LAYING THE FOUNDATION

FOR A NEW SPELLING INITIATIVE

by

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CHAPTER 1

Background and Statement of the Problem

> There is no program, no book, no speller, no machine that alone will build language competence in a child. Unfortunately, spelling can't be isolated from other language processes, from attitudes toward reading and writing, from homes where print power is seen as valuable, from classrooms where words are recognized as treasures, and where teachers act as guides to that wealth rather than wardens who keep it for themselves.
>
> - David Booth in *Spelling Links* (1991)

Introduction

Many elementary and middle school teachers are frustrated in their attempts to teach spelling. They believe that students should be able to correctly spell words they have studied. Teachers are perplexed when that does not happen (Chandler & the Mapleton Teacher Research Group, 1999; Fresch, 2003). They complain that abbreviated and invented spellings are appearing in personal e-mail messages and are slowly finding their way into the classroom (Christian Science Monitor, May 17, 2005). They express confusion and uncertainty about how to teach spelling effectively. Given the increased attention to test preparation and test taking, teachers find themselves with reduced time to teach spelling. Even when they are aware of the current research on spelling, few have the expertise to navigate through the consistencies and inconsistencies of the English language (Johnston, 2001a; Moats, 2000). Lacking knowledge, confidence, time, and direction, educators get by as best they can (Fresch, 2003; Schlagal, 2002).

The professional literature suggests that the perception of decline in spelling ability is widespread (Gill & Scharer, 1996; Griffiths, 1998; Templeton & Morris, 1999). A number of factors may contribute to this problem. For one, it is not unusual to hear off-hand comments such as, “Some people are just natural spellers, and you either have it or you don’t.” This statement implies that there is a genetic basis for spelling prowess (Gentry, 1997), and that scholarship will do little to remediate problems. Secondly, in many schools there is no unified spelling program or curriculum (Chandler & the Mapleton Teacher Research Group, 1999; Griffiths, 1998; Marten, 2003; Schlagal, 2002). Griffiths (1998) reports that some schools actually dropped spelling from their language arts curriculum after teachers of “process writing” were told to “remove the constraint of correct spelling from children’s writing attempts” (p. 5). He contends, “Traditionally education has been more concerned with what to teach in spelling rather than how it might be taught” (p. 2). With the current popularity of the workshop approach to writing, teachers may be tempted to view spelling simply as a minor part of the editing process (Morris, Blanton, Blanton & Perney, 1995), without devoting time to actually teaching it.

The availability of spell-check software on home and school computers may also be contributing to the problem. Students use the excuse, “But I spell checked my paper” to explain the uncorrected errors in their published writing, even though they have been told repeatedly that spell check is not a substitute for proofreading. Wasowicz, Masterson, and Apel (2003) estimate that spell checkers are effective only 63% of the time (p. 6).

The lack of preservice training for novice teachers has been suggested as a contributing factor in the decline of spelling competency. Louisa Moats points out that language study is seldom required of, or provided to, teachers. In her book, *Speech to Print: Language Essentials for Teachers* (2000), she maintains that teachers must have a solid base of English language knowledge in order to deliver quality instruction to students, especially those whose first language is not English. According to Moats,

> Students without awareness of language systems will be less able to sound out a new word when they encounter it, less able to spell, less able to interpret punctuation and sentence meaning, and less able to learn new vocabulary words from reading them in context. One of the most important jobs of any teacher of reading and writing is to give students sufficient understanding of the language they speak, read, and write so that they can use it to communicate well (Moats, 2000, p. 14).

In the introduction to their book, *Essential Linguistics: What You Need to Know to Teach Reading, ESL, Spelling, Phonics, and Grammar* (2004), David and Yvonne Freeman reiterate that teachers should be well-versed in language concepts.

> When teachers understand basic linguistic concepts, they can make informed decisions about how to teach language to their students. Knowledgeable teachers can teach their students using a descriptive approach. They also have the knowledge base to determine how to approach topics like phonics, vocabulary, and spelling (p. x) . . . . (Educators) who investigate how language works can

> apply insights from their study to their own reading, writing, and language development (p. xv).

These authors maintain that the typical classroom teacher cannot convey the power of language to students if her foundations of language are weak. They recommend a deeper level of language instruction during preservice training.

The International Reading Association states that a Reading Specialist can be an *agent of change* (2000) for the purpose of strengthening existing literacy programs or to introduce new ones. The researcher studied a body of professional literature related to language systems, literacy, and professional development for the purpose of identifying the best practices in spelling instruction. Then a survey of elementary and middle schools teachers within her school district followed. The data revealed some areas of strengths as well as weaknesses. Consequently, recommendations were made for constructive change and further study.

Background

Despite the movement toward high-stakes testing, spelling does not appear to be receiving the priority it deserves, at least in this teacher-researcher's experience. Little attention was given to spelling theory or methods in undergraduate or graduate studies programs, nor were professional development opportunities in spelling offered to her as a Title I Reading Teacher at a middle school in a small, rural community in Wisconsin. The school district serves 1200 students; approximately 400 of those students are enrolled in grades 4-8. Observations and conversations with teachers at the middle school led the writer to speculate that the teaching of spelling was only marginally successful in terms

of its carryover into daily writing, what most educators consider to be the true test of mastery (Sitton, 1995).

This situation is unfortunate because spelling deficits impact writing in a number of negative ways. Writing becomes labored when thought processes are interrupted by excessive attention to spelling (Moats, 2000), creating a form of disfluency. Poor spellers limit their word choices to the trite and mundane, thereby stifling creativity and the writer's unique voice. Written pieces become shorter in length and details become fewer. Motivation to write also declines (Sitton, 1995, p. 47). Educators who teach spelling mainly within the context of writing (e.g. Calkins, 1994, and Routman, 1996, as cited in Fresch, 2003), may be overlooking the significant impact spelling has on reading. In the words of Shane Templeton and Darrell Morris, "orthographic or spelling knowledge is the engine that drives efficient reading as well as efficient writing" (1999, p. 103). In fact, an analysis of students' spelling errors can yield a wealth of information about their knowledge of the English language system, and how they apply that knowledge to spelling and decoding (Ehri, 1989; Gentry, 1982; Henderson & Beers, 1980).

The teacher-researcher observed that some Title One students passed their weekly spelling tests by employing rote memorization, yet they could not read all of the words correctly when encountering them in unfamiliar text. These same students frequently misspelled simple one-syllable words and high frequency words in their assignments. Higher-achieving students were not applying correct spelling to their work either. Displays of student-made posters and handwritten or word-processed reports provided glaring evidence of spelling errors. There were also many cases of trite wordage like

cool, awesome, and *stuff. Did* was frequently substituted for a more descriptive verb. Was this due to poor proofreading skills, failure to use the text or spelling references, or just plain indifference? Were students choosing to write only the words they could spell correctly? Were they not being exposed to rich vocabulary? Perhaps their teachers were excusing them from editing published work. There was much room for speculation.

Though not responsible for the teaching of spelling per se, the Title I teacher-researcher supports reading and writing while working with students in both pull-out and push-in situations. That position also involves consulting with and advising the larger learning community consisting of staff, parents, and administrators, and keeping abreast of current research and practices. Her frustrations and those of her colleagues led to the decision to take a closer look at the school district's K-8 spelling curriculum and teaching practices to determine what was contributing to this troubling situation.

Statement of the Problem

The researcher provides the following scenario to illustrate the frustration and confusion that some teachers at her middle school experienced related to the teaching of spelling: It was the beginning of the 2004-2005 school year. Four sixth-grade teachers were discussing how to teach spelling. Their students traditionally rotated to a different teacher each quarter in order to learn the unique language and writing skills specific to the various content areas. Each of the sixth-grade teachers was required to cover one section of spelling-language arts for three 47-minute periods per week, as well as four periods of science, math, social studies, or reading.

The reading teacher intended to return to a spelling program she had used previously, one based on high-frequency words; she had new and improved materials that should require less prep time and planning, and would, she hoped, ensure consistency from week to week. The science teacher, newly hired but with many years of experience, would be teaching language arts for the first time, and needed something quick and easy without a great deal of theory or methodology to master. The social studies teacher planned to engage in action research to determine if student choice in practice activities would improve spelling performance. He and the math teacher were already familiar with the literature approach to spelling from previous years. Most of their spelling words would be taken from the themes and content of the literature anthology that was no longer being used by the reading teacher because she had adopted trade books for her reading program. In addition, the basic list would be expanded to include the same high-frequency Core Word list the reading teacher was using, Sitton Spelling. Students would complete workbook pages for the science and math teachers, and choose from a menu of spelling activities offered by the social studies teacher.

When the researcher discussed this scenario with the district's Reading Specialist, she confirmed that it was not unusual in this particular school system for teachers to choose their own method of spelling instruction because there was no spelling curriculum mandated for the elementary and middle schools, nor were there district benchmarks signifying mastery at each grade level. She suspected that both phonemic awareness and spelling performance were weaknesses of the current reading-language arts program.

She also recognized that a need existed within the district to examine current spelling programs for their consistency, scope and sequence, compatibility with recent initiatives in the areas of reading and writing, and effectiveness in application to authentic literacy experiences. Spelling had been receiving very little attention in curriculum meetings for the three years that the researcher was employed in the district, and probably even longer. The District Reading Specialist was supportive of the proposed study and was interested in the findings.

The researcher decided, first, to identify the key elements of a robust spelling program, and then to compare those elements to what was actually occurring in the district. This action required an instrument that would elicit honest answers from teachers in the elementary and middle schools. The researcher did not know with any certainty or depth how the teaching of spelling was implemented in grades K-8, and wanting to be accurate and unbiased, decided to survey the elementary and middle school teachers using a self-made questionnaire.

Four broad questions composed the heart of the study. They are as follows:

(1) What is the role of a Reading Specialist in an investigation of this type, and in any subsequent action that might derive from the investigation?

(2) Are teaching methods designated as best practice currently in use within the classrooms?

(3) If best practices are not being followed, what obstacles are preventing their implementation?

(4) What changes or new spelling initiatives are indicated by the results of the study?

Subsequent sections outline the process followed by the researcher to discover if a uniform scope and sequence or consistency exists within her school district, and if the instruction delivered by classroom teachers conforms to best practices as identified by research and reading/language arts experts. If the survey instrument uncovered serious deficits, the investigation could become the basis for a new initiative in the teaching of spelling.

Review of Literature

The Role of the Reading Specialist.

In one position paper, the International Reading Association describes the role of the Reading Specialist as a resource, instructor, leader, and agent of change. In that capacity Reading Specialists

> aid teachers by suggesting ideas, strategies, or materials that can enhance instruction. They play an essential role in supporting individual teachers—especially new teachers—and administrators in becoming more knowledgeable about the teaching of reading (p. 3). . . . Reading specialists have a strong influence on the overall reading program in the school . . . Such specialists become change agents who work with teachers to create total school reform. Specialists in this position have a major responsibility for coordinating and providing leadership for the school-wide literacy program, including the selection of materials and the development of curriculum. They provide professional development for school staff so that teachers are aware of current strategies and techniques for teaching literacy (p. 4).

The Educational Excellence for All Children Act, which includes Title I initiatives, periodically issues new provisions for reading programs and reading teachers. In a report published in 2001, Abha Gupta and Eileen Oboler remind educators that "Title One is no longer intended to operate solely as a remedial program focused on low-level skills development" (p. 3). The authors describe a number of roles for the Title I teacher, including staff developer and team teacher. But they caution that "a program plan is only part of the change, deciding how the program can best be implemented . . . is a major responsibility for both the teachers. Both, reading and classroom teachers in a school must participate" (p. 3).

The researcher hypothesized that by taking an active role in investigating the causes of the problem, she could collect a body of critical research that might be unknown to current practitioners and administrators, and later play a supporting role in whatever response administrators deem necessary. Guided by these two interpretations of her current role as a Title I Reading Teacher and her future role as a Reading Specialist, the researcher proceeded with the study, cognizant that, in the end, "the responsibilities and roles of teachers are shaped by the district office and the school administration" (Gupta & Oboler, 2001, p. 4). In any case, parents, teachers and administrators would require proof that there was a need for change, and that the means to this end would be reasonable, affordable, and acceptable to all parties. If results warranted it, laying the foundation for a new spelling initiative would require the combined efforts of stakeholders as well as policy makers; therefore, it was imperative that arguments be supported by evidence.

Beginnings of Language and Spelling Research.

> The spelling of a word *is* a special thing. It is a record of the origins of our language, a recognition of a symbol system that has grown over centuries, so that we can communicate to each other not only ideas, but the history behind those ideas . . . As we learn about words, we are making thoughtful connections, careful decisions, contributions to sharing.
>
> - David Booth in *Spelling Links* (1991)

Spelling is defined by Richard Hodges (1984) as "the process of converting oral language to visual form by placing graphic symbols on some writing surface" (p. 1). The perception that spelling skill is innate, imparted to a few fortunate souls, and based on the natural ability to memorize letters in the correct sequence is a common one (Gentry, 1997; Marten, 2003). In other words, "Spellers are born, not made." For many years memorization has been validated and encouraged as the key to success in spelling. At various times, it was assumed that the English language was so full of exceptions to standardized rules that it was useless to rely on sound-to-letter matching as a technique for spelling. It would be better to just memorize "the list" in preparation for the traditional Friday test.

Hodges (1984) goes on to say, "Spelling ability involves more than memorizing the spelling of individual words. . . . Researchers' observations reveal that spelling ability is a developmental achievement gained through interaction over time with the orthography in both writing and reading" (p. 2). Thirty years of literature concerning the

structure of the English language orthography contradicts the notion that success in spelling is achieved chiefly by memorization.

There was a very active period of language investigation beginning in the 1960s that led to new understandings about how children process alphabetic symbols to arrive at an approximation of words and their meanings. The more notable pioneers of that period were primarily linguists who established the foundation for a developmental understanding of spelling: Carol Chomsky, (1970), Noam Chomsky and Morris Halle (1968), Theodore Clymer (1963), Paul Hanna, Jean Hanna, and Richard Hodges (1966), Charles Read (1971, 1975), and Richard Venezky (1967).

In the early 1960s Clymer examined the literature in educational reading programs looking for the common words used in instructional materials. He wanted to see if students would be able to reliably decode 75% of the words based on the phonics rules that they were being taught. He concluded that in most cases they would not. For instance, the popular verse "When two vowels go walking, the first one does the talking" was consistent only about 45% of the time. The consonant-vowel-consonant- silent *e* pattern where the first vowel "says its name" was reliable about 63% of the time. At first glance this was quite discouraging, and it led to criticism of phonics–based approaches to reading. But when Hanna, Hanna, Hodges, and Rudorf (1966) analyzed words by *syllable* and *letter position* using the new technology of early computers, they concluded that 43 of 45 generalizations matched Clymer's 75% benchmark. With this revelation, the value of developing an awareness of spelling patterns was established. The research of Hanna and his colleagues has been revisited on a number of occasions since the original

research. It has been judged valid, and according to Mary Abbott (2000), it demonstrates that “educators need to move past the old notions of thinking of phonics generalizations in the context of only sound-letter relationships” (p. 244).

In the 1970s, Charles Read discovered that young children are capable of organizing information about letters and sounds in a developmental fashion. Without being taught generalizations, children intuitively manage to develop consistent, invented spellings based on what they know. During the next twenty years, Edmund Henderson and his doctoral students at the University of Virginia built upon this research by examining the invented spellings of children, and a sequential pattern of development emerged. This seminal and collective body of work is commonly referred to in the literature as The Virginia Studies**.**

Henderson’s former students—Donald Bear, Richard Gentry, Marcia Invernizzi, Darrell Morris, Shane Templeton, and Jerry Zutell—are still contributing to our body of knowledge about language and literacy today. After examining six years of writing samples from one child that are included in Glenda Bissex’s book, *GYNS AT WRK* (1980), J. Richard Gentry (1982) presented a developmental classification system based on Read’s earlier work (Lutz, 1986). Henderson and James Beers (1981) and Templeton and Bear (1992) subsequently categorized five stages of developmental spelling spanning the preliterate to mature stages of spelling.

As related by Patrick Groff (1996), an advocate of simplified spelling reform, Ronald Cramer and James Cipielewski (1995) analyzed the spelling errors of 18,599 children in all fifty states and 256 classrooms from grades one through eight. They

concluded that the English language is “reasonably predictable” in four ways: (1) letter-sound matches of consonants, (2) patterns within words, (3) the application of affixes, and (4) similar spellings in words with related meanings (p. 14). It is no coincidence that these understandings mirror four of Templeton and Bear’s stages of spelling development.

Acquisition and Development of Language Skills.

A direct link exists between the ability to spell words and the ability to read words (Perfetti, 1997). The same intellectual operators are at work when decoding words as well as when spelling them. Both lingual systems draw upon the recognition of specific sounds--phonics, and the ability to discriminate and manipulate sounds--phonemic awareness. But it is not enough to rely solely on that phonological knowledge. One must also be aware of which individual letters and combinations represent those sounds--the alphabetic system; the arrangements of letters within syllables--the patterns; and the meanings that those arrangements carry (Cramer, 1998; Ehri, 1989; Gill, 1992; Henderson, 1981; Henry, 1989; Templeton, 1989; Zutell, 1992). Both reading and spelling develop in a proscribed sequence from knowledge of letter sounds to the understanding that meaning can be conveyed by the specific arrangements of letters. As Louisa Moats (2000) notes

> Children who read well are sensitive to linguistic structure at the level of speech sounds, parts of words, meaningful parts of words, sentences, and text . . . Effective teaching of reading presents these concepts in an order in which

> children can learn them and reinforces appreciation for the whole **system** in which these elements are arranged (p. 8).

Developmental stages provide a scope and sequence for instruction. Drawing on Henderson's original model (1981), Bear and Templeton's stages of spelling development (1998) are described here, along with Gentry's (1982) which is listed second. The Prephonemic-Precommunicative Stage involves scribbles or drawings to communicate, rather than words. In the early Letter Name-Semiphonetic Stage, consonant sounds, first in the initial and then in the final positions, are articulated and matched to letters. In the fully developed Letter Name stage, children spell simple words with vowels in the medial position based on the sounds associated with the letters' *names*. In the Within Words-Phonetic stage, children spell words based on letter *sounds*. They begin to use letter combinations to represent sounds, including long vowel patterns and r-controlled vowels. They also decode and spell using word "chunks." In the Syllable Juncture-Transitional Stage, children work with words of multiple syllables, studying such things as stress patterns and generalizations for attaching affixes. They must make the critical transition from spelling by sound to spelling by pattern and rely on their observations, analogies, and visual memories of how words are assembled. In the Derivational Relations –Independent Stage students learn how word parts are related to meanings; polysyllabic words are the focus of learning. At this stage, instruction is concerned with base words, Latin and Greek derivatives, affixes, accents, and the origins of words. Though students are exposed to the concepts of word knowledge in their formal education, spelling mastery is, in reality, a lifelong effort.

This researcher has a keen interest in the reading and spelling connection as well as the developmental nature of the process and its implications for literacy programs. Therefore, the next points are critical to understanding how best to interweave the separate language arts strands into a cohesive curriculum. Writing for the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, Templeton (2003) emphasizes that "a common core of word or orthographic knowledge underlies students' ability to read and spell words . . .The system is logical, learnable, and critical to reading as well as writing, but the most important thing is, it makes sense" (pp. 6 & 7).

The demands of twenty-first century literacy require that students first be "word solvers." In *Word Matters,* Gay Su Pinnell and Irene Fountas (1998) connect the processes of reading and writing. They maintain that word solvers must be keen visual observers of letters, letter chunks, patterns, similarities, and differences between words, as well as discriminating auditory observers of sounds—in essence, "word explorers" chap. 13, title). They recommend that teachers initiate a system of word study beginning in second grade.

Citing Ellis and Cataldo (1992), Marcia Invernizzi and Latisha Hayes (2004) credit spelling as the most frequent predictor of reading achievement. Summarizing the work of Virginia Berninger and her colleagues (1998), along with McCandliss, Beck, Sandak and Perfetti (2003), they conclude, "Students who receive additional spelling instruction perform better on reading tasks such as oral reading, silent reading comprehension, and other reading-related measures in addition to spelling" (p. 225). The ability to decode words quickly builds fluency, thereby increasing comprehension,

motivation to read, and engagement with text (Cunningham & Cunningham, 1992; Pikulski & Chard, 2005). Readers are aided in their comprehension of longer words and specialized vocabulary when they are attuned to affixes, Latin and Greek elements of words, and the consistency of spelling words derived from those forms (Templeton & Morris, 1999). It is often said and written that wider and more frequent reading will naturally lead to better spelling (e.g., Krashen, 1993). Although this is often true for skillful readers, and is certainly laudatory in its promotion of reading, it does not address the issue of low-achieving readers, those with learning disabilities, non-native speakers of the language, or reluctant readers, whose lack of consistent exposure to ever more complex text puts them at greater risk of failure. They will require a more intensive and explicit program than daily reading alone can provide (Moats, 2000; Schlagal, 2001).

When examined from this broader perspective, spelling takes on the form of *word study* (Bear, Invernezzi & Templeton, 1995), the basis for practices currently recommended by literacy experts like Gentry (2000b), Invernizzi (1997), Pinell & Fountas (1998), Robert Schlagal (2002)), and a host of others.

Word study and its application to classroom instruction.

Abbott (2000), Bear and Templeton (1998), Invernizzi (2004), Templeton and Morris (2000), write from experience about the benefits of reconceptualizing spelling as word study. Word study encompasses both exploration and direct instruction applied to phonics, vocabulary, spelling and reading (Bear & Templeton, 1998). Methodologies are explicit and incidental, multi-modal, broadly focused, and supportive of fluency as well as vocabulary acquisition and comprehension. Word sorting, word hunts, word

building, and analyzing word families are some practices involving the examination of words at the earliest stages of spelling development and beyond (Templeton & Morris, 1999). Ultimately, word study must include "the explicit presentation and discussion of how morphology or meaning is presented in the spelling system" (Templeton & Morris, 2000, p. 538). Bear & Templeton (1998) emphasize the value of word study for English Language Learners:

> Studying other languages more carefully is important in order to understand comparisons and contrasts that second-language learners make when they spell in English (Fashola, Drum, Mayer & Kang; Zutell & Allen, 1988). . . . The study of spelling in other languages leads to word studies that enrich students' vocabularies and engenders curiosity about other languages (p. 238).

Three examples of actual word study initiatives are presented for comparison. In the first, Marcia Invernizzi, Mary Abouzeid, and Janet Bloodgood (1997) melded word study into a language arts and social studies unit on the Civil War. While reading, fifth-grade students sorted words by concept and parts of speech, made connections between spellings and word meanings, and studied dialects in the books they were reading. They observed that syllable stress affected inflectional endings. After reading, they created poetry and character webs that incorporated the new words they had learned. Such authentic applications of language activities are truly exemplary. These educators took spelling out of its narrowly focused and isolated block and wove it into other subjects in the curriculum.

In the second example, Mary Abbott (2001) undertook a yearlong study to determine if time devoted to word study, as opposed to traditional spelling instruction, "led to noticeable differences over time in students' orthographic knowledge and transfer of that knowledge to untaught words in both high- and low-frequency conditions" (p.2). In the study, two second-grade classrooms consisting of 48 students from the same elementary school were compared. The results of her study follow:

Teacher A used whole group instruction and a list of 15-20 spelling words drawn from the basal reader and other curricular areas. She taught word meanings, dictionary skills, sentence writing, alphabetizing, grammar, and punctuation during the 45-minute spelling class. Teacher A taught reading to the whole group using a basal reader, and assigned pages from the basal workbook. Teacher B used *Words Their Way* (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 1996) to guide her instruction. Individual and small-group work consisted of word sorts, word hunts, and partner quizzes. Units focused on common patterns for particular sounds, and lasted from two to four weeks. Students learned word families but did not study from a spelling list. They did not take performance tests; rather the teacher periodically checked their progress with informal assessments. Teacher B taught guided reading using trade books.

Eight students from each classroom who were in the Within Word stage of word knowledge were compared by taking tests on transfer words every two weeks. The transfer words exhibited orthographic patterns studied by both groups. Pretests and post-tests indicated that there was no significant difference in spelling achievement between the two classes; however, in terms of orthographic knowledge, the extended word study

instruction was more effective, though less significant for high-frequency words (Abbott, 2001, p. 9).

Later, Bloodgood and Linda Pacifici (2004) mentored 35 teachers who voluntarily agreed to experiment with word study in their classrooms. At first the teachers had reservations about the effects on their daily schedules, lack of experience or training, possible reactions from parents, and organizational issues. In response to these concerns, the mentors devised instructional activities that were incidental rather than systematic. Activities for grades 5-8, like Root-of-the-Day and word webs, Homophone Rummy and Concentration, think sheets and partner work consumed ten to thirty minutes a day and were organized around regular units of study.

While Bloodgood and Pacifici (2004) conceded that word study is "a complex, multi-leveled process requiring time and practice to grasp its various aspects" (p. 262), and "a systematic approach to word-knowledge instruction certainly would be better" (p. 253), the mentors felt that an incidental approach provided a suitable jumping-off point to pique the interest of students and teachers alike. The word-play activities they devised stimulated students' curiosity while allowing teachers time to "build their confidence, knowledge base, and implementation strategies" (p. 253) as they gradually became comfortable with a new philosophy directed toward the integrated teaching of not only spelling, but grammar and vocabulary as well (p. 251).

Word sorting.

Grouping words by categories is at the heart of word study. Word sorting is based on observations of word sounds, patterns, structure, and meaning, and is a key activity

throughout the stages of language development (Bear & Templeton, 1998; Pinell & Fountas, 1998). Invernizzi & Hayes (2004) report that "virtually every teacher's manual in every major reading series at least nominally suggests word sorts, and even the Texas Reading First materials include word study as a best practice" (p. 217). Word sorting is a feature of Making Words, a word study activity promoted by Patricia Cunningham and James Cunningham (1992) and modified by Tim Rasinski (1999). Gentry (2000a) believes that word sorting should be a primary focus of instruction, at least during the early stages of spelling development.

There are numerous references in the literature explaining the dynamics and benefits of word sorts in small group settings, as part of a holistic word study program, or as one element of a basal program (e.g., Bear & Templeton, 1998; Fresch, 2000; Fresch & Wheaton, 1997; Rasinski, 1999; Zuttell, 2004). Word sorting improves both reading and spelling as students discover generalizations that they can apply to new words they encounter in reading, and words they choose to use in their writing (Bear et al., 1996). Analysis of the finished product yields valuable information about a student's strategy use and developmental stage (Henderson, 1981). For those students who prefer a hands-on, active learning style, words sorts are particularly attractive. When assigned to partners or small groups, word sorting requires negotiation and discussion to arrive at a consensus; its collaborative aspects support Lev Vygotsky's theory that learning is socially constructed (1978).

Words can be grouped in a number of creative ways, and errors are easily corrected. The teacher can encourage students to devise their own categories for sorting--

an open sort, or may prompt students to sort words by a particular feature, such as vowel pattern, rime, or even concepts -- a closed sort (Bear et all, 1996). In the upper elementary grades, word sorting can be used not only to support orthographic study, but also as a tool for semantic and morphological study. Word sorting entails thoughtful attention to word parts and wholes; drawing upon higher-level thinking skills to categorize words, and noticing the ways in which they are similar or different, students gradually become more fluent in their ability to examine, compare, and sort (Fountas & Pinnell, 1998). At that point the teacher can predict with some assurance that students are mastering particular patterns. A writing sort will confirm or disprove that suspicion (Bear & Templeton, 1998). Templeton (2002) recommends writing sorts to enhance connections between "visual or spelling patterns, sound patterns, and meaning patterns" (p. 3). While one student pronounces the words, another student writes them under the appropriate category. Additionally, Ruth Scott (1991) and Mary Jo Fresch (2000) found that when they asked students to report their thinking while sorting words, the conceptual knowledge that learners brought to the task was revealed.

Word walls.

When entering classrooms in any school in America, the visitor will notice immediately a lack of empty wall space. Posters, mementos, motivational messages, and displays of students' work cover every available spot not taken up by writing surfaces or furniture. In a word study classroom the visitor will see word walls or large charts, defined by Cunningham (1995), and cited by Pinell and Fountas in *Word Matters* (1998, p. 43). In their view:

> A word wall is a systematically organized collection of words displayed in large letters on a wall or other large display place in the classroom. It is a tool to use, not simply display . . . Word walls are designed to:
>
> - Support the teaching of important general principles about words and how they work.
> - Foster reading and writing.
> - Provide reference support for children during their writing and reading.
> - Promote independence on the part of young students as they work with words in writing and reading.
> - Provide a visual map to help children remember the connections between words and the characteristics that will help them form categories.

Five secondary teachers collaborated on a book about challenged middle school and high school spellers, *They Still Can't Spell* (2003). In that book Rebecca Sipe and her colleagues devoted a chapter to word walls. Their word walls feature frequently-misspelled words, thematic words, homophones, words derived from Latin and Greek roots, lists of literary devices, vocabulary words, synonyms and substitutions for overworked words, poetic words, word webs, and any words students simply find colorful, unusual, and appealing. To make the word walls interactive, they devised games and activities like "human words" (p. 67) and card sorts. Students also learn to generalize rules from lists on display. These authors emphasize that word walls are not meant to be static, and that teachers must exhibit a sense of wonder about language to entice students to join them in word study.

> To be successful, (word walls) must be built, rebuilt, and adapted so that students absorb a metacognitive sense about their language. As teachers of challenged spellers, our own excitement about words is supremely important. When we highlight words, put words on the board for students to examine and question, and encourage students to weave those words into their own writing, we are helping

> them begin to see that language is rich, interesting, and fun rather than something that is always academic, testable, and painful (Sipe, Nordwall, Resewarne, Putnam, & Walsh, 2003, p. 74).

Assessment and differentiation.

Just as the guided reading philosophy (Pinnell & Fountas, 1991) is based on differentiated groupings at instructional levels for the purpose of success for all learners, it seems that a similar philosophy should shape the spelling curriculum. In fact, that is the assertion that spelling experts are now making (e.g., Invernizzi & Hayes, 2004; Morris, Blanton, Blanton, & Perney, 1995; Schlagal & Trathen, 1998; Templeton & Morris, 2000). According to Richard Gentry,

> One has to differentiate spelling instruction. Just as you have to match children in grades 4-6 with books that are just right for them depending upon their independent reading levels (i.e., books that they can read), one needs to match children who are learning word specific knowledge with the right words (J. R. Gentry, personal communication, July 19, 2004).

Morris, Blanton, Blanton, Nowacek, and Perney (1995) found that students benefit most when they are working at their instructional level. In one of their studies, forty-eight low-achieving students in third grade performed as well or better than their higher-achieving classmates on a third-grade posttest, and scored higher on a test of unknown transfer words, even though they were using a second-grade spelling workbook for their instruction. The extent of their orthographic knowledge was thought to be the determining factor in success or failure. Trathen, Morris and Schlagal duplicated this

affect (1995). They grouped students by high, medium, or low spelling performance, then conducted lessons which became progressively more difficult over the span of four weeks. After just the first week, the lowest group had already reached their frustration level, and with each successive week, the next lowest group dropped by the wayside. The researchers concluded:

> What students have learned about orthography will directly affect what they can learn from spelling instruction . . . It seems reasonable to conclude that teachers can improve students' learning of English orthography by matching instruction to students' level of knowledge (cited in Schagal & Trathen, 1998, p. 17).

Schlagal, Trathen, Mock and McIntire (1998) participated in a follow-up study to test the value of differentiated spelling instruction. Four groups of sixth graders from four schools were selected. Half the students received regular spelling instruction as a whole group, while the other half were grouped and regrouped. One of these groups was given workbooks at grade level; other groups worked at the fifth grade or fourth grade level. The lowest level group made the most progress, and overall, the large traditional group working at grade level made the least progress. The researchers concluded that placement at the appropriate level allowed low achieving spellers to retain information and to "generalize patterns and principles learned to similar words not studied" (Schlagal & Trathen, 1998, p. 19).

The first requirement for creating small, homogeneous groups is accurate assessment of spelling development. Analysis of invented, incidental, or attempted spellings must be at the heart of assessment (Gentry, 2000b; Marten, 2003; Templeton,

2001). In response to the need for diagnostic information, a number of quick and easy assessments have been devised (Bear et al, 1996; Ganske, 1999; Gentry & Gillet, 1993; Masterson, Apel, & Wasowicz, 2002; Templeton & Johnston, 2000). Based on an analysis of errors or substitutions, teachers can group students within their Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978), where they are using but confusing words in their writing (Invernizzi, Abouzeid, & Gill, 1994, p. 160). These types of assessments are also useful indicators of word-solving ability and fluency in reading (Zutell, 2004b). However, in *Word Crafting: Teaching Spelling, Grades K-6 ,* Cindy Marten (2003) offers a caveat that comes from six years of using diagnostic assessments.

> Don't assume that just because a student gets a particular feature right on an inventory that the child has "learned" or "mastered" that feature. The inventory is designed to tell us the stage at which the student's linguistic knowledge begins to break down (p. 45).

She also suggests, "It's an easy task to collect ten or so misspelled words from your student's writing and do your own qualitative analysis of the errors you see" (p. 54).

Mary Jo Fresch (2001) offers another avenue for assessment. She followed the literacy development of a child from kindergarten through fourth grade by examining her school journals. She lists the advantages of this approach:

> The personal selection afforded by journal writing provides a broad base of words to observe because emphasis is on the message rather than on selecting words that can be conventionally spelled . . . As opposed to spelling tests, where children put their "best foot forward," the journal allows us the opportunity to watch children

> use their spelling skills in context. Journal entries can provide rich and authentic examples of a child moving through developmental stages. Often, entries are vivid examples of a particular stage, while others demonstrate fluidity of the continuum of stages (p. 2).

From a teacher's point of view, it may seem impractical to examine the journals of twenty-plus students, but for those students who struggle, it would provide another valuable piece of literacy information.

Ruth Scott (1991) goes a step further when she recommends that the child be actively involved in assessment. In an individual conference, the teacher can show students that "there is usually a logical reason for their spelling errors" (p. 130). She suggests that teachers listen to the child's oral reading because "difficulties in decoding words may suggest inadequate knowledge of sound/symbol principles, which in turn may affect the ability to apply such principles to the spelling of words" (p. 131). Scott also notes that dictation of words "in the context of meaningful sentences . . . often forces children to attempt words they would not spell if they were choosing only familiar words for their writing" (p. 136). As with any assessment task, multiple writing samples and reading behaviors should be examined to develop an accurate portrait of a student's word knowledge (Marten, 2003).

Developing a Spelling Consciousness.

A number of authors have alluded to the concept of spelling consciousness and the role it plays in becoming a competent speller. The concept has variously been used in reference to strategy development, accountability, awareness, sensitivity, and

responsibility. Cindy Marten (2003) tells her students, “When words are misspelled there are social consequences ranging from miscommunication to embarrassment to financial obligation,” and she shows her students real-life examples to prove her point that “even the simplest spelling mistake can alter the meaning and importance of the subject” (p. 16). Kevin Harris and Steven Graham (1997) equate spelling consciousness with self-regulation, which includes goal-setting, self-monitoring, self-talk, making choices, and arranging the environment to support learning. Jeff Wilhelm (2002), author of numerous books on strategic reading, believes spelling consciousness derives from knowing how and when to use resources and strategies. He writes, “When students engage with strategic instruction, they learn to use authoritative sources, personal dictionaries, mnemonics, spelling journals, pattern analyses, analogy, proofreading skills, spell checkers, and many other transferable strategies” (p. 38). Howard Miller (2002) agrees on the use of strategies, “tools that build responsibility” (p.35), but he adds accountability to the mix.

> Once we bring spelling to a conscious level for our students, give them the wherewithal to be successful spellers, and hold them accountable for their spelling, then we will have gone a long way towards helping them make the shift from inventive spellers to strategic learners (p. 37).

In *Strategic Spelling: Every Writer’s Tool*, Liz Simon (2004) writes,

> (The) child needs to develop more than one system—a multi-sensory approach to identifying and distinguishing letters and words. Learning to spell involves understanding and using strategies—analyzing words, creating hypotheses,

> forming analogies, seeing relationships, perceiving and being flexible enough to deal with differences and unusual spellings. Competent spellers are *strategic spellers* . . . and they need lots of practice writing and spelling in meaningful contexts in order to use these strategies (p. 5).

Paraphrasing these authors, a working definition of spelling consciousness would encompass anything that leads a speller to become responsible, independent, and competent, whether by using personal skills or learned strategies. It also thrives in an environment of direct instruction and quiet guidance by the classroom teacher. Lawrence Sipe (2001) writes about the critical role of the teacher in scaffolding students' development. "An active child does not imply an inactive teacher. Teachers should be more than just close observers of children . . . Active intervention by the teacher and judicious use of direct, explicit instruction can help children along the literacy road" (p. 272). Howard Miller (2002) sums up everyone's portrait of the ideal teacher.

> Teachers do need to be supportive, yet at the same time, they need to be moving their students in the direction of becoming independent and interdependent members of the community of learners . . . Teachers need to strive to instill in their young writers a sense of obligation to the reader and offer them the skills and tools to fulfill that obligation (p. 35).

One Ohio school district created its own word study program; then fifteen teachers and a university researcher "looked through the lens of children's explanations to determine spelling strategies" (Dahl, Barto, Bonfils, Carasello, Christopher, Davis, et al, 2003, p. 311). Forty-four children were observed and interviewed both during and

after writing practice. Responses were coded as visualizations, connections, sound strategies, reflections, or combinations of the four categories. They found that strategy use was consistent with developmental stages, and they were pleasantly surprised that children were so original in combining a number of strategies. This is a prime example of active learning on the part of the students and the teachers. Students were equipping themselves with skills that would lead to self-confidence and teachers were adding another assessment piece to *their* toolbox in a wonderful collaboration.

Identification of Best Practices.

The major points of agreement in the research of spelling support instruction that is sequential, developmentally appropriate, differentiated based on students' existing orthographic knowledge (both explicit and incidental), strategic rather than wholly dependent on visual memory, and practiced by writing for varied purposes across the curriculum. Robert Schlagal (2002) summarized the history of spelling research for *Reading Research and Instruction*, listing "the basic principles and practices established by an earlier era of research and teaching" (p. 49-50). Those principles are listed in Figure 1 on the next page. For a well-organized list of best practices associated with appropriate goals, but too lengthy to be duplicated here, see Appendix A, *Suggestions for Implementing Research-Based Spelling Instruction In the Language Arts Curriculum* (Learning by Design, Inc., 2004). Rebecca Sitton includes an overview of the research that guided the formation of her spelling program on her web page at http://www.sitton spelling.com/philosophy/Research-Base.pdf, along with practices that she has incorporated into it.

Summary of Historic Research

1. Learning to spell words from lists is more efficient than learning them from context.

2. Creating spelling words from frequency lists (rather than from content vocabulary) guarantees the usefulness of the words for most writing demands. Words learned from the 4000 most commonly used words (accounting for nearly 98 percent of words used in ordinary writing) provide a "security blanket" leading to greater fluency in writing.

3. Controlling the difficulty of lists by frequency and by word length successfully differentiates task difficulty.

4. The organization of spelling lists should highlight linguistic principles of English spelling (e.g., phoneme-grapheme, sound-to-pattern, and meaning-to-pattern principles) to promote the development of orthographic concepts.

5. Organizational principles introduced should have reasonable generalizability.

6. Orthographic patterns taught should be introduced in relation to documented developmental trends.

7. Words and patterns taught should be subject to periodic review.

8. Study of spelling words should be distributed in small amounts across the week, rather than concentrated in large but less frequent amounts.

9. (a) Pretests should be used prior to a teaching unit, and (b) children should self-correct their errors, (c) copying them over correctly no more than three times.

10. A study method should be taught and practiced (e.g., "look, say, cover, write, check"). In addition, the following recommendations have been strongly advanced from within the traditional model of spelling instruction:

11. Students should have ample opportunity to practice and apply growing skills through abundant writing.

12. Opportunities for incidental spelling instruction should be exploited to better meet individual needs, broaden understanding, and assist students in application of the spellings and principles taught.

13. Students should be able to read the words they are being asked to spell.

14. Students should be guided in understanding words by their spoken and written patterns.

(Schlagal, 2002)

Figure 1: Summary of Historic Research.

Purpose

Informal observations, conversations, and concerns voiced in gatherings of fellow teachers at the middle school, in professional readings, and on electronic list-servs (Middle Web, Mosaic of Thought, Reading Teacher, National Council of Teachers of English) pointed to frustration, confusion, and uncertainty about the effectiveness of current spelling instruction, leading to speculation that the same phenomenon might apply to the researcher's situation across the elementary and middle school grades. This study was intended primarily to build a foundation of knowledge about the nature of spelling development, but also to collect data to determine strengths and weaknesses in spelling programs in use in the researcher's own school district. Positive outcomes might include opportunities for dialogue, both formally and informally, study groups, inservice opportunities, curriculum development, and/or major changes in policy and practice. With that goal in mind, the writer-researcher generated a list of best practices. (See Figure 2.) Then she developed a list of questions that derived from best practices and which seemed to apply to the conditions in her school district (See Figure 3.)

There is a consensus on the issue of what constitutes best practice in the teaching of spelling strategies. According to the experts who collaborated on The Virginia Studies, best practices combine both spelling and reading methods that are deliberate and explicit, and teachable strategies that are supportive of reading and writing fluency as well as reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. Whether afforded by a commercial program of spelling materials at one end of the spectrum, or a teacher-designed, all-

inclusive system at the other, a combination of approaches in reading to spell and spelling to read is desirable. Instruction should be targeted to specific areas of confusion at the appropriate developmental stage exhibited by the students, with the intention that they are taught at their optimal learning levels.

As the 2004-2005 school year was coming to a close, teachers were administering a number of end-of-year assessments. The teacher-researcher was administering Ganske's Developmental Spelling Analysis (1999) to all fourth and fifth graders. She made the decision to conduct her survey of teachers at the same time. She realized that interviews would be more informative, but when looking for patterns and the overall big picture, a standard questionnaire was deemed more efficient, and would ensure confidentiality.

The Researcher's Understanding of Some Best Practices in a Spelling-Word Study Program

1. Multiple assessments of students' spelling errors to determine developmental and instructional stage, with instruction to match.

2. Emphasis on letter sounds, word patterns, and meanings delivered in small group settings.

3. Less emphasis on memorization of a weekly spelling list and more attention to generalizing and applying what is learned through exploration and investigation.

4. Multiple opportunities to practice and apply knowledge to reading and writing.

5. Direct, explicit instruction delivered by a teacher who is well-versed in the history and structure of the English language, who models an interest and enthusiasm for instructional word play, and teaches rather than merely assigning and testing.

6. Development of strategies that learners can choose from their "toolbox" to become more independent and confident.

The Researcher's Questions Pertaining to the Teaching of Spelling

1. Word Choice

Do high-frequency words appear with regularity on lists of words to be studied and memorized?

Are some words for study based on errors from students' daily writing? Are other words presented sequentially by level of difficulty?

Are words presented and grouped according to specific features that correspond to developmental stages?

Can generalizations be applied to these words or patterns?

Are the words previously studied recycled in some manner at regular intervals or applied to other contexts across the curriculum?

2. **Differentiation**

Are students pre-tested to determine their instructional level?

Are students grouped by their degree of word knowledge?

How are struggling readers and writers supported and encouraged?

3. **Fostering a Spelling Consciousness**:

Do students self-correct their work or engage in peer-editing?

Are they encouraged to "have-a-go" at words to develop a visual memory of them?

Can they use their knowledge of sounds, patterns, and word meanings to solve new words?

Are students held accountable for correct spelling in at least some of their work?

4. **Application**

Are students both incidentally and explicitly made aware of the regularities of the English language as well as the exceptions?

Do students engage in meaningful writing activities that require the use of thinking and spelling strategies?

Are teachers using writing activities, conferences, and assignments to assess student knowledge and progress, to offer help with strategic spelling, and to scaffold student's learning?

How much reliance is placed on a spelling text or workbook?

5. **Word Study**

Are word hunts, word sorts, games or puzzles, exposure to rich language, and word play regular occurrences within the classroom?

Is vocabulary instruction multi-layered and appropriate to the students' level of knowledge?

Is word study incorporated with other subjects besides language arts?

6. A speller's toolbox

Are students taught how and when to use reference materials?

Is spell check used correctly for word-processed documents?

Do students maintain a personal word study or spelling notebook?

Are word walls or word lists displayed around the classroom for a reasonable length of time, or are they in the students' possession? Are word walls used as a teaching and learning tool?

7. Assessment

Are diagnostic measures used to pinpoint problems in phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension?

Are progress and growth measured in multiple ways, through oral reading, writing samples, informal quizzes and the like?

Figure 3: The Researcher's Questions Pertaining to the Teaching of Spelling.

CHAPTER 2

The Method

Development of the Survey Instrument

Identification of best practices formed the framework for the questions that contributed to the survey. The literature elicited much thought on the part of the teacher-researcher, and led to a number of deeper questions that could not be answered by a simple questionnaire. The researcher hoped that by keeping the format of the instrument simple, there would be a greater return rate. At the very least, teachers would benefit from the process of analyzing and reflecting on their practices.

As presented in the preceding chapter, Schlagal's Summary of Historic Research (2002), Suggestions for Implementing Research-Based Spelling Instruction In the Language Arts Curriculum (2004, Learning by Design, Inc.) and Sitton's (1995) Spelling research gave direction to some of the survey questions. Multiple sources in the literature described word study activities and spelling exercises that are promoted by authors and publishers.

Schlagal's (2002) analysis of three different approaches to spelling instruction is helpful in pinpointing the similarities and differences among teaching styles. Approaches are labeled as *incidental* if spelling is learned from actual reading and writing, with mini-lessons and proofreading as the primary focus. *Developmental word study* is the approach that has been described in detail in the first chapter. It involves systematic instruction that is based on analysis of spelling errors, and conscientious attention to the sounds, patterns, and meanings of words chosen to match the students'

orthographic knowledge. Some teachers extend word study across the school day rather than confining instruction to a set block of time. The *basal speller* approach is the most traditional. It most often relies upon a spelling book for leveled word lists and activities, and is usually delivered to the whole group without regard for ability or past performance on tests.

Three general questions were addressed by the questionnaire: (1) What kind of instruction in spelling and word study is currently being provided? (2) Are teachers' current practices indeed the best practices as suggested by the research? (3) Is there a consistent and deliberate sequence in the design of the spelling curriculum? Questions fell into categories pertaining to spelling-word study programs, the degree of satisfaction with current programs and practices, the perceived strengths of instruction, and other concerns.

It was hoped that the survey would help to determine if teachers in the district were aware of the developmental approach to spelling, and were modifying their classroom instruction to reflect that. These were questions that obviously could not be to asked directly of teachers. Two unstated but equally critical questions that could logically be anticipated from the results had to do with administrators: (1) Are administrators aware of the concept and importance of word study, and (2) Would they support modifications to the curriculum, schedule, or methodology? Those questions would go unanswered for the time being, but could be raised more directly in the future.

The six-page questionnaire was a mix of short answer questions, open-ended questions, and checklists. The first section inquired about components of classroom

programs including the origin of spelling lists, and the strategies taught for studying and recalling words. The second section asked teachers to describe their programs in greater detail. Sections three and four required teachers to report on specific practices they employed by selecting from checklists of traditional and word study activities. The final section invited teachers to express their concerns, frustrations, and opinions about how and why they did what they did. The complete questionnaire is found in Appendix B.

Decisions About Administration of the Instrument

Because the nature of word study varies as students progress through the different levels of knowledge, it was important that questions be directed to teachers from the elementary and middle schools to cover all the stages of development at different grade levels. Typically one might expect a greater emphasis on phonics in the elementary grades. The emphasis on meaning making increases at the Derivational Relations Stage, which may or may not include students in self-contained classrooms. There would be apparent differences if word study is confined to spelling class or applied across the grade level curriculum throughout the day. The researcher had little knowledge of practices at the elementary school and little contact with teachers there; hence, all teachers were encouraged to provide additional comments in the event some component of instruction or assessment was overlooked.

Participants were allowed the option of declining to answer, but because the sample was small, it was hoped that most would cooperate. There were also concerns about how to ensure confidentiality so that staff would not feel intimidated or fearful of criticism from colleagues or supervisors. Labeling each survey only by primary,

intermediate, or middle level made it easier to determine if all questionnaires had been returned, and where to direct reminders if one or two were delayed, while at the same time concealing the identities of participants. It was important to impress upon staff the investigative nature of this survey, and the possible benefits to be derived from taking a closer look at spelling-word study along the entire continuum. This is an area of literacy that has not been explored by the school district, yet has the potential to strengthen existing literacy programs. The survey was administered during the fourth quarter of the school year, which coincided with assessments of end-of-year progress in reading and language arts.

Administration of the Questionnaire

The survey instrument was distributed to teachers in grades two through eight at the K-3 elementary school and the 4-8 middle school in a rural Wisconsin community serving approximately 1200 students. All K-8 teachers were invited to participate but the kindergarten and first-grade teachers informed the researcher that they did not teach spelling, and after looking over the survey, they realized that most of the questions did not pertain to their reading and writing programs. They politely declined to participate.

The questionnaire was distributed during an after-school gathering at the elementary school, at team meetings with fourth and fifth grade teachers, and individually to teachers of grades 6-8. The directions were explained to the teachers with instructions to contact the researcher if questions arose. Teachers were asked to return their questionnaires to the mailboxes of the District Reading Specialist or the Title I Reading Teacher rather than to principals to avoid face-to-face contact with those in positions of

authority. Some of the middle school staff had expressed curiosity about the research initially, but the researcher shared little information during the process of the investigation in order to preserve the integrity of the project and to avoid influencing responses.

To encourage honest and thoughtful answers, respondents were asked to complete the questionnaire privately rather than in consultation with their grade level teams. They were assured that their identities would be concealed, but that results would be shared with administrators. The researcher's intention was to convey to teachers that this was a data-gathering exercise rather than a critique of their work.

CHAPTER 3

Examination of Data

Participation

Twenty-one teachers in grades 2-8 received the questionnaires and sixteen completed them for a total sample of 76%. Six out of seven surveys were returned from grades two and three, an 86% return rate; six surveys came from grades four and five, a 75% return rate; four surveys were received from teachers in grades six through eight, a 67% return rate. Three teachers declined the opportunity to participate, and two surveys were not returned. Ironically, after the researcher went to great lengths to ensure anonymity, a few teachers made little effort to disguise their identities when they submitted copies of the survey. Two teachers went so far as to write the grade number on their cover sheet, and two teachers openly wrote about “sixth grade” approaches and decisions. Table 1 shows results arranged according to category and grade level. The data are summarized briefly by grade level in the next three sections.

Primary Grades Report

The elementary spelling program appears to follow a traditional approach as described by Schlagal (2002). It typically consists of one list of spelling words presented on Mondays, along with practice activities, a study method, and a final test on Fridays. Four teachers specifically listed the Sitton high-frequency words as the basis for their word lists. Three of them added words from the Houghton-Mifflin Spelling and Vocabulary textbook. Only two used the test-study-test procedure. Parents were expected to practice with their children at home. One teacher recycled some words if students were

unsuccessful with them on the end-of-week test. Teachers said they hold students accountable for correct spellings of all these words in their daily work. Instruction was provided in a whole group setting and students were not grouped for different types of instruction or alternate lists.

	Grades 2-3	Grades 4-5	Grades 6-8
Procedures:			
Words in spelling list	Average 12-14.	Average 12 - 15	Commonly 20.
Diagnostic test	yes - 3	yes - 2	none
Hrs./wk. week spent writing	1.5 - 4 hrs./week mostly in reading	.5 hrs. - 8 hrs./ week	1.5 - 2 hrs./ week in L.A.
Weekly test	yes - 5	yes - 6	yes - 3
Pretest	yes – 2	yes – 4	yes - 3
Test-study-test	yes - 4	yes - 4	yes - 3
Teach spelling as a component of writing	yes - 5	yes - all	yes - 3
Teach phonemics	yes - 5	yes - 3	yes - 2
Teach phonics	yes - 5	yes - 6	yes - 3
Accountable in daily work	often - 4 sometimes- 1	often - 4 sometimes - 2	often - none sometimes - 3
Interventions	tutoring– 2 home study – 2 carryover – 1 none - 1	tutoring - 1 carryover – 2 penmanship – 1 none - 2	for ESL only
Questionable activities:			
Spell out loud	yes - 6	yes – 6	yes - 2
Crossword puzzles	yes - 1	yes - 4	yes - 2
Word searches	yes - 2	yes - 4	yes - 3
Alphabetize	yes - 3	yes - 5	yes - 1
Write definitions	yes - 4	yes - 6	yes - 2
Words in sentences	yes - 5	yes - 6	yes - 4
Other activities:			
Dictation	yes - 6	yes - 4	none
Write words 5 times	yes - 2	yes - 2	yes - 1
Word study activities			
Word sorts	yes - 4	yes – 2	yes - 1
Word hunts	yes – 4	yes – 4	yes - 3
Word families	yes - 5	yes - 4	yes - 2
Word maps/webs	yes - 2	yes - 2	yes - 1

Small groups	yes - 3	yes - 1	none
Ability groups	none	yes - 1	none
Mini-lessons on generalizations	yes - 4	yes - 4	yes - 2
Word play	yes - 4	yes - 5	yes - 2
Making Words	yes - 5	yes - 3	none
Fostering independence:			
Dictionary	yes - 3	yes - 5	yes - 3
Ask classmates	yes - 2	yes - 1	yes - 1
Sound it out	yes - 6	yes - 5	yes - 2
Analogies	yes - 4	yes - 2	yes - 4
Look around room or in text/word wall	yes - 3 yes - 4	yes - 1 yes - 1	yes - 1 none
Have-a-go	yes - 2	yes - 1	none
Mnemonics	yes - 5	yes - 6	yes - 4
Proof-reading	yes - 6	yes - all	yes - 3
Spell check	Not applicable – 3 yes - 2	no - 1 yes - 5	 yes - 4
Personal word list	yes - 2	yes - 2	none
Assessment:			
Test scores	yes - 4	yes - 6	yes - 4
Writing samples	yes - 6	yes - 6	yes - 4
Weekly tests	yes - 5	yes - 6	yes - 3
Oral reading	yes - 1	yes - 1	none
Sources of spelling words:			
Student choice	yes - 1	yes - 1	none
Mastery list	yes - 3	yes - 2	yes - 3
Errors in writing	yes - 3	yes - 3	yes - 1
Units of study	yes - 3	yes - 3	yes - 1
Features/patterns	yes - 4	yes - 2	none
Sitton words	yes - 4	yes - 3	yes - 2
High frequency	yes - 2	yes - 5	yes - 2
L.A./reading book	yes - 3	yes - 1	yes - 2
Themes	yes - 1	yes - 1	none
Teacher concerns:			
Lack of time	yes - 2	yes - 4	yes - 1
Which words?	yes - 1	yes - 1	yes - 4
Lack of resources	yes - 1	yes - 3	yes - 1
Preservice ?	none	none	yes - 1
Inservice ?	none	yes - 1	yes - 1
Lack of standards	yes - 2	yes - 2	yes - 3
Messages conflict	yes - 1	yes - 1	yes - 1
Lack of transfer	yes - 2	yes - 4	yes - 3

Table 1: Responses to the Spelling-Word Study Survey

Teaching occurred during a designated spelling block. Practice was incorporated through reading and writing activities across the day. None of the teachers had concerns from parents about their spelling program or their child's performance.

All six teachers in the primary grades (2-3) followed this approach. One teacher broke with tradition by forsaking the weekly test. Instead, this teacher concentrated instruction on spelling strategies (teacher's emphasis) based on word patterns. Twelve words per week were taught to the whole group, but he or she did not give tests on the words; however, children were expected to write the words correctly in their work. Assessment was through writing samples alone. This teacher also used the Houghton-Mifflin Spelling and Vocabulary workbook, and noted, "All Sitton words are included in this program." The only concern expressed by this teacher was, "I get conflicting messages about what to teach and how to teach spelling."

Five out of six primary-grade teachers included phonemic awareness and phonics activities in the study of word families; three incorporated some small group work. There were a number of teachers using word study practices regularly. All teachers encouraged students to "sound out" unfamiliar words, and four suggested analogies to encourage independence. In addition, four teachers featured word walls in the classroom. Four teachers said they had students copy additional words into a personal spelling notebook, yet only two checked personal word lists as "regularly found in your classroom." Writing definitions and using spelling words in sentences was part of general practice.

Teachers at this level all listed different strengths of their methods: skill building and review, student choice (no indication of what choices), a study method, words linked

to the reading selection, and word analysis. At the primary level there was no common concerns and one teacher wrote, “I love to teach spelling.” Another commented, “Everyone does not teach spelling in the same way or even the same words,” a concern shared by the District Reading Specialist. However, the survey results do not support that comment. If teachers have been forthright, then there appears to be a great deal of uniformity across the primary grades both in terms of word choice and instructional practices.

Intermediate Grades Report

Grades 4 and 5 also followed a traditional approach to spelling. They consistently used the Sitton high-frequency words. Half of the teachers drew additional words from units of study or errors from student writings. Whole-class lists averaged 15 words per week. Five out of six teachers gave weekly tests and four taught a test-study-test method for memorizing words. All assessed through writing samples and all said they hold students accountable for correct spelling in daily work. Unfortunately, the teacher-researcher did not anticipate the nature of the Sitton Spelling program that separates words into three categories of importance, so it is unclear which set of words students must spell correctly all the time.

All teachers integrated spelling across the curriculum, and they also had a daily 25-minute spelling block. Five out of six teachers still recommended “sounding out” as a strategy, but unlike the elementary teachers, intermediate teachers were more likely to refer students to the dictionary. There was a decline in the use of word walls and only two teachers used word sorts in their practice. Though all teachers said they taught analogies,

only two said they encouraged students to use this strategy when spelling unknown words. All teachers included phonics practice, spelling words out loud, writing definitions and sentences, and proofreading. Five out of six required students to alphabetize their spelling words. Just one reported working with small groups; two teachers reported assigning challenge words for the better spellers and also expressed interest in learning how to differentiate for all students. One of these teachers also had concerns about the lack of both preservice and inservice training in spelling. Intermediate teachers listed these strengths of their approach: Core Words and skill building (Sitton), "freedom to add words of my choice," emphasis on common features of words, "my challenge club," a vocabulary component, and high-frequency words.

At this level, two-thirds of teachers checked lack of time and lack of transfer to everyday writing as concerns. One teacher privately said that she was pleased to know that the spelling curriculum was being examined, and another asked if the Sitton Spelling approach was an effective way of teaching spelling, because she had some doubts about its lack of pattern words and application to reading. This came at the same time when teachers were examining a new edition of the Sitton materials. They were considering the suggestion that Sitton Spelling become the text for all grades during the next school term.

Middle Grades Report

Four teachers out of six from grades 6-8 returned the survey . In sixth grade students make the transition from self-contained classrooms to rotations where they are exposed to language arts and spelling by specialists in the content area subjects. As mentioned previously, four teachers share responsibility for a language arts block that

includes a regular spelling component. In grades seven and eight, spelling is not taught as a separate subject; rather the two teachers focus on spelling when they wish or as the need arises (the incidental approach). A careful reading will be necessary to separate the sixth grade program from seventh and eighth grade programs in this commentary.

As pointed out in Chapter 1, in sixth grade all teachers use the Sitton high-frequency word lists with the same Priority Words for accountability. Three of the four teachers surveyed teach words from a spelling text and have workbooks to use with their students, but only one used writing errors as the basis for instruction. One teacher differentiated the number or level of spelling words sparingly, while other students were assigned the same word list to study. All teach the test-study-test method. All sixth grade teachers give weekly tests; three out of four teachers surveyed administer a weekly test. According to the survey, ability grouping was practiced, and only English Language Learners had merited intervention and remediation. Teachers estimated purposeful writing activities to average 1.5 to 2.5 hours per week.

All teachers shared a common practice activity—writing words in sentences. Only one teacher included word sorts in lesson plans, two incorporated vocabulary lessons, and two studied word structures with their classes. Three teachers assigned word searches, proofreading, and spelling out loud. There was no common strategy they all favored for fostering independence. According to different teachers, the best features of their programs were: practicing words in context, word analysis, assessing spelling words in paragraphs, a vocabulary component, theme words, consistency, and student choice.

All four teachers said they were confused about which words to teach. Three were concerned about lack of transfer to everyday writing and lack of State Standards for spelling. More so than the others, the middle school teachers seemed less confident of their methodology.

CHAPTER 4

Discussion

Generalizations

Participants in the survey seemed genuinely interested in describing their spelling practices and curriculum. They often wrote detailed answers to the open-ended questions. But the limitations of the survey were evident from the responses. Some questions were too open-ended or confusing, and did not elicit the information the researcher was seeking. For instance, the question "Do you teach spelling as a component of writing rather than as a separate subject?" should have required a simple *yes* or *no* answer instead of o*ften, sometimes,* or *rarely*. Some questions indicated the balance between assigning and testing or teaching and learning (Marten, 2003) or provided corroboration for other answers; those responses do not appear in the data (Table 1). Vague or unclear answers were subject to the researcher's interpretation. Analysis of the items was challenging when one response seemed to contradict another. Some respondents were confused by terminology, especially *cloze, word study, differentiation*, and *Nifty Thrifty Fifty* (Cunningham & Hall, 1998). Some teachers wrote a question mark next to those items or left the questions unanswered if they were not familiar with the terms. A conscious decision was made by the researcher not to define these terms to see if teachers were familiar with them through their professional training or reading, and no one asked for a clarification. Despite the limitations of the survey, it was possible to arrive at some generalizations about the scope and sequence of the District's K-8 spelling curriculum.

Most teachers are using the Sitton high-frequency words across the grades with the addition of other words from a spelling text, mastery list, or unit themes, reserving the right to make personal choices. They are assigning many of the activities listed in the manual or other resources. These materials offer consistency along with variety and answer keys. There is usually an organization or sequence to the presentation of words. Purchased materials have the additional advantage of a format that parents can relate to and teachers feel comfortable using. It appears that the traditional approach has a strong following, and overall, spelling seems to be perceived as a test of memorization skill.

In grades 2-5, spelling is taught as a separate subject. In grade six, spelling is taught as one strand of the language arts classes that meet three times a week; reading is taught as a separate course. In grades seven and eight, reading and writing are top priorities in the language arts curriculum with spelling receiving less attention. Spelling is either taught or assigned infrequently, and is mainly embedded in writing activities where it is treated as one of the Six Traits of Writing (Spandel & Stiggins, 1997). However, students at all levels have many opportunities to practice their spelling in writing assignments.

Parents have not expressed concerns about spelling, though two teachers did report that parents are not helping their children study from the spelling list. Teachers listed eight common areas of concern about their spelling programs, and at first glance, none stand out as glaring problems. Primary teachers have fewer concerns overall, while intermediate teachers listed sixteen concerns and middle school teachers noted fifteen.

Closer examination shows that seventy-five percent of fourth and fifth grade teachers listed lack of time to teach spelling properly as a concern. Intermediate teachers, in general, have frequently expressed frustration with their weekly schedule and limited time for academics. At the primary level, where teachers seem to equate reading ability with word knowledge, large blocks of time are set aside for literacy learning. But this is not the case in the middle school. Teachers have less class time to teach literacy and the core subjects. Limitations of space, funding, and staffing dictate a 4-8 grade alignment in the middle school, in contrast to the typical 6-8 middle school configuration. In fourth and fifth grade, there are numerous classes of thirty minutes or more interspersed throughout the week, along with special and extended curricular programs not found in the primary grades. Teachers keep a close watch on the clock, and admit they cover little of the science and social studies curriculum; math and reading/language arts take precedence. Testing at the beginning and end of the year also infringes on valuable instructional time.

Seventy-five percent of intermediate teachers also listed lack of correct spelling in daily work as a primary concern. Is there a correlation between lack of time and lack of transfer? Is student accountability the critical issue here as Rebecca Sitton maintains? In retrospect, the survey question should not have asked “Do you hold students accountable for spelling in their everyday writing?” but rather “HOW do you hold your students accountable?” That conversation might shed more light on how to address a perplexing issue. Without a doubt, a combination of factors is at work undermining current programs, and a closer look at attitudes and practices is warranted.

The sixth grade specialists have expressed reluctance about teaching a language arts section and would be happy if they were relieved of that responsibility. All four middle school teachers who participated in the survey wonder about what their spelling curriculum should consist of, and which words they should be teaching. It would be beneficial to interview the teachers of grades 4-8 to learn more about their dissatisfaction because it might have a negative effect on student attitudes and performance. It would also be interesting to learn from primary teachers what contributes to their higher level of satisfaction.

Seven teachers also noted a lack of State Spelling Standards as an issue. Wisconsin State Language Arts Standards read only, “Students will spell frequently used words correctly” (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Language Arts B.4.3.). The statement does not indicate when and where this standard should be applied. Perhaps educators would prefer a little more direction in this regard because “frequently used words” is a very broad term. The lack of further clarification gives the impression that spelling may not be a high priority as far as the Department of Public Instruction is concerned.

The survey results show that there is little intervention for students who are doing poorly on their weekly tests and very little evidence of differentiation across grade levels, with the exception of challenge words for the top students and occasional small group work. There are students beyond the primary grades who have not mastered the short vowel patterns in one-syllable words, much less complex vowel patterns and consonant combinations, as demonstrated by the data from Ganske’s Developmental Spelling

Analysis (1999) administered to fourth and fifth graders in May 2005. While some teachers wrote of working occasionally with struggling readers and writers, there was no mention that students who are assigned “challenge words” receive individualized instruction. Diagnostic tests and pretests are seldom used to predict student performance or to group for instruction, leading the researcher to regret that “lack of student progress” or “underachieving students” was not offered as a choice in the portion of the survey dealing with teacher concerns. It seems that there are a number of students who are being underserved in the area of word study.

All teachers use writing samples as assessment, but only seven said they use student errors as a basis for their instruction; just one of those teachers taught at the middle school. Perhaps there is a connection between this situation and students’ lack of spelling consciousness. Two teachers out of sixteen access spelling and word knowledge through oral reading, leading the researcher to believe that teachers are not aware of the strong connection between reading and spelling, which is a major argument for redefining spelling as word study.

Looking at the responses, there is evidence of deliberate word study activities, with some decline in grades 4-5 and more in grades 6-8. However, an examination of the written comments revises that conclusion. It points to numerous occasions of incidental word study. In the upper grades, vocabulary instruction and grammar are occasionally finding their way into the spelling period, especially in sixth grade where spelling is taught by the math, science, and social studies teachers. Middle grade teachers noted word meanings, grammatical forms, parts of speech, word structure and patterns,

synonyms and antonyms as their focus of spelling instruction. Yet, few of them answered the question about word study as if they understood the concept and its implications.

A *strategic spelling toolbox* (Simon, 2004) is considered an essential feature of a spelling-word study program for the purpose of developing spelling consciousness and student accountability (Miller, 2002). The data reveal that students are most often directed to spell by sound, use mnemonics for irregular words, and think of a similar or rhyming word when they cannot visualize a word they are trying to spell. They are also advised to consult a spell check device or dictionary. Missing from all but a few classrooms are personal word lists and word walls or other useful strategies meant to lessen reliance on the teacher. Proofreading is high on the list of activities practiced, but students' published work indicates that this procedure has not been very effective. Proofreading is an advanced visual skill requiring that students first realize that something looks or sounds wrong; then they must accept responsibility for cross-checking and making corrections. Proofreading is aided by word study and large amounts of reading. Sadly, this teacher-researcher encounters more and more students who are avoiding reading as either a leisure or assigned activity. Horn (1969), as cited in Schlagal & Trathen (1998), suggests that finding the spelling errors of others is easier than identifying errors in one's own work. Unfortunately, peer editing was omitted from the list of options under the Current Practices portion of the survey.

Questions Raised and Answered by the Study

One of the research questions concerned the presence or absence of identified best practices. It should be noted that there is much reliance on questionable activities across

the grades, particularly in grades 4 and 5 where teachers expressed frustration with lack of time to teach spelling. Experts frown upon activities like writing words in sentences, alphabetizing, and writing definitions because they do little to improve spelling ability. Even spelling words out loud is considered questionable, though some teachers would put this practice in the category of word games. Recalling the visual image of words is crucial to spelling and reading fluency, but the goal is to reduce students' reliance on memorization to pass the weekly tests. Students' time would be better spent examining spelling patterns, making generalizations about words, proofreading, and reinforcing skills that strengthen both reading and spelling. Teachers' time could be better spent analyzing student errors for areas of confusion or conferencing with individuals.

A major deficit of current practices is the absence of ability grouping. Teachers in the study generally did not equate the term "differentiation" as grouping by students' word knowledge level and modifying the curriculum to match students' instructional level. They mainly use the pretest to introduce words rather than as a method to predict success or failure, or to accommodate poor spellers who fail tests week after week; rather, the pretest cues students on words that will require greater effort to master for the final test.

It is quite possible that these teachers see grouping as time consuming and unmanageable (Bloodgood & Pacifici, 2004). Some of them may have had minimal experience with heterogeneous groups. Practically speaking, primary and intermediate teachers have the luxury of being able to connect spelling to all their daily lessons, and could take advantage of incidental learning opportunities outside the spelling block to

meet with small groups of students or reinforce language concepts in other subjects. According to Darrell Morris and his colleagues (1995) high-achieving students become independent learners when their teachers spend more time working with other students. With judicious monitoring and coaching, teachers could begin differentiation with this population of independent learners before moving on to low-achieving students who frequently require more support and time on task.

On the positive side, since high-frequency words are targeted across the grades, there is that element of consistency; patterns and generalizations are taught in many classes, opportunities to write vary from reading-based at the elementary level to project-based at the intermediate and middle levels, and teachers are modeling a variety of strategies for word learning in addition to drilling for a weekly test. However, in light of the last two decades of research, the latter remains a questionable practice except for irregular high-frequency words when all is said and done. Realistically, memorizing words may be so deeply ingrained as to be difficult to surrender and rationalize to parents. In the final analysis, more could be accomplished individual classrooms to foster a curiosity about language and respect for correct spelling. Most importantly, a shift in philosophy to encompass a differentiated word-study curriculum that supports students as readers and writers could improve the district-wide literacy program.

Impediments to Implementation

The literature infers that there are impediments or resistance to adopting a word study model. One might reasonably expect to see significant changes in classrooms procedures by now since developmental research was first presented over two decades

ago. Invernizzi and Hayes (2004) offer two possible explanations for the slow progress of change—"lack of understanding about the English writing system itself" and "the propagation of mixed messages from commercial publishers and policymakers regarding the nature of systematic instruction" (p. 217).

As noted earlier, some university educators and textbook authors (e.g., Freeman & Freeman, 2004; Johnston, 2001b; Moats, 2000) feel that lack of teacher training in language is having a negative effect on student performance. The teacher-researcher initiated this study partially because of a perceived lack of training in spelling both as an undergraduate and graduate student. Surprisingly, only two of the teachers in the study perceived any deficiency in their preservice or inservice training. Perhaps teachers do lack a deeper understanding of English language systems, but are not aware of it. The teacher-researcher would have been unaware of significant gaps in her knowledge of linguistics had it not been for this study. With a better understanding of the English language and comparative languages, as well as the nature of children's language development, teachers could examine student errors through an analysis of particular vowel and consonant patterns and place students in appropriate settings for instruction. They would also be able to better select words and generalizations for study and provide more individual assistance to students.

How influential are textbooks in the teaching of spelling? Morris, Blanton, Blanton, and Perney (1995) observed six elementary teachers for one year to determine how spelling textbooks influence instruction and achievement. In the study, these highly-experienced teachers used 84 out of 85 activities suggested by the publisher. Sixty-two

percent of teachers in Mary Jo Fresch's National Survey of Spelling Instruction (2003) relied on a spelling textbook and followed its recommendations closely. Sixty percent of participants in that study cited the convenience of basal spellers, the lack of authority for decision-making, and obstacles within their school system as reasons for not making changes to their practices. Even when teachers are aware of new shifts in pedagogy, they are slow to change their practices. For example, 47% of Fresch's participants said that students should be grouped for instruction based on their developmental stage, but in practice, only 28% provided different lists based on ability. In another case, 45% of the teachers agreed that using one common word list was effective practice, yet 72% provided students with a single list. In effect, there was a 19% discrepancy rate between belief and practice in the first case, and a 27% discrepancy rate in the second case.

In Francine Johnston's (2001a) study of teacher beliefs versus practice, teachers also reported that they did not have input or authority when it came to the adoption of curriculum or resources. This argument was not given by any of the teachers in the researcher's study; therefore, the researcher cannot verify if this is valid for the school district in which she is employed. However, in September 2005 elementary and middle school teachers will have copies of, and possibly begin training with, the Sitton Sourcebooks and Blackline Masters. A new phonemic awareness program will be in place for kindergarten classrooms, and structured phonics will follow in first and second grades in succeeding years. How these decisions were made, whether the staff requested them, and who provided input is unclear to the researcher. At any rate, teachers were

given Sitton Spelling materials for examination a few weeks before the end of the school year, and they may have provided feedback to the Reading Specialist as a result.

Teachers also say they get conflicting messages about what to teach and how to teach from researchers and publishers, as reported by Invernizzi and Hayes (2004). Teachers trust publishers' materials to reflect standards and best practices, especially when the names of well-known experts appear as authors or consultants (e.g., Gentry and Zutell for Zaner-Bloser; Templeton and Bear for Scholastic); yet, according to Marten (2003), few textbooks move students through the stages of word knowledge in a true developmental sequence. When experts recommend the use of textbooks as they are currently written, it seems that they are sanctioning the weekly test of memorization over development of orthographic knowledge. In the experience of the teacher-researcher, textbooks are more apt to be used effectively when the instructor is familiar with the philosophy and research behind the program, its organization and development, and has received training on how to adapt the curriculum to the needs of the students, rather than using the teacher manual as a script. In other words, teachers and administrators should do their own research and engage in a thorough review of the materials prior to implementing any new program or text.

Robert Schlagal (2001) believes spelling textbooks can be adapted to address the issue of diverse learners. He points to research by Darrell Morris and his colleagues (1995), where low-achieving third graders were grouped by ability and were taught with spelling workbooks at their instructional levels. The favorable results led Schlagal to conclude, "Although it requires careful planning" (p. 15) and "flexibility" on the part of

the teacher, “significant gains can be made by many poor spellers” (p. 13). He recommend this course of action particularly when teachers lack specialized knowledge of language structures or experience with multiple ability groups.

In addition to the previously mentioned issues, there are other possible explanations for the delay in moving to a word study model in the researcher’s district--scheduling, leadership, and financial commitment. Scheduling has always been a thorny problem at the researcher’s middle school. It is caused in part by limited space, shared staff, and many subjects vying for instructional time, thereby limiting curricular initiatives. If teachers and administrators feel that additional time is necessary to accommodate heterogeneous groups of spellers, it could create quite a dilemma. Yet, in spite of scheduling restrictions, limited time and limited space, the district has undertaken a number of initiatives in language arts and reading in the past five to ten years; in addition to character education, curriculum development, technology, assessment, and team building. The school board recently has been involved in reorganizing its form of governance while dealing with the impact of legislation from No Child Left Behind. Not only have budgets been stretched to accommodate new programs, but instructional time has been reallocated for test preparation and test taking. Teachers have been expected to adapt to each new program and challenge, and have come under closer scrutiny by parents, administrators, and the community. All of this makes for a stressful working environment, and predisposes staff and students to be wary as well as weary of frequent change.

In one respect, the implementation of the district's new reading program could be a major obstacle to new initiatives in spelling or word study. Roughly seventy-five percent of the teachers surveyed are being trained for this labor-intensive and highly-structured program that incorporates the Mosaic of Thought strategies (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997) with graphic organizers and children's literature. Teachers from grades 2-6 will now be required to read three trade books per month with their students, learn and teach a visual tool for the targeted strategy, write their own rubrics, develop their own performance assessments, and learn new vocabulary to engage in year-long study with their colleagues. In grades 7-8 the requirements are not as stringent because reading takes the form of literature study rather than strategy instruction, but all teachers will be expected to correct and grade papers before reporting to administrators and parents. It is a particularly exhausting task in the first year of implementation. It would undoubtedly present an additional burden on the staff to manage even two spelling groups. In addition, professional development sessions during the next term will be devoted to learning the new reading approach—in effect, teachers have created their own yearlong study group.

On a positive note, there is a phonics component to the reading program in the elementary grades, and vocabulary strands at all levels, providing some elements of word study no matter what label is attached to it. It will be interesting to see if the amount of process writing decreases, and if students' written expression improves as a result of time spent crafting summaries and reflections for the reading program. Perhaps when teachers realize that they are capable of managing multiple groups and planning for all of them,

they may be more receptive to modifying spelling practices, especially if they can be convinced of the link between reading to spell and spelling to read.

By sharing the results of this study, awareness of these issues will have been raised. The teacher-researcher is providing a bit of guidance in this direction along with a standing offer of ongoing assistance. Leadership from two principals, the Curriculum and Instruction Director, the Student Services Director, and the District Reading Specialist are essential to effectively assist, support, monitor progress, and provide the initial impetus to generate cooperation from staff. Fortunately, the suggestions forthcoming from the researcher in the next sections should require little in the way of additional expenditures from the district.

Sowing the Seeds of Change

The District's current plan to move toward a uniform program may be seen as the first step toward ensuring a scope and sequence from grade 2 through grade 8, although at the present time regular spelling instruction occurs only through grade 6. Much will depend on how receptive teachers are to the Sitton Spelling philosophy and how committed they are using and supplementing the program. A few minor changes could improve the good work that is already in place.

This researcher finds much to celebrate and recommend about the word study focus and variety of activities in the Sitton materials. In the past ten years, Sitton has been slowly modifying materials as the research base for word study grows. However, Sitton's claim that the program is sequential and developmental by virtue of its presentation of words in the order of frequency must be addressed. The newest promotional material

calls Sitton Spelling a "totally integrated approach" supporting "every aspect of any communications curriculum . . . It is as much a word study curriculum as it is a spelling program" (http://www.sittonspelling.com/sourcebook/changes.html, para. 1.) It has acquired a new name—Rebecca Sitton's *Sourcebook for Teaching Spelling and Word Skills* (3rd edition). The total program still numbers 1200 words by order of frequency of use, and presents a short list for study each week while constantly recycling previous words until they become automatic. The word list and its lack of a common pattern, meaning, or concept to group these words in the list for purposes of instruction is questionable in the mind of the teacher-researcher.

Consider that *wall* (word #609) is not targeted for instruction until about fourth grade. Children who can spell *all* (word #33), *small* (150), *ball* (404), and *tall* (490) in early second grade should be able to spell *wall* as well. They should be also be capable of contrasting those words with *shall* (not one of the 1200 high-frequency words) before fourth grade, especially if those words are revisited frequently like the program requires. Now compare *through* (#102), and *go (*#105). *Through* is more phonetically and graphically complex, is a homophone, and is often confused with *though*. Students will quickly master *go* and *all*, but they might be confused by *through* for a long while. *Through* should be studied in the Within Word Stage due to its triple consonants and complex vowel pattern, but will probably remain a spelling demon for many children during the course of their school experience. It would seem wiser to introduce *go* and *all* to students when they are in the early Letter Name Stage since both words are entirely phonetic, and at the same time teach the students in the Within Word Stage more

complex words at their level, like *through*. As children acquire more orthographic knowledge, they are better able to process confusing patterns.

Supposedly, in terms of frequency, *mane* is #155 on the Sitton list, yet *main* is #469. The two words would logically be compared during word sorts of long /a/ words, but they are taught at different grade levels in the Sitton program. Consider how often a student will hear, read, or write *mane* as opposed to *main* during the course of a year. *Main* is used more frequently, as in *the main idea, the main character, Main Street, the main reason*, or even *remainder*. It seems doubtful that *mane,* which refers only to the hair of certain animals and humans, and appears infrequently in adult writing, would even be considered a high-frequency word in children's literature.

Cindy Marten (2003) relates Poway United School District's experience with Sitton Spelling. "Sitton's theory makes sense, but her influence led my district to create a core spelling curriculum based solely on the twelve hundred most frequently used words. As a consequence, we were only assigning spelling, rather than teaching it" (pp. 67-68). In time, Poway United made its own list of 100 Frequently Misspelled Words for teaching and learning rather than expect students to practice words they had already mastered. Marten refers her readers to Cramer and Cipielewski's *100 Most Commonly Misspelled Words Across Eight Grade Levels* (1995) for a comparison to the Sitton Priority Words so they can draw their own conclusions.

If teachers were to take on the task of grouping the Sitton words according to literacy stages (Bear et al., 1996) they could expect less frustration from students who are under-challenged and academically inclined, as well as support for the higher-level books

they like to read. Zutell's research (2004b) as reported at *The American Reading Online Forum* lends ever more credence to the practice of grouping students based on their sight vocabularies and spelling ability, both of which can be measured easily with informal inventories. "The results of this study suggest that it is possible to create lists whose words fall within appropriate frequency ranges for estimating level of word identification ***and*** can be organized to provide more detailed understanding of student word knowledge" (p. 5). The teacher-researcher has already attempted to reorganize the Sitton word lists by spelling stage; perhaps one or two teachers would be amenable to adopting this presentation method as an action research project.

In describing her latest (3rd edition) sourcebook Rebecca Sitton says, "Differentiated activities focus on an integrated approach for teaching and learning word strategies . . . Teachers select lessons from a menu of activities that reflects the same concept, but varies in difficulty to meet all students' needs. All unit tests are differentiated" (p. 2). If this is so, teachers must be prepared for the word study features of the program. They must first learn how to analyze spelling errors to determine what students already know and need to know before selecting the best activities for their students, or until, as Zutell (2004b) predicts, they can use reading inventories in the same way. From Sitton's literature one might surmise that the Priority Words and Core Words have become a minor part of the total word study package. If so, at some point, teachers will also want to assess skill-building words (referred to as springboard words or transfer words) through writing samples, oral reading, or unannounced tests rather than just an end-of-week test.

It is at the middle level, grades 6-8, that guidance and additional training from the district may prove most helpful; it is here that teachers expressed the most confusion about which words to teach. Sixth grade teachers have expressed annoyance with having to teach spelling at all. This year three of them used lists developed around themes of the literature series, one of the practices that is discouraged in the professional literature. Only one teacher out of four employed word sorting, the practice endorsed by all of the spelling experts. So much could be accomplished at this level to investigate words, their meanings and origins, idioms, roots, affixes, etc. rather than assigning words to memorize, especially if students are not able to read the words. In that case, syllabication or word chunking remains a particularly appropriate activity for engagement. By choosing words from Cunningham and Hall's Nifty Thrifty Fifty List (1998), a teacher could provide eight months of instruction for students primarily at the Derivational Relations Stage of confusion. Fifty carefully selected words provide practice with word roots, affixes, and meanings. Cunningham estimates that each word can be used to read and spell an additional seven words.

Fluency and automaticity should be a primary goal of the spelling curriculum, but high-frequency words cannot be the only words targeted for instruction. Content-specific words like *character, summary, author,* and *solution* are often misspelled in students' reading logs and on displays of their work. While not found on high-frequency word lists, nevertheless these are words that students use regularly throughout the year and continue to be misspelled. Adjectives describing character traits also become high-frequency words in reading classes. The same can be said for words specific to social studies, words

like *society, conflict, national,* and *defense.* Science, language arts, and math all have specialized vocabulary that students ne**e**d to read and write with fluency. Content specific words could be placed in the spell check word bank for future reference, and distributed to students based on their orthographic knowledge.

The possibilities for connections to content areas are limitless. Content area teachers may serve as models to acquaint students with the specialized vocabulary of their field of study. They could be following the example of Invernizzi, Abouzeid, and Bloodgood (1997) who embedded word study in their Civil War unit. With a little effort, unit design could be expanded to provide more opportunities for small group work involving language-related activities, either in consultation with a reading professional, or through collaboration on the project with the language arts department. The sixth grade science teacher and learning disabilities teacher have already had success with this type of collaboration during the Jason Project, as have teachers in eight grade social studies, science, and language arts.

There are excellent resources for uncovering delightful and humorous aspects of word usage that would make word study enjoyable, and word play should be encouraged. The case could be made that short sessions of word study each day, as opposed to occasional spelling units (Schlagal, 2002), would be most beneficial in the seventh and eighth grades as a foundation for building vocabulary before high school. Teachers could open their lessons with a mini-lesson or fill the last few minutes before dismissal with a word of the day to extend and deepen vocabulary study. Extended word study is particularly appropriate in the middle grades as students encounter more expository

reading, and write for a wider variety of purposes. Peer editing during the writing cycle could provide an additional method of proofreading since students have difficulty finding errors in their own writing (Horn, 1969, as cited in Schlagal & Trathen, 1998). Placing a higher priority on correct spelling in published work would also send a clear message that accuracy is valued.

In light of the fact that few teachers have interventions in place to address poor student performance, the pretest could be used to identify students who are below grade level in their word knowledge and therefore not likely to master the whole-group word list on the final assessment. At this point, the teacher could differentiate the difficulty of spelling lists so that all students are being taught at their instructional level. This could be made more manageable by using spelling texts or spelling lists at different levels just as teachers use leveled books for reading, as long as research-based activities accompany instruction (Morris et al., 1995). And students should never be expected to spell words they cannot read without assistance (Schlagal, 2002; Sitton, 1995).

The Developmental Spelling Analysis (Ganske, 1999) disclosed that four different stages of spelling development are represented by students in one fourth-grade classroom, not to mention stages within the stages. If spelling retained its common time block, students could be grouped and assigned permanently to one of four different classrooms during that time for instruction with the same teacher. Each teacher would then be responsible for one large group rather than numerous small ones, making lesson planning and monitoring progress that much easier, and giving students the opportunity to improve at their own rate. Within those groups, entertaining word play as an alternative to

traditional word searches and crossword puzzles could lead to greater appreciation for spoken language and literature. Teachers might also find that they could apply this procedure to their reading groups, book clubs, or literature circles and be responsible for only one class novel at a time instead of three.

Students should be taught to try different spellings of unfamiliar words to build on their visual memory (Miller, 2002). This is a strategy that mimics spell check programs, where students must pick the spelling that "looks right". *Share and Compare* (Buschman, 2003) is a technique that partners an older buddy with a younger student. (Pairings of students of different ability levels would be equally appropriate). Both students write the same sentence on separate sheets of paper. After the younger student has had sufficient time to have-a-go (Bolton & Snowball, 1993) at conventional spellings and sentence structure, the older buddy shares his sentence, and they compare the two versions. In this scenario, the older buddy, by virtue of his expertise, provides the scaffolding consistent with an apprenticeship model, rather than the teacher. This is a quiet activity that could be completed at any time of the day, or when students have finished their other work.

So far, teachers in the researcher's district have been receptive to allowing the Title I Reading Teacher to test fourth and fifth graders with a developmental features analysis (Ganske, 2000). The teachers understand that it will help them to set up their guided reading groups, which is a requirement of the new reading program. The advantage to calculating stage scores at the end of May is that students can be grouped as soon as the new school year begins without going through the tedious process of administering informal reading inventories in September. It will also allow Title I

services to focus on specific students in a more timely and precise fashion. Of course, it will also facilitate grouping for instruction in writing and spelling. In time, teachers may be ready to consider that possibility.

One factor that might make change more palatable is if the work connected with ability grouping were shared. If teachers are committed to textbooks, they might welcome an assistant who could work with one group in a higher or lower book. Students will have already become accustomed to flexible groups through their experiences in reading. This seems to suggest that one could also group the Sitton high-frequency words by pattern or level of difficulty, and use them as the source of leveled spelling lists. This would present an opportunity for the Title I teachers to provide support as described by the International Reading Association in its policy statement on the role of the Reading Specialist (2000), and to facilitate the collaborative team teaching that Title One guidelines endorse (Gupta & Oboler, 2001). Working as an agent of change can be challenging and invigorating, especially when cooperation comes from both the top and bottom of the educational hierarchy, and colleagues have a shared vision.

Addressing Impediments Through Individual Study

There are a number of classroom teachers in the professional literature who have adopted word study for their repertoire; books such as *Words Their Way*, (Bear et al., revised in 2003), *The Science of Spelling* (Gentry, 2004), *They Still Can't Spell* (Sipe et al, 2003), and *Strategic Spelling: Every Writer's Tool* (Simon, 2004) show that it can be accomplished successfully. One creative and progressive educator is fifth-grade teacher William "Max" Brand who prepares his students to be *word savvy* (Brand, 2004, Title).

Brand integrates vocabulary instruction and word study throughout the entire day in his writing and reading blocks, and carries strategies into math, science, and social studies. The purpose of his vocabulary instruction is "to help students understand the power of words, how to craft words while speaking and writing, and how to understand words encountered during daily reading" (p. 100). He characterizes rich instruction as that which is facilitated by teachers who share their fascination with words, provide plenty of opportunities to "inquire, wonder, and delight" and help students "build and refine their understanding of 'big ideas' or concepts" (p. 101).

Brand (2004) has little use for weekly spelling tests. Instead he administers pop quizzes of twenty to thirty words once each grading period. When he introduces a spelling feature, his students collect words from their reading, or misspellings from their writing, to contribute to word sorts. He uses these "self-assessments" (p. 76) to guide students in writing their own personal spelling goals. He is a firm believer in observations, connections from the known to the unknown, visual tools, "looking across the word" (p. 63), personal word lists, and multiple notebooks. Brand keeps detailed notes to inform his teaching, and shows students how to record their thinking as they read and write. Self-reflection is a large part of this teacher's practice; he models constantly for his students. He favors the apprenticeship approach, and scaffolds instruction through anchor charts, rotating word walls, mini-lessons, profuse note-taking, word collecting, and during the first week of school, "name explorations" (p. 39). Clearly he holds the attention of students, all the while challenging them to use the vocabulary of readers and writers as they engage in thoughtful discussions. The conversational tone of this book

makes for easy reading, but the reader may wonder how Max does it all.

Some savvy teachers are taking the initiative to inform and reform themselves. Cindy Marten (2003) has been actively involved in word study for at least six years. She explains her belief that

> (t)raditional approaches to spelling instruction focus on *assigning* and *correcting* rather than on *teaching* and *learning* . . . Even if the words you assign *are* developmentally appropriate for your students, rote assignments without active inquiry and engagement will not produce the lasting results you want (p. 40).

Consequently, Marten taught herself to analyze students' spelling by comparing different spelling inventories and doing active classroom research based on her reading. She maintains, "We need to know the thinking behind the features we see and we need to be able to apply what we know when we look at any piece of student writing, not just a spelling inventory" (p. 53). These are the kinds of understandings that do not come from conferences and workshops or half-day professional development sessions. Educators like Marten possess the desire to do their best for all students while satisfying their own curiosity as lifelong learners.

Addressing Impediments Through Study Groups

Kelly Chandler (1999) then an assistant professor at Syracuse University, joined with elementary teachers at Mapleton School in Maine and formed a study group to examine their classroom practices. They had many of the same concerns that prompted this investigation. They shared their consternation at students' lack of spelling consciousness. Students just did not seem to care enough to make the effort to correct

their misspellings. The study group surveyed parents about their attitudes and concerns related to spelling and language arts. They questioned students in conferences, they asked what good spellers do, they conducted metacognitive mini-surveys, and they read the writings of professionals. The results were gratifying. In their words, "Developing a schoolwide belief statement and evaluation tool pushed us to articulate a consistent vision for spelling at our school" (Chandler & the Mapleton Teacher Research Group, 2000, p. 229).

In Poudre, Colorado, ten K-6 classroom teachers who were nominated by their peers as excellent teachers of spelling were interviewed to determine what constituted best practices. The teachers kept detailed logs of their instruction and collected artifacts. In addition, fifty students were also interviewed about their views of spelling. The teachers who practiced their beliefs considered themselves successful, no matter how they taught. Although each teacher taught differently and from a variety of word sources, the district was able to generalize from the results to make recommendations for all of their staff (Hagerty, Foster, & Cobb, 1997). In so doing, they acknowledged that there are various exemplary ways to teach spelling (p. 10), and that teacher choice plays an important role in teacher satisfaction (p. 9). Although one may question their conclusions, these educators are to be commended for their sincerity and commitment to the study of best practices in spelling.

Another example of the power of inquiry and self-determination is a study by college educators, Charleen Gill and Patricia Sharer (1993), who led monthly inservice sessions

for an elementary school in Ohio at the invitation of its principal. Nine teachers elected to participate, and selected spelling as the topic that concerned them most. During the first meeting teachers filled out a detailed questionnaire that was followed by interviews to clarify the data collected. In six months, they learned to use the Qualitative Inventory of Word Knowledge (Schlagal, 1982) as the basis of their diagnostic assessment and instruction. They were introduced to alternative methods of teaching. They shared their classroom successes and failures. These educators saw growth in their students' spelling skills and growth in themselves. Figure 4 lists some of their reported successes.

Results of One School's Spelling Inquiry

1. Teachers were amazed at the range of abilities in their classrooms, and consequently abandoned the practice of one word list for all.

2. Teachers were able to analyze miscues to document students' progress even when words were still spelled incorrectly.

3. Teachers learned to analyze mistakes in writing to find patterns that would inform their instruction.

4. Teachers began to select words for study from students' writing pieces rather than from reading selections.

5. Mini-lessons, self-editing, and peer editing appeared in spelling instruction on a regular basis.

6. Word sorts, word hunts, and personal notebooks replaced memorization strategies.

7. Teachers developed a rubric they could use in place of weekly tests, and parents actually preferred it to the report card.

8. Though at first they were more concerned about management, time, and grading issues, in the end the teachers became more interested in fine-tuning their classroom practices. (Gill & Sharer, 1993)

Figure 4: Successes Reported by One Ohio Study Group.

After six months, teachers still felt unsure of their ability to analyze errors and prepare suitable activities for their different spelling groups, but they also continued to pursue further study and requested additional professional resources. They were extremely grateful for the experience, and were committed to continuing their inquiry. Any of these small changes would be welcome in the researcher's district. In this case, the key to success was the vision of the school principal, the availability of experts who had the expertise required to lead the staff and scaffold their learning, and both personal and financial commitments to make it all happen.

Conclusion

There are larger questions to be considered in light of this investigation, some of them being: (1) Should a spelling list and weekly test be used at all? Is it more desirable to equate mastery with memorization, or is it better to teach and test applications of word knowledge, as well as exceptions to the generalizations? Is strategy instruction more powerful than memorization? (2) Since carryover from tests to writing is poor, is that grounds for enforced accountability? Specifically, what does accountabilit*y* mean? Is it applied to Priority Words, Core Words, and/or words at grade level? Is it applied to ever*y* piece of writing or just published works? (3) Should there be grade level end-of-year benchmarks or is that unreasonable if students progress in their word knowledge at different rates? The researcher would like to see these topics examined so that expectations could become more standardized across the grades.

Given that spelling and word knowledge play a significant role in reading, other questions to be considering are: (4) Could stronger connections to decoding and vocabulary

study be made through a word study approach? (5) Considering that lack of time to teach spelling was cited as a concern by middle school teachers, would word study require more or less instructional time? Would it require a separate block of time or could it be made a focus throughout the day? (6) Are teachers willing and capable of grouping their students by developmental stage? How does a teacher successfully manage multiple learning groups? (7) Do teachers have the background knowledge to analyze errors and sequence their instruction? Are there high-quality materials to support teachers, and opportunities to learn from experienced educators? Are teachers competent and confident enough to deliver the information students need?

These are the types of questions that lend themselves to study and discussion involving all stakeholders over an extended period of time, an undertaking that requires a commitment from administrators and staff members alike. According to an organization called Florida Literacy and Reading Excellence (FlaRE), “If schools had to choose one professional development vehicle that has the capacity to make the greatest contribution to teachers, faculties and students, study groups would be at the top of the list” (FlaRE, 2003, p. 1). Study groups provide a support system for teachers, along with renewed energy and a sense of empowerment. This enthusiasm carries over to the classroom. Quoting Murphy and Lick (2001), FLaRE points out that a boost in student achievement is the crowning achievement as well as the ultimate goal of group study. Study groups are usually autonomous, with participants choosing topics of study and resources, agreeing on protocols, assigning or rotating roles, maintaining records, and setting a tone and direction

for the process. They may bring in outside facilitators of their choice, model practices in each other's classrooms, or involve themselves in action research (Robb, 2000).

Returning to the basic understanding that first interested the researcher, spelling and reading are two disciplines that are inexorably linked by virtue of their shared cognitive processing requirements and their mutually beneficial manifestations. Recently, Jerry Zutell (2004c) reported on his comparison of two assessment tools—a reading inventory and a developmental spelling inventory. He was able to find a significant correlation between the two, providing justification for using the spelling inventory as a word identification tool, and vice versa. The implications and ramifications of his work are sure to be felt in the ensuing years. He says,

> Traditionally phonics/word identification and spelling instruction are treated as separate, unrelated parts of the literacy curriculum. They are often taught at different parts of the day with different materials and/or programs. Furthermore, phonics instruction may be organized according to reading groups, providing some differentiated instruction, but spelling is very often taught as a whole-class activity, with all students studying the same lists regardless of their reading levels . . . (I)t stands to reason that spelling lists and patterns should be governed by the nature and extent of student's sight vocabulary . . . Word study instruction should be developmentally based and organized for both reading and spelling (2004c, p. 5).

Wide reading in the areas of language acquisition, language disorders, reading decoding, fluency and comprehension, phonemic awareness and phonics, spelling, vocabulary, and writing led this teacher-researcher to conclude that word study and its

mix of implicit and explicit instruction has merit at all levels of literacy development. This is not a radical idea, considering the precedent set by guided reading. It does require that teachers exhibit a consciousness, a curiosity, and a wonder in addition to frustration, at the consistencies and inconsistencies, the mystery and the murkiness of the evolving English language. Secondly, it requires a commitment to teaching children at their developmental and instructional levels. Third, it requires that teachers stop "assigning and testing" (Marten, 2003, p. 40), that they get out from behind their desks, and get down to the level of the child to see what is going on in the minds of their struggling learners (Dahl et al., 2003). Finally, as with any goal for improvement, it requires the active participation and support of administrative leadership (Robb, 2000).

The professional literature offers a bounty of engaging activities for all learning styles, so that children can explore words and come to their own understandings of how the language works. They can be taught strategies that require and encourage critical thinking and cooperative learning. Most importantly to this researcher, the implications for reading empowerment are greatly expanded by the research on developmental spelling. Balanced literacy should include an acknowledgement of word study as an essential foundation for reading and writing. The word knowledge that educators expect from accomplished readers is also to be expected from competent spellers.

There is no one right way to grow competent spellers, but we do know that a fertile environment will go a long way toward creating children who are "lovers of language, writers eager and anxious to find and try new words, to make subtle meanings, to paint their images with print" (Booth, 1991, p. 7). Writing is word study, reading i*s*

word study, phonics is word study as well as word play. Skill in word crafting is acquired over time and through varied circumstances. “We will never know how to spell all words. We will never know all about all words. We will continue to grow as language learners all our lives” (Booth, 1991, p. 8). Word study requires higher levels of critical thinking and the use of receptive and expressive language, as well as fluency and curiosity. It is the necessity to communicate in written form that currently drives spelling instruction, and allows us a glimpse of what it will mean to be truly literate in the twenty-first century.

From the beginning, this researcher was convinced that teachers would be more receptive to modest change if they could read the research for themselves and use it to reflect on their practices. The time seems opportune to incorporate fresh ideas into a holistic approach to literacy. A precedent has been set in the district by a previous investigation of *Mosaic of Thought* (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997) and *Strategies That Work* (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000). That was followed by the current pilot project in reading. The district has made a commitment to that project for the next few years, and if successful, it could lead to more collaboration and acceptance of other initiatives.

The experts promise that a combined effort in all facets of language arts will result in significant improvement for students. That is the hope that drove this researcher’s investigation and provides the incentive to persevere as an agent of change. In conclusion, this can be an exciting time if all stakeholders are willing to invest the time, effort, and training to transform spelling practices. A groundswell of interest by

teachers and forward-thinking administrators who perceive teachers as professionals, could enormously impact the direction of instruction.

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APPENDIX A
Suggestions for Implementing Research-Based Spelling Instruction In the Language Arts Curriculum

Phonology-based spelling instruction

The goal is to foster awareness of sounds in words with the understanding that letters are used to represent sounds in words.

- Encourage students to sound out phonetically-spelled words and write the letters as they say each sound.
- Introduce sounds in a sequence that reflects perceptual and linguistic complexity.
- Control the complexity of other sounds and letters in the word when introducing a new spelling pattern.

Phonics-based spelling instruction

The goal is to teach the different letters and letter combinations that can represent a sound.

- Display the alphabet on the classroom wall; establish key words for alphabetic letters.
- Encourage letter hunts for all the letters in a list of words that have the same sound.
- Use word sorts to sort words according to different spellings of the same sound.
- Ask the student to create and keep a list of allowable spellings for each sound.

Pattern and rule-based spelling instruction

The goal is to develop knowledge of patterns and rules for combining letters to spell words.

- The most important rule is – Don't teach the rule! Create opportunities for students to discover the pattern or rule and to use their own words to describe the pattern or rule.
- Contrast the correct spelling of a target pattern with another familiar word (e.g., rate vs. rat); guide students through explaining how and why the words *look* different.
- Teach spelling patterns in a sequence that reflects orthographic complexity.
- Address phonetic context, and syllable and word position constraints on spelling.
- Group weekly spelling words together according to target pattern; add words to the list so that each target pattern is represented by at least 3-4 words.

Semantics and morphology-based spelling instruction

The goal is to use the meaning of words and parts of words to spell.

Discuss meaning of words and identify relationships between and among words.
Teach correct spelling of prefixes and suffixes along with the meaning of these word parts.
Create opportunities for students to discover rules for modifying words when adding affixes.
Teach words that do not involve a modification to the base word when adding an affix before teaching words that involve a phonological and/or orthographic change to the base word.

Mental orthographic image-based spelling instruction

The goal is to develop clear and complete mental images of words in long-term memory.

- Always encourage students to print the word rather than recite the word's spelling.
- Discuss characteristics of the printed word; visualize the word.
- Present intentional misspellings for correction by students; encourage students to try the different possible spellings to see which one "looks right".
- Encourage students' self-monitoring and proofing of their own work.

Allow students with poor penmanship to use a word processor for their writing work.

Appendix B

GRADES 2-8 SPELLING SURVEY

A. SHORT ANSWERS ABOUT YOUR CURRENT PROGRAM

1. How many words, on average, make up your spelling word lists?

2. How often do you test on those words?

3. How often do you review previously tested words?

4. How much time would you say you devote to purposeful writing in an average week?

Please circle your response to these questions.

1. Do you directly teach a study method for spelling? (ex: look, say, cover, write, check)	often	sometimes	rarely
2. Do you encourage the use of spell check in word-processed papers (if applicable to grade level)	often	sometimes	rarely
3. Do you teach mnemonic devices for remembering word spellings?	often	sometimes	rarely
4. Do you teach analogies for remembering word spellings? (ex: If you can spell *cause,* you can spell *pause.*	often	sometimes	rarely
5. Do you have different words lists for different students?	often	sometimes	rarely
6. Do you hold your students accountable for correct spelling in their daily work?	often	sometimes	rarely
7. Do you teach spelling as a component of writing rather than as a separate subject?	often	sometimes	rarely

B. OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR CURRENT PROGRAM

1. Do you differentiate your spelling instruction? If so, how?

2. Do you have a procedure or intervention if a student has not mastered his/her spelling words by the final test? If so, describe.

3. What do you consider to be the strengths of your current program?

4. What does "word study" look like in your classroom?

5. Have parents expressed concern about a child's spelling, or dissatisfaction with your instruction or program? If so, what was the nature of that concern?

C. REPORTING CURRENT PRACTICES

1. Which practices are regularly found in your classroom? Check all that apply.

___ pretest

___ practice test

___ practice with a buddy

___ weekly test or post-test

___ diagnostic assessment

___ crossword puzzles

___ cloze activities

___ word maps or webs

___ phonics instruction

___ spell out loud

___ word play

___ word hunts

___ computer drills

___ word walls

___ word families

___ segmenting, blending, rhyming practice

___ write the words 5 or more times

___ alphabetize the words

___ word searches

___ write definitions of the words

___ use the words in sentences

___ sentence or paragraph dictation

___ proofreading for errors

___ word sorts

___ small group word study

___ spelling games

___ mini-lessons on rules or generalizations

___ individual tutoring

___ personal word lists

___ Making Words

___ review of previously-tested words

___ other (specify)

___ ability grouping and leveled word lists

2. How do you introduce new words to students? Check all that apply.

___ I write the word list on the board.

___ I present the words in the context of a written passage.

___ I send the word list home to study.

___ I group the words by common features.

___ I refer students to their workbooks.

___ I pretest/preview the words sight unseen.

___ I play Guess the Covered Word.

___ I do some form of word play.

___ I introduce the words as vocabulary.

___ Other _____

3. What do you do when a student asks you for the spelling of a word?

___ I send her to the dictionary to look it up.

___ I tell her to ask two classmates before asking me.

___ I tell her to "sound it out."

___ I tell her to think of a word it rhymes with or is closely related to.

___ I tell her to substitute a word she *does* know how to spell.

___ I tell her the word, then have her copy it into her personal spelling book.

___ I just tell her the word.

4. How do you measure student's growth in spelling? Check all that apply.

___ test scores ___ their oral reading

___ word sorts ___ high-frequency words

___ analysis of writing samples ___ think-alouds or self-reporting

___ other _____

5. What source(s) do you use for your spelling words? Check all that apply.

___ student choice ___ Language Arts/Reading series

___ spelling mastery lists ___ high-frequency words

___ errors in student writing ___ the Nifty Thrifty Fifty

___ spelling demons ___ words related by meaning

___ words based on units of study ___ words related by theme

___ words that share a specific sound pattern or structure

___ words based on current reading selections or class books

___ formal spelling program by (publisher or title) _____

___ other _____

F. CONCERNS: Do you have any of these concerns or frustrations with your current program? If so, check all that apply.

___ I don't have time to teach spelling properly.

___ I'm not sure which words I should be teaching.

___ I don't have the proper resources or materials to teach spelling the way it should be taught.

___ I am not familiar with English language codes that explain why words are spelled the way they are.

___ My pre-service training in spelling was inadequate.

___ My inservice training in spelling has been inadequate.

___ I'm not familiar with state or national standards for spelling.

___ Student's don't transfer correct spelling to their everyday writing.

___ Parents are not supporting their child's spelling at home.

___ Content area teachers are not supporting spelling in their classes.

___ Others _____