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The Effectiveness of Word Walls on Various Groups of Students

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Abstract

This paper discusses what word walls are and how they are used in a classroom. The various types of word walls are introduced, as well as their uses for spelling and vocabulary. It looks at the impact that word walls have on the following groups of students in a classroom: students at grade level, students above grade level, students below grade level, and students with disabilities. It was discovered that students above grade level receive the least benefits from word walls and that word walls are the most effective when accompanied with activities and explicit instruction. This paper also details how to effectively use word walls in the classroom based upon the information gathered about the impact that word walls have on the aforementioned groups of students. An alternative to word walls, a Words I Use When I Write book, is also discussed in this paper.

Introduction

A word wall is defined as "an ongoing, organized display of key words that provides visual reference for students throughout a unit of study or a term" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). In an elementary setting, word walls typically take one of two forms: either an ongoing wall of spelling or sight words that is kept up over the duration of the year and is continually added to as new words are learned, or a short-term wall of words related to a particular unit of study. In both circumstances, the word wall serves as a visual aid to the students and provides immediate access to important spelling/sight words or important vocabulary words.

Within a classroom setting, there are various groups of student ability and skill. For the purpose of this research paper, the students will be grouped into one of four levels: students in at grade level, students above grade level, students below grade level, and students with disabilities. While it is noted that students with disabilities may fall into one of the three prior groups of students, they will be in a separate section to focus further on the impact that word walls have on these students.

In regards to currently existing research, it became evident that much of the research seemed to be focused on the impact that word walls play on students with disabilities or reading fluency overall with a lack of research regarding the impact on different levels of students. To supplement this and make up for the lack of research, the information gathered in this paper on the impact of the different levels of students was also retrieved from two currently practicing teachers. The first teacher interviewed is a first-grade teacher, D. Pegrim. The word wall type that she utilizes in her classroom is of the first variety mentioned above, that which contains the spelling words/sight words the students learn over the course of the year and that is added to as

the words are learned. This teacher also uses an alternative to word walls, a book called "Words

I Use When I Write." This alternative will be discussed in further detail in a section of this

research paper. The second teacher interviewed is a special education teacher serving students

from Kindergarten to fourth grade, B. Crookes. Due to the fact that this teacher has students in

her room from various grades, she does not have a word wall in her own classroom; however,

she does use other strategies and has been able to see the impact that word walls have on the

students she teaches from the word walls their general education teachers use in their classrooms.

An Overview of Word Walls

Word walls are a common fixture seen in many elementary classrooms. They are

"designed to be an interactive tool for students and contains an array of words that can be used

during writing and reading" (Reading Rockets, 2018). Generally, the words are displayed

alphabetically, with the words sectioned with the letter they fall under as a heading at the top of

each list. The words may be displayed in a variety of ways, including index cards, magnets, or

cardstock (Filkins, 2018). The students are able to visually see important words that they may

need to use when either writing or spelling.

The words that make up a word wall vary depending on the teacher, subject, and even the

grade. In early elementary classrooms, there is often at least one permanent word wall in the

class consists of the spelling or sight words that are introduced throughout the school year (D.

Pegrim, personal communication, February 5, 2018). As the year progresses and the students

learn more words every week, the word wall is added to and expanded. Many teachers also

choose to use word walls specific to a content that is being taught, often science. This word wall

consists of a specific theme or unit, and is often altered as the students enter new units. These

word walls contain content-area terms from the unit and serve a specific purpose (Reading

Rockets, 2018). The terms are important vocabulary that will be gone over in the unit. Some word walls also include a definition or picture to increase effectiveness.

Impact on Students at Grade Level

The first group of students to be looked at is the students who are at grade level. The term "grade level" refers to the fact that the students are, in this case, reading or spelling at the "expected level of difficulty" (Read Charlotte, 2017). These students are meeting the expectations of the grade level with the appropriate challenges and successes, and, according to D. Pegrim, generally accounts for a third of the total number of students in a class (personal communication, February 5, 2018).

When looking at the impact of word walls containing the spelling words learned over the course of the year, this group of students received the most benefit from these word walls (D. Pegrim, personal communication, February 5, 2018). As the students in the class learned the new spelling words, they were added to the word wall. This group of students learn the words as they are added, and are the most likely to retain the spelling and meaning of the words because they are performing at grade level. Thus, the words are at the exact level that the students are at in their development. By having constant access to the word walls in their classroom, these students are able to visually conceptualize the important words that they should know, and have a means of learning their spelling in a way that is developmentally appropriate for them.

Word walls aid students in developing both phonics and spelling skills (Reading Rockets, 2018). Seeing the words on the word walls allows the students to visualize the spelling patterns as well as the relationships between words. Students at grade level in reading and writing are able to therefore take what they see to successfully build the skills necessary to increase their phonics and spelling.

Impact on Students Above Grade Level

In every classroom, there will be a group of students who are preforming above grade level in their reading and spelling development. In the typical classroom, around 30% of the students are reading at a level that is above their grade level (Duke University Talent Identification Program, 2018). This is a significant number of children in the classroom, more so than what is generally expected.

Due to the fact that this group of students are reading and spelling above grade level, the words added to a spelling word wall are typically words that the students already have knowledge about and know how to spell (D. Pegrim, personal communication, 2018). This impacts the effectiveness that spelling word themed word walls has on these students. Because this group is likely to already be familiar with the words, the word wall becomes obsolete to them; the visual reference to the words is unnecessary because the spelling is already known to the students. While many teachers use two spelling lists, a "regular list" and a "challenge list," oftentimes, the only words added to the word wall are those from the regular spelling list. In one study, a word wall was used to teach students high frequency words through various activities. The study showed that students who were learning above grade level did not benefit as much from this as students who were below grade level (May, 2004).

According to Yasmine Rana, "students performing one (or more) years above grade level are equally deserving of academic support as those working to achieve grade-level proficiency" (2016). It is a teacher's responsibility to provide the students above grade level with appropriate materials and supports that strengthens their academic learning. As such, word walls themselves are not always an effective tool to teach grade level spelling words for students reading and

spelling above grade level. These students require differentiation of the materials, and an alternative to word walls to aid students with spelling suited for their level.

Impact on Students Below Grade Level

Word walls enable students to independently learn the spelling of words contained on the word wall without the assistance of a teacher (Dastyck, 2007). Instead of having to ask the teacher to spell every word for them, the students have a reference in their classroom to refer to when writing. For students who are performing below grade level, the availability of a visual reference that is a constant fixture in the classroom may therefore be beneficial to these students.

However, students also require "a strong understanding of letter recognition to be able to use a word wall," (Dastyck, 2007). If a student is unable to recognize letters or the sound of a letter, he or she may be unable to effectively use a word wall, as the word being searched for is unlikely to be found by the student. The student may need additional supports in being able to use a word wall to its greatest benefit, including phonics supports geared towards letter recognition.

According to D. Pegrim and her experience teaching first graders for twenty-five years, students who are performing below grade level may be less likely to use word walls as they are unable to apply strategies that make the word walls beneficial to students (personal communication, February 5, 2018). While students performing at grade level may be able to see "cat" on the word wall and use phonics strategies to realize that by knowing the spelling of "cat," they are able to spell the word "hat," students who are performing below grade level struggle with applying this strategy. The student may be able to look at the word wall and spell the words currently on it, but are unable to use the wall for unfamiliar words not explicitly contained on the wall.

Overall, while students who are performing below grade level may be positively impacted by word walls in the classroom, they often require more explicit instruction on how to use these walls. This instruction will aid the students on receiving the most benefit from the word walls, something that on their own, they may struggle to achieve. May's student mentioned in a previous section showed that students in this group received the most benefit and growth from engaging in activities that teach high frequency words on word walls (2004). This demonstrates the importance of not simply having a word wall displayed in a room, but instead ensuring that activities are used that correspond with the words on these walls.

Impact on Students with Disabilities

There are many different types of disabilities, including mobility disabilities, loss of hearing, vision problems, learning disabilities, autism, and chronic illnesses or disorders (Picard, 2015). In any classroom, there may be students who have a variety of disabilities. According to B. Crookes, word walls alone will typically not positively impact a student with a disability (personal communication, February 9, 2018). These students often do not possess the knowledge of recognizing that they are able to look up at a wall to find a word that they do not know how to spell. Instead, like in the below grade level group of students as well, it is most beneficial to use activities correlating to the word wall with students. She states that in her classroom, she incorporates kinesthetic activities to help her students remember their important spelling and vocabulary words. One such activity is called hunks and chunks. They tap out the words on their own bodies, as well as incorporate other movements as they recite the words with a saying that corresponds with the word. This helps the students remember the spelling of the words, and can also be used to help the students remember the meaning of them.

One study showed that students in special education classrooms who use word walls were able to retain the meaning of vocabulary words 75% of the time (Eustace-DeBaun, 2017). For this study, the students used an interactive word wall, and thus were active participants in using the word wall. Because of this interaction through various activities, the students were more likely to remember the meaning of the words. This shows the importance of incorporating activities to allow for word walls to positively impact students.

Of course, there are some students with disabilities who are unlikely to benefit from the use of traditional word walls. Students who have vision impairments may be unable to see a word wall, and require a variation that would be appropriate for use with the disability they possess. For example, the word wall could be lower in the classroom that the student would be able to walk over and see. If a student was blind, a variation could be for the students to have a personal word wall in a book with Braille letters for the word.

Word walls can have a positive impact on students with disabilities if used appropriately. They must be used in accordance with related activities, such as the hunks and chunks activity mentioned previously. Teachers should make it known repeatedly to the students where the word wall is in the classroom and how to use it when writing (B. Crookes, personal communication, February 9, 2018). This can be done by demonstrating how to use a word wall when writing. The most important aspect to keep in mind as a teacher using a word wall is that no matter how the word wall is being used, it must be done so consistently (B. Crookes, personal communication, February 9, 2018). This will allow the student to get into the routine of the word wall, which makes students with disabilities more likely to use it.

Effectively Utilizing Word Walls in the Classroom

When displaying a word wall, it is important to place it in an area that is accessible to the students and ensure that the words are clear and easy to read (Reading Rockets, 2018). Every student should be able to view the word wall, and as an educator, it is important to take into consideration all of the students in the classroom. For example, if a student has a disability regarding his or her sight, a word wall may be the most beneficial in an area where it is placed low so that the student is able to see it close up. This will enable this student to also benefit from having a word wall in the classroom. The teacher should also explicitly tell the students the purpose of the word wall, and how it displays either key spelling words or vocabulary words that they will use when reading or writing (Filkins, 2018).

Filkins also suggests allowing students to come up with other ways to arrange the words on the word walls as the list grows (2018). This is a strategy that may be especially useful in upper elementary grades, as it allows the students to interact more hands-on with the words on the word wall. According to the constructivist theory of education, students learn by actively constructing their own knowledge of a topic (Hein, 2016). When students are asked to rearrange the words on a word wall, it forces them to use their knowledge about various concepts, such as spelling, phonics, phonemic awareness, definitions, and synonyms or antonyms. From this existing knowledge, they are working to further construct information about the words on the word wall, helping them to better understand the words themselves.

Word walls themselves can be differentiated based upon the needs of the students in a classroom. The Ontario Ministry of Education lists several ways that word walls can be altered (2014). The first way is to group similar words from a single unit on the same colored paper. This allows students to visual make the distinction between units and which words go together

on the word wall, regardless of whether or not they are side-by-side. This would be especially

useful for a teacher who groups the words alphabetically on a word wall rather than by unit.

The second way that the Ontario Ministry of Education states that word walls can be

varied is to add a picture beside the word (2014). For struggling readers, this is a tool that can be

especially beneficial. Seeing the picture beside the word will allow the student to recognize what

the word says, thus enabling him or her to learn the sound and spelling of the word. This

strategy is also beneficial for English language learners. Just as with struggling readers, the

picture will allow the English language learner to connect the picture with the English word.

The Ontario Ministry of Education also says that a word on the word wall could be listed

with its definition also on the card (2014). For word walls used for a particular unit where the

words are the important vocabulary for the unit, this strategy would be particularly effective.

Not only would the students be introduced to the vocabulary term, but they would also be able to

see what the term means right beside it. This would help the students be able to internalize

definitions and better understand the words on the word wall.

While having a word wall can help improve spelling and vocabulary, one cannot only

have a word wall in their classroom simply for a visual aid; rather, a teacher must use appropriate

strategies to integrate word walls into everyday classroom work to increase their effectiveness

(Reading Rockets, 2018 and Dastyck, 2007). Activities help the students become accustomed to

using the word wall as well as provide them with increased exposure to the important words

consisting of the word wall.

Alternatives to Word Walls

While word walls are a valuable strategy to scaffolding student knowledge of vocabulary

words and spelling words, they are not the only tool that is available to students. According to

D. Pegrim, the first-grade teacher interviewed, a strategy that she believes to be more beneficial to all students is a "Words I Use When I Write" book (personal communication, February 5, 2018). The book is divided into sections for each letter of the alphabet, and contains a few pre-selected words that are suited for the grade level of the students. However, each section contains a number of blank lines as well. These lines are intended for student use, as they add in words that they do not know how to spell on them. When writing, the students ask a teacher to spell unknown words for them, which are then added into their Words I Use When I Write book.

Each student has their own copy of this book, making it individualized for each student. These books support differentiation, as the students decide which words to ask for the spelling of and to add into their book. They empower students to take control of their own learning of spelling, which promotes independence as well. Every student will know the spelling of different words, and not only that, but they may *want* to know the spelling of different words that otherwise would not have been placed onto a word wall in their class.

Within a classroom, Words I Use When I Write books can be utilized in several different ways. One way is for the students to learn their spelling words (D. Pegrim, personal communication, February 5, 2018). In her classroom, Mrs. Pegrim aids this learning by having her students write in their own spelling words during morning work time one day a week to supplement the addition of the words on the word wall. The students are practicing the spelling of their words by having to write them physically down themselves versus having only the visual reference of the word wall. Another way they are used is when students are writing independently. If a student does not know how to spell a certain word, he or she is able to ask the teacher to spell the word for him or her, which is then added to the appropriate page in their

book. The student now has a word individualized for him or her that he or she will be able to look back on and reference in future writings as well.

Conclusion

Word walls can be an important classroom tool to aid students with spelling and vocabulary. Within a classroom, there are a variety of groups of students, including students on grade level, students above grade level, students below grade level, and students with disabilities. While each group is impacted slightly differently by word walls, one component that remains universal throughout each of the groups is that word walls cannot be used in isolation. Simply displaying a wall of words in the classroom without any further instruction or guidance does not help students with spelling or vocabulary; instead, word walls must be accompanied with activities and explicit instruction of how they are to be used. When this is done, word walls have the ability to positively benefit students in the classroom.

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