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Andrea N. Kleinpaste

Northern Michigan University, akleinpa@gmail.com

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THE EFFECTS OF INDIVIDUALIZED, STUDENT-SELECTED SPELLING LISTS  
ON ELEMENTARY STUDENT LEARNING AND MOTIVATION

By

Andrea N. Kleinpaste

THESIS

Submitted to  
Northern Michigan University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of

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July 2014

SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

THE EFFECTS OF INDIVIDUALIZED, STUDENT-SELECTED SPELLING LISTS  
ON ELEMENTARY STUDENT LEARNING AND MOTIVATION

This thesis by Andrea N. Kleinpaste is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of Education and by the Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research.

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Committee Chair: Christi Edge, PhD Date

---

First Reader: Derek Anderson, EdD Date

---

Second Reader: Judith Puncochar, PhD Date

---

Department Head: Joseph Lubig, EdD Date

---

Dr. Brian D. Cherry, PhD Date  
Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research

## ABSTRACT

### THE EFFECTS OF INDIVIDUALIZED, STUDENT-SELECTED SPELLING LISTS ON ELEMENTARY STUDENT LEARNING AND MOTIVATION

By

Andrea N. Kleinpaste

Educators and researchers disagree about the best way to teach spelling to children.

Frustrations from the lack of a spelling program provided by the school led the author to research a new spelling routine focused on choice and differentiation of spelling lists.

First-grade students participated in a three-and-a-half-week study focused on the effects of individualized, student-selected spelling lists on student learning and motivation.

Students took pre-and post-surveys about their viewpoints of various activities involved in first-grade spelling, which included spelling lists, word-work, spelling tests, and personal feelings about spelling achievement. The researcher held one-on-one discussions with students about spelling and observed students during spelling. Students' spelling test grades and sentence dictation grades were recorded along with an analysis of specific student word choices in relation to their developmentally appropriate spelling level.

Students enjoyed the choice that was intertwined into the study when they selected words for their lists, practiced in the classroom with word-work activities, and practiced at home with spelling homework assignments. Student motivation for word-work and spelling increased during the study. Implications from this study demonstrate student attitudes and reflections of a new spelling program in the classroom. The author argues that choice is an important motivator in a spelling program.

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2014

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This thesis follows the format prescribed by the APA Publication Manual and the Department of Education.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This action research focuses on choice and motivation during spelling and word-work activities in a first-grade classroom. Educators and researchers debate the best way to teach spelling and word-work in the classroom (e.g., Invernizzi, Abouzeid, & Bloodgood, 1997; Schlagal, 2002; Wallace, 2006). Personal outcomes of teachers and students depend heavily on teachers' own skills at developing a spelling curriculum (Wallace, 2006). Without district guidelines on how to teach spelling and word-work, instruction is up to the teacher to find best practices that work in the classroom. I wanted to study how choice effects student learning and motivation in my classroom to better support my students in becoming more self-regulated, proficient, and motivated in their learning of spelling.

Although educators do not agree on how spelling should be taught, they do agree that spelling proficiency is crucial (Graham, Morphy, Harris, Fink-Chorzempa, Saddler, Moran, & Mason, 2008; Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2004). Spelling instruction teaches students how to use conventional spellings in their writing. Educators teach students how letters and sounds correspond to develop useful spelling skills. Spelling proficiency is important in reading and writing (Graham et al., 2008). Students who struggle with spelling can have obstructions of their thought process and ideas while reading or writing (Graham et al., 2008).

Teachers and researchers also dispute where spelling words should come from. Spelling words can be chosen from a variety of sources including spelling programs, basal readers, material students read, students' compositions, and student self-selection

(Graham et al., 2008; Schlagal, 2002; Wallace, 2006). Choice has been found to be a major component to positive student attitude, excitement, and willingness to learn (Gambrell, 2011; Alderman & Green, 2011). This study focused on student self-selected word lists. This action research was dedicated to finding the effects of student choice with spelling lists and word-work activities.

### **Statement of the Problem**

This thesis is based on an action research project rooted in the author's dissatisfaction and wonderings of how to best provide spelling instruction and practice to first-grade students. As a teacher-researcher I was interested in making spelling and word-work a more meaningful task for my first-grade students. I hypothesized that reading was the basis of a successful educational experience. I wanted to provide my students with best practice teaching in all areas of literacy. My school district did not currently have a mandated spelling program for teachers to follow. Teachers had to decide the best way to teach students spelling skills. First-grade teachers had previously produced a phonetic skills list that was used throughout the grade level. Although similar phonetic skills were taught during the year, individual first-grade teachers taught spelling and word-work in different ways.

Prior to this study, I gave students a spelling list each week; the list contained teacher-selected words that focused on a specific phonetic skill. Spelling lists were not differentiated for the diverse needs and abilities of students. Spelling list words contained a mixture of easy to hard words, although compound words and multi-syllable words were usually not included due to their difficulty level. Students studied the words, worked with the words in the classroom and at home, and were tested one week later.

Students were dealing with lists that were too hard or too easy and were frequently not motivated or excited about their teacher-selected word lists. Spelling homework, which consisted of copy spelling words once, was insignificant and mundane. The majority of students did well on weekly tests. Upon closer assessment, I hypothesized that students were memorizing the lists and not learning and implanting the actual spelling rule to their memory, writing, and reading. These frustrations led to this action research project that focused on examining the relationship between individualized, student-selected spelling lists on student learning and motivation toward spelling and word-work.

### **Theoretical Framework**

As a teacher-researcher, my thinking is guided by constructivist theory. Bruner, classified as a constructivist theorist, hypothesized that the purpose of education is to facilitate students' learning, which can then be transmitted to a range of situations they encounter. Constructivist theorists focus on student choice, with active learners constructing their own knowledge, scaffolding, and discovery learning. Teachers facilitate the learning process and let students assemble their own knowledge. Bruner also speculated that culture structures the mind and that environmental and experimental factors effect student learning. Students base and build their learning on prior knowledge (Stringer, Christensen, & Baldwin, 2009).

### **Research Question**

This action research study aimed to answer questions about differentiating spelling instruction to permit student choice and to create motivation during spelling and word-work activities. Specifically, this study addresses the questions: How do individualized, student-selected spelling lists affect student learning and motivation

toward spelling and word-work? Do self-selection word lists positively influence student learning and motivation toward word-work when compared with teacher-selected word lists?

### **Definition of Terms**

Key terms used in this study are defined as follows:

**Choice.** Making a decision about your learning.

**Developmental spelling knowledge.** “Five stages of spelling development: emergent, letter name-alphabetic, within word pattern, syllables and affixes, or derivational relations” (Bear et al., 2004, p. 10).

**Dictated sentences.** Three teacher-selected sentences that students write using their spelling knowledge.

**Differentiation.** “A differentiated classroom provides different avenues to acquiring content, to processing or making sense of ideas, and to developing product so that each student can learn effectively” (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 1).

**Individualized.** This “model of instruction recognized that the teacher needed to work sometimes with the whole class, sometimes with small groups, and sometimes with individuals. These variations were important in order both to move each student along in his particular understandings and skills as well as to build a sense of community in a group” (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 2).

**Motivation.** “The tendency to find academic activities meaningful and worthwhile and to try to benefit from them” (Woolfolk, 2010, p. 400). As the teacher for this action research, I judged my students’ motivation by their feelings and attitudes

toward spelling and word work activities, and their behavior and enjoyment during spelling and word work activities.

**Phonics.** “The systematic relationship between letters and sounds” (Bear et al., 2004, p. 64).

**Self-efficacy.** “A person’s sense of being able to deal effectively with a particular task, beliefs about personal competence in a particular situation” (Bandura, 1997; Woolfolk, 2010, p. 350).

**Spelling instruction.** Includes spelling lessons, word-work activities, small group lessons, word sorts, spelling homework, spelling tests, and sentence dictation tests.

**Student learning.** Spelling knowledge that students learn during spelling and can apply to their writing. Student learning is assessed with spelling tests and sentence dictation tests.

**Student-selected.** The student chooses spelling words with guidance from the teacher.

**Teacher-selected.** Spelling words are chosen by the teacher. All students receive identical spelling lists.

**Word-work.** Learner-centered, hands-on activities focusing on similarities and differences in words and word parts (Bear et al., 2004).

### **Significance of the Study**

During my research, the method of making spelling lists and homework were changed to differentiate the spelling program and motivate students toward their learning. Action research was conducted in the classroom involving normal classroom procedures to examine the effects of differentiation and choice in a spelling program.



This action research project was a practical way to explore a new teaching method for spelling instruction which gave students more choice and differentiation possibilities with their spelling word lists. Action research is “a systematic inquiry into one’s own practice. Action research allows teachers to study their own classrooms” (Mertler, 2012, p. 4). Teachers are guided through four steps when conducting action research: choosing a classroom focus, collecting data, analyzing and evaluating the data, and finally developing a plan of action (Mertler, 2012). Action research allowed me to explore and modify my teaching methods for spelling and word-work. I hypothesized the benefits of this study would include motivation for students, growth as spellers, enjoyment, more choice and ownership, and more meaningful practice of spelling words.

### **Limitations**

Limitations to this study included the timing of the study, which occurred at the end of the school year. Students may not have been as focused on their schoolwork as they were earlier in the year due to excitement, sunshine, and exciting end of the year activities. The reality of a first-grade classroom is that students can be quick to answer or respond because they want to be done and move on to the next activity. A limitation of this study could be students not answering fully or truthfully during the survey and one-on-one discussions. Some students just put an answer down to be done, for example, filling out all the same answer instead of attempting to answer honestly. The difficulty level of student-selected spelling list words could have also been a limitation for students. Student word choices were guided by the teacher, but situations occurred where students picked words that were developmentally too hard or too easy. This situation could have affected spelling test grades and created stress for individual students. Since this study

was an action research project, findings will not be generalized to all students and teachers, but instead focuses on my individualized classroom instruction and learning.

### **Chapter Summary and Brief Overview of the Study**

Action research was used to study the effectiveness of student-selected spelling lists in comparison to teacher-selected spelling lists on student motivation. I changed my teaching method for how spelling list words were chosen for weekly lists. Students learned a specific, teacher-selected phonetic spelling rule each week. As a class, students searched for words around the classroom and in books that followed the spelling rule. Students formed a combined list of words on the whiteboard that, with teacher guidance, visually leveled words from easiest to hardest (Appendix A). Each student selected words for their personal spelling list each week. Students selected words that were important, meaningful, and self-determined appropriately challenging. Through student-teacher conversations and examples, students were carefully directed toward words that were developmentally appropriate for their lists. Throughout the week, students were involved in ample mini-lessons, small group instruction, and opportunities to practice the particular spelling rule.

Data were collected with both qualitative and quantitative techniques. Students participated in a pre- and post-survey about their attitude and motivation with spelling and word-work (Appendix C). Students were tested with dictated sentences to observe the use of spelling rules outside of a customary spelling test form (Appendix E). Qualitative data were collected in the form of observations recorded in my research notebook and anecdotal descriptions of conversations with students about their spelling and word-work (Appendix D).

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The lack of differentiation, student choice, and ownership in my spelling instruction strategies was addressed in this study because they affected spelling instruction and learning in my classroom. As a teacher-researcher I wanted to make spelling instruction more meaningful and beneficial for my students. This literature review will focus on the following topics: spelling instruction history, background, and today's classrooms: spelling instruction concerns and options: spelling development: word study: differentiation: and meaningful spelling practice.

### **Spelling Instruction: Past and Present Spelling Instruction Approaches**

Spelling instruction has moved through many stages and styles over the years and is still a topic debated in education. Spelling instruction has been presented as rote memory tasks, teacher-selected list form, numbers of syllables, orthographic principle, study-test verses test-study-test approach, most frequently used words, memory-based, basal spellers, orthographic generalizations, curriculum-based content vocabulary lists, and individualized instruction (Schlagal, 2002). Although educators do not agree on which of these instructional strategies is best, they do agree that spelling proficiency is crucial (Graham, Morphy, Harris, Fink-Chorzempa, Saddler, Moran, & Mason, 2008; Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2004). The following studies look at what teachers are doing in their classrooms to effectively teach literacy skills.

Eighty-three primary-level teachers from the United States, who were rated as effective literacy teachers by a superior, participated in a national questionnaire about essential practices for literacy instruction (Pressley, Rankin, & Yokoi, 1996). Effective

literacy teachers created literacy-rich environments for students, had classroom libraries, displayed student work, used chart stories and poems, posted word lists, used learning centers, read stories aloud to students, and had opportunities to listen to taped stories. The surveyed teachers reported using various teaching methods including modeling, practice and repetition, grouping, differentiation, and integration in their literacy instruction. Pressley et al. (1996) observed differences in what these highly effective teachers understood to be the best way to teach spelling instruction. Teachers reported all views of teaching phonics from using daily phonics instruction to phonics workbooks to never teaching phonics in isolation. Teachers created classrooms that were supportive of literacy. High-quality literature was available to students in classrooms. Attention to the alphabetic principle and phoneme awareness supports long-term positive effects of literacy achievement.

Teachers and researchers dispute where words should come from for spelling lists. A nationwide survey (Graham, 2008) of spelling instruction practices and adaptations that randomly selected primary-grade teachers from across the United States found that teachers taught spelling for an average of 90 minutes per week. One hundred sixty-nine first- through third-grade randomly-selected teachers were surveyed through questionnaires focusing on instructional practices for spelling and adaptations made for students who struggled with spelling. Graham's seven-point Likert-type scale survey reported 98% of participating teachers taught spelling, gathering words from different sources including spelling programs (66%), basal readers (37%), material students read (30%), students' compositions (26%), and students' self-selection (14%). Additionally, the researcher articulated how multifaceted primary-grade spelling instruction is.

Teachers taught a variety of spelling skills through instructional procedures and activities including phonological awareness, phonics for spelling, spelling rules, strategies for spelling unknown words, mini lessons, peer learning activities, games, invented spellings, spell checkers, and proofreading.

### **Spelling Instruction: Concerns and Options**

To thoughtfully and consciously learn spelling, students need to learn to sound out words, look for visual patterns, word families, word meanings, word structures, and roots (Wallace, 2006). Nevertheless, students typically experience traditional instruction-centered teaching of strategies with a commercial textbook and weekly word lists and exercises (Fresch, 2007; Wallace, 2006).

In a nationwide survey (Fresch, 2007) addressing teachers' concerns about spelling instruction, 355 random samples of first- through fifth-grade teachers in the United States were surveyed about spelling instruction and student spelling abilities. Teachers responded in writing to three open-ended statements about instructional practices and spelling needs of students. Teachers reported traditional memorization spelling lists were used most often in classrooms. Traditional memorization spelling lists consist of teacher-selected words that students practice and tend to memorize the words and not the spelling rule. Teachers also reported the frustration of students not applying their practiced spelling to their independent writing. Key areas where many teachers expressed concerns with spelling instruction included meeting student's individual needs, availability and expense of resources, time to teach, and students retaining and applying words learned to reading and writing. Teachers also mentioned several recurring specific student issues: lack of proofreading, student's phonetic background, student smooth

transition from invented spelling to conventional spelling, and home support. Overall, researchers stressed the importance of developing teachers' understanding of spelling knowledge and development for students. Improving student's spelling performance starts with changing spelling instruction to meet student needs. Teachers provide instruction to develop student skills, knowledge, and understanding of necessary components to spelling knowledge.

Fifteen second- through fifth-grade teachers participated in two semi-structured interviews focused on their knowledge of literacy instruction (Hammond, 2004). The teachers taught at a primary school in Australia that had received literacy awards for innovative programs, which spoke highly of the staff interviewed. Teachers used a combination of child-centered and instruction-centered routines for spelling instruction. Common concerns about spelling instruction included how to best teach spelling, what to design curriculum around, and effective teaching strategies. Commonalities throughout teacher responses included teachers focused on spelling instruction for at least 20 minutes a day, students were administered pre- and post-tests in each spelling cycle consisting of 12 to 20 words, and teachers used a blend of child-centered and instruction-centered strategies. Teachers reported satisfaction with their combined approach of teaching spelling and the high spelling achievement of their students. The highly qualified teachers taught using a variety of spelling instructions and activities to reach all students needs.

### **Spelling Development**

Learning to spell is a complex developmental process that leads to spelling proficiency over many stages (Bear et al., 2004; Henderson & Templeton, 1986). The English orthography is an intricate writing system of letter sequences (Bear et al., 2004).

Students move through identified stages of developmental spelling knowledge (Bear et al., 2004; Henderson & Templeton, 1986). Children start in the beginning stage where they listen to stories, scribble, and become aware of phonemes. Children continue to move through key developmental features – being aware of the alphabetic principal, using invented spelling and noticing first and final sounds, observing word families and short vowel patterns, using within-word spellings, noticing long vowel patterns and complex single syllable words, detecting syllabication rules, verbs, and special vowel patterns, and finally, noticing derivational families using roots and stems to make connections and understandings between words (Bear et al., 2004; Henderson & Templeton, 1986). Henderson and Templeton (1986) concluded that when spelling is understood linguistically and presented developmentally, a complex system becomes an orderly system of steps. Teachers need to understand students' independent developmental spelling knowledge to support learning in the classroom with differentiated spelling instruction.

Twenty-two first-grade students with mixed abilities (low, medium, and high) were split into similar experimental and control groups in Uhry and Shepherd's (1993) research study. Both groups received similar spelling instruction lessons focused mainly in the ideas of whole-language learning focused on real-life tasks. The experimental group practiced segmentation and spelling of consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) words while the control group practiced reading the CVC words and was not taught segmentation strategies to use in their reading and writing. Students were tested four times throughout the study on nonsense word reading, sight vocabulary, oral passage reading, silent reading comprehension, segmenting, blending, and spelling. To focus on

the interactions between time and group, measures were collected and analyzed using univariate analysis. Experimental subjects were superior to control subjects after six-and-a-half months of training on measures of nonsense word reading, timed word reading, and timed oral passage reading. Experimental subjects also made noteworthy gains in segmenting and spelling. Teachers used a variety of teaching strategies and a combination approach to support student needs.

Tangel and Blachman (1995) studied the effects of phoneme awareness instruction on 131 first-grade students' spelling over a two-year span. This study stressed the importance of teaching students phoneme awareness and the alphabetic principle. Phoneme awareness consists of being aware of the sounds in spoken words. Alphabetic principle is being aware that words are made up of letters that represent sounds. Sixty-two control students received traditional instruction from a reading program used by the district. Students used a basal series, a phonics workbook, and had access to the classroom library. Sixty-nine treatment students received two years of a phoneme awareness program that focused on segmentation, grouping, phoneme awareness, blending, high-frequency sight words, and phonetically regular texts. Students from both groups were tested for spelling proficiency three times throughout kindergarten and first-grade with a developmental spelling test. Student work was measured with a seven-point scale, which considered the number of phonemes employed and the stage of orthographic representation. Results of independent *t* tests indicated that the treatment group's points were significantly higher than the control group's points. When researchers organized students from both groups into bottom, middle, and top spellers, the top group of spellers included 41% of the treatment students and only 27% of the control students. In the



bottom group of spellers, 47% were from the control group in contrast to 21% from the treatment group. Differences in the groups of spellers were significant ( $p=.009$ ). The treatment group demonstrated more rapid growth with the between tests. Students who were taught with an emphasis on segmenting, phoneme awareness, and the alphabetic principal remained significantly ahead of students learning invented spelling and standard spelling programs.

Following building frustration from first-grade teachers wanting to better address the spelling needs of their students, Invernizzi and Hayes (2004) researched developmental spelling. First-grade teachers theorized that their whole-group spelling lessons did not best address the diverse needs of their students. The teachers and researchers examined how teachers could make developmental-spelling functional for their first-grade classrooms. Invernizzi and Hayes noted general spelling knowledge is needed when students come across words they have never seen before or have never written before. Teachers developed flexible student groups based on qualitative spelling assessment outcomes, which established the instructional spelling levels of students. Teachers practiced spelling with teacher-directed small group lessons focusing on students' developmental spelling knowledge and word-work opportunities. Advocates of word study argue that through word study students will generalize spelling rules that will transfer to reading and writing activities. Three tiers of English spelling include alphabet, pattern, and meaning, which were used to guide spelling instruction. Evidence from this study suggests students' knowledge of the orthography is essential to their literacy achievement.

## **Word Study**

Word study requires students to group words into categories by looking at similarities and differences. Students can sort words by spelling, meaning, and patterns (Bear et al., 2004; Invernizzi et al., 1997). Students benefit from hands-on opportunities to work with words, to manipulate, and to find patterns that can be generalized to whole groups of words (Bear et al., 2004). In classrooms where teachers use best practice strategies, teachers provide purposeful writing experiences and have students write frequently to give ample opportunities to practice spelling in meaningful ways.

Word study instruction helps support literacy development. Williams (2009) worked with four kindergarten through second-grade colleague teachers to study implementing word study instruction into their classrooms. The researchers carried out four qualitative investigations of word study instruction within eight years. The researchers first studied word study using commonly misspelled words by Title One students. Misspelled words were used in spelling lists focused on a specific orthographic feature or principle. Students correctly used target words 85% of the time after word study instruction. William's team was most impressed by the children's use of the specific orthographic features used in different words that were not on their initial list of target words. The second investigation focused on the impact of whole-group word study instruction in a kindergarten classroom. Lessons were most beneficial to students with average literacy skills. High and low students' academic needs were not fully met with whole-group instruction lessons. Second graders were split into small developmental groups in their next study. Small developmental groups for word study lessons were beneficial to meeting all students' instructional needs. The final study focused on linking

word study lessons to interactive writing opportunities. Title One first graders were promoted to use what they had learned from word study lessons in their writing. Results expressed the importance of linking word study lessons to writing through interactive writing instruction. Williams discusses nine suggestions for implementing word study:

- assess students' word knowledge using multiple assessment tools
- use a homogeneous small-group approach to instruction
- carve out time to prepare for word study instruction
- teach word knowledge, not just words
- demonstrate how word study can be used during reading and writing
- teach strategies that support students' use of word study instruction
- make your word wall work
- “word-work” should work, too!
- engage students in extensive “real” reading and writing (p. 572)

### **Differentiation**

Students have a diverse mix of spelling abilities. Students come from many different backgrounds and have obtained different knowledge to base their learning on (Graham et al., 2008). Teachers need to be aware of students' developmental spelling knowledge to provide meaningful spelling instruction. Exceptional literacy teachers teach lessons to all students, but differentiate teaching within the lesson to meet the needs of individual students (Pressley et al., 1996). Differentiated classrooms provide students with multiple avenues to take in and make sense of information. Differentiated classrooms provide students multiple ways to express what they learned (Tomlinson, 2001). A proactive teacher plans qualitative differentiated instruction rooted in

assessment by constantly assessing students' developing readiness, interests, and modes of learning. Differentiation provides multiple approaches for learning and is student centered while being a blend of whole group, small group, and individual instruction (Tomlinson, 2001). Spelling lesson needs are different for each grade level and individual student, depending on the developmental spelling stage of the learner. Differentiating instruction and word-work allows students to work with words in an array of different ways to utilize the spelling rule in different contexts.

Instructional levels in spelling were studied with 48 low-achieving spellers in third-grade classrooms (Morris, L. Blanton, W. Blanton, Nowacek, & Perney, 1995). Twenty-four students were taught in an intervention group focused on a second-grade spelling book. The comparison group with the other 24 students worked with a third-grade spelling book. Researchers were curious about the effects of ability grouping third-grade students during spelling instruction on their spelling achievement. In two previous studies the same researchers concluded that spelling instructional levels were present with students. Students who obtained significant spelling pattern knowledge were able to master grade-level spelling curriculum and apply their spelling knowledge in writing. Low-achieving spellers experienced difficulty in learning spelling patterns and did not apply their knowledge to their writing. During the first six weeks all students were taught from the third-grade spelling curriculum. The intervention group was then taught from the second-grade spelling curriculum for the next 16 weeks and then learned the first eight units in the third-grade book for the final eight weeks. The comparison group studied the third-grade spelling curriculum the whole time. The intervention group surpassed the comparison group on several posttest data. Intervention students scored

higher than comparison students on the second-grade posttest (75% to 64%) and on the third-grade transfer test (47% to 37%). Researchers questioned the possibility that learning to spell is a, “hierarchical system of orthographic patterns” (p. 174) and by increasing students’ lower-level knowledge of spelling could support their learning of higher-level spelling patterns later. The largest benefiter of this differentiated spelling instruction were the students who were the farthest behind grade-level at the beginning of the study outperforming other students on the second-grade posttest (75% to 64%) and the third-grade transfer test (47% to 35%). The intervention group scored almost as high as comparison groups on the third-grade curriculum-based posttest (47% to 50%). The researchers questioned if the comparison groups were not ready for the third-grade level of needed orthographic knowledge, where the intervention group benefited from reviewing second-grade orthographic knowledge to base their future learning on.

### **Meaningful Spelling Practice**

Student choice is a powerful tool for engagement in an educational setting. Students are more motivated toward learning when they have a say in the matter. Choice allows students to feel ownership and responsibility of their learning. Students also develop intrinsic motivation through choice (Gambrell, 2001).

Educators and researchers agree that spelling proficiency is a crucial component of literacy skills (Graham, Morphy, Harris, Fink-Chorzempa, Saddler, Moran, & Mason, 2008; Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2004). Students’ achievement or failure with spelling instruction is strongly associated to their educational motivation (Sideridis, 2005). Careful instructional practices in spelling can build student’s motivation and confidence (Alderman & Green, 2011). If spelling lessons and activities show the fun

side of learning about words students could become more motivated to participate. Motivation increases when students understand the significance and function of a learning task (Sideridis, 2005). Another way to spark student learning is to give opportunities for students to participate in decision making about their learning. Having students participate in decisions promotes higher levels of engagement (Alderman & Green, 2011).

Young students have a hard time reflecting on their learning and rarely do so (Zimmerman, 1990). With years of education students will optimistically become self-regulated learners and become, “masters of their own learning” (Zimmerman, 1990, p. 4). Self-regulated learners are confident, motivated, knowledgeable, active participants in their own learning, and accept responsibility for their academics (Zimmerman, 1990). Alderman and Green (2011) share three classroom elements to increase spellers awareness and motivation: “(1) varied and meaningful yet challenging tasks, (2) new evaluation and recognition practices, and (3) student participation in decision-making” (p. 604). Permitting students to play a role in their spelling instruction and word-work allows them to develop a personal sense of success (Alderman & Green, 2011).

Few studies have focused on self-efficacy and literacy with students in early elementary grades kindergarten through second grade (Wilson & Trainin, 2007). With the need high in this area of research, Wilson and Trainin (2007) gathered 198 first-grade students from a California school district to participate in a study focused on self-efficacy in reading, writing, and spelling. Results from a repeated-measures ANOVA show a significant difference ( $p < .001$ ) between the self-efficacy scale mean scores for reading, spelling and writing. Self-efficacy for reading had a scale mean score of 5.86 (SE=0.13).

Students' self-efficacy for spelling had a mean scale of 6.2 (SE = 0.12), while their self-efficacy for writing had a mean scale of 6.79 (SE = 0.12). Wilson and Trainin hypothesized this outcome was the case because students receive the most tangible oral feedback during reading, less during spelling, and the least amount during writing. Whole class oral feedback is limited during writing lessons, consequently limiting social comparisons that may affect a student's self-efficacy. Effort and other internal attributions were articulated more with students of higher literacy achievement, while students of lower literacy achievement mentioned external factors affecting their performances. There was a strong correlational relationship connecting self-efficacy and perceived capability for literacy tasks. Early education needs to focus on acquiring basic skills that lead to reading attempts and use internal attribution statements to help students understand effort and their successes or failures in literacy tasks.

Main findings in this literature review focused on spelling instruction history, background, and today's classrooms: spelling instruction concerns and options: spelling development: word study: differentiation: and meaningful spelling practice. The purpose of this literature review was to look at past and present approaches to spelling instruction. Researchers and teachers agree that spelling instruction is crucial to students' learning. Differentiation and focusing on students' spelling developmental knowledge can alter a child's learning experience during spelling. Choice and motivation can be powerful tools in engaging students in spelling work. This literature review provided support for my action research question focused on how individualized, student-selected spelling lists affect student learning and motivation toward spelling and word-work.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

This thesis was based on an action research project rooted in the dissatisfaction and wonderings of how to best provide spelling instruction and practice to first-grade students. Frustration with the initial spelling instruction lead to changes in the classroom and to teaching practices. This action research project focused on examining the relationship between individualized, student-selected spelling lists on student learning and motivation toward spelling and word-work.

### **Setting and Participants**

As a teacher-researcher I studied my research question in my general education first-grade classroom. I teach in a public education preK through eighth-grade school in Northern Michigan. Our preK-eight building has about 850 students, about 95 of them being first-graders. Five first-grade classes and teachers were in our building this year.

The participants were comprised of my own general education 19 first-grade students, 10 boys and nine girls. Their ages ranged from six to seven years old. All students were Caucasian. Seven of my students were on free and reduced meals at school. One student was not involved in the study since he went to the resource room for spelling instruction. One student with behavior issues would not participate in all aspects of this study therefore only his test scores and word choice analysis were included in the data collection and analysis. He did not participate in the pre-and post-survey or one-on-one discussions. My study focused on the remaining 17 first-grade students, eight boys and nine girls.



## **Overview of Study**

This study came about because I was interested in making spelling and word-work a more meaningful task for my first-grade students. I hypothesized that reading was the basis of a successful educational experience and that spelling knowledge had a large role in being a successful reader. I wanted to provide my students with best practice teaching in all areas of literacy. My school district did not currently have a mandated spelling program for teachers to follow. Teachers decided the best way to teach students spelling skills and what words to teach. First-grade teachers taught the same phonetic skills throughout the year. In the beginning of the 2013-2014 school year all first-grade teachers would send home a list of spelling words following a certain phonetic skill. This spelling list would be practiced for one week. Students would complete spelling homework by copying their words once and turning the assignment in to their teacher. In class, students would be learning and working with the specific spelling rule for the week.

I started questioning the use of an identical spelling list for each student in my classroom and the meaningless homework that accompanied the list. I needed to change my instruction to better fit individual student needs and help them be excited and motivated for spelling. I revamped my spelling instruction routine by adding choice, differentiation, and new meaningful homework where students made choices pertaining to what their assignments were for the week. Students participated in a new spelling routine for the last three and a half weeks of school. The first-graders were introduced to a new spelling rule each Monday, for example, learning the diphthong aw in the word saw. Students were taught and practiced with the new generalized rule. As a class we

then searched the classroom, books, and papers for any words that followed the spelling rule. We met at the carpet and students read words to me that they found. As I wrote them on the board I listed the words from left to right, easiest to hardest (Appendix A). Students then chose words for their individual lists that they cared about, were excited about, and were self-determined appropriately challenging for them. Students received nine options for homework each week (Appendix B). They differed to accommodate a plethora of learning styles and likes from the students. Examples included drawing a picture and hiding your words in the picture, writing or typing your words in a fun font, having an adult give you a practice test, and finding vowels and consonants in your words. Students selected two homework assignments to complete each week. Students were tested, one-on-one, on their personal spelling list. I hypothesized the benefits of this study would include motivation for students, growth as spellers, enjoyment, more choice and ownership, and meaningful practice of spelling words.

### **Data Collection**

My data collection timeline is below with explanations of each data source collected following the timeline.

Table 1

*Data Collection Timeline*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Data Collected</b>
2013-2014 school year	archived data – spelling test grades
5-12-14	archived data – pre-survey
5-12-14, 5-13-14	archived data – written notes from one-on-one conversations
week of 5-12-14	teach phonetic skill: diphthong aw choose words for individual spelling lists
5-19-14	test diphthong aw
week of 5-19-14	teach phonetic skill: diphthong au choose words for individual spelling lists
5-21-14	sentence dictation test #1
5-27-14	test diphthong au
week of 5-27-14	teach phonetic skill: phonogram –nk choose words for individual spelling lists
5-29-14	sentence dictation test #2
6-2-14	test phonogram –nk
6-3-14	sentence dictation test #3
6-3-14	post-survey
6-3-14	written notes from one-on-one conversations

**Pre- and post-survey.** I made a survey using a Likert-type scale to collect data from my students on how students perceived themselves as spellers and their feelings and attitudes toward spelling and word-work activities (Appendix C). Spelling and word-work activities include spelling lists, spelling homework, spelling tests, and word-work activities. Examples of word-work activities contain white boards, letter magnets, letter tiles, letter stamps, cray-pas and other fun writing utensils, word sorts, and playing word games with spelling words or sight words (Appendix H). Students responded to survey statements by coloring in one of three smiley faces: a happy face, a middle face, or a sad face. The use of smiley face pictures helped adapt the survey to be first-grade friendly.

Surveys were read aloud to students who completed them in private spaces in the classroom.

**Written notes from one-on-one conversations.** I held pre- and post-individual discussions (Appendix D) with each of my students about spelling and word-work. Students were asked about how they felt about spelling. They were asked to explain or give examples about aspects of spelling that they enjoyed or did not enjoy. Students were asked about how they felt during a spelling test. Using spelling rules in writing and applying spelling rules to new words is the future teachers anticipate for our spellers. I asked students if they used their spelling rules in their writing and also asked students if they felt they had choice in the words they work with each week. Finally, I asked students what would make spelling more fun to gather ideas for future word-work activities.

**Sentence dictation tests.** Students were given three dictation tests throughout the study focused on finding out if students were constructing spelling knowledge and able to apply their spelling knowledge in a new setting. Three sentences were verbally given to students during each dictation test (Appendix E). Students repeated the sentence and worked on their paper to write the sentence as best as they could.

**Spelling test grades.** I had archived data of students' test scores from their whole first-grade year up to the start of the study. I also had current data of their spelling tests with the new spelling and word-work changes (Appendix F). Spelling test grades were not analyzed for this study based on the fact that this study focused on student choice and motivation during spelling instruction. Spelling test grades were used to look at and notice patterns for further studying of the topic of spelling.

**Word choice analysis.** The last piece of data collected was a student word choice analysis (Appendix F). Adding choice to a spelling program where students got to choose the words they wanted to practice created certain issues. Some students chose words that were too easy for them, some chose words that were too hard for them, and sometimes students collected words that were just right and appropriately challenging for them. I looked closely at the word lists students made and decided if they chose words that were just right for them, too easy for them, or too hard for them. Students were given a number one through three based on their word choices. Students received a one if the words were too easy, a two if the words were just right, and a three if the words were too hard. I searched the data for patterns in regards to their word choices and their spelling test and sentence dictation test scores.

### **Analysis Procedures**

Most of the data collected for this research were qualitative which needed inductive logic to analyze (Mertler, 2012). To analyze the data systematically, I used a coding scheme to find groups of data that were similar. While conducting the inductive analysis I searched for patterns and data that presented similar types of information. Inductive analysis had three steps to work through with the data collected. The steps involved organization, description, and interpretation (Mertler, 2012).

I randomly assigned a number to each participating student using a number generator on the Internet. Each child's identity was protected and students were referred to as student one, student two, and so on in the context of the research study. The pre- and post-survey were similar to a Likert scale with three options for students to choose

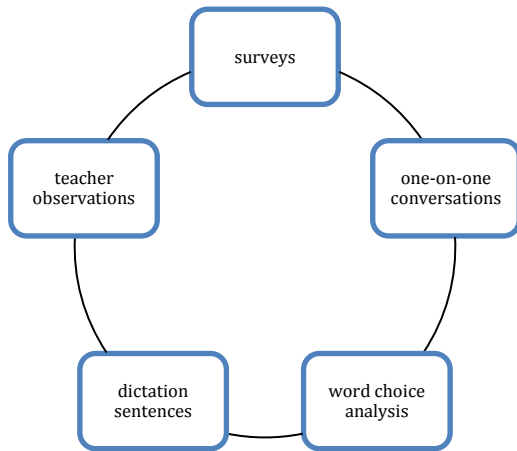
from. Data from the surveys were collected and organized digitally to find most common responses to each statement.

Responses from the one-on-one discussions with students were entered into a Word document (Appendix G). I read, categorized, and interpreted the data by highlighting similarities and noticing any contradictions. I also factored in setting, participants, and any other event that could have altered outcomes of student responses.

Students took three sentence dictation tests during the new spelling routine. Percentages were given to each test based on how many spelling rule words were right in the sentences. Errors on punctuation or words that did not follow the specific spelling rule were not held against any student. Data from these quantitative assessments were analyzed with descriptive statistics, or “simple mathematical procedures that serve to simplify, summarize, and organize relatively large amounts of numerical data” (Mertler, 2012, p. 163). Measures of central tendency were calculated to indicate what is typical of the first-grade spelling dictation tests. Data were entered in frequency distribution tables to see how students’ scores spread out.

## **Summary**

Multiple data collection tools were used to triangulate data through a variety of angles. Triangulation is “a process of relating multiple sources of data in order to establish their trustworthiness or verification of the consistency of the facts” (Mertler, 2012, p.12). This triangulation provides a well-rounded view of the study and greater confidence in the findings. The following chart shows how the data sources triangulate to provide confidence in the outcomes of data analysis.



*Figure 1. Data Triangulation*

Data were collected and analyzed from many view points of the classroom. Data were collected in surveys, conversations, observations, and tests to help answer my action research questions regarding student motivation and choice in spelling and word-work. Through data analysis I found patterns and themes that emerged to help answer the question about how individualized, student-selected spelling lists affect elementary student learning and motivation.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

There are many ways to teach spelling to first-grade students. This research grew from aggravation with teaching practices used during spelling instruction in my classroom. I was frustrated that my spelling instruction did not include differentiation of words, student choice and motivation. These frustrations and concerns led me to inquire: How do individualized, student-selected spelling lists affect student learning and motivation toward spelling and word-work?

Each week during the study students continued to learn and practice a new phonetic skill. The new spelling routine allowed students to select their own words for their spelling list. After the new phonetic skill was taught to all of the students together, students searched the room for words that followed the phonetic rule. Words were categorized on the board according to difficulty level. Students then chose words that they wanted to learn and were excited to work with for the week. Students were guided to choose words that were developmentally appropriate for them. Throughout the week students practiced their chosen words in many different ways through word-work activities and homework options. Students chose two assignments out of nine options to complete each week for homework. Assignments varied from drawing a picture and hiding spelling words in the picture to finding vowels and consonants in spelling words. One week later students took a spelling test one-on-one with a teacher.

I used multiple data points to analyze and support my findings including: pre- and post-surveys about spelling instruction, word-work, and motivation, one-on-one conversations with students about spelling, word choice analysis for difficulty of words,



spelling test percentages, sentence dictation test percentages, and teacher observations of the classroom. Data analysis focused on the research question, which included the following components: differentiation of instruction, student choice, student motivation, and student learning of specific spelling rules. Common themes are addressed in this section regarding the information gathered from my study considering students' statements, academic performance, and my own observations of student work.

### **Theme: Differentiation of Instruction**

Before the study, I differentiated my spelling program by providing students with multiple word-work options for practicing their spelling words. Examples of word-work activities included white boards, letter magnets, letter tiles, letter stamps, cray-pas and other fun writing utensils, word sorts, and playing word games with spelling words or sight words. In the initial one-on-one conversations held with students they specifically mentioned enjoying writing on whiteboards, working with word sorts, writing words with crayons, using letter stamps, playing hangman on whiteboards, drawing pictures of their words, and playing memory match. Whiteboards were mentioned the most often.

**Student motivation through differentiated instruction.** After implementing the new spelling routine, 14 out of 17 students (82%) had something positive to say about spelling when asked how they felt about the new spelling routines. Student comments focused on spelling being fun, having choice on spelling words and homework options, working on writing, and enjoying the new procedure. One student reflected, "I think it's fun because it gives me more stuff to do and more homework. It doesn't just take five minutes for me to do." Another student mentioned, "It's fun. We get to write our own

words and search around the classroom for them.” Student responses suggested that students enjoyed the choice with their words and homework options.

**Differentiation through student choice.** I guided students through lessons and individual conversations to choose words that were just right for them, a term we used in reading and are familiar with. Students needed to make good word choices for their lists to best differentiate and address their individual needs. Most students were able to pick just right words as determined by my word choice analysis. Overall, for the three and a half weeks with the new spelling routine, the class picked just right words for their spelling lists 78% of the time. Eleven percent picked words that were developmentally too hard and 11% picked words that were too easy. Interestingly, ratings for too easy all occurred in the first week and ratings of too hard all occurred in the second week. By the third week all students selected appropriately challenging words to study and practice. This may have occurred because doing this approach over time allowed students to learn how to select developmentally appropriate words. Students needed time to practice selecting words. This could have also occurred because of the words available to choose from each week. For example, working with the diphthong au during the second week of the study presented the students with more challenging word options to choose from compared to working in the third week with the phonogram –nk, which tends to occur in single syllable words, limiting the difficulty of the word options.

When asked what they enjoyed most about the new spelling routine one student replied, “the tests because there are challenges.” This came from a student who probably had not been challenged many times throughout the year in spelling because of the identical spelling lists that were practiced. Other students needed more guidance in

choosing just right words to challenge themselves like the student who told me, “I actually like it (spelling), but I do want the easiest ones (words). I choose the easy ones.”

**Differentiation through teacher choice.** I also added differentiation into the weekly spelling homework assignment. Homework options (Appendix B) allowed students to practice their spelling words in meaningful ways. Students enjoyed the new spelling homework because they got to choose what they wanted to do. Five students (29%) mentioned the new homework as what they enjoyed most about the new spelling routine.

**Barriers of differentiation.** The differentiation in the spelling routines might have created more anxiety during spelling tests. In the pre-survey three students (18%) agreed with the statement, “I feel nervous during a spelling test because I think I’ll get some wrong.” In comparison, the post-survey showed that six students (35%) agreed with the same statement. More anxiety could come from the word lists being more of a challenge for some students or taking the spelling test one-on-one with a teacher instead of whole class, which could have put more attention toward the students spelling thus creating more nerves.

Overall, the differentiation of spelling word choices and spelling homework options created a more fun spelling program where students enjoyed having a say in their learning. Students chose words that they cared about and were developmentally ready to learn. To sum it up, a student mentioned, “I like spelling because you learn new words.”

### **Theme: Student Choice and Motivation**

The pre-survey showed that five students (29%) felt like they had choice in spelling before the changes in the routine. When students were asked about choice in

one-on-one conversations only five students felt like they had choice during spelling. One student mentioned that she had choices at home by saying, “My mom lets me do that at home on whiteboards.” I hypothesized that students who said they do feel like they had choice in spelling were thinking about their word-work options for practicing their words rather than choice in selecting their individual spelling words. After the implementation of the new spelling routines the post-survey recorded eight students (47%) felt like they had choice during spelling. During conversations with students twelve students (71%) mentioned they felt they had choice in spelling. When asked about having choice in spelling one student replied, “Yes, because you get to do more stuff with them (words) and search for words around the classroom and in books.” Another student added, “Yes, because you get to pick them and all the other stuff.” A final student included, “Yes, at the end of the year,” which coincided with when the study took place.

**Choice in spelling homework.** The surveys illustrated that students enjoyed their spelling homework more after the new spelling homework was put into practice. Five students (29%) disagreed with the statement, “I like doing my spelling homework,” on the pre-survey compared to only one student (6%) disagreeing on the post-survey. Nine students (53%) agreed with the statement after the new spelling practices were in place compared to seven (41%) who previously agreed. Although there was not much of a numerical change in students’ comments, I observed a change in students’ enjoyment of their work with words and spelling. I observed students bringing in homework assignments and showing them off to their friends in the cubby room. One student was thrilled to illustrate a beautiful picture and hide all of her spelling words in the picture for her classmates to find. A student told me that they like the new spelling because, “You

get to do something new.” Another student mentioned how she enjoyed, “choosing words and homework because we get to choose what to do.”

**Choice created challenges.** A few students mentioned difficulties they encountered during the new spelling routine. One high-achieving student was upset that she couldn’t choose all of the easy words for her spelling list mentioning, “I don’t like that we can’t do all the easy ones.” I pushed her to choose more difficult words for her list since she was a high-achieving student who needed challenges to learn at her developmental level.

Three students noted the time and writing demands of making the lists on the first day were overwhelming and time consuming. Students had to make two lists. One list was for their spelling folders at school and one list was to take home for spelling homework. They declared that they did not like “that you have to write all of the words down twice on the first day.” One outlier made a complaint in regards to learning spelling every day.

### **Theme: Student Learning of Spelling Rules**

The post-survey revealed that many students enjoyed taking their spelling tests one-on-one with a teacher. Students mentioned, “I like them because we don’t have to do them together, we can do them separately,” “Good, because you don’t have to hear all the noise when you’re doing it,” and, “It’s easier because there’s not that much people talking.” Another student enjoyed the difficulty of her chosen words saying, “I like the tests because there are challenges.” A different student mentioned that during tests, “I feel very confident but sometimes it’s a littler hard.” On the post-survey nine students agreed with the statement, “When I take a spelling test I feel happy because I know I will

do well.” Seven students chose the middle, straight-faced smiley, and only one student disagreed with the statement.

Spelling test grades varied from 21% to 100% on the three different spelling tests taken during the study. Below two simple frequency distribution tables have the spread of grades on the spelling tests. Table 2 has the frequency distribution of percentage grades of each individual spelling test. Table 3 has the frequency distribution of percentage grades of all three spelling tests during the study.

Table 2

*Frequency Distribution of Individual Spelling Test Grades*

Percentage Range	Week 1		Week 2		Week 3	
	Frequency	Percentage of Tests	Frequency	Percentage of Tests	Frequency	Percentage of Tests
90-100%	16	88.9	8	44.4	10	55.6
80-89%	0	0.0	2	11.1	4	22.2
70-79%	0	0.0	2	11.1	2	11.1
60-69%	1	5.6	1	5.6	0	0.0
50-59%	0	0.0	2	11.1	1	5.6
40-49%	1	5.6	1	5.6	0	0.0
30-39%	0	0.0	1	5.6	0	0.0
20-29%	0	0.0	1	5.6	1	5.6
10-19%	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
0-9%	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>100.1</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>100.1</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>100.1</b>

Table 3

*Frequency Distribution of All Spelling Test Grades*

<b>Percentage Range</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage of Tests</b>
<b>90-100%</b>	34	63.0
<b>80-89%</b>	6	11.1
<b>70-79%</b>	4	7.4
<b>60-69%</b>	2	3.7
<b>50-59%</b>	3	5.6
<b>40-49%</b>	2	3.7
<b>30-39%</b>	1	1.9
<b>20-29%</b>	2	3.7
<b>10-19%</b>	0	0.0
<b>0-9%</b>	0	0.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>100.1</b>

A few days after a spelling test, students were verbally given three sentences to write down for a sentence dictation test. The sentences were written by their teacher and each contained words of the spelling rule that was practiced the week before and already tested on Monday. Students had to do their best spelling to write the words in each sentence. Students' test scores averaged 86.5% on the sentence dictation tests and 83.8% on the generic spelling list tests. Students were successful on academic tests when they used spelling words in the context of a sentence. Below two simple frequency distribution tables have the spread of grades on the sentence dictation spelling tests. Table 4 has the frequency distribution of percentage grades of each individual sentence dictation test. Table 5 has the frequency distribution of percentage grades of all three sentence dictation tests during the study.

Table 4

*Frequency Distribution of Individual Sentence Dictation Test Grades*

Percentage Range	Week 1		Week 2		Week 3	
	Frequency	Percentage of Tests	Frequency	Percentage of Tests	Frequency	Percentage of Tests
<b>90-100%</b>	14	77.8	11	61.1	9	50.0
<b>80-89%</b>	3	16.7	0	0.0	0	0.0
<b>70-79%</b>	0	0.0	4	22.2	6	33.3
<b>60-69%</b>	1	5.6	0	0.0	0	0.0
<b>50-59%</b>	0	0.0	1	5.6	3	16.7
<b>40-49%</b>	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
<b>30-39%</b>	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
<b>20-29%</b>	0	0.0	1	5.6	0	0.0
<b>10-19%</b>	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
<b>0-9%</b>	0	0.0	1	5.6	0	0.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>100.1</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>100.1</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 5

*Frequency Distribution of All Sentence Dictation Test Grades*

Percentage Range	Frequency	Percentage of Tests
<b>90-100%</b>	34	63.0
<b>80-89%</b>	3	5.6
<b>70-79%</b>	10	18.5
<b>60-69%</b>	1	1.9
<b>50-59%</b>	4	7.4
<b>40-49%</b>	0	0.0
<b>30-39%</b>	0	0.0
<b>20-29%</b>	1	1.9
<b>10-19%</b>	0	0.0
<b>0-9%</b>	1	1.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>100.2</b>



Although plenty of positive comments arose from the students about the new spelling routines, a few outlier comments are important to address. One student mentioned on the post-survey that they felt, “Kind of bad because it has changed a lot.” Another mentioned she just, “Did not like it,” with no supporting examples. A couple first-graders didn’t have strong opinions on any of the questions or statements and just stayed in the middle stating, “I don’t know.” At the conclusion of the study 16 of 17 students agreed (nine) or were in the middle (seven) on a Likert type survey with the statement, “It is important to me to do well in spelling.”

### **Summary**

Differentiation of spelling lists was met by students being able to choose words that they enjoyed and with teacher guidance to choose words that were developmentally appropriate for each individual. Students experienced being challenged on their spelling lists since most lists were developmentally appropriate for each individual learner. Students enjoyed the choice that was intertwined into the study when they chose words for their lists, chose word-work activities to practice with, and chose spelling homework assignments. Student motivation for word-work and spelling increased during the study.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

This action research study sought to explore answers to the research question: How do individualized, student-selected spelling lists affect student learning and motivation toward spelling and word-work? I was frustrated that my spelling instruction did not include differentiation of words, student choice and motivation, which are dissatisfactions many teachers have experienced with spelling instruction (Fresch, 2007). During the new spelling routine students were given choice in the words that they studied and the homework assignments that they completed each week. Through these new spelling routines students' spelling lists were differentiated to accommodate individual student needs giving increasing evidence that differentiation is important to spelling instruction (Graham et al., 2008; Morris et al., 1995; Pressley et al., 1996; Williams, 2009). Students experienced choice during spelling and were active learners by constructing knowledge during the learning processes that the teacher was facilitating.

The study took place over a three-and-a-half-week span at the end of the school year in my first-grade classroom. Barriers during the research came about in working with first-graders as research subjects. The reality of a first-grade classroom is that students are quick to answer and want to please; they are just starting to learn about intrinsic motivation and the importance of caring for their work. Some students didn't take time to answer questions on the survey or in discussions and appeared to just put an answer down to be done. These survey and discussion results could have altered the outcome of findings. Another barrier in this study was that some students did not know what choice meant in questions. Students mentioned that they loved to pick their own

homework assignments, but then when asked if they felt like they had choice in spelling they would say no. This barrier could have altered data outcomes, as well. Time was also a barrier during this study. Teaching spelling with the new routines required a large amount of time dedicated to spelling on Mondays. Students were tested one at a time with a teacher instead of as a whole class. Time was required for searching the classroom for words and for students to write their spelling lists. Pre- and post-surveys and conversations were only three and a half weeks apart. Many students did not change their responses or feelings about certain topics in the survey, which could be a result of limited time.

Findings from this study indicate that the changes I made to my spelling program resulted in choice, differentiation, and students' excitement about spelling. Choice was important to me as a teacher because students became more motivated and excited to do their work if they had a say in the activities. Differentiation was important to me in this study because it is important to always be differentiating instruction and practice activities for students in a first-grade classroom. Students need to learn at their level of ability and differentiation helps support that. It is also important to me that my students are excited about their learning and appropriately challenged by their work. Excited students tend to stay focused and on task more. Challenges create deep thinkers and problem solvers and push students to learn more. This study has influenced me as a constructivist thinker by stressing the importance of teachers being facilitators of the learning process and letting students actively explore and construct new knowledge. Discussion will focus on choice and differentiation in spelling.

## **Choice in Spelling**

As a classroom teacher, I noticed when students enjoyed a project or lesson they would put more effort and thought into their work. Careful instructional practices in a spelling program can build student's motivation and confidence (Alderman & Green, 2011). In classrooms today, it is important that students enjoy their schoolwork and are motivated to do their work. This is a change from previous generations of learners who just regurgitated what they were told to study. Today's students need to be motivated and excited to care about the work put in front of them. Choice creates motivation in learners (Alderman & Green, 2011; Gambrell, 2011; Sideridis, 2005). With the new spelling routines that were put in place during this study I observed my students being excited about spelling and learning. My students were excited about choosing their own words for their weekly spelling lists, which supported having students participate in decisions to promote higher levels of engagement (Alderman & Green, 2011). Students would giggle at the silly words we found and were energized when a word connected to their lives somehow. Students chose meaningful words that were significant to their learning task, which increased motivation (Sideridis, 2005). Students told me how much they enjoyed their spelling homework assignments. Implementing choice to my spelling routines added enthusiasm and motivation for most of my students.

Choice in the new spelling routines added challenges for students who had possibly not been challenged many times throughout the year. High-achieving students were able to pick challenging words for their weekly lists. From a teacher's standpoint, it was very pleasing to see my higher academic students challenged in their learning. They

were able to practice words that combined many spelling skills instead of the single skill we were focusing on as a class.

### **Differentiation in Spelling**

Each week, students chose words for their spelling lists from a class made list of words on the board. Words were ordered from easiest to hardest, left to right on the board. I gave many mini lessons on how to choose just right words for individual student lists and guided students toward words that were developmentally appropriate while they were choosing words. Individual student selections and teacher guidance relied heavily on the student's level of phonics skills, phoneme awareness, and alphabetic principle knowledge, which was used as guidance toward appropriate words (Henderson & Templeton, 1996; Invernizzi & Hayes, 2004; Tangel & Blachman, 1995; Uhry & Shepherd, 1993). Despite the lessons, I observed that selecting developmentally appropriate words was hard for some students to choose for their individual lists. I took notes in regards to students' word choices and how I felt about their word choices. I kept track of if I thought they chose words that were too easy, just right, or too hard. Interestingly, ratings for too easy all occurred in the first week and ratings of too hard all occurred in the second week. By the third week all students selected appropriately challenging words to study and practice. Students needed time and repeated opportunities to practice selecting words and adjusting their selections to better fit their abilities.

Spelling instruction was differentiated in small group lessons throughout the week with students grouped at similar levels of spelling knowledge and needs. Overall, the differentiation of spelling word choices and spelling homework options created a more fun spelling program where students enjoyed having a say in their learning. The changes

also provided a differentiated spelling system where students were working with words that were appropriately challenging their learning.

### **The Importance of Spelling Assessments**

An interesting finding during this study was found with the two different spelling assessments. Students' test scores averaged 86.5% on the sentence dictation tests, when they used spelling words in the context of a sentence, and averaged 83.8% on the generic spelling list tests. As a teacher I understand the importance of giving spelling lists and tests. This study has started to pose new questions for myself and my teaching strategies, one of them in regards to how students should be tested on spelling skills. There are different ways to assess students' spelling including spelling tests, sentence dictation tests, or looking at everyday student writing. What is the best way for students to be assessed in spelling? I theorize that with a healthy balance of assessment types students feel comfortable and confident. I hypothesize that spelling assessments should mainly be used for teachers to know where their students are developmentally and help them gauge what skill to teach next. Effective teachers use a blend of child-centered and instruction-centered strategies, creating a multifaceted instruction of spelling (Graham et al., 2008; Hammond, 2004). This study is consistent with many studies that found teachers using a variety of instructional approaches and activities to teach spelling (Fresch, 2007; Graham, 2008; Hammond, 2004; Pressley et al., 1996; Uhry & Shepherd, 1993).

This study has also helped me realize how students feel about spelling tests. Some students enjoyed spelling tests because they knew they would do well. Others felt nervous during spelling tests. Many students mentioned the enjoyment of taking their

spelling test one-on-one with a teacher for various reasons like less noise and less interruptions.

### **Summary**

This study has demonstrated the importance of choice and differentiation in my spelling program. Students enjoyed spelling more with the new spelling routines. They enjoyed having choice and ownership in their spelling list word choices, word-work activities, and their spelling homework, which gives increasing evidence that choice is a motivator for students (Alderman & Green, 2011; Gambrell, 2011). I enjoyed being able to guide students to differentiated spelling lists that were developmentally appropriate for each learner since students can experience greater growth through developmentally appropriate spelling instruction (Henderson & Templeton, 1996; Invernizzi & Hayes, 2004; Tangel & Blachman, 1995; Uhry & Shepherd, 1993). With practice most students would have been able to choose developmentally appropriate words for their lists on their own. Differentiation on the spelling lists created suitable challenges for students to help them grow as spellers. Overall, individualized, student-selected spelling lists created more choice and motivation for my first-grade students. Students were more excited and enthusiastic about their learning and practice of spelling rules.

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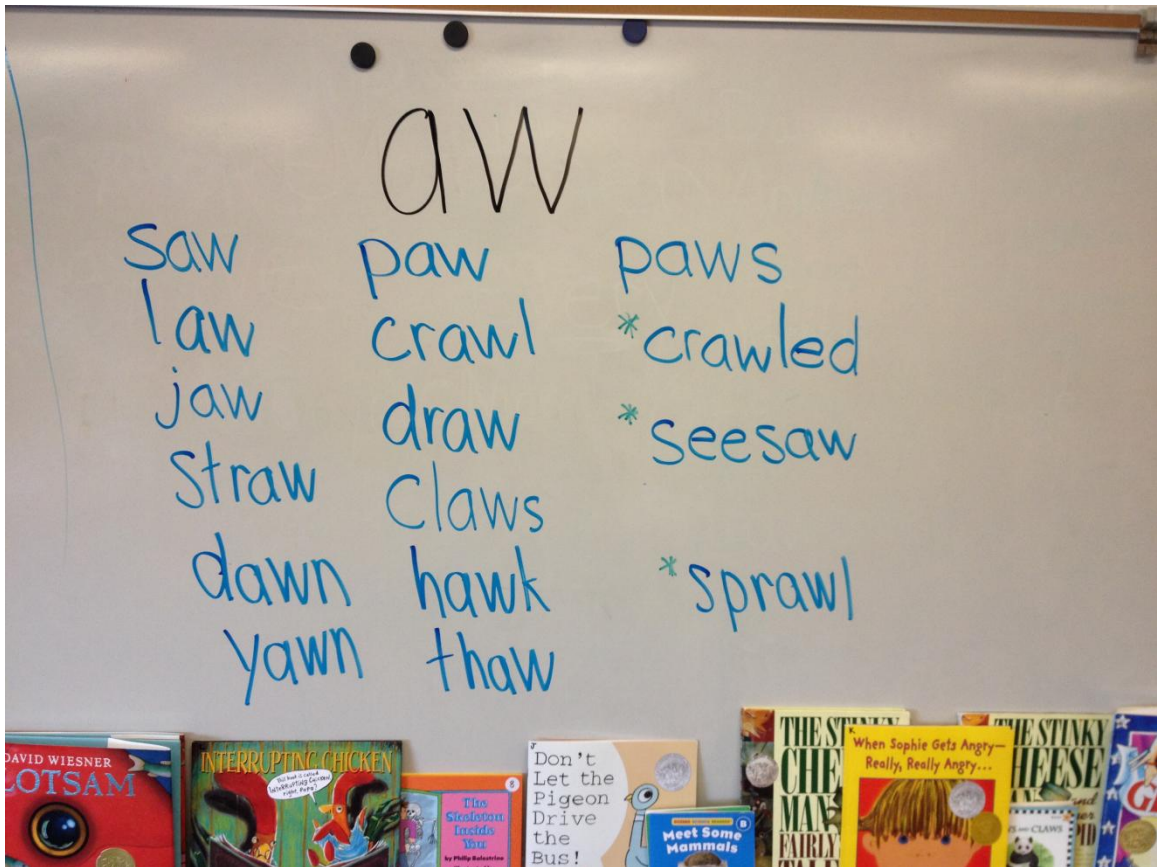


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APPENDIX A

LIST OF SPELLING WORD CHOICES FOUND BY STUDENTS



APPENDIX B

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT CHOICES

**SPELLING HOMEWORK**

Choose two squares to complete this week.  
Homework assignments are due by Friday.

<p><b>ITEM 1</b></p> <p>Draw and color a picture. Hide the words in the picture. Please do not color over the words.</p>	<p><b>ITEM 2</b></p> <p>Find the spelling words in newspapers and magazines, or look for them online and print out pages with the words. Cut out the words and glue them to a piece of paper.</p>	<p><b>ITEM 3</b></p> <p>Write your words with a pencil and then go over them with a crayon or marker.</p>
<p><b>ITEM 4</b></p> <p>Write the spelling words in ABC order.</p> <p>Example: ant bat dog</p>	<p><b>ITEM 5</b></p> <p>Have an adult give you a practice test at home. Be sure the test is checked and signed by the adult.</p>	<p><b>ITEM 6</b></p> <p>Write each of your words with fancy letters or type them on the computer with a different font.</p>
<p><b>ITEM 7</b></p> <p>Write each of the regular spelling words. Underline all of the consonants. Circle all of the vowels.</p>	<p><b>ITEM 8</b></p> <p>Write each of your words using rainbow colors (each letter is a different color).</p>	<p><b>ITEM 9</b></p> <p>Write your words three times each in your very best handwriting.</p>

APPENDIX C

SURVEY

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. When I take a spelling test I feel happy because I know I will do well.



2. I enjoy working with my spelling words.



3. I am a smart spelling student.



4. I like doing my spelling homework.



5. I use spelling rules in my writing.



6. It is important to me to do well in spelling.



7. I feel nervous during a spelling test because I think I'll get some wrong.



8. I like learning about spelling.



9. I often practice my spelling words at home.



10. I enjoy doing word-work during daily 5.



11. I practice my spelling words because I want to do well.



12. I like getting good grades in spelling.



13. I want to practice my spelling words.



14. I feel like I have choice in spelling.



APPENDIX D

ONE-ON-ONE DISCUSSION FORM

Student:\_\_\_\_\_ Date:\_\_\_\_\_

How do you feel about spelling?

What do you enjoy about spelling?

What do you not like about spelling?

How do you feel about spelling tests?

Do you use your spelling rules in your writing?

Do you feel like you have choice in your words?

What would make spelling more fun?

## APPENDIX E

### LIST OF SENTENCES GIVEN FOR SENTENCE DICTATION TESTS

#### **Week 1 – diphthong aw**

1. I saw a hawk in the sky.
2. Every dog has paws and claws.
3. Give the straw to mom.

#### **Week 2 – diphthong au**

1. Paul had to haul the dirt.
2. It was my fault.
3. The coins were in the vault.

#### **Week 3 – phonogram –nk**

1. I honk the horn.
2. The skunk was stinky.
3. I sank in the pool.

APPENDIX F

TABLE WITH TEST SCORES AND WORD CHOICE ANALYSIS

<u>Word Choice Analysis</u> 1 pt. = too easy 2 pt. = just right 3 pt. = too hard	List #1 (aw)			List #2 (au)			List #3 (-nk)		
	Word Choice Analysis	Test Score	sentence dictation score	Word Choice Analysis	Test Score	Sentence Dictation Score	Word Choice Analysis	Test Score	Sentence Dictation Score
<b>student 1</b>	1	100%	100%	2	79%	100%	2	100%	100%
<b>student 2</b>	2	64%	80%	3	36%	75%	2	93%	50%
<b>student 3</b>	2	100%	100%	2	57%	100%	2	71%	100%
<b>student 4</b>	1	93%	100%	2	93%	75%	2	100%	75%
<b>student 5</b>	2	100%	100%	2	93%	100%	2	100%	100%
<b>student 6</b>	2	100%	100%	2	86%	100%	2	86%	75%
<b>student 7</b>	2	93%	100%	3	43%	75%	2	57%	75%
<b>student 8</b>	2	43%	60%	2	25%	50%	2	86%	50%
<b>student 9</b>	1	100%	100%	2	100%	100%	2	100%	100%
<b>student 10</b>	2	100%	100%	2	100%	100%	2	100%	100%
<b>student 11</b>	2	100%	100%	3	93%	0%	2	93%	75%
<b>student 12</b>	1	100%	100%	2	86%	100%	2	93%	75%
<b>student 13</b>	2	100%	80%	2	71%	100%	2	86%	100%
<b>student 14</b>	1	100%	100%	3	100%	100%	2	93%	100%
<b>student 15</b>	1	93%	100%	2	100%	75%	2	86%	75%
<b>student 16</b>	2	93%	80%	3	57%	25%	2	21%	50%
<b>student 17</b>	2	93%	100%	2	100%	100%	2	100%	100%
<b>student 18</b>	2	100%	100%	3	64%	100%	2	79%	100%
<b>Averages:</b>		90.5%	94.4%		75.2%	81.9%		85.8%	83.3%



# APPENDIX G

## PICTURE OF COLLECTED DATA FROM CONVERSATIONS AND SURVEYS

**POST-SURVEY 6-2-14**

**How do you feel about spelling?**

student 1: there is kind of a little hard words  
 student 2: it's cool because we get to pick our own words  
 student 3: good, I like it, I like to write  
 student 4: well I mean I actually like it but I do want the easiest ones (words)... I try to pick from the easy ones but I can't do all the easy ones  
 student 5: good, it's fun because we get to choose our own words  
 student 6: kind of bad because it has changed a lot  
 student 7: in the middle  
 student 8:  
 student 9: it's fun spelling  
 student 10: I think it's fun because it give me more stuff to do and more homework... it doesn't just take 5 minutes for me to do  
 student 11: good because you get to do something new  
 student 12: it's fun... we get to write our own words and search around the classroom for them  
 student 13: good, having to choose your own words  
 student 14: good... I don't know why  
 student 15: I don't know... not too much  
 student 16: good, because its kind of fun  
 student 17: I don't like it  
 student 18: I like that we get to spell but I don't like that we have to find words that are really hard to find

**What do you enjoy about spelling?**

student 1: that it is kind of fun... you know how to spell words  
 student 2: I like spelling because you learn new words  
 student 3: writing... I use my good handwriting  
 student 4: that we get to choose our own words and I choose the easy ones  
 student 5: choosing words and homework because we get to choose what to do  
 student 6: well, that we get to choose our own words  
 student 7: I like that we still get to do homework  
 student 8:  
 student 9: it's easier because we don't have to do longer words  
 student 10: choosing different things to do  
 student 11: you get to pick your own homework... you can do rainbow words or pencil and markers and crayons  
 student 12: we get to choose our own words  
 student 13: writing the words on whiteboards  
 student 14: the tests because there are challenges  
 student 15: I don't really know anything  
 student 16: that you get to learn a lot about letters... how you get to use the computers  
 student 17: you get to use colors

**POST-SURVEY 6-2-14**

1. When I take a spelling test I feel happy because I know I will do well.	9	7	1	1
2. I enjoy working with my spelling words.	9	5	3	
3. I am a smart spelling student.	9	7	1	1
4. I like doing my spelling homework.	9	7	1	1
5. I use spelling rules in my writing.	9	6	2	
6. It is important to me to do well in spelling.	9	7	1	1
7. I feel nervous during a spelling test because I think I'll get some wrong.	6	4	7	
8. I like learning about spelling.	10	4	3	
9. I often practice my spelling words at home.	11	4	2	
10. I enjoy doing word work during daily5.	9	5	3	
11. I practice my spelling words because I want to do well.	9	8	0	
12. I like getting good grades in spelling.	13	3	1	1
13. I want to practice my spelling words.	8	6	3	
14. I feel like I have choice in spelling.	8	4	5	

*Dislike comments*

*Motivation*

*Differentiation Instruction*

*motivation*

*confidence in learning differentiation*

*choice*

*whiteboards progress papers class-pass*

*hard to find words I don't like it changed a lot in the middle I like*

*hard to find words I don't like it changed a lot*

APPENDIX H

EXAMPLES OF WORD-WORK ACTIVITIES

Letter tiles



Rainbow words



WORD WORK ACTIVITIES



Whiteboards, Magnets, & Stamps