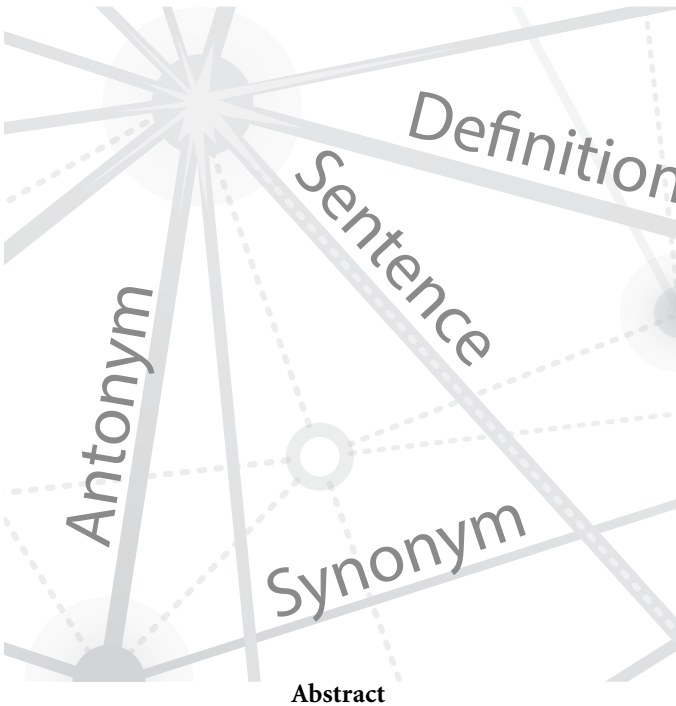


Allyson Schaefer

Following Multiple Paths to Spelling Success: Differentiated Spelling in a Fourth-grade Classroom



This study examines the progress fourth grade students made in spelling when using a differentiated spelling program. Twenty-two students participated in this 6-week study. The teacher administered a spelling inventory from Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, and Johnston (2008). Using this data, students were divided into three leveled groups. Spelling groups then met three times a week for 15 minutes to study a specific word feature. Students were expected to complete word sorts and word hunts on their own. Data sources include weekly spelling tests, pre and post surveys from students and parents, and an upper-level spelling inventory administered at the end of the study. Results from the final inventory show that all but two students moved up at least one spelling level during the course of the study.

Keywords: differentiation, spelling, small groups, orthography, literacy

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I felt the same twisting in my stomach every week. I heard the same groaning and saw the same eyes rolling. It was no secret that my students shared my hatred for our spelling tests. None of us could see their importance. Even as I graded each student's list of 20 words regurgitated onto paper, I knew who would perform well, and I knew who would be correcting their work for homework. About the tenth week of school, I told myself enough times that this simply was not working and was a waste of everyone's time. As I reflected on my practice, surveyed other teachers, and read some of the research, I realized that many teachers felt the same way I did regarding their spelling time. I knew there had to be a better way, but I was not sure where to begin.

As a first-year teacher, I considered what I had been taught in my teacher preparation program (both undergraduate and graduate): differentiation—multiple paths to the same destination. Yet, I chose a single path at spelling time for the sake of what is easiest: Each student gets a list of 20 words that may or may not be related and that may or may not challenge her or him. My students were not at the same literacy proficiency level; why was I treating spelling as if they were?

This realization led me to explore alternative approaches to spelling instruction. Some may say that in a technological age, spelling has lost its importance—after all, we have spell check, write? Orthography is an important aspect of literacy instruction (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2008). But the question remained: How can I most effectively teach students to become better spellers, no matter their starting level? I felt a great sense of urgency on the matter and wanted to know if my students and their parents felt the same.

The State of Spelling Instruction

My desire to examine spelling instruction in my classroom sprang from my frustration every Friday morning. Like most teachers, I gave a pretest on Monday morning, assigned homework throughout the week, collected it on Friday, then tested (Fresch, 2007). The same students either scored perfectly on their pretests, excusing them from that week's activities, or completed their homework and scored well on the final tests,

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leaving a group of low achievers not doing their homework and therefore scoring poorly on Friday's tests. I felt as though not one student was benefitting from my current practices. However, I knew spelling was too important a skill simply to let go.

In 2007, Fresch conducted a nationwide survey exploring first- through fifth-grade teachers' concerns about spelling instruction and their students' spelling skills. Fresch concluded that teachers need a deeper understanding about the stages of spelling as well as guidance in choosing developmentally appropriate word lists. Most teachers were unhappy with their traditional methods of teaching spelling, but like me, they were unsure how to improve their instructional strategies.

In a similar study focusing on novice teachers, Spear-Swerling and Bruckner (2004) concluded that many teacher education programs inadequately prepare novice teachers to teach reading and spelling skills. In order to teach such skills effectively, teachers need to understand word structure. In trying to teach children spelling, novice teachers may unintentionally confuse students because they do not have a firm enough grasp of the concepts themselves.

Qualities of Effective Spelling Instruction

Several studies have been conducted aiming to help teachers focus on what they believe are the most important qualities of effective spelling instruction (Christo & Davis, 2008; Devonshire & Fluck, 2010; Murray & Steinen, 2011; Wallace, 2006). The most effective word lists include high frequency words selected from content area textbooks and literature and frequently misspelled words in student writing (Wallace, 2006). However, the words must be selected to fit the spelling features being studied, regardless of their connection to novels being read, content area studied, or student use. The word lists should share orthographic features being taught in the students' developmental spelling levels (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2008):

- Emergent – Students who are preconventionally literate, who are not yet representing speech sounds with written symbols consistently.
- Letter Name Alphabetic – Students who are learning to spell CVC (consonant-vowel-consonant) words correctly, beginning with initial and final consonants, then short vowels, then consonant digraphs, then consonant blends.
- Within Word Pattern – Students who are learning to spell words with long vowel patterns, ambiguous vowel patterns, and diphthong vowel patterns correctly.
- Syllables and Affixes – Students who are learning about multisyllabic words and what happens at the junctions of syllables and when you add affixes to root words.
- Derivational Relations – Students who are learning about how there is a spelling/meaning connection in our most complex words, and how we can use morphology to give clues about orthography.

Students' developmental levels are determined by assessing their performance on spelling inventories that determine their use of different patterns and features in spelling.

The most effective spelling instruction includes (as is appropriate for the developmental level): rapid naming exercises, strategy instruction, word mapping, and separate word lists for various stages of spelling development. Wallace determined that the most effective early spelling strategies are sounding out words slowly, looking for visual patterns, creating an analogy, and looking for word families, while later successful spelling strategies include thinking about word meaning and examining word structure.

Our New Path

In order to investigate developmental spelling instruction, I conducted my study in my fourth grade classroom at Lake Hills Elementary (a pseudonym). Demographically, the school's population is 83% white, 14% Hispanic, and 2% Asian with 10% of the total population receiving free or reduced lunch. My class consisted of 13 boys and 9 girls.

To begin my study, I administered a survey to my students and also to their parents. I wanted to understand what my participants thought about spelling as a subject as well as their (or their child's) strengths and needs as a speller. I distributed the same survey at the end of the study to determine if attitudes had changed. Using information gathered using a spelling diagnostic test (Bear Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2008), I grouped students according to their identified spelling levels: Within Word Pattern, Syllables & Affixes, or Derivational Relations.

Contracts are due every Friday. Name: _____

Date: _____

Word Study Contract

Feature: _____

Word Sort Example

Category 1:	Category 2:	Category 3:

Word Hunt

Word	Found in
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	

Word Sort times:

1. _____ seconds

2. _____ seconds

3. _____ seconds

Word sorts were practiced at home: (parent signature) _____ min

Figure 1. Word study contract.

Knowing that spelling is often forgotten or skipped over, I wanted to ensure that my students and I scheduled instruction multiple times each week. Thus, I created reminder cards for each student that listed their assigned spelling lesson times. These were taped on each student's desk to serve as a reminder both to them and to me.

I met with each flexible small group for 15 minutes, three times a week. The first meeting of the week served as an introductory lesson. I reviewed the orthographic feature each level would focus on that week, completed an example word sort, and asked the students to give me more examples of the feature. The students then completed a Word Study Contract (see Figure 1) as homework throughout the week. During the second meeting, I briefly reviewed the feature with each group, and then we played some sort of game to practice the feature. Finally, on our third meeting, I assessed each student's knowledge of the word feature.

My assessments did not look like traditional spelling tests. For example, one feature we studied was the -able versus -ible suffix. To test their understanding, I would give students a root word (e.g., expend) and ask them to spell the word with the correct suffix (e.g., expendable). This ensured that the students knew the proper pattern for each suffix, and they were not simply memorizing the words. I repeated this sequence for six weeks before collecting final data by administering an upper level spelling diagnostic test.

Our Destination

After analyzing the final diagnostic test, I found that 20 (out of 22) students improved at least one spelling level over the course of the study (see Figure 2). Further analysis revealed that one of the two students whose growth was slower did not turn in any of the word study contracts assigned as homework. The other student is diagnosed as having dyslexia and receives supportive services.

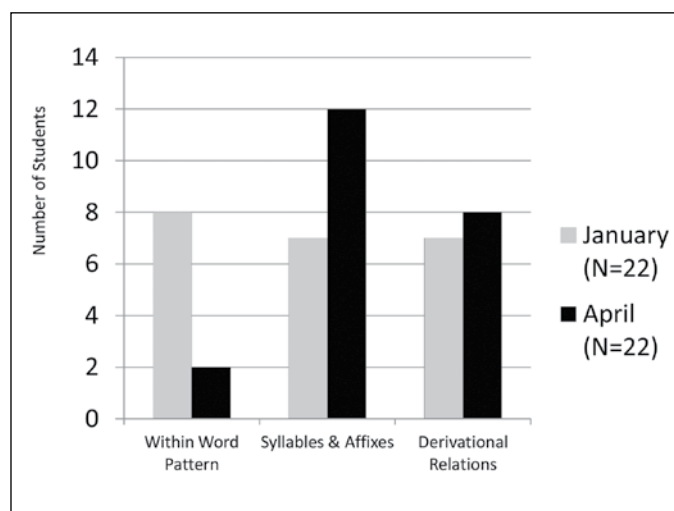


Figure 2. Number of students in each spelling stage.

Based on the student attitude surveys, students found spelling to be more important and reported spending less time preparing for tests at home; instead, they noted that their practice was spread throughout the week. Students also gained more efficient strategies for determining a correct spelling. When surveyed in January, Hayley said, in order to find the correct word spelling, "I write [the word] on my hand and if it's not write [sic] my hand feels weird." Following six weeks of a word study approach, students' top strategies now included using print from the environment, breaking the word into syllables, and thinking about the word's meaning. While many still listed "Ask someone for help" as their top strategy, I am encouraged that students are more aware of their misspelled words.

Parent surveys revealed the high importance parents place on spelling skills. One parent expressed a concern over technology's effect on spelling skills: "Kids today aren't learning to spell very well because they use so much abbreviated language in text messages, etc. And as they get older, they use spell check for their papers but don't take the time to learn what they misspelled." While many parents and educators, and even I, at one point, share this concern, recent research has shown that even students who use "textisms" regularly can perform well on standardized tests (Wood, Jackson, Hart, Plester, & Wilde, 2011).

At the beginning of the study, parents, on average, rated their child's spelling skills a 3.1 out of 5, with a "5" being "very strong". After the study, this increased to 3.6 out of 5 (see Figure 3). Interestingly, students' opinions of their spelling skills actually decreased (though still remained higher than parent perceptions) after the study.

What I Learned

From conducting this study, I learned that students and parents are generally dissatisfied with spelling instruction in its current state. As shown in the surveys, many have expressed a desire for change, which has encouraged me as an educator. Though my new approach to spelling instruction consumed much more of my already precious time as compared to the "memorize 20 words" structure I previously used, I found the results to be worth the investment.

Although my students did not express a positive change in their self-perception in their surveys, I saw their confidence growing in their abilities as spellers in candid conversations and everyday activities. Students grew more aware of their misspellings. Those students who were concerned with high achievement and grades took the extra time to use strategies they learned from word study to correct the word, while other students were content to accept that the word was spelled wrong or chose to use a "safer" word they were confident in spelling. One parent expressed this concern: "I often feel that my child has a much larger oral vocabulary that he fears using

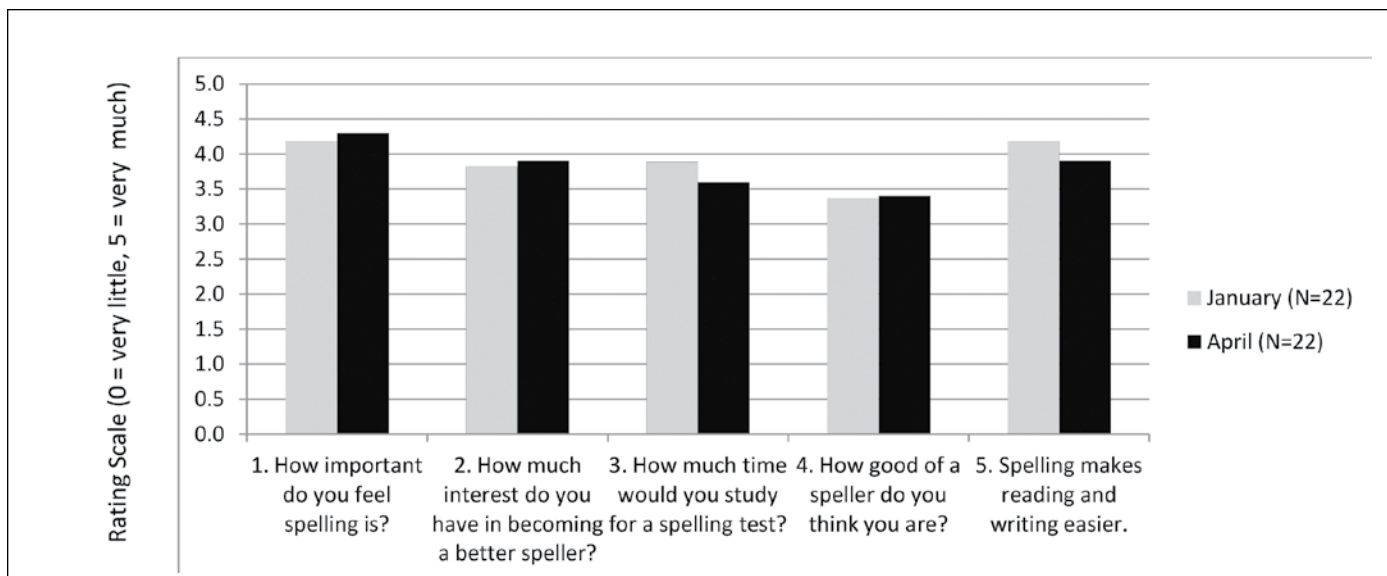


Figure 3. Student attitude survey results.

because he can't spell as well as he would like. I wonder if the lack of these words creates an inaccurate picture of him as a student." Concerns like this one will spur me toward improving my craft as a language arts teacher. A student fearing to use her strengths because of fear of making an error is unfortunate. Students need to be unafraid to take the risk to attempt new words and to attempt to apply their new knowledge as they move along their path to better spelling.

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