THE EFFECT OF WORD STUDY COMBINED WITH COGNITIVE AND METACOGNITIVE STRATEGY TRAINING ON THE SPELLING ABILITIES OF POOR SPELLERS IN THE MIDDLE AND UPPER PRIMARY GRADES.

by

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CERTIFICATE

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not being currently submitted for any other degrees.

I certify that to the best of my knowledge any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

Judith M Smith

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ABSTRACT

There has been a wealth of research into spelling and spelling instruction. However, the majority of studies have been theoretical in nature rather than empirical. While the quantitative researchers have sought to control variables in their studies they may have lost sight of the complexities in which the learning occurs. On the other hand while much of the qualitative research may have considered the complex nature of the classroom, they have on the whole failed to carefully describe the research design.

There is mounting evidence to suggest that many students in the middle and upper grades (nine, ten and eleven year olds) fail to learn how to spell through an immersion in reading and writing alone. Serious gaps exist between current research and its application to the classroom. Teachers do not clearly understand the philosophy and the methodology behind the whole language integrated approaches and are keen to learn how they can assist their students to become better and more independent spellers.

In this study, Class Teachers were trained in methods to assist the poor spellers within the regular classroom setting, so that the findings could be more easily applied in real classroom situations and hence contribute to gaps in the literature. The intervention endeavoured to blend the best of both the traditional approaches and the whole language approach in an effort to better meet the needs of individual students. The errors that students made in real writing situations were used to determine the content of group word study lessons which were specifically designed to teach the students about aspects of the English spelling system. In this way writing, spelling and word study were unequivocally linked. This spelling instruction was further supported by the explicit teaching of cognitive, metacognitive and motivational strategies related to spelling in isolation, in context and in proof reading situations.

Initially the effectiveness of the intervention on the spelling behaviours of those students identified as poor readers/poor spellers and the average to good readers/poor spellers was explored in one class. A second phase of the research, involving in-depth case studies of six individual students, was conducted in order to explore the effectiveness of the intervention in three classes. This was done in an endeavour to allow for some generalisations about the findings and to allow for a deeper and more critical examination of the issues that were explored in the initial study together with other patterns and insights that arose in the initial phase.

To enable the research to align as closely as possible with the largely interactive nature of metacognitive strategy training instruction; the complex nature of the classroom and to enable the findings to be applied in real classroom situations, the methods of data collection and analysis were largely qualitative. However, in order to increase the confidence of the findings of the research, quantitative methods of data collection and analysis were also used.

The intervention was found to be effective in improving the spelling ability of the large majority of the students in three of the four classes. Students who made significant gains in spelling were the good readers/good spellers, the average to good readers/poor spellers and the poor readers and poor spellers. The group where the intervention seemed to be least effective was the group of average readers/average spellers. The area of greatest gain appeared to be that of knowledge, knowledge of the English language system, of spelling strategies and of proof reading strategies. The group of average to good readers/poor spellers appeared to make the most significant gains. They demonstrated that they not only used a repertoire of spelling strategies but that they also used them metacognitively. The research thus added support to the argument that spelling should be taught.

Before the intervention, a large percentage of the students in this study presented with misspellings that were not consistently phonetic and much word study time was spent in developing phonemic awareness. Hence it is believed that the need for phonemic awareness training should not be overlooked.

As a result of the study, it is believed that the students' knowledge of the English spelling system, learner characteristics, knowledge and use of spelling strategies interact to produce learning in spelling. When considering a particular student's needs, the student's learning style and repertoire of preferred spelling strategies should also be considered as well as the student's particular stage of spelling development. A predominantly visual learner may need to be encouraged to use phonological strategies to expand his/her repertoire. Similarly a predominantly auditory learner may need to be encouraged to use visual strategies. Since the English spelling system has been found to be regular at three levels (sound, visual pattern and meaning) no one strategy will suffice.

Exploring the effectiveness of the intervention in different classes gave rise to the need to search for possible reasons for the different levels of achievement in each of the four classes in which the intervention was implemented. It is hypothesised that the teaching/learning process in spelling is a complex web involving not only student factors, but teacher factors, school factors, outside school factors and the interrelationship between all of these factors. While this study sought to explore student factors further research is needed to explore the influence of the other factors on a student's ability to spell.