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Exploring the Implementation of Words Their Way in a First Grade Classroom

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Exploring the Implementation of *Words Their Way* in a First Grade Classroom

Kathryn J Horch

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

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Chapter One: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

It was August and I was sitting in my rather stark classroom looking at the walls and envisioning twenty two or so clean, empty desks with colorful name tags, large alphabet charts lining the walls, helpful anchor charts at the eye level of a 6 year old, and a poster of our student-made classroom rules. I did this because I was embarking on my second year as a full-time teacher preparing for twenty two first grade students in less than three weeks. After meeting with my building principal and reading teacher I had a collection of books to be used as my literacy curriculum. The first of these curriculum books were two books by Gail Boushey and Joan Mosher. *The Daily 5: Fostering Literacy Independence in the Elementary Grades* which detailed a classroom routine for developing the daily habits of reading, writing, and working independently (Boushey & Mosher, 2006). The next book by the same authors was called *The CAFÉ Book: Engaging All Students in Daily Literacy Assessment & Instruction* (Boushey & Mosher, 2009). This book described reading strategies and focus lessons that incorporated goal-setting, small group instruction, conferring, and assessment. The final book pertaining to literacy was entitled *Phonics Lessons: Letters, Words, and How They Work* (Fountas & Pinnell, 2005).

I have deep love for literacy instruction and as such really admire the work of all four of the above stated authors. I was excited to prepare the mini-lessons, provided by Fountas and Pinnell, and really help my students to grasp the principles of language and word study. The purpose of these lessons were to help children become expert word solvers and effective readers. To say I was a novice when it came to the area of phonics instruction would have be an understatement. Due to that, I was thrilled to have a manual of sorts to use to steer my instruction. These mini-
lessons were to be used in conjunction with my Reader’s and Writer’s Workshop. The structure of the lesson was a 10-minute whole group mini-lesson focused on a literacy principle. For example some of the first principles to be taught were the differences between one letter and one word, that each letter has a specific sound, and also that we write letters in words in the order we hear the sounds they represent. Following the mini lesson students worked independently and in small groups to apply the new skill or principle and the lesson concludes with a time of sharing. In total, the duration of the lessons should be around thirty minutes. Upon reading some of the beginning lessons I was excited to see how they would assist my students in becoming better readers and writers. In *Phonics Lessons* the academic year was mapped out in monthly lesson plans and varied in complexity and number of lessons. The lessons plans began very simply and progressed gradually as the lessons went on (Fountas & Pinnell, 2005).

As the school year progressed I had had the opportunity to teach several months of lesson plans following the guide included in *Phonics Lessons (2005)*. As it is with any classroom, my students came with a range of working knowledge about letters and their sounds. Some started the year with only moderate awareness of letter and sound knowledge and were emergent readers, while other students I viewed as beginning readers and had an above grade level familiarity with letters and sounds. The school year progressed and I began to notice that a good portion of my students already understood most of the skills I was teaching. I had two students who came into my classroom with advanced reading skills, eager to learn more and read every book I had in my library. In my classroom we use the Fountas and Pinnell text levels to level books to better meet the needs of our student readers (Fountas & Pinnell, 2005). Upon leaving kindergarten the goal is for the student to be reading at or around a level D. I assessed all my students at the start of the new school year and I had five students reading above a level G! I was
very excited about having such wonderful readers in my classroom and was excited to lead them into the next level of their literacy development. With my Fountas and Pinnell book in hand, I began with lesson one for September where I was to teach all about letters and how each one had a specific sound and then began with the letters of each of our names. My five students, who were already well beyond this particular level, were wonderful and did as I asked, but as I watched them breeze through not only the letter that began their name but also the entire alphabet I began to wonder and doubt my practices. As a relatively new teacher, and in the absence of a comparable curriculum, I decided to give this program and these authors the chance they deserved. I continued to follow the lessons as written, even though I was anxious to help my advanced readers progress and felt as though I was somehow failing them.

It was March and I had had six months with my students and had a good grasp of who they were as readers and writers. I had followed *Phonics Lessons: Letters, Words, and How They Work* as closely as I was able and noticed some positive and negative aspects (Fountas & Pinnell, 2005). A positive aspect of these lessons was the structure. It provided a good framework and incorporated games as a means of cementing the lessons taught whole group. A negative aspect of this program was the fact that it was only taught whole group. In these whole group lessons students were expected to do the same thing at the same time no matter what they were already able to do. The best instruction is when students are taught within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1962) and although these lessons were seemingly comprehensive, various students became bored with the lessons because the skills being taught some students were already well versed in. Other students had the opposite experience, in that they were not ready to progress past certain ideas. I had decided that teaching the same lesson to a whole group with a wide range of learners was not in the best interest of my students, and began to request
assistance in finding a program that was better suited to the growing needs of my student population. I was also looking for a program that had a greater focus solely on phonics instruction, which was developmental in nature.

I found that answer in the book *Words Their Way* by Donald Bear, Marcia Invernizzi, Shane Templeton, and Francine Johnston. “Word study is not a one-size-fits-all program of instruction that begins in the same place for all students within a grade level” (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, Johnston 2008, p. 8). With that one sentence I had my epiphany that this would be the new motto for my phonics program.

Using Fountas and Pinnell’s book as my complete phonics instructions was not working for me or my students. Providing the same instruction to a whole class of students didn’t meet the needs of all students involved. Within any classroom teachers are going to have a range in student ability as well as a range of knowledge students possess upon entering the classroom. Our job as educators is to discover what our children already know and what they need to learn next. So often that is not how the story unfolds. There are teachers who receive a teaching manual and start on page one and go page by page until they get to the back cover, never really stopping to assess if what they are teaching is relevant to their current population or if it is what their students truly need (Bear et al., 2008).

For this study I investigated the impact a word study program would have assisting me in determining what my students knew, what they should learn next, and informing my instruction.
Significance of the Problem

Designing and implementing a word/phonics study program that clearly teaches students necessary skills and motivates them to learn how words work is an essential aspect of any literacy program (Bear et al., 2008). Phonics is defined as the systematic relationship between phonology (sounds) and orthography (written spelling) (Tompkins, 2010). There has been great debate over the years as to what instructional approach has the most success when it comes to teaching phonics to readers. The two approaches have been described as the “systematic” approach and the “hit-or-miss” approach. The systematic approach states that there should be a prescribed order in which the skills are taught to children. The “hit-or-miss” approach is very much as the title implies. This approach teaches all skills to all students and the students who are ready to learn the skill do and those who are not ready do not. The main idea that these researchers agree on is that any approach is better than no approach and also that children need to develop phonemic awareness, sequential decoding and have regular opportunities to apply their phonics skills in real literacy situations (Cunningham & Cunningham, 2002).

Purpose of the Study

It was my goal that by exploring the different frameworks of phonics instruction I would gain a better understanding of how my students might learn important phonics skills and principles. As I planned my phonics instruction using the Fountas and Pinnell book *Phonics Lessons: Grade 1*, my routine was to open my book and simply choose one of the ten to fifteen lessons designated for that month of the year (Fountas & Pinnell, 2005). I then planned my whole group discussion and demonstration, and prepared any additional learning materials or games that may be used during that lesson. I strongly believed that expert teachers always differentiate
for a wide range of learners. Due to that belief, following that broad layout, I then needed to look at which skill was being taught and decide how to best enhance that particular lesson for my above grade level readers and focus it more on what their needs were. Sometimes that included creating supplemental materials or changing the word lists to more challenging words to avoid the inevitable boredom they would feel with words they already had an acceptable knowledge of prior to the lesson. Finally, I needed to do a similar task of making sure this lesson was accessible to my struggling readers. This process took anywhere from forty to sixty minutes to complete for a thirty minute phonics lesson. This was not an acceptable amount of planning time for a “pre-planned” lesson that would only last thirty minutes.

*Words Their Way* took a different approach entirely. They suggested that knowledgeable educators know that word study instruction needed to match the needs of the child (Bear et. al, 2008). They did this by finding the child’s instructional level through a spelling analysis and then grouping the students who are using like spelling patterns and work within the needs of those students. This process was less about finding an exact level for students and more about figuring out what students knew and what they were ready to learn next. A developmental spelling analysis was a good way to get an overview of what children were using correctly and what they may have been using but confusing (Bear et al., 2008). This topic will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 2.

This study built on my understanding of phonics and word study instruction as well as enhanced my knowledge of developmental spelling. This resulted in my ability to teach students within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1962).
The goal was to enhance my teaching practices by researching an essential question that directly impacted my abilities as an educator. The essential question of my study was:

How might the implementation of the program *Words Their Way* impact how students’ use their knowledge of phonics within their real reading and writing experiences?

**Study Approach**

The research study followed a practical action research design. As a teacher-researcher I constructed this study to further the research on successful instructional approaches of phonics instruction.

The participants of my study were twenty two first grade students who attended an elementary school in a middle-class suburb just outside a mid-size city in Western New York. The participants were students of mine who currently displayed a wide-range of reading and writing abilities. This took part during my English Language Arts (ELA) block for thirty minutes, five times a week over the course of a six-week period using the framework provided by the program *Words Their Way* (Bear et al., 2008). The program began with teacher observations. I needed to observe students in real reading and writing experiences to discern what word knowledge they were currently using. Following this time of observation, I selected and administered an appropriately leveled spelling inventory. A Developmental Spelling Assessment (DSA), also known as a Qualitative Spelling Inventory was essentially a spelling test that was designed to represent a variety of spelling features and patterns. Next, I scored the inventories using a spelling feature analysis and reviewed what each particular student was using at that time. With that data I formed groups based around the features they were using and what they were ready to learn.
next. After groups were formed I began creating appropriate word study activities for each of the
groups based on the spelling inventory. The lessons that were described in the *Words Their Way*
(*Bear et al., 2008*) program encompassed a wide variety of basic word study activities such as:
word sorts, category sorts, word hunts, buddy sorts, speed sorts, and draw/label activities. There
were an incredible range of activities that involved sorting words into various different categories.
The way the teacher structures the classroom routine for word study can vary but one sample
schedule can be seen in the following chart:

This example would work for grades PK-2 students who are working with pictures and words:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Wednesday</th>
<th>Thursday</th>
<th>Friday</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Picture/Word</td>
<td>Drawing and</td>
<td>Cutting and</td>
<td>Word Hunt</td>
<td>Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sorting</td>
<td>Labeling</td>
<td>Pasting</td>
<td>Word Banks</td>
<td>and Games</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following table is a schedule that would work for student grades 2-5 who are working
with different ways to sort words:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Wednesday</th>
<th>Thursday</th>
<th>Friday</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduce sort</td>
<td>Re-sort and</td>
<td>Buddy Sort</td>
<td>Word Hunt and</td>
<td>Testing and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in group</td>
<td>write sort</td>
<td>Writing Sort</td>
<td>Sentences</td>
<td>Games</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These word study schedules were designed to provide time for independent and group
practice as well as time for me to interact and instruct. The most important part of these
groupings was the fact that they were all based on what the student was ready to learn next.
The data collection and analysis strategies for the study were woven throughout the schedule. An important aspect of *Words Their Way* was that it allowed me to facilitate directed practice and instruction with small groups throughout the week (Bear et al., 2008). In chapter 2, I will discuss more about the importance of working with smaller groups of children. Through weekly spelling assessments, that were specific and targeted for each group, I was able to collect data on the skills students had acquired that were specifically chosen for them. Through independent and small group work, I was able to collect anecdotal notes that assisted in my selection of what skills and principles were taught in future lessons. Writing samples provided qualitative data that assisted in assessing whether or not students had begun to master the skills taught. All of these various pieces of data informed the outcome of my study.

**Rationale**

The main goal of the study was to redesign my instructional practices to better suit the needs of my diverse student population. The current framework of whole group instruction was a poor fit for the large range of learners that were present within my classroom. A qualitative study allowed me to explore various needs in my class and track the impact of implementing a different instructional approach.

My data collection process worked well within my classroom schedule. Observations allowed me to conduct class as usual and made the data collection process feasible within the constraints of a classroom setting. The spelling assessments allowed me to track my students’ progress over the six-week period and allowed for changes in group formations so I was consistently working within their instructional level.
Summary

As I observed my students certain concerns came to light. The instructional framework for phonics instruction provided by my school district did not fit the needs of my classroom population. A thirty-minute block of time for a whole group phonics lesson, and the addition of forty to fifty minutes of additional planning time to differentiate that lesson, did not make good use of my time. As a second-year teacher I was at a loss as to how to better meet my students’ needs. Researching and reading *Words Their Way* provided a structure for teaching my diverse learners and boosted my confidence as a new teacher. With the use of this program, I was able to: help my students build on what the already knew, help them learn what they needed to know, and consistently push them toward acquiring new skills (Bear et al, 2008).

Contending with a wide-range of learners from well-above grade level to well-below grade level produced inconsistencies. The idea of whole group instruction and a systematic teaching of skills did not bode well in a classroom full of diverse learners at a range of instructional levels. Educators must teach children at students’ instruction level; to do anything else results in frustration or boredom and produces very little if any true learning (Bear et al, 2008).
Chapter Two: Literature Review

In this chapter I will describe some background on phonics, word study, and their instruction. I will also discuss instructional strategies and the assessments that are included within. Developmental spelling assessments, running records, and miscue analysis are the assessments that will be discussed.

Phonics and Orthography

Background

English is an alphabetic language and as children begin to learn about language they learn about phonemes, graphemes, and the relationship between the two, known as the graphophonemic relationship. Phonics is the set of relationships between the sounds of speech (phonology) and the spelling patterns of words (orthography). The emphasis in phonics is on the patterns within words due to the fact that the English language does not have a one to one correspondence between the sounds a person hears (phonemes) and the letters (graphemes) within our writing system (Tompkins 2010). Phonemes are the smallest unit of sound and therefore phonemic awareness is the ability to hear the individual letter sounds within words (Tompkins 2010; Chappell, Stephens, Kinnison, & Pettigrew, 2009). Ding, Richardson, and Schnell (2013) stated that:

Reading is a learned skill, and early childhood is a critical time for children to develop the language and reading skills that will be needed for language development later in life. Some early reading skills include phonemic awareness (e.g., rhyming, blending, segmenting), letter-sound relationship, or alphabetic and print aware-ness. With proper exposure and
learning opportunity, most children can develop these foundational skills during early childhood. (p. 132)

**Layers of English Orthography**

**Alphabet** The alphabetic layer in English spelling is the first layer of information that a child will work with. This layer represents the relationship between letters and sounds. For example, in the word *sat* each sound is represented by a single letter and the blending of those sounds together form the word *sat*. In the word *chin*, a person can also hear 3 sounds but those sounds are represented by 4 letters because *ch* work together to form the */ch/* sound at the beginning of the word *chin* (Bear et al., 2008). This layer of English orthography is the first source of information early readers and writers develop. (Bear et al., 2008).

**Pattern** The pattern layer follows the alphabetic layer because English does not have a single sound for each letter in all words. This irregularity forms word patterns that are at the core of this orthographic layer. For example words like *cape*, *bead*, and *light* would look like *cap*, *bed*, and *lit* if students were to simply use only alphabetic knowledge to encode them. Students that are working within this layer are working with patterns of letters that form only one sound (Bear et al., 2008).

**Meaning** The meaning layer builds upon the pattern and alphabetic layers. Students can learn that groups of letters can represent meanings. These groups of letters could be prefixes, suffixes, roots, or stems. When students come upon unusual spelling or unknown words they can use these units of multiple letters to assist in developing meaning and decoding unfamiliar words (Bear et al., 2008).
Instructional Strategies

Developmental Word Study

Word study integrates spelling, phonics, and vocabulary instruction (Bear & Templeton, 1998; Gehsmann, 2008). This approach has been supported by decades of research beginning in the 1970’s and continuing through the research and studies of many today (Gehsmann, 2008).

According to Bear et al. (2008) word study begins when teachers discover where students are “using but confusing” certain orthographic features. At this point educators can be confident that they are beginning instruction at the students’ instructional levels. In order to pinpoint the students’ instructional levels Bear et al. (2008), teachers should assess students’ developmental stages by administering a developmental spelling inventory.

Developmental spelling research describes students’ knowledge of words as a range or a sequence of chronologically ordered stages or phases of word knowledge. In the text *Words Their Way* they are using the word *stage* as a metaphor to inform instruction (Bear et al., 2008). This is important to understand because as students grow in their knowledge it is along a continuum and not necessarily only at a particular stage. By placing students within a stage teachers are using that information to decide what to teach, but it is vital to remember that there is often overlap with the orthographic features students use and understand and sometimes that overlap can cross developmental spelling stages. As students develop their knowledge of words they progress through a continuum and a systematic layering of alphabet, pattern, and meaning, moving from easier one-to-one correspondences between letters and sounds, to more challenging relationships between letter patterns and sounds, to an advanced relationships working with meaning units.
By utilizing developmental spelling analyses teachers can group students according to their current word knowledge and then target instruction based on that information (Bear et al., 2008; Invernizzi & Hayes, 2004). Word study is a “teacher-directed yet student-centered approach to spelling instruction” and when that is included as a part of a balanced literacy program it can support students’ literacy development (Williams, Phillips-Birdsong, Hufnagel, Hungler, and Lundstrom, 2009, p. 577). Bear et al. (2008) found that teaching about words can be specifically targeted using the developmental spelling stage a student is within by grouping students together who are within the same stage of spelling development. I will describe the developmental spelling stages more fully in a coming section within this document. In word study, teachers do not just teach words but teach a myriad of strategies and processes for thinking about words and how words work as people read and write (Bear & Templeton, 1998).

After assessing and forming groups, teachers of word study prepare appropriate lessons and create lists of words for student to read, write, and manipulate (Gehsmann, 2008). These words are chosen by studying the orthographic features present in the students’ current developmental spelling stage. One way students manipulate these words is through word sorts. The practice of sorting words helps students to see the differences and similarities in meaning, sounds, and patterns. For example if a student is in the “within word stage” they may be working with the long vowel /e/ sound with patterns of –ea and -ee. An activity for that student might be sorting a list of words based on the vowel pattern present in certain words, grouping all the –ee words (weed, speed, meet etc.) together and all the –ea words (read, bean, lead etc.) together as well. An additional activity may be a word hunt where students read books at their independent level while searching for words with those vowel patterns (Gehsmann, 2008; Bear et al., 2008).
Word study is an approach to spelling and phonics instruction that moves away from memorization. This instructional practice of teaching students about words does not rely on rote memorization of lists of words (Bear et al., 2008). The word study approach to phonics and spelling has come from research surrounding developmental spelling assessments, also known as DSA’s. Word study has been said to be one of the pillars of evidence-based instruction (Invernizzi & Hayes, 2004). When implementing word study teachers use a variety of hands on activities often called word work. Word study teaches students to use their knowledge of how words work within other aspects of their literate development. The goal in teaching word study is that children will use the knowledge learned to support their spelling attempts while encoding during writing, but also support them in decoding unfamiliar words while reading. The main goal of word study is to develop students’ working knowledge of orthography so that they may apply this knowledge strategically in a myriad of other literacy activities (Williams et al., 2009).

Teachers use word study within a balanced literacy approach. Balanced literacy combines explicit instruction in the areas of comprehension, fluency, vocabulary, phonics, and phonemic awareness (Gehsmann, 2008). In order for students to internalize this knowledge they need to be immersed in quality instruction as well as have daily opportunities to apply what they have learned in their real reading and writing experiences (Tompkins, 2010). Gehsmann (2008) states that word study is typically associated with phonics, spelling, and vocabulary instruction. She elaborates by showing that throughout a balanced literacy approach teachers infuse word study in other literacy activities as well as teaching word study explicitly. There are several activities that illustrate how word study could be integrated within a balanced literacy approach; examples of these activities are: reading a big book while teaching one to one correspondence, reading a book
whole group while discussing various word meanings, and conducting guided reading groups while teaching decoding and chunking (Gehsmann, 2008).

Research supports the understanding that reading and spelling (writing) have a reciprocal relationship (Gehsmann, 2008; Bear & Templeton, 1998; Bear et al., 2008). This relationship has been named the “synchrony of literacy development” (Gehsmann, 2008, p. 2). Bear et al. (2008) and Tompkins (2010) both agree that the best way to advance student awareness of word features is to take part in real reading and writing activities in addition to other opportunities for students to manipulate words out of context. By learning about how words work and working with them in a multitude of ways, students are able to carry that knowledge into their reading and writing (Tompkins, 2010; Williams & Lundstrom, 2007; Bear et al., 2008).

**Whole Group vs. Small Group Instruction**

Teachers often use three different types of groupings within their classrooms. At times students will work together as a whole class, often referred to as whole group teaching. Other times teachers will create smaller groupings of students to focus or target instruction based on need. Finally, teachers can work one on one with a student individually to home in on individual needs or struggles. Deciding which level of grouping to use usually depends on specific student need(s) or on the teacher’s purpose (Tompkins 2010).

In the area of word study, research has shown that the impact of targeted, small group instruction surpasses the impact of whole group instruction (Williams et al., 2009; Williams & Lundstrom, 2007). In one particular research study focusing on word study within grades kindergarten through second, researchers found that whole group lessons were too difficult for
the students with the least amount of literacy knowledge and too simple for those with the most amount of literacy knowledge. In a similar study researchers produced comparable outcomes in that they discovered that small developmental groups met the students’ instructional needs and consequently saw an impact in how the students were using spelling patterns within their journal entries (Williams et al., 2009).

Throughout the current research there is a trend that shows that small group instruction has a greater impact on student achievement than whole group instruction. It should be noted that there can be stigmas attached to grouping students. Grouping for instructional purposes can be a challenge especially when those groups are homogenous or based on the ability of the students within the groups. With that being said, students do benefit from “developmentally appropriate instruction” especially when working in word study groups that are focusing on specific orthographic features. It has been shown that when students are learning a new feature they should be grouped among students who are ready to learn that feature as well (Bear et al., 2008).

**Differentiation and Flexible Groupings**

Grouping for instruction can be challenging for teachers. “Ability grouping has been a contentious issue in education” (Nomi, 2009, p. 56). Research has shown that, if not used appropriately, there are reasons to be cautious when grouping students by ability (Nomi, 2009). For example, Nomi’s (2009) research showed that the effectiveness of ability groupings was often influenced by a schools socioeconomic make-up. Schools that were attended by students with advantaged backgrounds were able to use groupings in such a way that they benefited all students. However, schools that served more economically disadvantaged children did not demonstrate improvement in student achievement. In addition, the schools in Nomi’s (2009)
research study that were not successful showed adverse effects mostly within the low-skilled students whom, in theory, need the most support.

Whatever the stigma may be, students do benefit greatly from receiving developmentally appropriate instruction especially when working with orthography (Bear et al., 2008). Grouping students is one of the most critical parts of literacy instruction and it’s important to note that it is particularly beneficial for at-risk students (Invernizzi & Hayes, 2004). Flexible means that instructors use a variety of instructional procedures and groupings in order to support all students at their zone of proximal development (Tompkins, 2010). The zone of proximal development is the distance between a child’s actual developmental level (the knowledge and abilities they already possess) and the child’s potential developmental level which can only be accomplished with quality scaffolding (Tompkins, 2010). Educators should be consistently assessing and looking at the knowledge level of their students and using that data to form and vary the groupings as needed. Teachers who use word study and choose to form spelling groups based on word knowledge often create 3-4 small groups where students have the ability and teacher assistance to complete activities specific to their needs (Bear et al., 2008). Some programs currently being used move through lessons at the same pace as well as teach the same words to all students no matter what their current level of word knowledge may be (Invernizzi & Hayes, 2004).

A vital aspect of flexible groupings is that these groups should be “fluid”. An expert teacher should be diligent in her efforts to observe when students may be frustrated by skills or patterns that they are not ready to learn, as well as observe students who are bored or not challenged in their current groupings. If either of these situations were to arise it is the teacher’s responsibility
to reorganize those groupings to make for more appropriate instruction where necessary (Bear et al., 2008).

Being able to successfully differentiate within the classroom is one of the goals of exceptional teachers. “The expectation that all students are to meet the same literacy standards at each grade level implies that all students should receive the same instructional program, but teachers know that some of their students are working at grade level but others are struggling or advanced” (Tompkins, 2010, p. 362). By differentiating instruction for the various learners teachers adjust expectations to meet the needs of all students. For example, to instruct a child in first grade that is non-reader and has yet to grasp the relationship between letters and sounds or the difference between a vowel and a consonant would not meet the needs of that particular student. In addition, to instruct a child in first grade who is reading above grade level the difference between a vowel and a consonant would not meet the needs of that particular student, either.

Word study and spelling groups are not the “static groups” of the past; these groups are flexible and dynamic. Teachers need to regroup as necessary to meet the ever changing needs of the students he/she instructs to create an environment where all learners are challenged and given the skills they need to be successful (Invernizzi & Hayes, 2004).

Effective Assessments

Developmental Spelling Assessments

The developmental stage model of spelling acquisition is used by teachers to examine specific features students are using when they write (Bear et al., 2008). When students use the
sounds they hear in words to encode their writing they are showing what orthographic knowledge and orthographic features they know. As readers and writers grow in their knowledge of sounds, letters, and patterns they continually change the way they encode words. Even when a child spells a word unconventionally it shows a lot about what the student is using correctly, trying to use correctly, and what they have yet to learn (Invernizzi & Hayes, 2004). Within a developmental spelling assessment children demonstrate what layer of orthography they are currently working within. Misspellings students make change over time, transitioning from “using but confusing elements of sound to using but confusing elements of pattern and meaning” following the three layers of English orthography (Bear et al., 2008, p. 10).

Developmental Spelling Assessments, also known as DSA’s, consist of a list of words specifically chosen to utilize a plethora of spelling features and patterns which steadily increase in difficulty (Bear et al., 2008). Spelling assessments, also known as spelling inventories, outline the landscape of the orthographic system that needs to be learned and it catalogs specific spelling features to be taught in a progression (Invernizzi & Hayes, 2004). These spelling assessments are designed to evaluate student knowledge of key spelling features and that also correlate with the different developmental spelling stages. The developmental stages of spelling are related to the three layers of orthography (alphabet, pattern, and meaning) and are marked by broad shifts in the types of miscues students make. There are 5 developmental spelling stages: emergent, letter name – alphabetic, within word pattern, syllables and affixes, and derivational relations (Bear et al., 2008).
**Emergent Stage** Throughout the emergent stage students begin to learn letters, pay attention to the sounds in words, and towards the end of the stage begin writing the sounds they hear in words. During this stage students are not reading conventionally (Bear et al., 2008).

**Letter Name – Alphabetic Stage** In the letter name stage students learn to segment sounds within words and match the correct letter or letters in sequential order. During this time period students are undergoing formal reading instruction and are taught to read conventionally. This stage is broken into early, middle, and late due to the rapid growth students demonstrate. This stage is divided into early, middle, and late because of the rapid growth students display throughout this stage.

In the early stage students are able to apply the alphabetic principle to consonants, often giving the first and final consonant sounds in words such as FT for “float”. This is considered to be semiphonetic because not all phonemes are represented (Bear et al., 2008).

Within the middle stage students begin to use long vowel sounds correctly and use but confuse short vowel sounds. Students also begin to represent both sounds present in consonant blends and digraphs. This is considered to be phonetic because students can represent most of the sounds within single syllable words (Bear et al., 2008).

In the late stage, students are able to use most regular short vowel sounds as well as digraphs, and blends. This is considered to be full phonemic segmentation due to a students’ ability to separate and represent the sounds heard in words (Bear et al., 2008).

**Within Word Pattern Stage** Students within this stage can read and spell many words conventionally due to the fact that they have automatic knowledge of letter sounds and short
vowel patterns. Also, students work with long vowel patterns such as *oa* as in coach or the *ow* as in crow. They will begin to explore meaning as well as an introduction to the final two spelling stages (Bear et al., 2008).

**Syllables and Affixes Stage** In this stage of writing students are beginning to work with more complex multisyllabic words. They also begin to combine their knowledge of patterns and incorporate more challenging ideas involving the meanings of affixes (suffixes, prefixes) (Bear et al., 2008).

**Derivational Relations Stage** In this final stage of developmental spelling, students examine how words share derivations, word roots, as well as related base words. During this stage students begin to see that certain parts of words remain the same due to their meaning and origin (Bear et al., 2008).

Spelling inventories are used to assist teachers in determining a specific spelling stage for each student. The word lists are not exhaustive but they point out word features that help to pinpoint a spelling stage and inform instruction (Invernizzi & Hayes, 2004). The spelling assessment is administered in the same way a spelling test is. A word is read aloud, a sentence is spoken, and finally the word is repeated. These assessments are quick to administer and are reliable and valid measures that convey what students know about words. Depending on grade level, age, and ability an administrator may choose between 3 spelling inventories available in the program *Words Their Way*: Primary Spelling Inventory, Elementary Spelling Inventory, and Upper Level Spelling Inventory (Bear et al., 2008).
Upon completing a DSA, teachers should place students in developmentally appropriate word study groups based on the instructional level. Once students have been grouped, teachers will use the data collected from the DSA to plan instruction that suits the specific needs of each individual grouping (Invernizzi & Hayes, 2004).

**Impact of Word Study on Authentic Writings**

One positive outcome of successful word study instruction is a student’s ability to use the skills, patterns, and principles taught to advance their abilities in writing. When students begin to see themselves as readers and writers the ability to approximate spellings becomes critical to their processes (Bear et al., 2008). Even without word study instruction children will learn new words and locate patterns and sounds as they take part in literacy activities. However, when teachers and students examine orthographic features, patterns, sounds, and meanings they will acquire a much greater amount of not only words but knowledge about how words work (Bear et al., 2008).

During writing conferences and when assessing students’ writings, a teacher will be able to determine what knowledge the students are drawing on and what they may need continued work with. For example, when reading over a student’s work, the teacher will be able to look for the orthographic skills that have been taught within their developmental stage. A student who is in the “early letter name-alphabetic stage” should be able to encode beginning and ending consonants accurately. Within that child’s writing the teacher should also look for evidence that the child is using but possibly confusing short vowel sounds present within that stage. A teacher will be able to assess what strategies and features a student is using based on the features that
exist within that child’s developmentally appropriate spelling stage, simply by reviewing the writings (Bear et al., 2008).

**Running Records and Miscue Analysis**

A running record is an assessment that classroom teachers administer to assess a student’s ability to use a range of strategies to identify words, fluently read, and comprehend what has been read. During an oral reading of a book, a teacher will record miscues that are made and following the reading will be able to analyze those miscues by categorizing them into three cueing systems: semantic (meaning), graphophonic (visual), and syntactic (structure). A miscue analysis is a way of assessing and analyzing what cueing systems a reader is attending to and “provides a detailed forensic picture of the strategies and cognitive understandings students employ to read” (Dean, 2010, p. 8). Clay (1993) states that teachers can infer from a student’s miscues and self-corrections what he/she is attending to. Upon completion of a miscue analysis, patterns emerge portraying the cues that are either used or neglected.

Within the area of word study, running records can be a valuable assessment tool. While a student is reading the teacher will observe evidence of student learning based on what the child does when they encounter an unknown word. For example if the child is working within the “within word spelling stage” and that child comes across the unknown word “coach” and is able to correctly identify it, that informs the teacher’s assessments by noting that not only may this child have knowledge of the digraph of /ch/, but the reader may also have knowledge of the long vowel o pattern of /oa/. Due to the fact that readers are coordinating between all three cueing systems, this evidence is just one piece of information to consider. Further assessments would need to be done in order to validate that analysis (Bear et al., 2008).
Running records and miscue analysis drive instruction. A plethora of information can be accessed by assessing the oral reading of a child. During the reading, the teacher will observe a multitude of strategies a child is currently using and determine which strategies or skills would best enhance the literacy knowledge of that student. By taking this record of reading it allows the teacher to “follow the child” (Estice, 1997, p. 87). Thinking beyond what book to teach or what story to write, running records help teachers to “follow the child” and make conclusions based on the child’s existing way of responding (Estice, 1997, p. 87). The idea behind recording observations is so that the teacher can decide “What does this child need to learn next?” (Estice, 1997, p. 88). From the information provided during a running record the teacher will then determine what he/she believes to be the priority for that student and teaches the strategy(ies) the student needs.

Summary

Reading is perhaps the most important skill children will learn and develop as they engage in their education. Systematic word study helps students to learn the patterns and orthographic features of words and assists students in their abilities to read and write (Williams et al., 2009). Primary-grade teachers should incorporate the word study approach because it enhances and supports students’ ability to word solve as well as learn words (Williams & Lundstrom, 2007). If educators arm students with the abilities and skills they need in order to be able to break words apart and solve them, rather than rote memorization, teachers will be creating students who have the ability to help themselves to become better readers and writers. Word study is one instructional approach that can support this type of literacy learning. I hope my research will
contribute to the educators that have confidence in developmental spelling assessments and the importance and impact of word study within a first grade classroom.
Chapter 3: Methods and Procedures

The purpose of my study was to explore a different framework for the instruction of phonics in order for my students to grasp important concepts and skills.

Through a six week study I explored: How might the implementation of the program Words Their Way impact how students use their knowledge of phonics within their real reading experiences?

Participants

The participants in the study were twenty two first grade students in a suburban community in upstate New York. My class was comprised of two African American boys, three African American girls, one Indian boy, two Hispanic boys, one Korean girl, five Caucasian boys, and eight Caucasian girls. They came from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds and familial structures.

I focused my data collection on a subgroup of students. To choose that subgroup I made a purposeful selection to represent a range of developmental levels as well as a balance of males to females and of the demographic diversity in my classroom. Participants were assessed to find their stages of spelling development and were selected with that in mind, as well. I assessed their spelling stages through the use of the Words Their Way developmental spelling inventory (Bear et al., 2008). This inventory was administered like a common spelling test. I called out a word, read a scripted sentence and then repeated the word. The word list that I chose for this assessment depended on the level of students who took the assessment. In my study I used the Primary Spelling Inventory (PSI) (Bear et al., 2008). Upon completing the administration of this test, I
analyzed the results using the *Words Their Way* Primary Spelling Inventory Feature Guide (Bear et al., 2008). This guide assisted in pinpointing what spelling features students knew and which they did not. It also helped to select the spelling stage they were working within (Bear et al., 2008).

In order to choose the focus group participants, I formed groups of students based on their developmental spelling stages. From those groupings, I selected 1-2 students from each stage within my classroom population for a total of three students.

**Context of the Study**

This study took place in a mid-sized suburban district in western New York. This district has four elementary schools with student populations ranging from 300-500. The district was comprised predominantly of white students followed by African Americans, Hispanic and Latinos and finally Asian Americans (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011). The median household income for this district was $52,260 (State and County Quick Facts, 2014). This study took place in my first grade classroom which was located in a cluster of other first grade classrooms and directly across the hall from the Reading Recovery/AIS teacher. The students were situated in small groups of four to six students around the classroom. There was a leveled classroom library, as well as supplemental books categorized by genre, topic, and author.

Phonics instruction took place during guided reading in the early afternoon as well as the last instructional half hour of the day. Additional literacy instruction took place in the afternoon prior to phonics instruction. Our class used the *Daily Five* as well as Writer’s Workshop (Boushey & Moser, 2006; Fountas & Pinnell, 2005). During our Daily Five time there was a rotation entitled
“Word Work”. During that rotation students took part in a variety of activities, some relating to high frequency words and others directly correlated with our phonics lesson(s) for that week.

The basis of my research study was the implementation of the program *Words Their Way* within my literacy block. This program allowed students to examine, manipulate, and categorize words through word study. It was a hands-on approach to study words with students that allowed them to focus their attention not on memorization but on the essential features in words; their sounds, patterns, and meanings (Bear et al., 2008).

This program began with a developmental spelling analysis, also known as a spelling inventory. This inventory assessed the current developmental spelling stage the student was in while allowing the teacher to make groupings that clustered students who were ready to learn similar spelling features. After students were grouped together, a weekly schedule was made which incorporated teacher-directed small group instruction, partner activities, and independent work. These groupings allowed for students to work together and independently, with assistance and scaffolding, to learn spelling patterns, sounds, and meanings in their specific stage of spelling development.

I implemented the majority of this program into my literacy block and created three groups, which were dependent on the results of the spelling inventory and the make-up of my classroom. I focused my data collection on three students of various developmental levels; however, my entire class took part in the word study program.
My Positionality as the Researcher

For the purposes of this research study I held the role of researcher, teacher, and observer. I implemented a new approach for instructing phonics skills.

I was a twenty nine year old, middle class, white teacher, living within five miles of the school where I conducted my research. I had a bachelor's degree in Childhood Education and Special Education. I was completing my thesis and graduate program at The College at Brockport, State University of New York in literacy education. I was teaching full time at a suburban school in western New York. This was my second year, full time after completing two long-term substitute positions over the course of a year and half in first and third grade classrooms. I believed that a quality literacy education was the most important thing a school can offer a young student. Literacy skills are the building blocks for all other areas and can be an enormous benefit or a daunting hurdle.

I believed that any child could grow as a learner. I believed that if educators taught a student in his/her zone of proximal development (ZPD) he/she could make gains and show growth as a literate person (Vygotsky, 1962). An important aspect within this theory by Lev Vygotsky was scaffolding. Scaffolding is a way to support students so they can accomplish more difficult tasks with the aid of an adult or more knowledgeable other (Tompkins, 2010). By teaching in this manner educators make it possible for children to learn within their zone of proximal development (ZPD), which is the distance between a child’s actual developmental level (the knowledge and abilities they already possess) and the child’s potential developmental level, which can only be accomplished with quality scaffolding (Tompkins, 2010). “This theory suggests that individuals learn best when they are working at the “edge” of their own knowledge, using
current understandings as a resource to perform a more challenging task or take on new learning” (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009, p. 463).

Within my teaching, I stood by the idea that small group instruction, that was targeted to meet the needs of my students, was more effective than blanket whole group instruction. When educators meet the needs of their students they become a bridge to learning that may otherwise be missing. In addition, I believed that children could become successful readers if they were immersed in a balanced literacy approach that encouraged learning through close readings of real, authentic, and continuous texts (Tompkins, 2010).

In summation, my philosophy was that teachers needed to impress upon children the value and necessity of learning to read. Teachers accomplish this goal by tapping into the likes and interests of their students; getting them engaged in reading continuous texts; and focusing on the tools readers use to comprehend and attend during literate experiences.

**Data Collection**

The purpose of this study was to explore phonics instruction and to try a new strategy to improve my practices as an educator. My research study was completed over six weeks. During that time, I collected data from analyzing readers’ miscues during reading experiences, observations of students engaged in reading and writing activities, and writing samples staggered within the time frame of my research.
Observations and Anecdotal Notes

The primary method of data collection was observations. These observations took place after grouping the students by the results of their Developmental Spelling Inventories and embarking on group lessons specific to those levels. The purpose of these observations were to watch and record how students were internalizing and developing concepts and skills taught as part of the *Words Their Way* program (Bear et al., 2008). I took anecdotal notes during my observations of students’ real reading and writing experiences. I also conferenced with students and observed them during phonics instruction and independent work. During these observations I was a participant observer and, along with my regular notes on students’ reading behaviors, I recorded and documented evidence of children using what they had learned in phonics instruction in these literate activities. To document these observations, I used an observation protocol which is attached at the end of this document. I included in this document my own insights, descriptive notes, and evidence of new knowledge that was shown by students. I took notes during instruction, as well as immediately following instruction. I collected data a minimum of three times each week for each student. I made sure to collect data during reading, writing, and word sorting to show growth through various literacy activities.

During these observations I collected various forms of data. Within my regular assessment of students, I frequently used running records to record students’ miscues while reading. I recorded this information on a running record form (Meacham, 2011). The miscues I observed contributed to my data and supported my conclusions of what new knowledge was being obtained through the *Words Their Way* program (Bear et al., 2008). I also included observations of student-initiated self-corrections as they related to his/her phonics instruction. To enhance my
data collection, I also recorded the prompts I used when I helped a student decipher an unknown word using the principles and concepts taught during word study.

**Students’ use of Meaning, Structure, and Visual Cues in Authentic Reading**

In connection with my observations of students, I collected running records as well as completed a miscue analysis for each student. A running record is a way to assess and record the oral reading of a student through a series of check marks for correctly read words and other marks that indicate miscues that have been made. An additional purpose of this assessment was to decipher whether or not the current level of book was at an appropriate level for independent or instructional reading. Upon completion of a running record I performed a miscue analysis. A miscue analysis categorized miscues according to three sources of information. When students were reading, the miscues they made were a window into their learning. Good readers use multiple sources of information to work their way through unfamiliar texts. There are three sources of information that students can attend to as they read (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009).

**Meaning.** While reading, students should be consistently focused on the meaning and main idea of the text. Meaning can be carried through pictures as well as words and include a students’ background knowledge (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009).

**Structural.** Structural information focuses on the syntax of language. It should sound like spoken language. They also focus on how sentences are formed and the way words and phrases are put together (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009).
**Visual/Graphophonic.** This type of information is in regard to the sounds letters represent and the words they form. This form of information does include punctuation (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009).

I regularly used this assessment in my classroom. I conferenced with students during my daily guided reading groups and used that time to observe students’ reading and to perform running records so I was able to analyze their miscues. The purpose of collecting the MSV data from miscues made provided information on how students were incorporating what they had learned during our word study instruction. I used a running record form to collect this data and analyzed students’ miscues during reading experiences. The form I used for running record data collection is attached to this document.

By analyzing the miscues students made, while using the three sources of information listed above, I determined what a student knows and I was able to decide what I believed this student needed to learn next. If a student was attending to only one type of information, I helped them to become a better reader by providing instruction on the cueing systems that they were neglecting. For the purpose of my study, I observed my students reading and focused on how they were attending to the visual information present in their texts, including how they used visual cues in conjunction with meaning and structural cues. I analyzed my students’ reading to see if the word study lessons, which were implemented during this research, were having an impact on the way they were processing visual information as they read.
Writing Samples

Along with observations and analysis of students’ miscues, I collected data in the form of writing samples. The purpose of this data collection was to search for evidence of the transfer of concepts and skills taught during phonics instruction into students’ writing. I collected samples once a week from the students in my focal group by photocopying students’ journal entries. During our English language arts time I assigned a writing prompt or task each week that was completed while students were in a “work on writing” rotation. I collected a sample each week and searched for evidence of application of new learning. Since the writing task was done independently, I believed it would also be a valid measure of their knowledge of skills and concepts taught.

Data Analysis

I used a constant comparison method to analyze my data. I used that method to code and find categories within my data. The data I collected were typically gleaned from observations and anecdotal notes on my students. Using the data, I looked across types in order to find similarities and differences (Hubbard & Power, 1999).

Observations and Anecdotal Notes

I analyzed the data collected using my observation protocols to review my focus students’ behaviors during their reading and writing experiences and looked for evidence of application of concepts that were specifically taught to those students. For example, if one group was working on long vowel patterns within words, I inspected the observation data that was obtained during writing conferences with students and looked for evidence of that learning. Evidence of learning
was seen in many ways. For example a child may not have the correct spelling of a short “a” word such as “fan” and still demonstrate his/her new learning. He/She could write the word as “fna” and would be demonstrating that he/she was able to hear the short /a/ within the word. A possible next teaching point in this scenario may have been to discuss that letters in words are written in the order they are heard (Bear et al., 2008). I then reviewed and analyzed these anecdotal notes for consistency with a phonics concept or skill over the course of multiple conferences to see if a student had gained “mastery” with a particular concept. This was one example of how I observed and adjusted for student learning.

**Meaning, Structure, and Visual Cues**

I used the information collected from reading conferences to show evidence of students using the visual/graphophonic cueing system, especially in conjunction with meaning and structural cues. I discerned whether or not these students were applying knowledge that was the focus of their *Words Their Way* lessons. I also examined this data to find a relationship between the structure of how the phonics concepts are taught within *Words Their Way* and the other cueing systems the students may already be using. I organized this data into categories and found similar pieces of data that demonstrated if and how students were integrating phonics knowledge into the reading process (Bear et al., 2008).

When I performed a miscue analysis the student and I sat together while the student read aloud. I administered a running record and conducted a MSV analysis. In order to conduct this analysis, I used a running record and analyzed each individual miscue to decipher what information the reader was attending to. When a student miscued it was up to me to decide, from my observations, what information the child was using. When readers are reading effectively and
efficiently they are synchronizing all three cueing systems. Those cueing systems are meaning (semantic), structure (syntactic), and visual (graphophonic). The semantic cueing system refers to the meaning students derive from words to make sense of the text while incorporating their own experiences and knowledge. The syntactic cueing system refers to the way words are put together in sentences and phrases (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009). Beside each miscue I wrote the letters “m s v” as an abbreviation for the three sources of information. I then circled the sources of information used by the reader up until the point of the miscue. After I analyzed each miscue, I then totaled each source of information used and was left with three numbers. The results identified which sources of information were being used the most and what sources of information were being used the least.

This assessment and analysis informed my study by allowing me to track an individual’s progress when processing visual or graphophonic information, and in particular, how students used those cues in conjunction with meaning and structural cues. By incorporating *Words Their Way* I hoped to see that students visual processing, and in turn their comprehension, would increase due to lessons taught during word study (Bear et al., 2008).

**Writing Samples**

I used writing samples collected from students to search for evidence of students’ ability to transfer new phonics concepts or principles into their written literacy activities. By looking at their writings, I compared what was discussed during word study and examined their writings to see if they were using the new knowledge they had constructed. During my observations of word study, I recorded words and concepts they were learning and color coded them by week to see what was being applied from week to week. I also used spelling inventories to progress monitor
students’ development. As students grew from week to week I continued to assess and reorganize the word study groups so that they were flexible, depending on knowledge that was obtained.

I analyzed and coded data upon completion of my data collection. I coded the data and looked for patterns in student development and growth. I completed case studies on each focal group student to document his or her learning over the course of my study. With the help of these case studies, I looked for themes throughout and compared those ideas across the students within my focal group. Through my focal group of diverse students, I analyzed and looked for differences and similarities in literacy growth and learning based on the students’ developmental spelling analysis and their ending spelling stages. I utilized all forms of data and looked across the information, and case studies, in order to triangulate the data for the best accuracy.

**Procedures**

The process of data collection took approximately six weeks. The following outline was the schedule to which I adhered:

**Week 1:** I assessed each student on his/her development spelling stage, analyzed the results, and grouped students who were within similar stages. After forming the word study groups I selected my focus group from among them. During this week I recorded a baseline for my focus group students and tracked their progress throughout the six weeks. I also administered a writing task as a baseline, so I could make comparisons in skills upon completion of research study.

**Week 2:** I introduced the new lesson format and procedure for the new phonics program. Then I began phonics instruction in a rotating format as was called for by the new program. This format included small group lessons, word sorts, word/picture hunts, word games, and assessments that
were staggered. I began my data collection through observations of students during the word study program. I took anecdotal notes on student behaviors during independent reading that related to phonics.

**Week 3-5:** I continued with phonics instruction in the new format. I also continued observation protocols and miscue analyses for students.

**Week 6:** I re-administered the Developmental Spelling Assessment and charted students’ progress. I began organizing focal group data by coding each student’s observations and anecdotal notes to find patterns in learning and possibly what students may still be struggling with and why.

**Week 7-9:** I analyzed data and began to form my summarizing thoughts about my research question.

**Criteria for Trustworthiness**

It was important for my research that I was able to accurately and consistently record my observations and notes on each student for the duration of my six week study in order to collect meaningful data on the implementation of this new program. The success of my research study hinged on my ability to provide an unbiased review of my students’ learning in this new program. This study was six weeks long. A prolonged engagement would increase the validity of my research and data. Because of the fact that I was conducting this study within my own classroom, the quantity and length of my observations were plentiful and regular. Collecting data from multiple participants in a variety of ways allowed me to triangulate my findings and increased the reliability. Triangulation enhanced the accuracy of my study by corroborating and substantiating...
evidence from different sources. Due to the fact that I drew from several data types, I was ensuring that my results were as accurate as possible (Plano-Clark & Creswell, 2010). The inclusion of a detailed description of my study increased the dependability of my study and allowed it to be openly reviewed. In addition, my participants and their parents were debriefed on the purpose of my study, which was to improve my practices as a teacher and increase phonics knowledge within my students.

Limitations of the Study

As is the case with most research studies, my research came with limitations. With observations having been my main source of data collection, there came with that the need to consistently and with solid regularity collect that information. Being a second year classroom teacher, my focus was sometimes split between my work as a graduate student and my occupation as a classroom teacher. I implemented this program in the early afternoon to ensure its consistent application and to avoid running out of time at the end of the school day.

As a participant researcher, invested in the outcomes of this study, there was the possibility that my interpretation of what knowledge had been attained may have been clouded by my desire for a positive outcome. I addressed this by discussing my findings with my research partner as well as my advisor. I discussed my viewpoints and described how I came to my conclusions.

Summary

Through this research study I used observations, anecdotal notes, miscue analyses, and writing samples in order to evaluate the possible affects the new phonics/word study program had on the reading and writing abilities of my first grade students. I believed that quality
instruction included a combination of whole group, small group, and one-on-one learning. During this study, I deciphered whether or not the implementation of a small group model of instruction produced gains in the literacy learning of early readers and writers.
Chapter 4: Findings

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of using the program *Words Their Way* on students’ reading and writing skills and how my students learn and use important phonics skills and principles. I posed the question: How might the implementation of the program *Words Their Way* impact how students use their knowledge of phonics within their real reading and writing experiences? I wanted to observe a small group of students to see if the specific word study lessons taught would be transferred into their reading and writing.

The program *Words Their Way* (Bear et al. 2008) was implemented with all the students in my classroom. I formed three groupings based upon my initial developmental spelling analysis of each student. This study involved taking a closer look at three students who range from a student currently below grade level, a second who was on grade level and a third who was above grade level. This was part of a first grade class of twenty-two students in a suburban district. Of these students four students received additional services outside of the classroom environment.

This chapter will consist of the findings from three case study students organized by week to include instruction that took place, activities that were completed, and observations that were made. Each case study student was assessed at the start of the study with a developmental spelling analysis and grouped with like peers to meet the students at their instructional levels. Following the grouping of these students, a spelling feature was selected and specific word sorts were chosen. During the course of each week students were required to sort their words daily and to complete accompanying activities as well as sort their words collaboratively with partners to
increase recognition of words and speed. At the conclusion of each week, students were either assessed formally with a spelling assessment or informally through observation and anecdotal notes. Each week of the six-week study continued in this manner for the three participants.

Several themes arose during the course of this study and will be addressed in the following case studies. Each of the activities included in the program had an impact on the participants. The first theme was observed while students participated in the activity of word sorting. Evidence provided showed that the word sorts that took place during each week impacted the students’ ability to learn specific spelling features. The word sorts taught each week provided groups of words that were specific to the feature being taught and assisted in characterizing the spelling feature. Through repeated sorting in small groups, and independently, students became very familiar with the feature or “rule” being communicated. Different types of sorts were also modeled for students to increase the impact the word sorts had. Blind sorts and speed sorts were two other types of word sorting activities that were used. Blind sorts took place with partners and allowed for collaborative learning while also challenging the students to refrain from solely relying on how a word looks but also on how a word sounds. Evidence showed that both partners benefitted from this type of sort due to the fact that while one student was practicing reading the word sort cards, the other was practicing actively listening for the sounds that characterized the feature being studied.

The second theme was observed while students used their new knowledge to incorporate specific spelling features into their writing. Using the word sort cards provided to students, they were asked to write sentences using those same words and to also be on the lookout for that same feature in their writing experiences. Purposefully incorporating these features into students’
writing helped to cement new learning that had taken place. Writing assignments and spelling sentences were also used to assess students’ progress and automaticity.

A third and final theme observed throughout the following case studies surrounded assessment. Weekly formal and informal assessments allowed for students to receive the full impact of the word study program. Information provided by these assessments allowed for students to move seamlessly from one feature or sort to the next creating a foundation of word knowledge that built upon previously learned information.

Case Study One

Mitch

Mitch was a six year old boy who began the year below grade level. I chose Mitch to be a case study student because he was still not meeting grade level standards after the second marking period. Mitch started the year with low sight word knowledge. Throughout the year we continued to practice his knowledge of these words but still he struggled. A point of difficulty with Mitch was with his knowledge of short vowel sounds. Even after Mitch had studied sight words he would still confuse the ones that began with the same letter (i.e. with, went, where, were), not monitoring the middle sound of the words he was reading. Mitch was over-relying on the first letters of sight words, demonstrating that he was having difficulty coordinating visual cues with meaning and structure cues. During independent reading he did not self correct his miscues, showing that he was not monitoring for syntax or meaning. When he came to an unknown word he would substitute any word that began with the same letter regardless of how that made the sentence sound or its impact on the meaning of the sentence.
An added concern was in Mitch’s confidence level. Mitch always believed that the word he said was correct and would often argue that point with whoever was instructing him. This also served as evidence that Mitch may have been over-relying on phonics and using that knowledge to defend his word attempts. “This word is bun (sun) because sometimes an s makes a /b/ sound.” He was able to emphatically justify wrong responses whenever they arose, making it difficult for Mitch to progress his reading skills or for Mitch to monitor for meaning.

Mitch also struggled in his ability to write words that contained short vowel sounds. At the start of the year he was not using vowels within his words consistently. As the year moved on he learned that every word should contain a vowel and began using, but confusing, this new skill.

Mitch truly enjoyed writer’s workshop and had a love for non-fiction books, which resulted in the majority of Mitch’s writing to be centered on animals. He was fascinated by animals and enthusiastically read, watched, and listened to anything he could on nature. This love of nature created a wealth of background knowledge that Mitch tried to share. He would often become frustrated with his writing because he wanted to use words in his writing that were well beyond his current level of writing development. Although he attempted invented spellings he was very aware that the words were spelled incorrectly and would often perseverate over his attempts.

Mitch was a very nice boy with a fun-loving spirit and love of everything in nature. He wanted to be reading and writing books that were of interest to him and that added to his already vast knowledge of animals. Due to this intense interest, Mitch was motivated to learn more about words and increase his knowledge of words. For these reasons I chose to focus on learning how to break apart words and how to decipher between short vowel sounds.
The first week of the study focused on learning more about Mitch, his ability to break apart words and begin work on short vowel sounds. On day one, I assessed Mitch on his recognition of beginning consonant sounds. Out of nineteen words, Mitch did not miss any of the beginning sounds. He did however confuse five vowel sounds, spelling the word “yell” as “yla”, the word “duck” as “dot”, the word “leaf” as “laf”, the word “foot” as “fut”, and the word “web” as “wab”. During this assessment I noticed that Mitch was still reversing some letters. He was able to self-correct himself with the letter p but wrote the letter z backwards. An observation I noted during this assessment was that Mitch was consistently using letter sound correspondence, but was decoding words very slowly.

Each week Mitch’s group was given a list of words to work with. On the day they were given these words, I would work with the students to demonstrate how to sort, or in Mitch’s case, match the words. Mitch was taught that he had to say the word he saw in the picture and then match that picture to the word with the same sounds. Mitch’s first week of words were focused on short o, using the word families, -ot, -op, and -og. During our initial matching, Mitch was excited to match up the pictures and words and at several times told me, “Miss Horch, I am very good at this game.” Mitch was able to match all the pictures and words together, only making one miscue when he confused the word “log” and matched it with the picture of a pot. What I noticed about Mitch’s miscue was that the word “log” was upside down making it have similar visual characteristics to the word “pot”. Once Mitch turned the word card right side up, he was able to self-correct and select the correct card that said “pot”. This activity demonstrated that Mitch was working within the letter name stage of development; he was able to listen for the sounds in a
spoken word and match those sounds to a written word. This was also evidence that Mitch was self-correcting his work and was able to adjust.

Mitch was reading a level D at the beginning of this study (Fountas & Pinnell, 2015). During Mitch’s running record he demonstrated that he was using meaning cues to help him read accurately. Reading for meaning is very important for young readers. Early elementary teachers try to help students use all three cueing systems to gain the full meaning of a text. We encourage students to use all three cueing systems, but that is not the main purpose of reading. The main purpose of reading is to make meaning. Currently Mitch was not using visual cues accurately when he encountered unknown words. Often times Mitch was thinking ahead about what he thought the book should say and did not attend to the print on the page. This was evident in his running record when he read, “The wheel comes off the truck.” as, “The wheel goes off the truck.” This miscue demonstrates that Mitch was making sense of the story; he understood the meaning the author was conveying but his miscue showed that he may not have been attending to the visual cues which could’ve lead to a loss of meaning. Mitch checked the illustrations in the text often. This was a strategy that was taught during guided reading groups, in order to emphasize that the illustrations can help readers understand or add to the meaning of the text. Another example where Mitch was relying solely on meaning cues and not attending to visual cues was in the sentence, “The wheel rolls through the town.” Mitch read this sentence as, “The wheel rolls to the road.” Although Mitch was not reading the words on the page he was still gaining the meaning of the sentence. Mitch’s frequent miscues would often result in his reading not being accurate enough to gain the full meaning of the story. As the study continued it was important for Mitch to work with the visual cueing system to look for word parts he knows and use that information to correctly decode unknown words as well as coordinate the meaning and structure cueing systems.
In his writing, Mitch was still working on some reversals of letters, particularly “b” and “d” but also he continued to reverse the letter “z.” His spacing between words was larger than was necessary.

In this writing piece Mitch used short “i” with accuracy. Words that contained a short “a” seemed to be difficult for Mitch and because of that difficulty he often left them out. In the alphabetic stage of spelling, students often use the names of letters to represent short vowel sounds ie., bet for “bat” and pit for “pot”. The letter “A” is the closest match to the short vowel “a” sound. This may explain why Mitch was struggling to match the short “a” sound to a letter in the alphabet and because of that, left the letter out entirely. I observed that although Mitch could not figure out the short vowel sound he should use in the word “dragon,” he did however notice that a vowel should be there and left a space for it. I praised Mitch for this and we worked on the word “dragon” one on one segmenting the sounds we heard.
During this initial week of the study, Mitch demonstrated his need for instruction with short vowel sounds. Upon working with short vowel “o”, it was clear that Mitch was working at his instructional level and gaining knowledge of this sound through repeated word sorts and activities. The sort chosen for week one was appropriate for Mitch and upon observing his behaviors during this sort, showed that this method of word study was increasing his knowledge of short vowel sounds and his ability to match a word with the correct picture.

Week 2-April 21, 2014

With Mitch, I knew it was going to be important to continue to work on short vowel sounds so that he would be able to write more efficiently. What Mitch needed for his word knowledge to grow was more instruction hearing and using short vowel sounds. This was evident by his writing samples, as well as his developmental spelling analysis pre-assessment. Looking at Mitch’s other work I saw that he was beginning to listen for short “a” sounds. Due to this fact, Mitch worked with short “e” words through a variety of word study activities during week two.

We began each week by introducing the word sort words. Mitch’s words during week two were focused on short e, using the word families, -et, -eg, and –en. While meeting in a small group of three, Mitch and I went through the words and pictures naming them all. I did this to make sure that Mitch was focused on listening for a sound and not focused on deciphering the picture. During our sort, Mitch matched most words quickly without saying the word aloud. We discussed the importance of being “noisy” when we worked on word study because a big part of reading and writing is listening for the sounds we hear and practicing pronouncing the words correctly.
While sorting the words Mitch matched the word “pet” to a picture of a peg. He did not self-correct, and as such I stopped him and asked him if he could break that word apart for me. He indicated he was unsure of what I meant by saying, “How can I break it apart? It’s all together.” At that point Mitch and I revisited a lesson taught previously in the year about onset and rimes, but I chose not to use those exact words so as not to overwhelm Mitch with unnecessary language at this point. We discussed together what letters we considered vowels and how we could use those vowels to find the beginning and ending parts of a word. After teaching Mitch how to break a word apart, he was able to use his fingers to cover up the word family of the word “pet” and locate the correct picture. An important observation to note was at that point Mitch started noticing that there were other /–et/ words in our sort. He asked after we matched all the words with their pair if we could then sort them by word family. This was an exciting result, as I had not yet taught Mitch the concept of open sorts where he chose the categories. He was able to successfully separate all word families with only minor errors that he was able to self-correct on his own.
In Mitch’s writing sample he chose to write about his stuffed animals. He wrote a three sentence paragraph with correct punctuation and capitalization which was something Mitch continued to work on. In his writing he showed that he has control over some of the kindergarten sight words such as “I”, “and”, “my”, and “to”. This was evident by his use of these sight words with correct spelling and syntax. A goal set for Mitch was to continue to work on first grade sight words. This was evident by his spelling of the word “them” spelled as “vum.” After working with short vowel “e” during the week, the spelling of “them” as “vum” was showing that Mitch needed to continue practice encoding short vowel “e” into his on-demand writing pieces. However, during his sentence writing activity Mitch was able to use short vowel “e” with consistency. He demonstrated this by writing the sentences, “the jet wus wet.”, and “I see ten han (hands).”

As an informal assessment of Mitch’s work, we worked together creating short “e” words with magnetic letters. We started with words from the sort we had been working on during his second week. When Mitch knew we were working with words that definitely had a short vowel “e”, he was able to add beginning and ending sounds to accurately create the word I had spoken. I decided to keep Mitch engaged by switching to a white board and whiteboard crayons. I told Mitch that we were going to play a game called “Tricky Teacher”, where I was going to use short vowel “o” words as well as short vowel “e” words and he had to make sure he used the correct vowel. Mitch was noticeably excited about this and was eager to participate. I began with the word “pet” which he was able to quickly record on his board and he received one point. I then said the word “not” and Mitch responded with, “Tricky Teacher, I know that’s not an “e” word.” We continued this game for several words. Mitch was able to record all short vowel “e” words I gave him those being: ten, men, bet, met, them, and beg. This was evidence that Mitch was able to write these words in isolation but may continue to struggle to include them in his writing. At that point I
continued my informal assessment of Mitch and decided to ask him to write me a sentence. The sentence was, “I saw them get on the jet with a hen.” Although this was not an on-demand writing piece and was not created by Mitch, I believed it be a good measure of what he would be able to do independently. Mitch wrote,

“I soe them git on the jet with a hen.”

This demonstrated that Mitch was still working on his sight word knowledge but was able to correctly encode words with the short vowel “e”.

At the conclusion of week two Mitch was showing that he was becoming more familiar with short vowel sounds. He was able to write short vowel “e” words on demand and independently demonstrated that he was retaining previous instruction from past lessons. Mitch was motivated by game-like situations which are included within this word study resource.

*Week 3-April 28, 2014*

We began the week as usual with our picture and word match sort. During week three we worked on short vowel “u” by using the word families of: -ug, -un, and -ut. During this sort a bad habit had re-emerged. Mitch had a tendency to be overly confident and this negatively affected his reading and writing abilities. This was evident when he explained the reasoning behind matching the word “sun” to the picture of a bun. He said, “This (“sun”) matches with the bun (picture) because I know that sometimes an “s” makes a /b/ sound.” Mitch had a tendency to insist he was correct and justify his answer with a made up fact or misconception. When matching the word “sun” with the picture of a bun Mitch was showing that he was not cross checking his work. When cross checking students need to check one source of information with another. When Mitch used a
phonics explanation to match a picture of a bun with the word “sun” he was attempting to use visual cues, but was not cross checking with meaning cues possibly demonstrating and over-reliance on phonics. This showed that he could lose the meaning of a text because he was not checking visual information with the meaning of the picture which is the goal of reading.

Mitch was able to complete his picture and word matching sort. He showed that he was really beginning to understand how words are put together. This was evident by the fact that he said each word slowly and figured out the onset and the rime and was able to match those words to corresponding pictures. For example, Mitch was able to break apart the word “tug” into an onset /t/ and a rime /ug/. He was then able to tell me that this was a short “u” sound because he could “feel it in his belly.” Following the match of all words and pictures I took away the pictures and had Mitch sort the words into word families. We had completed this task previously when we worked during week two on short “e”.

During some small group time Mitch worked on writing sentences that contained some of the words he had been sorting during week three. He was able to accurately use five short “u” words with correct syntax and spelling. Mitch was still showing a lack of sight word knowledge. He demonstrated this by writing the sentences, “the bug was on the run.”, and “the mug wus sopr (super) hot.” Mitch was able to accurately spell short phonetic sight words but was still struggling to consistently write irregular sight words such as “was.” Mitch’s stamina and ability to focus on a given task was not consistent throughout the school day. This was evident by his correct spelling of known sight words in the beginning of a task and then misspelling those same sight words towards the end of the task as Mitch began to lose focus.
Mitch’s struggle to maintain focus continued the next day during writer’s workshop. In his journal entry about his brother, Mitch demonstrated poor handwriting as well as a lack of substantial content. Even with the short length of this writing piece Mitch continued to show his control over kindergarten sight words. He also shows success in his ability to hear and encode words that contain a short “i.”

Mitch’s reading observation came from a level E text about animals in the sea (Fountas & Pinnell, 2015). One of Mitch’s strengths was his schema about animals. He enjoyed reading non-fiction texts and did so voraciously. During this reading of *In the Sea* (Roberts, 2010), Mitch showed that he was beginning to use some visual cues when encountering an unknown word. For example when Mitch encountered the word “fish” he began with the beginning sound /f/ and paused before completing the end of the word /ish/. This was evidence of the fact that Mitch was just beginning to use the skill of breaking words apart to assist him in his reading abilities.
Over the course of this week working with word sorts for short vowel “u”, Mitch had grown in his ability to break apart words. Due to the makeup of these word sorts and the inclusion of several word families, Mitch was making connections between words by comparing their rime and noting the difference between them. These connections made it easier for Mitch to use this new knowledge in his writing experiences. During his sentence writing this week Mitch was able to use the short “u” sound correctly by actively listening for the short vowel sound as he practiced throughout the week as shown above. These writing assignments have provided direction for instruction that allowed Mitch to continue to work within his instructional range and to continue making progress in the areas he needs most.

Week 4-May 5, 2014

Mitch saw some success during this week in the area of word study. He has gained confidence in his ability to recognize and sort his word study words. Although, he continued to work on increasing his sight word knowledge, he was still confusing sight words that begin with the letter “w.” For example, while Mitch worked on writing his sentences, he used the word “with” when he should have used the word “went.”

up
“The pig with ^ the hill.”

This had become a common problem with Mitch during his writing and reading tasks making it difficult for Mitch to maintain meaning as he read. A positive outcome that was observed was that Mitch was beginning to monitor his own work by re-reading and self-correcting. Upon re-reading his sentence Mitch noticed that he left out the word “up” and edited his writing through the use of a caret. This shed light on the fact that Mitch had trouble encoding sight words that began with
“w”, and instead was using his visual memory of a word to write that word. It also showed that Mitch was beginning to read for meaning and structure even though he was not accurately reading the words he had written. This demonstrated that he was cross checking his work with at least two of the cueing systems.

Another example of Mitch using meaning to help read words came about during our word and picture match sort. During week four we focused on short vowel “i” using the word families –ill, -ip, and -ig. One of the words Mitch was to match to a picture was “hill.” Mitch quickly picked up the picture card representing “dig” and matched the card with “hill.” He justified his pairing by saying, “This word is “him” and this is a picture of a guy.” I complimented Mitch on using meaning to match the word and picture but drew his attention to what the man was doing in the picture. At that time Mitch and I revisited the lesson on how to break words apart. I modeled how to break apart the word “wig” by finding the vowel and breaking the word just before that vowel. That left the onset “w” and the rime of -ig. Upon breaking the word apart for Mitch, I then modeled how to segment the sounds and put them back together to form a word. Mitch then correctly used this same process, with prompting, to segment the word “hill.” Realizing his error he found the correct picture card match.

Mitch had increased his stamina during word study so much so that I decided to see how he might work independently. I assigned Mitch a writing-prompt to write about his favorite sport. Mitch chose to write about soccer. In writer’s workshop we had been working on non-fiction writing for some time so this task was appropriate for Mitch to attempt independently. Since Mitch truly enjoys drawing, his picture had great detail, but due to the lack of structure in this independent task he did not even start his writing during a twenty minute rotation. This may have
showed that Mitch continued to struggle with maintaining focus and attention when given a specific independent task even though his stamina had increased during his word study work. It could have also been showing that Mitch was planning his writing through his illustration. It was possible that if Mitch was given more time he may have been able to complete this writing task as instructed. Mitch was intrinsically motivated. If the task was something of interest to him he has the ability to remain focused and complete his work, but since writing did not come easily to him he may have been focusing on his illustration because that was something that Mitch excelled with. Mitch needed more structure during his independent work time and an increase in extrinsic motivation. For example, Mitch could be instructed to complete his illustration with a sketch with some details and then move on to describing his picture in writing. Finally he could be allowed time to add further details to his illustration.

At the conclusion of the week, Mitch took a nine-word short vowel “i” assessment. He demonstrated that he was able to spell short “i” words with accuracy. Mitch correctly spelled the words pill, lip, pig, zip, wig, rip, dig, and hill. The only word Mitch incorrectly encoded was “hill” spelling the word “hil.” Because we were working on three word families, it was expected that he would be able to conventionally spell “hill” even though the digraph “ll” represents the same sound as “l”. Mitch continued to work on correcting his reversals, in particular, “p,” “z,” and “d.”

During this week Mitch showed increased success in monitoring his work and correcting miscues while sorting and reading. The word sorts Mitch has worked with contained word families with the same medial vowel sound often with very slight differences. In order to accurately sort these words Mitch had to be diligent in tracking through the entire word. By working with these types of sorts, Mitch has increased his ability to discern minor differences in
words resulting in greater attention to detail in his other work. This progress showed that he was beginning to learn that tracking through to the end of words was vital to reading accurately with the end goal of obtaining the full meaning of a text.

Throughout the course of the week, Mitch worked on several strategies during his word sorts that can be related to reading and writing. He worked on checking his work after he was completed, and showed that he was able to correct previously incorrect work. Monitoring and reviewing work was part of the process I taught during word sorting. Another skill we practiced during word sorts was checking the picture/word sort using meaning cues. By looking to the picture to find meaning, Mitch was able to locate the correct word match. Using meaning cues is an important aspect of reading; this skill assisted Mitch when he searched the pictures within his books to help him gain the full meaning of the text. The final skill we worked on was the break apart strategy. Mitch practiced this skill and this helped him to decode unknown words as he read. These new skills assisted in Mitch’s reading and writing abilities and helped to draw a connection between word study and reading and writing abilities.

Week 5-May 12, 2014

Mitch showed increased confidence with his short vowel sounds as he completed a summative assessment and moved on to digraphs. For Mitch’s post assessment he completed a written assessment as well as a multiple choice assessment. These assessments contained several words from each previous word sort. On the first assessment Mitch was required to fill in the blank with the word that matches the picture given. The words assessed were the pictures that were included in his sort during the week, so he had experience with the words and as such should have been able to identify independently. He had to carefully encode the words on the
page, listening for the correct short vowel sound. Mitch missed one picture out of fifteen when he misspelled the word “jet” by writing “jat.” This was a common error described in the spelling program because of the way vowels are articulated in the mouth. Both short “a” and short “e” are made in the front lower portion of the mouth making the two sounds easy to confuse. Through this assessment Mitch demonstrated good control over short vowel sounds, however he still needed some instruction and practice with short vowel “e.” He also demonstrated a decreased frequency using reversals. Although it took Mitch longer than expected to take the assessment he was able to segment and encode the sounds he heard.

The purpose of the second assessment was to see if he was able to choose the correct word from a bank of words that correctly matched the picture. This assessment helped to assess Mitch’s ability to read short vowel sounds as well as he ability to identify and encode beginning and ending sounds. Mitch was able to read the words on the page and choose the words that matched the pictures. He answered all fifteen problems successfully. This improvement could be attributed to the new skill of tracking through a whole word in order to distinguish slight differences. This demonstrated that Mitch had improved greatly in this area.

This data showed that Mitch has come a long way in his ability to encode and decode short vowel sounds in CVC words. It also showed that he was able to correctly encode beginning and ending sounds in order to make a variety of words with close similarity.

Mitch read the book *Monkey to the Top* (Ryan, 2010). The book was a level F and was all about Molly a monkey who liked to climb things. In this running record Mitch showed growth in his use of visual cues. He also found many short vowel sounds that he had previously worked on. For example in the sentence, “She loves to climb to the very top of things.” Mitch did several things
correctly. The first thing Mitch said when he encountered the word "top" was, "Hey, I practiced this word." He followed up his exclamation by breaking apart the word “things” into its onset and rime and finally combined the two sounds to correctly decode the word “things.” I praised Mitch for his efforts and he seemed to glow with new confidence.

Over the course of this study Mitch has practiced breaking apart words in order to read and spell them accurately. The week’s activities provided evidence that Mitch was using newly acquired skills. Mitch accurately and quickly broke apart the unfamiliar word “thing” while reading. Breaking apart words was a new strategy for Mitch and he was using them to enhance his reading and writing experiences. The word family sorts helped to empower Mitch to work with words and gave him the confidence to break a word apart in order to solve it correctly. The assessment at the start of the week, in which Mitch had to circle the correct word to match the picture, was further evidence that Mitch was cross checking meaning and visual cues by using the pictures and the words to correctly read short vowel words. Mitch was making substantial growth in this area.

*Week 6-May 19, 2014*

Moving on to the last week of the study, I decided that the next word study sort Mitch would focus on was digraphs. Now that he was already consistently and accurately using short vowel sounds in words, it would be important that Mitch learn that the onset of a word can be more than one letter. This week we focused on the digraph “ch”. The sort he worked on included words that began with the letter “c”, the letter “h” and the digraph “ch”. It was important that Mitch learn that these letters and digraphs make a very different sound when they are apart and together.
In small group the sort was introduced in the same manner they had been introduced in the past. The lesson began with modeling the sounds that each heading card made and modeling how to pronounce and identify the key word picture on the card. Then one card was sorted under each heading, for the students, so they could focus on breaking the word apart to segment the first sound and sort accordingly. This sort was a picture sort so the students did not focus solely on what the word looked like, but instead had to listen carefully for the correct beginning sound and sort them under the correct heading and key word.

During this exercise Mitch was able to segment the sounds and place all picture cards under the correct category heading with very little prompting. This was evidence that Mitch had gained the skill of breaking a word apart and placing it under the correct category. The only assistance that I provided for Mitch was based on his lack background knowledge about Native Americans. In the picture cards, there was a picture of a Native American chief and he was unsure of what that was. He called the picture an “Indian” and then looked up and said, “This is an Indian. I think this card must have gotten mixed up with my cards.” I praised him for making that meaningful observation and that he was correct that the word “Indian” would not fit with the headings that we had. After explaining that this picture was actually of a “chief” he then quickly put it under the correct heading saying, “That works now.”

Each week Mitch completed a written sort of his picture cards. Due to evidence from previous independent work time, it was best that, while working on independent work, that Mitch be in close proximity to me. With any program or new instructional structure, it is important that scaffolds be in place to provide an environment that suits the learner and allows for them to demonstrate what they know. A benefit of sorting pictures, instead of just words, was that Mitch
had to use his listening and segmenting skills to listen for and encode the pictures he sorted. He was able to sort the cards into the correct groupings. Mitch was also able to correctly write the beginning sounds of all the words. The words he correctly sorted into the “ch” group were “chick”, “cherry”, “chin”, “chimney”, “chop”, “chief”, and “check.” Although not all words were spelled correctly, Mitch showed that he was able to use the digraph as well as include the correct short vowel sound. My focus for this assessment was not on conventional spelling, but was focused on whether Mitch was including the “ch” digraph on words when necessary. Below was what Mitch wrote in his written sort chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>c Words</th>
<th>Mitch’s Spelling</th>
<th>h Words</th>
<th>Mitch’s Spelling</th>
<th>ch-Words</th>
<th>Mitch’s Spelling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>comb</td>
<td>com</td>
<td>horn</td>
<td>hon</td>
<td>chick</td>
<td>Chik</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cake</td>
<td>cake</td>
<td>hat</td>
<td>hat</td>
<td>cherry</td>
<td>chee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>coat</td>
<td>cot</td>
<td>heart</td>
<td>hrt</td>
<td>chin</td>
<td>Chin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>candy</td>
<td>can</td>
<td>hook</td>
<td>huk</td>
<td>chimney</td>
<td>chimnne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>chop</td>
<td>chop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>chief</td>
<td>chef</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>check</td>
<td>chak</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.4

Mitch’s writing sample for week six was done in a small group. After the previous week’s independent work, it was still clear that focus was a main concern for Mitch. He worked with a small group of three students who were also working on their own writing assignments. Working in this small group provided a better learning environment and helped Mitch to maintain his focus.
While I observed Mitch during this writing time it was easy to see that he tended to lose focus when he was trying to segment a longer word. In his writing about lions, Mitch was trying to spell the word “cheetah” which he spelled “ced.” After working on the “ch” digraph this week I expected that he would hear the /ch/ as the beginning of the word and spell the word like “chetu.” Due to Mitch’s lack of focus and the fact that he was working hard during this small group time, I waited until he was done with his writing piece to ask about the spelling of the word “cheetah.” After he finished his writing task I asked him to read his piece back to me and when he got to the
word “cheetah” he indicated that he thought he spelled the word incorrectly. He also indicated that he knew it started with a “c” because he had read about cheetahs in his *National Geographic* book. This was evidence that Mitch was realizing that not all words are phonetic and that simply encoding words based on sounds would not always result in the correct spelling. At this point I complimented Mitch on what he had accomplished and for his focus during this writing time.

Using a dry-erase board and crayons I asked Mitch to attempt to spell the word again and prompted him to think carefully about the beginning of the word. He said the word aloud several times and then looked at me for help, I believe this was because the two other students at the table were eager to assist Mitch and were looking at him as well. I asked Mitch, “Where do you hear a vowel sound?” and he was able to tell me he heard the “e” in the middle. I then asked him to say the word again but stop before the “e”. Before verbally saying the word again he quickly grabbed his crayon and wrote “ch” on his board. Mitch received a big high-five from me and was glowing with pride. He then continued to spell the word “cheta” and he was praised for his hard work and attention to the digraph at the beginning of the word. This showed me that Mitch had the ability to hear the sounds within a word, and when he focused carefully on the sounds he was hearing, was able to encode the word with more accuracy.

Another surprising observation was when he explained his reasoning for writing the “lions” like “line”. He said, “This one (the long “i”) is talking so there must be another vowel at the end.” This was a surprising statement from Mitch, because that was a lesson that was taught whole group previously in the week. Mitch did not usually internalize whole group lessons due to his short attention span. This was evidence that Mitch was taking more ownership of his learning. This also showed that Mitch was paying attention to his writing while also trying to incorporate the lessons he had learned. He was not simply writing the sounds he heard, but was attempting to
use the lessons he had learned to enhance his spelling. Another observation was that he continued to use that spelling of “lions” throughout his writing piece, showing that he remained focused on the new “rule” and continued it for the duration of his writing piece.

During this week Mitch took part in several activities during word study time. While working on sorts Mitch continued to exhibit off task behavior and a lack of focus when he was working independently. This behavior was also observed during his writing task during the week. To help maintain his focus Mitch was instructed to work at the back table so he was closer to me. This proximity to me helped Mitch to maintain focus and to complete his work to the best of his ability. This adjustment in work location resulted in a greater output of work and a better quality of work.

During this time Mitch showed that he was not relying solely on the sounds in words but was relying on skills he had learned as well as drawing from his own schema. Listening for the sounds Mitch hears in words was still important, but it was also important for him to start to include new “rules” and accurate spellings from his own bank of word knowledge. This was evident as Mitch wrote about a cheetah during his writing time. When Mitch was asked to look at his spelling of cheetah again he was able to draw information from his own knowledge of that word and did not just simply write what he heard but tried to remember what the word looked like, using his visual memory, in order to spell it correctly in his writing. This writing task also showed that when Mitch was working on a word in isolation he was able to break the word into known parts and encode. He had not accomplished this task during his initial writing of his piece. These activities assisted in providing specific information about how Mitch was hearing and encoding words.
As a final assessment, Mitch was given the DSA to determine which spelling stage Mitch was working within. At the beginning of the study, Mitch was working in the middle Within Word spelling stage. At the conclusion of the study, Mitch’s DSA showed that he was working in middle Within Word spelling stage. This showed that Mitch made tremendous growth over the course of the study. The early stage, of Within Word, focuses on blends. Mitch correctly encoded the blends of the words “sled”, “stick”, “blade”, and “fright.” In the middle Within Word stage, which focuses on long vowel patterns, Mitch correctly encoded the long vowel pattern in the word “shine.” He spelled the words “hope” as “hoep”, “wait” as “waet”, “dream” as “bem”, “blade” as “blaed”, “coach” as “coch”, and “fright” as “frit.” This was evidence that Mitch was working within the middle Within Word spelling stage.

Common Themes for Mitch

A theme for Mitch was that he needed one on one or small group instruction. His issues with attention and his ability to complete independent work made this conclusion clear. When learning in a whole group situation, Mitch was prone to inattentiveness often looking around the classroom and fidgeting in his seat. He would not retain skills learned during those whole group lessons. Once Mitch started working in a smaller group, with more teacher interaction and prompts, he began to grow his knowledge of words and how they work. These new working conditions allowed Mitch to better demonstrate what he had learned.

During small group instruction Mitch grew in his awareness of short vowel sounds. By the end of the study Mitch was able to spell words with short vowel sounds with a CVC pattern. During the short vowel word sorts, weeks one through five, he also showed that he was able to write CVC short vowel words with accuracy by the end of each week, with one exception being the
short vowel "e." He also learned how to break a word apart and how to use that new skill in his own writing tasks. This was evident by Mitch verbally segmenting words while writing. He did this particularly well when I told him he was taking an assessment to see how much he had learned.

With consistent prompts, Mitch was able to edit and correct his own work. For example when he wrote about lions he was able to break the word “cheetah” apart and to correctly write the digraph, short vowel, and ending sound. Although Mitch didn’t always use conventional spelling, he was able to accurately write the sounds he heard, showing growth in that area.

Mitch’s writing skills increased over the course of the study. In the beginning his focus was writing a sentence that was structurally correct and using his phonemic skills to encode the sounds he heard in words. As he learned more about words and how we make them, he was better equipped to correctly include short vowel sounds as well as break a word apart in order to spell that word by using its onset and rime. The word study lessons taught used word families. This helped Mitch to see that you can spell a lot of different words using the same word family and just change the beginning sound. Mitch was able to increase the amount he was writing because it was not taking him as long to segment different words. A continued concern was that Mitch was not able to remain focused during his writing tasks. A strategy that was used was changing Mitch’s proximity to me. This kept Mitch accountable for his work and also made it possible to give him a quick look to get him back into his writing pieces.

Mitch’s newly learned ability to break apart words helped him to take control over his reading. At the beginning of this study when Mitch encountered an unknown word he would use meaning cues and appropriate structures to guess at the word. Usually the word selected by Mitch
had no visual similarities to the word written. As the study progressed Mitch showed increased confidence and awareness of visual cues and was able to use the strategy and skill of breaking apart words in order for him to correctly decode the short vowel words he was finding. By coordinating all three cueing systems, meaning, structure and visual, he was now able to read with greater accuracy and that enhanced his comprehension of the text fulfilling the main goal of reading which is to gain meaning.

Mitch needed more work on short vowel “e” because even at the end of the study this sound still confused him. He consistently substituted an “a” where there should be a short vowel “e.” This could be due to how vowels are formed in the mouth. When the mouth forms vowel sounds the air flow is restricted and articulation is not as precise as it can be for some consonant sounds such as /t/ or /p/. Also short vowels sound similar because there are only minor differences in the position of the mouth when verbalizing these sounds. Over the course of the study it became evident that he would need more work with his first grade sight words, in particular words that begin with a “w.” Each time he encountered a sight word that he was not sure how to spell he would sound the word out and each time he wrote the word he would use a different spelling. For example he would write the words “have and “was” in several different ways within one writing piece. The sorts within this program did incorporate some sight words but upon the conclusion of this study Mitch had not shown much growth in that area. It would be interesting to see if Mitch continued with the program what the overall impact may have been with his sight word knowledge.
I am pleased with the growth Mitch made over the course of the study. He was better equipped to read and write short vowel words. He has grown in his ability to manipulate words and use onset and rime to help him achieve more.

Many activities and instructional strategies were included within this program such as word sorts, picture sorts, blind sorts, speed sorting, writing tasks, assessments and games. These activities helped to increase Mitch’s working knowledge of words and their structure and spelling. Word sorts assisted Mitch in internalizing specific phonological and orthographic features through repeated sorting. This repetition brought new knowledge into Mitch’s working memory, which allowed him to draw on that knowledge when he was reading and writing. In addition, these word sorts were instrumental in increasing Mitch’s ability to break apart a word and distinguish between different sounds. The blind sorts and picture sorts allowed Mitch to focus on the sounds he heard. These sorts were also crucial in Mitch’s ability to draw connections and discriminate between word families. Realizing that many words are written using the same word family was beneficial to Mitch’s growth. By working with word family sorts, Mitch also learned the importance of tracking a word to the end in order to identify slight differences in words that change meaning drastically. These skills increased Mitch’s spelling abilities, as well as increased his confidence when reading and writing.

An important part of the word study program was implementing the skills and features into real writing experiences. During these work times Mitch showed great progress in his ability to use new features learned during word study. Written tasks also assisted in discovering what word sorts Mitch would benefit most from. By observing his written tasks, it was possible to decide which sorts could be skipped and which sort might require extended time. These written
exercises shed light on Mitch’s problem working independently. During these writing tasks it became obvious that Mitch required more supervision during his work times; observations shed light on Mitch’s problem working independently. These writing tasks increased his stamina and confidence, when he was in close proximity to the teacher. Mitch began focusing and taking pride in his work. He was encoding words beyond the phonological level and began using his background knowledge and features he had learned. Mitch was using his new knowledge to help him spell conventionally. Finally, these writing tasks provided practice breaking apart unknown words and listening for the short vowel sounds he needed to encode.

Overall the activities and lessons within this program provided leveled instruction for Mitch, increased his knowledge of words, and his ability to use this new knowledge as he completed reading and writing experiences.

Case Study Two

Camilla

Camilla was a seven year old girl who began the year on grade level and continued to meet grade level expectations at the start of the study. For this reason, I chose Camilla to be a case study student.

Camilla enjoys writing and reading and was able to choose a topic and write meaningfully about that topic. Her writing topics focused on friends, family, and events that were important in her life. Camilla was a very caring girl with many friends.
Her struggles in the beginning of the year were with short vowel sounds and digraphs. As I began the study, Camilla continued her work with short vowel “u” and worked on the “th” digraph with words that contained an r-controlled vowel (i.e., “third”, “curb”). Camilla was also working to incorporate correctly spelled long vowel sounds but was not using patterns correctly. Camilla relied heavily on classroom supports, such as her personal and classroom word walls, as well as books that she was reading. This helped Camilla to spell words accurately, but there were times when she would remember a word that was in a book and then spend a good deal of time trying to find that word in the book so she could copy it down in her writing. Camilla was focusing on accurate spelling of words instead of focusing on the composition of her piece. This often negatively impacted the amount and quality of writing she could complete during writer’s workshop. A focus during the study was helping Camilla to gain confidence with her skills, so she would rely less on classroom supports and more on her own knowledge of words.

Camilla was reading on grade level, reading books that were a level H on the Fountas and Pinnell Text Level Gradient. These books were usually picture books, with small illustrations, that had three to eight lines of text on a page with mostly one to two syllable words, contained many high frequency words and some complex spellings. A focus for the study was helping Camilla to draw connections between the word patterns she finds and reads in texts and transferring that into her writing without the aid of those texts.

Her lack of confidence and struggle to attempt unknown words without the assistance of classroom or teacher supports were focuses for the study. This was accomplished by including instruction and practice breaking words apart, looking for commonalities in spellings and patterns, as well as using what was known about words to read new words.
Week 1-April 7, 2014

At the start of the study Camilla took a pre-assessment (with pictures) on listening for long vowel sounds in words like “kite” and “feet” and had to circle the correct vowel sound that was heard. Camilla was able to do this with perfect accuracy. Most of the students in the group said the words aloud and then circled the correct answer but Camilla did not say the words aloud. The picture of a bar of soap initially was confusing for Camilla. She circled an “a” at first but then amended her answer and changed it to an “o.” Without Camilla saying the words aloud I can only assume that she was pronouncing the word “s-uh-ope” and confusing the /uh/ sound for an “a.”

During small group, Camilla worked on sort six in the Words Their Way (Bear et al., 2008) text, which was a review of long vowels with word matches. For this sort students had to sort pictures and words under the correct long vowel heading with a keyword. Following, they had to match the pictures with the words. To begin, I demonstrated and explained explicitly the procedure I wanted the students to follow while sorting and matching these words. For example,

“This is a picture of tape. I will say the word slowly listening for the middle vowel sound like this, t-āāā-p. I heard the letter “a” say its name. When we hear a vowel say its name, we call that a long-vowel sound. I heard a long “a” so I will place this picture under the picture of a cake because that makes the same sound.”

Continuing in this manner each vowel sound was demonstrated and students began sorting on their own using the same procedure. Camilla seemed to struggle with long “u” sounds, particularly with the word “flute.” Because she was unsure, she would set these cards aside or use her closest neighbor’s work to place under the correct heading. This was evidence that when Camilla was not completely confident of the right answer she would not attempt placement on her
own but looked for help from an adult or another student. Confusion with long vowel “u” is understandable considering that long “u” can make two different sounds /yoo/, like the letter name, and /oo/. For now Camilla was instructed to use the word card to help her place it under the correct heading by looking at how the word was spelled. During a sort, later in the study, we discussed in greater detail about the different sounds long “u” make.

To finish off the lesson, we briefly discussed the word pattern CVCe and how not all words that contain a long vowel will follow this pattern. This was a bit of pre-teaching for the following word sort.

Following group work, Camilla was instructed to complete a written sort of the words for this week in her word study packet. She correctly spelled all the words and sorted them accurately. Upon checking in with Camilla, it was observed that she was monitoring her work by using each word card to spell the words correctly. Although this was a skill that was taught in the classroom and one that was usually praised, I continued to push Camilla to draw upon skills that she has learned in order to become less dependent on other resources.
In Camilla’s writing sample she had a hard time coming up with a topic. This was not the usual for Camilla so I prompted her to write about what she was wearing which was a “Hello Kitty” shirt. After agreeing to the topic Camilla quickly got to work writing. Camilla was not encoding long vowel sounds into multisyllabic words with complete accuracy. This was evident by her spelling of “Valentine’s.” Camilla should have been able to encode the sounds she heard. This word contains a long vowel “i” at the end and as such Camilla should have been able to attempt the new long vowel pattern she was learning. For example she spelled “Valentine’s” like “Valinten’s.”
This showed that although she was hearing and using short vowel sounds within this word, she did not hear the long vowel “i” at the end of the word or possibly misplaced what she heard.

I observed Camilla reading the book *The Sleepover Party* which was included in the *Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System* (Fountas & Pinnell, 2008). This was a level H text about a boy named Jim who was going to his first sleepover. This story was of great interest to Camilla who was just beginning to have play dates and sleepovers of her own. During the running record taken, she had no miscues with long vowel words within the text. Camilla was relying heavily on meaning to decode unknown words and was monitoring her reading by self-correcting when necessary. Reading for meaning is the goal of reading and as such Camilla was working hard to comprehend texts. Camilla’s reading of this book showed that she was ready to move on to the next level of text complexity.

The final activity for the week was for Camilla to use her word sort words to write sentences. Camilla did so with accuracy and was able to write sentences that were structurally correct. A sample of her work was, “I saw a rose on the grund.” An observation that was noted was that Camilla did not choose to use any of the word sort words that contained a long vowel “u” within her sentences. This could be evidence that Camilla was still not comfortable deciphering that sound and could be avoiding them.

The activities used through *Words Their Way* (Bear et al., 2008) helped me to select strategies that Camilla was using and others she needed to continue work with. The long vowel assessment that was given prior to the sort helped to show that, while Camilla was showing good phonemic awareness, she was not reading words aloud to aid in her ability to hear the long vowel sounds she was searching for. During word sorting, it became obvious that Camilla was not comfortable sorting works that contained long vowel "u" or possibly that she was having difficulty
hearing that sound in the words included in the sort. While working on writing sentences that contained various long vowel sounds Camilla demonstrated that she was able to use the new feature with accuracy but was not using words that contained a long “u” sound. Due to that evidence it could be inferred that Camilla may need to focus more attention when working on the sort for long vowel “u” later in the study.

Week 2-April 21, 2014

During week two, the lesson was more focused on individual long vowel sounds. In small group Camilla learned about the CVCe pattern and with modeling and support learned to break apart words and look at their patterns and hear the sounds that they made. Week two’s sort consisted of short “a” and long “a” vowel sounds. This sort also included what were called “oddballs”, which are words that may have the correct pattern with the wrong sound or vice versa. Prior to completing the sort, I would model sorting one word under each category. I would also read the words to the students and have them repeat each word as to assist in their ability to identify the word, but also so they can hear the correct pronunciation.

Camilla improved her sorting process. She was conscientious when saying the word sort words aloud and had very few problems sorting the words into the correct categories. The few problems that Camilla encountered were when she was sorting words that contained digraphs. For example when sorting the word “whale” Camilla would put the emphasis on the /wh/ and would say the word “w-uh-ale.” The /uh/ that she was hearing caused Camilla to sort this word under the short “a” heading which is a common miscue at her stage of development. A teaching point for Camilla during this lesson was that she always needed to compare the word she was sorting to the keywords and pictures used in the headings. For example the keywords were “cake” for long “a” and “cat” for short “a.” I modeled this strategy with the word “bat” and asked if she
could then check “whale” with the keyword “cat” and tell me what she noticed. Upon doing this Camilla started to get upset. She did not say the words out loud but instead read the words silently and then would not look up at me. Camilla and I talked about how good readers and writers have to take risks and that it was even more important when learning new skills. After comparing the word “whale” with “cat” and “cake”, Camilla moved the card from the short “a” heading to the long “a” heading. She continued the sort with a few prompts when blends were involved.

After the sort was completed the students were asked what they noticed about the words, and how they were alike and how they were different. I instructed that upon sorting all word cards students should read vertically down each column and check to make sure that the vowel sounds they were hearing matched each other and the keyword of the grouping. Camilla was the first to answer reporting that all the words we sorted had an “a” in the middle. Another student responded with another observation reporting that all the words in the “cake” column had an “e” on the end. I asked Camilla if she was surprised by that and she said, “Well, no, because isn’t that what we were looking for?” This was evidence that Camilla was noticing the patterns that were similar between words that were different.

The written word sort for this week showed that Camilla had improved in her ability to compare the sort words to the keywords provided. I overheard Camilla repeatedly using “cake” when she was sorting a long vowel word. During her written sort Camilla was working on words that contained blends like “grass”, “glass”, and “snap.” Having learned how to break apart words at the first vowel, Camilla was segmenting the word “grass” into two parts, the “gr” blend and the rime “ass.” She brought this to my attention thinking that she must be saying the words wrong because the word “grass” contained a bad word. I praised her for accurately breaking the word
apart and told her that she was correct in that the ending of “grass” was not a nice word but she was correct in the way she broke the word apart. After asking her to repeat the word altogether she was able to match the sound with the keyword “cat.” Camilla’s confidence was growing and I was pleased that she was able to find the “oddball” word “what” on her own. She was even able to explain to me why “what” didn’t fit into either heading because although it had an “a” it did not make the long or short vowel sound and did not include the silent “e” at the end.

I like my home.
Mine and my brother Colin's play room is a mess. We like to play in their but never clean up.
We like to play in others' rooms. Colin likes to go in my room and
Camilla was beginning to write longer pieces. This writing sample was about her brother and their home. She was writing about events with which she had experiences and I believed this was what accounted for the longer piece.

Camilla was able to encode all long vowel sounds within this piece. Even though they are not all spelled conventionally, Camilla attempted words that had the CVCe pattern and others like “play” which have an open syllable ending and are less common and usually occur in harder words. This writing piece was evidence that Camilla was hearing the long vowel sounds and working toward including those sounds and their conventional spelling patterns.

Week two’s activities showed growth in Camilla’s abilities to differentiate between short and long vowel words particularly those long vowel words that had a CVCe pattern. While working on her sort Camilla was able to grow in her ability to break words apart and to better hone this skill to check her placement of words during the sort. Camilla was able to accurately sort the short “a” and long “a” words which gave evidence that she was hearing the correct sounds and was able to sort them appropriately. Also during her word sorting, Camilla and I were able to improve her
process by encouraging her to verbally say the words aloud and break them into their onset and rime prior to sorting. That new process helped her to gain confidence in her work and encouraged her to take risks and help herself when encountering more difficult words. Her ability to check her own work by reading each group separately demonstrated that Camilla was noticing the patterns in words and discovered that she could use that new knowledge to double check her accuracy. Camilla’s completion of the written sort for these words gave her further practice breaking apart words in order to correctly encode them, as well as use the pattern taught during word study to spell long vowel words accurately. These activities were of great use to Camilla and me as the teacher.

Week 3-April 28, 2014

During week three Camilla continued work on long vowel sounds with the CVCe pattern. Moving on to long “i” Camilla sorted words that contained a long “i” with the CVCe pattern, as well as words containing short ‘i”, and words that have a medial “i” but do not make a short or long sound and which were considered “oddballs.”

The sorting exercise was modeled for students, followed by the students’ completion of the sort on their own while I observed. Camilla was observed sorting the words quickly but not using the process she had been taught which was to say the word aloud, then compare it to the keywords and finally to place it under the correct heading. Instead, Camilla pushed her cards around the table and picked through only grabbing the cards that had words that contained an “e” at the end. She was very proud of the fact that she was able to sort her words so quickly and was surprised that there were no oddballs in her sorting of the words. Upon asking Camilla how she was sorting, she was able to explain that since she was looking for words that had the CVCe
pattern it was easier to just find all the words that had the “e” and to sort the words in that way. I asked her to check to see if her new way of sorting correctly grouped the words. She assured me it did work so I followed up by asking her to read each column of words and to listen for the appropriate sound. As Camilla read the long “i” words aloud she came to the word “give” and continued on because she knew the word and had read the word correctly. Directing her back to the word “give” I asked her to segment the word into its beginning and ending parts otherwise known as its onset and rime. She completed the task with ease breaking the word “give” into /g/ and /ive/ and was asked if the sounds she heard matched the sound in the keyword “kite.” Camilla smiled and moved the word “give” to the oddball heading. Upon asking her to explain, she responded by telling me that this word tricked her because it had the correct pattern but now she knows it was really an oddball because it had a short “i” sound instead of a long “i” sound.

A lesson taught during this small group time was looking at words to figure out what was alike and different between the sorted groups. All students including Camilla, understood that all the long vowel “i” words in this sort ended with an “e” and said their name. To follow up, a question was asked about what the similarities and differences were when they compared the long vowel group to the oddball “give.” Camilla spoke up first saying that the word “give” had the same pattern, but did not say its name which would make the “i” a long vowel. This was evidence that Camilla was beginning to internalize the lesson that although a word may contain the correct pattern it does not always produce the long vowel sound.

I observed Camilla during a guided reading lesson where I had her reading again for the benchmarking system by Fountas and Pinnell (Fountas & Pinnell, 2008). Previously she read a level H book which I measured to be independent reading for Camilla. During this running reading
record Camilla was attempting to read a level K book called *Edwin’s Haircut* (Fountas & Pinnell, 2008). During this reading of the text Camilla was able to read with 98% accuracy. She read the text making only four miscues and two self-corrections. In the sentence, “’Good morning, Ruff,’ he said to his shaggy son.” Camilla read the sentence as, “’Good morning, Ruff,’ he said to his sh/ug/gy son.” In her reading of the sentence Camilla did not recognize the “a” in the word “shaggy” to be a short vowel “a” sound or she was confusing the /uh/ sound with a short “a.” She pronounced the word using a short vowel “u” sound. Often when reading Camilla would pronounce the word “a” as /uh/. This is a common way to read the word “a” but can cause confusion when working with short vowel sounds. Camilla did not seem to notice that “shuggy” was not a real word and continued reading on. This showed, that in this instance, Camilla was not reading for meaning or that she assumed she did not know the meaning of the word. Camilla’s trouble came during the assessment of her comprehension. She demonstrated limited comprehension of this text when asked several questions about what had occurred in the story. Her retelling of the text was not sequential and her “Beyond the Text” understandings were incredibly limited. As Camilla grows in her ability to identify short and long vowel sounds, I believed that she will be able to transfer those skills to her decoding abilities, and with the use of the other cueing systems, will be able to read with full meaning.

The following day Camilla worked on a “blind sort” with me. A “blind sort” is when students partner up and while one student reads the words aloud the other student has to listen for the sound without being able to look at the word. Once the student has decided whether the word has a short or long sound they then will look at the spelling of the word, check for the appropriate pattern, and sort the word accordingly. This was an important skill for students to practice so they did not solely rely on the spelling pattern of the word in order to choose the
appropriate category. This one on one time was used as an informal assessment to check Camilla’s ability to listen for short and long sounds and then monitor her work by checking the pattern and correctly sorting the words. Camilla completed this with ease which affirmed her abilities with this skill. Camilla then completed her written sort of these words while I observed. For this written sort I chose to read the words aloud to Camilla to assess whether she was able to use the spelling pattern CVCe correctly. In her written sort she was able to spell all short vowel words correctly including those that had a –ck ending like “kick” and “stick.” Camilla encountered some confusion with the word “knife” but due to the fact that this was not a lesson that had been taught this evidence did not contribute to my conclusion that Camilla was working with this pattern accurately. Camilla was able to spell all long vowel sounds correctly even those that were preceded by a blend like “prize” and “drive.” Camilla lacked confidence while trying to spell the word “while.” She was not confident in her ability to spell this word so at this point we moved to a dry erase board and I asked Camilla to be a fearless learner and write what she heard. She spelled the word “wile” confirming that although she was still working on using digraphs correctly, she was still hearing the long vowel sound and attempting to use the correct pattern. The “wh” digraph is a difficult digraph to encode because in most dialects you do not hear the “h”, and because of that I was not focusing on Camilla spelling the word “while” conventionally. I was focused on monitoring whether Camilla was able to hear and encode the long vowel pattern. This was more evidence that Camilla was using this pattern in isolation. The next step I took was to check for Camilla’s proper use of this pattern within her real writing experiences.
Camilla’s writing sample was again about her brother. She wrote about how she loves her brother and how they tend to get silly when they are around each other and playing. She had increased the amount she was writing, which was evidence that Camilla was increasing her confidence during her independent writing time. In the Work on Writing station during our Daily Five time, Camilla came up to the back table to tell me all about the word “love.” She was eager to let me know that she found out that the word “love” would be an oddball. Upon asking her to
explain Camilla told me that she knew how love was spelled and then spoke about how “love” makes a short “u” sound like /uh/ but it has the CVCe pattern that should make it say “o” but it does not say “o.” She was very pleased with herself as was I. This was evidence that even though we had not worked through the long vowel “o” pattern Camilla was beginning to transfer new skills to her real writing experiences and to vowel sounds we had not yet covered. This was a big moment for Camilla and this experience resulted in a large confidence boost for Camilla.

This was a successful week for Camilla. She showed tremendous growth in her ability to compare and encode vowel sounds with their spelling patterns. She also showed that she was transferring new knowledge into her writing and doing so with confidence and accuracy. Her word sort sentences this week reinforced that Camilla was working toward hearing long vowel sounds. Her long vowel “i” words were spelled conventionally, however in the word “almost” Camilla wrote “allst” giving evidence that even though Camilla was progressing she needed to continue working on long vowel sounds. Additional skills for Camilla to work on following long vowel patterns were with her incorporation of digraphs into her writing. She would also benefit from learning about words that contain silent letter partners like kn- in words like “knife,” wr- in words like “wrench,” and –mb in words like “comb.”

The activities in Words Their Way (Bear et al., 2008) are contributing to Camilla’s growth as a young reader and writer. The word sorting made Camilla aware that although we had learned about the CVCe pattern there were exceptions to the rule in such cases as “give” and “love.” This new learning was observed when Camilla found the word “love” in her own writing and was able to explain why that word would be considered an “oddball” within her word sort. Camilla’s transfer of this new knowledge served as evidence that she was taking lessons learned and
applying them to her independent work. Her written sort provided further evidence that Camilla was using the long vowel pattern with consistency, as well as shedding a light on a deficit in her knowledge that being her use of the “wh” digraph. The activities she had completed increased Camilla’s confidence in her own knowledge and use of new spelling patterns.

**Week 4-May 5, 2014**

Moving on to the fourth week in the study, Camilla continued to work on long vowel sounds. This week’s focus was on long vowel “o” and continuing with work on the CVCe spelling pattern. During our lessons last week, Camilla demonstrated good understanding of the spelling pattern but was still working on making this new learning automatic. During her writing time she was working to hear and encode long and short vowel sounds as well as use the pattern when she hears long vowel sounds. Camilla did not always hear the long vowel sounds and at times was encoding words with no vowels at all. On the occasions when she heard the long vowel sounds she was consistently using the correct pattern to encode.

For the long “o” sort the same procedure was used to introduce and model as was in previous weeks. Camilla decided to sort the words in the same manner she sorted the words last week using the presence of an “e” to sort her word cards. The thought crossed my mind to correct Camilla but I was interested to see if she would remember what we had talked about during the previous week and fix her errors. Camilla finished sorting the cards by looking for a final “e.” She then took those cards and read through the words sorting out the two oddballs (“come” and “some”) that were included in the stack just as she was taught in the previous week. She was very pleased that she was able to find those words so quickly and then continued with the procedure to
read through all groupings and compare the words to the keywords included. Camilla’s sort was completed accurately.

An additional lesson this week was focused on homophones. In the word list this week there were two homophones those being: “rode” and “hole” not to be confused with “road” and “whole.” Before showing the students the word they were asked to use one of the two words in a sentence. Camilla started by using “rode” in a sentence saying that she rode her bike down the street. To reply to Camilla, I said the sentence, “I drove my car down the road.” The students believed my and Camilla’s sentences to both be correct. Upon writing two words on the board I asked the students which one they thought was spelled correctly either “road” or “rode.” They responded by saying that it must be “rode” because it follows the correct pattern. They were all shocked to find out that both words were spelled correctly but that they had different meanings. After explaining the definitions, the students wrote sentences on their dry erase boards using one of the two words. Camilla wrote the same sentence she used as a verbal example and spelled the long vowel word “rode” correctly. This new lesson helped students to understand that even though a word can have a long vowel sound it doesn’t always have the pattern CVCe so it was important for them to think about if the word looks right as well as sounds right.

Following this lesson we completed a word hunt using “just right” books from their guided reading book boxes. I instructed them to look for long vowel words that followed the CVCe pattern. This activity was meant to help students draw connections between spelling words and reading words. Word Hunts provide additional examples of words that go along with the sound, pattern, or meaning unit students are studying. Camilla completed the activity with ease. This
activity was given as a choice for the students whenever they were in the word work rotation during *Daily Five*.

Figure 4.9

Camilla’s writing sample was about her friends in the classroom. She wrote five sentences in which she described how she played with her friends. During Camilla’s writing task she asked for assistance spelling the word “together.” From this study it had become evident that Camilla needed encouragement to complete assignments on her own, by trying to spell unknown words without the assistance of the teacher. In order to assist Camilla in this task, she needed strategies to draw from when trying to encode multi-syllabic words. I taught Camilla how to clap out the syllables in a word earlier in the year. Camilla needed some further instruction on using those syllables to correctly encode new words. Camilla was asked to clap the word “together” out into syllables. Then, I asked her to slow down her pronunciation in order to segment the syllables she
heard. I told her I would do the same and then she could check her spelling with my own after she
had given it a try herself. She segmented the word like /to/ /geth/ /er/. Camilla knew to look for
smaller words within larger words when she was decoding during reading, drawing from that skill
she was instructed to listen for smaller words within a larger word. She spelled the first syllable
/to/ correctly and moved on to the second. She said the word aloud and focused on the second
syllable /geth/ which she repeated several times before writing the “ge.” She followed it up by
pronouncing the /th/ sound and saying, “This is just like the beginning of “there” so it must be
“th.”” She was very pleased that she was solving the word independently, because of that the only
prompt given was encouragement to continue. This prompt was given to increase Camilla’s
confidence and independent work, as well as to show her that she can work through tough words
using the strategies she knows. Camilla completed the word easily adding the ending “er” and
expectantly waiting for me to show the word that I had written on my board. Upon showing her
my spelling she was elated. I complimented her for a job well done and instructed her to try this
new strategy whenever she encountered an unknown word, but also to include any new lessons
she had learned about how words work. This work was evident in her writing piece as she
correctly encoded the word “together” three different times.

Another example of Camilla’s writing was in her word sort sentences. She wrote strong
sentences and correctly spelled all long vowel “o” words correctly. This could be evidence that she
was using these words independently or that she was still using supports to help in her writing
such as her word study cards. In either case Camilla was using these words correctly and
monitoring her own writing. This was one of her sentences:

“Can I have a cone with chery ice crem plese?”
In this sentence Camilla correctly used the word “cone” from her word study list. She then attempted to spell “cream” but instead writes it as “crem” possibly showing she was not carefully encoding for long vowel sounds using known patterns. She then ends her sentence with “please” spelled “plese” demonstrating that she was attempting to spell these long vowel “e” words with the CVCe pattern as she had been learning during this study. This was evidence that Camilla was attempting to encode long vowel words using what she had been taught. It is important to note that when a child is using but confusing a new skill he or she is working within his or her zone of proximal development which is a key aspect in the *Word Their Way* program (Bear et al., 2008).

During these word study activities Camilla demonstrated that she was gaining new knowledge and attempting to incorporate that knowledge into her reading and writing. While working on her word sorts, Camilla demonstrated good speed and accuracy when sorting her word cards. She was able to carry over previously learned skills from past word sorts and sorted her cards in a way that was meaningful to her learning. This word sort also allowed for time to teach about homophones because of the words included. This was a great opportunity and was provided at a meaningful point in Camilla’s learning when she was ready for the additional knowledge. At this point in the study Camilla showed good control over long vowel patterns. The additional instruction with homophones came at a time when Camilla was ready to learn something a bit more challenging. Working with the homophones “road” and “rode” as well as “hole” and “whole”, Camilla showed that she was able to create verbal and written sentences using these words.

Another activity that I selected was Word Hunts. This activity connected the reading and spelling of words together and allowed time for students to search within their own books to find
additional examples of the long vowel pattern they were studying. This activity was very important and showed students the connection between reading and writing. During Camilla’s writing experiences she had the chance to encode longer words and to utilize the skill of breaking words apart. She demonstrated this when she encoded the word “together”, without error, using a new strategy. This provided valuable evidence that Camilla was using what she had been learning in word study in order to enhance her writing. She demonstrated that she was able to use known words to assist her in writing new unknown words. Observing Camilla implement new strategies independently was important as she increased her knowledge of how words work.

*Week 5-May 12, 2014*

During week five Camilla worked on long vowel “u”, the last vowel sound used with the CVCe pattern. At this point Camilla was very close to using this pattern accurately. Working with long vowel “u” was important for her because this sound was one that Camilla had struggled to hear and encode for some time as was evident by the first week of this study. This was a challenging word sort because long vowel “u” can make two different sounds those being /yoo/ (the letter name) and /oo/ like in the word “boot.” During the initial word sort instruction and modeling we compared the word “cute” and “tube” to demonstrate these different sounds. Students were told that even though they make a slightly different sound they are spelled in the same way using the CVCe pattern. Camilla was taking great pride in her work during word study. On the first day that we meet each week students are given the words to cut out and sort this being the only task they are required to finish. However, on Monday Camilla not only sorted her word cards accurately but, she also completed her written word sort within her word study packet. Her sort was completed as follows:
Long vowel “u” can be confusing because even though it makes two distinct sounds, they are both considered long vowel “u” and as such are sorted under the long vowel “u” category heading. Camilla’s sort shows that she understood this new information and was able to sort the long vowel sounds accurately and with the correct spelling patterns.

The next activity that I taught was called “Change-o.” Change-o is an activity described in *Words Their Way* (Bear et al., 2008) which encourages students to play with words by adding or removing one or two letters to change a word into a different word. Typically consonants are exchanged for consonants when starting this activity. For example the word “cat” could be changed to “car” by removing the “t” and adding an “r.” Teachers can make Change-O more challenging as students work with more difficult words or by requiring students to swap out the vowel with a different vowel, for example changing “drive” to “drove.” This activity was taught in a small group with the use of dry erase boards. After I modeled several examples, the students were presented with their starting word, from the sort, and asked to add or change one letter. Camilla’s responses were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Short u (cup)</th>
<th>Long u (tube, mule)</th>
<th>Oddball</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>shut</td>
<td>cut</td>
<td>rude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bus</td>
<td>club</td>
<td>mule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hunt</td>
<td>just</td>
<td>Use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>drum</td>
<td>jump</td>
<td>june</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>such</td>
<td>Plus</td>
<td>cute</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.10
This activity showed that Camilla was becoming more confident in her abilities to manipulate words and encode them correctly. Her error with the word “float” shows that Camilla continued to use the pattern correctly and provided additional information on future teaching. Changing the vowel sound of words is advanced when first beginning this activity. Camilla demonstrated this on the first try by changing “flute” to “float.” During this study Camilla was working in the middle Within Word stage of spelling focusing on long vowel patterns with the CVCe pattern. This confusion with other vowel teams such as the “oa” in “float” was evidence that Camilla was ready to be moved into the late Within Word stage and was showing that she was making substantial progress. In the late Within Word stage, students begin working with other vowel patterns outside of the CVCe pattern.

Camilla completed her spelling sentences with a small group. The word sort contained both short and long vowel sounds. Camilla has shown, in previous weeks, to use mostly long vowel words during her spelling sentences that demonstrated that she was working with the spelling pattern, but this week Camilla began using only short vowel words. I believe this was
evidence to show that although Camilla’s confidence has grown she may be more confident using short vowel “u” than long vowel “u.” When she was instructed to try long vowel words in her sentences Camilla was able to use and spell them correctly for the last two sentences of the activity.
If you’re in grades K–2, the Loom is the toy for you. You should get the Loom because it works the best for making cool out of other bands. You can make many more bracelets. It comes with 40 Tangles to tell you how to make it and it comes with a book to help you. Put it in the right spot, it also comes with 600 tube bans as you can see this is the toy for your child.
Camilla’s writing sample was chosen from her work during writer’s workshop. As a class, students had been learning about persuasive writing and were finishing writing toy reviews. These lessons were taught through week four and week five and Camilla was excelling in this type of writing. Camilla chose to complete her final toy review about a rubber band loom that makes jewelry. In her writing, Camilla used many words that she had been studying over the last five weeks. Her writing piece was six sentences long, stayed on topic, and included a topic and concluding sentence.

In the first sentence Camilla wrote the word “grades” but encoded the word without the long vowel “a” but included the silent “e” before she added the plural “s.” This was evidence that Camilla was using the pattern taught but was not monitoring her work. This was believed to be true because in Camilla’s prewriting, she correctly wrote the word “grades” but during the transfer process she misspelled the word. Camilla used the word “comes” several times in this writing piece, spelling it correctly each time. This was an oddball word in week four’s word study list and may show that Camilla was transferring learned material into her writing. I noticed that Camilla did not know the rule that when adding an ending to words that end in “e” the writer must drop the “e” before adding the ending. This writing piece showed that she had not done so correctly by her spelling of the word “making” like “makeing.” This skill had not been taught during word study and as such I was not concerned about these spelling errors.

As Camilla worked on long vowel “u” she showed growth in her ability to encode words containing that vowel sound. As evident by her spelling sentences, she still seemed to shy away from using the long “u” sound in her writing but when encouraged to do so was able to do so accurately. These sentences assisted in showing that Camilla was able to use the correct pattern
even when she nervous that she may be incorrect. During the activity Change-O, Camilla was working with the relationships between words that are similar. She was able to successfully change one word to another by removing or changing a letter within the word. Using known words to create similar words showed that Camilla was using the new spelling pattern. In her writing sample Camilla revealed that she was using word study words, including oddball words, with correct syntax and spelling.

*Week 6-May 19, 2014*

For the final week of the study students compiled the lessons taught in the previous four weeks by working with a word study list that contained short vowel words with the CVC pattern and long vowel words with the CVCe pattern.

This word sort was completed with the same procedure as previous weeks. The sort was modeled for the students and they segmented each word and placed it under the correct heading. The difference with the sort for this week was that there were no keywords for the students to compare the words to. The students needed to listen and remember what the short and long vowel sounds were and place them under the column marked CVC Short or CVCe Long. This sort contained two oddball words, “done” and “have” which were not previously learned in other sorts.

At this point in the study Camilla had gained confidence during her word sorts. She was no longer appealing for help from the teacher or using other classmates to complete her sort. When following the procedure of reading the word aloud and then placing it under the correct category, Camilla initially placed the word “done” under the short vowel word sort. As she segmented the word she said the beginning /d/ and then said /uh/ several times before placing the word in the short vowel category apparently thinking the short “u” sound she had heard should be placed
there. She continued sorting words but then all of the sudden went back to the word “done” and said, “I didn’t notice the “e.” Believing she would then simply place the word in the CVCe column Camilla stopped read the word again and said, “Found my first oddball!” This was evidence that Camilla was now not only listening for the vowel sound in the word but also looking at the pattern and making the appropriate placement. This also showed that she was internalizing this new knowledge into her schema about how words work.

During this word sort I heard Camilla segment several words aloud, identify the vowel sound, and place it accordingly. For example she said the word “rule” in three parts like, /r/ /oo/ /l/ looked at the pattern and placed it under the CVCe Long column. Also, she said the word “crop” like, /cr/ /op/ and placed it under the CVC Short column. This was evidence that even when Camilla was not sorting and segmenting words with the same vowel, she was able to use the same procedure with words that contain different vowels.
Camilla's writing sample was taken from a book she was writing about the seasons of the year. This particular chapter was about the months of the year. In this piece all long vowel words are spelled correctly. She correctly encoded the words “name” and “same”. She also correctly spelled the oddball words “have” and “some.” This was evidence that Camilla was continuing to transfer learned words and spelling patterns into her everyday writing. In her illustration box, Camilla decided to make a decorated word list of the months of the year. She correctly spelled the word “June.” She also remembered to capitalize the first letter which she had not previously done during her week five written word sort.
Camilla was assessed for her spring benchmark assessment during a rotation in our ELA block. In my district, I was required to complete three benchmark assessments to determine the instructional levels of my students. This time of assessment often took place during our ELA block. Over the course of the study Camilla had come a long way in her abilities to break apart words and identify their vowel sounds. In this level M, text Camilla read about the life cycle of a monarch butterfly. As Camilla read there were several moments when Camilla drew upon her word study skills and her knowledge of short and long vowel sounds. In her reading Camilla came across the word “changes.” She quickly found the digraph “ch” and broke the word into two parts and solved the word correctly. Another instance where Camilla used her new skills was when she decoded the word “female.” At first Camilla pronounced the word “f/eh/-male” using a short vowel “e” sound. Using meaning cues, Camilla knew this was not a real word and as such did not make sense so she attempted to change the beginning vowel sound to a long “e” and said, “Fee-male. That means girl I think.” This was evidence that Camilla was able to use the skills she learned during word study in her real reading experiences. Working with both long and short vowel sounds she had the knowledge of both sounds and was able to attempt both sounds to distinguish which sound made the word, and sentence, make sense.

During her other weekly activities, Camilla demonstrated control over the CVCe and CVC patterns. Her spelling sentences included correctly encoded long vowel words with capitalization and punctuation. Her written word sort was done accurately, with all word study words spelled correctly. Camilla had made gains in her confidence level and was working independently with little to no assistance from other students or adults in the classroom.
To conclude the study, Camilla was given an assessment on short and long vowels that contain the CVCe pattern. This assessment included twenty different pictures which Camilla needed to identify and correctly spell. In a small group, these pictures were identified for the students and they were allowed to ask what a picture was if they were still confused after the initial identification. Camilla correctly spelled eighteen of the twenty words. The only two words she missed were words in which she did not ask for assistance and identified the picture incorrectly. For example she wrote the word “books” next to the picture that stood for the word “pile” and she wrote “oven” next to the picture that stood for “stove.”

The culminating week of activities showed that Camilla had control over the long vowel pattern CVCe. While Camilla sorted short and long vowel words she made no attempt to appeal to teachers or other students in the classroom. She showed confidence while working, double checking her work and making corrections when needed. During her writing tasks she again showed control over the long vowel patterns and was using oddball words with precision. While reading, Camilla encountered untaught words with long vowel patterns and was able to decode the words accurately by breaking them apart and noticing spelling patterns which gave her clues on how to pronounce unknown words. Through the final assessment, it was observed that Camilla had gained much confidence identifying and encoding long vowel words. The activities within the *Words Their Way* (Bear et al., 2008) program greatly impacted Camilla’s reading and writing experiences.
Common Themes for Camilla

Common themes for Camilla included a lack of confidence when she was working independently and a need for teacher or classroom supports when she encountered unknown words while reading and writing.

To build confidence in Camilla during writing and word study it was important to teach her strategies and skills she could use independently. Once a new skill was taught it was imperative that Camilla used that skill immediately in order for her to gain much needed confidence while working independently. To accomplish this, Camilla learned new material while in a small group setting. This allowed for Camilla to have the support she desired while still working with some independence. After being taught a new word study pattern, for example the CVCe pattern, it was necessary for Camilla to have the skill modeled before being asked to complete a task independently. This teaching method worked well for Camilla and she began to gain confidence in order to complete tasks on her own while there was still some teacher support available and then to gradual decrease the amount of support she was being given.

Camilla was a bright young girl who needed to build confidence in her attempts to solve unknown words while reading and writing, but particularly in writing. As the weeks went on Camilla was given an additional strategy to use when she encountered unknown words in her writing. We practiced clapping out the syllables in words and then took those syllables and encoded them using words she knew as well as rules she learned about how words work. This strategy was another boost to Camilla’s self-confidence showing her that she was a very capable student. This was evident by Camilla’s writing sample where she worked using the clapping strategy to segment and encode multi-syllabic words. She did this with the word “together”
during her writing piece about her friends and was able to do so successfully. The writing tasks involved in the *Words Their Way* (Bear et al., 2008) program assisted in assessing whether a new pattern was learned. These activities also allowed for independent and guided practice with new skills such as breaking apart words by onset and rime and careful encoding those words. Camilla was able to use these writing experiences to implement new strategies and connect known words to unknown words and encode with good accuracy. This helped to increase Camilla’s confidence and allowed her to be more independent.

During the course of the study Camilla gained the confidence she needed and more. This was evident by her writing samples and her observed word sorting abilities. During week one Camilla would put words aside during her word sort that she was unsure of and either look at a classmates’ sort or ask for direct help from the teacher. The strategy of breaking words apart by onset and rime helped Camilla to take control of her own learning. As a result Camilla needed less and less support, in place of that support she received prompts for her to keep trying and was then given the opportunity to check her work with the teacher. At that point praise was an important component for Camilla. Word sorts also gave Camilla the opportunity to notice spelling patterns and to learn that there were exceptions to the rule. By the end of the study Camilla was working independently on assignments with very few errors in her work and her confidence grew as a result. Camilla was no longer afraid to make errors because she knew how to double check her sorts after grouping the words together. She often made errors in sorting and was able to locate those errors and sort them accordingly.

During the study Camilla gained control over words that contained a long vowel sound and were consistent with the CVCe pattern. She was able to independently segment words and encode
words with multiple syllables. Additionally, Camilla gained knowledge of homophones and some digraphs through the course of the word study that was conducted in a small group setting.

Data shows that Camilla was ready to begin working with other vowel patterns. This was consistent with the DSA that was taken at the conclusion of the study. Camilla started as a student in the middle Within Word Stage of developmental spelling. After working on long vowel sounds with the CVCe pattern Camilla will need to move on to the late Within Word stage of spelling. In this stage students receive instruction on vowel teams such as “ou”, “oi”, and “oa.” In her DSA Camilla correctly spelled the words “wait”, “thorn”, and “growl.” She spelled the words “chewed” as “chowing”, “crawl” as “crawl”, “shouted” as “shoted”, “spoiled” as “sporyle”, and “third” as “therd.”

Camilla began the study as a nervous student who was afraid to make any errors. By the conclusion of the study, Camilla was armed with strategies and knowledge that made her independent work more successful and allowed her to rely more on her own knowledge than on the knowledge of those around her or teacher and classroom supports. I was very proud of the growth Camilla had made.

Case Study Three

Caitlin

Caitlin was a bright 7 year old girl who excels academically. She was reading beyond a first grade level by the start of the study. She worked hard while at school and did not allow herself to be distracted when I gave her a task to complete. Upon the completion of her first developmental spelling analysis, she was assessed to be in the middle Within Word stage. In this spelling stage,
Caitlin worked on long vowel sounds with a CVCe pattern. Caitlin and Camilla were in the same grouping and therefore did many of the same activities. Where Camilla needed teacher support, Caitlin was able to complete rigorous tasks when they are assigned. She was also a very fast learner. When she was taught a new skill she was usually able to complete that skill with ease when assessed.

Caitlin was a very confident young lady, and because of that she excelled in the academic environment and she did not use classroom supports often. This was a positive trait when she was learning new information, because she was not afraid to attempt unknown words when reading or writing. At times this did hinder Caitlin’s work when she made the same errors in spelling, though she showed consistency using these words in other areas. For example, Caitlin has been able to read all of the first grade sight words since January, however when she was encoding these words, she made the same spelling error again and again. Caitlin could identify the word “they” when reading but whenever she uses the word in a writing sample it was almost always spelled as “thay.” As children learn to read and write they often begin with approximations, and through repeated opportunities reading and writing they come to spell words conventionally. When Caitlin was asked how to spell certain words like “they” in isolation she was able to do so accurately. However, when she was using the word within the context of her writing she consistently spelled these known words using the phonemic knowledge she was currently working with. By giving Caitlin opportunities reading and writing, I believed she would learn how irregular words are written conventionally.

During the course of this study Caitlin worked on long vowel patterns in words like “shine”, “hope”, and “blade.” We also discussed how sometimes words may contain these patterns
but make a different sound and vice versa. In addition she learned about homophones as well as some vowel teams.

Caitlin was the type of student who completed tasks independently and this skill served her well as she learned more about how words work and developed strategies that assisted her during her learning.

**Week 1-April 7, 2014**

To begin the study Caitlin was assessed on her ability to hear long vowel sounds in words. This assessment gave Caitlin a series of pictures in which she needed to circle the correct long vowel sound she heard. The pictures in the assessment were identified for Caitlin, and then she worked independently to listen for and circle the correct vowel. At any point if Caitlin needed assistance in recalling what a picture was she was able to ask for the picture to be identified. Caitlin was able to correctly identify twelve different pictures and correctly selected which long vowel sound was present within the word represented. The assessment showed pictures of the words pile, kite, paint, leaf, feet, rope, suit, gate, rain, peach, soap, and slide. Caitlin was able to circle the correct long vowel sound for each picture given. This was evidence that Caitlin was able to isolate the vowel sound and identify it. This skill proved to be invaluable as we delved deeper into long vowel sounds and the patterns used to create those sounds.

Each week, as described in previous case studies, Caitlin was given a word sort containing words and pictures that used the vowel sound being studied. The word sort contained long vowels sounds spelled with a CVCe and long vowel “e” spelled with the vowel team “ee.” The purpose of this sort was to expose students to various long vowel sounds and the common pattern of CVCe that is used to create them. During the small group session introducing this sort, the procedure
was modeled for Caitlin and then students worked independently while at a small table with teacher assistance if needed. Caitlin was able to short all words accurately. During the sort we worked together on locating the vowel sound and splitting the words into its two parts, onset and rime. Caitlin was able to do this with ease. Caitlin showed this by segmenting the onset and rime in the words “tape” as /t/ and /ape/, “bike” as /b/ and /ike/, and “cone” as /c/ and /one/ when I asked her to do so out loud.

Following the word sort I had students move into a written word sort where they were to record the sort they had just completed. Caitlin was able to do so but did not use the word cards to assist her spelling the words and therefore spelled several words incorrectly. I praised her for trying the spellings on her own using her phonetic knowledge, but was then asked to double check her work with the word cards. During her first attempt Caitlin spelled the words “tree” spelling it “threee,” “bride” spelling it “brde,” and “tape” spelling it “tap.” After referring to her word cards Caitlin corrected the words. This was an important skill for Caitlin to work on. She was a very confident learner and as such did not always monitor her work for accuracy. As an emergent reader, it was expected that Caitlin would need continued opportunities to practice reviewing her work to master this skill. During the course of this study Caitlin was encouraged to take risks on unknown words but was also encouraged to refer to classroom supports to monitor her completed tasks.

Each week Caitlin was given a word study packet that contained all of the activities she was asked to complete during each week. In this packet Caitlin completed sentences with the word study list for that week. Students were instructed to create sentences that contained one of the word study words for that week. Caitlin was always looking for a way to go above and beyond so
she used two words for each sentence. In this week’s sentences Caitlin used all of the eleven word study words she was given. Samples of her sentences were as follows:

“The bride had a rose in her hair.”

“I saw a bee in a tree.”

Caitlin correctly spelled all words within her sentences with the one exception being the word “cream” which she encoded as “crem.” Caitlin heard the long vowel “e” but did not attempt to spell it using the CVCe pattern or using a vowel team. This skill was worked on later within the study.

During the course of the study Caitlin was observed reading “just right” books while I watched for any obvious transfer of knowledge. This week Caitlin was observed reading the story *Animal Olympics* (Slade, 2009), about a monkey named Bongo who was competing to be in the Olympics. This book was a level J and was assessed to be at Caitlin’s instructional level. She made nine miscues out of a 154 words. Caitlin was reading for meaning which is the most important of the three cueing systems. For example, Caitlin read the sentence “He was a great jumper.” as “He was a good jumper.” Caitlin’s reading of this sentence provided evidence that she was using all three of the cueing systems but was relying on meaning cues the most. She used partial visual cues when she saw the “g” in “great” but read the word as “good.” This did not change the meaning or structure of the sentence and was a close approximation of the text on the page. She made a similar miscue when she read the sentence “Bongo did not even reach the sandpit.” as “Bongo did not even reach the sandbox.” Caitlin used the illustration in the text to help her reach the word “sandbox.” Caitlin did not have much background knowledge about the Olympics, and as such was approximating words based on the illustrations and her own background knowledge.

Out of approximately twelve long vowel words Caitlin was able to read all but one. This running
record was evidence that Caitlin was working towards coordinating all three cueing systems and was able to read most long vowel words within a text.

Each week Caitlin provided a writing piece that was used for data collection to see if Caitlin was using the skills she had learned during small group sessions. In week one Caitlin wrote an entry in her journal all about her weekend. This writing piece was completed during the Daily Five rotation of work on writing. Although this was a short piece for Caitlin, it demonstrated that she was listening for the vowel sounds she heard in words and was attempting to encode those sounds. In this piece Caitlin spells the long vowel “a” correctly using “ay” in the words “today,” “Thursday,” and “Friday.” Caitlin did miss the “r” controlled vowel in the word “Thursday” and spelled it as “thersday” but this was not a skill she needed to focus on at this point in her learning.
Caitlin’s spelling of the word “Thursday” did make sense phonetically which showed she was using what she knew about words. This piece also showed that Caitlin was still working on first grade sight words like “very” and “because” spelling each of these two words incorrectly as shown above. This writing piece was evidence that Caitlin was attempting to spell words conventionally and was not relying solely on her ability to spell words phonetically.

During the activities during week one Caitlin demonstrated that she was using her own knowledge to spell words to the best of her ability. She also showed that she was attempting to use the CVCe pattern to spell long vowel words conventionally. While Caitlin sorted her word cards she showed that she was not yet checking her work against the available resources she had at her disposal, while creating her written sort. In her written sort she spelled the words “tree” as “threee,” “bride” as “brde,” and “tape” as “tap”, even though she was using her word cards with the correct spelling available. It did however show that she was able to sort by vowel sound. In her written sort this week Caitlin attempted to use her new knowledge of the CVCe pattern but was not yet doing so completely accurately. This was evidence that Caitlin had room for growth using this spelling feature. This observation was, again, supported by data collected through writing samples. Although she was trying to use the new spelling feature she was not doing so throughout her writing samples. This could have been because she did not need to use long vowel words with CVCe pattern while writing about her chosen topic. An additional observation was that Caitlin still needed work on some of the first grade sight words. This activity provided valuable information about Caitlin’s ability to transfer new knowledge into her real writing experiences. While reading Caitlin demonstrated that she was reading most long vowel words accurately but still could grow in this area. During reading Caitlin was relying on meaning cues to solve for unknown words. This was an important observation and showed that Caitlin was focusing on the meaning of the
story but also showed that Caitlin could continue her growth using visual cues while reading.

Although meaning was not lost during this reading sample, it was important for Caitlin to increase her overall accuracy while reading.

*Week 2 - April 21, 2014*

For week two of the study Caitlin continued to focus on the CVCe pattern and her ability to differentiate between short vowel “a” and long vowel “a.” This sort also included what were called “oddballs” which are words that may have the correct pattern with the wrong sound or vice versa.

During the initial sort Caitlin did not have much trouble differentiating between the short and long sounds. The only problem Caitlin seemed to encounter was about the oddball word “what.” Due to the fact that this word did not contain either short or long vowel “a” sound she was confused on where it should be placed. Working with Caitlin one on one, she was asked if she could produce the long “a” sound. She replied, “Well doesn't it just say its name?” after confirming for Caitlin that she was correct, she was asked what sound a short vowel “a” makes. Caitlin replied by saying that it sounds like the /a/ in “apple.” I followed up by asking Caitlin if she heard either the long vowel sound of “a” or the short vowel sound /a/ like “apple?” She responded that it didn’t have either of those sounds or the CVCe pattern. Caitlin was instructed that this particular word does not fit the pattern or sound of this week’s lesson so there was only one place it could belong. Caitlin then correctly placed the word “what” under the oddball category heading.

After the completion of the word sort, the group was asked to look at the work they had done and tell what they saw that was alike and what was different. Camilla spoke about how each word contained an “a.” Caitlin spoke up next and informed the group that each of the words under the long vowel “a” column had an “e” on the end. After a few groans from other students, who
appeared to know the answer as well, it was obvious that this group of students had begun to look at the letters and patterns in words and respond appropriately. This was an important skill for early readers because as they learn to compare words to one another they will be able to transfer this knowledge when decoding and encoding words during reading and writing by using known words to assist them.

Caitlin’s written sort showed growth. Out of twenty one words Caitlin was able to sort the words accurately with only two minor mistakes. Her sort appeared as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Short a “cat”</th>
<th>Long a “cake”</th>
<th>Oddballs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>fast</td>
<td>snap</td>
<td>page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sack</td>
<td>last</td>
<td>gate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>whale</td>
<td>grass</td>
<td>came</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bat</td>
<td>ask</td>
<td>base</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mad</td>
<td>hand</td>
<td>made</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.15

The only mistakes that were made by Caitlin were placing the long vowel word “whale” in the short vowel “a” column. The other mistake made was leaving out the word “glass” from the written sort all together. Due to the fact that the errors that Caitlin made during her written sort were small, they did not shed much light on Caitlin’s abilities. What can be noted about Caitlin was that she was not monitoring her work for accuracy. This was something that Caitlin needed growth in. Because she was a very bright young child and usually completed tasks with ease, she had never truly learned the value of checking over her work or using classroom supports to
review work. For the average child that would be developmentally appropriate but because Caitlin was advanced, expecting this from her was not inappropriate.

Even though these inaccuracies were small, Caitlin placing “whale” in the short “a” column provided an opportunity for Caitlin and me to work on breaking a word apart by its onset and rime. Using these activities provided information that helped drive my instruction and this was one example of how that worked. The ability to break apart words is vital for any early reader and Caitlin was ready to learn this new skill. Words with blends are good examples to use because they provide a clearer onset. The word “whale” begins with a digraph but the digraph “wh” was one that Caitlin was familiar with so it worked well as an example. Caitlin needed to learn how to break words apart so she would be able to independently check her own work even when she encountered and unknown word. Using the word “whale” Caitlin was asked to identify the first vowel in the word. After identifying the “a” I told Caitlin to dry a line right before the “a” so she would have two parts of the word “whale” and write the parts on her dry erase aboard with a space where she drew the line. Caitlin was able to and she discovered the onset to be “wh” and the rime to be “ale.” Looking at the two word parts I asked Caitlin to say both part individually and then quickly to form the word again. We practiced this skill on several other words and Caitlin understood that this would be a good way to identify the vowel sound in a word if she was having trouble but this would also assist her as she encoded these words in writing.
For Caitlin’s writing sample, she chose to write about playing with her little brother. Caitlin often writes about her brother and how they play together at home. For this sample Caitlin wrote much more than the previous week. She completed five sentences about her brother and how they went to dinner and played together. Within her work Caitlin again showed good control over
the vowel team “ay” as she used it again accurately to spell the words “stayed” and “played.” Some data to note was that Caitlin spelled “stayed” again later on as “staed” even though she has shown repeatedly that this was a vowel team that she had control over. As a growing reader, Caitlin showed that she was using what she knew about letters and sounds to convey meaning. Caitlin has shown that she was using “ay” with consistency and accuracy. This small invented spelling, encoding the word “stayed” as “staed”, provided an opportunity for Caitlin and me to reread her piece and look for errors in her encoding. This error did not hinder the meaning of her piece, but gave us the chance to carefully check her work for accuracy. This provided evidence that Caitlin may not be self-monitoring her work independently and needed support in this area. As Caitlin continued with her piece she wrote the sentence,

“I whant to go up stares to see what was up thar and I did not whant to go up thare.”

This one sentence showed a lot about Caitlin and what skills she was working with.

Starting with the word “want” Caitlin encodes this word as “whant” twice. This was due to the fact that we had been working on the “wh” digraph during guided reading word work and Caitlin was attempting to use her newly attained knowledge. This had a positive impact for Caitlin but was something that will need to be discussed during guided reading group. Following, Caitlin spelled the word “stair” with the CVCe pattern. This was evidence that Caitlin was hearing the long vowel sound in unknown words and was attempting to use the correct pattern to encode those words. Finally this sentence was more evidence that Caitlin was still working on her knowledge of sight words within her writing tasks. As stated previously Caitlin was able to spell all of her sight words
in isolation and was able to read all first grade sight words but something was missing when it came to using those sight words while engrossed in a writing task.

During week two Caitlin exhibited a lot of focus and showed growth in her abilities as evident by her work. She completed several word sorts, a written word sort, and several writing pieces. These activities helped to guide instruction. Caitlin showed that she was working within her zone of proximal development when she used but confused the spelling feature within her word study work. During Caitlin’s writing pieces this week she was attempting to spell the words “stair” and “there”, spelling them as “stare” and “thare.” When pronouncing and segmenting these two words, Caitlin stretched the words slowly. In the process of stretching the words, she distorted the pronunciations of them, creating what she heard as a long vowel a. She demonstrated this when she encoded the words with the CVCe pattern. This illustrated that, even though she was attempting to hear the correct sounds in the words, she would need continued assistance with stretching and segmenting in order to do so accurately.

While working on her word sort, Caitlin showed that she was not monitoring her work for accuracy, but was using what she knew to assist in her completion of the sort. School assignments had come easy to Caitlin, and as such she needed to realize the importance of checking her work over. This theme became evident as Caitlin worked on these word study activities. Upon asking Caitlin to check over her work using the strategies (i.e. breaking apart words) we had worked on, she was able to self-correct her errors. This showed that while she was able to complete the work correctly, she was not doing so on her first attempt. Due to the fact that this word study is by nature differentiated, Caitlin would continue to be challenged as we worked on the edge of what she knew and what she was learning.
Week 3-April 28, 2014

We continued work with long vowel patterns and this sort focused on long and short vowel “i.” We continued working with the CVCe pattern in words like “five.” During the initial introduction and sort, it was noted that most of the students were able to easily differentiate between the two sounds. Short and long vowel “i” have two very different sounds, so students were taught how to complete a blind sort with a partner from the *Words Their Way* text (Bear et al., 2008). During a blind sort the students sat facing one another and took turns reading the word cards to their partner and the listener told the speaker whether the word had a long or short sound. When students are asked to sort words that can “give away” the correct category, a blind sort can be a helpful activity. Due to the CVCe pattern we were working with, blind sorts allowed students the added challenge of listening for either the short or long vowel sound without the assistance of the pattern to help them. Either the teacher or a partner reads a card aloud without letting the listener see and then the listener has to tell the speaker which category to sort the word card in. This was a beneficial activity for both speaker and listener because it forced the listener to identify which vowel sound was within the word without being able to see the word pattern, and focus solely on the sounds.

During the word sort this week Caitlin showed improvement in her ability to sort words by breaking them apart and segmenting the medial vowel sound. Previously Caitlin had been sorting the words almost silently and then only really saying the words when she was looking for similarities and differences upon completion of her sort. This sort went much differently. Caitlin
broke the words apart into onset and rime and placed them under the correct heading. Caitlin segmented the word, “swim” as /sw/ and /im/, the word “while” as /wh/ and /ile/, and the word “stick” as /st/ and /ick/.

The oddball word for this week was “give.” This was a particularly hard oddball because it looks like it should have a long “i” sound but it actually contains a short “i” sound. This oddball word was confusing for the students because there was a category heading for words that contained a short vowel “i.” Caitlin was one of the many students who misplaced this word into the short vowel heading. When Caitlin proceeded to read through her word groupings she read right past the word “give” because it seemingly fit the category heading of short vowel sounds. She was asked to look at the long vowel column and respond with what was similar about all those words. Caitlin knew right away that all of those words ended with an “e.” She was then asked to look at the short vowel column and was asked the same question. She responded with the fact that they all contained an “i.” Upon asking Caitlin if she saw any words in the short vowel column that looked like they didn’t belong she pointed to the word “give” and justified her placement of the word because it contained a short “i” sound. She was praised for locating and identifying the vowel sound, but when reminded that we are looking for words that have the CVCe pattern and a long vowel, she gave a sheepish smile and moved the word to the oddball heading. She explained that “give” was a very tricky oddball.

The following day students were instructed to complete their written sort of the word study words before they began a blind sort with their partner. Blind sorts are used to help students rely only on their listening skills when sorting words into short and long vowel
categories. Students are then able to check the word for the correct or incorrect pattern, after identifying whether it was a long or short vowel and place under a heading.

Caitlin’s written sort this week was completely accurate. This sort was completed independently with only a quick prompt to the entire class on remembering to use the tools available to them in order to check their work. Caitlin not only sorted the words correctly but she used her word cards to correctly spell each word study word. This was evidence that Caitlin was beginning to use classroom supports and resources in order to monitor her own work as well as work on internalizing the new long vowel pattern.

During the blind sort with her partner, Caitlin was able to listen for short and long vowel sounds and sort words, while she was being observed, and even gave a little grin when she had to sort the oddball word “give.” Caitlin listened carefully to the speaker and was observed segmenting the word “nice” as /n/ and /ice/, the word “prize” as /pr/ and /ize/, the word “kick” as /k/ and /ick/. When it was Caitlin’s turn to read the word cards she realized her partner needed her to slow down her pronunciation of the word. If she read the word card quickly she often would have to repeat the word several times. Caitlin eventually moved on from slowly saying the word, to basically segmenting the word for her partner. She did this for her partner by putting and emphasis on the medial vowel sound. I let this continue for a round because both students were benefitting from the activity in meaningful ways. While Caitlin was practicing segmenting words her partner benefitted from the added emphasis Caitlin’s reading provided.

During Caitlin’s reading observation she read the fiction text *The Mailman’s Hat* (Higgins, 2009). Caitlin’s comprehension of this story was excellent and she was able to sequentially retell the story. She continued to use meaning cues to guide her reading and improved her self-
correction rate. Out of 168 words Caitlin miscued on eleven words. The majority of her miscues were visual. She read at a fast pace and this caused Caitlin to miscue even on known words. Caitlin was able to read these words in isolation however; she needed continued work to read these words accurately. As readers, students do not often read words in isolation, so it benefitted Caitlin to slow down and attend to the text on the page in order to improve accuracy. In the text, the author used twenty-six long vowel words and ten of which matched the CVCe pattern that Caitlin was studying. Out of those ten words she only miscued on one word that used the CVCe pattern. In the sentence, “Mr. Smith was a mailman, and he wore a mailman’s hat.” Caitlin read the word “wore” as “wored.” She pronounced the long vowel “o” but added the -ed ending making a structural miscue. The word “wore” is an irregular past tense word. Her miscue showed that Caitlin was attempting to read for meaning by changing the irregular past tense word into a more regular pattern. As I observed Caitlin I noticed that she paused after the sentence seemingly hearing that something did not sound right but did not self-correct to use correct structure. Overall Caitlin was reading for meaning and was working to coordinate all cueing systems.

Caitlin completed five spelling sentences during a twenty-minute word work rotation. She continued to go above and beyond, and instead of just using one word study word per sentence; Caitlin was using two or three words from the sort for each sentence. This sometimes resulted in some very unusual sentences but they remained structurally correct with accurate spelling of all word study words. For example:

“I fond thin mice in my shed.”
Caitlin’s writing sample came from her journal and was all about her dog, Brono. She wrote seven sentences focused on the same topic and added punctuation appropriately throughout. There were several long vowel words within this writing piece and Caitlin did an exceptional job spelling all CVCe patterned words correctly. She did display some trouble while working with long vowel sounds that used a vowel team instead of the CVCe pattern. Since we had not
specifically worked on that skill this was not a skill that was expected of Caitlin. In each vowel team word she wrote, she was able to correctly encode the long vowel sound but ultimately did not spell the word conventionally. For example she spelled the word “tail” like “tall” and “weeks” like “wekks.” These spellings were interesting because Caitlin knew something was different about these words but because she was not yet using vowel teams accurately, she attempted to alter her spellings. This was evidence that Caitlin was not only hearing long vowel sounds but she was working to correctly encode those words by using patterns and her own approximations.

Caitlin’s work during week three showed tremendous growth in her ability to read and write words that contained long vowel sounds particularly those that used the CVCe pattern. During her initial sort of this word group, Caitlin demonstrated that she was segmenting words accurately and noticing minute differences in sound and spelling. While she worked on a blind sort with a partner Caitlin was able to practice listening for and producing both long and short vowels. This sort also helped Caitlin to check her work by reviewing the spelling pattern in the word and sorting the word correctly, as shown above. While working on her spelling sentences and her own journal writing, Caitlin demonstrated that she was able to use resources available to her in order to practice the CVCe pattern, internalize the new spelling feature, and monitor her work for accuracy. Another benefit of observing Caitlin’s writing was that she was able to show what long vowel patterns she was using but confusing. As Caitlin began to use the CVCe pattern correctly, it was observed that she was also attempting to encode words with different long vowel spellings such as –ai and –ee. This was valuable information that was used to plan instruction. The activities completed provided significant information about what Caitlin had control over and what she needed further instruction on.
Caitlin showed growth with long vowel patterns and could have moved on to other vowel teams but seeing as though she was still confusing some vowel sounds while writing, it was important to continue with long vowel sounds that used the CVCe pattern. The words for week four contained short and long “o” sounds and the list contained two oddball words those being, “come” and “some.” During the initial introduction and sort Caitlin did not follow the procedure explained previously. She was not segmenting the words and matching them to the keywords. Instead, Caitlin was saying the words silently and when asked to break a word apart she struggled to do so. This could have resulted from Caitlin forgetting the newly learned skill of breaking words apart or it could have resulted from some confusion Caitlin was having hearing the difference between long and short vowel “o”. Either way, I believed it was important to revisit onset and rime and make sure she was able to break apart words even when she struggled with a new sound. This was important for Caitlin’s independence as well as her self-monitoring skills.

Upon reviewing how to break words apart, students worked individually at the back table in a small group. While observing Caitlin, it was evident that she was able to sort these words by short and long vowel sounds. Even though she was not following the procedure instructed, she was accurately sorting these words. This could be evidence that Caitlin did not need to segment the words for this sound. Her initial struggles with the word sort could be attributed to the fact that it was her first time with the new words. Now that she had worked on identifying those words, she did not need to segment them until she came to a more difficult word. Caitlin watched as a fellow student sorted their cards by only looking at the ending “e” and for the second half of her own sort Caitlin did that as well. Caitlin quickly realized that she must have made an error
while sorting because she knew each word sort had at least one oddball word and her word sort did not have any oddball words. Caitlin went back through each grouping and found the oddball “come” easily. She did not realize that this sort contained two oddball words and, as had become a habit of Caitlin’s, she did not continue to check her work because she was confident that she had completed the activity accurately. Caitlin was asked to wait before cleaning up her word cards and was asked if she could read through each grouping and double check for accuracy. A link was made between word study and math, in that it was important in math to double check your answers and that the same was true for reading and writing. Realizing that she had made an error, Caitlin quickly read through all the long vowel words and found the oddball “some”. It was explained to Caitlin, and the entire group, how sorting by looking at the end of the word was one way to sort the cards but by doing so they may make more mistakes than if they followed the procedure given.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Long o “bone”</th>
<th>Short o “sock”</th>
<th>Oddballs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joke</td>
<td>stove</td>
<td>hot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hope</td>
<td>home</td>
<td>chop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>those</td>
<td>broke</td>
<td>clock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hose</td>
<td>rode</td>
<td>pot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hole</td>
<td>cone</td>
<td>spot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rope</td>
<td>rose</td>
<td>job</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.18

Caitlin’s written word sort this week was perfect again. She completed this activity independently so there was no way to confirm whether Caitlin used her word cards to spell these words or if she was able to do so completely independently. What can be surmised was that Caitlin was able to locate both oddballs without prompts from the teacher.
In class we had learned about informational writing. Caitlin’s writing was all about flowers. The first observation made about this writing piece was that it was very short in length. During our writer’s workshop time we had studied mentor texts by National Geographic, Gail Gibbons, and many others. During the reading of these mentor texts we studied the illustrations and text features that were employed by these authors. During this sample, Caitlin was very focused on her illustration and labels. This may have been the cause of the shorter writing piece. The writing in this piece was interesting for a number of reasons. I could tell that Caitlin was really attempting to encode long vowel patterns when she heard them. This was evident in her illustrations when she labeled the flower “lielocks” attempting to spell the word “lilacs.” This was a wonderful approximation of the word “lilacs”, and showed that she was truly focused on hearing and encoding the long vowel sounds. Caitlin heard the long vowel “i” and attempted to use either a vowel team or the CVCe pattern. Either way, this was evidence that she was attempting these unknown long vowel words. Another word Caitlin attempted to encode was “wild” spelled
“willed.” As she did in the previous week’s writing sample, Caitlin knew there was a long vowel sound but was unsure how to encode that word so she attempted an alternate spelling by doubling the “l” in “wild.”

Caitlin completed five sentences this week and completed them in the same manner as she had been, using two words per sentence with accuracy. Two sentences shed light on some areas of improvement for Caitlin. Those sentences were:

“I choped up vegatebels and put them in a pot.”

“I hope those kid do it.”

These sentences showed evidence that Caitlin was ready to learn about adding endings where the consonant needed to be doubled dependent on short or long vowels. This skill focus is embedded in the Syllables and Affixes stage of spelling, which is the next stage of spelling. For Caitlin’s second sentence it was surprising to see that she had some structural issues using plural “s.” This was not common for Caitlin and therefore leads me to believe that this probably had more to do with her tendency to rush and not monitor or reread her finished product. This was evidence that although Caitlin was improving in her ability to self monitor previously, she still had room for improvement.

Words Their Way incorporates various literacy activities (Bear et al., 2008). This variety of activities often provided insight to what the student was working toward. Week four’s activities showed that Caitlin was gaining confidence in her spelling of long vowel words but that she still had areas in which to improve. Through these activities it was shown that Caitlin did not seem to be rereading or checking over her work after completion. Although this was not the main goal of
instruction, it offered information that helped to tailor Caitlin’s instruction. During her word sorting, Caitlin continued to work with patterns to solidify her understandings as well as practice breaking words by their onset and rime in order to segment the vowel sounds when needed. By including oddballs into the word sort, Caitlin was able to identify that not all words will fit every pattern she was taught. Working with words like “come” and “some” while sorting for short and long “o”, Caitlin was able to identify that while these words fit the pattern being studied they do not have the correct vowel sound and as such needed special attention. The activities completed provided insight for me as well as for Caitlin.

Week 5-May 12, 2014

During week five Caitlin worked on long and short vowel “u”, the last vowel sound used with the CVCe pattern. At this point in the study Caitlin was showing control over this pattern and was even working to include known vowel teams into her writing. However, this was a challenging word sort because long vowel “u” can make two different sounds those being /yoo/ (the letter name) and /oo/ like in the word “boot.” During the initial word sort instruction and modeling we compared the word “cute” and “tube” to demonstrate these different sounds. Students were told that even though they make a slightly different sound they are spelled in the same way using the CVCe pattern. On the first day that we met each week students were given the words to cut out and sort this being the only task they were required to finish that day. Caitlin showed amazing growth during this word sort. At first Caitlin was thrown by the different sounds long “u” can make and found the sort a little challenging for the first words sorted but as she remained determined she excelled with this sort while many other students struggled. Caitlin was able to
verbally break apart words and at times was even drawing a line separating the onset and rime on her word cards. The oddball was “put” and Caitlin was able to quickly identify it as such.

During the course of this study Caitlin was encouraged to monitor her work and to use the classroom supports in order to help her refrain from forming bad habits. With this in mind, Caitlin needed to be formally assessed on whether she was correctly using the spelling pattern CVCe for long vowel sounds in words. For Caitlin’s written word the words were read aloud to her while she attempted to encode the words given. As we concluded instruction working with this long vowel pattern, I needed to decide whether she was ready to move on to other word study skills or if she needed additional time with the CVCe pattern. A re-creation of Caitlin’s word sort was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Short u “cup”</th>
<th>Long u “tube/mule”</th>
<th>Oddballs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>put</td>
<td>drum</td>
<td>June</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pluse</td>
<td>such</td>
<td>cube</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>just</td>
<td>shut</td>
<td>tune</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bus</td>
<td>cut</td>
<td>cute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jump</td>
<td>club</td>
<td>rude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hunt</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During this sort Caitlin showed that she was able to apply all that she had been learning over the last three weeks. Caitlin made three small errors during her blind written sort. She spelled the word “plus” like “pluse” and the word “mule” like “mulel.” The latter I believed to be the result of how Caitlin was segmenting the word to herself adding an extra /l/ to her pronunciation of the word. She also sorted the word “put” under the short “u” column. It was interesting that she also correctly identified “put” as the oddball word within this sort. My
assumption was that Caitlin, sorted the word “put” incorrectly because she was only looking at the CVC pattern and was not focused on the unique sound in “put.” This was evidence that Caitlin was ready to move onto the next skill within her developmental spelling stage.

Caitlin was assessed this week with a running reading record from the *Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System* (Fountas & Pinnell, 2008). She read the level L text *Dog Stories.* This running record consisted of 267 words, thirty eight of which contained long vowel sounds. Of those thirty eight, thirteen words used the CVCe pattern. Caitlin did not miscue on any words that used the CVCe pattern and read with ninety-seven percent accuracy overall. Caitlin missed one long vowel word but did so by omitting the word “right” which we had not studied. During word study Caitlin learned and practiced breaking words apart. During her reading she used that skill to break apart the word “envelope.” She broke this word into three syllables, “en-ve-lope.” She segmented the word accurately and noticed that the end of the word followed the CVCe pattern. This piece of evidence allowed me to informally assess that Caitlin was using new skills to assist in her reading. As she had done previously, Caitlin was using meaning to guide her word choice. She did not self-correct any of the nine miscues made. This running record was evidence that Caitlin was using the lessons taught during word study to assist in her reading abilities.
Caitlin’s writing sample came from her journal and depicts what she did on a Monday when she was home sick from school. Caitlin showed control over many long vowel words such as “Monday,” “home,” and “like.” She also correctly used several oddball words that we worked on throughout the course of the study such as “come” and “have.” Two pieces of information to be noted were, in the words “huge” spelled “heuge” and “lemonade” spelled “leminaid.” Caitlin’s spelling of “huge” was typical of when she was working independently. She was aware that she needed to add an “e” to make this word correct but did not follow the correct pattern. Caitlin’s spelling of the word “lemonade” was very indicative of her attempts to encode a long vowel sound using vowel teams in a multisyllabic word. This writing piece was evidence that Caitlin was
successful in listening for and hearing all the phonemes within unknown words. It also showed that she was ready to begin more challenging lessons about vowel teams.

While I observed Caitlin work it became obvious that Caitlin was transferring knowledge from her word study lessons to her other areas of work. The word sort lessons and skills she had learned were assisting her in her reading and writing endeavors. During reading Caitlin used her break apart skills to help her to decode the unknown word “envelope” correctly. While writing Caitlin was using long vowel spelling patterns to encode words with those vowel sounds. Although Caitlin was still confusing some long vowel sounds, she was using what she had learned to enhance the quality of her work. The written word sort, included in the program, helped to assess Caitlin’s use of the spelling pattern CVCe. Overall the *Words Their Way* program assisted Caitlin in her growth as reader and writer (Bear et. al, 2008).

Week 6-May 19, 2014

To end the study, Caitlin and the rest of her word study group needed to bring together the lessons taught in the previous four weeks by working with a word study list that contained short vowel words with the CVC pattern and long vowel words with the CVCe pattern.

This word sort was completed with the same procedure as was in previous weeks. The sort was modeled for the students and they segmented the sounds in each word and placed each word under the correct heading. The difference with this sort was that there were no keywords for the students to compare the words to. The students needed to listen for and remember what the short and long vowels sounded like and place the word cards under either the column marked
CVC Short or CVCe Long. Week six’s sort contained two oddball words, “done” and “have” which were not previously learned in other sorts.

During this sort Caitlin did an exceptional job following the procedures outlined for her. This was evidence that Caitlin had learned from her errors in the past. She was now realizing that the shortcuts she had attempted previously did not save her time and actually made the task more difficult. Caitlin struggled with the word “done.” She initially placed the word under the short vowel heading but repeatedly returned to the word and eventually placed the word to the side to complete her sort. With the exception of the oddball word “done” Caitlin was able to correctly sort all remaining words. When Caitlin was asked if she needed assistance with the word “done” she was able to respond giving the reason for her confusion. She stated that she heard the short vowel sound /uh/ but it shouldn’t go in that column because of the “e” on the end. As Caitlin verbalized her confusion she managed to answer her own question and finally placed the word into the oddball column. This confusion was noted and was informally assessed again through her written sort.

Caitlin continued to do outstanding work with her spelling sentences. She was still using two or more word sort words per sentence and was showing growth in her ability to correctly structure each sentence, even those that turned out to be somewhat outlandish. A common theme that was emerging from the data was that Caitlin was ready to learn how to add endings to different words. This was evident by the sentences:

“The wax was dripping from the car.”

“I was ruleing the race.”
In both of these examples Caitlin attempted to add endings to her word study words. This was evidence that Caitlin was ready to work beyond just long vowel patterns and was also ready to begin learning more difficult skills, such as inflected endings within the Syllables and Affixes stage of spelling development.

For the final reading assessment, Caitlin was assessed, again, using the *Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System* (Fountas & Pinnell, 2008). She read the level L fiction text, *Plenty of Pets*. This running record contained 206 words, thirty seven of which used long vowels and twenty one words that used the CVCe pattern. Caitlin miscued on only one of the thirty seven long vowel words within this text. Caitlin read the sentence,

“All around the classroom, students who hoped to be picked to bring home the adorable, fuzzy hamster shot their hands up high.”

Caitlin miscued on the word “hoped” reading “hopped.” Upon completing the running record Caitlin and I discussed how past tense CVCe words look a little different when you add –ed. One on one, Caitlin worked on adding –ed to short vowel words that needed a double consonant before adding –ed and worked on adding –ed to long vowel CVCe words. This was a new skill for Caitlin and one she had previously showed was something she needed to work on. This running record was evidence that Caitlin had success with long vowel words and was ready to move on to more challenging skills.

Caitlin’s written sort this week showed continued evidence of growth. In last week’s written word sort Caitlin misspelled the word “mule” and this week was able to encode that same word perfectly. As was shown during the initial word sort, Caitlin had trouble with the oddball word “done.” This confusion remained as Caitlin wrote both the word “done” and “dune” under
the oddball heading. Although Caitlin correctly identified the word as being an oddball, she was unsure of how she should spell it. When questioned Caitlin responded by saying, “I wasn’t sure but I heard the /uh/ so I tried it both ways.” Upon asking Caitlin which word she thought looked correct, she was able to identify the correctly spelled word and therefore crossed out the incorrect version of the word. Caitlin was praised for taking a risk and using her knowledge of long and short vowel sounds in order to monitor and correct her work.

Caitlin was very pleased with her written piece during week six. She wrote about our guided reading group and her part in our upcoming reader’s theater play. Caitlin spelled all short and long vowel words correctly with the exception of “keep” which she spelled “cepe.” Even though this word was spelled incorrectly it was important to note that she was attempting to use the correct long vowel pattern and was recording letters for each phoneme. This was further evidence that Caitlin was ready for the Syllables and Affixes stage of spelling development, where there is a focus on vowel teams.
To conclude the study, Caitlin was given a formal assessment on short and long vowel words that contained the CVCe pattern. This assessment included twenty different pictures, which Caitlin needed to identify and correctly spell. As a small group the pictures were identified for the students and they were permitted to ask what a picture was if they were confused after the initial identification. Caitlin correctly spelled eighteen of the twenty words. The only two words she encoded incorrectly were words in which she did not ask for assistance but named the picture something else. This was done by several students during this assessment. For example she wrote the word “books” next to the picture that stood for the word “pile” and she wrote “rock” next to the picture that stood for “stack.” Every other long and short vowel word was spelled correctly. This was evidence that Caitlin had gained substantial knowledge and skills using long vowel patterns to correctly encode these words.

Upon the completion of the study Caitlin was given a second developmental spelling analysis. This analysis showed that Caitlin had progressed in her spelling abilities. She started the study in the middle Within Word stage only correctly spelling three of the seven words assessing that stage of development. Her final DSA showed that Caitlin had moved out of the Within Word stage and into the Syllables and Affixes stage. Within the Syllables and Affixes stage, her DSA showed that she had correctly spelled five of the seven words assessed at that stage of development which revolved around inflected endings. She correctly encoded the words “chewed”, “shouted”, “camped”, “clapping”, and “riding.” She spelled the word “wishes” as “wishis”, and the word “tries” as “trys.” This supported the previous conclusion that Caitlin was ready to work on adding specific endings to different types of words.
Upon completion of the activities, during the final week of the study Caitlin showed substantial growth in all areas of literacy development. During her word sort, she improved her speed and accuracy while using the correct procedure and as such had great success sorting the words. Also, during Caitlin’s word sort when she encountered a confusing situation, Caitlin was able to articulate what she knew about words and how they worked. By verbalizing her thoughts and knowledge Caitlin was able to solve a problem she was having independently. This was evidence that Caitlin was able to use what she had learned to greatly impact her abilities to problem solve as well encode and decode words. Caitlin was using her new knowledge of words within her reading and writing experiences. She consistently used skills and procedures taught within word study to enhance her work writing and reading. As Caitlin was assessed in the final week of the study, results confirmed and supported conclusions that had come to light in previous weeks. As Caitlin worked through the sorts, she showed control over certain patterns and showed deficits in others which were vital in choosing what Caitlin needed to learn next.

**Common Themes for Caitlin**

**Common themes for Caitlin include self-monitoring her work through the possible use of classroom supports, drawing on known words and skills, and sight word recognition and use.**

**Caitlin was a very smart young lady and as such has a lot of confidence in the work she produced. This had been a positive attribute of Caitlin’s for the majority of the school year. The concern arose when Caitlin was so confident that she failed to monitor her own work and because of that made errors within her work that did not exemplify the level of work she was truly capable of.** This was evident in her written pieces and spelling sentences. Over the course of the study Caitlin was encouraged to review her work upon completion and to make use of word walls and
classroom supports when appropriate. By the completion of the study Caitlin was self-monitoring more frequently and using classroom supports available to her. This was evident in her word sorts and writing during weeks four, five and six. In those activities Caitlin was able to check over her work and make corrections to her own work through procedures taught during word study.

At the start of the study, Caitlin was previously assessed on her knowledge of first grade sight words. Caitlin was able to recognize all one hundred sight words. She was also capable of spelling over ninety of those words correctly. During the course of the study Caitlin did not consistently show this exceptional knowledge of sight words and as such spelled these words phonetically often. Frequent repetitions of misspelled words may have caused some of those misspellings to become engrained, which increased the frequency of errors she made while writing during writer’s workshop and our Daily Five rotations. This evidence eluded that Caitlin’s sight word knowledge was not as high as it truly was. As Caitlin became more aware of the need to check over her work during word study that habit was reflected in her writing and as such her errors on known words decreased.

While working with new spelling patterns, Caitlin increased her ability to use that spelling pattern to enhance the quality of work she was producing. Working with long vowel patterns, Caitlin was able to transfer that knowledge over into her reading and writing tasks. As she learned to break apart words in order to segment sounds, Caitlin then used this same skill in reading and writing to help her to encode and decode known words. This impacted the quantity and quality of her written work.
Word sorts, written tasks, and assessments helped to assess skills and features in which Caitlin needed to learn. Procedures used during word study were transferred over into other areas and assisted with speed and accuracy while reading and writing.

I am pleased with the work Caitlin accomplished and the growth she made. She was working beyond grade level and would enter second grade working at a high level of competency.

Looking Across the Cases

Throughout the course of the study, commonalities, differences and some anomalies came to light. The most obvious change I noticed across all three case study students was the students' abilities to see similarities and differences between words that were similar. When using their sorts, students were taught to look carefully at words and notice what was the same and what was different. They were then able to sort their word cards, as well as check their groupings for correct sounds and spelling patterns. This helped them when writing and reading. During their literate activities they showed growth when decoding and encoding words. A strategy that I taught my case study students was the break apart strategy. The break apart strategy helped students to break about words using their onset and rimes. By finding the first vowel and segmenting words into their onset and rime, Mitch, Camilla, and Caitlin were able to read, write, and examine words. This was a useful strategy that was another common way that they used this program to impact their writing. During sorting, reading and writing activities, all three students used this strategy to encode and decode unknown words, which had an immediate impact on their reading and writing experiences.

While learning different strategies and participating in different activities, all three students began to draw connections between reading and writing. They were noticing that these
strategies and skills helped them to solve words, in both reading and writing that, they previously had not been able to read or write. This new connection they made helped to increase rate, word solving and word identification.

The final similarity I noticed during the course of the study was an increase in the students’ abilities noticing that some words can have predictable patterns, and that those patterns can help them to solve unknown words. The word sorts included, focused student learning on specific orthographic features. All three case study students began to internalize those lessons and use them in their literate activities. Learning about the different vowel sounds, patterns, and digraphs focused students’ learning. This gave them new knowledge they were able to use almost immediately in their own work.

While there were many commonalities across the three case studies, some differences were also evident. A theme for Camilla was that she needed to work on increasing her confidence level. The procedures set forth by the program helped Camilla to take risks when working with new sounds and patterns. Teaching her how to check over her completed work, taught Camilla that she could take risks and then carefully review her work in order to find errors or misinterpretations in her own work independently. This was a boost to her confidence, and as such was able to grow as a reader and writer by attempting challenging tasks. While these new skills helped Camilla to be more confident, Caitlin had a different outcome. Caitlin was a very confident student at the beginning of the study and as such, she would make slight errors even with skills she had already shown consistency with. Caitlin did not show as much growth as Camilla had when revising her work.
Another difference between the students in the study was evident during their independent work. Camilla and Caitlin showed that as they internalized new procedures for breaking apart words and reviewing their work, they were able to work at a higher level particularly when working independently. Mitch did not have the same outcome. Mitch needed much more one on one support until these new procedures became internalized. He showed that he was able to monitor his work but did not successfully grasp these new skills as quickly as Camilla and Caitlin had.

Overall, all the students gained new word knowledge, strategies, and skills which enhanced their abilities to read and write with confidence while utilizing new information.

Conclusion

Key findings in this study were repetition, classroom routines and supports, spelling strategies, and confidence levels. The next chapter will discuss in further detail the implications of each of these findings. During this study I determined that it was vital for students to learn more about words and how they work at an early age in order to build the confidence that was necessary to read and write this challenging language. I have also discovered that each child was unique in the way that they learned and needed to be taught various strategies so they could be in control of their own learning. English is a difficult language to master but through the use of word study, students can become better equipped to grapple with this challenge.
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this research study was to study the impact of the developmental word study program *Words Their Way* on a first grade classroom (Bear et al., 2008). This study took place in a first grade classroom with twenty two students. A focal group was selected and three students were studied and observed in depth while completing this word study program. The groupings were made by measuring students’ spelling abilities by means of a developmental spelling analysis provided in the program. Of those students three were chosen who were at different academic levels. The focus of this study was the research question: How might the implementation of the program *Words Their Way* (Bear et al., 2008) impact how students use their knowledge of phonics within their real reading and writing experiences?

Conclusions

Over the course of the study many key findings emerged that helped to answer the research question. This program helped students to: learn more about words through the use of a variety of activities; learn and practice several strategies for reading, spelling, and solving words; make connections between words with similar sounds and patterns; build their confidence levels which made independent reading and writing easier. Williams, et al. (2009) support the idea that systematic word study helps students to learn the patterns and orthographic features of words and assists students in their ability to read and write. By working through phonics instruction, in a systematic and targeted way, students learn how to work with words and apply orthographic features to other words within their writing. Word study supports students as they work to gain a
working knowledge or orthography so students are able to apply that knowledge to their reading and writing.

**Students learned more about words through a variety of activities.** The *Words Their Way* program provided lists of words to be used to teach new sounds and spelling features. Researchers Williams and Lundstrom (2007) recommend that primary teachers use word study to support word solving in addition to word learning. Students were able to do this by taking part in various activities working with new patterns, and features.

The lists provided by this program were used in a variety of ways. A key activity in the program was sorting. Students were able to sort word cards into predetermined groups as well as make their own groupings by looking at the similarities and differences within their word list. As students study patterns, they need to look beyond single letter sounds and look at patterns containing multiple letters (Williams, et al., 2009). This activity provided students with opportunities to recognize words, read them aloud to partners, and compare similarities and differences in pattern. By sorting words in a variety of ways, students had prolonged exposure and practice with those sounds and patterns. Williams and Lundstrom (2007) stated that providing students with hands-on activities helped them to discover patterns and features. This often resulted in students monitoring their work more closely. By working with the same word cards for an entire week, students became familiar with word families and recognized what they looked like and sounded like. While Mitch worked on sorting his word cards during week one, he demonstrated that he was able to self-correct his work by checking the word he had matched incorrectly and correctly matching the picture and word cards. In Mitch’s week four data he also demonstrated his ability to check over his work and adjust his writing to demonstrate what
concepts he already had control of. This was evidence that Mitch was increasing his ability to monitor his own work which he previously was not doing consistently. Similarly, evidence emerged as Camilla demonstrated her ability to self-correct her work. She demonstrated this when she double checked her word sort and found that she had misplaced her oddball word card and was able to adjust using her new knowledge.

Blind sorts were a way students could practice listening for certain sounds in words rather than relying on a pattern that was easily discernible by the spelling. According to Bear et al. (2008) sorting words helps students see the differences and similarities in meaning, sounds, and patterns. Williams et al. (2009) also highly recommended word sorts because it actively engaged students which allowed them to explore and analyze while they looked for similarities and differences. Williams et al. (2009) also wrote that by comparing and contrasting word features, students form knowledge that could be applied to new words. Written sorts provided the opportunity for students to practice spelling words through the help of the word cards and also provided an opportunity for students to attempt correct spelling of a picture word. This information was a concrete way to assess what understandings the students may have constructed from the lessons and activities during word study. During Camilla’s week two written sort she demonstrated that she was able to accurately break words apart in order to listen for the correct vowel sound and sort accordingly. During Caitlin’s week three sort she was able to demonstrate good control over the CVCe pattern and conventionally encoded her written sort words. This was evidence that showed that students were learning more about words through a variety of activities. Engaging students in a myriad of hands-on activities helped students to discover the regularities, patterns, and features in words (Williams & Lundstrom, 2007).
Word hunts were another activity used during this program. A word hunt was when a student searched through his or her guided reading books to look for examples of a sound or pattern that they were working with during that week. This activity helped students to draw connections between words and gave students real life experiences with the word study skills. Gehsmann (2008) supports the understanding that reading and spelling (writing) have a reciprocal relationship. This activity helped foster that relationship as students drew connections between spelling words and reading words. Word hunts provided additional examples of words that had a similar sound, pattern, or meaning. Camilla was able to easily find words that matched the vowel “o” sounds she had been studying, which was evidence that she was drawing connections between word study and reading.

Another activity used during word study was spelling sentences. In this activity students were required to write sentences that contained words from their study list. This was another concrete way teachers could assess student progress and correct any misunderstandings in meaning. After sorting the word cards several times over the course of a week, spelling sentences were a great way to culminate learning and monitor any transfer of knowledge or identify areas for future teaching.

Invernizzi and Hayes (2004) state that knowledge of the orthographic system grows, in part, from accumulated experiences with specific word spellings and patterns. The Words Their Way program incorporates multiple activities for each word list. By giving students the opportunity to work with these words and patterns, teachers provided students with meaningful experiences which in turn resulted in a greater understanding of words and how they worked.
Students learned and practiced several strategies for reading, spelling and solving unknown words. During small group word study I modeled how to complete the sort for that week, as well as point out the sounds or spelling feature that my students would be working with. Following that instruction, we worked together to sort or match the word cards. During this time of guided instruction I would take advantage of opportunities to teach word solving strategies to the small group. The research by Williams et al. (2009) stated that the impact of targeted, small group instruction surpassed the impact of whole group instruction supporting the practice of guided word study instruction. During small group instruction targeted, explicit strategy instruction can occur. Strategy instruction is important because those strategies become the tools that students use when they are working independently (Williams et al., 2009). When working in small groups and teaching specific strategies, we encourage and model for students to move beyond spelling and think cognitively about what they know about orthography (Williams et al. 2009).

Bear and Templeton (1998), support that teaching a myriad of strategies and processes for thinking about words and how words work, help students to read and write. One strategy involved breaking the words apart by their onset and rime. By finding the first vowel and breaking the word into two parts, students were often able to segment the two parts and then solve the word. This strategy was one that I instructed on and prompted for often during small group and whole group instruction. During week six Mitch showed that he was able to use this break apart strategy to conventionally encode words while writing independently. Similarly during week six of Camilla’s data, she also used this strategy while sorting her word cards into their categories. Students need frequent opportunities to practice this strategy alongside teacher scaffolding (Williams et al., 2009).
Another word solving strategy that was taught involved syllables. I would model how to clap out the syllables in multi-syllabic words and how to then segment the word into its individual syllables. This strategy assisted students in decoding and encoding words. Camilla took advantage of this strategy as she worked during independent writing time. When she was encoding a multi-syllabic word she used this strategy to break the word apart into smaller chunks that were easier for her to encode. Mitch also used this strategy when he was working to encode the word “cheetah”. Even though Mitch spelled the word “chetu” he was showing that he was able to hear the short vowel sound as well as the digraph “ch.” Williams (2009) discussed that the goal of teaching word study is to show children how to use the knowledge they have learned to support their spelling attempts while encoding when writing and decoding when reading.

Explicit strategy instruction and modeling take place during small group instruction, making it one of the most important aspects of word study. Teaching about orthographic features and principles was only one part of this program. By teaching word solving strategies, I was giving my students the tools they needed in order to be successful independently. If I expected students to transfer this learning to their own reading and writing tasks, I had to explicitly teach and model what I expected students to do when they encountered an unknown word. Teaching strategies like: how to break a word apart, clap out the syllables, or use a word they know, I provided students with tools they used independently to construct new word knowledge. This provided students with word knowledge that they then used to enhance a wide range of reading and writing activities (Williams et al., 2009). During my own study, I observed Camilla and Caitlin using the syllables strategy to encode multisyllabic words while writing. Mitch drew on the break apart strategy often, particularly when he was working to encode medial short vowel sounds. These examples would not have been possible if I had simply focused solely on orthographic
features. Instead, I explicitly taught students word solving strategies which they were able to draw upon as the need arose.

**Students made connections between words with similar sounds and patterns while reading and writing.** Drawing connections between words was an important aspect of this program. The emphasis in phonics is on the patterns within words due to the fact that the English language does not have one to one correspondence between phonemes and graphemes (Tompkins, 2010). By working on groups of words that contained the same feature or sound, drawing connections between similar words was simple for the students in this study. While working on certain vowel sounds, Camilla and Caitlin were able to transfer that knowledge over into their reading and writing experiences. Bear et al. (2008) state that a successful outcome to word study instruction is a student's ability to use skills, patterns, and principles taught to advance his or her abilities in writing. When they encountered an unknown word that contained the letter “a” they were able to think back on their word study work and attempt both vowel sounds and decide what sounded right and what would make sense in the sentence they were reading. By transferring this knowledge into their reading experiences students were able to read with greater accuracy which directly impacted their comprehension of a text.

Working with word family patterns allowed Mitch to practice short vowel sounds by working with chunks of words. Instead of sounding out the word “cat” as /c/ /a/ /t/ he was able to break the word into its onset /c/ and its rime /at/. This was a more efficient way to decode this word and made decoding other words with the /at/ word family simple. This new skill increased Mitch’s ability to decode words. Efficient decoding increased his rate, and in turn his fluency, when reading words with word families he was familiar with. Drawing this connection between word
study and reading increased the quality of his reading. Williams et al. (2009) stated that the main goal of word study is to develop students’ working knowledge of orthography so that they may apply this knowledge strategically in a myriad of other literacy activities. Explicit teaching of word solving strategies provided students with the tools they needed to be successful independently. For example, Mitch utilized the strategy of breaking apart a word by its onset and rime. This strategy enabled Mitch to manipulate words by finding familiar chunks which in turn enhanced his ability to work independently to encode similar words. This skill can also be observed during reading as a student decodes a word with word families.

**Students built their confidence levels, which made independent reading and writing easier.** Learning about how words work and being able to manipulate them in several ways gave students the confidence to take risks when reading and writing unknown words. Working at the students’ instructional level (within their stage of spelling development) provided work that the students’ were ready to learn and therefore reduced the amount of frustration and increased their confidence. Word study begins when teachers discover where students are “using but confusing” certain orthographic features. An expert teacher needs to be diligent in his or her efforts to observe when students may be frustrated or bored and make adjustments as needed (Bear et al., 2008). These important observations help to maintain confidence levels in students as they learn new principles and skills. Gehsmann (2008) explains that when teachers begin to realize the wide range of spellers in their classrooms, they are better able to differentiate instruction and reevaluate a one-size-fits-all instructional approach.

When Mitch began this study he did not consistently encode short vowel sounds accurately. I found that he was segmenting words so slowly that he was adding vowel sounds where there
were none present. By working with short vowel families, Mitch’s knowledge of short vowel sounds grew as well as his ability to find like patterns while reading and writing. This new knowledge gave Mitch added confidence to spell words conventionally by using the word families studied during small group.

For Camilla an increase in confidence was observed during the word sort for week three. While sorting her word cards Camilla was using the silent “e” at the end of her words to help her sort the words into their long and short vowel categories. This strategy was initiated by Camilla and when she incorrectly sorted the word “done” into the long vowel family, she was able to correct her error as she read through each grouping of words. Although she made an error during her sort, her confidence grew when she was able to check her work and correct her placement of the word “done” into the correct category. This gave her a feeling of control over her work and was demonstrated when she confidently sorted the words again making no errors.

Williams et al. (2009) wrote that while whole-group lessons were too challenging for students with the least literacy knowledge, they were also too easy for the students with the most literacy knowledge. Finding the instructional level of each student, as outlined by the *Words Their Way* program, empowered those students to work confidently because they were neither frustrated nor bored by lessons they were receiving.

**Implications for Student Learning**

**Students need instruction at their individual developmental spelling stage.** Assessing students’ current developmental stage of spelling was imperative to working within their instructional level. Vygotsky (1962) teaches that the best instruction is when students are being taught within their zone of proximal development. By assessing what stage the student was
currently working within, I was able to choose appropriate word study lessons that provided
growth in students’ word knowledge. This also prevented frustration by working where the
student was currently. Frustration would have occurred if a student was being instructed on
orthographic knowledge that was beyond his/her development. By building on the students’
extisting knowledge, I was able to challenge them without causing undue frustration that can occur
when students’ are working beyond their current needs. Monitoring student progress is important
so the teacher can adjust instruction based on the needs of the student.

Gehsmann (2008) states that after finding a student’s instructional level, teachers can
determine a scope and sequence of instruction that will engage and meet the student at their
current stage of development. In my own experience, any time a student was attempting to work
beyond his or her instructional level, it only resulted in frustration and feelings of defeat. In
addition, Invernizzi and Hayes (2004) agree that working at students’ instructional levels allows
teachers to target specific areas of need. These researchers also found that the relationship
between reading and writing emphasize the need for differentiated instruction (2004). Just as
students are reading at various levels within the classroom, those same students are also working
within various levels of spelling development. This made it imperative to use a word study
program that highlighted the need for instruction at different developmental levels.

**Students need many opportunities to work with new knowledge.** Different
opportunities for sustained practice with sounds and word patterns helped the students to apply
new knowledge in reading and writing settings. Transfer of learning relied heavily on how often
students worked with a particular sound or pattern. Tompkins (2010) stated that in order for
students to internalize new knowledge they need to be immersed in quality instruction as well as
have daily opportunities to apply what they have learned. Working with partners on word hunts, blind sorts, and while reading, students were able to discuss the words they were encountering and discuss how they corresponded to what they had been studying in word study groups. Williams et al. (2009) agreed that students need activities that are crafted in such a way that they can engage with them independently or with a partner. In addition, these researchers found that making, breaking and sorting words was particularly beneficial for all students to explore and analyze words. This repeated practice with words with similar orthographic features supported students in becoming familiar with these patterns and provided an opportunity to draw connections between words with like features.

Students also need frequent practice working with strategies they have learned. Ding, Richardson, & Schnell (2013), explained that with proper exposure and learning opportunity, most children can develop foundational skills during early childhood. In addition, Williams et al. (2009) stated that students need plenty of opportunities to explore specific orthographic features through hands-on games and activities. While working in small groups, it was important that students received several reminders to use what they knew until they initiated a strategy independently. By setting clear expectations the students were required to try a strategy before asking for assistance. Invernizzi and Hayes (2004) stated that general knowledge of the orthographic system evolves from multiple experiences with specific word spellings and features. Without a system of word study to learn about orthography and specific spelling features and patterns, students are left to rely on rote memorization which does not result in long term spelling success.
Students need to learn sounds, patterns, or meaning units rather than working on spelling individual words. While working with this program, students did not have a spelling list that contained words with various spelling features or sounds. This program allowed students to work with words that contained similar orthographic features such as sounds or patterns. Bear et al. (2008) explain that word study is an approach to phonics instruction that moves away from memorization. The instructional practice of teaching students about words does not rely on rote memorization. Word study moves away from a focus on memorization. It reflects what researchers have discovered about the alphabetic, pattern and meaning layers of orthography (Williams et al., 2009). For example, when students study the alphabetic layer they are studying the relationship between letters and sounds and are able to create words. In the pattern layer, students look past single and paired letters to search for more complex and longer patterns such as CVCe and CVVC. The meaning layer helps students to understand how spelling features can directly reflect the meaning relationships across similar words. (Williams et al., 2009). In word study, students should be taught to explore the sound, pattern, and meaning relationships among words by comparing and contrasting through word sorts (Ganske, 2000).

During the study students worked with a list of words that related to one another on an orthographic level. They were provided opportunities to work with these words, by manipulating and breaking them apart, which helped students to better understand how words work and how spelling patterns relate to one another. Williams et al. (2009) support the idea that making and breaking words is imperative to students learning. This method allowed students to gain vast knowledge about other words that may contain a similar feature and thus made drawing connections between words more accessible. Gehsmann supports this way of instructing by explaining that teachers of word study prepare appropriate lessons and create lists of words that
are chosen by selecting an orthographic feature that is within a student’s current developmental stage. This approach to learning orthography provides students with opportunities to generalize patterns of spelling and meaning and work far beyond pre-made list of unrelated words (2008).

Implications for My Teaching

Teachers need to provide many opportunities for students to manipulate words.

Students need many opportunities to work with words. By learning about how words work and working with them in a multitude of ways, students are able to carry that knowledge into their literate activities (Tompkins, 2010; Williams & Lundstrom, 2007). Teachers need to use various tools to allow students time to manipulate words. Magnetic letters help students to create words and allow for instant feedback from the teacher. Letter cards with various orthographic features such as digraphs and blends need to be used with students so they can create many words that contain the same spelling feature to further engrain new word knowledge.

Word sorting is another activity that engages students and allows them to manipulate words. This exploration of words, through word sorts, allows students to compare and contrast features and form orthographic knowledge that can be transferred to other aspects of literacy (Williams et al., 2009). According to Invernizzi and Hayes, word sorting requires students to examine new features in order to compare similar characteristics of other words they already know (2004).

Teachers should provide opportunities for students to work together so they can discuss what they notice about words and share strategies for identifying, reading, and writing words. Partners can also challenge each other’s thinking and check each other’s work making any activity interactive and engaging (Williams et al., 2009). In addition to working with partners, small
groups of students can participate in several activities each week that would provide repeated opportunities to examine new concepts together (Williams et al., 2009). All of these various opportunities helped students to transfer word knowledge to other literacy activities.

**Teachers need to observe and assess work samples closely.** The most important aspect of a developmental word study approach is that students are working within their instructional level. Teachers need to be constantly observing what students are able to do and what they are ready to learn next. A child’s spelling errors, “their inventions made in the absence of a complete knowledge of the spelling system,” are seen as ways to understand that child’s current word knowledge (Ganske, 2000, p. 1). According to Invernizzi and Hayes spelling errors specify which spelling features students have mastered and enlighten teachers on which ones must be learned next (2004). Through assessments teachers can itemize the knowledge students are currently working with and be informed of how best to proceed with instruction. By assessing a student’s orthographic knowledge teachers can identify a stage of development as well as the features that student is currently negotiating from those they may already know or have no knowledge of (Ganske, 2000).

Educators should consistently be assessing and observing the knowledge level of their students and using that data to form and vary the groupings as needed (Tompkins, 2010). Flexible groupings are important so students can be challenged without being frustrated. This is vital to their success. However it is important to remember that Bear et al. (2008) use the word stage as a metaphor to inform instruction, and as students grow in their knowledge it is along a continuum and the spelling stages are meant to be used to decide what to teach while remembering that orthographic features can overlap across stages. Instruction can vary from child to child because
even within a single class, children progress at different rates through different stages (Ganske, 2000). Invernizzi and Hayes state that by assessing students regularly teachers ensure that the instruction they are providing fits the needs of the students by differentiating small group instruction (2004).

Teachers need to use different strategies and different settings to increase transfer of knowledge. No two students are alike in every way and as such no two students should be instructed in the exact same way. Teachers need to use a variety of strategies and settings to reach every student in his or her classroom. Working in small groups provides the opportunity for teachers to encourage their students to be independent by attempting to use a strategy taught previously with gentle prompting. Word study is a “teacher-directed yet student-centered approach to spelling instruction” and when that is included as a part of a balanced literacy program it can support students’ literacy development (Williams et al., 2009, p. 577). A guided approach is needed when attempting to increase students word knowledge; this approach helps students to learn what to look for and to recognize what they are seeing as they discover new words and patterns (Ganske, 2000). Word study requires explicit strategy instruction; teachers need to purposefully teach a wide variety of strategies that students can use to encode and decode unfamiliar words (Williams & Lundstrom, 2007). By teaching students strategically how to look at words and break them apart, teachers are giving students the cognitive tools they need to transfer this knowledge to other literate areas (Williams et al., 2009). When teaching students to look for known parts of a word, they are able to transfer that strategy over to their reading and writing. They can use that strategy to decode or encode unknown words by identifying similar parts.

Strategy instruction is the key to supporting students in becoming independent word solvers.
Different classroom settings are also important for student learning. Some students learn best in small groups where they have opportunities to interact with classmates while other students work best one on one in order to maintain focus. In small groups, students can learn about words in a supportive environment alongside their peers. Small group instruction enables students to explore spelling features they are beginning to use but are using inconsistently (Ganske, 2000). According to Williams et al. (2009) small groups meet the instructional needs of the students involved when they are grouped by the students’ orthographic knowledge. These small groups are not static; they are flexible so they will meet the changing needs of the students (Invernizzi & Hayes, 2004; Ganske, 2000). It will be important for teachers to know how best their students learn and try to accommodate different learning styles. Students will make the most gains when using a variety of settings.

Recommendations for Future Research

**Future research studies could span longer periods of time.** This research study was six weeks long and took place toward the end of the academic school year. Future research could span an entire academic year so teachers could track the growth of students throughout the year. This would allow the teacher to see possible increased gains through the use of this program. As the participant researcher I thought that I was just scratching the surface of all this program has to offer. If I had had an entire year to implement, I may have been able to put into use more aspects of the program and may have seen greater improvements from my students.

**Future research could include more participants.** Although my entire class took part in this program I only collected research data from three students. Future research could include
more participants which could provide more information and include students from various developmental spelling stages.

**Future research could have a more structured independent writing time.** As I collected writing prompts through this study, I noticed that often times the Mitch's focus was a factor in the product that was being collected. Some of the samples I received were not valid assessments of the knowledge these students possessed. I also found myself redirecting the focal students from my guided reading table and those redirections took instructional time away from the students I was working with. Future researchers could better structure the independent work time in order to hold the students more accountable for the work they turned in to the teacher to be assessed.

**Final Thoughts**

This study was an attempt to answer the question: How might the implementation of the program *Words Their Way* (Bear et al., 2008) impact how students' use their knowledge of phonics within their real reading and writing experiences?

As I started this study I knew that whole group phonics instruction was not a good fit for me or for my students. Having a wide range of learners, I knew I was going to be boring some students while frustrating others, and I couldn't let that happen. Vygotsky (1962) teaches that the best instruction is when students are being taught within their zone of proximal development. The authors of *Words Their Way* suggest that knowledgeable educators know that word study instruction needs to match the needs of the child (Bear et. al, 2008). With those two thoughts in mind it is evident that a developmental word study program will foster students who are able to articulate what they know about words, encourage them to use that knowledge to take risks in
their reading and writing, and help to create more literate students in charge of their own learning.
References


Appendices

Appendix A

Observation Protocol

Participant Pseudonym: ________________________________________________________________

Observation Date and Time: ___________________________________________________________

Length of Observation: ______________________________________________________________

Type of Observation: (circle one)  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Words Their Way</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Description of Activity</td>
<td>Observations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Summary:
## Running Record Sheet

Name __________________________ Date ______________ Text Level

Scores: Running Words: Errors

- Easy 95-100%
- Instructional 90-94%
- Hard 50-89%

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Error Rate: [ ]

Sc Rate: [ ]