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## Impact of Implementing Differentiated Spelling Curriculum On Student Spelling Ability Using Words Their Way (2012)

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IMPACT OF IMPLEMENTING DIFFERENTIATED SPELLING CURRICULUM ON  
STUDENT SPELLING ABILITY USING *WORDS THEIR WAY* (2012)

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Education.

Hamline University

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## CHAPTER ONE

### **Introduction**

#### **Overview**

Spelling is an important skill for every child to learn at a young age. Today, students are learning how to spell as early as kindergarten by sounding out words and writing the corresponding letter for each sound they hear. Deciphering what these little ones are trying to spell can be difficult. The reader may need to ask the child for help reading what the child wrote. This can sometimes be frustrating for the child, as they tried so hard but can not communicate effectively.

My research focus is on *differentiated spelling utilizing Words Their Way (2012) curriculum and how it may positively impact student phonetic spelling*. I have chosen this research focus because my district recently held several vertical alignment meetings about concerns and gaps in the curriculum. Some concerns that were frequently raised were related to writing, especially spelling ability of older students. It has become clear to me that what we have been doing for spelling in the past is proving to be ineffective.

#### **Focus**

The focus of this project is to educate my colleagues in a new way to teach spelling, through the *Words Their Way (2012)* spelling curriculum, and differentiating this program to meet the needs of all their students. I hope to persuade my colleagues to explore teaching spelling in new ways through differentiation in partnership with phonetic instruction and practice, rather than the traditional way. I plan on providing this education through a professional development presentation.

## Significance

Correct spelling is necessary when communicating thoughts and ideas through email, letters, or documents. Essentially, spelling is imperative to become successful in today's job force. A 2015 survey conducted by the CBI (Confederation of British Industry) with UK employers found that 37% of employers were dissatisfied with the literacy ability of young people entering the workforce. An associate professor at the University of Queensland in Australia, Roslyn Petelin asserts that "young people coming out of university may have all the right interpersonal skills, but if they can not write coherently, employers will not give them a job." (Morrison, 2017). Petelin continued by saying, "nothing can make you lose credibility more quickly and seem uneducated than a spelling mistake..."(Morrison, 2017).

It is undoubtedly the school's responsibility to prepare these students for their future careers. Students need help from educators to become proficient in many areas, not the least of which is spelling. Unfortunately, some schools today have decreased the time that they spend, or stopped altogether, teaching spelling. Dr. Kelli Sandman-Hurley, doctor in literacy specializing in reading dyslexia, described this process passionately in her writing by emphasizing that schools have declared spelling ridiculous and unimportant (Sandman-Hurley, 2015).

The lack of importance placed on spelling could be due to a variety of reasons, one of which could be that spelling isn't truly assessed in state accountability tests. Roberta Price Gardner, assistant professor of Reading and Literacy Education at Kennesaw State University, expressed that state assessments "seldom include direct measures for spelling competence" but acknowledges that it has some consideration during the writing portion of the test (Denn, 2019).

In the state of Minnesota, there is no writing portion included in our state assessment. The Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment website states that for each grade level “Writing and speaking will be assessed at the classroom level only” (2019, n.p.). Therefore, there is seemingly no accountability for districts to teach spelling proficiency.

Differentiation within my classroom is important to me as a first grade teacher, because students come to me with a vast range of abilities. I have students that are working on letter sounds, students who can read at a 5th grade level, and students that fall within that range--all in the same classroom. My job, as their teacher, is to help every child grow, and the best way to do this is to meet every child’s needs. Early in my career, I came to realize that the traditional whole class instruction model of teaching wasn’t able to meet the needs of my students. The most effective way I found to meet their needs is through differentiation.

The traditional model of teaching through whole class instruction is the learning environment that many adults experienced as students. The teacher teaches to the median ability of their students. Teachers expect all of their students to learn the same material, do the same work, and take the same assessments based on the concepts being learned (Tomlinson, 1999). This one-size-fits all approach is meaningful to a few of their students. However, there are students who find the material too difficult for them to learn and master. Those students may begin to feel frustrated when they are not experiencing success with the material being taught to them. When this happens, their level of engagement in the lessons may diminish and they may continue to fall behind their peers academically.

Through the traditional model of whole group instruction, those students who are advanced beyond the material being covered in the lessons may not feel challenged

academically, and may become bored and frustrated as a result. In my experience, poor behaviors arise when students are feeling bored and unchallenged. These students sit through hours of instruction each day, covering simple concepts that they already understand. These students may be disengaged throughout the lesson or may be distracting other students around them.

Every child in your classroom is quite different from their peer sitting next to them.

Tomlinson and Imbeau (2011) stated that

“Students differ as learners in terms of background experience, culture, language, gender, interests, readiness to learn, modes of learning, speed of learning, support systems for learning, self-awareness as a learner, confidence as a learner, independence as a learner, and a host of other ways. These Differences profoundly affect how students learn and the nature of scaffolding they will need at various points in the learning process”(p.14).

If these students are so different from one another, then applying whole group instruction with all the same lessons, work, and assessments for every student would not be effective for much of the class.

Differentiation is a process where teachers respond to the varying needs of their students in the classroom (Tomlinsons, 2000). This can be implemented in a variety of ways, but in my classroom, I form small groups throughout the day. I give the children pre-assessments to determine their starting ability in the academic area, and create groups of students with like abilities. Because first graders have such varying ability levels, sometimes that means there are up to six groups for a topic at a time. The children are so excited when it is their group’s turn to



meet with me throughout the day. Sometimes these are quick mini lessons and then they work on work relevant to their learning. These short lessons keep them engaged and excited to try the skills they just learned, and help them feel valued and challenged. Because of this, I have a very engaged class with very few behavior issues due to boredom or frustration.

### **Personal Background**

On my way to my first day of first grade, I remember reading *Ralph and the Motorcycle* (1965) by Beverly Cleary, a fifth grade level book. I brought it into school with me, and my teacher was surprised to see that I had a chapter book with me, and was shocked when I showed her I was able to read it. Looking back, I think that she was not sure how I would fit in with her plans for reading instruction.

I always loved to read. My mother was an avid reader, as a professional technical writer and editor. My parents read to us, and encouraged us to look at books and begin reading at an early age. An appreciation for literature, grammar, and spelling was instilled in me. I also had a love of math, as my father, a computer engineer, worked on it often with me. I was very lucky that I had such a great support system at home to continue challenging me. At school, however, I did not feel challenged because my teacher taught whole group lessons and we all did the same work. When I finished early, I was to help other kids with their work as well. I did not mind helping the other students, but I definitely remember being bored.

This pattern continued throughout my elementary career. At times, I grew impatient spending so much time on concepts that I either already knew or was absorbing quickly. I frequently talked to my classmates seated near me, or did not listen to the teacher's directions, and became a distraction to the classroom. My teachers were exasperated with my behavior,

especially since I was a bright student and should have known better. My attitude toward school started to suffer as well. I once was so thrilled for school and to continue to learn, but my excitement had diminished due to boredom that spiraled into behavior problems in the classroom.

A few years later, I continued to middle school, and academics started to become harder for me. Because in elementary school everything was easy for me and I was never challenged, I did not learn how to persevere through academic challenges. I felt that because I could not understand the material the first time I tried it, as I was always able to, that meant I was unintelligent, and I quickly gave up. My grades were slipping and my attitude towards school was at an all time low.

It wasn't until high school that I felt truly supported and understood by the teachers. My grades were improving, and that motivated me to come in early for help when I found it challenging. My positive attitude toward school was restored, and I became interested in becoming a high school teacher. But, when I was seventeen, I started to work after school at a daycare center with preschool aged children. I loved my job, connecting with the children and watching them grow and learn. They were so curious and excited about learning anything and everything. I had so much fun and felt that I was making a difference. I decided that I wanted to teach elementary school, and to give my students a different experience than I had.

### **Experience with Differentiation and Words Their Way**

In college I discovered the concept of differentiation. It intrigued me, but I did not know how it would truly work. I was lucky enough to be placed for student teaching in a first grade class that focused on differentiation and small group instruction. The cooperating teacher was

very organized and knowledgeable about stages and levels of instruction in each academic area that she taught. My cooperating teacher introduced me to the spelling program *Words Their Way* (2012) as it was a spelling curriculum they used in her district. She was very passionate about this program because she loved how it met every student's needs within the same fifteen to twenty minutes each day.

When I began teaching in my current school district, I found that my colleagues were doing spelling very traditionally. They gave every student the same list that went along with the reading skill that was being taught that week. For my first year, I decided to give this method a try, and I found that the spelling words were not meaningful to my students. My high academic students already possessed the reading skills, and the lower academic students were working on more basic reading skills. There also wasn't time set aside each day to focus on spelling itself, as it was a part of the reading core time. This sent a message to my students that spelling wasn't meaningful or important; it was more of an afterthought.

At the end of my first year of teaching, I introduced the *Words Their Way* program to my colleagues in the first grade teaching team. They were very apprehensive at first, as the program was going to take a lot of work to learn and apply to their classroom. They did not know if it would be worth taking up fifteen to twenty minutes of their instruction time, but they trusted me and changed up their spelling instruction with this program. Now, my first grade teaching colleagues agree that it is worth the extra time and effort to implement this spelling program that differentiates for every student's spelling needs.

### **Objective**

Currently, my first grade team is the only grade level to implement this spelling program. I feel that as the children move on to later grades, they will not continue to experience the same amount of growth, challenge, and success as they have with this program. I find this to be very upsetting. Eventually, my hope is that every classroom is utilizing this program in their classroom, and that our district makes differentiated spelling a priority.

My goal is to create a professional development opportunity to introduce this program to my colleagues, and help them get started learning and implementing this spelling program in their classrooms. I would like to get the support of our curriculum director in order to receive some curriculum funding toward this program as well. This way, every teacher would be given the resources to be successful. I hope to train our instructional coaches in the district with this program so they will be resources for the teachers within the district while working on implementing the program within their own classrooms.

One way to do this is through sharing research that I have found about word study and differentiation. This research includes studies that have been conducted, as well as testimonials from well-respected authorities in education. I will do a review of different perspectives and experiences with spelling, word study, and differentiation, and how this intervention is applied in other areas such as writing and reading capabilities.

### **Conclusion and Summary**

Chapter one explored the importance of spelling in society, as well as the necessity of changing traditional teaching practices. This chapter provided background information of the researcher, giving understanding to the reader of the importance of this topic to the researcher. This chapter also provides the researcher's professional experience in both the *Words Their Way*

(2012) spelling curriculum and in differentiated instruction. In chapter two, the topics of spelling and differentiation will continue to be discussed through exploration of research by experts in the field of spelling and differentiation. This chapter will also look at the results of studies looking at spelling and differentiated instruction.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### Overview

As described in chapter one, spelling is an area of Language Arts that has been overlooked, yet also deemed important. Students are expected to use rote memorization to remember how to spell seemingly arbitrary words, and then will quickly forget after the test. Spelling is an important skill that needs to be taught in a more meaningful way for students to master this ability as they transition to adulthood. My research focus is on differentiated spelling utilizing *Words Their Way* (2012) curriculum and how it may positively impact student phonetic spelling.

The focus of this paper is differentiating for content, specifically in the content area of spelling. The major themes in this research topic include differentiation, barriers, spelling, and word study. Differentiation can be applied to all areas of the classroom experience: content, process, products, and learning environment. This chapter will discuss the importance of explicitly teaching spelling and explore different ways of teaching spelling. The chapter will also specifically look into the method of teaching spelling through word study, which is one way to learn and apply patterns found within words.

Also covered in this chapter will be the topic of differentiation. Differentiation is important to promote student engagement and motivation to learn different skills. Small groups is one strategy to help teachers meet the needs of individual students more appropriately. Many teachers agree that differentiation is important, but teachers experience barriers to implementing a differentiated classroom, which also will be covered in this chapter.

## Significance of Spelling

### Rationale

There are differing opinions about whether spelling is truly important to learn in schools today. On one side, Steve Graham (2002) argues in his article, *Contribution of Spelling Instruction to the Spelling, Writing, and Reading of Poor Spellers*, that spelling is a learned skill that children will be required to utilize throughout their adult lives. When someone struggles with spelling, it affects their writing and can distort messages that are trying to be communicated (Graham et al., 2002). Misspellings may lead to negative perceptions of one's overall intelligence. One's ideas are regarded as less significant, and information as less reliable than those communicated without spelling errors (Graham et al., 2002).

People who struggle with spelling also struggle to fluently convey ideas in their writing. If writers are completely occupied with thinking of how to spell words, they may often forget ideas and intentions. This ineffectual process affects the overall quality of the final writing product (Graham et al., 2002). Graham also found that when students have difficulty mastering spelling, they will evade writing altogether. This leads to these children becoming frustrated and doubt their writing ability, as writing proves to be an arduous task due to their consistent spelling difficulties (Graham, 1999).

There are also those who do not believe in the importance of spelling instruction, and think that it should be minimized or eliminated from school programming (Krashen, 1989). One argument is that students do not apply the words they learned in spelling to other areas of learning, so teaching spelling is not worthwhile (Graham, 2014). Many teachers notice that students might get a word correct on the spelling test, but then misspell the same word later

during writing time (Graham, 2014). The inability to transfer their spelling knowledge can be frustrating for teachers and students. Teachers also feel spelling is no longer a skill that needs to be learned, as computers have spell check, and speech synthesis will become what all people eventually use in order to communicate through the written word (Graham, 2002). This technology reliance demotivates teachers to spend valuable instruction time on skills that may be considered obsolete a few years later.

Instead of spending instructional time explicitly teaching spelling, teachers are trying a different approach of naturally obtaining the skill of spelling through only reading, writing, and using informal methods when a specific spelling need arises (Graham, 2002). They believe that the more a child is exposed to the written word, they will be able to recognize the spellings of these words on their own as they begin to learn and use these words. Graham(2002) found that this approach did not work well for struggling spellers.

Affirming these findings, Morris, Blanton, Blanton, & Perney, 1995, found that poor spellers were able to learn how to spell only a very few words that were not explicitly taught to them throughout a school year. Elementary spellers with low abilities are also found to have more anxiety and avoidance to spelling instruction (Sideridis, 2005). This is due to the spelling words being too difficult for them to master. The information of these students experiencing more anxiety towards spelling is concerning because struggling spellers need more motivation to practice with the aim of mastering these skills so that they can be transferred to other areas of their literacy advancement.



## ***Benefits***

Spelling is extremely important in all areas of a child's literacy development. Explicit spelling instruction has been shown to affect writing, reading, and phonological awareness abilities in children from Kindergarten through 10th grade (Graham et al., 2014). Graham, 2014, found that the average student who was taught spelling through explicit instruction went from the 50th percentile in applying correct spelling in writing to the 83rd percentile. This is a significant jump, and shows that explicit spelling instruction does play a large factor in a child's writing ability. The study found that even if a child did not specifically learn how to spell a particular word, they found they were able to transfer knowledge of spelling patterns of other words to apply to new words (Graham et al., 2014).

Explicit spelling instruction also increased student's phonological awareness as well. The same study found that the average student went from the 50th percentile in phonological awareness ability to the 70th percentile due to spelling instruction (Graham et al., 2014). Finally, the study that Graham and colleagues conducted found that spelling instruction also positively affected the students' reading ability. The average student in this study went from the 50th percentile to the 67th percentile in overall reading performance. Students showed improvement in individual word reading, as well as reading comprehension (Graham et al., 2014).

## **Methods**

Spelling is explicitly taught in the classroom in many different ways. Most teachers still use rote memorization to teach spelling (Kleinpaste, 2014). The spelling lists that students are required to memorize are comprised of words that are many times found in basal reader curriculums, words are selected based on criteria such as number of syllables, orthographic

principle, orthographic generalizations, curriculum content vocabulary lists, high-frequency words, and teacher-selected (Schlagal, 2002).

Kleinpaste, 2014, discussed a survey collected by Graham and colleagues, 2008, given to randomly selected primary teachers. The survey found that on average teachers spend 90 minutes a week teaching spelling. They gave another survey, to determine instructional spelling practices, to one-hundred-sixty-nine first through third grade teachers. This survey found that 98% of these teachers taught spelling. The weekly words used were from different sources such as spelling programs (66%), basal readers (37%), material that students read (30%), students' compositions (26%), and students' self-selection (14%).

Also, researchers found that primary-grade spelling instruction is varied. Teachers reported teaching many different instructional concepts including phonological awareness, phonics, spelling rules, and strategies for spelling new words (Kleinpaste, 2014). This shows that teachers in primary grades recognize the importance of spending time on spelling, and the many areas and concepts that surround and support spelling development.

### ***Developmental Spelling***

The developmental spelling approach is based on how students learn at different points in their personal development, and the chances that all students in a classroom are ready for the same skills at the same time are very small (Bear & Templeton, 1998). Bear and Templeton's research (1998) shows that for students to become proficient in spelling, students must learn spelling skills in order, and must master skills before moving on to the next set of skills. This creates the opportunity for the learner to be successful and move at a pace that is appropriate for them.

Bear and Templeton, 1998, suggested that developmental spelling breaks down spelling into six stages that are appropriate, starting at preschool and continuing to twelfth grade. The first stage is pre-phonemic spelling, which includes rhyming and letter names. The second stage is semi-phonemic spelling or the early letter name stage, in which students now use pictures and words to sort initial and final sounds. After this skill is mastered, students fully move to the letter name stage, and work on short vowel word families with pictures and words. This stage also includes learning and mastering digraphs and blends.

The next stage is within-word patterns. Students in this stage work on the many long vowel patterns with words and pictures, as well as building on short vowels, blends, and digraph knowledge. Syllable juncture is the next stage, in which students work on skills such as consonant doubling, common suffixes, past tense, open and closed syllables, word accents, and prefixes. The final stage is derivational constancy, which focuses on word bases and roots (Bear & Templeton, 1998).

These stages along with words and activities for each stage are found in the *Words Their Way* (2012) spelling curriculum. Bear & Templeton, 1998, assert that establishing a spelling stage for students is not to label the student, but to find the appropriate starting point to build upon. Throughout the developmental spelling process, continued assessment is crucial to determine the most appropriate instruction level for the students. (Bear & Templeton, 1998). Students who begin at the same stage may need more or less time to work on their skills than their peers. Frequently evaluating students allows for more efficient use for instructional time and increases their spelling growth potential.

### ***Word Study***

Word study is an instructional process that examines shades of sound, structure, and meaning of words (Bear & Templeton, 1998). The practice of word study not only teaches words, but also explores processes and strategies by breaking down developmentally appropriate words into patterns that can be applied when students read and write similar words. This creates a meaningful connection between words that students come across both in and out of the context of spelling.

Tracy Dew (2012) conducted a study in which students were put into small groups based on the Spelling Inventory given by the *Words Their Way* (Bear et al., 2012). The study was based on an eight-week small group word study spelling intervention. The students then would take the same spelling inventory at the end of the eight weeks to determine the effectiveness of the *Words Their Way* (Bear et al., 2012) intervention. When looking at the data at the beginning and end of the time period, one can see that students were able to retain spelling skills from word study better than from traditional spelling instruction methods. The study found that students who did well on weekly spelling tests were able to retain their learned skills, and showed improvement on the spelling inventory at the end of the intervention period as well. Students who did poorly on the weekly spelling tests showed very little growth on their spelling inventory assessment at the end of the intervention (Dew, 2012). Therefore, if a child has not mastered the word study skill, they would not do well on the weekly test and would not show improvement on the spelling inventory assessment.

The study conducted by Tracy Dew, 2012, also looked at the effectiveness of *Words Their Way* (Bear et al., 2008) in student daily writing. The researcher assessed twenty-eight

writing samples and found the following: 61% of students spelled old assigned words correctly most of the time, 21% of the students spelled their assigned words correctly some of the time, and 18% of students never spelled past assigned words correctly. Those students who did not spell them correctly were the same children who performed poorly on weekly spelling tests (Dew, 2012). This shows that if a student is practicing the spelling skills throughout the week, they will be more likely to apply these skills correctly most of the time in their writing.

Word study gives the students opportunities to compare and contrast word patterns from one word to another (Bear et al., 2012). The students can engage in many different activities practicing their developmentally appropriate weekly words. One of the main ways to practice these words is through sorting and manipulating words to find patterns. These learned patterns then can be generalized and transferred to groups of words that were not explicitly taught (Bear et al., 2012). Other activities to practice these words include fun ways of writing the words and activities that involve partner collaboration.

Williams and Hufnagel (2005) found that word study is most effective when used in small group settings. Research shows that using whole group word study instruction does not meet the needs of all students (Williams & Hufnagel, 2005). When word study is done in the whole group, the words are chosen based on grade level expectations. This level of instruction benefits only a small portion of students in the classroom (Williams & Hufnagel, 2005). The method is particularly ineffective for low achieving students as the words and patterns being studied are too difficult and do not appropriately match their developmental readiness level. These students are often unable to transfer the word study patterns being taught to their reading or writing (Williams & Hufnagel, 2005).

High achieving students also do not benefit from whole group word study, as the words may not be challenging enough for them. These students already know these concepts before they are taught to the class (Williams & Hufnagel, 2005). Students need to be taught in small groups, working on skills that are most appropriate to support their learning potential. Spelling and word study continue to be important as we look to differentiation within the classroom setting to best meet students' spelling needs.

### **Importance of Differentiation**

#### **Rationale**

Differentiation is the process through which the teacher changes their instruction to meet the needs of the varied students in their classroom. (Tomlinson 2000). Differentiation is important because every child in a classroom has a different background, ability, and circumstance than their peers. Students cannot be expected to all learn at the same way or rate as one another (Tomlinson, 2009).

The process of differentiation can be applied to many different aspects in the classroom such as the content, process, products, and learning environment (Tomlinson, 2000). When a teacher differentiates for content, the teacher needs to consider what the child is ready to learn based on their current ability in that content area. When differentiating for process, the teacher determines how much support the students need, as well as how the students practice the content being learned. Product is how students display or prove what they have learned. When differentiating for product, teachers can give students options to produce (show what they have learned) in a way that makes them most comfortable and confident. Learning environments can also be differentiated by creating spaces in the classroom to meet their sensory needs or

encourage collaboration (Tomlinson, 2000). To create the most effective classroom environment, teachers need to be constantly thinking about these areas to best meet the needs of all of their students.

In the typical public school classrooms, an observer would find 27 students whose academic ability spans five grade levels. (Hertberg-Davis & Brighton, 2006). Generally, teachers choose to teach their students together in a large group, and focus their instruction to meet the needs of the middle of their students' varied abilities (Tomlinson, 1999). This may waste valuable instruction time because the lessons may not reach the majority of the students in the classroom. The content is too difficult for some students, while at the same time too easy for some other students. Students feel successful and satisfied in school when they are given appropriately challenging instruction (Tomlinson, 2000). When students are not being appropriately challenged, it leads to frustration, boredom, and loss of engagement and motivation toward school.

### **Engagement and Motivation**

Engaging students by appropriately challenging them is the best way to maximize instruction time and allow for all students to grow academically. To create an engaging classroom, differentiation is key to give students appropriately challenging instruction and practice. (Tomlinson, 2000). This is best executed when teachers meet with individual or small groups of students of similar academic attributes in order to meet their specific learning needs (Tomlinson, 2000). To create these small groups of students, teachers need to be collecting data through summative assessments of their students to determine their levels in different academic

areas (Tomlinson, 2000). Based on this information, teachers need to give instruction that is just beyond the students' current level of mastery (Tomlinson, 1999).

When educators give students choices in their learning process, they are also encouraging student engagement. Choices help students to become motivated to learn (Alderman & Green, 2011). This concept of choice leading to engagement and motivation was researched in a study from Kleinpaste. The study found that giving students a choice in their weekly spelling words as well as how they practice those words resulted in students becoming excited about spelling and learning. The students were able to choose activities to practice their spelling words within their classroom at word work stations, as well as choose activities to do for homework. Students were given a choice board with nine activities, from which they could choose two spelling practice activities to accomplish within a week.

The results of the study found that 13 out of 17 students, or 71% of the class, felt that they were able to make choices in their spelling routine when orally asked. The study also found that 14 out of 17, or 82 % of students had positive things to say about the spelling routine. Students made comments to the researcher about how much they liked spelling and how they thought their homework was fun. The researcher also observed students enjoying their homework, even bringing in their work and showing their classmates what they worked on the night prior (Kleinpaste, 2014).

Motivation is encouraged by student engagement, and is also extremely important for student academic success. Academic motivation is strongly linked to spelling success or failure. (Alderman & Green, 2011). Providing students with multisensory opportunities to practice skills that explore visual, auditory, and kinesthetic activities creates an exciting learning environment



conducive to motivating students to participate and learn (Alderman & Green, 2011). Allowing students a choice of activities is a great way to motivate students to learn. When they are given choices, it gives students the ability to personally invest in, and feel a sense of responsibility for, their own learning process (Gambrell, 2001).

Another way to motivate and engage students is by making their learning process meaningful as well as enjoyable. If students see the value of what they're learning in everyday life, they will want to master this skill (Sideridis, 2005). The teacher should provide life applicable opportunities to practice learned skills. Some ways to do this for the content area of spelling are tasks such as writing letters and cards to people, making lists, and writing songs (Alderman & Green, 2011). When students can see the practicality of these skills, they are excited to join in these everyday practices, and encouraged to continue mastering the skills.

Motivation also will increase when students feel a sense of success (Alderman & Green, 2011). To create an environment where all students feel successful in their varying learning abilities and styles, differentiation is necessary to appropriately challenge students at all levels. Teachers must give attention to student readiness by collecting and analyzing data. (Tomlinson, et al., 2003). After analyzing student data, teachers can determine independent, instructional, and frustration levels for all students in different content areas. Teachers then should be aiming their instruction for all students to be at their instructional level, the level just above their current skill level. This is the level that they are ready to truly understand, yet appropriately challenging for the student (Tomlinson, 2009). Using this knowledge of student abilities in different content areas, small groups will be formed to better meet the needs of children with similar ability levels within the classroom setting.

## Small Groups

It is important to create small groups of students in the classroom to maximize the instruction time the teacher has each day with his or her students. When teachers assess their students, they are learning about their academic readiness level and grouping them with students of like learning attributes or abilities. In Tomlinson's article, *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners*, she references a meta-analysis that studied the effects of within-class grouping on student achievement (Lou et al., 1996). This study found that students who were placed in small learning groups, with two or three other students, achieved significantly more than students who were not in small groups. The study also found that students in small groups had better attitudes toward learning than their peers in other classrooms who were being taught using whole-class instruction. Researchers determined that teachers were able to better address the variety of learning abilities in these small groups than when teaching through whole-class instruction.

A study conducted in 2012 by Emily Pettit researched the effects of small group word work instruction using the *Words Their Way* (Bear et. al., 2008) curriculum. This study was conducted over a two week period with a group of sixteen fourth grade students. The *Words Their Way* (Bear et. al., 2008) intervention was implemented each day of the school week. The research compared the spelling growth of these students before and after using the differentiated small group intervention. The *Words Their Way* (Bear et. al., 2008) spelling inventory assessment was given at the beginning of the school year in September.

The teacher implemented whole-class spelling instruction for five months. Then, the students took the inventory assessment again in February to measure their spelling growth from

September. The results showed a little growth during this time for most students, while two students' scores showed no growth during this time while being taught through whole group instruction. The teacher then conducted differentiated small group spelling interventions using *Words Their Way* (Bear et. al., 2008) curriculum for two weeks.

The small groups were created homogeneously based on the *Words Their Way* (Bear et. al., 2008) spelling inventory. The spelling inventory taken in February determined the developmental spelling stages for each student, and that data helped the teacher create homogeneous small groups comprised of students who tested in the same developmental spelling stage. At the end of the two week intervention, the students took the spelling inventory a third time to measure their spelling growth over the two week period.

The study found that 12 out of the 16 fourth graders showed great improvement from the two weeks of differentiated small group instruction. This data is significant because it showed that these students benefited more from the two weeks of small group instruction than they did throughout the five months of whole group instruction. One student even grew by twelve points and moved up a developmental spelling stage from this two week intervention. The results showed that the intervention created growth for all different levels of developmental spelling groups, and did not show any significant difference of success between genders.

The researcher believed that the two week intervention worked because the students were provided with the opportunity to work on words that were at their instructional level, and were therefore able to be developmentally ready to understand these skills. The research also found that working in small groups created an environment where the teacher was able to be more available in helping students more closely understand the material while practicing and

processing the content. Lastly, the teacher felt that the fact that students were working in homogeneous groups was integral to their success with this intervention. With homogeneous groups, students were able to receive instruction that was most relevant to their developmental learning stage.

### ***Flexible Grouping***

Grouping students based on assessment data is a great way to help your students learn relevant content to help them grow. However, Tomlinson in her article *The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners*, warned teachers not to permanently group students based on what the teacher deems ability to succeed. Tomlinson stated that teachers often focus on student deficit, and group students in stagnant groups of students who are deemed likely to succeed, and students deemed less likely or even unlikely to succeed. (Tomlinson, 2009). This practice is very discouraging and demotivating to the many students who find themselves permanently categorized as less likely to succeed in the eyes of the teacher. Generally, teachers will categorize these students as such across all content areas, and fail to see their potential or ability differs depending on differing topics and skill areas.

This categorization happens very early on in a child's academic career and can be very detrimental to students who are deemed less likely or unlikely to succeed academically. Pamela Muller (2001) asserts "Once the kindergarten teacher places a child in the low reading group, she is doomed to stay there forever, regardless of what she does. Once the label has been given, a child begins to look at herself in a different light. And so does the school. Instruction changes, behavior changes, relationships among peers. change, treatment among peers changes (Mueller,

2001, p.9). Students must be given the opportunity to be correctly estimated by their teacher in all academic areas through assessment and observation.

When grouping students, the teacher must allow groups to be flexible to truly meet student needs. Tomlinson, in her article *The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners*, referenced a meta-analysis of within-class grouping (Lou et al., 1996). This meta-analysis found that low-ability students learned better in heterogeneous groups comprised of students with varying ability levels. The study also found that middle-level students learned better in homogeneous groups composed of students with similar ability levels. High-ability learners were able to do well in either setting. The research found that due to the large variance in student abilities in all content areas, interests, and learning styles, it is important to group students in many different ways (Lou et al., 1996).

Small groups should not be created on assessment data alone for every content area. For some activities it is appropriate to pair up students based on their learner profile, how they learn best (Tomlinson, 2009). This could be grouping students who enjoy working collaboratively together. These students could be grouped further by how they enjoy practicing skills and producing final products.

Another way to group in the classroom would be to place students who like to work independently into a meeting group that then disperses to work alone. Independent work stations, such as a Daily 5 model (Boushey et al., 2014), is a great tool to keep students actively engaged in learning even while not directly working with the teacher. A classroom full of students working on different activities independently can be difficult to manage. Some might view this difficulty as a barrier as they move towards a differentiated model.

## **Barriers to Differentiation**

Many teachers recognize that differentiation appears to be the answer to creating engaging and motivating classrooms to improve student learning at all levels. Carol Tomlinson (1999) refers to a national survey conducted in 1998 (Hootstein, 1998) of high school teachers. The survey results showed that 90% of teachers thought responding to academic differences with students was important or very important. A survey of middle school teachers found that 50% of teachers do not differentiate to meet the needs of student readiness, interest, or learning style (Moon, Tomlinson, & Callahan, 1995). Even though so many teachers recognize the importance of differentiating, it is not being implemented as highly as it is recognized.

There are many barriers to teachers utilizing differentiation in their classroom settings. Planning different lessons and activities for different small groups of kids throughout the day takes extensive amounts of planning. As explained by Brighton et. al (2005), in the article *The Feasibility of High-end Learning in a Diverse Middle School*, “On their own, differentiation of instruction and assessment are complex endeavors requiring extended time and concentrated effort to master”. Adding to this complexity, current realities of school such as large class sizes, limited resource materials, lack of planning time, lack of structures in place to allow collaboration with colleagues, and ever-increasing number of teacher responsibilities, and the tasks become even more daunting.” (Brighton et. al, 2005). This describes many of the frustrations teachers face on a daily basis. The class sizes and expectations for teachers and students continue to grow, yet the student and teacher support decreases or disappears.

Another barrier to differentiation is classroom management. A typical classroom has about 27 students in the classroom at the same time (Hertberg-Davis & Brighton, 2006). When meeting for whole group instruction, students are all together, doing the same thing at the same time. This is relatively easy to manage, and the school day continues with a great deal of structure in place. However, differentiation requires small groups of students meeting with the teacher at a time. Many teachers feel overwhelmed trying to manage the rest of the class with whom they are not meeting at that time (Hertberg-Davis & Brighton, 2006). Teachers with inadequate classroom management support find that this time leads to an increase in poor student behaviors, which demotivates the teacher to want to work to create the differentiated opportunities within their class.

Brighton et al. (2005) reported that schools that provide support and encouragement to teachers from administration, as well as resources such as more planning time, had more teachers willing to differentiate their instruction (Bondie et al., 2019). The article from Brighton et al. (2005) also stated that teachers were more motivated to differentiate when they felt confident in their knowledge and ability to implement this instruction in their classroom. This shows that teachers need more adequate support to effectively implement differentiated instruction within their classroom.

### **Conclusion**

Spelling is an extremely important skill that needs to be allotted time to be explicitly taught in classrooms. Words that are selected for weekly study should be developmentally appropriate to best support student growth. Word study is important for children to explore, compare, and identify patterns. Teaching about spelling patterns allows for students to apply this

knowledge while spelling future words. Word study is most effective in small group settings, with the teacher determining appropriate words to study and practice. Students should be consistently and frequently assessed to place them in flexible groups that best meet their academic needs and allow them to improve their skills.

Differentiation is important to best meet each student's specific level and support their academic growth. When a student is appropriately challenged with academic rigor, that student becomes engaged in their learning and motivated to push themselves. Students are also motivated and engaged through small group activities. Closer proximity to their teacher, as well as relevant learning material increases student engagement.

Small groups need to be flexible, and students need to be estimated correctly in each academic area through assessment and teacher observation. Small groups should be composed of both homogeneous and heterogeneous groupings of children throughout their day as to not make students feel labeled. In spelling small groups, students show best results being grouped homogeneously in order to learn spelling skills that are developmentally appropriate for them.

Many barriers prevent teachers from providing differentiated instruction to their students. One of those barriers is time constraints. Districts need to provide proper support to their teachers in order to be able to plan meaningful activities to meet their diverse learners. Teachers also are in need of teacher training to help them understand how to scaffold their instruction to create an environment where every child is challenged and successful. Teachers also need supports put in place to help them with their classroom management in order for small group meetings to be successful.



Explicit instruction of spelling utilizing differentiation and word study is an effective instructional strategy that teachers should employ in their classrooms. This requires the teacher to have an understanding of developmental spelling stages to help students grow by building on prior knowledge. The curriculum *Words Their Way* (Bear et al., 2008) is an excellent resource for teachers to enable students' spelling knowledge to build upon itself. Students who practice spelling patterns through this curriculum are more likely to be able to spell previously learned words correctly, and apply these patterns to new words.

Teachers need to consistently assess their students through weekly assessments of classroom writing activities and spelling inventory to create small groups conducive to appropriately challenging students. Students who practice spelling patterns through this curriculum are more likely to be able to spell previously learned words correctly, and apply these patterns to new words. When students are appropriately challenged, instructional time is most effective, and their learning potential is best realized.

Chapter two explored research written by experts in the field of spelling and differentiation. This chapter also looked at results of action research conducted in the classroom showing the impact of these instructional strategies within a classroom environment. Chapter three will discuss the methodology and research paradigm of professional development. This chapter will also talk about the capstone project description, as well as the setting and audience, including demographics.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **Methodology**

#### **Overview**

The focus of this project is to bring awareness to educators of the importance of meaningful spelling instruction using a differentiated instruction strategy through the *Words Their Way* (2012) spelling curriculum. Currently in my district, only first grade is utilizing this resource and instructional strategy to teach our students spelling. In second grade and beyond, teachers use traditional whole-class instruction with a static spelling list targeted to the median skill. Therefore, after first grade, the students' progress in spelling is being disrupted, and they are given arbitrary spelling lists and required to use rote memorization to remember their words for their Friday weekly spelling tests. A frequent conversation in our vertical alignment meetings is concerning the fact that students are unable to apply correct spelling well in their writing. Because of these spelling application frustrations with older grade levels, my research question is: To what extent can differentiated spelling, as measured through the Words Their Way program, positively impact student phonetic spelling?

This project is a professional development opportunity specifically for teachers who teach kindergarten through fifth grade. The professional development opportunity will be about three hours long, giving teachers the ability to understand the reasoning behind a program such as this, to practice assessing student work and creating small groups, to organize resources and materials needed for this program, and to create weekly routines within and outside of the classroom.

## **Rationale**

Conversations through vertical alignment of kindergarten through fifth grade teachers, revealed that students were not applying spelling principles they have learned while writing. First grade level teachers came to the conclusion that the way spelling was currently being taught was not working for the majority of our students. This was especially true for new words that they haven't explicitly practiced in the past. The conclusion was that we needed a curriculum that taught patterns within words that would help them apply principles to future words with similar patterns, and the ability to meet all of our students at their individual level.

The reason the *Words Their Way* (2012) spelling curriculum was selected for this study and subsequent professional development opportunity is due to extensive research as to a spelling program that takes an individualized approach to student developmental spelling. This identified need of a differentiated spelling curriculum comes from many years of teaching spelling through a traditional model of rote memorization as a part of our reading curriculum. Our school district has used the Scott Foresman Reading Curriculum (2007) for grades K-5 since the curriculum first came out in 2007, and have continued using it for 13 years. The consensus with grade level teachers at Byron School District, has been that it is necessary to change to our spelling curriculum and allow for a differentiated small group approach that will be more meaningful to students.

The *Words Their Way* (2012) spelling program is also considered an intervention and can be used in a Response To Intervention (RTI) model (Eddy et al., 2011). The Byron School District recognizes it as an intervention and teachers are able to use this data, along with other data collected throughout the year, when referring students to get extra help through possible

Special Education referrals and Reading Intervention help. Keeping data on student ability while using an intervention given based on student ability is great information that can be used to better help students to be successful.

### **Research Paradigm**

Continued professional development is extremely important for teachers to be equipped to meet the needs of their students. The world of education is ever-changing, and it is important for teachers to continuously learn and keep up with new ideas and information. Through professional development, teachers are able to learn improved ways to teach by discovering new teaching strategies. It is important for teachers to learn these new strategies and knowledge, as it directly impacts their students' education ("Professional Development for Teachers: Understanding It's Importance", n.d.). Teachers are also able to learn and develop better organization and planning skills, which increases efficiency while planning and administering lessons (The Importance of Professional Development for Educators, n.d.).

Professional development opportunities can be very meaningful for teachers when done correctly. According to the Learning Policy Institute, professional development needs to have many aspects to be truly effective. One must make sure the professional development opportunity is content focused, and incorporates active learning. It also must support collaboration as well as include modeling of how to effectively implement the strategy being explained. The professional development must provide coaching and expert support, and provide opportunities for feedback and reflection (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, Gardner, Espinoza, 2017). Using this knowledge of effective practices, this project aims to provide an effective professional development environment and provide meaningful learning for my colleagues.

## **Setting and Audience**

The intended audience is elementary school teachers, specifically teachers in the Byron School District. My goal of this project is to have all the elementary grade level teachers, kindergarten through fifth grade, adopt this program in their classrooms. This way, our students will be able to move continuously through the program from grade to grade, and learn spelling patterns that are most developmentally appropriate for them. This presentation can be used in other districts and adapted to meet their needs.

## ***Demographics***

The Byron School District is located in a suburban, southeastern town of Minnesota. The town has a population size of 5,523 inhabitants, and the district has 2,215 students. The district consists of four schools: primary school (K-2), intermediate school (3-5), middle school (6-8), and the high school (9-12). The ethnic composition of the student body is 91.1% White students, 3.7% Hispanic or Latino, 1.4% Asian, .6% Black or African American, .3% American Indian or Alaskan, and 2.8% of students identify as two or more races. The student population has 0.9% of students who are English learners. Also within this student population, 10.9% of students qualify for special education services. 10.8% of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals, and 0.8% of students are considered homeless.

## **Project Description**

This project is a professional development opportunity that includes a presentation that will be given to teachers in order to inform and provide training in order to effectively use the program *Words Their Way* (2012). This new spelling curriculum can then be used to meet the varying needs of spellers in their classrooms. This presentation includes familiarizing teachers on

how to use the resources, how to organize the resources, how to implement learning, and assess skills using this program. The most important part of this project is to have teacher buy-in so the teachers are motivated to learn a new program and truly implement it with their students.

First, I will explain to my colleagues what the *Words Their Way* program is, and how this program will be beneficial and meet the spelling needs of students using a developmental and differentiated approach. I will help them see the need of a program such as this in their classroom to motivate them to want to learn more about how they can utilize this in their classroom. I will make sure each teacher will have access to a copy of the book *Words Their Way: Word Study for Phonics, Vocabulary and Spelling Instruction* (2012) written by Donald R. Bear, Marcia Invernizzi, Shane Templeton, and Francine Johnston. This text serves as a resource that they are able to continuously look back upon for more ideas and information.

Next, I will explain how to determine the spelling-stage ability of their students using the *Words Their Way* Spelling Inventory Assessment. This is an assessment that every student takes at the same time. The students will be given a paper with twenty-six blank spaces, and will do their best to spell the increasingly difficult words given orally by the teacher. This pre assessment can be given all at once, or broken up over a span of two days for the younger grade levels. When the students have completed the assessment, the teacher will then score it using the corresponding Spelling Feature Guide. This guide will lead teachers to truly assess their students' spelling abilities by breaking down words into different stages to see what spelling patterns each student is able to detect from the words.

After assessing initial/final consonant ability, short vowel, digraphs, blends, long vowel etc., as directed by the Spelling Feature Guide, they will be able to determine each students'

spelling stage based on their scores. The teacher will then create small groups based on the students' spelling stages. These groups can be created and used within the classroom, or can be combined with multiple classrooms across a grade level to meet the needs of multiple students. This has been done in past years on our team by grouping multiple classes together so that one teacher can teach many students the same spelling skill. This strategy enables each teacher to spend more time focusing on helping all the students with the same specific spelling pattern, helping more students in a shorter period of time. This strategy will also allow for teachers to have better classroom management by creating an environment where all students are working on the same task and skills that are appropriately challenging for all students.

Next, I will introduce the many activities that teachers can choose from to create a weekly routine for students. The teachers will be given an example of a weekly routine that has been used in first grade classrooms, and they can change it to fit their specific grade level needs. The routines are intended? for inside and outside of the classroom. As appropriate for their grade level, each team will need to create a fifteen minute routine each day for spelling to be practiced intentionally in the classroom, as well as a routine for spelling to be practiced at home each day. The routine could include a choice board that they create or adapt that students must accomplish each week and turn in, or specific activities for each day. The routines will vary for different age groups, but teachers will have some decisions in creating this routine, which likely will increase motivation and teacher buy-in.

After a routine is put in place, I will help teachers learn how to organize the resources, such as the weekly spelling words that must be prepared each week for every student. Again, I will give ideas to teachers and they will decide how it will work best for their team. One way that

it can be done is by organizing the resources by numbers and colors corresponding to the books the pages are from. These can be organized in a filing cabinet system that all grade level teachers have access to, such as a storage closet. Some teams may choose to store them in their individual classrooms instead. The teacher can decide to name or organize their small groups in whatever way makes most sense to them. This could be by colors, animals, sports teams, etc. Organizing the small groups in this way makes it easy to give each group specific directions.

The teachers will also be shown how a student will organize their words from day to day for the whole week. Each student is given a notebook, and inside the front cover, the teacher will staple a zippered quart size baggie so that it can still be opened but remain inside the notebook for ease of transportation and preventing lost words. The students will use the notebook pages to create the sorting columns that differ from week to week, and to practice their words throughout the activities in the week as they prepare for the weekly spelling tests.

The teachers will be shown what a weekly spelling test looks like for a classroom with multiple spelling stages. There are many options for how to do this, and the teacher can decide what works best and makes most sense to them. The presenter will model each option to the teachers. One option is to test the class all at once, calling a word out for each group and prefacing the words with the group name so they know that it is their word to write down. Another option is to do the test in small groups, and each group waits their turn by doing different work or whatever the teacher directs them to do during this time. Another option is to create QR codes that link to an audio version of the test; students listen through headphones on an iPad or mobile device. The student will pause the audio track when they need some time to write down the word, and can rewind if they missed a word. In this version, the students will be



doing this assessment completely independently, and turn it in when they are finished. The teachers can determine which option will work best in their classroom, and will receive support to figure out what would be best and how to do it. The teachers can also determine something else that would work for this as well in their classrooms.

The assessment will consist of 10 teacher-chosen words from the student group's weekly spelling words that the students have been practicing. The students will be graded by spelling the word correctly as well as sorting the words correctly by the spelling rules that had been discussed in their group that week. Each word is worth two points: one point for correct spelling and one point for sorting it correctly. The total points possible each week is 20 points. The teacher will track student data to make sure students are able to be successful with the weekly spelling words. If not, it might mean the spelling skills are too difficult and the student might need to be moved down a spelling skill level or receive more intensive instruction.

Students will continue to move through the spelling skills based on their spelling stage determined at the beginning through the Spelling Inventory Assessment. Following the assessment schedule for the general year, students should be assessed and reassessed using the Spelling Inventory Assessment in the fall, winter, and spring to regroup students. This is due to some students being ready for a bigger challenge as their spelling skills have increased significantly, and some students needing to start their spelling stage over to gain more practice on those skills. Some students may advance so quickly as to skip multiple spelling stages, others will progress steadily, and other students might not show the desired growth. The Spelling Inventory Assessment will show student data on this, and keeping their Fall, Winter, and Spring assessments and Spelling Feature Guide is a good idea to see how these students have grown.

### **Conclusion**

The *Words Their Way* spelling program is a great resource for spelling instruction in kindergarten through fifth grade. When used throughout every grade level, it provides the opportunity for students to continue through their developmental spelling journey. Students can continue to learn meaningful spelling skills that they can apply to new words as well. This will help their reading and writing skills as well as their ability to spell. It is important for this district to continue to support their students' spelling knowledge.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Conclusion

#### Introduction

The focus of this research is *differentiated spelling utilizing Words Their Way (2012) curriculum and how it may positively impact student phonetic spelling*. I chose this as my focus because I am passionate about differentiating in my classroom to better meet my students' needs. I also am passionate about best utilizing academic time with students with effective programs and practices. Through conversations in vertical alignment meetings, one area of instruction that was a concern for many grade levels was spelling. Because of this, I researched a program that would be able to meet all my students at their spelling level to create meaningful instruction.

In Chapter Four, I reflect on the capstone process and what I have learned as a writer, researcher, learner, and educator through this process. I explore implications from creating and eventually presenting the professional development project. This chapter also looks at future research that could become inspired by the literature gathered, as well as the impact that it could have on the students in my district.

#### Reflection

In Chapter One, I reflected on myself as a child and now teacher. Writing this chapter helped me as an educator to reflect on my own education experiences to learn how to change those experiences for my own students. This also helped me to understand why I am passionate about this project. Differentiation has become extremely important to me to incorporate throughout my instructional time. This chapter afforded the opportunity to not only reflect on my own specific classroom needs, but also the needs of other classrooms and grade levels. This

helped focus my research to include spelling as well as differentiation as the focus of my research. This way, I could use my project to elicit change within the district to help students in all grade levels kindergarten through fifth grade continue to meaningfully develop their spelling skills.

Chapter Two considered action research results and articles of respected professionals on the topics of differentiation, spelling, developmental spelling, and word work. While reviewing this literature, I found and read many different forms of research. Something that I had never read was an action research capstone project. It was interesting to read the methodology and results of their research. The action research projects that I used in this chapter were all implemented a little differently from one another, but found similar results with their students. This research was valuable because it gave justification as to why this program is worthwhile. I also found articles from respected experts in each of the areas of differentiation, spelling, and developmental word study. These impassioned articles allowed me as a writer to feel passionate about my work as well. Their studies and conclusions helped me understand as a researcher how to draw appropriate conclusions based on gathered evidence.

Chapter Three was about the professional development presentation on the *Words Their Way* program. This process of creating this presentation, and thinking of activities was a new challenge for me. It made me realize that I haven't been to many focused professional development presentations. The presentation that I created is thorough, creates opportunities for exploration as well as opportunities for each team to make decisions, and provides guided practice. As a learner, I found a new appreciation for professional development due to the amount of work that is needed.

The knowledge that I gained from this learning experience was relatively what I expected to discover. I had a good understanding that the *Words Their Way* spelling curriculum model would be considered an effective program. I already had some experience with this program, and found it to be an important piece in elementary school students' education. The amount of research that has already been conducted to measure the effectiveness of this program came as a surprise. Every action research that I found and read about this program showed positive results from using the program. This is most especially true of the research done by Emily Pettit (2012) where she assessed her students' growth over a five month period using a traditional spelling program, and then used the *Words Their Way* spelling model for two weeks and reassessed her students. Pettit found that most of her students grew more in the two weeks using *Words Their Way* than in the five months of the traditional spelling model. I found this information exciting and validating for my passion about changing spelling to be differentiated and allowing students to learn spelling at a developmentally appropriate pace that will create meaningful learning.

### **Implications**

I chose the focus of differentiating spelling through developmental word study with the sole purpose to impact my district. After conversations within vertical alignment meetings within the district, I found that spelling is an area of concern for many of my colleagues who teach older students. After reviewing our current spelling curriculum, I found that it was too hard or too easy for many of my students. These students were also expected to use rote memorization to learn and practice these words. Students seemed to get the words correct on the spelling test each week, then forget them while writing. This did not seem to be an effective way to teach spelling.

The professional development project that I created will provide an opportunity for all elementary grade levels, kindergarten through fifth grade, to change their old spelling curriculum to this developmental word study approach through the *Words Their Way* spelling program. Currently, only first grade is utilizing this program with their students. With all elementary grade levels using this program, our students can have a more continuous process for developing their spelling skills. This will provide consistency for the students, which will help solidify a general routine for students to continue each year. These spelling routines will help teachers with managing spelling in small groups.

This project could also create an opportunity for my colleagues at this district to become more knowledgeable and confident in differentiating instruction in other curricular areas in their classroom as well. Many teachers believe in differentiation, but find the concept daunting with managing different groups (Hertberg-Davis & Brighton, 2006). This program could create a big enough impact on their students' spelling ability to build a desire for more differentiated instruction opportunities throughout their day.

This project will have a great impact on my district. Introducing the *Words Their Way* program to my district will allow for my students to have a continuous development of their spelling. Hopefully, these positive changes in our school district will have an impact on staff who want to be more knowledgeable about how this program works for their students in more areas than spelling alone.

### **Future Work**

Developmental phonetic spelling, along with differentiation, is something that I believe still has potential for further research to improve techniques and reap increased benefits. This

capstone project has helped me develop as a researcher and piqued my curiosity about collecting and analyzing data. The research conducted in this capstone has shown how students benefit from this spelling program by showing growth in spelling assessments. I believe that the educational community would benefit from further study of the effects of the *Words Their Way* program on different areas of their English Language Arts learning.

A study that I would like to conduct or inspire is a study on how *Words Their Way* affects elementary school students' applied spelling. This study would look at a student writing sample to see how the student applies their phonetic spelling knowledge before using this program. After a few weeks of developmentally appropriate spelling instruction, the study would determine how their spelling application has changed in their writing in different subjects. This study would provide interesting data on whether student writing is improving across curricula. If there is an increase in application ability, this would deem the program even more worth valuable instructional time spent on studying spelling principles.

Another aspect that could be studied is how the *Words Their Way* program impacts student reading. Because this program focuses on phonetic patterns and what these patterns sound and look like in words, students may be using that knowledge to read new words. This could greatly benefit their reading ability levels, and students may experience a much faster increase in their reading ability due to the differentiated phonetic instruction.

Once this program is implemented throughout my districts' elementary grade levels, I would have the ability to see how these students grew over a six year span. This data would be significant due to the sample size, as well as the duration of the study. These findings could have the capacity to encourage other districts as well to consider changing their spelling curriculum to

this differentiated, developmentally appropriate phonetic spelling approach using the *Words Their Way* program.

### **Summary**

In considering my own near future work, I plan to show this capstone project to my principal and curriculum director. I am passionate about getting more grade levels to participate and become excited about changing our spelling curriculum. I would like to begin this professional development change in the coming Fall of the year 2021 during our professional development days. This would allow for teachers to get a good plan in place before the year starts. It also will allow for the teachers to do parts at a time so it doesn't completely overwhelm them and create more stress and anxiety about the start of the year.

This project has afforded me the opportunity to learn to be passionate about a topic in my career. This project has also taught me how research is important in order to provide justification for change. Varying research is important to find multiple perspectives of respected experts in their field, as well as action research findings. Creating the presentation was eye opening as well to understand how much work is involved in creating a meaningful and interactive professional development presentation. Finally, being able to speculate the impact that this project will have on the students in my district and community makes me very hopeful. I am eager to share my findings with my colleagues and make some important changes.



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