities. I used the *WTW* books to choose word lists for each group. The highest group worked on identifying prefixes. Group three worked on triple digraph blends. Group two worked on silent wr- and kn- and gn- blends. Group one worked on words with short vowels sounds with i, o, and a. As the weeks progressed, I would use the next list in the book for each group. During our first week of this study, one student exclaimed, “I can read all of the words!” This was one student who had difficulty reading

the words on his previous spelling lists. All of the students were able to work on their instructional level. This program is also versatile because I was able to alter my spelling groups depending on how they were doing. I also changed my spelling groups from four groups to three and this made the preparation time more manageable. If I noticed that we did not have a lot of time to practice our words, we would use the same words for the next week.

Students also enjoyed completing the spelling practice activities and the choices they had for the spelling practice activities. I began my study using a word study choice board. Then, students would complete their spelling activities on notebook paper. However, my classroom teacher and I had difficulty keeping track of who had completed the required amount of activities. During the next week, I had students complete spelling activities in a packet. Students only had to complete a minimum of two activities in that packet. Some of the activities included writing their 12 words in alphabetical order, writing their words in sentences, writing their words and drawing a picture for each word, writing their words using code symbols, using their words in a short story, learning their words using sign language, and pretending to type their words on a printed keyboard. Virtual students were able to complete their spelling activities on Google Slides. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we had virtual students as well as in-person students in the classroom. During my interviews with the students, they told me about their favorite activities. My teacher and I agreed that when students get to choose which activities they want to complete, they are more engaged in studying their spelling words.

Students also enjoyed sorting their words at my small group table. At the beginning of each week, I met with each spelling group for about 15 minutes. During this time, I had students find ways to sort the words on the table. Many of the students enjoyed finding their patterns because it was like “a puzzle or mystery” that they had to figure out. Then, I would bring out the

category titles for the spelling words and explicitly teach the pattern. Then, we would read the words together and define the words. There were usually a few words that I had to help students define each week. Students would then write the words and category titles in their word work journals. Lastly, I would have them brainstorm other words that could fit into our patterns.

Drawbacks of the *Words Their Way* Program

Although there were many benefits to using the *WTW* program, there were some drawbacks. Like other teachers that have previously used this program, I noticed this program requires an overwhelming amount of time and preparation in order to be effective. Especially having virtual students in our classroom, I had to create all of the sorts and spelling practice activities on Google Slides. At the end of each week, I would print a new list of words for the students to sort for each spelling group. I then cut out all of the words. Next, I created my spelling lists for each group on Spelling City. Then, I would print word lists and spelling activity packets for each spelling group. Lastly, I would then create the word sorts and spelling activities on Google Slides. This took a lot of time and preparation for spelling each week. Before I implemented the *WTW* program, I talked with other teachers and administrators that had used this program before to get advice about how to implement this program effectively. I also spent a lot of time reading the *WTW* books about how to implement this program best. These books were very long, and it took a lot of time to decipher what I would need to use with my elementary age students.

I enjoyed using most of the activities in the *WTW* program. However, the blind sort, when students sort their 20 words on their own and glue them into their journals, was difficult to use in my classroom because it was hard to find time to check students' blind sort in their word work journals. It also took a lot of time. I had planned for students to complete the blind sort and

complete a spelling activity. However, our reading stations were only 15 minutes. So, students barely had enough time to cut out all of their words, sort them, and glue them into their journal in those 15 minutes. I also noticed that there were a lot of students who had dropped some of the words on the ground, got frustrated with having to cut out and glue all of their words in their journals, or were not able to finish cutting, sorting, and gluing their words in their journals. There were also a few students who had sorted and glued their words in the wrong categories. Therefore, on week two of my data collection period, I had students write a few of their words in their journals during my spelling small group time. Because they were writing their words in their journals at my table, I could easily provide scaffolding and reteaching as necessary if students were struggling with the pattern for the week.

Lastly, I also noticed how difficult this program was to use in a classroom setting due to the many factors in a school that take away from instructional time. During my study, I had to change my spelling plans due to school drills, library times, benchmark testing, MAPS testing, and picture day. Students would normally complete a spelling activity or meet with me in small groups during reading station time in the mornings. However, these factors led to inconsistent reading and spelling schedules. I frequently had to have students complete a spelling activity in the afternoon so that they could at least complete two spelling activities a week before they took their spelling tests. Despite these drawbacks, my classroom teacher and I agreed that “as teachers, we do what we need to do for our students to be successful.”

Words Their Way Program’s Perceived Impact on Students’ Journal Writing

Due to the short amount of data collection time, I was unable to see any impact on the *WTW* program on students’ engagement in or motivation towards their journal writing. During my interviews, some of the students talked about how they were able to use a few of the words

on their spelling lists during the 10-minute daily journal writing time in the mornings. There was one student that claimed to use a word during journal writing time that aligned with a prefix pattern we had learned about in small groups. Other students claimed that they had not noticed a difference in their motivation or engagement in journal writing time.

During my interview with the classroom teacher, she had mentioned that she had not seen a “ton of improvement” in students’ engagement in and motivation towards journal writing after implementing the *WTW* program. However, she thought that if we had used this program for a longer period of time, we might have seen more of an impact on students’ engagement in and motivation towards journal writing. I think this would be an interesting topic for future research using the *WTW* program in classrooms. During my interview with the classroom teacher, we discussed the difficulty of students being able to regularly use new words in their vocabulary and journal writing. I do think the spelling activities of having students write sentences and stories with their new words helps with this building of vocabulary. My classroom teacher also mentioned that she rarely saw students using their spelling words from last fall in their journal writing. Lastly, my classroom teacher and I agreed that spelling is highly correlated with students’ reading and writing skills. My classroom teacher also mentioned that she often observes students struggling with wanting to write down their creative thoughts or details, but they do not know how to spell those creative thoughts or details.

***Words Their Way* Program Helping Improve Students’ Spelling Accuracy**

Out of my eight participants, most students showed growth on their *WTW* post-assessments. There were a total of 87 points possible for students to earn on the *WTW* elementary pre and post-assessments. Students earned one point for each word spelled correctly, and there

were 25 total words. Then, there were 62 possible feature points. The *WTW* pre- and post-test scores are shown below in Figure 1.

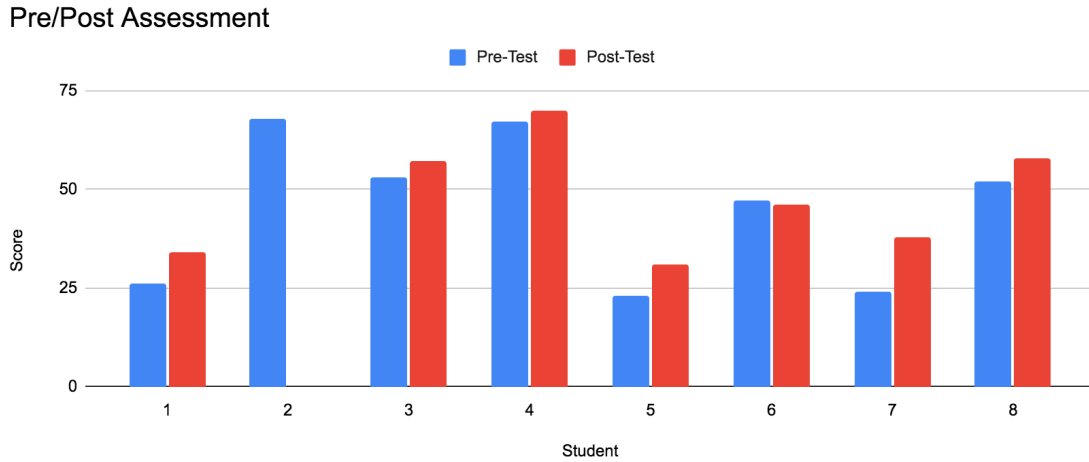


Figure 1. A bar graph demonstrating students’ growth on the *WTW* pre- and post-test.

Feature points were assigned on the *WTW* Elementary Spelling Inventory with a checkmark. Students earned a checkmark for spelling certain parts or sounds of words correctly. An example of a completed *WTW* Elementary Spelling Inventory Feature Guide for Jenny’s pre-assessment and post-assessment can be found below in Figures 2 and 3 respectively.

Student's Name: Jenny Teacher: Ms. Bragdon Grade: 4 Date: 2/1/21
 Words Spelled Correctly: 3/25 Feature Points: 21/62 Total: 24/62 Spelling Stage: Letter Name Late

Features	CONSONANT ALPHABETIC				WITHIN WORD INITIAL				Syllables AND AFFIXES				Feature Points	Words Spelled Correctly
	INITIAL	FINAL	SHORT VOWELS	DIGRAPHS	COMMON LONG VOWELS	SYLLABLES AND AFFIXES	SYLLABLES	UNUSUAL PREFIX SYLLABLES	ADVANCED SUFFIXES	BASES OR ROOTS				
1. bed	b	d	e	ed										
2. ship	p	sh	i	ph										
3. when	w	n	e	wh										
4. lamp	l	m	a	mp										
5. boat	b	o	a	oi										
6. train	t	r	a	tr										
7. place	p	l	a	pl										
8. drive	d	r	i	dr										
9. bright	b	r	i	br										
10. shopping	o	sh	p	shp										
11. spin	s	p	i	sp										
12. sewing	s	w	e	sw										
13. chewed	ch	w	e	chw										
14. carries	c	r	y	cr										
15. marched	m	r	ch	mrch										
16. shower	sh	w	e	shw										
17. bottle	b	o	t	bot										
18. floor	f	l	o	fl										
19. open	o	p	n	op										
20. collar	c	l	a	cl										
21. pleasure	l	u	r	lur										
22. fortunate	f	o	r	for										
23. confident	c	o	n	con										
24. civitate	c	i	v	ci										
25. opposition	o	p	o	op										
Totals	7/22	4/18	1/6	12/22	1/15	1/17	0/15	1/15	0/15	0/15	21/62	3/25		

Figure 2. Jenny’s pre-assessment feature guide.

Student's Name: Jenny Teacher: Ms. Bragdon Grade: 4th Date: 3-23-21
 Words Spelled Correctly: 7/25 Feature Points: 31/62 Total: 38/62 Spelling Stage: Within Word Middle

Features	LETTERNAME ALPHABETIC				WITHIN WORD INITIAL				Syllables AND AFFIXES				Feature Points	Words Spelled Correctly
	INITIAL	FINAL	SHORT VOWELS	DIGRAPHS	COMMON LONG VOWELS	SYLLABLES AND AFFIXES	SYLLABLES	UNUSUAL PREFIX SYLLABLES	ADVANCED SUFFIXES	BASES OR ROOTS				
1. bed	b	d	e	ed										
2. ship	p	sh	i	ph										
3. when	w	n	e	wh										
4. lamp	l	m	a	mp										
5. boat	b	o	a	oi										
6. train	t	r	a	tr										
7. place	p	l	a	pl										
8. drive	d	r	i	dr										
9. bright	b	r	i	br										
10. shopping	o	sh	p	shp										
11. spin	s	p	i	sp										
12. sewing	s	w	e	sw										
13. chewed	ch	w	e	chw										
14. carries	c	r	y	cr										
15. marched	m	r	ch	mrch										
16. shower	sh	w	e	shw										
17. bottle	b	o	t	bot										
18. floor	f	l	o	fl										
19. open	o	p	n	op										
20. collar	c	l	a	cl										
21. pleasure	l	u	r	lur										
22. fortunate	f	o	r	for										
23. confident	c	o	n	con										
24. civitate	c	i	v	ci										
25. opposition	o	p	o	op										
Totals	7/25	5/18	4/6	17/25	2/15	2/17	1/15	2/15	1/15	0/15	31/62	7/25		

Figure 3. Jenny’s post-assessment feature guide.

Student one spelled two words correctly and earned 24 feature points on the pre-assessment. On the post-assessment, student one spelled three words correctly and earned 31 feature points. Student one grew by eight points. Student two took the pre-assessment, but moved during my data collection period and did not complete the post-assessment. Student three spelled 10 words correctly and earned 43 feature points on the pre-assessment. On the post-assessment, student three spelled 13 words correctly and earned 44 feature points. Student three grew by four points. Student four spelled 17 words correctly and earned 50 feature points on the pre-assessment. On the post-assessment, student four spelled 18 words correctly and earned 52 feature points. Student four grew by three points. Student five spelled three words correctly and earned 20 feature points on the pre-assessment. On the post-assessment, student five spelled two words correctly and earned 29 feature points. Despite spelling one less word correctly, student five grew by eight points. Student six spelled 9 words correctly and earned 38 points on the pre-assessment. On the post-assessment, student six spelled 10 words correctly and earned 36 feature points. Student six showed growth in being able to spell one more word correctly, but he dropped two feature points. I think this drop in feature points was because I administered the post-assessment at the very end of the day, and I think this student was distracted. Student seven spelled three words correctly and earned 21 feature points. On the post-assessment, student seven spelled seven words correctly and earned 31 feature points. See Figures 2 and 3. This student grew by 14 points, and she increased two spelling stages. This student showed the most growth using the *WTW* program. Student eight spelled 12 words correctly and earned 40 feature points. On the post-assessment, this student spelled 14 words correctly and earned 44 feature points. This student grew by six points.

Overall, the students enjoyed this program and thought it helped improve their spelling abilities. One student claimed that “she couldn’t really spell anything” when she was younger, but she is now able to spell and type larger words in her assignments. She is a virtual student and has even noticed an improvement in her spelling when she typed words. The students seemed to be more engaged in their spelling activities and demonstrate more motivation to learn new spelling patterns according to their spelling abilities. The majority of my student participants also demonstrated growth on their pre- and post-assessments after only a short five week data collection period. Therefore, this program was effective in improving most of my students’ spelling abilities.

Implications for Teachers

Spelling is a subject in school that often gets neglected due to the time constraints in school schedules. Due to the strong correlation between spelling and reading and writing, I would argue that teachers should make more time in their English and Language Arts time to explicitly study spelling patterns in small groups based on students’ spelling abilities (Bear et al., 2003). The information in my study can help teachers better plan for and implement the *WTW* program in their classrooms. Prior to implementing my study, I noticed that there was a limited amount of published research related to differentiating spelling instruction using small groups, especially in a classroom setting with an older elementary grade level. Based on my findings, students seemed to enjoy the *WTW* program activities as well as the small group sorting. This helped improve students’ motivation and engagement during our 15-minute word work station time. Most of my participants also demonstrated growth between the pre- and post-assessments. There was one student who went down one point out of eighty-seven points on the post-

assessment. However, I think this decline of one point can be attributed to completing the post-assessment at the end of the day and being tired.

Because the *WTW* program is based on students' spelling abilities, students were challenged to learn new spelling patterns on their instructional spelling level. At the beginning of my study, I had created four spelling groups based on students' pre-assessment scores because we had four reading station rotations. In the middle of my study, however, I changed my groups to three spelling groups so that I could spend more time with each group during our limited time allotted for reading instruction. The three spelling groups proved to be more beneficial as well as more manageable because I was able to meet with each group at the beginning of each week for a longer amount of time, and I had fewer spelling lists to print and prepare for. Before I conducted my study, some of my students complained that they knew all of the words on the weekly class spelling list and therefore, did not need to study their words throughout the week. Other students, however, had difficulty even reading the words on the weekly class spelling list. During my interviews, students shared that they thought their spelling scores had increased due to the differentiated spelling groups and they were learning more relevant words according to their spelling abilities.

Lastly, students were also highly engaged during our 15-minute word work station time each day because they enjoyed coming to my table and sorting their new words at the beginning of the week as well as working on their hands-on spelling activities throughout each week. Before I conducted my study, students were reluctant to complete any spelling activity and they were unmotivated to study their weekly class list of spelling words because it was either too difficult or too easy for students. During my study, students were excited to sort their words and complete a spelling activity. This excitement can also be attributed to students being able to

choose which activities they wanted to complete throughout the week. Students also felt empowered in the classroom because they had the ability to choose which spelling activities they wanted to complete (Minor, 2018). Students also improved in their self-regulation skills because they had to hold themselves accountable for completing the required amount of spelling activities each week by turning in their packet.

In my future classrooms, I want to continue implementing the *WTW* program. My research study has emphasized the importance of differentiating spelling patterns in classrooms according to students' spelling abilities. I believe that all students can learn. Therefore, the *WTW* program helps teachers best meet the spelling needs of all students. With the *WTW* program, students are challenged on their instructional spelling level and teachers are able to provide significant enrichment and support during small group instruction. After only a five-week data collection period, students were already demonstrating significant growth in their spelling abilities. Students also reported feeling more confident in their spelling abilities.

While my study has highlighted many benefits and drawbacks of the *WTW* program in a classroom setting, there are still other unresolved questions to consider for future studies. Is there a correlation between an improvement in the *WTW* program and students' reading and writing abilities? Does the *WTW* program impact students' motivation and engagement in journal writing time? I am also wondering how the *WTW* program would impact a school with different demographics? Reading and writing are critical skills students learn throughout all grade levels. Therefore, teachers should recognize the importance of differentiating spelling patterns so that students can use their knowledge to improve their reading and writing skills as well. Students are unique in their needs, strengths, interests, and cultures. Differentiating spelling instruction is one way to best meet the learning needs of all students in the classroom.

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Appendix A

Words Their Way Elementary Spelling Inventory Feature Guide

Words Their Way Elementary Spelling Inventory Feature Guide

Student _____ Teacher _____ Grade _____ Date _____

Words Spelled Correctly: ____ / 25 Feature Points: ____ / 62 Total ____ / 87 Spelling Stage _____

Stages and gradations → Features → ↓ Words	Emergent		Letter Name		Within Word Pattern			Syllables and Affixes		Derivational Relations		Feature Points	Words Spelled Correctly
	Late	Early	Short Vowels	Digraphs	Blends	Early	Middle	Late	Early	Middle	Early		
1. bed	b	d	e										
2. ship		p	i	sh									
3. when			e	wh									
4. lump	l		u		mp								
5. float		t			fl	oa							
6. train		n			tr	ai							
7. place					pl	a-e							
8. drive		v			dr	i-e							
9. bright					br	igh							
10. shopping			o	sh			pping						
11. spoil					sp	oi							
12. serving						er	ving						
13. chewed				ch		ew	ed						
14. carries						ar	ies	ff					
15. marched				ch		ar	ed						
16. shower				sh		ow		er					
17. bottle							tt	le					
18. favor							v	or					
19. ripen							p	en					
20. cellar							ll	ar					
21. pleasure								ure	pleas				
22. fortunate						or		ate	fortun				
23. confident								ent	confid				
24. civilize								ize	civil				
25. opposition								tion	pos				
Totals		7	15	16	17	15	15	17	15	15	15	162	125

Appendix B

Words Their Way Elementary Spelling Inventory Classroom Composite

Words Their Way Elementary Spelling Inventory Classroom Composite

Teacher _____ Date _____
 School _____ Grade _____

SPELLING STAGES →	EMERGENT		LETTER NAME-ALPHABETIC			WITHIN WORD PATTERN			SYLLABLES AND AFFIXES			DERIVATIONAL RELATIONS			Total Rank Order
	LATE	EARLY	EARLY	MIDDLE	LATE	EARLY	MIDDLE	LATE	EARLY	MIDDLE	LATE	EARLY	MIDDLE	EARLY	
Students' J-Names			Consonants	Short Vowels	Digraphs	Blends	Common Long Vowels	Other Vowels	Inflected Endings	Syllable Junctures	Unaccented Final Syllables	Advanced Suffixes	Bases or Roots	Correct Spelling	87
Possible Points	7	5	6	7	5	7	5	7	5	5	5	5	5	25	
1.															
2.															
3.															
4.															
5.															
6.															
7.															
8.															
9.															
10.															
11.															
12.															
13.															
14.															
15.															
16.															
17.															
18.															
19.															
20.															
21.															
22.															
23.															
24.															
25.															
26.															
Highlight for instruction*															

*Highlight students who miss more than 1 on a particular feature; they will benefit from more instruction in that area.

Appendix D

Student Survey

1. How do you feel about the small group spelling instruction?



Very Happy



A Little Happy



A Little Upset



Very Upset

2. How do you feel about others studying words that are different from yours?



Very Happy



A Little Happy



A Little Upset



Very Upset

3. How do you feel about learning word patterns in small groups?



Very Happy



A Little Happy



A Little Upset



Very Upset

4. How do you feel about the word sorting activities?



Very Happy



A Little Happy



A Little Upset



Very Upset

5. How do you feel about studying word patterns with your teacher?



Very Happy



A Little Happy



A Little Upset



Very Upset

6. What are some things you like about small group spelling instruction?

7. What are some things you dislike about the small group spelling instruction?

8. Do you think the small group spelling instruction has improved your spelling? Why or why not?

Appendix E

One-on-one Student and Group Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about the small group spelling instruction.
2. How do you feel about the small group spelling instruction?
3. How do you feel about others studying words that are different from yours?
4. Do you think your spelling has improved since we started the spelling small groups? Why or why not?
5. How do you feel about the word work activities throughout the week?
6. How do you feel about studying the words with your teacher and a small group of students?
7. Is it easier for you to write during journal writing time now that you know how to spell more words correctly? Why or why not?
8. What are some things you like about small group spelling instruction?
9. What are some things you dislike about small group spelling instruction?
10. Do you prefer the small group spelling instruction, or would you rather go back to studying the same words as everyone else each week? Why or why not?

Teacher Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about the differentiated small group spelling instruction.
2. How do you feel about the differentiated small group instruction?
3. How do you feel about students' studying different words according to their needs?
4. How do you feel about the word work activities throughout the week?
5. How do you feel about students studying the words with a teacher and a small group?
6. Do you think it is easier for students to write during journal writing time now that they know how to spell more words correctly? Why or why not?
7. Do you think this program has helped improved students' motivation and engagement during journal writing time? Why or why not?
8. What are some things you like about small group spelling instruction?
9. What are some things you dislike about small group spelling instruction?
10. Do you prefer the small group spelling instruction, or would you rather go back to having students study the same spelling words each week? Why or why not?

Questions may vary and additional questions may be asked depending on the answers of the participants.

Appendix F

Codebook

Level 2	Level 1	Definition	Example	Color
Benefits of the WTW program		The advantages of implementing a word study program in the classroom.	“I think that the way that we've tested them to see where their areas of weakness are, I think that's been really good to target the area that they need to work on.”	
	Completing an online spelling test	Instead of completing their spelling tests on paper, the students completed their spelling test online using a website that would read each word and each word as a sentence to them.	“I like it more online because it took forever to take the other one. I also like it because everyone is so quiet.”	
	Differentiation of words	There were three different spelling groups based on students' pre-assessment, scores and each group studied different words depending on their spelling needs.	“I love the differentiation, because I think that's really good for students to have things at their level things that they need to work on. So, I think that's great.”	
	Enjoying the spelling practice activities	Students completed a variety of spelling activities in either a spelling menu or a packet.	“My favorite activity is Picture Perfect. Yeah, I love drawing and all that stuff and it helps my drawing and also I can identify the word more.”	
	Enjoying the student-led sorting	Students completed a student-led sort in small groups with their new words at the beginning of each week to identify a common pattern among the words.	“But I wanted it to be more organic by asking them questions about what they noticed about the patterns.”	
	Expanding students' vocabulary	In small groups, students learned the meaning of their words.	“But to me, knowing those prefixes, suffixes, affixes, and all that kind of stuff they can take that and then use that in reading.”	
	Providing many choices	Students were able to choose which activities they wanted to complete in the spelling menu or packet depending on their interests and modalities.	“I like them to have some choice when working with their words. Because I think if they get to pick, they're going to be a little more engaged in the activity, so I think they've been good.”	
	Providing more support	During small groups, the teacher is able to provide	“They were also able to answer my questions about	

		ample scaffolding and enrichment with the word lists.	how many wheels a bike would have if it was a quadricycle, tricycle, and unicycle.”	
	Versatility of the <i>WTW</i> program	This program is easily adaptable to meet the needs of the students and the classroom teacher.	“I have them write in their journals with me instead of cutting, gluing, and sorting their words in a blind sort as a station because I noticed that students were taking too long with that, losing some of their words, or not gluing them incorrectly.”	
Drawbacks of the <i>WTW</i> program		The disadvantages of implementing a word study program in the classroom.	“...it's the time constraints that make it more difficult.”	
	Being disappointed with spelling	Students having low self-esteem about their spelling abilities.	“He said ‘oh’ when he saw his test and walked away.”	
	Difficult to use the <i>WTW</i> with inconsistent school schedules	This program requires a lot of time and commitment in the classroom to be effective, and there were a lot of schedule conflicts that made it difficult to implement the <i>WTW</i> program.	“We did not have reading stations today because the students had to complete a reading benchmark test during reading station time.”	
	Not liking the <i>WTW</i> program	These are factors about the <i>WTW</i> program that people did not like.	“There was one student that glued in the words in the wrong columns.”	
	Overwhelmed with the amount of time and preparation of the <i>WTW</i> program	The <i>WTW</i> requires the teacher to spend a lot of time prepping materials and understanding the program in order to implement it effectively.	“But it was a lot to try to get all the word sorts and to give the pre-assessment to know where their weaknesses were.”	
<i>WTW</i> program’s impact on students’ journal writing	<i>WTW</i> effecting students’ journal writing	Students and the teacher were asked about how they felt the <i>WTW</i> program effected students’ journal writing skills.	“So, I think it would have helped had it been all year long, but I haven't seen a ton of improvement.”	
<i>WTW</i> program helping improve students’ spelling accuracy	<i>WTW</i> helping improve students’ spelling accuracy	These are examples of how students’ and the teacher felt about how the <i>WTW</i> program effected students’ spelling accuracy.	“Well, since about second grade I would say, I really couldn't spell anything. But since I've been doing the small group...I spelt like a really big word in there, so I was really happy about it.”	

Appendix G

Quantitative Data From Survey Results (Frequency Counts)

Survey

