

Words Their Way: A Survey of Teachers Using the Approach as a School-
wide Spelling Program

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the graduate school of the University of
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Abstract

This project surveyed teachers who were in the second year of the implementation of a developmental spelling program based on Words Their Way, developed by Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston. (2004). The teachers were all from Kindergarten through second grade and had some previous experience with the program. An anonymous, electronic survey was given three times during the school year requesting teachers reflect on their practice, the support they received as they were implementing the program, and the challenges encountered in implementation. Most teachers wrote about their grade level colleagues and how much support they gave each other. When challenges arose, they often came up with solutions as a team.

Teachers also wrote about many strategies they used to keep student engagement high. One challenge that teachers wrote about more than once related to grading practices and how difficult they found it to level their students for the purposes of the quarterly report card.

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Purpose of and Rationale for the Project

This study came about because administrators and staff in my elementary building implement many new initiatives, sometimes more than one a year, but we rarely couple the new initiative with professional development (past the initial year). We implemented the *Words Their Way* spelling program across the building the previous school year, 2007-2008, as a pilot-program for a possible district adoption. The district decided to adopt the program based on our feedback so I wanted to examine my colleagues' reflections about this program and its usefulness to them, as well as the level of support they felt they received after the pilot was over (during the 2008-2009 school year).

The purpose of this study was to look at the professional development side of implementing the *Words their Way* program in my elementary building across all grade levels during the 2008-2009 academic year. I focused on implementation processes at the primary grade levels (K-2) as I am most familiar with that age range of students. I wanted to find out what my colleagues at these levels thought about the quality and effectiveness of the program and how it was being implemented and supported in its second year. I also wanted to examine what obstacles teachers encountered as they continued to implement the program and what solutions they devised to these problems.

This study was guided by two research questions: 1) What was the progression of teacher learning and what support was available from a professional development perspective as teachers implemented the new program? 2) What obstacles did teachers face as they implemented the program and what strategies were developed to combat those obstacles?

Literature Review

Invented or developmental spelling has been a controversial subject in schools, even though it has been increasingly accepted by teachers and school districts (Johnston, 2001). Many researchers have studied this phenomenon (Clarke, 1988; Ehri & Wilce, 1987; Gentry, 2000; Invernizzi, Abouzeid, & Gill, 1994) with findings indicating that an analysis of students' invented spellings can inform teachers what to teach. There is still a strong practice found in schools where students follow traditional spelling programs that include weekly lists and spelling tests. The standardized lists of words are often the same for all students regardless of readiness or ability. Such programs do not recognize spelling as a developmental process. Several researchers (Cunningham & Cunningham, 1992; Ediger, 2002; Kolodziej & Columba, 2007; Templeton & Morris, 1999) have published texts for parents and teachers that present a different perspective. These researchers indicate that children who engage in the writing environment with fewer constraints become more successful as writers because they are able to explore and experiment with language. In addition, their materials attempt to make

invented spelling user-friendly and more accessible to the general public.

The research above was a precursor to a research study that involved invented spelling and a particular spelling program, Words Their Way, developed by Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston (2004).

Developmental Spelling

According to Bear, et al. (2004), invented spellings free children to write even before they can read. The term “invented spelling” often brings to mind the idea that children merely make up their own spelling and that teachers never hold them accountable for spelling things correctly. Bear, et al. (2004) argue that students are actually doing hard work when writing a word using invented spelling. “To invent a spelling, a child must have some degree of phonemic awareness and some knowledge of letter sounds” (p.99). In this case phonemic awareness is defined as the ability to divide words into the smallest units of sound. Downing (1986) found when asked the reasoning behind their misspellings, many students gave phonetic reasons. English is a complicated language to learn to write and read. Often the “rules” taught to students don’t hold true in all instances, yet there are patterns that emerge in words that can help students in both their writing and their reading as they draw on the same resources (Templeton & Morris, 1999).

The work of Charles Read (1971, 1975) explains the hidden logic behind students’ invented spellings. Read (1971) studied preschoolers and uncovered a systematic, phonetic logic to the students’ categorizations of

sounds in speech. His insights led to much more work in this arena across grade levels, which corroborated his findings and resulted in a comprehensive model of developmental word knowledge (Henderson, 1990; Templeton & Bear, 1992; Templeton & Morris, 2000).

Current researchers favor the term “developmental spelling” over invented spelling to shift the perceptions created when talking about this topic with parents and other stakeholders in education. This shift came about in the last decade or so and researchers feel it is significant to educate parents and staff regarding spelling as a developmental process because spelling of this nature is vastly different from traditional spelling. Traditional spelling has winners and losers – those who can spell and everyone else. Developmental spelling instruction meets each child where s/he is and assists him/her in learning specific spelling strategies and patterns to apply in his/her writing. Traditional spelling programs have also been critiqued as being disconnected from writing and children’s individual needs. It is important for quality spelling instruction to understand the stages of developmental spelling.

Gentry’s Stages of Developmental Spelling

Researchers have developed different stages of spelling that students progress through in their quest to become efficient spellers and writers. Gentry (1982) laid out five developmental stages in his study. Now widely accepted, he found a precommunicative stage, the semiphonetic stage, the phonetic stage, the transitional stage, and the correct stage.

Precommunicative Stage

Characteristics of students in the precommunicative stage included some knowledge of the alphabet through production of letter forms to represent a message, but no knowledge of letter-sound correspondences. These spellers have a tendency to string random letters together, and occasionally use numbers as part of the spelling of a word. Students in this stage favor uppercase letters and often mix uppercase and lowercase letters indiscriminately.

Semiphonetic Stage

As spellers move into the semiphonetic stage, Gentry suggests that they are better able to conceptualize that letters have sounds that can be used to represent words. Words spelled in this stage may have only two or three letters to represent a whole word (i.e. OD for old.) Also, students in this stage employ a letter name strategy where, when possible, the student represent sounds that match their letter names (i.e. R [are].)

Phonetic Stage

During the phonetic stage, students are able to represent each sound in a word with a letter. They began to systematically develop particular spelling patterns while assigning letters based strictly on sound. Word spacing is generally present in this stage of development (i.e. I WEL KOM TO YOR HAWS [I will come to your house].)

Transitional Stage

The transitional phase of spelling, according to Gentry, marks the shift to a more orthographically acceptable way of writing. Students use vowels in every syllable and begin to move from phonetic spelling to morphological and visual spelling. Students pay more attention to orthographically acceptable patterns (i.e. TAOD [toad]), but may reverse them.

Correct Stage

Gentry's final stage is called the correct stage where students have a firmly established knowledge of the English orthographic system and its basic rules. The correct speller extends his/her knowledge of words to different environments and shows an understanding of word structure including accurate spelling of prefixes, suffixes, contractions, and compound words. The correct speller continues to master irregular and unfamiliar spellings and accumulates a large pool of learned words.

In a later follow-up article, Gentry (2000) found that these stages were still relevant under the criteria for what constitutes developmental stages. Gentry believed that invented spellings could be used as "windows into the minds" of students. This was just one example of how to look at the subject area of spelling as a developmental process and contributed to the idea that developmental spelling was part of good spelling teaching practices.

Ediger (2001) took a different approach from Gentry and recommended that spelling lists be created to be more relevant to students. She suggested that teachers make individualized spelling lists based on the

errors students make in their daily writing. Bear, et al. (2004) felt that there had to be middle ground somewhere between individualized spelling lists and traditional one-size-fits all spelling. This was the basis for creating the *Words Their Way* approach to spelling.

Words Their Way

“When we say that we want to help students explore and learn about words their way, we mean that our instruction will be sensitive to two fundamental tenets: 1. Students’ learning of spelling and vocabulary is based on their developmental or instructional level. 2. Students’ learning is based on the way they are naturally inclined to learn, on their natural course of conceptual learning.” (p.27)

According to Bear, et al. (2004), this word study program “evolves from three decades of research in developmental aspects of word knowledge with children and adults” (p. 5). This research has documented certain patterns of errors that children make and that reflect confusion over certain orthographic principles. There are three types of errors: errors dealing with the alphabetic match of letters and sounds, errors dealing with letter patterns, and errors dealing with words related in meaning. These types of errors are consistent across all children from learning disabled to ELL students and represent the three layers of orthography in our language.

Based on the work of Henderson in the 1970’s, Bear and his colleagues identified five stages of spelling development that students fit into and described the characteristics that are typical of a student’s spelling when

they are in each stage. Their program is characterized by the idea that teachers need to find out what students are “using but confusing” to understand what they are developmentally ready to learn. That being said, there are typical age ranges that have been shown to correspond with each stage. Research in developmental spelling has shown this to be true for all learners with variations only in the rate of acquisition (Bear, 1991). There has also been research to show connections between students’ spelling ability and their reading ability based on when children typically start to exhibit certain characteristics (Ehri, 2000). These will be discussed in the following sections describing each stage outlined in Words Their Way.

Emergent Spellers

The first stage identified by Bear and colleagues is emergent spelling. This stage is characterized by a lack of sound-symbol correspondence. That is, students may write letters on the page, but there may be in no discernible order or direction (p. 11-13). Students in this stage typically range from ages 0-5 years and could also be called emergent readers. They pretend to read and write, and are learning concepts of print and rhyming during their pre-K and Kindergarten years.

Letter-name Alphabetic Spellers

Around first and second grade students move into the letter-name alphabetic stage. This stage is characterized by the use of the letter names in combination with the alphabetic principle when spelling. This stage is further divided into three parts: early, middle and late. At each point students

have mastered different skills in spelling (p. 13-15). Early letter-name alphabetic spellers are most likely working on using beginning and ending consonants in words. Middle letter-name alphabetic spellers work on using short vowels in words as well as consonant digraphs such as *sh*, *ch*, or *th*. Late letter-name alphabetic spellers continue to work on using consonant digraphs as well as consonant blends in their spelling and daily writing. These spellers are often also beginning readers who like to read aloud and rely heavily on decoding words to make meaning.

Within Word Pattern Spellers

The third spelling stage is called within word pattern spelling. These transitional readers are generally in second, third, or fourth grade and have a growing sight word vocabulary. They are able to read new material independently and begin to self-select their material. This stage, as with the previous one, is broken down into early, middle, and late periods in which students have different skills they are working on (p.15-17). Early within word pattern spellers continue their work with consonant blends and move into the tough work of learning long vowel patterns. In the middle of the within word pattern stage, students continue to work with common long vowel patterns and also move to other vowel patterns such as w- and r-controlled vowels. The late within word pattern speller has mastered many long vowel patterns and has moved on to inflected endings of words such as *-s*, *-ed*, and *-ing*.

Syllables and Affixes Spellers

In the intermediate grades, fourth through eighth, students move into the syllables and affixes stage where they begin to explore where syllables meet and more details about prefixes and suffixes (p.17-19). This includes the work on inflected endings that was begun late in the within word pattern stage and moves through harder prefixes, suffixes, and unaccented final syllables. These students could be called intermediate readers and often have a purpose for their reading. They explore more genres and motivation plays a large role in their development.

Derivational Relations Spellers

The final stage in this word study program is called the derivational relations spelling stage. Students in this stage spell most words correctly but begin to examine how words share common derivations and related roots and bases (p.19-20). For example, students in this group may make errors when deciding whether or not to double consonants when adding a suffix. This stage is called the derivational relations stage because students examine how words share common derivations or root words and bases. These students are typically in high school and college and exhibit characteristics of adult readers.

Instruction Based on Timely Assessment

Students' placement in a stage to begin working is based on a developmental spelling inventory that asks students to spell a certain set of words that represent many orthographic elements. The inventory may vary based on students' ages and/or grade level. Students are then grouped

according to spelling elements they must master to begin working on new elements. Each week students work with different spelling features as they sort words and pictures according to those features. In the early years this is all picture sorting and it gradually progresses to sound spelling and then to correct spelling. Hauerwas & Walker (2004) found that word sorting helped children understand the relationships between spoken language and written language and that it helped gear instruction towards individual students. Masterson & Crede (1999) also supported the notion that effective instruction begins with targeted assessment of students.

The next section of the literature review will cover effective professional development models, with emphasis on the use of Professional Learning Communities. This is important to understand for this study because this is how the program that is being studied was implemented. Teachers were asked about the support they received and how this model worked for them as they learned and implemented a new program.

Professional Development

Professional development models have been changing in recent years to reflect the need for more active involvement on the part of the teachers participating in the professional development, versus the previous passive approach (e.g., “sit and get” information in one-shot sessions). Teachers are often cynical about professional development as they feel that they are being told what to do in a “top-down” fashion from administrators without any input or consideration of local settings or participating teachers’ needs. Often each

new school year begins with inservice sessions covering one or two new initiatives, while previous inservice topics are put on the back burner.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are a response to the one-shot inservice sessions and have been gaining in popularity throughout school districts as a structure for teachers to use to collaborate to improve student achievement. In their 1998 book, Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement, Dufour and Eaker give schools a guide for implementing PLCs to their fullest potential. When teachers work in a professional learning community, they have a clear sense of the goal they are trying to achieve and work in a cycle of continuous improvement. That is, teachers are always gathering and analyzing data to identify areas of weakness, brainstorming about ways to address those areas of weakness, and supporting each other through the process. DuFour (2003) provides four things that all successful professional learning communities do to make sure teachers are fully engaged in the learning: 1) Clarify essential outcomes for student, 2) Develop common assessments, 3) Define proficiency for students, and 4) Analyze results and develop improvement strategies. When PLCs follow these steps, teachers are engaged in meaningful collaboration that leads to student achievement.

Drawing on years of relevant research, Kinnucan-Welsh, et al. (2006) compiled six principles of design for effective, high-quality professional development. High-quality professional development is: 1) directly connected to student learning goals that are clear and accepted by all, 2) grounded in

active learning experiences for teachers, 3) embedded in the context of work in schools and classrooms, 4) continuous and ongoing, 5) based on an ongoing and focused inquiry related to teacher learning, student learning, and what we know about good instruction, and 6) coherent throughout the professional development system. Schools that follow these principles when planning professional development find that the goals they set for themselves are attainable through collaborative effort. Professional development changes from being perceived as another meeting for teachers to attend to time spent working on common goals for the better of all the students. Teachers are actively involved in improving their school and their practice in a safe environment where they can try new things and feel comfortable learning together and from each other.

The Current Study

The literature review provided as a backdrop to this study helped me understand better the research behind a program like *Words Their Way* and also the professional development model that was followed in the first year of the implementation in my school district. Reviewing research helped guide the questions I wanted to ask teachers on the survey in my study and also gave me more confidence as an educator that our choice to follow this program was a sound one, not based on the whim of an administrator. The professional development aspect of implementing *Words Their Way* was interesting to me as much of that research was new for me. My district has been using PLCs for a few years as a way for teachers to work together and I

vaguely remember that a few teachers from my building attended a workshop put on by Richard DuFour. When those teachers returned, the staff sat in a large circle as they shared a few things they learned about PLCs and why they were important for us to use, but we never knew the research behind their ideas or why the components were important. After that, the district mandated that all teachers would participate in PLCs without much guidance and we jumped in each year without clear direction as to what we should be doing, until we started working on learning how to do *Words Their Way* with our own grade levels. We finally had a purpose each time we met and actual data to analyze instead of having to invent things to fill the time. PLCs went from being a top-down mandate to something useful that gave us time built into our day to talk about our students and what we could do to help them develop their literacy skills. We met twice a month in grade-level teams for an hour each time to discuss our goals for students, analyze the data we collected about their spelling development, and learn from our colleagues who had used the program previously. The current study took place during the 2008-2009 school year, the year after *Words Their Way* was first implemented building-wide and PLCs were no longer focused on *Words Their Way*.

Methods

This study was conducted during the 2008-2009 school year in one suburban elementary school setting. Eleven teachers from Kindergarten through second grade at Literacy Elementary School¹ were surveyed three times during the year about the *Words Their Way* program used for spelling instruction. The sample size was chosen mostly due to my familiarity with the teachers in this building and the idea that our relationship would encourage more of a response than asking teachers who didn't know me. The survey was given electronically using Survey Monkey and respondents remained anonymous. This study was designed to follow up with the teachers using the program and to determine how effective they felt the program was, what kinds of support they received to learn and implement the program, and if they would continue to use the program in the future. Specifically, I investigated teacher attitudes about the level of support they received in implementing the spelling program in its second year.

Words Their Way in Action

Literacy Elementary School had taken Words Their Way and adapted it to be a weekly spelling program that followed a similar path through each grade level. All materials that were used were from the Words Their Way series. At the beginning of each grading quarter, students were given the spelling inventory from the program and teachers worked across a grade level

¹ This is a pseudonym for the elementary school used in the study. Pseudonyms will be used throughout this paper.

create groups of students with similar spelling needs. Each week on Monday, students would go to their “Word Work” teacher to take part in an interactive word sort using a SMART Board (e.g., this technology was in every classroom in the study). Students worked together to find the pattern/s in the words or pictures and then sort them according to the pattern. After successfully sorting on the SMART Board, students would return to their seats to do a paper version of the sort in their Word Work Journals with the teacher reinforcing the pattern for those who may not have fully understood. Students also received a copy of the paper version of the lesson to take home along with some directions and extension activities for parents to do at home as homework during the week. On Friday, the students would once again go to their Word Work teacher for a test. Students were tested either orally or with pictures to sort and glue and asked to put words in their correct categories. When developmentally appropriate, they were asked to spell the words correctly as well. These groups remained together for roughly 6-7 weeks and then students were given the inventory again and re-grouped based on their current needs. This pattern for the weekly routine was supported by Zucker’s & Invernizzi’s (2008) work with “My eSorts” and using technology to be a digital extension of the word sort. These authors found that the e-Sorts routine helped engage students in their own learning of spelling rules and patterns. The digital component of the sorting was added at this school because of a need identified by the third grade teachers when starting the program in their grade level. SMART Boards were readily

available and found to be highly motivating to the students in a variety of subject areas.

Setting and Sample

The elementary school that I used for my study was one of six elementary schools in a suburban district. The total student body for Kindergarten through fifth grade was about 775 students. The teacher leaders included the third grade team of teachers that had laid the groundwork and used the program previously. Grade level teams formed Professional Learning Communities to learn about and work on the program with support from the third grade teachers. The study included three Kindergarten teachers, four first grade teachers, and four second grade teachers. All the teachers in the study had four or more years of teaching experience except for one first grade teacher who was a first year teacher.

Instrumentation

The electronic surveys I created were formed in collaboration with my professors at the University of Minnesota. The first survey, given in November when teachers had been using the program for about a month, was short and meant to gather some baseline data about how much experience teachers had using the program, what kinds of strategies they used during teaching, and how much support they expected to receive during the year (see survey in Appendix A). The second survey, given two months later in January, took information from the first about different teaching strategies and asked how many of these were in use. It also asked teachers

to write about how effective they thought the strategies were, what kinds of support they were receiving, and some challenges they faced with the program (see survey in Appendix B). The final survey, given in April when the final groups for the year were wrapping up, asked the same questions as the second survey with one added at the end. This question probed whether teachers would continue to use the program in the future (see survey in Appendix C). All three surveys included mostly open-ended questions requiring teachers to write in responses. The only exceptions included questions about what grade level they taught, how many years they had been using the program, and which strategies they used in the classroom.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected three times during the school year using Survey Monkey. Each time, I emailed the link to the survey to my colleagues and asked them to take a few minutes out of their day to complete the survey. Each teacher remained anonymous when answering the survey, only identifying which grade level they taught. After about a week, an email reminder was sent to teachers asking them to complete the survey if they hadn't already done so. When about a month had passed and I had a majority of teachers' responses (7 or more out of 11), the results were printed from the site and I gathered them to analyze the data and look for themes. My process included the following: first I checked each survey for accuracy and completeness. Next I read through the open-ended responses and began listing and tallying responses to find what themes emerged. For

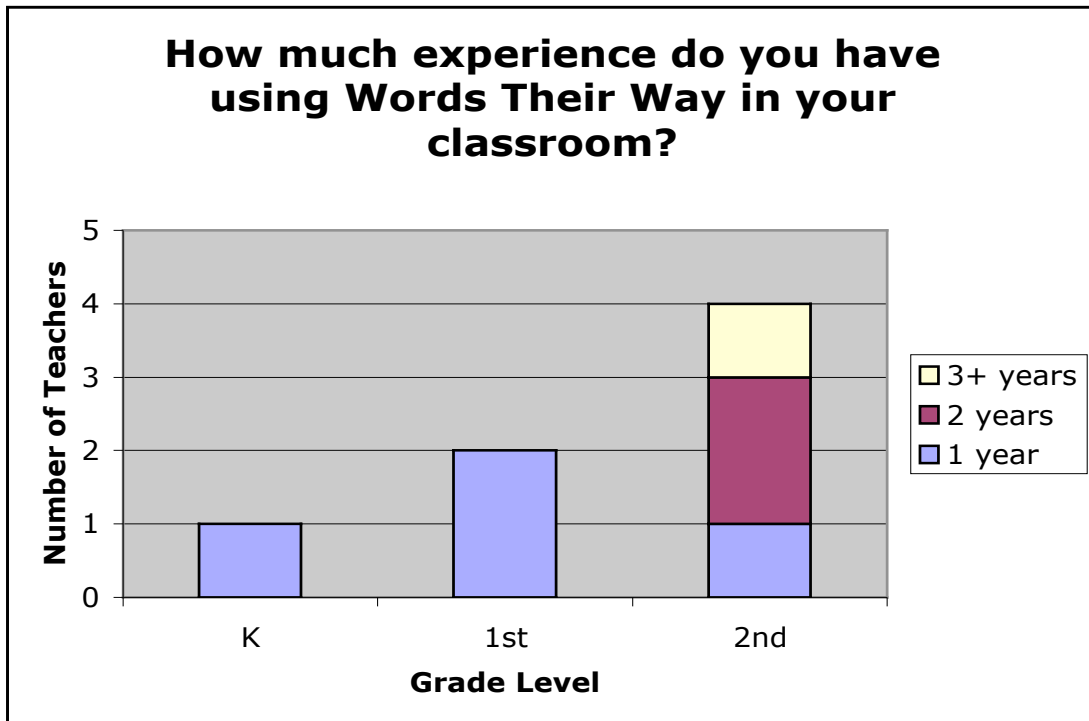
example, on the November survey question asking what strategies teachers planned to use with the *Words Their Way* program I generated a list of strategies for the following two surveys based solely on those responses. After each question had been analyzed and each response coded according to ideas that teachers brought up more than once, I generated complete surveys for each respondent so I could identify them by the grade level they taught. I felt this was important to know in case themes emerged at certain grade levels and would help in recounting the anecdotal responses from the teachers (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). The findings from the data analysis are presented below. First I report the data question by question as I go through each survey while I report the patterns that emerged from analyzing data across each of the three surveys. I also relate these findings to each of the guiding research questions.

Results

November Survey

The first survey was given to teachers in November after they had been using the program for about a month that school year. Seven out of the eleven teachers in grades K-2 responded. Second grade had the highest percentage of response with four out of four teachers reporting. First grade had two out of four teachers responding and Kindergarten had one out of three teachers that responded to the survey.

This survey was meant to gather some baseline data and included a question about how much experience the teachers responding had with the program. The results of teachers' responses are displayed in Table 1 below. My analysis indicates that all of the teachers surveyed had some familiarity with the program, though four out of the seven had only one year of previous experience, presumably during the school-wide implementation the previous year. Two teachers had two years of experience and one teacher had three or more years of experience with the program. For the majority of the teachers who responded to this initial survey, the program was fairly new.



Question 3: What do you want to learn about the *Words Their Way* approach this year?

Teachers were also asked open-ended questions regarding what they wanted to learn about the program this year, what teaching strategies they were planning to use with the program in the coming year, and also what kind of support they expected to receive in this, the second year of implementation.

Results indicated that teachers wanted to learn more strategies to keep students engaged and to make sure the kids were on the right track with their spelling development. For example, a first grade teacher wrote, “ I want to make sure I am fine-tuning our approach – [that I] am spending enough time on a feature during Monday’s lesson so the kids really get it; am I reaching each student during Monday’s lesson so s/he is attentive?” Other teachers wrote about how to assess whether or not their students are on grade level using the program. One second grade teacher wrote, “I’m in my second year of teaching with this program. I’d be interested finding out if there is some type of information available on what is considered ‘grade level.’” These comments indicate that teachers liked the program and wanted to know more about it. They wanted to be able to talk with colleagues about what was happening in their classrooms and were looking for additional resources to continue their learning.

Question 4: What teaching strategies are you planning to use with *Words Their Way*?

Teachers listed many different teaching strategies currently in use with the weekly sorting lessons, which were used as a basis for a question in the

second and third surveys of the study. Word sorts (5 teachers reported this pattern), games on the SMART Board (3), kids brainstorming ideas for new words to add (2), making connections to other words with the same patterns (1), flexible grouping (1), practicing out loud with a partner (1), closed sorts (1), spelling sparkle (1), incorporating literature (1), kinesthetic activities (1), and sentence writing (1) were all mentioned as techniques teachers used in their classroom on a weekly basis in conjunction with the *Words Their Way* program. This list of strategies indicates that teachers are using a number of different methods to convey the same curriculum to students.

Question 5: Now that it is the second year of the implementation, what kind of support do you expect to receive for implementing *Words Their Way* in your classroom?

Over half of the teachers (4 out of 7) reported not expecting any support from the administration for the program but knew they could work through it with their grade level teams. A first grade teacher wrote, "I don't expect any support from administration, but my team and I will work through it as we did last year." Teachers expected to feel comfortable assessing their students and also expected time to observe, discuss, and grade kids appropriately. This was based on their experience the previous year working together with their grade-level colleagues and understanding that these things are required to make the program operate successfully.

January Survey

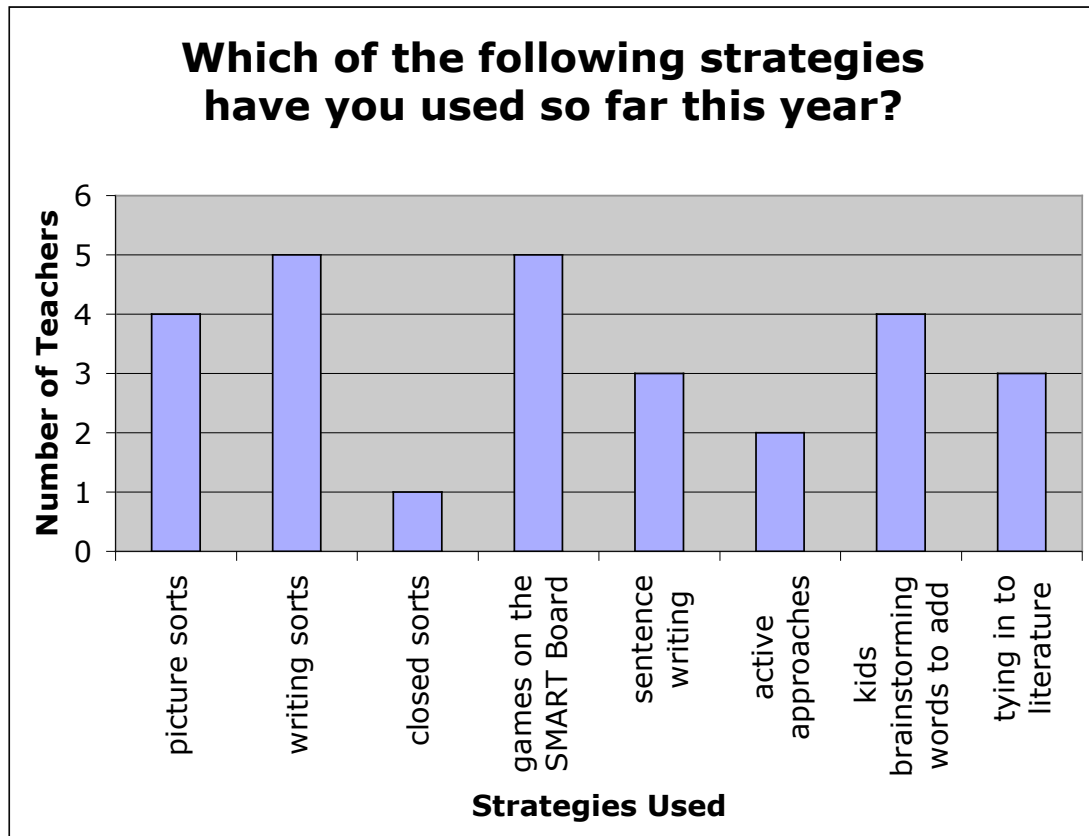
The January survey was given close to the time that teachers were assessing students for their second quarter report cards. They had been through one set of groups and were beginning to change the groups based on the most current spelling inventory data.

Again, seven out of eleven possible teachers responded to the survey. Second grade had three out of four teachers respond, while first grade had two out of four and Kindergarten had two out of three respond. All seven teachers reporting using the program weekly, following the building model of teaching a lesson on Monday and assessing on Friday of each week.

Question 3: Which of the following strategies have you used so far this year?

The next two questions on the survey asked teachers about the strategies they were using in their lessons and how effective they felt the strategies were. Teachers chose from a list of eight strategies that included using picture sorts, writing sorts, closed sorts, games on the SMART Board, sentence writing, active approaches, kids brainstorming words to add, and tying in literature. These choices were taken directly from the first survey, which had teachers list what strategies they used in their lessons, and teachers could make more than one selection. The two most popular teaching strategies were writing sorts and games on the SMART Board which five out of seven teachers reported using. Four out of seven teachers reported using picture sorts and having kids brainstorm words to add to the sort. These strategies were very popular with teachers because this was how

the program was modeled for them both by the authors of *Words Their Way* and the third grade teachers who were the teacher leaders for implementation.



Question 4: How effective have the strategies been?

In an open-ended question following the survey questions, six out of seven teachers reported they felt the strategies were effective with their students. One Kindergarten teacher wrote, “Very. The more I can expose kids, the better they get the concepts.” The first grade teacher who felt the strategies weren’t effective for her students wrote, “We have found that many of the kids aren’t progressing as they did last year.” Most teachers agreed

with the Kindergarten teachers that the strategies they were using were very effective in helping their students learn the spelling concepts they were teaching.

Question 5: Do you feel Words Their Way has helped show student growth?

Five out of the seven teachers felt that using WTW definitely showed their students' growth. One first grade teacher felt that the program showed growth clearly for some students, but not all. She wrote, "For some kids, it definitely does. For others, it is hard to tell." A second grade teacher reported that s/he felt the program showed minimal growth in students. S/he wrote, "They miss the more challenging spelling words we used to do. It is too easy for most, and too hard for a very small number." Teachers seemed to be divided on this issue a bit, but there was only one teacher who reported completely negatively. This could be attributed to an older teacher who has been doing spelling according to different ideals for many years.

Kindergarten teachers felt most strongly that this program showed the growth of their students while first and second grade teachers were more hesitant to say that it applied to every student. This indicates that as the program progresses into older grades where the expectations are higher for independent writing and spelling, it may not be as effective in showing the growth of students as they transfer their word sorting skills to their writing.

Question 6: What have you noticed about your students during Word Work?

Teachers reported a wide array of behaviors they observed from their students during Word Work time. The two first grade teachers reported that their students had begun to feel a bit bored with the routine of the lessons. “I think it’s getting a little routine – they like using the SMART Board, but it isn’t as new as it once was,” wrote one of the first grade teachers. “We need to come up with other routines for the groups lesson.” The remaining five teachers, from Kindergarten and second grade, reported that their students were engaged, independent learners who were taking pride in their work and their learning. Again the teachers were divided on an issue, but this time along grade level lines. Only the first grade teachers indicated that their students were getting bored sorting on the SMART Board indicating that perhaps the Kindergarten and second grade teachers might have other, more interesting aspects added to their SMART Board sorting time. Both first grade teachers were willing to talk with colleagues to figure out what they could do to make that time more engaging for kids, indicating their belief that this was an important component to the program.

Question 7: What have been some challenges you have faced in doing Word Work? Question 8: What solutions, if any, have been developed to combat these challenges?

The challenges reported by teachers ranged from not having support from the building level for professional development or grading (3 teachers reported this) to finding the time to prepare all the materials needed for each

sort (6 teachers) and keeping kids engaged when teaching the lesson (4 teachers). For solutions to these problems, teachers reported that working with their grade-level teammates was always the most helpful as they made decisions about things such as grading (3 teachers reported this). Teachers also reported moving students around the room as much as possible to keep them engaged (2 teachers). Teachers were not able to find solutions to some challenges such as having too many students in one group or not getting support from the building level. Many of the solutions teachers devised seemed to fulfill the needs they identified to keep the program running smoothly. Teachers were willing to develop solutions because they found value in the program and wanted it to remain effective for their students.

Question 9: What has been the most helpful in supporting your implementation of Word Work? What kinds of support have you received?

Six out of the seven teachers reported that their highest level of support came from their grade-level teams, with whom they shared students and resources. A Kindergarten teacher wrote, “We couldn’t do this program as effectively on our own. It’s nice to be able to group kids by skills.” Many teachers (5 out of 7) were also pleased with the support from the third grade team in the previous year when the program was initiated building wide. A second grade teacher wrote, “The roll out of the program was well done last year. I felt like we were given good step by step directions.” Four out of the seven teachers mentioned both having the support of their team and having the support of the third grade teachers as teacher leaders as the most helpful

things for them during the implementation. These statements indicate that both components are needed for teachers to feel they are being successful with the learning of a new program. This makes a case for providing a professional development model that includes multiple types of support for teachers as they learn and implement a new program.

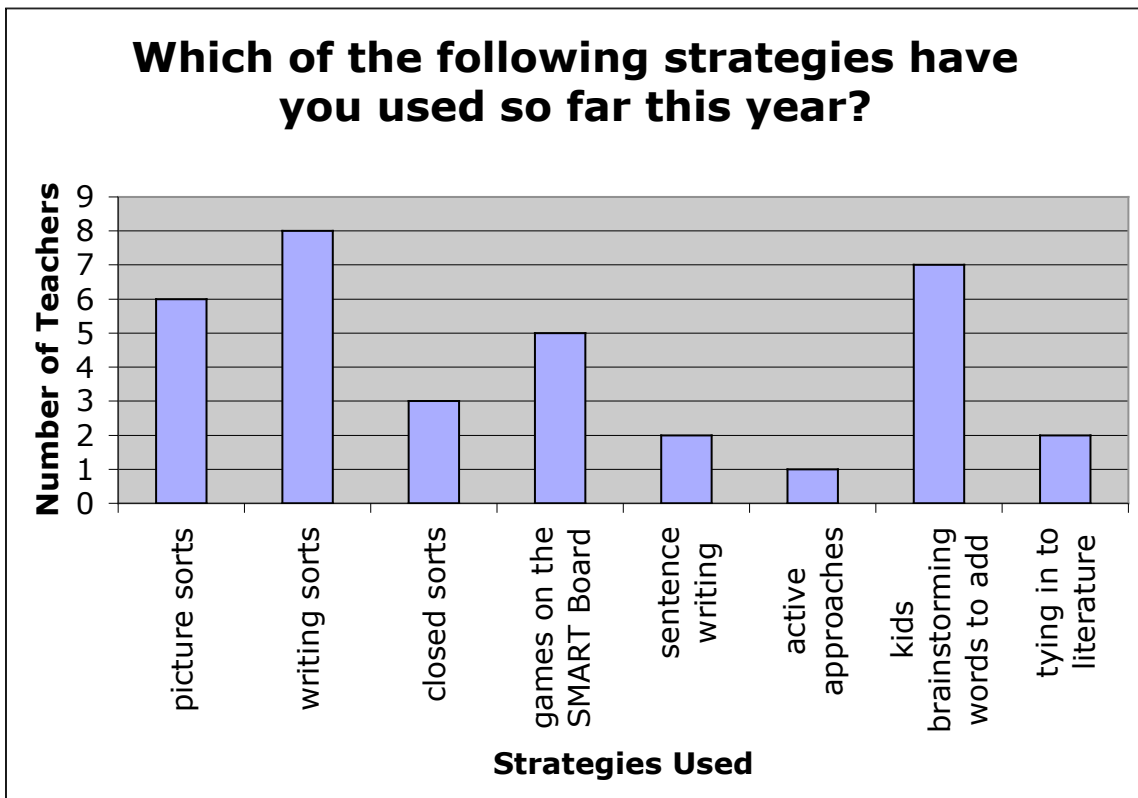
April Survey

This final survey was given in April when teachers were working with their final groupings of kids for the year. This survey had the highest participation with ten out of eleven teachers reporting. Both second grade and first grade had 100% participation with all four teachers responding to the survey. Kindergarten had two out of three teachers respond this time. Similarly to the January survey, all teachers reported using the program every week on Mondays and Fridays.

Question 3: Which of the following strategies have you used so far this year?

Teachers reported that writing sorts and having kids brainstorm words to add were the top two most popular teaching strategies for the Monday lesson time with 70-80% of teachers using them. Picture sorts and playing games on the SMART Board were also used by 50-60% of teachers. These were similar to the results from the January survey indicating that teachers continued to use strategies that were comfortable for them and recommended by the *Words Their Way* program's creators. They may not have felt experienced enough to begin to deviate from the program since for most it

was only their second year of using the program. Alternately, these results could also indicate that teachers felt confident that these were the best strategies to use with their students as they worked through the program. Most teachers (5 out of 7) reported in the previous survey that they felt the program was effective and therefore may not have seen a need to innovate at this point in their development as spelling teachers.



Question 4: How effective have the strategies been?

In contrast to the January survey where only about 86% of teachers reported they felt the strategies were effective with their students, during this survey 100% of teachers reported they felt the strategies were effective.

Teachers felt that the students were learning to sound out and write words better due to the use of these strategies. One Kindergarten teacher wrote, “I noticed big changes in my students throughout the year in their reading and writing.” This confirms the finding that teachers continued to use the same strategies throughout the year with little change because they felt the strategies were accomplishing the goals they had in mind for students’ development.

Question 5: Do you feel *Words Their Way* continues to help show student growth?

Teachers also felt more positive about WTW showing student growth on this survey versus the January survey. In April, 90% felt that the program was helping to show growth in their students as opposed to about 71% on the January survey and many (6 out of 7) reported they felt their students were learning the word patterns better and not just memorizing lists of words. A second grade teacher wrote, “I love the way they are placed at their developmental level and are able to learn the skills necessary to understand spelling vs. just memorizing words.” This indicates that teachers continued to feel the program was worth the work after two years of using it. They saw the benefits as outweighing the challenges they faced as they used the program with their students.

Question 6: What have you noticed about your students during Word Work?

Teachers again reported similar observations of their students during Word Work time. One second grade teacher wrote, “They are engaged.

They enjoy trying to figure out what the categories are each week.” Many teachers, eight out of ten, agreed with this teacher that their students enjoyed the program and were engaged in their learning of spelling, while a couple of teachers reported that some students still have trouble staying on task. A first grade teacher wrote that she needed to “change the activities to keep their interest up.” The idea of boredom during the sorting lesson was again repeated in the first grade responses indicating that this team still struggled with devising solutions for their students. This could have been dependent on the student population in first grade or perhaps not reaching out to other grade levels for ideas as they struggled. Having a system in place for the staff to communicate as a whole would have benefited this first grade team as they labored to keep their students engaged.

Question 7: What have been some challenges you have faced in doing Word Work? Question 8: What solutions, if any, have been developed to combat these challenges?

The challenges that teachers reported on this survey differed from the previous survey. Many still reported that time to work with students and prepare materials was still minimal (1 out of 10), but homework and parent involvement was reported as a new challenge (3 out of 8 teachers reported this, since the two Kindergarten teachers didn't give the sort as homework, this didn't apply to them). A first grade teacher wrote that “some kids don't seem to be doing their homework and then they don't do very well on their test.” Another first grade teacher wrote that a challenge she faced was

“communicating to parents these sorts need to be studied more than once” during the week. Teachers reported that communicating with parents more about the program helped with some of the homework issues students had been having and that sometimes they would help the student complete their homework at school to make sure it was done.

Leveling students into groups and lack of students transferring what they were learning into their daily writing were also reported as challenges in April (2 teachers). As one second grade teacher put it, “leveling is never an exact science.” Teachers reported playing games when students finished their initial sorts to help students make the connection of the spelling pattern they were learning to their writing. These results indicate that teachers continued to face challenges as they implemented the program, but still worked to develop solutions so that the program could continue. They felt the program was effective and worth their effort.

Question 9: What has been the most helpful in supporting your implementation of Word Work? What kinds of support have you received?

Again support from teammates was the most helpful for teachers using the program (7 teachers reported this). Two teachers also reported finding outside resources such as using special education teachers or reading teachers to take on some groups. One second grade teacher mentioned both of these things in his/her survey. S/he wrote, “Brainstorming ideas with my team has been the most helpful. At the beginning of the year I had a special ed. teacher in the room to help supervise children in the program.” Other

teachers echoed this sentiment in their surveys where one first grade teacher wrote, “My co-workers have been helpful in giving me feedback based on their experiences.” The statements made by teachers indicate that any professional development plan that involves implementing a new program would be wise to make sure teachers are given time to work with their grade level colleagues. A majority of teachers in this study mentioned this in all three surveys and emphasized the value of the time to work together.

Question 10: Do you plan to use Words Their Way next year? Do you plan to make any changes to the program or will you continue with how you have been doing things? Overall, are you satisfied with the program?

This final survey also asked teachers if they were satisfied overall with the program and if they would continue to use it in the future. All ten teachers reported that they would use the program again next year, but three clarified that they would only do so if the building and district expected them to do so. One second grade teacher wrote, “I think it is pretty boring for the kids and I miss having spelling tie into our L.A. (language arts) curriculum.” This indicates that this teacher could easily fall back to the traditional spelling program previously used at this school. The other two teachers who stipulated that it was required clarified a bit further saying it was required by the district but they liked the program and would continue to tweak it as they went along. Other teachers (7 out of 10) felt strongly that this program worked well for their students and were excited to use it again. One first grade

teacher wrote, “I think it is a wonderful program because it meets students where they are and challenges their learning. It is both teacher and student friendly.”

Some teachers reported that they planned to continue to tweak the program as they worked with it every year adding more writing to the program and also some basic high frequency words they felt were important for all students in their grade level to learn. While the program is required for all teachers in this district, teachers began to feel as though they could add components they felt were missing for their students.

Interpretations and Implications

The interpretations of the above survey results will be presented here organized by how they relate to the guiding research questions. Following the interpretation, implications for future research and professional development programs will be detailed.

Organized by Research Question

Research Question 1: What was the progression of teacher learning and what support was available from a professional development perspective as teachers implemented the new program?

Investigating the level of support teachers expected and received was the main focus of this study and teachers confirmed what I hypothesized might be true, that is they received a lot of support from each other and not

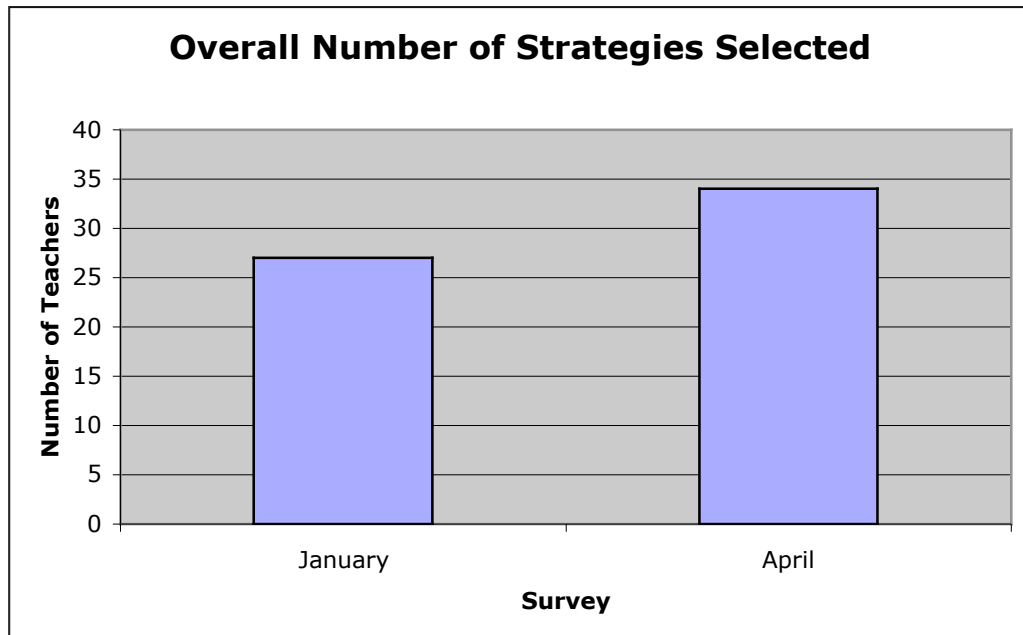
much support from the administration. During this second year of implementation, teachers didn't expect to receive any support from the building level as this building had a history of implementing new initiatives each year. Teachers did, however, write about how helpful it was to be working collaboratively with their grade level teammates to navigate the second year of implementation. Teachers wrote about how they were able to focus on one group of students since they were shared across the grade level and really pinpoint what each child needed at that point in the year. Teachers also wrote about how beneficial it was to have their colleagues to bounce ideas off of when challenges arose with certain groups or particular students.

This study joined teachers during year 2 of the implementation of the new spelling program, *Words Their Way*. In the first year of the program, teachers learned from third grade teachers in their building about the program and how they set it up as a weekly spelling program. The third grade team had used the program the year previous and served as teacher leaders for the school-wide implementation. Grade levels formed professional learning communities for the year as they worked through the first year of the implementation. In this study, many teachers praised the way the program was rolled out.

This research question pinpoints the frustrations that teachers were having in their second year of implementation. Problems were coming up that hadn't in the first year, but now there was no "point person" to ask as professional development had moved on to a new initiative. Teachers didn't

expect to receive any support from the building level and they didn't get any during this study. Instead, teachers relied on their grade level teams to work through challenges and problems that arose during the year. They reported supporting each other as they gathered data, grouping kids across the grade level, and figuring out what to do when their kids weren't getting it.

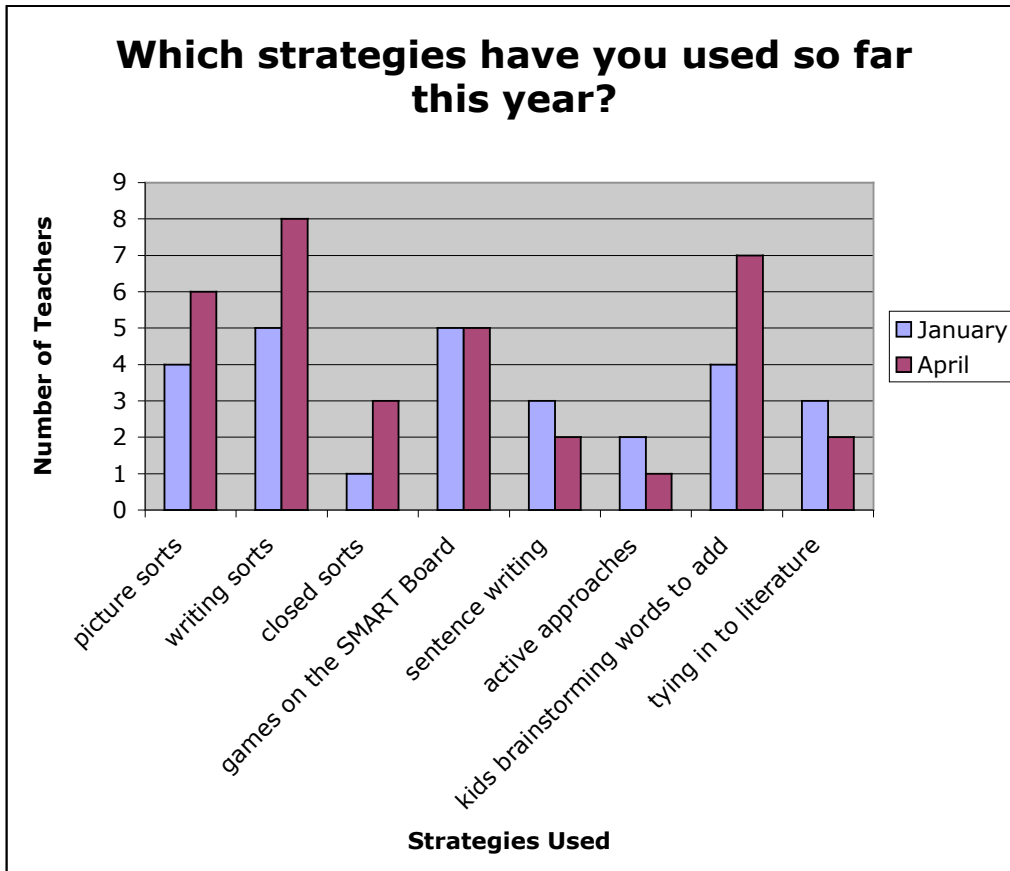
One first grade teacher wrote "ask me again after my team meets this week" in response to the question about what solutions they had come up



with to combat the problem of the kids feeling like the lessons were getting too routine and boring. This was a strength all the teams echoed in similar statements throughout the study. They relied on their team for working through problems and for new ideas when they were struggling personally with what to do. One piece of data that exemplifies this is the jump in the

number of strategies that teachers reported using from the January to April surveys.

In January, twenty-seven strategies were selected as ones that teachers used during their Word Work lessons. In April, the number had jumped to thirty-four strategies. When the data was broken down by specific strategy we can see that not all strategies became more popular. Strategies like picture sorts, writing sorts, closed sorts, and having kids brainstorm ideas for words to add to their sorts all gained in popularity when more teachers were involved in the survey. This could be attributed to the increased number of teachers responding or the fact that these were all strategies modeled by the *Words Their Way* program itself. In January, only seven teachers responded but in April that number rose to ten teachers. Strategies that teams brainstormed together showed as more popular in April when more members of the team responded to the survey.



Research Question 2: What obstacles did teachers face and what strategies were developed to combat those challenges?

Grading practice was mentioned as a challenge by at least one teacher on each survey given. This continued to be an issue all throughout the year and teachers reported that being able to discuss not only with their grade level, but with other surrounding grade levels as well, they were able to come to consensus on what was an appropriate way to grade students at report card time. Each quarter teachers would decide what at point on the spelling inventory they wanted their students to score in order to be considered to be

performing on grade level. This would change as their expectations grew higher during the year. One teacher brought up the larger issue of district wide grading and how consistent that might or might not be. This building had been a pilot building the year previous with the district beginning full implementation during the year of this study. When there are so many buildings (six) and teachers involved, it was hard to remain consistent in grading unless there was some strong leadership exhibited by teachers. From the comments on the surveys given, the teachers in this building wondered whether or not that was happening. One first grade teacher wrote, "It has been great to work as a team to figure out where to go. I only worry that it is not very uniform across our district."

Another challenge that was mentioned quite often by teachers was the time and organization it took to make the program work. This was mentioned by 6 teachers on the January survey and by 3 teachers on the April survey. Every week teachers had to prepare in-class sorts, homework sorts, SMART Board sorts for in class and also changed to pdf files for placement on the class website, and test sorts for each group that teacher taught. Some teachers had three or four groups going on in their room every week and this created quite a challenge for them time-wise. Teachers wrote one solution for this was that each quarter they switched off which teacher had more groups to even it out throughout the school year. Teacher also wrote about involving special personnel to help such as special education teachers or reading teachers who could take responsibility for some of the lower groups of kids.

One final challenge that teachers wrote about more often than others was that they felt their students were getting bored with the routine of sorting words on the SMART Board. One first grade teacher wrote, "...keeping everyone engaged during the group lesson [was a challenge]. They tend to turn off after they've had their turn at the SMART Board." I touched on this point earlier when discussing the types of support teachers had, but it is worth mentioning again. Teachers routinely worked with their colleagues to brainstorm ideas for new and innovative things to do to keep their students engaged.

Directions for Future Research

Aspects of this study prevent the findings from being generalized to larger populations. For example, the sample size of teachers was quite small. There were eleven possible respondents and the highest number of participants for any survey was only ten teachers. If this study were to be done again, it would be beneficial to include more teachers at all grade levels, not just primary, and perhaps involve more than one elementary site. A wider range of experiences would create more generalizable results.

Another aspect of this study that would prevent it from being generalizable was that the teachers who responded to the study were kept anonymous. This made it difficult to track what one person might have said from survey to survey. A future study would benefit from keeping track of respondents across multiple surveys and perhaps interviewing some teachers more in depth about their answers to questions on the surveys.

Other considerations for future research focus on the fact that *Words Their Way* was developed to be used with individual students or small groups of students in more of a tutoring format. It would be beneficial for future research to be done that explores how WTW might be adapted into a school-wide program. Does the program remain effective when taught as a whole group lesson? Are there structures that work better than others for making the program most effective with students in this larger format? Most teachers in this study felt this program was effective on the larger scale, but no data was collected about student achievement, only teachers' perceptions of student growth. That data could be beneficial to have for other districts or schools looking into adopting a similar format for the program.

Professional Development Implications

Teachers clearly wanted support from the building level in the second year of the implementation, but didn't expect to receive this support, based on past experience. It would have been beneficial for the staff to continue to work on the program together for more than one year so that larger issues, such as grading practices, could be consistently worked through.

Teachers in this study felt that the program was implemented well in the first year. They appreciated the work their colleagues had put into teaching them the program and the ease of use since the third grade teachers had done much of the leg-work as far as getting sorts ready to go. This shows that the models of professional development that are becoming more popular seem effective for teachers and make them feel as though they are

part of the process. They learned from their colleagues and decided to try something new rather than being told they had a new curriculum from the district level.

Teachers consistently mentioned how important collaborating with their grade level teammates was. Through the first year this was done in a professional learning community format, but even in the second year much of the same practices were evident though Word Work--which was not the official focus of their PLC for the year. Professional learning communities were working for these teachers so they kept using them, even when not mandated to by administration.

In Conclusion

In doing this study I have learned a few important things about this program and also professional development in general. Teachers felt the *Words Their Way* program was an effective tool in helping their students become better spellers. They believed that students were really learning spelling patterns and that this was contributing to their growth as writers and readers. Teachers also believed that this program was an effective way to measure their students' growth as spellers during the year.

Teachers in this study also felt very well supported by the professional development model that was used in Literacy Elementary School. There was a core group of teacher leaders who had previous experience with the program who led the professional development of the program as it was implemented initially. Teachers worked in professional learning communities

with their grade-level teammates during the first year and continued this practice in the second year, even when not required to do so. The important finding about professional development for me was that the staff felt they would have benefited from more work as a whole group beyond the first year rather than being left to continue on their own. This should be taken into account when districts or buildings are preparing professional development for their staff.

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Appendices

Appendix A – November Survey

Appendix B – January Survey

Appendix C – April Survey

Appendix A: November Survey

This survey was given electronically through a link to Survey Monkey.

Question 1: What grade do you teach?

Question 2: How much experience do you have using Words Their Way in your classroom?

Question 3: What do you want to learn about the Words Their Way approach this year?

Question 4: What teaching strategies are you planning to use with Words Their Way this year?

Question 5: Now that it is the second year of the implementation, what kind of support do you expect to receive for implementing Words Their Way in your classroom?

Appendix B: January Survey

This survey was given electronically through a link to Survey Monkey.

Question 1: What grade do you teach?

Question 2: How often do you use Words Their Way in your classroom?

Question 3: Which of the following strategies have you used so far this year?

Question 4: How effective have the strategies been?

Question 5: Do you feel Words Their Way has helped show student growth?

Question 6: What have you noticed about your students during Word Work?

Question 7: What have been some challenges you have faced in doing Word Work?

Question 8: What solutions, if any, have been developed to combat these challenges?

Question 9: What has been the most helpful in supporting your implementation of Word Work? What kinds of support have you received?

Appendix C: April Survey

This survey was given electronically through a link to Survey Monkey.

Question 1: What grade do you teach?

Question 2: How often do you use Words Their Way in your classroom?

Question 3: Which of the following strategies have you used so far this year?

Question 4: How effective have the strategies been?

Question 5: Do you feel Words Their Way has helped show student growth?

Question 6: What have you noticed about your students during Word Work?

Question 7: What have been some challenges you have faced in doing Word Work?

Question 8: What solutions, if any, have been developed to combat these challenges?

Question 9: What has been the most helpful in supporting your implementation of Word Work? What kinds of support have you received?

Question 10: Do you plan to use Words Their Way next year? Do you plan to make any changes to the program or will you continue with how you have been doing things? Overall, are you satisfied with the program?