

**Does Word Work Really Work? Investigating the Effects of Word Work  
vs. Traditional Spelling Instruction during Guided Reading**

By

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to determine the effects of word study instruction as opposed to traditional spelling instruction on students' reading abilities during guided reading. The participants consisted of three-second grade students who received word study instruction along with their guided reading for 30 minutes, 2 times per week. Prior to instruction, each student took a spelling inventory pre-test in order to determine his or her instructional needs. Each student was also assessed using the BAS (Benchmark Assessment System) in order to determine his/her instructional reading level as determined by their miscues, fluency, and comprehension. After six weeks of word study instruction students were post-tested using the spelling inventory and BAS. Students were also given a survey on their perceptions of the effects of word study instruction. The results revealed that word study instruction had positive effects on student's reading abilities; more specifically in the areas of fluency, comprehension and word accuracy. Each student's instructional level of reading increased as well as his or her spelling inventory scores. As reported in the post survey, students gained knowledge of the short and long /o/ sound as well as the digraphs /sh/ and /ch/. They also self-reported a preference for word study over traditional spelling instruction. These results were shared with the students, their parents, and their homeroom teachers in hopes to increase awareness of the importance of word study instruction on students' reading abilities.

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past years, the concept of spelling instruction has evolved as teachers and researchers perceive spelling as one of the language arts and integral in the reading process. In recent years, Read and Treiman have noticed an increased interest in how students learn to spell (Rymer & Williams, 2000). Also, the characteristics of children's misspellings has emerged as just as important as their correct spellings. Teachers are finding that if word work is presented in an active and engaging way, students can become excited about language and how it works (Bloodgood & Pacifici, 2004). This paper will describe the instructional theory of word study, discuss the advantages of using it as opposed to traditional spelling instruction, explain the benefits that word study provides for students' abilities in reading and writing, and discuss how word study can increase student's motivation in terms of literacy.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### What is Word Study?

In 1971, Charles Read revealed the importance of student's invented spellings. He investigated the invented spellings of preschoolers and found that teachers could use these invented spellings in order to better understand their students' phonological knowledge (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton & Johnston, 2004, p. 3). According to Bear, Ganske, and Invernizzi (2004), analysis of spelling errors informs teachers of students' levels of word knowledge. Dahl, et al., (2004) recommended that teachers find out which spelling strategies students are using and figure out ways to support those productive strategies within our teaching. Teachers are also able to develop effective instruction in phonics, spelling, and vocabulary through the use of students' invented spellings. Word Study, an alternative to traditional spelling instruction based on learning word patterns rather than memorizing unconnected words, has evolved from three decades of research in developmental aspects of word knowledge with children and adults and was created based on what we have learned about word structure (Henderson, 1990; Henderson & Beers, 1980; Templeton & Bear, 1992a). This instructional approach "reflects what researchers have discovered about the alphabetic pattern and meaning layers of English orthography," (Williams, Phillips-Birdson, Hufnagel, Hungler, & Lundstrom, 2009, p.570). Word work and word study can be used interchangeably and may include various activities such as word sorts, word hunts, making words and word games. Word sorts are when students use various cards with different words and sort them into categories based on similarities and differences. For example, if a student was doing a word sort for the long and short /o/ sound, they may have a card with the word *dot* which would be sorted into the short /o/ category, and a card with the word *home* which would be sorted in to the long /o/ category-more specifically, the

/o/ consonant /e/ category of words. This helps them to differentiate between the two vowel sounds. Word hunts are when the students are to find words in their books with a specific vowel pattern. Using the above example, the students would then be asked to find words with the long and short /o/ in the books that they were reading. Making words can be done a variety of ways. Essentially, the students are using letters to make up words in which you want them to learn. This can be done using magnetic letters, word cards, or any other materials in which you can make letters with. Lastly, word games can include commercial games such as Yahtzee and Scrabble or created games from teacher books or other resources.

In a word study program, students don't just learn words, they learn *about* words. Word study is an approach to spelling instruction that moves away from the memorization of words (Williams et al., 2009). According to Pinnell and Fountas, students learn to spell as they actively investigate how words work with memorization being only a small part of this process (Rymer & Williams, 2000). Barnes and Morris noted that "word study recommends a sequence of spelling concepts and activities, including a categorization task for grouping common sounds or orthographic features in words known as word sorting" (Abbott, 2001). During word sorting, students are given word cards. The student uses the words on the card in order to compare and contrast the word features and then places the card under one of several categories. These can be pre-determined (closed sort) or left up to the individual student (open sort) (Abbott, 2001). Teachers are able to use word sorts with students in order for them to actively explore how words are made (Williams et al., 2009). Word sorts are a particularly powerful means of exploring words. Along with comparing and contrasting words, students are thinking explicitly about how words are alike or different. Word sorting activities also provide children with the opportunity to show one another what patterns they notice among the words they are studying.

Students make generalizations about words and related patterns through this type of active work with words that can then be applied to the reading and spelling of unknown words (Barns, 1989). Word study most effectively occurs during classroom routines in which students make judgments about speech sounds, word structures, spelling patterns, and meanings of words. By sorting words students are gaining knowledge about the similarities and differences between the words. During word study, students are engaged in activities such as comparing and contrasting word features, sorting words based on different features, and learning word parts and meanings. (Bear, Invernizzi, et al., 2008). Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton and Johnston 2008) assert that “the most effective instruction in phonics, spelling and vocabulary links word study to the texts being read, provides a systematic scope and sequence of word-level skills, and provides multiple opportunities for hands-on practice and application. Word study teaches kids to focus on words to be able to have a better understanding of how they work” (p.3).

It is important to note that word study will have the highest impact on student learning if combined with authentic literacy experiences. Bear and Templeton (1998) emphasize that purposeful word study must be embedded in authentic reading and writing instruction. Students must explore words in a way that is meaningful to them. They also feel that “in order for students to read and write words appropriately and fluently and to appreciate fully how words work in context, instruction must balance authentic reading and writing with purposeful word study” (Bear & Templeton, 1998, p. 223).

Acquisition of literacy skills for struggling students requires a deep understanding of the alphabetic principal. Word work through manipulative letters and sentence writing helps students gain this understanding. Studies reveal that “these instructional elements provide students with the practice they need to decode words and to recognize high frequency words. Students

developed these understandings with extended practice, but that practice was always linked to the books they were reading” (Lane, H. B., Pullen, P.C., Hudson, R.F., Konold, T.R., 2009, p. 292). According to Bear and Templeton (1998), the knowledge of how words work is applied in students’ everyday reading and writing. Teachers need to engage students in explorations of word structure and create a balance between using words inside and outside of meaningful contexts. The authors emphasize that word study should consider students’ developmental levels and should be designed so that students use appropriate words and patterns while putting words back into those meaningful contexts. If teachers can achieve this, word study becomes useful and instructive for students. Although well intended, often teachers will choose only content-related words to use for word study. For example, while many first graders can learn to read words such as ocean and plankton as part of a thematic unit focusing on oceans, their ability to remember the spelling of these words is very limited (Bear & Templeton, 1998,p. 230). When exploring word study with children, teachers need to remember their developmental levels and interests. One way to do so is to incorporate word work into their personal writing or reading experiences.

### **Why Should Teachers Use Word Study as Opposed to Traditional Spelling Instruction?**

The fact that teachers have, for more than a century, used spelling lists as a method of spelling instruction does not necessarily mean that it is the best way to teach spelling (Abbott, 2001). Many commercial phonics, spelling and vocabulary programs often boast of drill and skill activities which are pre-arranged in a specific scope and sequence. They also usually depend on rote memorization, which requires very little critical thinking. This applies not only to spelling, but the learning of new vocabulary as well. Bear and Templeton (1998) note that rote

memorization is an inefficient means of learning content-related vocabulary terms. Students' learning of spelling and vocabulary is based on their developmental or instructional level. A pre-packaged program may not provide opportunities to meet the developmental needs of all of the students (Bearet al., 2008). According to Juel and Minden-Cupp, students' learning is based on the way they are naturally inclined to learn, on their natural course of conceptual learning. Most students need hands-on opportunities to manipulate word features in a way that allows them to generalize beyond isolated, individual examples to entire groups of words that are spelled the same way (Bear et al, 2004). Ehri complements this concept when he emphasizes, "What students store in memory about specific words' spellings is regulated in part by what they know about the general system. Learners who lack this knowledge are left with rote memorization, which takes longer and is more easily forgotten. Similarly, what students learn about the orthographic system evolves in part from the accumulation of experiences with specific word spellings" (as cited by Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton & Johnston, 2008, p. 308). Rymer and Williams (2000) note that children can memorize the spelling of words for their tests but not actually learn the correct spellings or the word meanings. Thus, spelling test results are not always indicative of a student's overall spelling ability or orthographic knowledge. Abbott (2001) agrees saying, "There is a difference between orthographic knowledge and spelling achievement. Incorrect spellings provide more information about a student's level of orthographic development than correct spellings" (p. 9). Researchers now know that word production is a far more sophisticated task than word recognition (Gill, 1992). Bear and Templeton state, "Children's brains are not cameras. We cannot 'teach' spelling by trying to get kids to take better pictures of words so that their mental images are clear and precise" (1998, p. 223). Alderman and Green (2011) also strongly support using the word study approach to

spelling for several reasons. They claim that word sorts are both fun and interesting and can promote hands-on learning with manipulative activities for students. They provide students with the chance to use known words, sounds, and pictures in order to better concentrate on the analysis of patterns. Rather than relying solely on rote memorization, word study emphasizes similarities and differences in words. They also feel that the structure of word study allows students to study more words in a shorter amount of time as compared to traditional spelling. Lastly, word sorts provide teachers with opportunities for differentiation in the classroom.

According to Powell and Aram (as cited in Williams et al., 2009), teachers and parents may find that regardless of the amount of time particular students spend studying their spelling words, they still have difficulties passing the weekly spelling test. This challenge becomes common in students around 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> grade when the list of spelling words becomes more complex. Powell (2008) points out that “good spellers have a repertoire of spelling strategies, including the use of sound-to-spelling patterns, visualization and meaning words” (p. 568). Often dividing the word into chunks or using prefixes, suffixes, and roots, is helpful during spelling. This can be facilitated through word study (Aram and Powell, 2008). Studying the meaning of a word helps students to understand the English spelling system. In addition, the small group approach of word work better meets the needs of the students. Teachers can teach children what they need to know about the English spelling system through small group instruction while keeping them engaged and motivated with hands-on, inquiry-based, word work activities (Williams et al., 2009). These hands-on, engaging activities provide students with opportunities to go beyond memorizing and to be able to apply critical thinking to spelling, vocabulary and syntax. Students involved in word study often benefit from the process with expanded vocabularies and effective strategies to make sense of how written language works. Teachers and



students become excited about language, which helps to promote further exploration (Bloodgood & Pacifici, 2004). Another important aspect of word study is scaffolding. Scaffolding to meet the needs of students is an important part of the learning environment. Aiken & Bayer (2002) describe how scaffolding during word work has affected their students: “They love words! The scaffolded prompts included with lessons help them to experience success in spelling the words conventionally”(p.71). Bearet al., (2008) further emphasize, “Spelling is just one part of the many aspects of word knowledge. Teachers who address word-knowledge components as integrated features rather than isolated sub skills encourage students to make connections across sources”(p.253).

So why do teachers continue to use the traditional method of spelling? Abbott asserts that “teachers may continue to use this method due to lack of knowledge that there are stronger alternatives” (Abbott, 2001, p. 11). The transition from traditional spelling to word instruction allows teachers and students to become more familiar with most common usage patterns. It can also “move teachers toward thinking of spelling instruction within a developmental framework and encourage teachers and students to examine the commonalities in English words” (Abbott, 2001, p.12). Even if teachers have to teach using a prescribed list of words, Pinnell and Fountas recommend that primary teachers use a word study approach as they feel it supports decoding and word learning strategies (1998).

### **Does Word Study Increase Students’ Reading and Writing Abilities?**

The goal of word study is for students to develop a working knowledge of the orthography that may be applied to students’ reading and writing. Bear and Templeton claim, “Word study teaches students how to use this word knowledge authentically to support their

spelling attempts during writing activities and to help them decode unfamiliar words while reading” (as cited in Williams et al., 2009, p. 571). Through word study, students make use of gained orthographic knowledge as well as cognitive strategies through authentic writing activities. Linking word study to writing supports children’s spelling and, ultimately, their writing development. Students also learn word knowledge that can be applied to a variety of reading and writing activities. Word study has the potential to support students’ reading and writing development if they understand the relationship between these processes. Teachers must teach children how to use word study independently in their reading and writing if they expect them to apply this process. In order for word study to move beyond simply spelling instruction and become an approach to supporting young children’s literacy development, most students need specific instruction on how they can use word study strategies during authentic reading and writing activities. They will also need to be provided with numerous opportunities for guided as well as independent practice. Teachers can support the early literacy learning of students by engaging them in using what they have learned through word study. Children need daily extended, authentic reading and writing activities in which they are encouraged to read and compose texts on topics of their choosing. Authentic writing activities provide teachers with the chance to examine students’ use of word study instruction (Williams, et al., 2009). Adams agrees, “Learning about spelling contributes to reading development, including children’s ability to pronounce words correctly and decode unknown words” (as cited in Graham and Harris, 2002, p.670).

A variety of meaningful reading and writing experiences provide the best opportunity for children to learn how to spell (Temple, Nathan & Burris, 1982; Wilde, 1992). Hughes and Searle state, “Meaningful, sustained reading and writing experiences support spelling development” (as

cited in Williams et al., 2009). Richels agrees and also believes the reverse is true--spelling knowledge supports students' reading and writing development (Williams et al., 2009).

Providing these opportunities is especially important for children who experience difficulty in learning to read and write. Teachers are encouraged to provide students with a variety of strategic tools that support fluent reading and writing (Graham & Harris, 2002). Adams claims, "Learning about words can enhance children's reading development, especially their ability to pronounce words correctly and decode unknown words" (p.49). He found that students who were involved in word study made greater gains in spelling, sentence writing, and reading word attack skills immediately following instruction (Graham, Harris, & Fink-Chorzempa, 2003). Perfetti (1985) agrees saying, "Most educators agree that a deep and thorough knowledge of English orthography enables fluent word decoding during reading and accurate spelling during writing. Word recognition is the strongest predictor of higher level reading comprehension" (as cited in Anderson, O'Flahavan, & Guthrie, 1986, p. 1). Aiken and Bayer (2002) warn that the instructional strategy of word work must not be the center of the curriculum but should be connected to various opportunities for students to read and write. Word study helped their students to take ownership in word strategies and helped increase their desire to read and write. Abbott (2001) found that abilities in spelling had a significant effect on reading and writing. The skills that make students good spellers also contribute to developing good readers. Effective readers use orthographic knowledge to understand what they say, read and write. Improving orthographic knowledge allows students to make better choices when attempting to spell and read unfamiliar words. Word study with a focus on spelling patterns and a holistic view of vocabulary, decoding, and phonics may be the key component needed to help students improve word recognition, and increase their reading and writing skills (Abbott, 2001).

### **Does Word Study Increase Student Motivation?**

Although the traditional method of spelling instruction is still widely used, many educators are now starting to wonder what, if anything, this method does for students' motivation to learn. DuBois, Erickson and Jacobs warn, "The 'Friday spelling test' as the major benchmark for spelling seems all too prevalent in classrooms today. This creates frustration and reduces motivation for students who struggle with spelling and general literacy. It also fails to take advantage of what we know about effective spelling instruction" (as cited in Alderman & Green, 2011, p. 599). Students' self-esteem is decreased and they feel less capable than those around them when they feel unsuccessful due to a poor score on a weekly spelling test. Alderman and Green (2011) note that students' academic success is strongly linked to their failure or success in spelling. Sideridis claims that children's success or failure in spelling is strongly linked to their academic motivation" (cited in Alderman & Green, 2011, p. 599). He goes on to say that elementary "low-spellers" have more anxiety and increased avoidance related to daily spelling instruction. Alderman and Green (2011) have seen avoidance and sense of defeat both with their own children and with many children they have worked with in various elementary schools. These conclusions emphasize the importance of students having positive experiences with spelling. If they have these positive experiences, they are more likely to value the need to spell throughout their lives. Providing students with a list of words to memorize does nothing for their learning or motivation. Alderman and Green (2011) feel this "makes implicit sense-- practicing a list of words over and over, trying to perfect them, can diminish motivation" (p. 600). Instead of practicing and reproducing words, teachers need to build on students' interest in how words work. This can be accomplished when teachers recognize that "students have a natural curiosity

about words, and with developmentally focused, engaging word study instruction . . . they will become interested in words and how they are spelled” (Dahl et al., 2004, p. 239).

In order to increase student motivation, teachers must discontinue the use of traditional spelling instruction and assessment and provide interesting activities as well as purposeful and meaningful word study tasks for students. If students are shown that working with words can be fun, motivation will increase and learning goals will be met more quickly (Alderman & Green, 2011). It is true that some students may benefit from being given a list of spelling rules.

However, this doesn't work for the majority of students. In fact, providing only the spelling rules may close off inquiry learning that can lead to long-term motivation and interest (Dahl et al., 2004). According to Dahlet al., “ If students have been meaningfully engaged in purposeful and motivating word study throughout the elementary years, they are well primed for continuing such exploration at the upper levels” (p. 239). One specific application of word work to increase motivation is word games. Wells and Narkton (2011) observe that the significant rewards in student attention and enthusiasm are well worth the additional time and preparation it may take to create lessons including word games. It is through engaging word study activities, including games, that teachers can implement cohesive strategies that engage and motivate students and enhance literacy instruction.

As word work becomes increasingly part of a balanced literacy curriculum, teachers continue to implement it in hopes to increase students' reading and writing abilities as well as increase their motivation to learn.

## METHODOLOGY

The research cited above suggests that the word study approach to instruction may be more beneficial than the traditional teaching of spelling to students in the areas of both reading and writing. As a teacher of intervention support, I am always looking for unconventional ways to better meet the needs of my students. I found the concept of word work intriguing and decided to use the following questions to guide my research:

- What are the effects on students' reading abilities using word study instruction as opposed to traditional spelling instruction during guided reading groups?
- Does word study instruction affect students' fluency rates, accuracy rates, comprehension, and overall instructional reading level?
- How do students feel about word study as opposed to traditional spelling instruction?

### **Participants**

This study's participants consisted of three second grade students from three different homerooms; one female and two males. Prior to the study, I interviewed the participants in order to obtain some background information. All three students have attended the same elementary school since Kindergarten. I have used pseudonyms for all participants. Lauren is an 8 year old who loves karate and her two cats. She enjoys school and her favorite activity is reading. She was born in this town. John is 8 years old and he enjoys swimming. His favorite part of school is recess. He was also born in this town. Grant is also 7 years old and enjoys playing soccer. Physical Education class is his favorite part of school. He was adopted from Russia as an infant.

## **Setting**

My study took place at a Midwest elementary school located in town that is a suburb of a large city. The school has a population of 827 students in grades K-5. Each grade level consists of four to six sections. Instruction took place at a table in the second-grade pod area while other support staff simultaneously worked with other second grade students. Our group met for 30 minutes every Monday and Wednesday for a total of 6 weeks.

## **Materials**

The majority of the word work instruction I used was based on the book, Words Their Way, written by Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton & Johnston (2008). From this book came the pre and post spelling inventory, instructional guidance, and word sort activities. I also used activities from Phonics Lessons ~ Grade 2 (Letters, Words, and How They Work), written by Fountas and Pinnel (2008). Each student received a folder as well as a word study notebook for use. Leveled guided reading books from our school's shared library were used for instruction as well. The Benchmark Assessment System (BAS), by Fountas and Pinnel (2008), was used in order to determine student's pre and post instructional reading levels based on word accuracy, fluency, and comprehension.

## **Procedures**

Before instruction began, I administered a miscue analysis on each student using the BAS (Benchmark Assessment System) in order to find an approximate instructional reading level as determined by the student's word accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. Each student was also

given the spelling inventory from Words Their Way (Bear et al., 2008) in order to place them on the spelling continuum and determine the word patterns and features in which I should focus my instruction.

During the six weeks of instruction, our group focused on two main word features. These included short and long vowel sounds with a focus on the /o/ sound as well as the /ch/ and /sh/ digraphs. These features were chosen based on the students' needs, which were indicated in the data from the spelling pre-inventories. Each lesson began with a re-read of a familiar guided reading text and a follow up on homework assignments. We would then review the previous lesson's word feature followed by a word sort. The word sorts consisted of teacher led, buddy sorts, and independent sorts. We would then do an activity such as play a game, sing a song, or create words using magnetic letters. Towards the end of the lesson, the students received a new guided reading book and a related activity for reinforcement. This continued for a total of 12 lessons over six weeks time.

At the end of the study I administered a post miscue analysis on each of the students, using the BAS, in order to compare the results with the BAS test given prior to the beginning of the study. I then examined the pre and post data to see if students' reading levels were higher or if fewer miscues were made (especially on words with features in which we have studied). I also looked at and compared pre and post fluency and comprehension scores. Each student also completed the post-spelling inventory. With this information I was able to check for increased knowledge of the words and concepts that we had worked on through our word study activities. The students also answered survey questions about his or her attitude towards word study versus traditional spelling instruction.



## FINDINGS AND RESULTS

**Benchmark Assessment**

The first assessment used was the Benchmark Assessment System (BAS) by Fountas and Pinnell (2008). This test is used to determine the student's instructional reading level as determined by their fluency, accuracy rating (including number of errors), and comprehension. The Instructional Level is based on the reading levels of Fountas and Pinell (2008) and can range from A to Z. The results are displayed in Table 1.

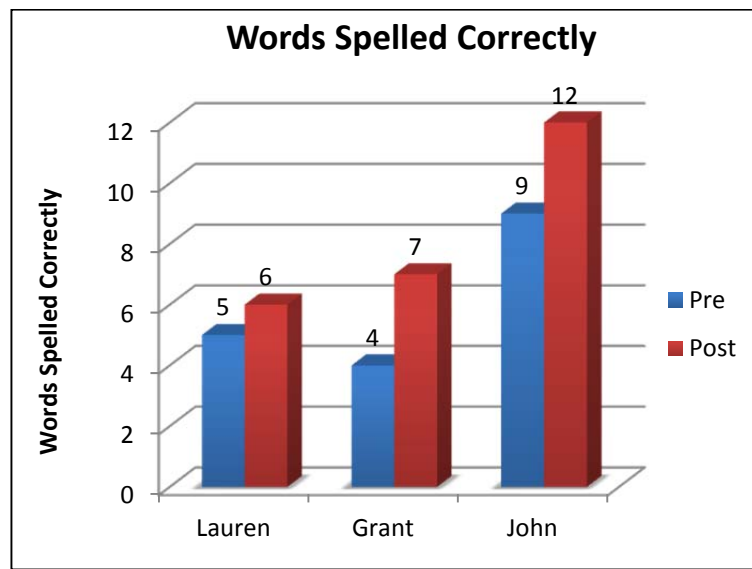
**Table 1: *Benchmark Assessment System Results***

Student	Instructional Level		Fluency (WPM)		Accuracy Rating		Number of Errors		Comprehension	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
<b>Lauren</b>	I	L	45	56	96%	97%	8	6	71%	71%
<b>Grant</b>	J	L	42	79	95%	95%	9	11	57%	90%
<b>John</b>	H	L	37	49	97%	98%	6	4	71%	98%

Each student showed an increase in fluency and overall instructional level. The comprehension of two of the students increased and one remained the same. Each student's instructional reading level showed an increase of two, three, or four guided reading levels. While administering the BAS test, I noticed the students displayed an increased level of decoding skills, meaning they were able to use the parts of the words that they knew in order to better figure out the entire word that they didn't know. Not only did their fluency increase, but I noticed an increase in their confidence as readers as well. This was confirmed by both their expression in reading which led to their increase in fluency, as well as their ability to answer the comprehension questions with great confidence.

## Spelling Inventory

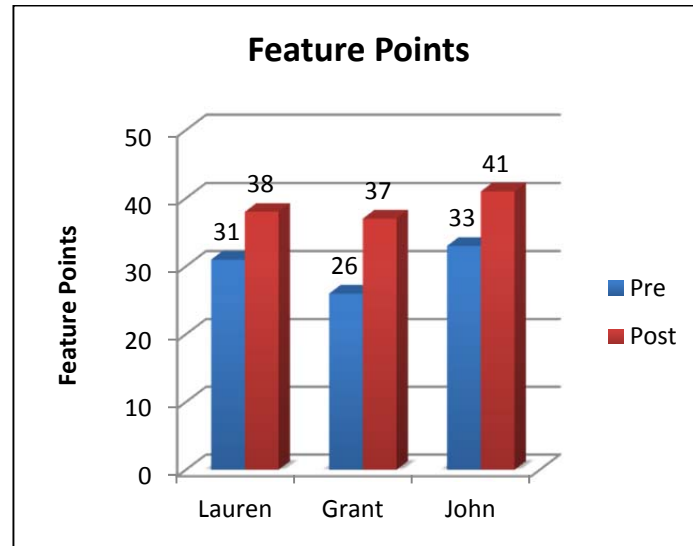
When analyzing the student's spelling inventories, three different parts were taken into account: words spelled correctly, feature points, and total points. All of this information helped to place each student in an instructional stage (a level of ability based on the pre-assessment). This helped to guide instruction based on student need. Below is a table displaying the students' words correctly spelled in the pre and post-tests. As you can see in Figure 1, each student's score increased following the word study instruction.



*Figure 1: Words Spelled Correctly*

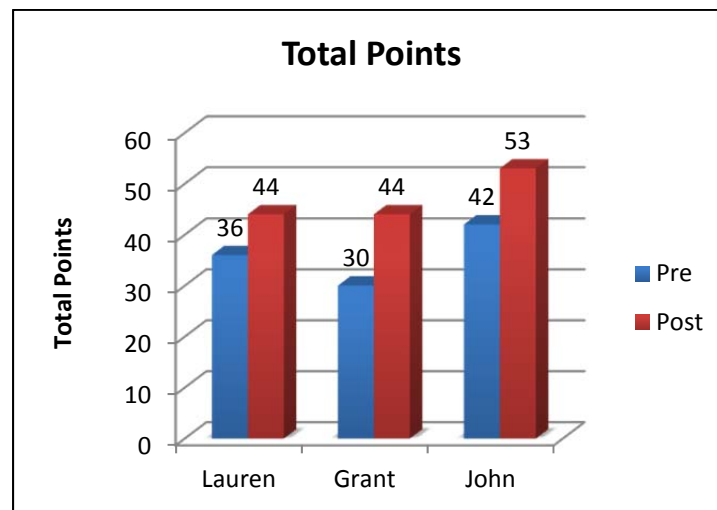
When administering the spelling inventory, feature points (points given for the correct spelling of specific word parts) were given when a student correctly used specific parts of a word such as the beginning, middle, and ending consonants, vowels, and blends. By breaking down the words, I was better able to determine which word features my students knew and those for which they needed further instruction. This also helped to determine the most appropriate word pattern in which to begin my instruction. As *Figure 2* shows, there was an increase in each

student's feature points from the pre to the post spelling inventory assessment. Interestingly, all three students showed increase in their knowledge of both short vowel sounds as well as digraphs (including the /ch/ and /sh/ sounds), which were the focus of instruction.



*Figure 2: Feature Points*

The total points were calculated by adding the number of words correct to the student's feature points. As shown in *Figure 3*, each student showed an increase in their total points as well.



*Figure 3: Total Points*

## Survey

Along with the formal assessments, I also administered a post survey in order to gain insight on students' perceptions of word study. The survey consisted of four questions, which I read to the students to aid in their comprehension. I also explained how important it was to be honest in their answers. According to their answers, the students enjoyed word sorting because it was fun and they learned new words. When asked what they disliked, all of the students replied, "nothing." The *long and short /o/* sound as well as the */sh/*, */ch/*, and */th/* digraphs were all listed as things that they had learned through word study. Also, all three students noted that they enjoyed the word sorts and activities because, "they were fun!"

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

### Conclusions

The post-interviews given to my students revealed their positive feedback on word study activities. Throughout the study, the students gained knowledge about the structure of words. They were able to correctly identify the short and long */o/* sound while reading and writing and they correctly used the */sh/* and */ch/* digraphs when reading and writing words. When this study first began, only one of the students was able to identify the difference between a vowel and a consonant, and none of the students showed awareness of any of the above patterns. Overall, the students gained a knowledge base for understanding the structure of words, which was demonstrated by identifying the word patterns in many of the words in the post spelling inventory.

## **Applications**

Upon completion of this study, I was able to share the findings with the homeroom teachers of the participants as well as my principal. They all agreed that it was difficult for an intervention support teacher who does not have her own classroom to try to implement an alternative way of spelling instruction. All three teachers were interested in learning more about incorporating word study into guided reading. Through our staff development time at staff meetings, I have also been able to share my successes. This has helped our English Language teacher to start using word study with her students. Our school has also requested copies of various word study books to spark ideas during Professional Learning Communities (PLC) time and staff development workshops. As I continue my role as a support teacher, I plan to continue certain aspects of word study instruction with all of my reading groups as I feel it is a fundamental part of reading instruction.

## **Limitations**

Throughout this action research study, I was faced with many limitations. Because I wanted to keep it a true “action research” study, I had to implement the study with one of the groups in which I teach. Therefore, the sample size was only three students and the amount of instruction time was limited as we could only meet twice a week for 30-minute sessions. Also, all three students were in different homerooms. This made it difficult to communicate our schedule and progress with the classroom teachers. The biggest limitation I was faced with was my students not having the opportunity for my instruction to carry over into their everyday literacy instruction in the classroom. There was not a connection from my small group instruction to their classroom instruction. This made it difficult to create a truly rich and meaningful word study experience for my students.

**Reflection**

As I look back on my research study, there are a few things I would have done differently. I wish I could have been able to work more closely with the classroom teachers of my participants to have them incorporate aspects of our word study instruction into their classroom literacy instruction. Also, the pre and post-spelling inventory given was to assess a much broader aspect of word study. It would have been more beneficial for me to create a specific pre and post spelling inventory focusing on just the word patterns taught in order to see specific examples of growth in students' knowledge of word patterns. Spending more time on each pattern would have been beneficial to the students and the study as well.

Throughout the process of this action research project, I found many further topics of interest and I am left with many further questions, which I hope to explore. One question I have is, "How can I teach word study strategies in a small group and better relate them to the classroom instruction?" Another question is, "Can the inquiry approach to word work have an effect on student's reading?" In the future, I plan to find more research supporting different types of word study and its effect on student's reading abilities. More specifically, "What is the most beneficial form of word study instruction with a small reading group?" Through further reflection, discussion and research I hope to find additional word study strategies that can be successfully applied in a small group setting outside of the classroom. The knowledge and motivation that I have gained through this study has better prepared me to do so.

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