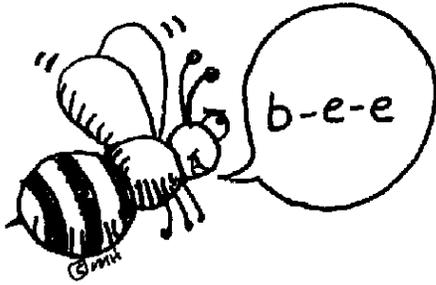


9/14/09



Dear Families,

We started our spelling program today. We call it "word study" here, and it is based on the research and materials in Words Their Way by Donald Bear and Shane Templeton (4th ed.). I have a good professional article on spelling, written by Shane Templeton, if you are interested in gaining more information. Just let me know, and I'll send it home with your child.

At the outset, word study may be most confusing to parents. For those of you who, like me, had a traditional spelling program in school, with a list of random words to memorize and a test on Fridays, this will be something a little different!

Word Study teaches students to look critically at words so they can build a deeper understanding of how spelling works to represent sounds and meaning. This is accomplished by sorting words into like categories based on the features they share. (You will hear the word "features" a lot.) This passage, taken from the Words Their Way introduction, helps to explain the rationale for this shift in spelling instruction.

Humans have a natural desire to find order, to compare and contrast, and to pay attention to what is the same despite minor variations. For example, young children call any animal with four legs a "dog" until they attend to the specific features that distinguish cats from dogs or cows.... and later they learn the vocabulary to categorize types of dogs such as Poodles, Labradors, etc.

In a nutshell, you will see...

- Students who are grouped into appropriate level spelling "sorts" depending on their initial spelling assessment.
- Students introduced to a new group of words with a specific feature as its focus each week.
- Students working on hands-on activities to sort words with common characteristics into defined groups.
- Students thinking hard about whether these features mean they have to HEAR what the words have in common or SEE what they have in common (or both).

For example, *cat, big, rug* would be sorted into one category because they all have one medial vowel that makes a short vowel sound. They follow a CVC (consonant, vowel, consonant) pattern. But *road, speak, and rain* would fit into

the CVVC category (two vowels between two consonants which make a long vowel sound). By repeated sorting of words with similar features, students learn to examine and make judgments about new words they encounter based on what they have learned. This is our goal.

The best part of Words Their Way spelling is that students can be provided with instruction that fits their particular stage of spelling development and be moved along sequentially in their instruction. It allows students to build on what they already know, to learn what they need to do next, and to move forward.

What does this mean for you at home? Your child will bring home a page of words each week. These words are not meant to be memorized or written multiple times for rote practice! Instead, you will receive a parent page with instructions for a certain type of sort to be done with your child each night. The students will have had experience sorting their words in class, so they should know what to do. All I ask is that you supervise each night's sort.

It may take a few weeks until everyone is fully comfortable with the differences between a "blind sort" and a "closed sort." The children have been split into three groups based on their spelling level. The sorting homework for every child will be the same, but the words and features will be different for each group.

We will assess how well the students learned that week's features by taking a simple test that combines writing and sorting words from the word list. Tests will be graded on two criteria: correct sorting into categories, and correct spelling (1 pt. each). I've attached a blank test so you can see what it looks like. Remember, a test may motivate your child to study, but their use of these features in their written work in class on a regular basis is what matters most.

As we go along, I will be requesting feedback from parents about parts of the word study process that are confusing, need clarification, and/or simply frustrating and not working at home. I have attached the inside cover of the book which describes the Developmental Stages of Spelling as outlined by Bear and Templeton.

Thank you. As always, contact me with questions.

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