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Sixth-Grade Students' Responses to Self-Selection of Spelling Words With the Use of Contracts

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Sixth-Grade Students' Responses to Self-Selection of Spelling Words
With the Use of Contracts.

A Thesis

Presented to the

Department of Teacher Education

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

University of Nebraska at Omaha

by

Susan R. Bergemann

July 1998

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Sixth-Grade Students' Responses to Self-Selection of Spelling Words

With the Use of Contracts

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College,

University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree, Master's of Arts in

Elementary Education,

University of Nebraska at Omaha

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Abstract

This study investigated sixth-grade students' academic and personal responses to self-selection in the spelling curriculum. Student participants were from a public elementary school classroom located in a Midwest urban school district. A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods of a non-emergent design was used. The students were considered as one group using an A-B-A research format, and as eleven independent case participants. The researcher used a two-tailed t-test and constant-comparative method for analysis of the collected data. Weekly test scores, field notes, and interview questions were used to identify patterns in individual student and group reactions to changes in instructional procedure. Interview responses indicated many students liked contracts and choice, but as the amount of choice involved in selecting words decreased, spelling test scores went down. The mean test scores from the treatment phase were slightly lower, but it was an insignificant decrease. Several students indicated that using learning contracts made them feel more accountable for turning homework in; however, completing assignments and activities had little impact on students' performance on weekly tests.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Section	Page
Acknowledgements.....	vii
Chapter One: The Problem	1
Introduction.....	1
Background of the Problem	1
Statement of the Problem.....	2
Research Questions.....	2
Significance of the Problem.....	2
Definitions.....	3
Limitations	3
Delimitations.....	4
Summary	4
Chapter Two: Review of the Literature	5
Introduction.....	5
Traditional Spelling Instruction	5
Self-Selection	7
Contract Spelling	10
Summary	10
Chapter Three: Methodology.....	12
Introduction.....	12

Research Questions.....	12
Methodology	12
Research Design.....	13
Setting of the Study.....	16
Participants.....	16
Procedures.....	17
Data Analysis	22
Summary	23
Chapter Four: Results	24
Introduction.....	24
Student Observations	24
Interview Questions	48
Cross-Case Patterns	50
Quantitative Data	54
Summary	55
Chapter Five: Discussion	57
Implications.....	60
Recommendations for Further Research.....	61
References.....	63
Appendices	
A. Institutional Review Board Approval	66
B. District Division of Research Approval.....	68

C. Building Principal Approval	70
D. Parent Information Letter	72
E. Spelling Word List	74
F. Word-Study Activity List	76
G. Spelling Activity Check Out Sheet	78
H. The Spelling Contract	80
I. Spelling Test Sentence List	82

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Chapter I

Introduction

According to Fresch (1995), believing children can successfully self-direct their learning is as important as providing an opportunity to do so. The design of this study gave sixth-grade students the opportunity to guide their learning by self-selecting their spelling words and word-study activities with the use of learning contracts.

Background of the Problem

Traditionally, spelling instruction is an area in which teachers have extended little effort to engage their students. The procedures used to teach spelling in most classrooms are primarily based on commercially prepared materials (Gettinger, 1993). Teachers introduce the new word list on Monday, assign homework from the basal (commercially prepared spelling text), and give a final test on Friday.

When children have real opportunities to choose, they do things because they want to (Wakefield, 1997). Changing the instructional procedures during the treatment phase of this study provided opportunities for students to become more engaged in spelling class by implementing self-selection. Learning contracts ensured students met the spelling objectives. In contract spelling, students develop a contract with the teacher to learn specific words during the week (Hoskisson & Tompkins, 1987). Similarly, with contracts, teachers place trust in their students' abilities to guide their learning.

Statement of the Problem

This study investigated sixth-grade students' responses to self-selection of spelling words and word-study activities with the use of contracts.

Research Questions

The research addressed the following questions:

1. How do sixth-grade students respond to learning words using self-selected word lists and self-selected activities?
2. How will the spelling test scores of sixth-grade students alter with the use of self-selected word lists, word-study activities, and learning contracts?

Significance of the Problem

Spelling is usually teacher directed, taught as a content area using predetermined words lists and word-study activities from a basal. Total teacher directed instruction does not provide students the opportunity to capitalize on their own learning. The instructional procedures used in the treatment phase of this study gave students the opportunity to self-direct their learning more than traditional instruction. According to Hoskisson and Tompkins (1987), when students have responsibility, they tend to perform better. If this is true, self-selected spelling words and word-study activities with the use of learning contracts should place more responsibility on the student, and in turn increase their test scores.

Definitions

Learning Contracts - Students develop a contract with the teacher to learn specific spelling words during the week (Hoskisson & Tompkins, 1987).

Self-selection of Spelling Words - Students are given freedom, within parameters, to decide the words they should learn (Ellison, 1996).

Self-selection of Word-Study Activities - Students choose the methods they will use to study their spelling words during the contract negotiations from a list provided by the teacher. (Hoskisson & Tompkins, 1987).

Spelling Tests - Weekly tests are administered by the teacher: pronounce each spelling word, read a sentence containing the word, and pronounce the word again. Students attempt to write each word correctly (Layman, Peoples, & Hefner, 1984).

Triangulation of Data - Data is collected using multiple methods to gain understanding from various points of view and to identify themes and patterns (Maykut & Moorehouse, 1994).

Word Study Activities - Activities are from Wallaker's Individualized Spelling (1997), designed to help students study their spelling words.

Limitations

Limitations of this study involved word selection choices and sample size. First, the students received a list of ninety words and instructions to select eighteen words to learn each week. As the study progressed, the students had fewer words from which to select. Another limitation is the students' lack of choice for the last eighteen words,

unless they had specifically chosen to study those words last. The last eighteen words chosen might have been the students' least favorite words, therefore affecting their study of these words. In addition, small class size provided only a small sample size.

Delimitations

Delimitations of this study involve changes in maturity, personal or family issues, and absences. Changes in maturity may affect students' study habits. As students mature, they may tend to study their spelling more (or less). Personal and family issues may also affect students' performance. A family under stress due to any number of difficulties may produce an environment that could affect a student's academic performance. Students' absences may result in loss of instruction and work time.

Summary

Typically, students have few opportunities to self-direct their learning in spelling class. Total teacher directed instruction does not allow students to make choices about what they are learning. Implementing learning contracts and self-selection into spelling class enables students to guide their own learning. This chapter introduces the study. Chapter II contains a complete review of the literature.

Chapter II

Review of the Literature

Introduction

This literature review is focused on three different areas: traditional spelling instruction, self-selection, and contract spelling. By combining these three aspects of spelling instruction, a more student-oriented approach to spelling can be developed.

Traditional Spelling Instruction

Traditionally, spelling is taught as a content area using word lists and word-study activities from spelling basals (Bos & Vaughn, 1991). Usually, teachers use a commercial textbook to provide predetermined weekly spelling word lists and practice activities. (Word lists and assignments are the same for each student, providing little or no opportunity for self-selection or individualization).

Due to the format of most spelling basals, the procedures used during spelling instruction are the same each week. On Monday, the teacher introduces the students to the week's word list from the basal. A midweek test is administered on Wednesday and a final test on Friday. Time is allocated throughout the week for students to complete practice exercises from the basal and study spelling word lists (Bloodgood, 1991).

Administration of spelling tests usually follows the same procedure each week. Teachers pronounce the spelling word, use the word in a sentence, and then pronounce

the word a second time. The procedure is repeated for each spelling word being tested (Layman, People, & Hefner, 1984).

Wallace, Shore and Williams (1995) conducted a study using third-grade students to try to determine if the traditional procedure used in administering a spelling test was more effective than using visualization and vocalization components. Students were tested under four conditions: "Administrator Repeat (the standard procedure), Child Repeat (subjects chorally repeated each word before writing it), Visualization (subjects visualized each word before writing it), and Visualization Plus Child Repeat (subjects visualized and chorally repeated each word before writing it) (p. 247)." The evidence suggested standard "spelling test" procedures were no less effective than procedures using visualization and vocalization. In fact, results indicated the standard test procedure was quicker and easier to use.

Word-study, or practice activities, may help students study their word lists each week. In traditional spelling, teachers usually assign the same word-study activities to all of their students, paying little attention to individual learning styles and intrinsic motivation. According to Scheuermann, Jacobs, McCall and Knies (1994), typical instructional activities to teach word lists include: writing sentences using the assigned words, writing the assigned words a certain number of times, working on dictionary activities, and spelling the words aloud without looking at them.

This traditional procedure for teaching spelling may not be beneficial to all students in a classroom. As individuals differ, their learning styles and interests differ,

too. Teachers should be cognizant of the individual needs of their students and provide opportunities to meet them. Responses to Griffith and Leavell's (1995) inquiry of a group of educators in a graduate class of what they thought of "spelling" and "spelling instruction" indicated that "many teachers appear to believe spelling is little more than rote memorization and meaningless drill and practice (p. 84)." Griffith and Leavell believe that teachers should design spelling activities for children that focus on prior knowledge.

During traditional spelling instruction, students have little opportunity to direct their own learning. The literature indicates that traditional instructors take responsibility for what students learn and how. "In order for educators to achieve the goal of teaching students how to learn, instructors should become facilitators of learning (Christiano, 1993, p. 3)."

Self-selection

Self-selection, or choice, provides students the opportunity to take an active part in their learning, and support can be found in the literature. Associate professor of early childhood education at the Darden College of Education, Alice Wakefield (1997) advocates self-selection, and describes how choice can be a motivator for further learning.

Child-initiated choice plays another important role in learning. When children have real opportunities to choose (e.g., which books to read, what to build or pretend, which game to play), they do things because they want to. When the

choice is made freely, it is driven by interest. And that interest presents distinct opportunities to practice the important dispositions of initiative and curiosity. Children with initiative and curiosity are in a good position to develop other positive dispositions, such as persistence and industry. As all teachers know well, developing or not developing these dispositions will profoundly affect children for the rest of their lives. Because children rarely choose to do what they can't, giving them a choice almost always ensures success. When children are successful, they feel confident about what they can do. They see themselves as being "smart," and self-esteem rises. This sense of success and competence helps create an optimal environment for further learning (pp. 235-236).

Turner (1993) implemented self-selection in a fourteen-week study that investigated the effects of modified instruction and the use of metacognition (thinking about thinking) on spelling achievement. The fifth-grade participants selected word-study activities according to what they thought would help them study best. Study results indicated self-selection as beneficial. It appeared that providing the students an opportunity to have more control over their learning had positive results. "Students play a significant part in capitalizing on their own learning style strengths and enhancing their own learning (p. 85)." This suggests teachers should provide students some opportunity to direct their learning.

Ellison (1996) conducted a study involving self-selection of spelling words. She and two teachers designed a spelling program which allowed second and third-grade

students in multi-age classrooms the freedom to choose their spelling words each week.

Ellison examined how and why students selected their words by conferencing with

students and conducting interviews. She discovered her students were more motivated to learn when they were provided meaningful opportunities to choose what they learned.

She stated:

It is clear to me that students need opportunities to help decide what they will learn. They are much more interested and motivated to learn when the subject matter is meaningful to them...Students also need opportunity to develop and create their own learning strategies (p. 88).

James (1986) conducted a study focusing on the effects of student selection versus teacher selection of spelling words. First through fourth-grade students were given the opportunity to direct their own learning by selecting their own spelling words. James found that motivation to learn selected spelling words increased, because the words the students selected were of interest to them. The findings of this study suggest that if students are allowed to select their own list of spelling words, motivation to learn their spelling words increases, which may improve spelling test scores.

Research has shown that teachers can make spelling more meaningful to students by providing self-selection opportunities. To manage the varied word lists and word-study activities students select, learning contracts can be beneficial.

Contract Spelling

Contract spelling is an important tool that allows students to take responsibility for their learning, which will hopefully help them to perform better. The contract is an agreement between teacher and student. “It allows the student to control and be responsible for the learning environment (Dixon & Others, 1992, p. 35).” Contracts are used as a management tool in order to keep track of the specific spelling words and word-study activities selected by the students each week. Students can use learning contracts to meet course objectives in a way that is relevant to their learning styles. Contracts also provide evidence that course objectives are being met (Christiano, 1993).

In contract spelling, students develop a contract with the teacher to learn specific words during the week. According to Hoskisson and Thompkins (1987), contract spelling places more responsibility on the students to take control of the learning process. When students have this responsibility, they tend to perform better.

Contracts involve students in making decisions about what they learn, how they will do it, and how they will evaluate the outcomes. Learning contracts have different uses and teachers can employ teacher-developed word lists, commercial spelling materials, or the total curriculum approach (Manning & Manning, 1986).

Summary

The literature suggests students should have more control over what they are learning. Allowing students to select their spelling words and word-study activities can make the learning experience more personal to the student. Contracts are an effective

agreement between the teacher and the student to ensure the completion of learning objectives. By empowering students to select spelling words and word-study activities, with the use of individualized learning contracts, student engagement as well as test scores in spelling should increase.

Chapter III

Methodology

Introduction

This study investigated sixth-grade students' academic and personal responses to self-selection in the spelling curriculum. Analysis of weekly test scores, field notes, and interviews identified individual student and group reactions to changes in procedure. A combination of qualitative and quantitative data sources was analyzed.

The Research Questions

The questions addressed in the research are as follows:

1. How do sixth-grade students respond to learning words using self-selected word lists and self-selected activities?
2. How will the spelling test scores of sixth-grade students alter with the use of self-selected word lists, word-study activities, and learning contracts?

Methodology

In order to answer the research questions, this study used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Primary, qualitative research methods take a holistic perspective by looking at the whole person in a naturalistic setting, complimented by quantitative research methods which are concerned with analyzing data using numerical values (Grandgenett & Ostler, 1996). By using qualitative and quantitative research methods, the researcher can attain insightful and in-depth research findings. This study used naturalistic inquiry because the research did not impose new or unusual

circumstances on the participants (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). The study was conducted in a sixth-grade elementary classroom where observations were recorded as they naturally occurred (Gay, 1992).

Research Design

The study was of non-emergent design, because the procedures used in this study were predetermined and did not change throughout the course of the study. The students were considered as one group using an A-B-A research format, and as eleven independent case participants. By using these two designs, data were analyzed by looking at students individually and as a group.

The A-B-A single-subject format was used to compare student test scores recorded during each of the three instructional phases of the study. "A-B-A designs basically involve alternating phases of baseline (A) and treatment (B)" (Gay, 1992, p. 337).

Case studies are used to "determine factors, and relationships among the factors, that have resulted in current behavior or status of the participant" (Gay, 1992, p. 236). The researcher used modified case studies to determine student responses to self-selection and contract spelling.

The instrumentation used consisted of weekly spelling-test scores, daily student observations in the form of observational field notes, and individual interviews. The researcher used a two-tailed t-test and constant-comparative method for analysis of the collected data.

Recording of students' test scores and writing observational field notes took place during each of the three phases of the study (baseline, treatment, and extinction). Each phase consisted of five weeks, totaling a fifteen-week study. The same criteria to evaluate tests were used during each of the three instructional phases. Test scores were recorded based on the percentage of words correct.

Each day of the study, the researcher observed each student in attendance. Observations were recorded for each student approximately ten minutes after spelling class began. Field notes included documentation on student behaviors, for example, time on task, tapping pencil, out of seat, participation, and body language. The researcher also indicated any outside forces that may have changed the "mood" of the classroom environment during spelling instruction (for example, assemblies right before instruction, and Spring recess). The researcher transcribed the notes into typed text each day.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each student individually after the second phase (treatment instruction) of the study was completed. Each student was asked the same basic questions. Probing questions were also used to elicit responses from students. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The basic interview and possible probing questions asked were as follows:

1. What did you notice about spelling?
 - A. Tell me about spelling.
 - B. Did you notice anything else?
 - C. Why do you say that?

2. How did you choose your word list each week?
 - A. How did you decide what words to pick?
 - B. What types of words did you choose?
 - C. What made you decide to do that?
3. How did you choose the spelling word-study activities each week?
 - A. How did you know which activities to pick?
 - B. How did you decide which activities to pick?
 - C. Why did you choose those activities?
4. What did you think about using learning contracts?
 - A. Do you have any opinions about using learning contracts?
 - B. How did you feel about using learning contracts?
5. How do you feel about spelling?
 - A. What do you think about spelling?
 - B. What are your opinions on spelling?
6. What have you learned about spelling?
 - A. What made you say that?
 - B. Has spelling taught you anything?

The three means of instrumentation: test scores, observational field notes and interviews were compiled and compared. Triangulation of data was used to look for cross-case patterns and evidence of similarities within the group and among individual students.

Setting of the Study

The classroom used for this study was a sixth-grade public elementary school classroom located in a Midwest urban school district. The school is an inner-city neighborhood school, and students were not involved in busing.

Participants

The Teacher

In this study, the classroom teacher was also the researcher. The researcher was a first-year teacher, with one year of substitute teaching experience, executing the research in conjunction with the requirements for a master's degree.

The Students

The student participants of this study were members of a pre-existing sixth-grade elementary school classroom. The ethnic make-up of the classroom was approximately 91% African American and 9% European American. All of the students were on free or reduced lunch. The students were randomly assigned to the classroom by the building principal at the end of the previous school year. Student ages ranged from ten to twelve years old. The class consisted of eight boys and five girls, two of whom were special education students (one girl and one boy) who did not participate in the study, for a total number of eleven participants. Formal permission was obtained from the University's Institutional Review Board (Appendix A), the school district Division of Research (Appendix B), and the building principal (Appendix C). Parents were also informed of their student's participation in this study (Appendix D).

Procedures

Baseline Phase Data Collection: Regular Spelling Instruction

Data collection began on day one of the study. The researcher took daily observational field notes during each of the three phases of the study. Documentation included such things as students' body language and actions indicating engagement (or non-participation) in spelling activities. During the first five weeks of the study, the researcher recorded weekly test scores using regular spelling instruction with the district adopted Zaner-Bloser spelling basal (Layman, Peoples, & Hefner, 1984). The same procedures to teach regular spelling instruction were used each of the five weeks.

Monday. The students began a new unit from the spelling basal and were introduced to the eighteen pre-selected spelling words for the week. The teacher pronounced each word to the students and asked volunteers to state a definition. If the word was unfamiliar to students, a volunteer read the definition from the glossary in the spelling basal. The class discussed each word and its meaning during whole group instruction. The teacher assigned the students to write the eighteen words and a correct definition for each word, due the next day.

Tuesday. Word-study activities in the spelling basal were introduced. These activities ranged from phonetic spellings to dictionary practice. The teacher read aloud the directions for each section of the basal pages. A student volunteer for each section then gave an example. The basal pages were assigned to be completed by the students, due on Thursday.

Wednesday. The teacher administered the mid-week test from the spelling basal. The teacher pronounced each word, read the mid-week test sentences from the basal and pronounced the word again for all eighteen words. At the end of the test, students exchanged papers and graded them using their own spelling books. Students who scored a 100% turned in their papers and the teacher excused them from taking the final test on Friday. For each word that was counted incorrect, students wrote it as many times as the last digit of the date. For example, if the date was the 25th, students wrote the word five times. If it was the 29th, students wrote the word nine times. The only exception was if the date ended in zero, for example, the 20th, then words were written five times. The teacher rechecked all mid-week spelling tests and encouraged students to work on their homework from the spelling basal, assigned Tuesday, during any remaining class time.

Thursday. Spelling homework from the basal was graded in class. Students exchanged papers and graded the homework as the teacher read the answers. The instructions to the students required them to follow along in their books. The class discussed all questions on the answers as they arose. After the papers were graded, the teacher collected and reviewed them. The teacher did not record scores on homework assignments. If time permitted, the students played a spelling game.

Friday. The teacher administered the final test on Friday. Students who had earned a 100% on Wednesday did not take the final test. The teacher pronounced each spelling word, read the final test sentences from the spelling basal and pronounced the word again. The teacher collected and graded all tests. Tests were graded using the

following criteria during each of the three phases of the study: (a) students were to spell each word accurately in order for it to count correct, (b) handwriting played no part in the evaluation of the words unless the word was unreadable, (c) spelling words that contained letters that were undistinguishable were counted incorrect, and (d) the word was still counted correct if the student did not dot an “i” or cross a “t”, the word was still counted correct.

Treatment Phase

At the start of the second phase of the study, (week six, day one), the researcher introduced the new treatment spelling procedures. The researcher distributed the entire five-week spelling word list (Appendix E) and explained that the list consisted of the words for the next five units in the basal, typed in alphabetical order. The teacher instructed the students to select eighteen words to study each week. At the end of the five weeks, the students had studied the same ninety words that were in the basal, but they selected the order of study.

The researcher explained the twenty word-study activities the student could choose from for study. The researcher passed out the activity lists (Appendix F) and told the students to select three activities to complete each week. Each activity was prepared as an individual packet so students could complete it individually. The activity packets consisted of a direction card, an activity check-out sheet (Appendix G) indicating any other necessary materials that needed to be returned to the packet, an example, and any materials needed to complete the activity such as crayons, paper punch, dice, etc. Paper

was not included in the activity packets. Three sets of word-study activities were prepared and contained in separate storage boxes. Each set contained one of each of the twenty activities. Three to four students were assigned to a set for organizational purposes. This organization enabled every student the opportunity to complete the activities he/she selected.

Lastly, the researcher explained and distributed the spelling contract (Appendix H). Students were instructed to write the eighteen words and three word-study activities they selected for the first week. The students were encouraged to use a highlighter or some other form of indicator to keep track of the words that they selected each week. Each of the students signed his/her contract and the researcher then collected the signed contracts.

For organization, the researcher prepared a file about each of the participants. Each file contained a copy of the entire word list, graded spelling tests, and all completed contracts and activities. The researcher tracked the words and word-study activities selected by the students by using a different color highlighter for each of the five weeks. The words selected by the students for week one were highlighted in orange, and the activity numbers were indicated using the same color on the individual word lists contained in the files prepared by the researcher. The researcher then signed the contracts and returned them to the students the same day.

The procedures during the five-week treatment period were as follows:

Monday. The students selected eighteen words from the word list and three word-study activities from the activity list. The students indicated their choice of words and activities on the spelling contract. By signing the contract, students agreed to study their eighteen selected words and complete the selected word-study activities. Students turned completed contracts into the researcher and the researcher recorded the selections. The researcher returned contracts to the student that same day.

Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. The students were given thirty minutes of class time each day to independently complete the selected word-study activities. If students completed the three activities before Thursday, they could use an alternative way to study their spelling words. While students were working, the researcher recorded observational field notes and answered questions regarding the word-study activities.

Friday. The researcher gave individual spelling tests to each student on Friday. A separate desk for testing was placed in the room by the teacher's desk, away from the other student desks. Students first turned in their completed spelling contract and word-study activities. The researcher checked for completion and indicated the total number of activities completed in observational field notes. The researcher did not record activity grades in order to stay consistent with homework grades, since homework grades were not recorded during the regular spelling procedures. The researcher then administered the individualized spelling tests. The researcher pronounced each word, read the test sentences, and pronounced each word again. Spelling sentences read were the same spelling sentences provided in the spelling basal for each word. An alphabetized spelling

test sentence list (Appendix I) had been compiled for organization. The researcher graded spelling tests and recorded scores.

At the conclusion of this phase of the study, the researcher conducted and audio-recorded semi-structured interviews with each student. The interviews were transcribed into text and analyzed along with spelling test scores and observational field notes.

Extinction Phase

After five weeks of treatment, (week eleven, day one) the researcher returned to the regular spelling procedure as described under the baseline phase procedures. The researcher continued to record spelling test scores and document observations using field notes. The study concluded after the fifteenth week.

Data Analysis

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to analyze and triangulate the data in order to find answers to the research questions.

Question One

How do sixth-grade students respond to learning words using self-selected word lists and self-selected activities?

Analysis of the qualitative data using the constant comparative method allowed the researcher to identify emerging themes and patterns as data were being collected. Individual student data from observational field notes, transcribed text of audio taped interviews, and student test scores were compiled and compared. The researcher analyzed data by reading and rereading, then highlighting emerging themes using

different colored highlighters. If a behavior happened more than two times, it was considered a theme. After identification of themes from individual student data, the researcher compared the themes of each student. Each of the three phases were first looked at as separate entities, and then compared as a whole. A second reader, CADRE Associate Dr. Cathy Christensen, also read data to corroborate and validate results.

Question Two

How will the spelling test scores of sixth-grade students alter with the use of self-selected word lists, word-study activities, and learning contracts?

Spelling test scores were statistically analyzed to compare mean scores using a two-tailed t-test for non-independent samples. A two-tailed t-test “allows that differences may occur in either direction” (Gay, 1992, p. 433). The two “A” phases (regular spelling instruction) were grouped as one and compared against the test scores from the “B” phase (treatment spelling instruction). Weekly mean scores were graphed to identify if scores moved in particular ways during the fifteen weeks, and to identify differences and/or similarities in baseline and extinction phases.

Summary

This chapter presented the two primary research questions for the study. Additionally, this chapter discussed the methodology and design of the study. Then, the location of the study and the participants were described. Finally, a detailed description of the procedures used in this study was provided. Next, Chapter IV presents the results of the study.

Chapter IV

Results

Introduction

This chapter reports the findings of this study. Two types of data were collected from students who participated in the study: qualitative data included field observational notes, interviews, and student test scores, and quantitative data included means, standard deviation, and ranges of test scores. Eleven students participated in the study. They were all regular education students in a sixth-grade classroom.

In order to make researcher involvement as clear as possible, from this point on I will write using first person. The students' names have been changed to provide for confidentiality. The following are the original research questions addressed in this study:

1. How do sixth-grade students respond to learning words using self-selected word lists and self-selected activities?
2. How will the spelling test scores of sixth-grade students alter with the use of self-selected word lists, word-study activities, and learning contracts?

Student Observations

Data collected from field observational notes, interviews, and student documents were used to find answers to the following question: How do sixth-grade students respond to learning words using self-selected word lists and self-selected activities? Observations of the eleven students follow.

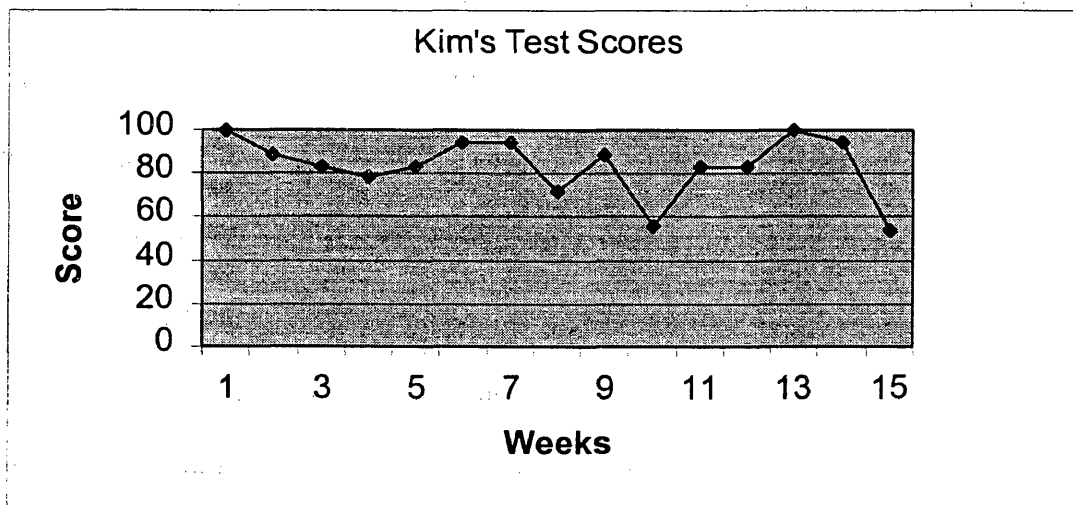
Kim

Baseline. During the baseline period of five weeks, Kim completed all homework assignments with a test score mean of 86.6%. She was suspended for five days during this period for fighting and absent one additional day, therefore, observations were not recorded on these days. I observed Kim engaged during spelling class, meaning that she used her time in class to complete homework assignments while also participating in class discussions. On two occasions, I observed Kim working ahead on her assignment while discussion of directions was still taking place.

Treatment. Kim completed all of her activities each week with a mean test score of 81%. She was absent once during the treatment period. She appeared interested in the new spelling as she stated, "It was fun to me, and plus I was learning new words...The (activities) seemed interesting to me because of what they were called," Kim also stated she liked spelling. I observed her giggling and talking to other students on three occasions during this period. On two of the occasions, she was working on the activity "clap-tap spelling" and the third "dice-roll rainbow." These activities could initiate such behavior. Kim stated she chose "the easy words first, and then I did the ones that I didn't know how to spell." I noticed during the treatment period, Kim's scores on the first two tests were 94%, while the last score was much lower at 56%. On three occasions, I observed Kim working on math assignments. I asked her to begin working on spelling on each occasion.

Extinction. During the extinction period, Kim was absent one day. She completed all of her homework and had a test score mean of 82.8%. Kim participated in class discussion and used class time effectively by working on homework assignments.

Kim's tests score means during the three periods where 86.6%, 81%, and 82.8%. Kim's scores went down during the treatment period. I noted Kim working on math on three occasions during the treatment, but I did not observe her working on math during the regular spelling.



Michelle

Baseline. During the baseline period, Michelle completed all homework assignments with a test score mean of 85%. I observed she seldom participated in class discussion of homework directions and assignments. On most occasions, I observed Michelle appeared disinterested as she laid with her head on her desk while working on homework assignments and taking tests. I also observed her working on assignments

from other subjects on two occasions during this phase of the study. In addition, she was observed playing with her fingernails and sitting with her feet on the chair next to her.

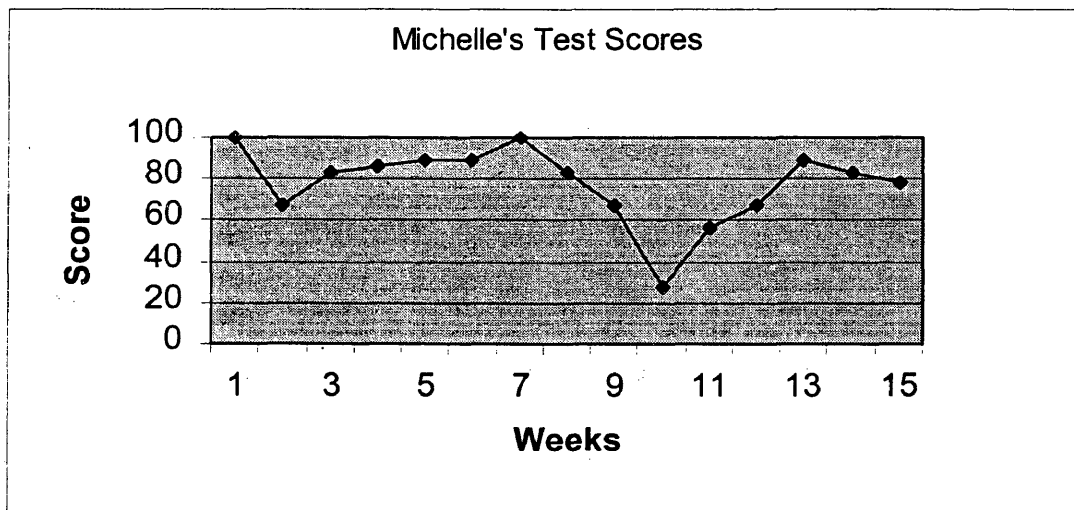
Treatment. Michelle completed all activities during the treatment phase with a mean test score of 73.4%. She was absent once during this five-week observation.

During three out of the five weeks of this phase, Michelle completed her activities before the due date. She stated she completed some of the activities at home. During the first week of the treatment, Michelle asked if she could change her mind on what activities to do. I told her to complete the activities she had written on her contract first, and then if she had time, she could work on other activities. On three occasions, I observed Michelle working on math assignments during spelling class. Each time she said she was finished with the selected activities.

Extinction. During the extinction phase, Michelle completed three out of the five homework assignments; she did not turn in the other two. She had a test score mean of 74.6%. I observed Michelle working on math only one time during this phase. She appeared to participate and follow along during class discussion more than during the first five weeks of the study. During tests, she would lay her head on her desk.

Michelle mentioned that the treatment spelling was “funner than the one we’re doing now.” She stated that she “did the easiest words first and the hardest last” during the treatment phase. She also stated that she chose the “little words first.” This is evident as her highest two test scores (89%, 100%) during the second phase of the study were during the first two weeks of the study. When asked how she chose her activities each

week, Michelle stated: "I chose the same first two every week and picked a different one for the third." Michelle also stated "it was fun" to use learning contracts and "it made it easier for us to learn the words." However, her test score mean was the lowest during that phase of the study. She also indicated she "liked the activities better...the three activities was easier than the other spelling.



Amy

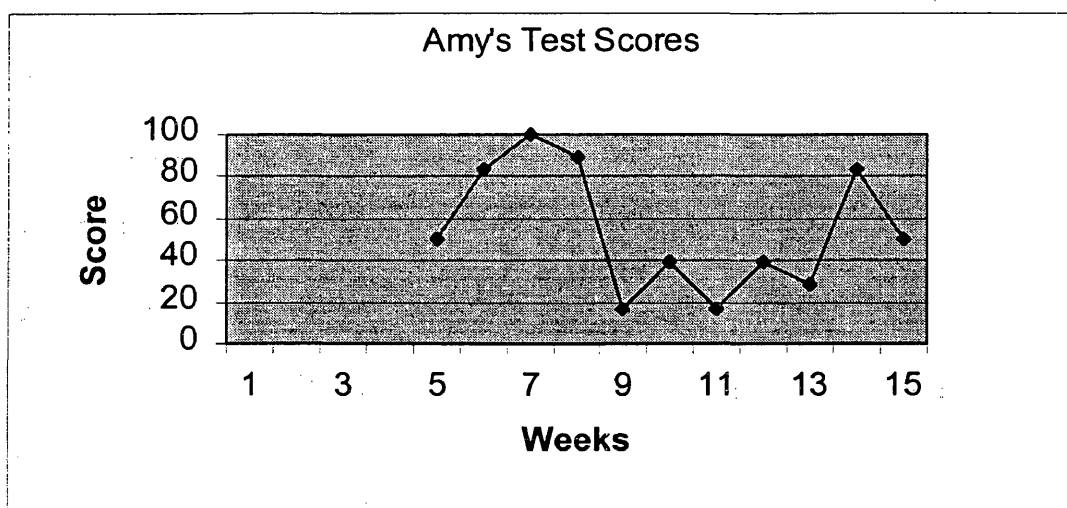
Baseline. Amy did not attend school the first four weeks of the study because she transferred in on the fifth week. During the one week of observation, I noticed she followed along in the book during discussion of directions. I observed her working on a math assignment while checking a spelling homework paper. Her test score for the one test was 50% and she had completed her homework.

Treatment. During the treatment phase of the study, Amy completed all but one of the activities and had a test score mean of 65.6%. I noticed Amy working on a math

assignment once during this phase. During the first week of the treatment period, Amy lost her contract and I gave her a new one to complete. She stated the treatment spelling “was fun.”

Extinction. I observed Amy working on math on four occasions during the third phase of the study. She completed four out of the five homework assignments and had a test score mean of 43.4%. She participated in some of the class discussions and worked on homework during the discussion.

Amy stated she noticed her “grades improved somewhat...because I got to choose the words I wanted” during the treatment phase. She stated, “I picked the words I thought was easy for me...I knew I could spell ’em and I knew I would do well. After all the (easy) words were gone I had to do the hard ones.” She also stated she chose “short and easy activities...the ones I thought I would get done by the end of the week.” Amy further commented on the use of learning contracts: “I think they was good ‘cause then you couldn’t change your mind on words that you picked. We wrote it on paper and knew what we had to do. We couldn’t go back on it. And then no one could get mad at the teacher because they picked em.” She also mentioned, “I like spelling...(but) it’s my worst subject cause I’m not very good at spelling.”



Mary

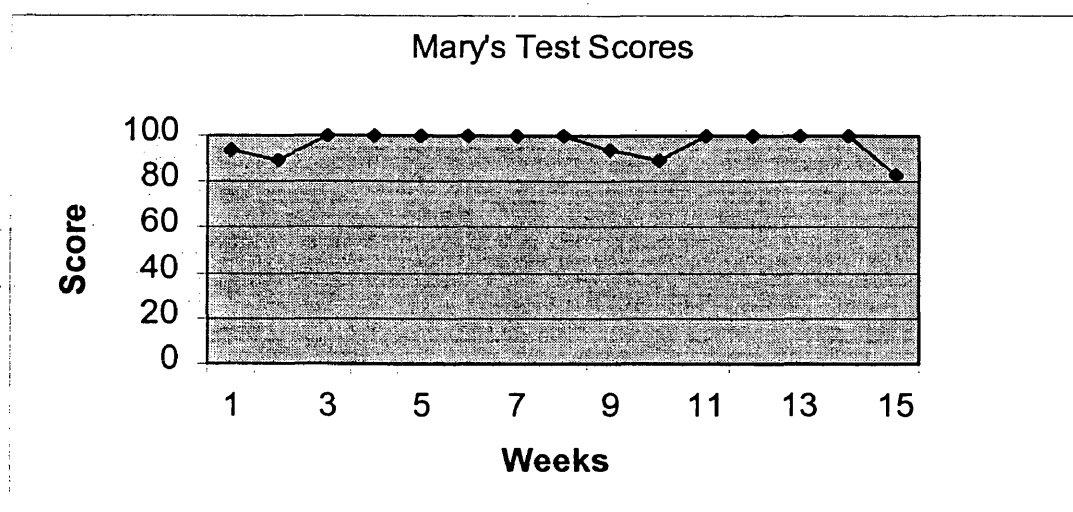
Baseline. Mary completed three out of five homework assignments with a mean test score of 96.6% during the baseline phase of the study. She was suspended for five days, therefore observations were not recorded during that time. I observed Mary participating in class discussion while working on homework assignments simultaneously. The only time she turned in her homework was when she completed her homework assignment during class time.

Treatment. During the treatment phase of the study, Mary completed all of her activities before the due-date. Her test score mean was 96.6%. During observations, Mary was involved in completing her activities. When she was finished, I suggested she find a new way to study her spelling words. She elected to type them on the computer on two occasions.

Extinction. Mary completed all homework assignments during the extinction phase. Her test score mean remained constant at 96.6%. I observed her working on math

on two occasions during spelling class. She participated in classroom discussion and completed homework assignments during class time.

I noticed Mary's test score mean remained consistent throughout the three phases of this study at 96.6%. She stated the activities were "better than doing it out of the book because it was activities not assignments." She stated she chose her words "easy to hardest." Words she considered easy were "the 'o' words...like outdoors." She said she picked the same activities each week "because you could color, and they were easy...the rest of them were stupid." She mentioned learning contracts were "all right cause you can't break it. You had to do the work. We had to keep our promise to learn those words." She also stated spelling is "fun...It's my favorite subject." When asked what she learned about spelling she replied, "How to spell my words and it can be fun. You can do a lot of assignments with words. Instead of doing it out of the book, I learned that there were other ways."



Andrew

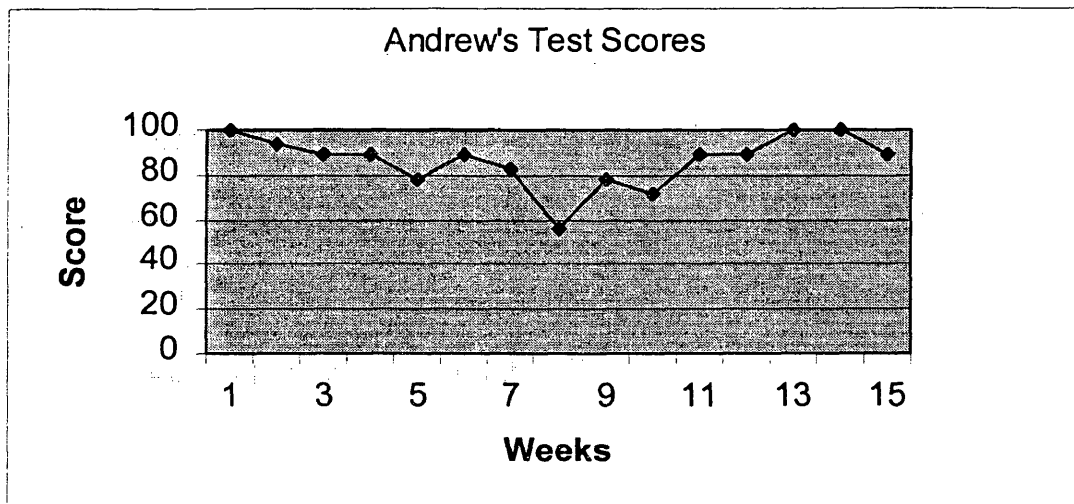
Baseline. Andrew completed all homework assignments with a test score mean of 90% during the baseline period. I noticed Andrew was off task more than fifty percent of the class time observations during this phase of the study. Inappropriate behaviors included talking during tests, sighing loudly during tests, and asking for spelling of test words. As an example, on the word 'imperfect' he asked, "Is that spelled i-m or i-n?" In addition, "Is that with two s's?" On both occasions, I reminded him there was to be no talking during the test.

Treatment. Andrew completed all of the activities with a test score mean of 75.6% during the treatment phase of this study. I observed him working on math on only one occasion, and was on task more than 50% of the time. When working on activity number three, circles, he made the comment, "It's easier to do if I write larger." He also made the comment during the first test of this phase; "This is easy."

Extinction. During the extinction phase of this study, Andrew completed all homework assignments with a test score mean of 93.4%. I observed Andrew was on task more than fifty percent of the time. However, he was out of the room two days during this phase of the study for assistance in the Positive Action Center room. He participated in class discussion and at times appeared upset when not called on to answer, for example, he sat at his desk waving his hand in the air. When not called on that particular day, he responded by saying, "uh!" and slammed his hand down on the desk. On one

occasion, I observed Andrew sitting at his desk with his book closed, not working on his homework. When asked to begin working, he stated, "This is boring."

I observed Andrew's test score mean started at 90% during the baseline phase, dropped to 75.6% during the treatment and then rose to 93.4% during the extinction. Andrew stated the activities were fun, and "we didn't have to take it home and do homework, we could do it in class." When asked what made them fun, he responded by saying, "Not having to bring them home. Not having to do homework." Andrew stated he chose the easiest words first, but he selected words that were in a column. He mentioned he chose the whole column of words because "they were already in alphabetical order." One of the activities he selected each week was alphabetical order. Andrew stated "All I had to do was write them down on a piece of paper" because they were already in alphabetical order. He selected the "funnest ones and the easiest ones" when selecting word-study activities. He stated he knew which ones were fun and easy "because I tried them." He also chose the same activities each week. When asked about using learning contracts, Andrew stated, "It's better so that you can stick to the ones that you picked...when the end of the week comes, they have to be finished or they'll get in trouble." When asked how he felt about spelling Andrew stated "It's fun. I like it. It's better now than what it was at the beginning of the year. The activities were fun. You get to color and stuff." Andrew stated spelling class "got fun." He also observed "You can do different activities with the words."



Carol

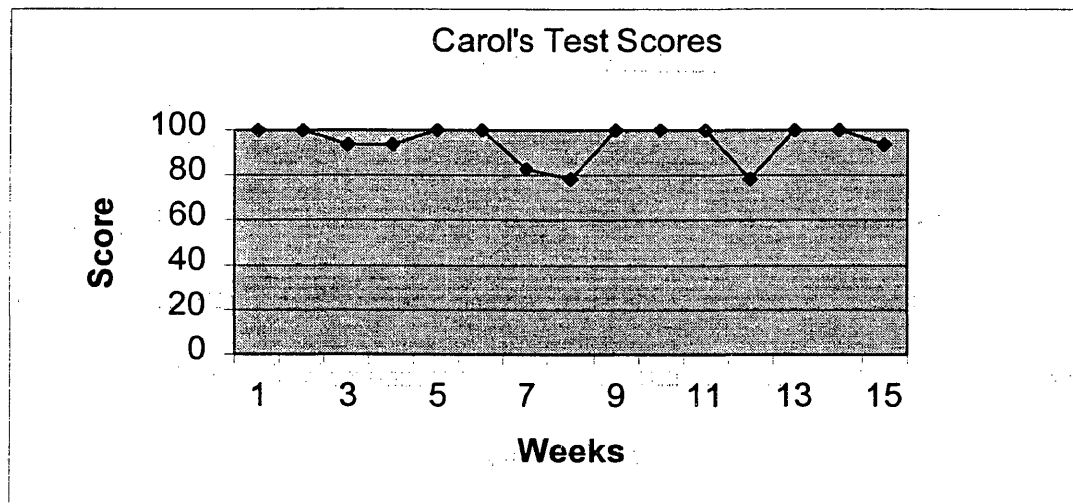
Baseline. Carol was absent five days during the baseline phase of this study. She completed all homework assignments and had a test score mean of 97.6%. I observed Carol begin working on her assignment during the discussion of directions, and had even started working on her spelling assignment before it was assigned on several occasions. She completed the majority of her assignments in class. She was on task during most spelling classes.

Treatment. During the treatment phase, Carol completed all activities with a test score mean of 92.2%. She was absent seven days. She appeared disinterested in the new spelling. She made the comment, "This is stupid." On two occasions, she stated she had completed all activities when she had not. I observed her working on a math assignment one-day during this phase.

Extinction. Carol was absent five days during the extinction phase. She completed all homework assignments with a test score mean of 94.4%. I observed her again working on homework assignments before they were given as well as during discussion of directions. On two occasions she did follow along and participate in class discussion of the assignment. During tests, Carol displayed off task behavior such as looking around the room and covering her mouth with her hand as if she was trying not to laugh.

I observed Carol's mean score of 97.6% during the baseline period dropped to 92.2% during the treatment, rising to 94.4% during the extinction phase. Carol said the regular spelling was "easier...It wasn't complicated. We did it so many weeks that we just got used to it." She also expressed a dislike towards the treatment spelling. "I didn't like it because of those games...I didn't take it as a spelling assignment because of those games...I can concentrate on spelling better (during the regular spelling) than when we did those projects." Carol selected her spelling words each week by choosing one entire column of words. She did this "because it was easy. Like if there was a word that sounded like an 's', if you look at them (the word list) because they are in alphabetical order, you could tell if it was a 'c' or an 's'. Or if it's a 'c' or if it's a 'k'." She said she chose the easiest word-study activities and the ones she liked. She also chose the same first two activities each week, and selected a new third activity each week. When asked what she thought about using learning contracts Carol commented, "At first I thought that if you don't sign it, you don't do that spelling you do the other (regular) spelling. And

then now I know that you have to sign the contract. Whatever you put on there you have to commit to doing it.” Carol stated she liked spelling. She also said she learned “just about the same thing I did before. But, I got better at spelling. I learned that if you practice more you get better in spelling.”



Dan

Baseline. Dan completed all homework assignments with a test score mean of 81% during the baseline phase of this study. He was absent from spelling class on two days due to band. I observed Dan following along during the discussion of homework assignments and using his time during class to complete his homework.

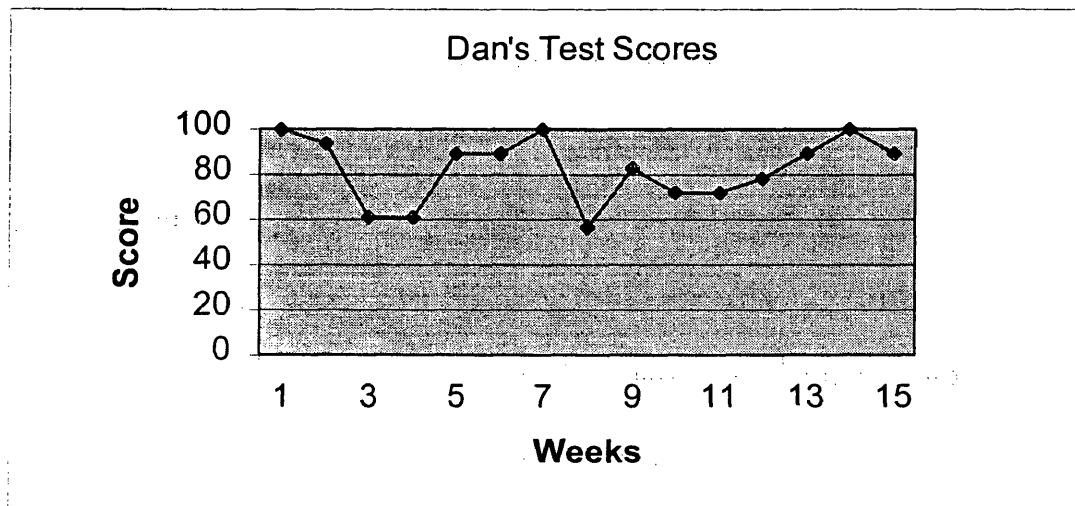
Treatment. During the treatment phase of this study, Dan completed six out of the fifteen total activities he agreed to complete. His test score mean was 80%. Dan was absent from spelling classes a total of five days. Two absences were because of band commitments. I observed on six separate days throughout this five-week phase that Dan

asked for specific directions on how to complete the activities he selected. On two occasions during the third and fourth weeks of this phase, I observed Dan with his head down on the desk. Once I asked him why he was not working on spelling. A second time I asked him if he was feeling okay. Both times, he replied, "I don't know how to do this." I went over the directions of the activities with him individually and demonstrated an example each of the six times that he stated he did not know how to do the activities. On two occasions, I observed Dan working on math during spelling class.

Extinction. Dan was absent a total of four times during the extinction phase of the study. Three absences were due to band. He completed all homework assignments with a test score mean of 85.6%. During homework assignments, I observed Dan was engaged in working on the assigned homework pages out of the book. On one occasion I observed him working on a math assignment and asked him to begin the spelling homework.

Dan's test score mean dropped slightly from 81% to 80% during the treatment phase. It rose during the extinction phase to 85.6%. Dan said spelling was "kind of good...a little bit hard, but I can get it." When I asked him how he chose his word list each week he stated, "I choosed it by the words that I liked...the easiest ones, and picked the hard words at the end. The hard ones I didn't understand that much." Dan's highest test scores (89%, 100%) were during the first two weeks of the treatment. During the interviews, Dan also eluded to his having difficulty understanding how to complete the activities. He only completed six out of the required fifteen. "I was just going to take the easy ones (words) and think about doing the hard ones after I had the full understand."

When I asked him what he wanted "full understanding of", he stated, "About how to do the activities." Dan indicated he chose his word-study activities each week based on difficulty, choosing one of each varying degree. "I picked ones that were kind of hard, one that's easy and one that's hard. Just like that. I picked different ones." When asked what he thought about learning contracts he commented, "I think you should get us some more fun activities like that, but not the hard ones. I liked doing them. When you have directions you learn more about spelling." Dan said he felt good about spelling, although it was difficult for him. "I mean sometimes it's just hard and I got to really think about it." When asked what he learned about spelling, Dan said he learned how to spell words.



Derek

Baseline. Derek was absent from spelling classes one day due to band. He completed all but one homework assignment with a test score mean of 92.2%. I noticed Derek participated in class during the discussion of homework assignments and

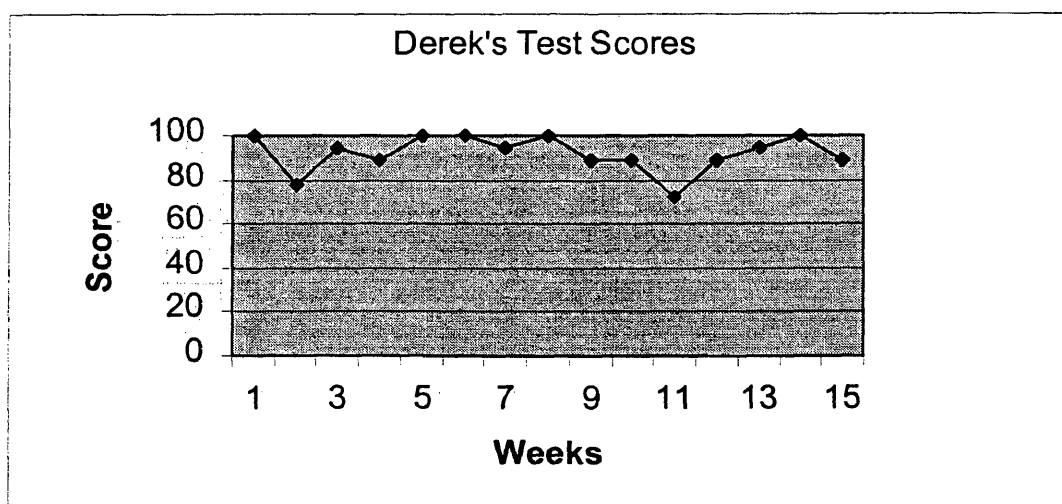
directions. He completed one homework assignment out of five on time. The other three assignments he turned in were not complete on the due date, but completed by the end of the week. He did not turn in one assignment.

Treatment. Derek was absent from spelling classes three days due to band during the treatment phase. He completed twelve out of the fifteen activities he selected, with a test score mean of 94.4%. I noticed Derek was working on math assignments during two spelling classes. Derek needed some prompting to begin working on the activities he selected. The first week of the treatment period, Derek was disinterested in selecting spelling word-study activities. He asked, “Do we have to do this? Why can’t we just do it the regular way?” On one day when I observed Derek working on math during spelling class, he commented, “I have until Friday to do these activities, but math is due today.”

Extinction. During the extinction phase of the study, Derek was absent three days due to band. He completed only two out of the five homework assignments with a test score mean of 88.8%. I again observed that Derek participated in class during the discussion of directions by raising his hand to volunteer answers. During the time provided in class for him to work on spelling homework, I observed Derek did not work on spelling. I saw him watching the fish tank one day. When asked to begin his spelling assignment, he stated he was going to take it home to work on. That particular week, he did not turn in his homework.

Derek said spelling was easier during the treatment phase. “We didn’t have to have it done by any special time. We had until the end of the week to do it. It was fun

cause it was easier. The other spelling, we had to do a whole page or something.” When I asked him to remember back to the start of the treatment when he asked me why he had to do the activities he stated, “I kinda changed my mind because it’s just easier, that’s all.” Derek’s test score mean rose slightly during the treatment period from 92.2% to 94.4%. After the treatment, his mean score dropped to 88.8%. When I asked Derek how he chose his words each week, he said he picked them based on structure or the way they looked on paper. “Sometimes I picked the ones, like some short, some long, and some with those hyphens.” When asked why he stated, “So you’d get the same amount of each one each time. Cause it would be the same each time.” Derek also continued to choose many of the same word-study activities each week. “I stuck with mostly the same kind...Those were the ones I liked. Cause they were easy.” Derek’s response to learning contracts was: “I liked it because we would both know which words and you would know which activities you picked.” Derek made a statement about spelling that may be part of the reason he did not complete all of his assignments. “I don’t care for it (spelling) that much. Cause it doesn’t have anything to do with what I’m interested in.” When asked what he had learned about spelling, he stated he learned how to spell words.



Adam

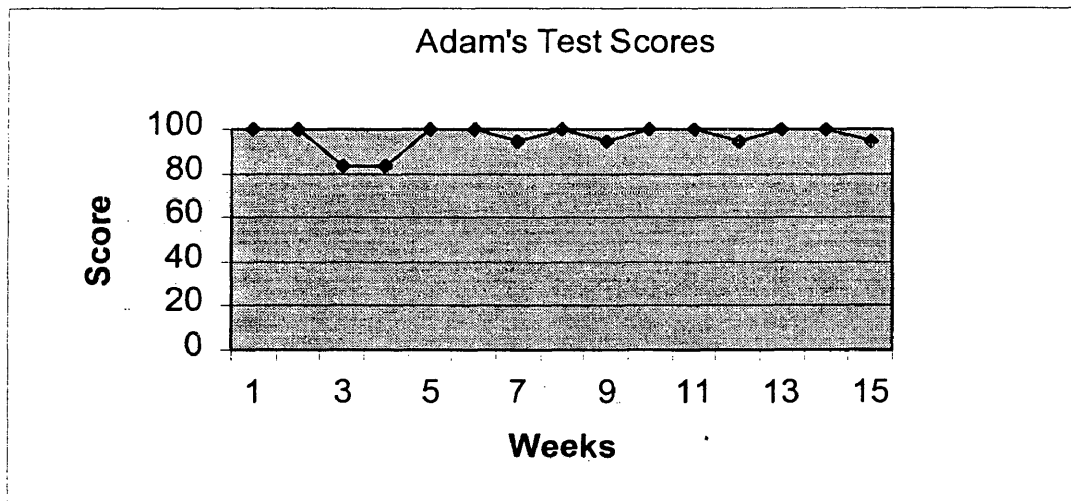
Baseline. During the baseline phase of this study, Adam was absent one day from spelling class. He completed all homework assignments and had a mean test score of 93.2%. Adam is an honor roll student and his effort is evident in all subject areas including spelling. He participated in class discussion of directions. During each observation, I noticed Adam was engaged in his spelling assignments.

Treatment. During the treatment phase of the study Adam completed all activities and had a test score mean of 97.6%. I observed him on task during spelling class working thoughtfully on word-study activities. He stated during the first week of the treatment phase that he “stayed up late last night to work on the acrostic activity. It was hard and I’m not going to pick that one again.” He completed it, although he said it was difficult and time consuming, and he never chose it again. During two of the five weeks,

Adam completed his activities before the due date. One occasion he studied the words off his contract and on the other occasion he worked on social studies homework.

Extinction. Adam was absent from spelling class on three occasions, one due to a math field trip. He completed all of his homework assignments and had a test score mean of 97.6%. Again, Adam participated in the class discussion of the directions for the homework assignment. I also observed him using class time to complete spelling homework assignments.

Adam said the treatment spelling was easier. "I guess because it was more fun than the other ones that we did out of the book." He also mentioned he chose difficult words first. "The first week I chose the hard ones (words) and then the easy ones later. The last words were the easiest. Those were the ones I saved for last." When asked how he chose his word-study activities Adam implied he chose them according to the degree of difficulty. "I just chose them. Like the ones I thought would be kind of easy or something. Not the real hard ones, but the ones that were easier. I wanted some medium, but not real hard." Adam stated that learning contracts were "really different, but it was okay." Adam also responded positively when asked about his feelings toward spelling: "It's fun because I know how to spell stuff. I know how to do it." Adam further mentioned that he learned how to spell different words. "It can be easier if you learn the words."



Donavan

Baseline. Donovan was absent one day and suspended for two days during the baseline phase of this study. He completed three out of the five homework assignments with a test score mean of 64.4%. From observational field notes, I observed Donovan engaged in off task behavior more than 50% of the spelling classes. For example, he sat sideways in his desk with his elbows resting on his knees holding his chin in his hands. Additionally, he continually spoke during tests; and mocked the teacher by repeating pronounced test words. On three separate occasions, I observed him slamming his desk with his hand when asked to begin working on the homework assignment.

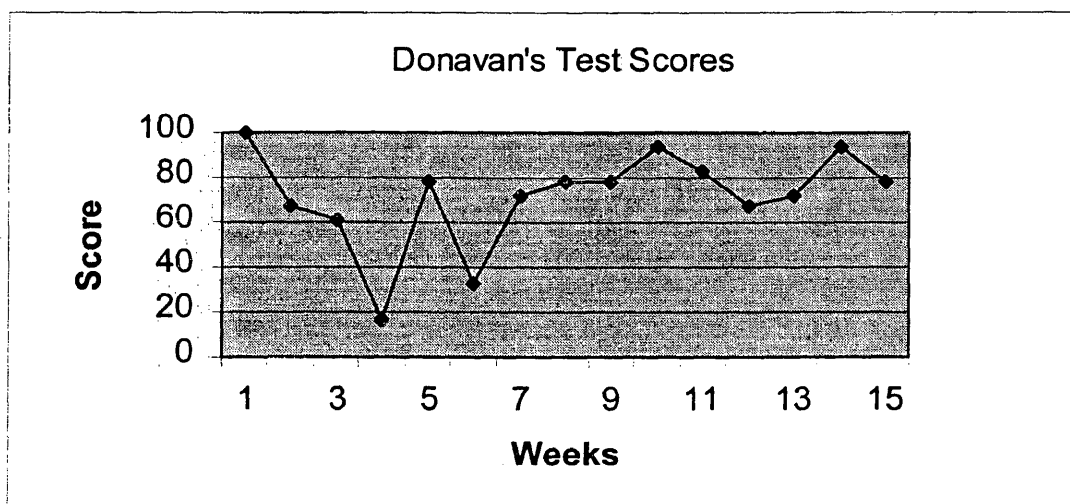
Treatment. Donovan completed a total of eight out of the fifteen word-study activities assigned with a test score mean of 71%. I observed Donovan off task more than 50% of the spelling classes. On three separate occasions, I observed him crumpling his homework and throwing it away. He appeared to be frustrated during these times. When

I saw him working on math and suggested he work on a spelling activity he stated, "I'm not done with my math. I don't want to do those stupid games!" Then he would sit the remainder of spelling class with his head down on the desk.

Extinction. During the extinction phase of this study, Donovan completed four out of five homework assignments with a test score mean of 78%. Donovan participated during the discussion of direction during most spelling classes. However, I observed him engaged in off-task behavior more than 50% of spelling class time. Because of his misbehavior, I redirected him towards working on spelling homework on several occasions. His misbehavior included turning in his seat, continuous talking, and laughing during spelling class.

When asked what he noticed about spelling he stated, "That it was different." He explained, "You had to do three assignments. They was not regular assignments. You got to choose which ones you wanted to do." He also stated, "They were more fun than the other ones." When asked why, he replied, "Because we got to choose what we wanted to do." Donovan picked his word list each week by choosing an entire column. He said, "I just went straight down the lines...I just went in ABC order." He mentioned he chose activities he liked. When asked how he decided which ones he liked he stated, "Cause you told us about them and I decided which ones I liked. I did the same ones, I just kept picking them." After referring to my records, I confirmed he did select the same three activities. I observed that he continued to select the tongue twister activity, although each time he turned it in, he did it incorrectly. That activity was not counted as

complete any of the five weeks during the treatment. Donovan said using learning contracts was “all right...We knew what words to use.” Donovan expressed a disinterest in spelling. When asked how he felt about it he stated, “It’s all right. It’s kind of boring, but you have three assignments and you have to think about the words and stuff.” When asked what he learned about spelling he stated, “Nothing that I didn’t know. Probably some new words.” I observed that Donovan’s test score mean rose about seven percent after each phase of the study. His mean rose from 64.4% to 71% to 78% respectively.



Mark

Baseline. Mark was absent four days during the baseline phase of this study. He completed two out of the five assignments with a test score mean of 90%. I observed Mark participating during the discussion of the spelling homework; however, I did not observe him working on his homework. He appeared to be interested in the discussion. During classroom work time, I observed Mark often sitting with his head on his desk, or

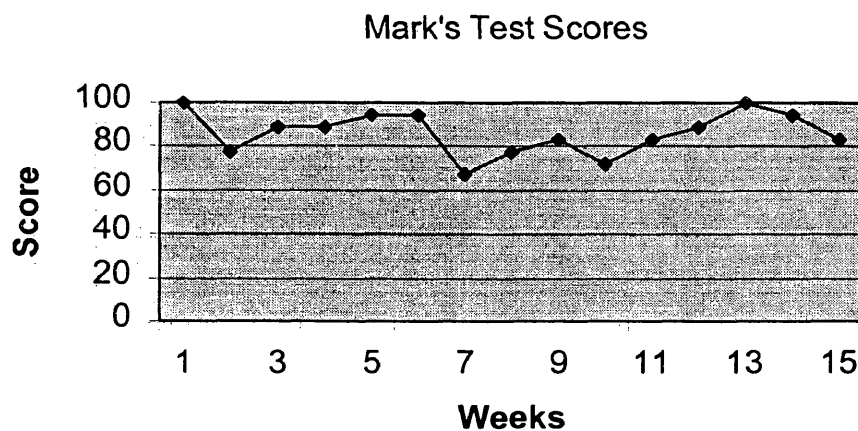
out of his seat to get a drink of water, sharpen a pencil, or use the restroom. He displayed this behavior during most subjects throughout the school day.

Treatment. During the treatment phase of the study, Mark was absent one day. He completed two of the fifteen activities with a test score mean of 78.8%. I again observed Mark not using class time to complete assignments. He worked on math assignments during two spelling class periods. I also noticed on several occasions Mark was sitting at his desk without an activity packet to work with. Again, during observational field notes, he was out of his seat frequently to get a drink of water, sharpen a pencil, or use the restroom. On two occasions I observed Mark studying his words off of his contract during spelling class instead of working on activities.

Extinction. Mark was absent six days during the extinction phase of the study. He completed one out of the five assignments with a test score mean of 89.8%. I observed Mark participating in the discussion of directions; however, he again appeared disinterested in completing the spelling homework during spelling class. I observed him with his head on the desk not working on spelling. He also continued to get out of his seat for a drink, to sharpen a pencil, or to use the restroom.

Mark's test score mean dropped from 90% to 78.8% during the treatment period, and then rose to 89.8% during the extinction. Mark said he liked the regular spelling better than the treatment. "I couldn't really catch on to that other kind." This may explain why he completed so few activities. However, I noted that Mark completed less than fifty percent of his homework assignments during both the regular and treatment

spelling. Mark said he chose what he considered the hard words first and selected the easier ones last. When asked why, he said, "Because at the end, I knew it would be easier to do the easier ones instead of the hard ones." Mark selected what he considered easy activities. "I just went through and thought which ones were easier. The easier ones I did instead of the other ones. Because that way I wouldn't have to go through all that hard work." He thought using learning contracts was "all right. Because you could keep track instead of having us like telling you, you could keep track." Mark said spelling was his second favorite subject. "Spelling teaches me words that I don't know how to pronounce. And by the end of the week I know how to pronounce it." Mark indicated he thought spelling was more fun than the other subjects were. He also stated it was "easier than all the other ones because it's got stuff that I don't know. It helps me learn better." His interview answers indicate that he likes spelling; however, his behavior during spelling class did not show it.



Interview Questions

After the completion of the treatment phase, I conducted individual semi-structured audio-taped interviews, asking each student the same six questions. Cross-case responses to the interview questions follow.

Question one: What did you notice about spelling?

The majority of the students responded positively towards spelling class. Seven of the students said it (the treatment) was fun, two stated it was easier, and three liked spelling because they were able to choose their own words each week. One student indicated that they were doing “activities, not assignments.”

Two students said they liked the regular spelling better than the treatment. One student commented, “The one in the book was easiest...not complicated... I can concentrate on my spelling better out of the book.” She also said she did not like the treatment spelling because of the activities. “I didn’t take it as a spelling assignment because of those games.”

Question two: How did you choose your word list each week?

More than half of the students chose words they felt were easy first, saving the hard words for last. Two students did the opposite, selecting the hard words first. Three students chose one column of words each week. They each said they selected the entire column because the words were in alphabetical order. Two students selected words based on size. “I picked some short, some long, and some with those hyphens,” one student commented.

Question three: How did you choose the spelling word-study activities each week?

Again, the majority of the students chose the activities they felt to be easier. Most students also chose activities they thought would be fun or interesting. Four students chose the same three activities each week, while two students chose the same first two activities and varied the third each week. Two students chose activities based on difficulty. One student commented, “I picked one that’s kind of hard, one that’s easy and one that’s hard. Just like that.”

Question four: What did you think about using learning contracts?

Eight of the students had positive opinions about learning contracts. Four students mentioned it was either fun or easier to learn new words. Two students said contracts were a good idea because both the teacher and the student knew which words the student was learning that week.

Five students mentioned accountability in their responses. Some of those included, “We had to do it because we signed it,” “You couldn’t change your mind...and then no one could get mad at the teacher because they picked em,” “You can’t break it. We had to keep our promise,” “Contracts are better because when the end of the week comes, they have to be finished,” “It’s better so that you can stick to the ones that you picked,” and “Whatever you put on there you have to commit to doing it.”

One student said she would rather not use learning contracts “because it’s kind of a waste of time because if you picked those words, obviously you’re going to get em right.” She also commented “it’s good to experiment with different things.”

Question five: How do you feel about spelling?

Seven students had positive feelings towards spelling, with two mentioning it was their favorite subject. Four students had negative feelings towards spelling such as it was their “worst subject,” “kind of boring,” “hard,” and “I don’t really care for it that much. It doesn’t have anything to do with what I’m interested in.”

Two students said that they liked doing the treatment spelling because they “liked the activities better.”

Question six: What have you learned about spelling?

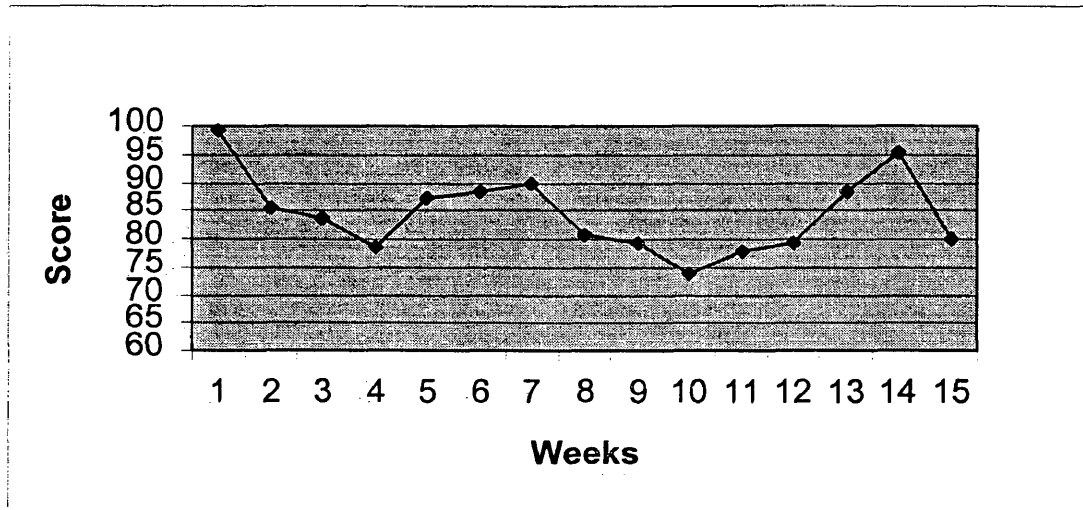
Six students responded to this question by saying, “I learned how to spell.” Four students noticed there are “different ways that you can do your homework assignments and use your spelling words.” Three different students mentioned spelling was easier using activities. Three students also mentioned they learned spelling can be fun. Two other students stated they had learned the same. One responded by saying, “Nothing that I didn’t know,” while the other stated, “I learned just about the same thing I did before.”

Cross-Case Patterns

Weekly test score means were calculated and graphed for the entire fifteen weeks of this study. The graph below displays the results of the weekly test score means calculations. The mean test scores dropped the first four weeks and rose sharply the fifth week during the baseline phase. During the first two weeks of the treatment phase (weeks six and seven), scores were relatively high and then dropped during the last three

weeks. Scores rose the first four weeks of the extinction phase (weeks eleven through fourteen) and dropped during the last week of the study.

Weekly Test Score Means



Graphs of student test scores, in the Student Observation Section of this chapter, show cross-student patterns. Over fifty-percent of the students (seven out of the eleven) noted in interviews that they selected the easy words first. Of those students, five students scored the highest during the first two weeks of the treatment phase (See Kim, Michelle, Mary, Andrew, and Dan). The number of words left to choose from decreased throughout the five weeks of the treatment phase, limiting the amount of choice for each student. Those students, who selected the easy words first, had only what they considered hard words left. Three of these students scored lowest during week ten of the study, the last week of the treatment period, which was also the week before Spring

recess (See Kim, Michelle, and Mary). However, three students who did not choose easy words first, scored 94% or above during this week (See Carol, Adam, and Donovan).

The majority of the students indicated that they chose what they considered “easy” word-study activities. About half of these students selected the same word-study activities each week while other students chose at least one different activity. After I looked at each student’s data, I conducted cross-case comparisons. I found no evidence of a pattern indicating that students in the class continued to select the same activities.

Most of the students had positive responses towards choice in spelling class. Even though most of the students selected “easy” words and word-study activities, two students indicated that they made selections that varied in difficulty. Derek stated that each week his word list contained “some short (words), some long, and some with...hyphens.” Adam chose word-study activities that he thought “would be kind of easy...I wanted some medium (word-study activities), but not real hard.”

Completion of word-study activities appeared to have no noticeable affect on student test scores. I chose four students to study this trend more closely. I selected Dan, Derek, Donovan, and Mark because they completed twelve or fewer word-study activities out of the possible fifteen.

Dan completed all of his homework assignments during the two regular-spelling instruction-phases of the study. During the treatment phase of the study, he completed less than 50% of the selected word-study activities. Dan’s mean spelling test score from

the treatment phase decreased only one percent from the previous mean recorded during regular-spelling instruction.

Derek completed four out of the five homework assignments during the baseline phase, twelve out of the fifteen activities in the treatment phase, and two out of the five assignments during the extinction phase. His mean test score increased more than two percent during the treatment phase, and decreased nearly six percent during the extinction phase.

Donovan completed three out of five homework assignments during the baseline phase, and four out of five assignments during the extinction phase. His mean test score from the treatment phase increased almost six percent, although he completed only fifty percent of the selected word-study activities. His mean test score from the extinction phase increased seven percent.

Throughout the three phases of the study, Mark completed less than fifty percent of his homework assignments. He completed two out of five assignments during the baseline phase and was able to maintain a test score mean of 90%. Mark completed only two of the fifteen word-study activities during the treatment phase. His test score mean dropped almost twelve percentage points. During the extinction phase, Mark's test score mean rose eleven percentage points to 89.8%, although he only completed one of the five homework assignments.

I noticed that almost half of the students (five out of eleven) indicated that using learning contracts made them feel more accountable for turning in their homework. Two

students, Andrew and Carol, completed all of their homework and word-study activities during each of the three phases of the study. Carol commented in her interviews that she felt learning contracts were “kind of a waste of time because if you pick those words, obviously you’re going to get em right.” Michelle and Mary both completed all of their word-study activities during the treatment phase, but each did not complete two homework assignments during regular spelling instruction. Michelle did not complete her homework during two weeks of the third (extinction) phase of the study, and Mary did not complete two homework assignments during the first (baseline) phase of the study. The fifth student, Amy, transferred in at the start of the fifth week of the study and completed the one homework assignment during the week she attended. Amy completed all but one word-study activity and one homework assignment during the treatment and extinction phases...

Four of the five students that said they felt more accountable for turning in homework using learning contracts completed all homework during the treatment phase. The fifth student completed all but one activity.

Quantitative Data

The section presents the results of analysis from data collected during weekly spelling tests. Amy’s test score data were not included in the analysis because she was not in attendance the first four weeks of the study. The original quantitative question asked in this research follows: How will the spelling test scores of sixth-grade students alter with the use of self-selected word lists, word-study activities, and learning contracts?

The participants in this study showed a mean test score of $\bar{x} = 87.95$ during the regular spelling instruction phases of this study. A mean score of $\bar{x} = 84.06$ was found during the treatment spelling instruction phase. The mean test score was higher during the regular spelling instruction, but not significantly.

To test for significance, I conducted a two-tailed t-test. I combined and correlated weekly test scores from the treatment (instructional) phase and weekly test scores from the regular spelling instruction (baseline and extinction phases).

The table below tabulates the results. The t-value was 2.03 and $p = .073$. I found the probability was in fact greater than .05 indicating no significant change in test scores.

Mean Test Score Comparisons, Standard Deviation, and t-test Scores Between Regular Spelling Instruction and Treatment Spelling Instruction

	Regular Spelling Instruction	Treatment Spelling Instruction
Mean	$\bar{x} = 87.95$	$\bar{x} = 84.06$
SD	8.065	10.127
t-value	2.03	

Summary

The results of the combined qualitative and quantitative data produced two distinct trends. The first, students selected easy words first, and most of them performed well during the first two weeks of the treatment phase. The second trend showed

completion of homework assignments and word-study activities appeared to have little affect on student test scores.

The results of the qualitative data varied with each individual student. The majority of the students responded positively towards spelling class and learning contracts. Almost fifty percent of the students liked learning contracts because using them made them feel accountable for doing the work.

Quantitative results showed insignificant difference in mean test scores between the regular spelling instruction and the treatment spelling instruction. Chapter V will conclude this paper with a discussion of the study.

Chapter V

Discussion

The primary objective of this research was to determine how students would respond to self-selection of spelling words and word-study activities through the use of learning contracts, and to see if spelling test scores would increase significantly.

Data analyzed came from observational field notes, interviews, and weekly spelling test scores. After the treatment phase of the study, I examined the data to determine a relation between self-selected spelling words, word-study activities and spelling test scores. The mean spelling test scores of students decreased. However, these findings were insignificant, only five of the eleven individual students' test score means were lower during the treatment phase of the study. It is also interesting to point out that those same five students' test score means increased during the extinction phase of the study (when regular spelling instruction returned).

The majority of the participants, seven out of the eleven, said they selected "easy" words first. Of those students, five of them did in fact earn their highest test scores during the first two weeks of the treatment phase. The remaining two students scored highest during the first and third weeks of the treatment phase. These scores seem reasonable since "easy" words would not likely be hard to remember.

I observed that as the amount of choice involved in selecting words decreased, (there were fewer words to choose from), spelling test scores went down. As a collective group, the test score mean during the treatment phase was lower than during regular

spelling instruction. This may be due to the fact that students who chose “easy” words first were required to study a larger number of what is to be considered difficult words. Because the students were selecting words from a list provided by the teacher, the number of words to select from as well as choice decreased after each week of the treatment phase.

The spelling test score mean may have decreased during the treatment phase due to the degree of freedom of choice during spelling class. The design of the study called for a somewhat unstructured environment during spelling class. Since twenty activities were available to choose from, each participant of the study could have potentially been working on a different activity. Because students had three days to complete the activities, quality time and effort may not have been given to completing the activities. Some students chose not to work on spelling during class time, rather, many students chose to work on math assignments. Student comments recorded in observational field notes indicated that students worked on homework other than spelling because it was due that day, and spelling was not due until Friday. I did not notice a difference in performance on weekly tests from students who worked on other homework assignments during spelling class time.

As I reviewed the data, I noticed some students did not consider the spelling activities as assignments, but rather as spelling games. This raised the question of whether turning in homework assignments affected spelling test scores or not. I selected four case participants to investigate the data further. Students selected were those who did not turn in two or more spelling activities during the treatment phase of the study.

The first, Donovan, turned in only three of four assignments during the baseline phase and maintained a test score average of 64.4%. During the treatment phase, Donovan successfully completed seven out of the fifteen assigned activities, yet increased his score nearly six percentage points to 71%. This may indicate that completion of homework assignments did not directly affect his performance on spelling tests.

Dan completed all homework assignments during the baseline and extinction phases; however, he only completed six out of the fifteen assigned activities during the treatment phase. Dan's test score mean dropped only one percent between the baseline and treatment phase.

Derek completed all but one homework assignment during the baseline phase, but only completed twelve of the fifteen activities during the treatment. Nevertheless, his test score mean rose two percentage points during the treatment phase.

Although Mark's test scores dropped during the treatment phase (from 90% during the baseline to 78.8% during treatment), throughout each of the three phases he consistently turned in less than fifty percent of assigned homework. During the baseline phase he completed only two out of the five assignments, yet was able to maintain a test score mean of 90%. Two out of fifteen activities were completed during the treatment phase, and Mark's test score mean was 78.8%. During the extinction phase of the study he completed only one of the five assignments and had a test score mean of 89.9%.

Two of these four students' test score means increased during the treatment phase even though not all homework activities were completed. One of the student's test score

mean decreased only one percent during the treatment phase. It appears that completion of homework had little impact on some students' test scores.

Most of the students responded positively towards using learning contracts. Five of the students indicated that signing the contract made them feel accountable for turning in their homework. Two students completed all homework and word-study activities throughout each of the three phases. Two students completed all word-study activities during the treatment phase of the study, but each did not turn in two assignments during the regular spelling instruction phases. The fifth student did not turn in one word-study activity during treatment and one homework assignment during the regular spelling instruction. It seems that those students who felt accountable for completing homework assignments using contracts did in fact turn them in during the treatment phase of the study.

Implications

Based on this study, I feel it is necessary to provide students an opportunity to direct some parts of their learning using self-selection. Most students seemed to enjoy selecting their spelling words and using learning contracts. However, some students appeared to prefer a learning environment that is structured and teacher directed. Understanding this, I will initiate discussions and conduct interviews with my future students in order to help make decisions about their learning.

Because many of the students selected mostly "easy" words first, causing them to study mostly "hard" words last, I feel it may be beneficial to teach students how to make

appropriate choices when selecting words. Through discussions and by providing examples I would encourage students to choose both “hard” and “easy” words each week.

Since student responses were positive, I will continue to use learning contracts as a management tool in my classroom. Almost all of the students seemed to understand how to use learning contracts, and some students felt more accountable for completing assignments when using them. I have found that learning contracts can be helpful when students are working on different projects or activities. Teachers can use learning contracts in almost all subject areas.

Recommendations for Further Research

Because the test score mean data in this research provided insignificant results, I suggest conducting this study over a longer duration of time with a larger sample size. I would also recommend the spelling word list be in random order and not in alphabetical order. Two of the participants said they chose columns of words because they were already in alphabetical order. This made the word-study activities more simplistic to complete- especially the activities that required the students to write the words in alphabetical order.

I noticed that students who indicated they liked spelling class appeared to do well in spelling class. It would be interesting to study how students’ attitudes toward spelling affect their performance in spelling class.

After reviewing the data, it would seem that actually completing assignments and activities had little impact on students’ performance on weekly tests. Most students’ test

scores remained consistent whether homework assignments were turned in or not. I suggest further study on these findings.

I found most students that participated in this study liked choosing their own spelling words; however, some students indicated they preferred a more structured, teacher directed learning environment. I recommend a similar study be conducted using students from a higher socio-economic status (SES) to determine if SES has an impact on results.

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APPENDIX A

Institutional Review Board Approval



University
of Nebraska
Medical Center

Office of Regulatory Affairs
Eppley Science Hall 3018
600 South 42nd Street
Box 986810
Omaha, NE 68198-6810
(402) 559-6463
Fax: (402) 559-7845

April 3, 1998

Susan Bergemann
8960 Underwood Avenue, #211
Omaha, NE 68114

IRB#: 045-98-EX

TITLE OF APPLICATION/PROTOCOL: The Impact of Student Self-Selected Spelling Words with the Use of Spelling Contracts on Spelling Test Scores in Sixth Grade Students

Dear Ms. Bergemann:

The IRB has reviewed your Exemption Form for the above-titled research project. According to the information provided, this project is exempt under 45 CFR 46.101b, category 1. You are therefore authorized to begin the research.

It is understood this project will be conducted in full accordance with all applicable sections of the IRB Guidelines. It is also understood that the IRB will be immediately notified of any proposed changes that may affect the exempt status of your research project.

Please be advised that the IRB has a maximum protocol approval period of five years from the original date of approval and release. If this study continues beyond the five year approval period, the project must be resubmitted in order to maintain an active approval status.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "E. Prentice/jlg".

Ernest D. Prentice, PhD
Vice Chair, IRB

EDP:jlg

APPENDIX B

District Division of Research Approval



DIVISION OF RESEARCH

3215 CUMING STREET OMAHA, NE 68131-2024 (402) 557-2080 FAX: (402) 557-2049

February 20, 1998

Susan R. Bergemann
8960 Underwood Ave. Apt. 211
Omaha, NE 68114

Dear Ms. Bergemann:

We have received your letter of application and prospectus outline for your proposed study on spelling achievement. The intent of your study is to determine if implementing student self-selection of basal spelling words and word study activities will help students achieve higher scores on weekly tests and promote a positive attitude toward spelling.

You indicate your method of data collection will include collection of test scores over a six week period and student questionnaires before and after the six week interval to determine students' attitudes towards spelling.

We believe your study has merit and permission is granted for you to proceed under the following conditions:

The principal of Belvedere agrees to your study.

You will notify parents of selected students of your study.

In the reporting of the results of your study, students will not be personally identifiable.

You will be willing to share results of your study with OPS.

Best wishes.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Peter Smith".

Peter Smith
Coordinator of Research

PS/jb

cc: Carol Ellis

APPENDIX C

Building Principal Approval

Belvedere School

6224 North 37th Street • Omaha, Nebraska • 68111 • Telephone (402) 457-6630 • Fax (402) 457-6609

Mrs. Carol Ellis, *Principal*
Mrs. Vanessa Marisett, *Assistant Principal*

Mrs. Kris Bivens, *Counselor*
Ms. Susan Wieberg, *Counselor*

January 12, 1998

Subject: Miss Susan Bergemann's Spelling Research Proposal

Dear Committee Members,

Miss Bergemann has shared with me her proposed research implementing self-selection of basal spelling words and word study activities for 6th grade students at Belvedere Elementary School. I fully support her research and methodology. I look forward to studying the results.

Sincerely,



Mrs. Carol Ellis

Principal



APPENDIX D

Parent Information Letter

March 2, 1998

Dear Parent or Guardian:

Your student has been selected to participate in a research study. This study is being done in conjunction with a master's degree program at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. I am the principal investigator in the study and will work with Dr. Wilma Kuhlman, professor in the Department of Teacher Education at UNO, Dr. Cathy Christensen, CADRE associate for OPS, and Dr. Neal Grangenett, associate professor in the Department of Teacher Education at UNO.

The study concerns the use of self-selection in the spelling curriculum. The study will involve the use of spelling contracts over a period of time to determine if its use will increase spelling test scores. All instruction will focus on meeting regular curriculum goals and objectives. The instructional techniques used, and compared, in the study are well accepted and respected in the educational community.

All tests and data collected will be confidential. An analysis of the data collected will be available upon completion of all research.

If you have any questions or if you object to the participation of your student, please contact me at 456-6630.

Sincerely,

Susan Bergemann

Belvedere Elementary School

APPENDIX E

Spelling Word List

Word List

air-condition	exhale	let-up	overburden	skyline
audio-visual	expand	likewise	overcome	soft-hearted
baby-sit	expansion	loaves	overdo	speeches
beliefs	expectant	machines	overeat	takeoff
boathouse	expel	make-believer	overflow	throughout
bodies	expense	managers	overhaul	thumbnail
broken-down	experienced	middle-aged	overlook	trademark
build-up	exploration	motorcycle	overwork	uncalled-for
bull's-eye	explorer	nevertheless	part-time	undercover
chiefs	exporter	ourselves	patches	undercut
citizens	expose	outburst	pianos	underneath
exactly	goodwill	outdone	ready-made	undersea
exceptional	greenhouse	outdoor	red-hot	underwater
exchange	halfway	outfit	roofs	underweight
excitable	heroes	outline	self-defense	up-to-date
exclaim	hush-hush	outnumber	selves	well-timed
exclamation	journeys	overalls	shelves	wives
exertion	leaves	overboard	shoestring	worries

APPENDIX F

Word-Study Activity List

Word-Study Activity List

Choose three word study activities each week.

1. ACROSTIC
2. ALPHABETICAL ORDER
3. CIRCLES
4. CLAP-TAP SPELLING
5. COLORED VOWELS
6. DECORATE IT
7. DICE-ROLL RAINBOW
8. DICTIONARY CARDS AND SENTENCES
9. FOUR-COLUMN SPELLING
10. GUIDE WORDS
11. LETTER WRITING
12. PAPER PUNCH
13. PUZZLE IT
14. RELATIONSHIPS
15. SCRAMBLED WORDS AND SENTENCES
16. SPELLING STAIRS
17. SPIRAL IT
18. TONGUE TWISTERS
19. VENN DIAGRAM
20. WORD FORMS

APPENDIX G

Spelling Activity Check-Out Sheet

SPELLING ACTIVITY CHECK-OUT SHEET

Materials: Activity card, _____

Name _____ **Date** _____

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

7. _____

8. _____

9. _____

10. _____

11. _____

12. _____

13. _____

APPENDIX H

The Spelling Contract

Name: _____

Week: _____

SPELLING CONTRACT

Write your spelling words for the week on the lines below.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____

10. _____
11. _____
12. _____
13. _____
14. _____
15. _____
16. _____
17. _____
18. _____

Write your word study activities you will complete this week on the lines below.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

By signing this contract, I agree to study the 18 words I selected. I will use the three word study activities to help me learn the words.

Student

Date

Teacher

Date

APPENDIX I

Spelling Test Sentence List

Spelling Sentences

AIR-CONDITION They need to air-condition the theater.
AUDIO-VISUAL Do you need any audio-visual equipment?
BABY-SIT Can you baby-sit this evening?
BELIEFS We have different beliefs than you do.
BOATHOUSE Let's dock at the boathouse.
BODIES Many bodies of water are located in Florida.
BROKEN-DOWN Nick fixed our broken-down television set.
BUILD-UP John tried a new set of build-up exercises.
BULL'S-EYE The bull's-eye was worth one hundred points.
CHIEFS The chiefs of state had a private meeting.
CITIZENS A group of citizens traveled to the capitol.
EXACTLY Measure the window exactly.
EXCEPTIONAL Rolf has exceptional abilities in math.
EXCHANGE Do you need to exchange that shirt?
EXCITABLE The puppy was very excitable.
EXCLAIM He will exclaim with joy at the news.
EXCLAMATION His loud exclamation made me jump.
EXERTION It will take great exertion to pedal up the hill.
EXHALE You can exhale now.
EXPAND Did you see the balloon expand?
EXPANSION Watch the expansion of my bike's tire.
EXPECTANT The child gave his mother an expectant look.
EXPEL When you exhale, you expel carbon dioxide.
EXPENSE Our souvenirs were an additional expense.
EXPERIENCED Janet is an experienced nurse.
EXPLORATION The divers' exploration is exciting.
EXPLORER Would you like to be a space explorer?
EXPORTER The United States is a major grain exporter.
EXPOSE We hope the trial will expose the facts.
GOODWILL Goodwill helped them to survive hard times.
GREENHOUSE We built a small greenhouse in our yard.
HALFWAY Meet me halfway between our houses.
HEROES Two men were honored as heroes.
HUSH-HUSH What was so hush-hush this morning?
JOURNEYS Books take you on journeys of the mind.
LEAVES Tiny leaves dotted the spring trees.
LET-UP Was there a let-up in the noise?

Spelling Sentences

LIKEWISE When I go home, you do likewise.
LOAVES The fresh loaves of bread were on our table.
MACHINES Robots are machines that can be programmed.
MAKE-BELIEVE Did you see the make-believe horse?
MANAGERS Some workers became managers.
MIDDLE-AGED I have five middle-aged cats.
MOTORCYCLE Dress warmly before riding the motorcycle.
NEVERTHELESS It's not lunchtime, but nevertheless I'm going.
OURSELVES We need to take care of ourselves.
OUTBURST There was an outburst of applause.
OUTDONE I've outdone my record for running a mile.
OUTDOOR Camping is an outdoor recreation.
OUTFIT You need a new outfit for the tennis match.
OUTLINE Let's write an outline for the report.
OUTNUMBER Our goals outnumber yours.
OVERALLS Did you buy new overalls?
OVERBOARD How did the man fall overboard?
OVERBURDEN Our teacher tries not to overburden us.
OVERCOME The fan will help grandma overcome the heat.
OVERDO Mother tends to overdo when she paints.
OVEREAT Try not to overeat.
OVERFLOW The creek will probably overflow tonight.
OVERHAUL I need to overhaul the old truck.
OVERLOOK Do not overlook the possibilities of employment.
OVERWORK Try not to overwork this week.
PART-TIME I help her with the part-time work.
PATCHES There are strawberry patches on the farm.
PIANOS That store sells pianos.
READY-MADE I wore a ready-made costume in the play.
RED-HOT The inside of my mouth feels red-hot.
ROOFS The snow on the roofs began to melt.
SELF-DEFENSE Linda is attending class in self-defense.
SELVES The plural form of self is selves.
SHELVES Place your belongings neatly on the shelves.
SHOESTRING You are stepping on your shoestring.
SKYLINE The trees were outlined on the skyline.
SOFT-HEARTED Jane is a very soft-hearted person.

Spelling Sentences

SPEECHES We gave speeches about pollution.

TAKEOFF Fasten your seatbelt for takeoff.

THROUGHOUT I was in suspense throughout the entire play.

THUMBNAIL She painted her thumbnail pink.

TRADEMARK A trademark can be a mark, name, or symbol.

UNCALLED-FOR The laughter was uncalled-for.

UNDERCOVER The spy did undercover work.

UNDERCUT The river undercut the rock.

UNDERNEATH Look for your shoe underneath the bed.

UNDERSEA An undersea cable stretches across the ocean.

UNDERWATER The river had a strong underwater current.

UNDERWEIGHT The tiny fawn was underweight.

UP-TO-DATE Mom brought her bank payments up-to-date.

WELL-TIMED Your visit was well-timed.

WIVES The men with wives were given two tickets.

WORRIES Ted's worries about his grades were needless.