Pre-Proposal for an Action Research Project

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Title of the Study

Spelling Achievement: Raising the Bar on Assessments through Inquiry-Learning

Research Paradigm

This action research project is characteristic of the pragmatist paradigm because its intent is to generate practical outcomes consistent with experimental results. This spelling inquiry action research project seeks solutions to the spelling instruction district-wide that will address the current low achievement within the ABC district’s fifth grade.

Statement of the Problem

Don McCabe, Research Director of the AVKO Educational Research Foundation states that, “Most commonly used methods of teaching spelling are ineffective. The most common complaint by teachers and parents is that students study their spelling words on Thursday nights, take the test on Friday, and by Monday the words they memorized are forgotten.” In the ABC school district, teachers are not even using a weekly test anymore to assess students spelling achievement. Instead word walls and student’s writing assignments are analyzed, without real data collection, for spelling assessment. This leads to more frustration for educators because students do not learn effective spelling patterns or rules that could enable them to improve their spelling abilities. ABC Elementary incorporates the four blocks literacy model in the district, which includes the use of word walls to teach spelling strategies. Spelling is taught in context of student writing instead of through rote memorization. However, many students struggle with basic spelling patterns and overall word awareness. Currently there is no form of assessment for spelling skills in the fifth grade level therefore, upon researching word awareness and spelling strategies, it is also necessary to research common assessment methods that allow for student
progress monitoring throughout the school year. Furthermore, at least 80% of the state assessments show a deficient of below grade level in the area of spelling each year within the ABC school district which must be combated.

**Background and Context for the Problem**

The ABC Elementary school serves approximately 120 students in kindergarten through grade five, with many students coming from disadvantaged homes in a rural community. Thirty-two percent of the businesses in ABC community are comprised of manufacturing and retail trade. The average median income is $23,349 which results in forty-seven percent of students receiving free or reduced lunches. The hardship of the community’s workforce in the ABC community means not only that these students do not have food on the table, but that they do not always have the necessary structure at home to be successful academically.

In the district, teachers are being pushed to transition from teachers to facilitators who actively use inquiry-based teaching strategies in the classroom. This move is important in teaching academic responsibility and independence to students. This structure can benefit the students in the district in all curriculum areas because they can discovery and learn on their own, with minimal support at home.

As most districts, including the ABC school district, are moving towards more math and science instruction and the integration of technology, they are skipping over some important curriculum areas. While spelling instruction seems small in comparison to math and science in today’s highly competitive global education, it offers a huge value to students. Strong spelling programs actually improve the students reading abilities. It is through this improvement that math and science instruction benefit. However, the ABC school district, like most schools in the area, is moving away from weekly patterned spelling instruction to using word walls consistent
with student misspellings. This proves a real problem in assessing and identifying individuals who might need more intense instruction to improve academically in the area of spelling. Furthermore, it doesn’t allow students to take responsibility for their academic success because instead of looking deeper at spelling patterns and rules they are correcting common spelling errors in their writing using a visual tool.

*Importance or Significance of the Study*

In the article titled “Spelling: The New American Idol,” the authors wrote “The real reality is that properly-taught spelling instruction in our nation’s classrooms is the “ticket” to reading and academic success for all students. The sad reality is that most of our students are not receiving proper spelling instruction.” Later, in the same article, the authors point out a few important points:

“For most students in U.S. schools, learning to spell is a dreaded rote memory task, a chore that has to be accomplished for the *Friday Test*. Most students will spend their week practicing multiple writings of their spelling words during class time throughout the week, with encouragement to practice at home, and a final spelling test on Friday. For most students, spelling has no relevance to other areas of the academic curriculum, and they see little reward for spelling words like *ursprache*. Their views and attitudes about spelling are reinforced when misspelled words in their writing assignments go uncorrected by their teachers or, worse yet, when students are told by their teachers that spelling doesn’t count toward their grade.”

Educators and administrators must stop and consider the impact they are having on students who in fact, do not know how to spell. They must also take action to uncover strategies that can help students raise their academic achievement in spelling. One core way of doing so, is to make
spelling an inquiry-based learning opportunity giving students responsibility and pride for their academic accomplishments. This action research project is designed to find the strategies that will be successful in providing that inquiry-learning base necessary to equip students with higher achievement in spelling. This action research project is also designed to aid the learning community and curriculum developers in overhauling spelling curriculum within the school district. Spelling has to be a priority for improvement in all subject areas.

*Research Design*

“Action research designs are systematic procedures done by teachers to gather information about, and subsequently improve, the ways their particular education setting operates, their teaching, and their student learning” (Creswell, 550, introduction paragraph). In the ABC school district, spelling achievement is an area that is in need of an overhaul due to low student performance in writing assignments and state assessments. Currently, there is no true measuring tool for spelling performance above grade three. Although, the weekly spelling test is not an effective measuring tool in any grade level. By conducting an action research study the intended outcome is to outline an appropriate way to increase the inquiry-based learning in spelling to make it more effective and meaningful to the students while also using appropriate assessment tools to differentiate learning. Because of the nature of this study, no other research design is appropriate.

*Research Purpose Statement*

The purpose of this action research project is to determine why fifth grade students in the ABC school district are consistently spelling below grade level and what strategies can be used to increase overall spelling achievement.
Research Questions

Many educators are faced with tight schedules and already depleted curriculum that they are often finding corners to cut. This may very well be one of the biggest deterrents in spelling instruction in all grade levels but speculation only prohibits success. Therefore reflection in teaching styles and curriculum are essential to discovering the true issues. What strategies will benefit fifth grade students in the ABC school district who are consistently scoring below grade level in the area of spelling? What role does inquiry learning play in spelling instruction? What are effective assessment methods in the area of spelling? How can assessments better prepare students for their own spelling improvements?

Annotated Bibliography


In this article, the authors use a metaphor of the popular television series, American Idol to focus on the lack of importance on spelling academics in America. In comparison to the Scripps Spelling Bee most students are underprivileged to not receive the true power to unlock language. This is a reputable article written by four doctorate authors who have professions in communications or speech and language. It is an eye-opener for educators to look more critically at how they are currently delivering spelling instruction in their own classroom. This article compliments the spelling inquiry research by providing information on what is wrong with spelling instruction and suggestions to make changes.

When spelling wasn’t working at one Maine Elementary School, the teachers formed the Mapleton Teacher-Research Group to make a change. Their own research sets high standards for other educators who also want to improve spelling instruction. This book outlines how the group was formed, what actions were taken in developing and carrying out the research, and the outcome of the research. Researchers benefit from engaging in this type of literature because it helps guide their own progress.


This article discusses a first year teachers own learning experiences when it came to spelling. Kelly Chandler admits to her naivety when she entered her secondary classroom and how her assumptions that her students could spell was so far off. She states “I did try to address spelling within the context of individual writing conferences, but this method seemed inefficient and time-consuming.” Many educators today are faced with the same dilemma, and much like Chandler, they prematurely think the previous teachers are to blame. However, as one reads further into the article they realize the author has a different view after working with a group of Mapleton teachers. She follows up, “As students’ writing and thinking become more complex, so do their spelling needs, and their teachers must be prepared to meet those needs.”

Within the context of this action research study on spelling, this article plays a crucial role on demonstrating that misconceptions must be broken down so that students can be successful. In Chandler’s article, she broke the misconception that spelling should already be learned prior to secondary school, or at her own level. In the action research on spelling inquiry being carried out, it is important to break through two misconceptions: 1) that spelling should be taught within
the context of student writing, and 2) that weekly spelling tests are the most effective way to assess students spelling.


*Spelling Connections* is a spelling program offered through Zaner-Bloser Company. It teaches spelling within the context of writing, technology and the five components of reading instruction. It is based on extensive research in spelling instruction and is aimed at differentiating spelling so all students can become successful spellers. J. Richard Gentry, Ph.D., is an internationally acclaimed author, educational consultant, and researcher who is a recognized leader in education for his work in spelling and emergent literacy. Throughout this action research on inquiry spelling, the *Spelling Connection*’s program will be utilized in the classroom being studied. It is important to base research in some grounded, well-known research such as provided with *Spelling Connections*.


This fact sheet found on NCATE, helps to give a bigger picture about how students can learn to spell. It does a good job including a background as well as research developments that help educators understand why the suggestions offered are important. For the purpose of the action research on spelling inquiry being carried out, it serves as a building block moving towards success in increased school-wide spelling achievement.
Data Collection

In qualitative research, researchers must identify who their participants and sites are at the onset of the research. In this action research project on spelling inquiry, concept sampling will be used. In the ABC school district there are three elementary schools. For the purpose of this study, each site will be studied based on spelling performance using different approaches. At the ABC elementary they will use the inquiry-based model described in detail within this research. At the DEF elementary they will use the standard four blocks that the district prescribes to. Then the GHI elementary will use weekly spelling tests only.

All students will be pre-assessed using the same assessment during the first two weeks of the school year. That data will be stored in each student’s academic file for further reference. Each teacher will keep running records based on students writing samples, observation notes, in class assessments, conferences, and spelling probes for each student.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

After organizing the data into an efficient system from all groups studied, it is important to analyze the data. Some researchers do this analyzing by hand while others rely on the computer. As data is organized it should be coded, that way it ensures data is correctly analyzed. For example, between analyzing three different classroom statistics, it is important to keep information organized appropriately. Data will then be divided into themes that might include gifted students, IEP students, reading growth, or progress in writing patterns. Then, multiple perspectives will be considered such as participating teachers, principal, parents, and curriculum director. Finally, the data will be organized in comparison charts so the educational community can contrast the data more accurately.
Ethical Considerations

The Belmont Report educates researchers on respect for persons, beneficence, and justice as ethical principles for carrying out research projects. This action research project on spelling inquiry meets all the criteria as outlined in the Belmont Report. Prior to the research beginning, a spelling questionnaire and release form will be sent to all parents of fifth graders in the ABC school district along with a detailed letter stating our objectives and our plan of action. An informational session will be scheduled for parents and community members that wish to learn more about the action research project. This action research project does not pose physical, legal, or mental threats to the participants, although minimal stress may occur over assessments as with any testing situation. This action research project is being conducted to improve the overall level of spelling achievement in the ABC district; therefore all data will be accurately recorded and available to the educational community in the ABC County. Assessments will be graded with the grade level team to ensure fairness among all students involved in the study. Most importantly, at all times confidentiality will be respected for all students involved in the study. Students will be identified only with alias or I.D. numbers.

Limitations of the Research Project

Growing up, many children hear the phrase “nothing is impossible.” But is that the case with research? Educators are faced everyday with new opportunities to research and expand their own classroom practices. But can this research be completely flawless? A critical educator will say a perfect research project is defiantly possible. But the more cynic educator will reason that perfection is impossible because there is always room for growth. In this particular action research project there is no perfect answer. In fact, starting the research could stem new questions and new answers to build from. One has to consider the diversity in student
backgrounds and learning styles, support at home, and even student motivation. These are all factors that could result in necessary modifications to the study.
References


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