

Using Word Their Way with a Balanced Literacy Program to Improve the Reading and Writing of Second Grade Students

Beth Dearnley, Janet Freeman, Tanyalee Gulick & Laura Neri
Randolph Elementary School
Arlington County (VA) Public Schools
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What is Words Their Way?

Words Their Way is a developmental spelling, phonics, and vocabulary program. It was developed by Invernizzi, Johnston, Bear, and Templeton. *Words Their Way* is intended to be a part of a balanced literacy plan that includes fluency, comprehension and writing. Word study is implemented as a small component of the literacy plan but it is also interwoven in actual reading and writing texts.

Words Their Way is an open-ended individual process. An assessment is given to determine where to begin instruction. Based on assessment results students are given words to study in order to discover the common attributes. In this manner students are actively constructing their own knowledge of spelling patterns. Students learn features by completing activities such as word sorting, word hunts, games and drawing and labeling. Students work individually, with partners, and in small groups to encourage cooperative learning and individual responsibility.

Background

Randolph Elementary School is a K-5 neighborhood school in Arlington, Va. with 612 students. The breakdown of the school population is as follows: 79% of the students receive free or reduce lunch, 69% are Hispanic, 14% are African American, 11% are Caucasian, 6% are Asian and 74 % of the student body does not speak English as their primary language. The population that was targeted for action research are second grade students. Of these students, 53% are females and 47% are males, 67% are Hispanic, 19% are African American, 7% are Caucasian and 7% are Asian. Nine special education students are included, which is 21% of the targeted population.

Among the four teachers who implemented this project there is a range from 2 years to 9 years of teaching experience. All teachers are certified kindergarten through six grade and have mostly taught the primary grades. One teacher just obtained a master's degree in special education and another has a mater's degree in reading.

Action Research

The first step for implementing *Words Their Way* is to establish a balanced literacy block. A balanced literacy block consists of fluency, comprehension, writing and word study. The literacy program takes place over a two hour uninterrupted block of time. An extension teacher works in the room with the

classroom teacher for an hour of that time. Therefore students are broken up into small ability based groups. This allows for both smaller guided reading groups (where fluency and comprehension are taught) and word study groups to be taught at various ability levels at one time.

The second step in implementing *Words Their Way* is a Developmental Spelling Analysis. This is an assessment of students' knowledge of word features. Based on these results, students were grouped according to ability. Instruction began at the students' ability level, which falls into one of these five spelling stages. Kathy Ganske describes the stages in her *Developmental Spelling Analysis* in the following concise manner (Ganske, 1993, p. 3-6).

- *Preliterate Stage:* *This first stage encompasses the writing attempts of children who are not yet reading.*
- *Letter Name Stage:* *This second stage, which is based on children's knowledge of the alphabet and beginning attempts to read, is characterized by attempt to match alphabetic letter names to salient phonemes, or speech sounds, within the words being spelled.*
- *Within-Word Pattern:* *This third stage is characterized by greater experience with print and leads to an increased awareness of how words work, and in turn to more conventional spelling.*
- *Syllable Juncture:* *The focus at this stage is on preserving the pattern principles across syllable boundaries.*
- *Derivational Constancy:* *This stage is seldom reached by young spellers. The words are of relatively low frequency and primarily of Greek and Latin origin.*

Once students have been placed in their appropriate stage, instruction begins for the students at what is termed "using but confusing" which are the spelling features they are beginning to *use but confuse*. As would be expected, these ability groups coincided with guided reading groups. See Table 1 below for a typical week of *Words Their Way* implementation.

Table 1
Typical Week of Word Study

Monday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students receive words to cut out. • Teacher introduces words, demonstrates sort in a small group. • Students explain why words are being sorted that way. • Students take their own words back to their seats and independently replicate the sort. • They will then write the sort in their word study notebooks.
Tuesday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students re-sort words. They will pick 6 words to draw and label.
Wednesday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students will sort words with a partner. They will check each other's work and discuss any difficulties.
Thursday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students sort words. They might have a speed sort against the teacher. • Students perform a word hunt using literature currently being read.
Friday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review game or activity using words of the week. • Test/Assessment.

After a Friday assessment if students do not grasp the feature studied, the same feature will be studied again next week, with new words. Similarly, when a new concept is introduced, two to three weeks might be devoted to one feature,

until students are able to show ownership of this feature. If a particular student is not progressing or is excelling, the groups are flexible and are often changing.

Findings

Prior to implementing this program 49% of the second grade students were below grade level in reading, 44% were on grade level in reading and 7% were above grade level in reading. The test used to determine grade level performance is a Virginia required state assessment, the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS). It is given in October and May. After one school year of implementing *Words Their Way* into a balanced literacy block the results were gratifying. There was a 26% increase in the students who were on grade level in reading by the end of the year; 70% were on grade level. When special education students and students who attended Randolph for less than half of the year were excluded from the targeted population 81% were on grade level.

Reflections

After administering PALS and reviewing writing samples, it was curious to why some students became fluent readers yet their spelling had not improved at the same rate. Out of the targeted population, 30% failed the PALS in May. Out of the students who did not meet the on grade level expectancy they fall into one of these categories:

- Special Education Students with IEP'S
- Students who came to second grade reading over a year below grade level and made at least a year's growth but are still not able to read second grade level material
- New students with less than 5 months of an attendance record and came knowing little or no English
- The question mark student: Students who do not have any special circumstances to impede their learning yet they did not pass the PALS

Out of the targeted population, only two students were termed as question mark students. Therefore, it was concluded overall that *Words Their Way* is a successful program. The teachers who conducted this action research plan to use the program again next year.

References

- Ganske, K. (1993) *Developmental Spelling Analysis: A Qualitative Measure for Assessment and Instructional Planning*. Turnersville, NJ
- Bear, D., Invernizzi, M., Templeton, S., & Johnston, F. (2000). *Words Their Way: Word Study for Phonics, Vocabulary and Spelling Instruction*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.