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Differentiated Spelling: Using Small Group Instruction

Sara Broughton ~ *Abilene Christian University*

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 curriculum, drawn from the *Words Their Way (WTW)* curriculum, 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 challenges of the *WTW* curriculum, *WTW* curriculum's perceived impact on students' journal writing, and *WTW* curriculum helping improve students' spelling accuracy. The researcher also found that most of the participants showed growth on the post-assessment.

Keywords: Differentiation, Differentiated Spelling Instruction, *Words Their Way*, Small Groups, Elementary Spelling, Spelling Instruction

Introduction

While walking around the classroom, I was enjoying the sound of a quiet classroom during our daily journal writing time that 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*?" 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 confidence. How frustrating is it for students to imagine so many creative ideas, but are unable to communicate these thoughts and ideas in writing?

Purpose

Spelling strongly correlates with students' reading and writing skills, and there are numerous conflicting ideas on how to best teach spelling. The traditional spelling instruction method, consisting of a 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). In a fourth-grade self-contained classroom, my classroom teacher and I noticed that on every traditional spelling test there were some students who scored highly every time and some students who had difficulty reading the words on the spelling list. We also wanted to explore a different spelling curriculum that could challenge students at all spelling stages. For my research study, I implemented the *Words Their Way* (WTW) curriculum by Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, and Johnston's (2003). This spelling curriculum is a student-centered, assessment-based, and developmental approach to spelling instruction. 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 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. Daisy Elementary School includes grades kindergarten through fifth grade and enrolls about 400 students. At Daisy Elementary School about 20% of the students were African American, about 50% were Hispanic, and about 30% were White. This study was conducted during COVID-19, so there were both virtual and in-person participants in this study.

Literature Review

Word study instruction is a type of spelling instruction that provides hands-on opportunities for students to gain a deeper understanding of written words and allows students to participate in active exploration to discover the “regularities, patterns, and conventions of English orthography” (Bear et al., 2003, p. 4) necessary to read and spell. Researchers have found many positive effects of the *WTW* word study instruction curriculum. Research studies also found that the *WTW* curriculum has been successful in improving students’ spelling abilities (Eddy, Ruitman, Hankel, Matelski, & Schmalstig, 2011; Klich, 2011; Schaefer, 2013). Schaefer (2013) conducted an action research study in a fourth-grade classroom using the *WTW* program, and found that all but two students moved up at least one spelling level during the six-week data collection period.

The *WTW* curriculum is unique because it helps differentiate spelling instruction for students (Klich, 2011; Williams & Lundstrom, 2007). Developmental spelling stages have adapted over time as more research developed about students’ spelling abilities. Gentry (1982) introduced his theory of developmental spelling stages such as the precommunicative, semiphonetic, phonetic, transitional, and conventional stages. The *WTW* curriculum, however, is based on the Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, and Johnston (2003) stages such as the Emergent spelling stage, the Letter-Name Alphabetic stage, the Within Word pattern stage, the Syllables and Affixes stage, and the Derivational Relationships stage. In the *WTW* curriculum, students complete a pre-assessment to determine their spelling stage. Then, they work in small groups and

complete word sorting activities to master specific spelling skills according to their spelling stage.

Teachers have also reported seeing positive effects in students' spelling and writing skills as a result of using the *WTW* curriculum (Fresch, 2007; Williams & Lundstrom, 2007; Williams & Phillips-Birdsong, 2006). Through my literature review research, I could not find other research regarding the impact of spelling instruction on students' engagement in and motivation towards journal writing. However, Graham and Santangelo (2014) used an explicit spelling instruction similar to the *WTW* curriculum, and found that students improved in their spelling abilities and spelled more words correctly in their daily writing assignments.

Although there are many benefits to using a word study instruction curriculum such as the *WTW* curriculum, there are also some limitations. Many teachers have felt that the *WTW* curriculum 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).

My study is necessary in the research field for numerous reasons. Many of the research studies were published over six years ago (Bear et al., 2003; Invernizzi & Hayes, 2004; Klich, 2011; Schaefer, 2013; Williams & Lundstrom, 2007; Williams & Phillips-Birdsong, 2006). 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, 2000). My study will demonstrate that differentiated small-group word study instruction is possible as well as manageable in a classroom setting.

Methods

I implemented the *WTW* curriculum and gathered data from a variety of sources over a five-week data collection period in a self-contained fourth-grade classroom. I administered the elementary *WTW* pre-assessment to determine students' spelling stage. All the students fell in either the letter-name alphabetic stage, the within word pattern stage, or the syllables and affixes stage. At the beginning of each week, I met with each group of students to discuss and sort their list of about 20 words taken from the *WTW* spelling stage book that coordinated with their spelling stage. During the week, students chose various hands-on activities to work on independently. At the end of each week, students completed an online spelling assessment.

Participant Selection

The participants in my study consisted of a single, self-contained classroom of fourth-grade students and one classroom teacher. This study took place in a hybrid classroom with both in-person and virtual students during COVID-19. 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 eight girls and six boys. Three of the students were Caucasian, three were African American, and eight were Hispanic. One of the student participants was a virtual student. 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 elaborated on my notes 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 (see Appendix A). 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 for about thirty minutes. I used purposive sampling according to the survey results to determine what students I interviewed (Patton, 1990). I interviewed three students each for about 15 minutes (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 for about twenty minutes with five students (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). All of the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

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 16 level 1 codes with the first 20% percent of my data so that I would not have an overwhelming amount of codes (Tracy, 2013). Level 1 codes are descriptive codes that are based on what is present in the data (Tracy,

2013). I coded the other 80% of my qualitative data using my initial 16 level 1 codes (Tracy, 2013). Then, I created four 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). 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 B).

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 C), and the pre- and post-assessment percent correct scores were displayed in a bar graph.

Findings

After analyzing my data, I noticed four major themes: benefits of the *WTW* curriculum, challenges using the *WTW* curriculum, the *WTW* curriculum's perceived impact on students' journal writing, and the *WTW* curriculum helping improve students' spelling accuracy. Below, I have expanded on each major theme found and how they relate to my research questions.

Benefits of the *Words Their Way* Curriculum

The *WTW* curriculum differentiates spelling instruction for all students. At the beginning of the year, my classroom teacher and I pulled spelling words from a list of second and third-grade sight words. 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 of the *WTW* curriculum 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 and create four spelling groups. 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 vowel sounds. 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.

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. Next, we would read and define the words together. Lastly, they brainstormed other words that could fit into the patterns.

Students also enjoyed completing the hands-on spelling activities. Students choose at least two activities to complete such as 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, and learning their words using sign language. Virtual students were able to complete their spelling activities on Google Slides. My

classroom teacher and I agreed that when students choose which activities they want to complete, they are more engaged in studying their spelling words.

Most students stated that they enjoyed completing their spelling tests online using *Spelling City*. On this website, I was able to create spelling lists for each group. The test read each word aloud and read each word in a sentence, and students would type in the words. It also 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. Students liked the online spelling test because "it was quiet" and they were able to "focus more."

Challenges Using the *Words Their Way* Curriculum

Although there were many benefits to using the *WTW* curriculum, there were some challenges. Like other teachers that have previously used this curriculum, I noticed this curriculum requires an overwhelming amount of time and preparation. Before I implemented the *WTW* curriculum, I talked with other teachers and administrators who had used this curriculum to get advice about how to implement this curriculum effectively. I also spent a lot of time reading the *WTW* books. At the end of each week, I would print and cut out a new list of words and activities for each group. Next, I created my spelling lists for each group on *Spelling City*. Lastly, I would then create the word sorts and spelling activities on Google Slides for my virtual learners.

I enjoyed using most of the activities in the *WTW* curriculum. 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. I noticed that there were a lot of students who had lost some of their words or glued their words into the wrong categories. After the first week, 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 noticed how difficult this curriculum was to use in a classroom setting due to many school factors 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 challenges, 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 Curriculum’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* curriculum 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* curriculum. However, she thought that if we had used this curriculum 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* curriculum in classrooms. During my interview with the classroom teacher, we discussed the difficulty of students being able to regularly use new words in their journal writing because it takes a long time to add words to students' regular vocabulary.

Words Their Way Curriculum 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. Out of 25 words, students earned one point for each word spelled correctly. Then, there were 62 possible feature points. 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. For example, students would earn three feature points for the word *bed* if they spelled the word correctly. Some of the features assessed during the pre- and post-assessment include beginning and final consonants, short vowels, digraphs, blends, long vowels, inflected endings, final syllables, and base or root words. The *WTW* pre- and post-test scores are shown below in Figure 1.

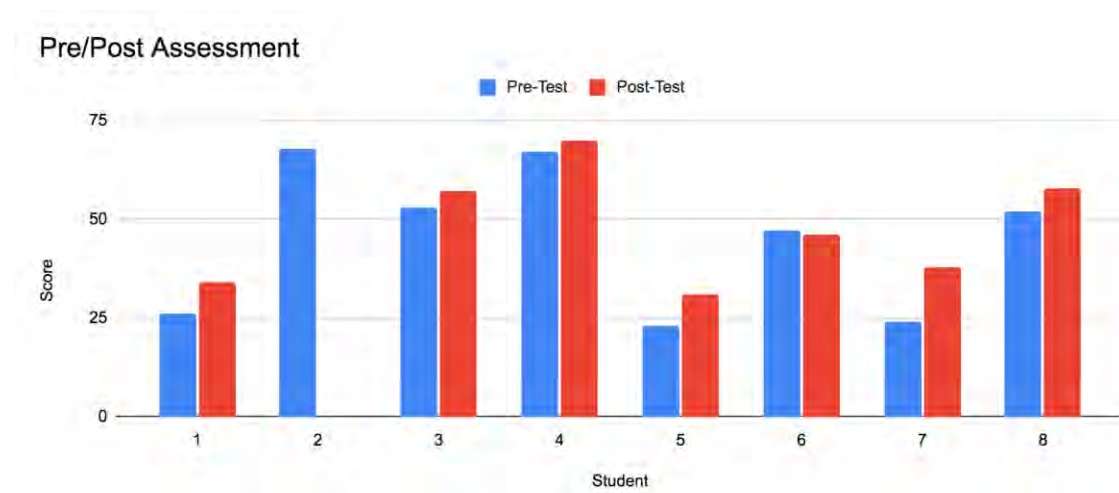


Figure 1. A bar graph demonstrating students' growth on the *WTW* pre- and post-test.

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 grew by four points. Student four grew by three points. Student five grew by eight 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. This student grew by 14 points, and she increased two spelling stages. This student showed the most growth using the *WTW* curriculum. Student eight grew by six points.

Overall, the students enjoyed this curriculum 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 more complex 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.

Implications for Teachers

Spelling is a subject in school that often gets neglected because of the time constraints in school schedules. Due to the strong correlation between spelling and reading and writing, however, I would argue that teachers should make more time in their English and Language Arts

time to explicitly teach 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* curriculum 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. Based on my findings, students seemed to enjoy the *WTW* curriculum activities as well as the small group sorting. Most of my participants also demonstrated growth between the pre- and post-assessments.

Because the *WTW* curriculum is based on students' spelling abilities, students were challenged to learn new spelling patterns on their instructional spelling level. My 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 prepare. 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 weekly spelling test scores had increased due to the differentiated spelling groups.

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. Students were excited because they were empowered by the ability to choose which spelling activities they wanted to complete.

In my future classrooms, I want to continue implementing the *WTW* curriculum. 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* curriculum helps teachers best meet the spelling needs of all students. With the *WTW* curriculum, 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 challenges of the *WTW* curriculum 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* curriculum and students' reading and writing abilities? Does the *WTW* curriculum impact students' motivation and engagement in journal writing time? I am also wondering how the *WTW* curriculum 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

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 B

Codebook

Level 2	Level 1	Definition	Example	Color
Benefits of the WTW curriculum		The advantages of implementing a word study curriculum 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 ample scaffolding and enrichment with the word lists.	“They were also able to answer my questions about how many wheels a bike would have if it was a quadricycle, tricycle, and unicycle.”	
	Versatility of the <i>WTW</i> curriculum	This curriculum 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.”	
Challenges of the <i>WTW</i> curriculum		The disadvantages of implementing a word study curriculum 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 curriculum 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> curriculum.	“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> curriculum	These are factors about the <i>WTW</i> curriculum 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> curriculum	The <i>WTW</i> requires the teacher to spend a lot of time prepping materials and understanding the curriculum 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> curriculum’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> curriculum 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> challenges 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> curriculum 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 C

Quantitative Data from Survey Results (Frequency Counts)

Survey

