Strategies for Teaching Literacy

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Strategies for Teaching Literacy

by

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A project submitted to the Department of Education and Human Development of the State University of New York College at Brockport in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education
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Chapter 1

Problem Statement

How do students learn to read and spell? What method is most effective in teaching students literacy skills? Some teachers feel that rote memorization is the best way to teach students how to spell and sound out words, but in the highly evolving world of education, differentiation and constructivism may lean toward another method. Learning to read and spell requires rote memorization, recognizing words by sight or relying on a comprehensive language arts program in which students explore and understand why words are spelled, spoken and read the way that they are. Skill and drill techniques of rote memorization have long been used in education, but there is another, more student-friendly way to learn spelling, phonics and sight words. This other choice for teaching and learning spelling and phonics is a balanced literacy program called word study.

Woods (2004) noted that spelling instruction must be taught, "in a way that encourages internalizing the structure of our language instead of memorizing words for
a weekly spelling test” (p. 20). Word study instruction offers students a hands-on way of learning how to spell and read words; it provides students with a way to construct their own meaning from what is being taught to them. Word study also allows students to delve into word patterns and begin to understand the ways in which the English language works. Word study seems to be a balance between sounding words out, phonics, and recognizing words by sight, whole-language.

As American classrooms continue to move toward full inclusion, teachers must be able to educate students who are at different levels of academic ability. Balancing phonics and whole-language instruction is a logical teaching method to help all students learn how to spell and read. Word study, a balanced literacy approach, can be taught using a variety of methods and with a variety of strategies to aid student recall and internalization.

Williams and Lundstrom (2007) found that students can be taught to use various word study strategies to learn about, sound out and spell words. Dahl et al. (2003) agreed with Williams and Lundstrom’s (2007) usage of many strategies in a balanced literacy program. According to Dahl et al. (2003), word solving strategy
combination should be supported and children should explain how and why they came to choose each approach. This type of meta-cognition encourages students to internalize what they are learning and increases the likelihood that students will be able to use the strategies independently.

To give every student what he or she needs in education, teachers are expected to differentiate their instruction and assessment. One of the easiest ways to do that is to develop groups or centers in a classroom and have students who are at the same level teach each other and grow together. To ensure student comprehension and retention, a teacher should develop a "hands-on" curriculum which requires students to learn by doing. This type of active teaching lends itself to using word study instruction to help students learn how to spell and sound out words.

Because of the different hands-on ways it can be taught, a balanced literacy program inherently lends itself to be part of a constructivist-based curriculum. Constructivism, according to Caine and Caine (2006) requires students to learn through experience and make individual meaning out of information that is presented
to them. Another important aspect of constructivism is the assurance that students are engaged in the task at hand and incorporating their own thoughts into whatever they are being taught (Caine and Caine, 2006).

Although a balanced literacy approach proves beneficial to students, it may be difficult for teachers to immediately implement in their classrooms. To properly use word study (both phonics and whole-language instruction), a teacher would need to complete a pre-assessment of a student’s phonemic and spelling ability and then take time to group students that have similar abilities. The teacher would then have to create centers that the groups of students could go to and complete word sorts, word games, journal writing and other hands-on activities that make up phonetic and whole-language based word study (Joseph, 2002).

Word study instruction works best with a schedule and a plan and therefore requires teachers to have both. Although a balanced literacy program takes a lot of time and effort to plan and implement, once a teacher has incorporated word study into his or her classroom, it is easy to continue and encourages students to work together to take responsibility for their own learning.
In this analytical review the questions that were studied were as follows: 1) What are the benefits of teaching reading and spelling using phonics instruction? 2) What are the benefits of teaching reading and spelling using whole-language instruction? 3) How can phonics and whole-language instruction be balanced in an integrated language arts program? 4) How does word study instruction, a balanced literacy approach, ensure differentiation and constructivism in the classroom? 5) What are the effects of implementing a balanced literacy program in the classroom?

Significance of the Topic

The reason why I was so interested in the best way to teach reading and spelling is because I am a special education teacher and I often work with students with severe reading deficiencies. This review allowed me to explore different resources and options for teaching reading and spelling. It provided me with research results that indicated the positive or negative effects of using phonics instruction, whole-language instruction and a mixture of the two as a language arts program in
the classroom. This analytical review gave me an in-depth look at a balanced literacy approach, word study, and the current research that surrounds the topic.

Being a relatively new teacher, I was still developing my reading and spelling program. While I felt that I was always trying to do what was right for my students, I was not sure if the way that I was teaching reading and spelling had a lasting positive effect on their academic achievement. I believe that this review gave me better insight as to how to implement a proper literacy program, what the components of a balanced literacy program were and what type of effect the aforementioned program had on students. I wanted to make sure that whatever literacy program I choose to use lends itself to differentiation and constructivism, two teaching concepts that I adhere to in my everyday teaching.

Overall as a teacher, I believe that learning the most relevant and effective instructional practices is essential. To ensure student achievement, a teacher must fully understand what he or she is teaching to his or her students. That is why I felt as though I needed to explore more about how to teach literacy in an elementary
level classroom. I also wanted to serve as a role model to other teachers in my building and teach them the best ways to teach literacy.

Rationale

Learning how to read and spell are two of the most, if not the most, important skills that elementary age students acquire. Reading and spelling are concepts that continue throughout life and get built upon with age. Therefore it is necessary for students to have a concrete foundation and understanding of how to decode and spell words. For decades in the public schooling system, teachers have relied on teaching decoding and spelling by rote memorization. Ickes-Dunbar (2006) was a recipient of the skill and drill technique of rote memorization. However, when Ickes-Dunbar became an educator in her own right, she found that what had worked for her in the 1970s was not working for her students in the year 2006 (2006). It was because of this and her students’ inability to correctly spell previously memorized spelling words on a consistent basis that she turned to a balanced hands-on spelling program.
Undoubtedly, reading and spelling must be taught in some form; students must be exposed to opportunities to learn and explore through reading. A balanced literacy approach offers just this type of experiential opportunity and exploration. My goal in this analytical review was to gain a thorough and research-based idea of what phonics and whole-language instruction was and what effect it had and will have on students. This study was significant not only to me, but also to the larger educational community as I planned to share my findings with my colleagues, administrators and school district officials.

Definition of Terms

Dahl et al. (2003) explained word study as, "an active learning approach to studying the basic principles of spelling [and decoding]... It also uses various activities such as word hunts, word sorts, pattern activities, games, and developmental word study journals to explore orthographic concepts" (p. 310). For the purpose of this analytical review, I used Dahl et al.'s (2003) aforementioned definition which included the ideas
that word study is active, engaging and comprised of numerous activities that attempt to teach students how to read and spell.

For the purpose of this analytical review, when an "elementary age or level student" was referred to it meant that the student was between grade levels one through six. Typically this meant that the student was between the ages of six and eleven or twelve.

Phonics, for this review, was defined as the relationship between sounds and letters in printed text. It was also defined as the sounding out, blending and segmenting of sounds to read written words. The fact that the text is printed allows students to use phonics in a word study language arts program to decode the words.

Whole-language was defined as an approach to teaching reading that requires students to recognize everyday words by sight and not sounding out.

Including phonic and whole-language techniques in a reading and spelling program was defined as a balanced literacy program. Balanced literacy programs encourage teachers to use the best components of phonics and whole-
language instruction to deliver an effective and efficient reading and spelling program to students.

Constructivism was defined as learning through experience. Constructivism calls on learners to create their own meaning out a lesson and take away their own individual understanding.

Lastly, for the purpose of this review, differentiation was defined as a way in which a teacher flexibly implements instruction based on student need and progress. To ensure a properly differentiated classroom, a teacher must administer ongoing assessments to students. Teachers and students must work collaboratively to create and sustain a challenging, yet relevant and current classroom environment.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

Phonics Instruction

One of the fundamental components of learning how to read is having an understanding what letters and sounds mean; that understanding is called phonics. According to Mesmer and Griffith, "Phonics is an extremely important component of literacy instruction because English is fundamentally an alphabetic code; spoken language is rendered into a written form using letters to represent the sounds in words" (2005, p. 367). The aforementioned quote helps to explain why phonics is so essential in the teaching of literacy. Mesmer and Griffith noted that phonics instruction is a basic building block for students to understand language (2005).

The English language is multi-layered and requires the first layer, phonics, to be taught to students to ensure that they will be able to understand the other layers of the English language, such as morphology and meaning (Cooper and Kiger, 2006). Morphology is the ability to understand the roots, prefixes and suffixes of
words. A concrete understanding of morphology allows students to read and spell larger words (Cunningham, 2005). The word 'meaning' refers to the ability to define and comprehend words, a more sophisticated concept of reading (Cooper and Kiger, 2006).

Mesmer and Griffith (2005) believed that phonics instruction is so important because it teaches students how to make sense of the many layers that are present in the English language and it allows students to devise their own system of remembering and applying the layers into their everyday practice.

Phonics is primarily based on using letters or symbols to read, write and speak (Mesmer and Griffith, 2005). Phonics also helps students recognize the relationships between letters, sounds and words. While phonics is defined as letter-sound reading, spelling, and speaking, that does not mean that phonics instruction has to be static and boring for students. Phonics instruction can be devised to allow students to make meaning on their own and can be used in a balanced literacy program (Mesmer and Griffith, 2005). Engaging students in phonic-related activities encourages students to recognize that phonics is not just sounding-out words.
It can allow students to think about their learning and to make connections to literature and authentic texts.

In agreement with Mesmer and Griffith’s notion that phonics instruction is essential for student reading and spelling development, Ryder, Tunmer and Greaney (2007) found that, “explicit attention to alphabetic coding skills in early reading instruction is helpful for all children, harmful for none, and crucial for some” (p. 350). That quote summarized how phonics instruction can help a student to read while, at the same time, explained how phonics instruction has individual benefits to different students. Recognizing that phonics affects each student differently increases the likelihood that a teacher will work to differentiate his or her phonics curriculum to ensure that all learners achieve success. Phonics teaches students letters, sounds and patterns and gives them a frame of reference that can be used throughout their lives. It would be extremely difficult for a teacher to teach every single letter-sound relationship to a student, so phonic strategies serve as a tool that students can rely on when they come to an unknown word (Ryder, Tunmer and Greaney, 2007).
Kim discussed the debate between teaching reading using phonics or a whole-language approach in his 2008 study. He found that the topic is still greatly debated and relevant among researchers and teachers and "even distinguished scholars are unable to agree on the scientific consensus about best practices in beginning reading instruction" (Kim, 2008, p.372). While the debate still continues, Kim (2008) uncovered a synthesis of experimental studies that were conducted during the twentieth century. In that synthesis, Kim (2008) found compelling evidence to support the notion that,

early code emphasis (phonics instruction) produced better outcomes in word recognition in the early grades and helped children read with better comprehension up to fourth grade than did instruction practices in which children were taught to read whole words and whole sentences (whole-language instruction). (p. 372)

Educators and school administrators are not the only people who have shown a vested interest in the ways that students learn to read. The United State government also became involved in the phonics versus whole-language debate by passing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, also known as No Child Left Behind, NCLB, in 2001 (Camilli, Wolfe and Smith, 2006). Based on NCLB regulations, districts and teachers are required to
provide research-driven and systematic reading programs to students (Camilli, Wolfe and Smith, 2006). The legislation requires that the reading program that districts and teachers select to use must be peer-reviewed, utilize empirical methods and produce observable results. As such, the National Reading Panel (NRP) published a meta-analysis of systematic phonics instruction.

Camilli, Wolfe and Smith (2006) reported that the NRP's extensive study, based on years of observation and discussion, supported the idea that systematic phonics instruction allows and encourages children's growth in reading more than alternative programs that do not use systematic, or any, phonics. This finding served as proof enough for some districts and educators as they began to adopt systematic phonics instruction as their reading program (Camilli, Wolfe and Smith, 2006; Cunningham, 2005).

A major component of phonics instruction is the teaching and developing of phonemic awareness, or the ability to hear, manipulate and identify the smallest units of sound, phonemes (Cunningham, 2005). Phonemic awareness is one of the most important reading-related
skills that readers must develop (Ryder, Tunmer and Greaney, 2007). Phonemic awareness develops through the explicit teaching of phonics and is found to be directly related to later reading achievement (Manning and Kato, 2006).

Phonemic awareness, like physical and academic development, occurs in stages. The stages that make up the phonemic awareness scale range from the ability to recognize letters and rhyme words to the ability to blend and segment words (Cunningham, 2005). The developmental stages of phonemic awareness require teachers to become aware, through assessment, what stage of phonemic awareness each individual student is at and develop a parallel phonic curriculum (Manning and Kato, 2006). While this may sound difficult and time-consuming, it is likely that some of the students will fall into the same developmental phonemic awareness category and can be grouped accordingly.

Cunningham (2005) also recognized phonemic awareness as an oral ability. While some researchers (Cooper and Kiger, 2006; Manning and Kato, 2006) are focused on how phonemic awareness can be perceived in print, Cunningham (2005) wrote that, "Children develop... phonemic awareness
as a result of the oral and written language they are exposed to. Nursery rhymes, chants and Dr. Seuss books usually play a large role in this development" (p. 6). The aforementioned quote provides support for the notion that students can learn through listening.

Cunningham (2005) also found that students develop phonemic awareness as they begin to write. She mentioned that while students are writing the words, they are also vocalizing the sounds in each word and blending and segmenting the sounds aloud. This type of oral reading is called decoding (Cunningham, 2005). Decoding is made easier when students have phonemic awareness and, along with comprehension, is an elemental component in learning to read (Cooper and Kiger, 2006).

Providing support for the necessity of phonemic awareness, Cooper and Kiger (2006) wrote that there is a research-supported relationship between phonemic awareness and learning to read; the more phonemically-aware a student is, the easier time he or she will have learning to read. The relationship would seem to indicate that one must have a clear and concise grasp on phonemic awareness before one can be expected to read.
Cooper and Kiger (2006) also recognized the importance of teaching the alphabetic principle to early readers. The alphabetic principle is the idea that sounds in the English language are represented by a graphic symbol (Cooper and Kiger, 2006). For example, students are taught that the written letter 'a' can represent both the sounds heard in the word apple and able. Students need explicit instruction in the alphabetic principle as it is not a naturally-learned ability. Cooper and Kiger continued to promote the importance of learning phonemic awareness and the alphabetic principle as they noted that unless students have achieved phonemic awareness, they will have difficulty recognizing and reading words (2006).

Henderson who championed the idea of developmental spelling, or spelling based on a student's ability, not grade level, recognized the struggles that people face while trying to spell. He noted that even well-educated adults like George Bernard Shaw wanted words to be spelled as they sounded (Henderson, 1974). That desire is one that has been heard in classrooms around America. Why is sign spelled with a 'gn'? It should just be spelled 'sine' is the argument that many students have
made. Henderson tackled that question by responding that certain words are spelled the way that they are because they must follow historical and semantic rules (1974). The rules that Henderson (1974) referenced were presented again as layers in Mesmer and Griffith's 2005 article.

Rule or layer recognition gives teachers the knowledge to create the exception to the rules of phonics. While phonics can teach patterns and relationships, it is also necessary to equip students with a method to recognize words when they are multi-layered and/or derived from unfamiliar root words, such as looking for meaning in the word or segmenting the individual sounds in the word. Henderson (1974) also wrote that teachers must give students encouragement, confidence, time and numerous activities in which students can read and write for meaning.

Teachers must devote a large portion of their time to developing a phonics curriculum. Formulating ways for students to remember how to read and spell words is extremely beneficial to both the teacher and the student as the teacher continues to recognize patterns in existing words. Henderson (1974) encouraged the use of patterning and found that the English language is not
irregular. The English language is very regular and can be easily understood by students who instinctively look for patterns in objects, pictures and words.

In agreement with Henderson, Ryder, Tunmer and Greaney (2007) recognized that the English language has redundant and memorable patterns, such as long and short vowels and open and closed syllables. Because of these patterns, it is believed that instruction in phonemic awareness and the alphabetic principle is essential in teaching students how to read. Scott (2000) also provided support for the notion that the English language is patterned and predictable, “Good spellers search for patterns and consistency in spelling... they find systems rather than chaos at alphabetic, orthographic, and meaning levels” (p. 68).

Brooks and Brooks (2005) wrote about the importance of learning how to read through patterns and a sequential and ordered process. They also found that code-emphasis instruction, or the emphasis on phonics and decoding, achieved higher reading levels than the students who did not receive code-emphasis instruction (Brooks and Brooks, 2005). Code-emphasis instruction encourages the use of
patterns and sequencing when trying to decode unfamiliar words.

Holden (2004) found through brain scans, that phonics teaching and tutoring changes how a student’s brain operates. In the so-called “reading pathways” of the brain, phonics students achieved “substantial normalization” (Holden, 2004, p. 1). Substantial normalization indicated that students who attended or received phonics teaching and/or tutoring were able to recognize words quicker and easier by sight as opposed to those who did not receive such teaching and/or tutoring. In response to this study and its results, Lyon commented, “The converging scientific evidence is very clear that poor readers need to be taught the ‘building blocks’ (phonemes) of words” (Holden, 2004, p. 1).

While phonics instructional techniques have been shown to work, there is the underlying question, “How can teachers systematically teach skills and strategies while still focusing on the individual needs of students” (Heide, 2005, p. 32)? That question is one of the underlying reasons why teachers are nervous to use a phonics program while instructing (Heide, 2005). To ensure that every student gets what he or she needs, a
teacher must differentiate his or her reading and phonics lessons. Discussed later in the review will be strategies to ensure that reading instruction is differentiated to meet the needs of each student.

Phonics instruction is one of the most recognized methods to educate students in the area of reading and spelling, but there is another way. Recently, districts and educators have displayed a vested interest in teaching reading using a whole-language approach. The next section of this review will discuss, in detail, what whole-language is and why some believe that it should be used to teach reading.

Whole-language Instruction

Brooks-Harper and Shelton (2003) wrote that the whole-language approach to teaching reading and spelling allows students to develop literacy naturally and socially, the same way that language is acquired. Smith, a pioneer in the whole-language movement, offered the earliest evidence of research and development in the whole-language movement in her 1938 article. Smith questioned the way in which reading was being taught in
schools in the 1930s. She noticed that reading and spelling were only being taught using phonetic techniques. She wondered whether or not teaching reading using phonics and repetition was actually beneficial for student learning (Smith, 1938).

Smith suggested that a method called look-and-say be used in schools. Calling it a modern method of reading instruction, Smith (1938) wrote that look-and-say offered students a different way to perceive words and included activities and games for enrichment. Smith (1938) wrote that using look-and-say for students piqued their love of reading and used various methods to practice reading skills.

While early evidence demonstrates that Smith began researching the effects of whole-language reading instruction in the 1930's, contemporary research in the whole-language movement did not begin until the 1970s and 1980s. The contemporary whole-language movement began as researchers recognized that there was a continuous transaction that occurred between the reader and the text (Cooper and Kiger, 2006). More specifically, the text became a concept and reading became an active process which included writing, speaking, listening, viewing and
thinking (Cooper and Kiger, 2006). Those elements became known as literacy and literacy hereafter became an all-encompassing term for anything having to do with reading, writing and speaking.

The whole-language movement received support in 1978 from Lee Vygotsky (Cooper and Kiger, 2006). Vygotsky offered that humans learn socially and through culture. He alleged that humans feed their own curiosity with inquiry (Pass, 2007). In fact, Vygotsky’s long-time opponent of social theory, Jean Piaget, even admitted that it was possible that student’s learning might be impacted socially (Pass, 2007). This support from two of the top educational theorists catapulted whole-language into classrooms and reading clinics across the nation (Brooks and Brooks, 2005).

Supporters of phonics, however, were not so excited. Pemberton (2003) offered a concern from supporters of phonics when she wrote that a loss of phonic understanding is a loss of understanding of what is being read. An understanding of what is being read is called comprehension and was considered by Cooper and Kiger (2006) to be one of the two major components of reading, with decoding being the other major component. Whole-
language proponents contend that comprehension is not lost when strategies other than phonics are employed in the classroom (Krashen, 2002; Brooks-Harper and Shelton, 2003).

In the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, whole-language reading instruction has been vilified as the reason why students are not able to read and why reading test scores are down in certain states including California (Krashen, 2002). Stephen Krashen, a professor of education at the University of Southern California, answered these allegations in 2002 with his own analysis of California reading programs and test scores. While the media attributed California’s low reading test scores to a whole-language only reading program instituted across the state, Krashen (2002) found otherwise.

Called the Great Plummet of 1987-1992, California’s shockingly low test scores were blamed on the whole-language administration a group of whole-language supporters, who moved in on the board of state education (Krashen, 2002). This supposed group of whole-language supporters were said to have vehemently opposed phonics instruction and pushed whole-language methods of instruction into all of the schools in California.
Krashen (2002) found, however, that whole-language reading programs were not the reason for the low test scores. He instead identified a lacking of early intervention programs, few libraries with very few books that students had access to, and an overall sense of immaturity in the area of reading readiness of students who entered elementary school. These were the reasons for the Great Plummet; however, the media and educational community accepted whole-language reading instruction as the reason and continued to blame whole-language reading instruction to this day (Krashen, 2002).

One important goal of educating students using a whole-language curriculum is giving them real world and authentic experiences. Ryder, Tunmer and Greaney (2007) wrote that learning is a natural process and should not be isolated from a real world setting. In addition to providing authentic reading and writing opportunities, whole-language instruction allows students to choose texts that they find interesting and relevant. In a survey of young readers, Allen (2003a) found that, "the right texts for reading aloud are critical to positive attitudes toward reading" (p. 268). If a student does not want to read or if he or she does not like what they
are supposed to read, they are not as likely to comprehend the reading material and transfer information from it.

In whole-language instruction, words are kept in their correct context. This means that words are kept in stories and sentences so that students can understand the word and its meaning by its context clues and use in a passage. Kim (2008) researched a study conducted by Goodman which found that phonics drills and skills-based approaches like word lists take words out of context and are not authentic examples of language learning. Most of the reading that humans must do comes in the form of passages. Aside from certain traffic signs, most words that need to be read are presented in a passage with other words. Reading words in context is a more authentic measurement of a student’s reading ability because not only does it require the student to decode the words, but also to make meaning from what they are saying.

Cooper and Kiger (2006) suggested a variety of strategies that can be used to teach students how to decipher word meanings when presented with words in context. Some of these strategies included, looking for
base words and reading to the end of the sentence for clues (Cooper and Kiger, 2006). Although looking for base words in a word could be done if a word is simply in a list, the more helpful tool - looking for clues in the sentence - can only be done when the word is in a passage.

One example of a useful whole-language classroom tool is a word wall. Word walls are areas of a classroom where words that students are frequently using or recognizing are put up for reference. Williams, Phillips-Birdsong, Hufnagel, Hungler and Lundstrom (2009) recommended creating a word wall in one's classroom that is made up of high frequency words as well as words that do not follow predictable patterns. In keeping with contemporary reading and spelling practices, Williams et al. (2009) suggested that teachers encourage students to focus on how a word looks and sounds instead of just memorizing it.

Word walls help students to develop their sight word bank, a useful tool when reading. Recognizing sight words is seen as a component in whole-language reading instruction. Allen (2003b) advocated making one's word walls "living" (p.62). By living, Allen (2003b) meant
that the wall will change daily and relate to the topic that is being discussed in the classroom. Just because words are being added, however, does not mean other words need to be taken down. While the new words are contextual and timely, the old words should not be forgotten, and instead built upon.

While students can sound out many words phonetically, some words in the English language are irregular and need to be memorized as high frequency words. Pinnell and Fountas (2003) recognized that, “A core of known high frequency words is a valuable resource as children build their reading and writing processes” (p. 7-8). Known high frequency words are also called sight words in the educational community. As previously mentioned, sight words are a useful whole-language instructional tool. Pinnell and Fountas (2003) suggested working with students to recognize high frequency words and find patterns and features within them. They then encouraged teachers to tell students to use their bank of high frequency sight words as a way to make sure that they are correctly reading unfamiliar words (2003).

On a regular basis, people only use a little over two hundred words with which to read and write
(Cunningham, 2005). While students are educated in possibly thousands of words, the aforementioned fact cannot be denied. In fact the words: of, and, a, to, is, the, in, you, that, and it comprise a little under twenty five percent of all of the words that people read and write (Cunningham, 2005). Those words would definitely be classified as high frequency and without question students should know those words by sight automatically. According to Cunningham (2005), "As soon as possible, children should learn to read and spell these high frequency words" (p. 64). As students are better able to recognize words automatically, they can begin to develop more complicated skills in literacy.

With an increased amount of sight words comes a higher level of reading fluency which, in turn, leads to better reading comprehension (Cooper and Kiger, 2006). Comprehension, along with decoding, make up how a student reads to learn (Cooper and Kiger, 2006). However while the two components work together to help a student comprehend and learn how to read, decoding cannot stand on its own. Decoding is not sufficient, alone, as a tool for reading. An individual must comprehend the text for actual reading to occur (Cooper and Kigel, 2006).
Reading comprehension is necessary for all students because they will not be able to make any individual connections or derive any meaning from what they are reading.

When it comes time for students to identify plot, setting, character and main idea, they will not be able to if they cannot comprehend the story text they are reading. As a student gets older and progresses into the higher grades, there is more of a focus put on not what the words say, but what they mean. What they mean is comprehension and comprehension cannot develop effectively if a student is unable to read fluently quickly, and with confidence.

The most important part of any instruction, whole-language not withstanding, is the student. The student must be able to make meaning from the words they are reading and must be able to interact with the text (Brooks and Brooks, 2005). A whole-language reading program actually allows teachers to include vocabulary, grammar and comprehension as well as decoding in their lessons. Whole-language instruction tends to be language centered and requires students to apply their own
experiential and personal knowledge to what they are reading or writing (Brooks-Harper and Shelton, 2003).

Phonics and whole-language teaching methods are the two major ways in which educators instruct students in reading and writing. The evidence on either side is compelling enough to adopt either program, yet there seems to be a better solution. Instead of adopting one program completely and forgetting the other program, maybe educators should look into integrating both the phonics and whole-language teaching methods into one comprehensive language arts program. An example of such a language arts program is called word study. In the following section, word study will be explored and it will be demonstrated that phonics and whole-language techniques can come together to create a successful and student-focused instruction.

History/Background of Word Study

For a teacher to effectively implement a word study intervention in a language arts program, he or she must understand what word study is and how and why it was
developed. As previously mentioned, word study is a hands-on language arts program that utilizes students' own ability to make meaning out of what they are learning. Word study applies the theory of constructivism in which students learn through experience and personalize what they learn to fit their own lives and social understanding.

The earliest evidence of word study being used and supported in education found seen in an article written in 1908. While the article focused mainly on why having a well-rounded understanding of words was important, it also suggested that word study activities may be a better option than memorization for learning how to use the English language (Craven, 1908). Even in 1908, while Craven recognized that the typical way in which students learned in the classroom was through memorization, he argued that memorization was not the best way for them to actually understand what was being taught. Craven contended that students needed to learn through discovery, not rote memorization, and they needed to be able to construct their own meaning from each lesson taught (1908). That was a controversial theory during
that time period as it was unacceptable to question common educational norms and practices.

Due to an incomplete understanding of the words, students create their own, often incorrect, definition of the words. This incorrect definition leads to the students using words incorrectly and failing to accurately comprehend written and orally delivered text. Craven (1908) did not believe that knowing how to spell words should be exclusive to knowing what words mean, "The spelling should go hand in hand with understanding and actual use" (p. 511). Craven’s (1908) statement began to usher in a different understanding of how language instruction should be delivered—spelling, reading and writing should be taught together, not separately.

Following Craven’s 1908 article, a 1921 experimental study was conducted that tested the efficacy of using word study when teaching language arts skills (Henmon, 1921). This study was conducted with middle school age students. The study was aimed at testing whether or not word study instruction increased student vocabulary, word discrimination, reading for understanding and the ability to assign meanings to words (Henmon, 1921).
After implementing word study instruction, the students were tested on their ability to recognize words, state the definition of words and read a leveled text. The study found that progress was made in the students' ability to discriminate words based on their usage, define vocabulary words and read for understanding. Although the results of the testing were positive and could indicate that word study instruction was beneficial to classrooms, Henmon (1921) was reluctant to acknowledge that word study would be helpful for students' language arts abilities. One of Henmon's major concerns was whether or not word study instruction defied traditional approaches to teaching and discipline. Because of this, Henmon doubted whether word study could be implemented into a language arts program and suggested that it should serve as a supplement to help students learn a foreign language (1921).

As teaching became more student-centered toward the middle of the twentieth century, word study was examined in greater detail (Gates and Graham, 1934). An article, written in 1934, researched the value of using word games and activities in the teaching of spelling (Gates and Graham, 1934). Two groups of elementary level students
with comparable academic abilities were used as test subjects in the study. The control group continued to learn spelling through rote memorization and skill and drill techniques. The experimental group was instructed in spelling using activities and word games such as: filling in the blank, doing crossword puzzles, rearranging the letters, completing the word, making flashcards, etc. (Gates and Graham, 1934). These activities engaged a student in hands-on learning and allowed the student to transfer prior and newly gained knowledge.

To gauge the effectiveness of word study instruction, students were tested before and after the intervention with a one hundred word spelling list. Students and teachers were also asked to complete qualitative surveys regarding how they felt about traditional methods of teaching spelling versus the non-traditional word study approach. After implementing word study instruction, it was found that students in the experimental group did slightly better on the spelling post-test than the students in the control group (Gates and Graham, 1934).
Even more compelling were results of qualitative surveys that showed almost all of the students liked using word study games and activities better than learning spelling through rote memorization. Teachers, in their own qualitative survey, reported that skill and drill spelling instruction was not interesting to any student (Gates and Graham, 1934).

Although students in the experimental group performed slightly better on the spelling test than the students in the control group, the student and teacher attitudes supported the implementation of word study instruction. A student is more likely to learn if he or she is interested in the material being presented and a teacher is only going to invest his or her time and effort if they know the student will find the material enlightening. The qualitative survey showed that both students and teachers thought that word study was more interesting and, in turn, can be regarded as more educationally relevant than rote memorization (Gates and Graham).

During the middle of the twentieth century educational researchers began to investigate exactly how word study should be taught. Gates (1955) offered a
psychological view of how and why word study should be taught. He believed that word study, like visual perception, relied on a person’s ability to look for distinctive characteristics of words and to distinguish words using their similarities and differences. This would seem to encourage the use of patterns when teaching spelling and word recognition. Gates further suggested, “The process of improving perception of any class of objects, such as words, is one which involves continuous reorganization and new patterning” (1955, p. 594).

When teaching word study techniques, teacher scaffolding is important. Teacher scaffolding is a technique during which an instructor models or shows a desired activity and then, over time, allows each student to do the task independently (Cooper and Kiger, 2006). Gates (1955) recognized the need for teacher scaffolding and peer conferencing. The aforementioned components of word study serve as significant building blocks as to what a complete word study intervention should entail. By clearly defining a teacher’s role in instruction and recommending the inclusion of peers in the learning process, Gates offered the educational community new standards to which word study instruction must be held.
In 1980, Henderson took word study instruction one step farther. He not only questioned how word study should be implemented in the classroom, but also what teaching methods should be used to instruct it. The two major instructional methods of teaching reading and spelling are phonics and whole-language. Often, proponents of one method find themselves as opponents of the other method, and there are some educators who believe that both methods can be used in tandem. Henderson (1980) offered a concise history of the struggle between phonics and whole-language. He recognized that over time educators had debated whether to teach literacy using phonics or whole-language instruction or a combination of the two (Henderson, 1980).

Henderson’s continuous research on word study allowed him to develop a model of developmental spelling (Ganske, 2000). His idea that spelling progressed over developmental stages was a revolutionary thought that further questioned traditional methods of teaching spelling. Henderson’s contributions to the world of spelling development inspired Ganske (2000) to write an informative and highly regarded how-to manual for
teaching and assessing a student’s orthographic development or spelling ability level.

Based on Henderson’s model of developmental spelling stages, Ganske (2000) outlined the exact features, words, strategies and methods that need to be included in an effective word study intervention program. Working from the notion that a student needs to learn about words and not just memorize them, Ganske (2000) created an intensive word study instruction manual for teachers and administrators. She made several valuable points as she mused about the reasons to use a balanced literacy approach. She found that students were better able to generalize the spelling of words when they were able to recognize sound and letter patterns.

Ganske (2000) also found that sorting out words based on their similarities and differences was a valuable activity. The sorting of words and recognizing their individual patterns is a more contemporary method of reading and spelling (Ganske, 2000). It differs from rote memorization in the sense that students are actually manipulating the words themselves and constructing meaning out of what they are learning.
Before Ganske published her 2000 book, *Word Journeys*, she wrote an article defending the usage of a balanced literacy approach and pre-assessment when teaching students how to read and spell. Her 1999 article focused on the fact that word study, as a balanced literacy program, actually stemmed from theory. Building on the idea that instruction should be student-centered, Ganske (1999) reported that the developmental stages in word study allow instruction to be more focused on each individual student’s abilities. Ganske (1999) wrote that spelling and vocabulary could be taught as one using a word study approach.

One relevant topic that Ganske (1999) mentioned was the need for early intervention. Students must be taught to read early and become inundated with words, word games and activities at a young age. Early intervention coupled with review and repeated practice will help students strengthen their memories of words and their meaning (Ganske, 1999). This notion supports the idea that a balanced literacy approach must include activities as well as review for students to internalize what is being taught.
Gehsmann (2008) offered a comprehensive definition of word study,

Word study is an approach to teaching phonics, vocabulary and spelling and is supported by nearly four decades of research, beginning with the work of Charles Read and Edmund Henderson in the 1970s and continues through the work of many today. (p.1)

Gehsmann (2008) managed to touch upon certain widely accepted principles of a balanced literacy program: developmental stages, student engagement, a relationship between reading and spelling, and assessment that helps guide instruction. These overarching themes are the basic building blocks of any balanced literacy program. Like a person develops in stages physically, he or she also develops in stages academically and mentally.

A balanced literacy approach addresses the need for developmental stages in reading and spelling instruction. Engaging the student in his or her own learning is another essential element of a balanced literacy program. Also called constructivism, this type of active learning increases the likelihood that students will be able to internalize words and the processes of how to read and spell.

Reading and spelling are inherently connected subjects. A balanced literacy approach provides a way in
which both phonic and whole-language techniques can be utilized and nurtured. Exposing students to a variety of strategies allows them to become empowered and encourages them to choose which way works best for their own individual learning style. Many researchers agree that pre-assessment is essential in guiding instruction (Gehsmann, 2008; Ganske, 1999; Gates and Graham, 1934). This does not seem to be a highly debatable issue, however to provide students with a balanced literacy program, a teacher must ensure that assessment is simply guiding instruction and not completely taking it over.

A balanced literacy approach merges phonics and whole-language instruction into a comprehensive individualized student-centered program. Boloz (2003) affirmed the need to teach the individual and have student-centered learning, “I have come to believe that understanding the individual is the key. Each of us [teachers] must make time to fully understand the child’s strengths... and to build on them” (p. 678). When implemented correctly, a balanced literacy approach can take the best techniques from phonics instruction and the best techniques from whole-language instruction and devise a plan that will work best for each student.
Combining the two major methods of reading and spelling development, a balanced literacy approach or word study, gives the student the best literacy instruction that he or she could receive.

**Constructivism and Differentiation in the Teaching of Literacy**

To construct one's own learning, gives a sense of personal accountability and achievement, the likes of which cannot be attained through direct instruction alone. Constructivism is a teaching style that is based on the notion that students are active members in their own learning (Gordon, 2009). Constructivism allows students to make meaning from what they are learning and creates a positive learning environment in the classroom. While this review has discussed the methods that can be used to teach reading and spelling, the exact implementation techniques have not been explored. Two essential components of teaching a phonics, whole-language or balanced literacy lesson are constructivism and differentiation. Without these two components, a
reading lesson may look stellar in print, but not mean anything to a learner.

A teacher may have to change his or her way of thinking and teaching to incorporate constructivist techniques into his or her lessons (Gulati, 2008). Teachers habitually teach lessons to others in the same way that they were taught (Gulati, 2008). Gulati further found that most teachers were taught in a skill and drill lecture type setting and that is how they manage and teach their students (2008).

To help encourage deeper comprehension in the classroom, teachers cannot see students as "passage recipients of knowledge" as has been the long-accepted norm (Gulati, 2008, p. 183). Teachers must engage students and allow them to make their own meaning out of what they are hearing and experiencing. Students must be allowed to be active members in their own learning, they must be given a voice and be heard; this is true in every school subject including reading and spelling (Kinchin, 2004).

When students are given their own voice and are allowed to have their own opinions and experiences, they are much happier and more willing to learn (Kinchin,
The results of a qualitative survey revealed that students overwhelmingly prefer learning in a constructivist classroom (Kinchin, 2004). It should be clear to districts and teachers that students flourish when they are taught in a constructivist environment. Constructivism also encourages a social learning atmosphere which is in agreement with the theorist, Lee Vygotsky (Cooper and Kiger, 2006). Vygotsky believed that social interaction plays a vital role in how students learn (Gulati, 2008). He encouraged students to learn with and from each other and he felt that socialization was necessary for the development of academics (Gulati, 2008). Constructivism encourages students to communicate and work and learn together (Gordon, 2009).

While constructivism has numerous positive effects on students, it also has one major negative effect on teachers. According to Gordon, "Teachers who choose this path (constructivism) must work harder, concentrate more, and embrace larger pedagogical responsibilities than if they only assigned text chapters and seatwork" (2009, p. 43).
It is clear that while constructivism is beneficial to students, it is a lot for a teacher to take on. A teacher must be able to be flexible and handle unexpected situations, they must be willing to actually listen to students and, most importantly, they must be ready to implement suggested student-created strategies and ideas into their lessons (Caine and Caine, 2006).

The reason that teachers choose to use constructivist practices in the classroom is because they give students a vested interest in what they are learning. It provides for an active learning environment and it actually holds students accountable for their own learning (Kinchin, 2004). When students are asked to be active participants in their own learning, they must be ready and willing to take responsibility for what they understand and on where they may need clarification. According to Kinchin, this sense of accountability is something that cannot be taught in a classroom (2004). Students must develop it on their own and constructivist teaching practices are one way to ensure that students develop their own sense of learning accountability (Gordon, 2009).
The positive and negative effects associated with constructivism have been established, but what does that mean for reading instruction? Reading instruction has been typically rooted in reading out of a text and answering comprehension questions, so constructivist practices may seem too difficult to apply to reading and spelling instruction (Bailey and Pransky, 2005). This is not completely true as there are ways to make phonics instruction, whole-language instruction and balanced literacy instruction more constructivist based (Bailey and Pransky, 2005).

A teacher should engage students in active dialogue, allow them to make flashcards and encourage them to play word games to try and incorporate phonics into a constructivist classroom (Caine and Caine, 2006). Active dialogue about what they are learning would encourage students to internalize the words being taught and to recognize the strategies that they have employed to figure out unfamiliar words (Gulati, 2008). Flashcards and word games would allow students to sound out words and increase their phonic ability (Caine and Caine, 2006).
Constructivist teaching methods can be implemented in whole-language reading instruction. Whole-language instruction promotes inquiry based learning which is also a component of constructivist teaching (Gordon, 2009). In whole-language reading instruction, students are expected to learn through discovery and create their own meaning which are two other essential components of constructivist teaching. The underlying themes of whole-language reading instruction parallel many of the components of constructivism.

While phonics and whole-language reading instruction can include constructivist activities and encourage active learning, the most constructivist-rooted reading program is a balanced literacy program. A balanced literacy program, like word study, allows students to actively explore and make meaning out of words (Williams and Lundstrom, 2007). Word study activities, games and journals encourage students to actively participate in meta-cognition and reflect on what they have learned (Kinchin, 2004).

Like constructivism, differentiation is another contemporary teaching technique that can be applied to a balanced literacy program (Bailey and Pransky, 2005).
Teachers can differentiate literacy lessons based on student need, progress, and even learning style. Differentiation is essential in every subject in the classroom as students all learn and develop differently. Anderson (2007) found that differentiation can also be used in tandem with constructivist teaching methods,

> Differentiated instruction integrates what we know about constructivist learning theory, learning styles, and brain development with empirical research on influencing factors of learner readiness, interest, and intelligence preferences toward students’ motivation, engagement, and academic growth within schools. (p. 50)

Phonics instruction can be differentiated by varying the level of words that the student is studying (Ganske, 2000). The phonic-related activities that a student is participating in can also be differentiated. Similarly, whole-language reading instruction can be differentiated by allowing student to have their choice of cultural and authentic texts (Cooper and Kiger, 2006). Allowing students to choose their own text gives students a sense of accountability and responsibility for their own learning as well as providing them with a curriculum that can be catered to their learning, cultural and ethnic specificities (Bailey and Pransky, 2005).
Similar to constructivism, differentiation is best applied in a balanced literacy approach. A balanced literacy program, such as word study, encourages students to work together to develop strategies to define unfamiliar words (Williams and Lundstrom, 2007). Word study instruction is based on developmental spelling and reading stages and therefore makes it is easy for a teacher to differentiate a lesson based on ability and student need.

Word sorting, an activity used in word study instruction, is easily differentiated as students and teachers can select the correct words based on level of difficulty. Ganske (2000) provides the necessary assessments and word lists to help students and teachers decide which stage of development is most applicable to each student. Once teachers and students have ascertained the students' developmental stages the students can be grouped and engaged in appropriate differentiated activities.

Making words, another word study activity, can also be differentiated easily (Rasinski and Oswald, 2005). Like word sorting, word making is directed at each student's developmental reading and spelling stage and
allows teachers to differentiate based on student need (Rasinski and Oswald, 2005). As students progress through developmental stages, word study instruction is easily differentiated and adapted to students at every reading level.

When one teaches using constructivist and differentiation practices, he or she helps to ensure that every type of learner is able to achieve success. Constructivism and differentiation can be applied to phonics, whole-language and balanced literacy programs. The next section of this review will discuss the impact implementing a balanced literacy program has on students.

The Effects of a Balanced Literacy Program

As the debate between whether to use phonics or whole-language to teach reading and spelling continues, there seems to be a more efficient and student-centered program emerging. This review has shown that there are positives and negatives to phonics and whole-language instruction, but a balanced literacy approach encourages educators to use the positives out of both phonics and
whole-language to create a constructivist-based language arts program.

There exists an understanding among English language arts teachers that students learn in developmental stages (Williams and Birdsong, 2006). Throughout the developmental stages, from alphabet and letter awareness to blending and segmenting words, students benefit from being taught how to break down words, sound out words, and use phonic strategies to identify unfamiliar words (Rasinski and Oswald, 2005).

Foster and Miller (2007) analyzed the developmental stages and progress of phonics and reading comprehension in kindergarten through third grade students. The purpose of the study was to see how children progressed with phonics and reading comprehension over their years of elementary schooling; more specifically the researchers wanted to know how students with high literacy ability and experience, average literacy ability and experience and low literacy ability and experience differed in their comprehension and retention of phonics and reading comprehension.

There were 12,621 students in this research study. Students were given a literacy assessment at the
beginning and ending of each school year to examine at what level they could decode words, recognize words in context and comprehend what they were reading.

The study found that if a first grade level student had below average phonics and comprehension skills upon entering school, that student is likely to have an achievement gap that lasts at least through third grade. Based on these results, the researchers suggested using phonemic awareness, blending and segmenting as ways in which early literacy skills can be taught (Foster and Miller, 2007).

The reason why Foster and Miller’s 2007 study was significant in describing the necessity of having a balanced literacy program for the students was because it showed that phonics was an essential element in balanced literacy instruction. It demonstrated that phonics instruction needed to be implemented when teaching students how to read and spell.

Abbott (2001) found that for students to become effective readers and spellers, in addition to being able to sound words out, students must have a bank of high frequency sight words they are able to recognize easily and quickly. In addition to having a bank of high
frequency sight words, Brooks-Harper and Shelton suggested the efficacy of teaching reading and spelling using other whole-language strategies like content authenticity (2003). Content authenticity requires students to make genuine connections from the text they are reading to their own lives. Students must make text to text, text to self, and text to world connections to demonstrate their understanding of the validity of what they are reading (Brooks-Harper and Shelton, 2003).

Brooks-Harper and Shelton encouraged teachers to allow students to write about their personal experiences and incorporate spelling, reading, writing and listening into every literacy lesson. It seems natural that reading and spelling should be taught in authentic context and whole-language research defends and supports that idea (Brooks-Harper and Shelton, 2003). Their 2003 article demonstrated why whole-language instruction was a significant component in teaching literacy.

Teachers need to be aware of utilizing both phonics and whole-language teaching strategies to ensure that differentiation and best teaching practices are used in the classroom. However, it is not simply a matter of implementing both phonics and whole-language techniques
in the classroom and expecting students to simply “get it”. Teachers must be trained in how to instruct phonics and be shown how to encourage students to develop their bank of sight words (Donnell, 2007).

Donnell (2007) investigated the effect that a balanced literacy instructional approach had in an urban setting. Donnell found that learning to read is very difficult for many students, especially for students who live in an urban setting. Donnell felt that word study, a balanced literacy program, offered a multi-sensory method of teaching which allows students to learn through kinesthetic, audio and visual lessons. Word study is, therefore, a teaching method to reach the multiple intelligences in students. Donnell (2007) found that, typically, word study instruction is used with students with disabilities, but suggested that it should be used with every student in every class.

She conducted a research study that included third grade students in 25 different classrooms throughout one school district. Donnell (2007) compared classrooms that used word study instruction to classrooms that did not utilize word study instruction or another balanced literacy approach to teaching reading and spelling. The
classrooms had similar socioeconomic status, ethnicity, school size and reading-achievement data. To ensure similarity between the lessons delivered in all of the experimental classrooms, Donnell (2007) created a universal word study unit plan that was used by all of the teachers. Students in both the control and experimental groups were tested before and after word study intervention (Donnell, 2007).

The data showed that using word study intervention, specifically audio, visual and kinesthetic lessons, helped increase the decoding ability of all of the students. The word study intervention also helped to increase the students' ability to correctly spell words and to recognize patterns in words. An increase in student reading speed was also a side effect of the word study intervention (Donnell, 2007).

Schlagal (2002) found similar results when he conducted a research study that examined the effects of using a balanced literacy program when teaching reading and spelling. Schlagal found that when teachers taught reading and spelling using word study techniques, like word hunts and word sorts, students worked well and made noticeable progress (2002). He noticed that students who
used basal spellers, or spelling workbooks, and traditional weekly spelling lists did not work as well and did not make as much progress. He (2002) also found that using word study techniques, "helped students not only attain accuracy, but fluency with the concepts being taught at their instructional level" (p. 54). This is a significant finding because it suggested that word study activities actually help students learn, not only how to spell words, but also what they mean and in what context they should be used.

Historical and contemporary research has demonstrated that it is necessary for students to be exposed to both phonic and whole-language components while being taught to read and spell. Although educational researchers may argue which techniques to use, it should be whatever benefits the student the most that is utilized. The fact remains that the student is the person who needs to learn how to read and spell.

While it is the student who receives instruction, the teacher is responsible for including constructivist practices in the classroom. Educational researchers agree that teachers must incorporate peer conferencing and tutoring into reading and spelling instruction.
(Gordon, 2009; Kinchin, 2004). Peer interaction encourages students to construct meaning from lessons while communicating their thoughts and inquiries with each other. This type of social constructivism is essential in promoting student learning and understanding in the teaching of reading and spelling.

In addition to including social constructivism in the classroom, pre-assessment and differentiation are a must in the teaching of reading and spelling. Those two components cannot be ignored as they provide an educator with a way to evaluate a student’s abilities before, during and after instruction and make necessary modifications as they see fit. As important as pre-assessment and differentiation are in instruction, students must also be able to sound out words and recognize them quickly. A balanced literacy approach allows educators the freedom to use the best practices at all times while doing what is necessary to teach reading and spelling to students.
Chapter 3

Reflections

According to Aiken and Bayer, "Reading and writing are emergent processes that begin with an emphasis on meaningful, authentic literacy experiences in the home and community" (2002, p. 69-70). Over the course of this review, I have internalized that quote and have started to develop my own reading and spelling instructional philosophy. I recognize that it is necessary to teach students how to read and spell by breaking words down into sounds (phonics) as well as using whole words to guide the reading process (whole-language).

I am a believer in applying the best of phonics and whole-language instruction into my constructivist and differentiated lessons. Incorporating all of the essential components of teaching reading and spelling will allow each child to construct his or her own personal meaning from the lesson and apply what he or she has learned to future reading and spelling ventures.

A balanced literacy approach in teaching reading and spelling incorporates phonic and whole-language
strategies into a seamless and effective program. As previously mentioned, word study is one way to teach a balanced literacy program. Joseph and Orlins stated, "Word study techniques have... been coined a contemporary way to teach phonics and considered to be spelling-based phonic techniques" (2005, p. 73). This quote addresses the fact that word study can be used in teaching phonics as well as teaching spelling.

A balanced literacy approach in instructing reading and spelling uses activities such as word sorts, making words and word games to enhance phonics acquisition and phonemic awareness (Manning and Kato, 2006). In my classroom, these literacy activities will be implemented to encourage student involvement and engagement in each reading lesson while increasing my students’ phonic abilities.

I found, while researching whole-language instruction, that balanced literacy lessons can also apply whole-language aspects to the teaching of reading and spelling. Using authentic experiences with contextually relevant materials to promote student learning and understanding, I plan on combining reading, spelling and writing lessons together into one cohesive
learning curriculum. The idea of teaching all of the aspects of literacy (reading, spelling and writing) in one lesson is supported by Brooks and Brooks who found, "Instructors using the whole-language approach to instruction do not teach spelling, vocabulary, and grammar as isolated events; rather, whole-language instruction teaches these functions of language contextually" (2005, p. 272). In my classroom, spelling, vocabulary and grammar will be taught with student input, authentic texts and real world experiential learning.

I fully support early intervention for reading and spelling and I will encourage the parents of my students to expose their children to written and verbal language often. Through my continued research, I have come to realize the effects of teaching students how to read and spell early in their academic development. According to Gill (2007), "It has been estimated that children in school learn 3,000 to 4,000 new words per year" (p. 79). That statistic would indicate that students need to learn approximately 22 new words a day.

Teaching 22 new words a day to a whole class of students is a daunting task for any teacher to take on, but with early intervention, students are more likely to
have prior knowledge of many of these words. When students are exposed to early literacy intervention, I believe they come to school equipped with a variety of sight words and reading strategies. What students already know about a topic is referred to as prior knowledge. With their prior knowledge, students will be less focused on learning the new words and more focused on comprehending the text they are reading.

Along with a balanced literacy program and an emphasis on early intervention, I feel that my literacy instruction will also include active student involvement and engagement, peer tutoring and group work and authentic, meaningful lessons. Numerous researchers have noted the importance of active student involvement and engagement in literacy instruction (Aiken and Bayer, 2002; Mesmer and Griffith, 2005; Heide, 2005; Pinnell and Fountas, 2003).

In my classroom, active student involvement would include students participating in literacy lessons with me, as the teacher, checking for understanding and engagement. Students will exhibit their participation in many different ways; they will be allowed to answer questions verbally and in written form. Students will be
able to select words that they find relevant to their
daily lives and place those words on the living word wall
in the classroom. Not only will students demonstrate
participation by selecting words that they need and use
frequently, but by selecting words that are important to
them, students will be able to show me which words might
need reinforcement and re-teaching.

When working with peers, students feel much more
open to learning and are willing to look at reading and
spelling differently. A peer may be able to explain
something that I could not and as such help another
student to better understand a reading and/or spelling
concept. While peers are helpful in the teaching of
reading and spelling they must be used correctly and in
an efficient manner (Cooper and Kiger, 2006). I need to
make sure that in my classroom, peers are not used solely
as literacy instructors, nor can they be allowed to teach
others without proper preparation. While this may mean
that I must do more work and teach students how to tutor
each other and work together, those educational qualities
will stay with my students for the rest of their academic
careers.
Students can be used in a variety of ways to help me create a classroom that is open and receptive to literacy instruction. Peers can be used for pairing and sharing activities and should be allowed to work together in word study activities (Cunningham, 2005). Students in partnerships and small groups can experience literacy together and make meaning from what they learn.

Through my research, I found that each student I teach will have a diverse understanding of what is being taught and can explain literacy concepts in different ways to each other. This allows students to understand concepts on their own, with my modeling and with student/peer assistance. I will also use active repetition of concepts in my classroom because I feel that, the more often a student hears a literacy concept, the more likely it is that he or she will be able to internalize the thoughts in a meaningful manner.

For my students to learn an idea, concept or thought, I must ensure that what I am teaching applies to each student's individual learning style and understanding. According to Kim, students must be encouraged to learn concepts through discovery learning and inquiry (2008). I feel that the best way in which to
make sure that my students are able to construct individual meaning out of a lesson is to use real world and authentic experiences in every lesson. Allowing students to figure things out for themselves, with my assistance and checks for understanding, promotes a deeper sense of accountability for each students’ individual learning. When students feel accountable for their own learning, they are more likely to put in a higher level of effort and take away a complex understanding of what is being taught.

To create an effective balanced literacy program, I must implement phonics and whole-language techniques into my literacy lessons. I also need to encourage active student engagement and support peer teaching and group work during literacy lessons. I feel that learning through inquiry based on differentiation and constructivism needs to be a requirement in each lesson. Including all of those components seems somewhat intimidating task to me, but I realize that it is extremely necessary to guarantee that each of my students get the best literacy instruction that he or she could receive.
In my opinion, reading and spelling are, perhaps, two of the most important subjects that can be taught to students in their academic careers. I feel that without the ability to read and decode words, students will have an increasingly difficult time as they move up through the grades in school. I have noticed in throughout my teaching career, if students are unable to quickly and efficiently recognize and/or decode words, they will be at a disadvantage when asked to comprehend what they are reading.

I believe that spelling, while often taught as an afterthought, is actually an extremely important component of literacy instruction. In my classroom I will allow students to have access to spell-check devices, but I will insist that they have a concrete and methodical understanding of how to spell words. I feel that a concrete understanding of how to spell words demonstrates much more than the ability to memorize a list of words; understanding spelling allows students to explore root words and uncover the multilayered nature that it the English language. This ability, in turn, allows students to write with more fluency and increased vocabulary. As students write with increased expression
and vocabulary, they will begin to enjoy writing and make improvements daily. That is my ultimate goal for my students, because if they like what they do, they are likely to do it more often.

When teaching reading and spelling, it is important to remember to keep instruction balanced. A teacher must not rely too much on phonics or whole-language techniques alone, but find a way to use them together. In my future literacy instruction, I will be using a balanced literacy approach to teaching reading and spelling. I will concentrate on how to incorporate various intelligences into my lessons and work to differentiate my instruction based on student need and progress. As I create my literacy lessons, I will continue to adhere to constructivist teaching practices and allow my students to be active participants in their own learning.

Through my extensive research, I have come to realize and appreciate how important literacy instruction actually is for students. The ability to read and spell not only allows students to succeed academically, but it also provides them with a sense of pride, accomplishment and accountability for their own learning.
After reading numerous articles about phonics and whole-language instruction, I have concluded that neither one method alone is the best way to teach students how to read. Instead, teachers should blend the two methods to create a balanced literacy program. Easy as that is to profess, I understand that actually implementing a balanced literacy program into the classroom is an arduous task; however my research compels me to do what is right for my students and I will do so by using a balanced literacy approach to teaching reading and spelling.


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