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2005

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## Publication Details

Kervin, L. K. & McKenzie, K. (2005). Keeping the conversation going: Creating a whole school approach to spelling. In J. Young (Eds.), *Pleasure, Passion and Provocation AATE/ALEA National Conference* (pp. 1-15). Broadbeach, QLD: ALEA.

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# Keeping the Conversation Going: Creating a Whole School Approach to Spelling

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## Abstract

How to best teach spelling across primary classrooms has been an issue of debate for many schools and in fact, many teachers for some time. How consistent spelling practice can be best incorporated into school policy and implemented into classroom literacy experiences has resulted in much confusion and debate, and has proven to be a difficult challenge for many primary school educators.

This paper aims to describe how one school developed a whole school approach to spelling, devised supporting documentation and supported staff to develop and implement teaching and learning experiences across the grades consistent with these. The process that was engaged with by the teaching staff will be examined, as will strategies employed to work towards staff ownership and understanding of adopted spelling practices.

## Introduction

Spelling, and the way it is taught in schools, is an educational issue that attracts significant attention within the wider community. Many teachers often feel torn between the policy expectations of mandatory syllabus documents (e.g. Board of Studies, 1998) and the pressures from key stakeholders within both the school and the wider community. In many cases, the portrayal of teaching and basic skills within the political arena and the media has not only confused the issue, but also directed the way spelling is taught in many schools. Political parties regularly make comments about the literacy standards of young Australians and how their policies will work to improve these. However, it appears that many of these political statements are made on weak and at best anecdotal evidence.

The media continually presents debates about the spelling development of children and the way it is taught in schools. These debates tend to focus on three main issues.

- i. “Phonics teaching” – whether phonics should be taught and how it should be taught. Often this is incorporated in the “Back to Basics” stance.
- ii. “Spelling” – whether it is being taught in our schools and how it is being taught.
- iii. “Basic Skills” – for example, the inclusion of the “Basic Skills Test” (BST) for students in years three and five and the “English Language and Literacy Assessment” (ELLA) exam for year seven students, has created many debates in regard to the literacy standards of students in New South Wales. The results of these have led to debates regarding the way literacy is taught in schools.

The debates that are presented by both the media and politicians are often very emotive, however they often neglect current thinking and research regarding language learning. Such debates I believe tend to avoid the underlying issues, namely the changing trends and thinking in regard to the way children learn language.

### **What do we know about spelling?**

There is a large body of literature surrounding the topic of “spelling”. The New South Wales English Syllabus K-6 (Board of Studies, 1998, p. 77) states:

Learning to spell is closely linked with learning to read and write. Learning about spelling reinforces knowledge about common letter sequences and about spelling-sound relationships. Good spelling involves flexible and strategic problem-solving behaviour. It is important that students are aware of the variety of strategies that can be used to spell words. They should be aware that, because of the peculiarities of the English spelling system, some strategies work better for some words than others.

Research reported from as early as the 1980s has presented educators with many valuable insights into spelling and its inextricable connections to language. Bean and Bouffler (1987, p. 7) highlighted that spelling is a part of language and as such has three main dimensions. We understand that spelling is *functional* as it impacts upon the meaning of the writing process. It is *social* as it enables readers to reconstruct meaning. Community determined spelling assists the reader to interpret the meaning of the text. Finally, it is *contextual* as spelling is affected according to the context in which it was written.

Learning how to spell is a language learning process. This skill is developed through language usage – that is, when children become aware of, understand and gain control over spelling norms used by more experienced language users. Spelling cannot be separated from writing, reading, talking or listening. Burke’s (1984) “linguistic data pool” theory demonstrated how children learn language by using language as they develop a knowledge bank from each language encounter. Such a theory values the importance of language experiences (such as a book being read, an experience as a writer, a spelling game) over more explicit traditional spelling lessons.

Kelly (1986, p. 43) reminded us that spelling is important, but it is not the most important aspect for young literacy learners. Spelling is for writing is ultimately less important than having something to write and being able to express it in writing. Bean and Bouffler (1987, p. 47) support such comments as they state “The greatest barrier to writing and spelling development is the excessive emphasis given to standard spelling before children even put

pen to paper”. Smith (1982, p. 197) emphasized the need for children to engage with writing tasks and subsequent spelling focuses that are meaningful and interesting to them.

Such knowledge about spelling has been available for decades. However, the way that spelling is taught in many classrooms often doesn’t represent such thinking.

### **How is spelling taught in schools?**

Cole and Knowles (2000, p. 89) describe teachers as “...typically lone adults working behind closed doors striving to meet the multiple and pressing demands of modern-day classrooms and schools”. The experiences teachers have, both as students and teachers, play a crucial role in what Whitehead (2000) refers to as an “individual learning and teaching theory”. It is important to understand this as Whitehead (2000) argues teachers draw upon such experiences when teaching such processes, particularly if they don’t understand the theoretical underpinnings of what they are teaching and how to best represent this in the classroom.

Kamler and Comber (2003, p. 338) report their discoveries of work teachers do ‘secretly’ that is, ‘...teachers’ independent decision-making against the grain of the authorized curriculum. Such secrecy can be the result of resistance to change and pressures from key stakeholders.

Teaching spelling within the classroom causes confusion and anxiety for many teachers. Connelly and Clandinin (1988, p. 113) state, “the field of curriculum is – to put it bluntly – a maze”. Teachers in New South Wales are guided by an outcome for each stage that focuses on spelling. For example, students working in Stage 2 (grades three and four) are guided by the following outcome for spelling:

WS2.11 Uses knowledge of letter-sound correspondences, common letter patterns and a range of strategies to spell familiar and unfamiliar words

This outcome is supported by indicators, which do serve to clarify it more for teachers.

However, as Bean (1998, p. 125) writes,

...The spelling outcomes or objectives are usually few in number and they need to be read in conjunction with those for reading and writing ... They will need to be ‘unpacked’ by staff in order to clarify what is expected and therefore what you will teach and, further, what it is that you will be assessing.

Bean suggests that there is much more involved in teaching spelling than what is contained in these outcomes. She argues they are too brief when considering the planning of a whole

school literacy plan. Teachers need to understand and be comfortable with how spelling is best taught and learnt by children within the classroom.

Graves (1984, p. 193) acknowledges that teachers all have "...orthodoxies in our teaching that prevent us from being sensitive to writers". He further explains that many of these orthodoxies are either "...coping mechanisms for our teaching situations", or teacher's "personal need to overuse something in order to understand it". Our observations of teachers (and in fact reflections on some aspects of our own classroom literacy teaching) have often revealed an eclectic approach to literacy teaching. Hoffman (1998) suggests teachers often draw upon what Graves refers to as orthodoxies as a response to puzzles they encounter in the classroom. However, he also acknowledges that it is important for teachers move to understanding of the solutions to these puzzles to ensure that these "orthodoxies" are the best response to them.

It is important for teachers to clarify their understandings of issues surrounding spelling in light of research and thinking around spelling and their school literacy policy. Bean (1998) identifies that the following issues need clarification for many teachers:

- Time spent on spelling;
- Approaches to lists, sources of words;
- Policies in regard to aspects such as spelling textbooks;
- Suggestions for developing a print environment;
- Preferred major teaching strategies;
- Approaches to editing and proofreading;
- Resources such as word charts and dictionaries;
- Approaches to monitoring progress;
- Assessing spelling.

Further, Bean suggests that often spelling is taught in isolation from reading and writing. Spelling should be taught as part of a planned integrated language program, which includes daily opportunities to read and write. The challenge remains as to how to establish a whole school approach to ensure that all teachers across all school grades are teaching spelling within the context of an integrated language program.

## **The Research Approach**

This article reflects data gained as part of Kervin's doctoral studies. The research took place in an independent primary school in metropolitan New South Wales. For this component of the study, Kervin worked with fourteen classroom teachers, in collaboration with McKenzie. Interaction occurred within individual teacher's classrooms over twenty weeks, then a ten week period for a group focus. Data was collected with a focus on the process the teachers engaged with as a whole school approach to spelling was developed. Data included the use of researcher observations and field notes, semi-structured interviews with the teachers, teacher reflections on the process and the collection of developed artifacts. Data were analysed by coding into categories based on the emerging themes. The researchers' conclusions were checked and discussed with the key stakeholders at the inquiry school.

### **Spelling in action: a case study of one school**

The inquiry school is located in the south-west area of Sydney in a low socio-economic area. The school has a significant turnover of staff from year to year with the average age of teachers in this inquiry year being thirty years of age compared to an average within the same geographical location of New South Wales of approximately fifty years of age. Over the past ten years the school has attracted a number of early career teachers. Anecdotal evidence revealed that the turnover of staff occurs due to appointment to positions closer to staff member's homes and promotional opportunities.

Connelly and Clandinin (1999, p. 100) describe schools as "...a landscape of interacting stories". What follows is the professional development journey undertaken by fourteen teachers and us as researchers as we worked towards developing and establishing a whole school approach to spelling. Activities, processes and people partnerships will be explored as we worked towards this common goal.

A number of different experiences were planned for and made available to support classroom teachers in the goal of establishing a whole school approach to spelling. Throughout the first two terms of the school year time was made available for Kervin as the primary researcher to work in the classrooms of the teachers during their literacy block. These times were scheduled at mutually convenient times and enabled each classroom teacher and Kervin to work together for an hour a week over a two term block. During these visits the action research spiral (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988, p. 11) was employed to guide us through the

process of planning, teaching and reflecting on what was happening during the teaching of writing with an emphasis on spelling. Each of the teachers and Kervin entered into frequent dialogue throughout this time – we challenged each other, debated issues with each other, pondered over student work samples and shared interesting literature focusing on the writing process and spelling. During this time, McKenzie acted as a critical friend to Kervin as they engaged in dialogue about what was happening and possible directions for each of the classroom teachers.

At the beginning of this process, each of the teachers were encouraged to articulate their beliefs about spelling and how they provided for the teaching of spelling in their classrooms. The reflections of Kate, a Kindergarten teacher are captured in Excerpt 1.

“A good writer is someone who experiments and takes risks with their writing and spelling. Children should be able to spell most high frequency words correctly after being immersed in them every day. I think knowing these helps when writing as they are not stopping to spell every word – only the ones they don’t know.”

Kate identified a number of things that she did in her classroom to teach spelling.

- Explicit teaching of spelling patterns / rules
- Giving children the opportunity to write every day
- Teaching children how to write - forming of letters, on the line etc (modelling)
- Having children write about a given topic and topics of their own choice
- Daily Guided Reading and Writing and Joint Writing
- Daily Letter and Word ID
- Daily print walks
- Teaching about what makes a good writer – eg punctuation, full stops etc

**Excerpt 1: Reflections from Kate**

Amanda, a Grade 1 teacher, identified that her own beliefs about spelling were focused primarily on the teaching of the spelling rules. When reflecting on her own experiences of learning to spell she stated: “I remember being a good speller. I rote learned my ‘spelling list’ every week”. Amanda’s teaching of spelling within her Grade 1 classroom was primarily focused on teaching spelling strategies. She said, “they [the children] need to know the quickest way to find a word, eg dictionary, have-a-go, look around the room etc”. She was very conscious of the need to equip students with strategies and knowledge of rules and patterns to enable them to be considered ‘good spellers’. In an interview in term 1, Amanda said, “As you know ... my children know many spelling patterns and are able to draw on these when they come across a ‘tricky’ word ... I am now teaching them the strategies they need when spelling unfamiliar words”. Observations showed that Amanda’s teaching of these strategies were often stand-alone lessons, not in the context of a writing experience as

suggested by the literature. Amanda's classroom experiences appeared to be directed by the pressures she experienced from the parents of the children in her class. Amanda found that from the beginning of the school year, parents repeatedly inquired about the use of spelling lists in the classroom. Amanda stated, "... they want to see spelling lists and letter cluster families ... they feel rote learning will help them" .

These initial examples from two teachers working in two consecutive grades (Kindergarten and Grade 1) show the differences that existed at this time in the approach to spelling in two sample classrooms. This trend was consistent across the school. By the beginning of the third term, Kervin had experienced each classroom's literacy block (Kindergarten to Grade Six) and had a fairly good knowledge of what spelling opportunities were being provided in each classroom. It became increasingly obvious that there were considerable differences in how spelling was approached across the stages and even within the same grade.

Throughout the third term, three opportunities for were made available for focus group meetings (involving the whole teaching staff) to meet with Kervin and McKenzie. Each of these ninety-minute meetings had a focus on spelling. For the first meeting the teachers were invited to bring classroom artifacts that focused on spelling (such as work samples, teaching programs, classroom resources). The teachers were given time to work in stage teams to share their artifacts and talk about their approach to teaching spelling. Groups were asked to report back and from these reports the teachers were able to begin to see the different approaches to spelling within their school. Teachers were provided with some professional literature to read before the next focus group meeting.

The second focus group meeting (again involving the whole staff) was held the following week. In this meeting the teachers discussed their beliefs upon spelling and identified a cohesive set of theoretical underpinnings for the approach their whole school was to take for spelling. Both Kervin and McKenzie facilitated this process. The teachers had been provided with professional readings from the beginning of the year and time had been made available for teachers to read these. Some teachers had contributed other readings to the collective 'library'. At the end of this meeting a philosophical basis had been drafted with connections to the literature on spelling, mandatory syllabus documents and district expectations. Excerpt 2 presents the philosophical basis that was developed from this meeting.

We believe:

- Conventional spelling is valued within the wider community.
- Spelling is an inseparable part of written language.
- Spelling is a thinking process, not just a rote learning task.
- Learning to spell is a developmental process, which requires the application of a multi-strategy approach.

Such strategies include:

- Hearing and recording sounds
- Spelling words through analogy
- Visual information (spelling patterns)
- Automatic recall of the spelling of high frequency and utility words
- Ability to detect and correct spelling errors (orthographic knowledge)
- Ability to use resources in connection with partially known information about a word (dictionary, spell checker)

The ability to spell easily and automatically enables students to become more effective writers.

### **Excerpt 2: Developed Philosophical Basis for Whole School Approach to Spelling**

A third meeting was held five weeks after the philosophical statements had been drafted. During this meeting, the teachers devised expectations of teachers Kindergarten to Year Six in their stage groups. These were then reported back to the whole staff and negotiations took place to devise those expectations that all teachers agreed to include in their classroom literacy experiences. Excerpt 3 presents examples of some of the expectations articulated during this time.

- A balanced writing block will operate in all classrooms Kindergarten to Year 6. Spelling will be taught within the context of this. The following episodes will be incorporated into this balanced writing block:
  - Joint writing
  - Daily independent writing
  - Guided writing
  - Modelled and independent proofreading
- Spelling experiences will be taught within the context of meaningful, continuous texts.
- Planned spelling experiences will be provided Kindergarten to Year 6 where the teacher demonstrates how to use visual, phonological, orthographic, morphemic, etymological knowledge (developmental through the Stages) when spelling words within the joint writing and guided writing episodes.
- Guided spelling experiences will be provided where the teacher works with a small group of students according to need and ability.
- Children will be encouraged and expected to engage in independent spelling, proofreading and editing in all writing tasks.
- Modelled and independent proofreading episodes will be incorporated Kindergarten to Year 6.
- A “practice area” will exist in every student’s book to be used to record independent, guided and planned spelling experiences.
- All students will complete writing homework, which is expected to be proofread.
- Formal assessment of student spelling will be through the teacher analysis of students’ draft writing samples using English K-6 Syllabus writing outcomes and indicators. Reporting of the results will be done via individual student learning portfolios.
- Informal assessment will occur frequently through teacher observation during the daily balanced writing block.

### **Excerpt 3: Classroom expectations for spelling**

A key principle of change as described by Stoll and Fink (1996, p. 45) is that “people have to understand change and work out their own meaning through clarification, which often occurs through practice.” The previously described focus group meetings had provided the teachers with some opportunity to begin to articulate beliefs and understandings and communicate their own expectations with classroom spelling experiences. While this had been documented, and was sufficient for the development of school policies, the need for the teachers to continue their professional learning through classroom practice became apparent.

At this time Kervin was teaching a Grade Four class and was also a member of the school leadership team. Another teacher, also on the leadership team, was teaching a Grade Two class. Interaction between Kervin and this teacher had identified that this teacher was confident and had a strong theoretical understanding of spelling which was evident in her classroom teaching. Time was made available for both Kervin and this executive teacher to visit each classroom at different times, but to also have each teacher visit both Kervin’s and executive teacher’s classroom during a spelling experience. Figure 4 provides a sample timetable implemented to facilitate this process.

9:00 – 9:30	Year 1 teacher to visit researcher’s classroom to observe a spelling experience
9:30 – 10:30	Researcher to work with Year 1 teacher on spelling experiences within Year 1 classroom
11:00 – 11:30	Year 5 teacher to visit executive teacher’s classroom to observe a spelling experience
11:30 – 12:30	Executive teacher to work with Year 5 teacher on spelling experiences within Year 5 classroom

**Figure 4: Sample timetable**

This process provided opportunities for each teacher to view a spelling experience in the beginning and middle stages of school. Attention was paid to the developmental nature of spelling experiences.

The relationship between each of the teachers and us as the researchers had a strong mentoring focus. It was a supportive relationship where two people at a time were working together towards the attainment of understanding of the how to best teach spelling within classroom literacy experiences. Kervin, with the support of McKenzie and the executive teacher, had the ‘experience’ and ‘wisdom’ to guide the teachers towards the pursuit of the nominated goal (Boreen and Nidday, 2000; Long, 2002; Stringer, 1996). The initial

relationships fitted within a 'controlled network' as described by Stake (1995). The focus was clear and specific times were allocated for the teachers to work with 'experts'. The importance of the project at the school level was emphasized with the provision of substantial periods of time. Time was available for teachers to discuss spelling, engage with professional input and review their classroom practices.

Over time the professional relationships changed as the mentoring network and ownership of the process was spread - everyone became 'experts' on spelling. The teachers had all become more professionally aware and knowledgeable about spelling that was represented in their classroom-based spelling experiences. The importance of an open collaborative culture and a supportive professional climate were recognized in the need to support the sustainability of the developed whole school approach to spelling (Katz and Kahn, 1978; Weindling and Earley, 1987). The collaborative structures and process facilitated amongst the staff gave the teachers forums where they were encouraged to talk with each other about what they were doing and why. The teachers were not relying just on the initial mentoring networks set up between themselves and Kervin. Instead, these spread throughout the school where different teachers invited each other to their rooms to view spelling in action and reflect together on future directions. In addition, the teachers continued their conversations with Kervin and McKenzie as they continually worked to refine their classroom spelling approaches.

At the end of the year, Kate reviewed her progress in discussion with Kervin. She stated, "If you had've [sic] said to me at the beginning of Term 2 'Your kids will be proofreading by the end of Term 3' I wouldn't have believed you! ... I would never have thought a five year old could proofread so well. But it happens in my classroom and its [sic] brilliant!" The writing produced by students within her classroom was supportive of such comments. Figure 5 shows two writing samples from 'Tara' a student that Kate identified as being an average writer within her classroom.

Beginning of Term 2 sample:

hohob. Ior. I i Re. ~~the~~  
 I like the garden

Mid Term 4 sample:

bliffllis have four wings  
 butterflies  
 bliffllis have a long  
 tongue to get me  
 nectar  
 Peter out. The girl

**Figure 5: Writing samples from ‘Tara’**

While you would expect to see significant growth within the writing of a Kindergarten student, these samples also show the changing focus within Kate’s teaching of spelling. The second sample clearly shows that the student has engaged with proofreading strategies, and the corrections made to the writing are from the student not the teacher.

## **Discussion**

The development of a whole school approach to spelling had been identified as a professional need within the school. It was an area of need that had been identified by the school leadership team and was prioritized and supported with the appropriate allocation of time and personnel. All teachers were supported in the professional learning initiative and all teachers were supported in their classrooms.

The development of a whole school approach to spelling was a professional focus that involved each classroom teacher employed within the school. As such, it was embraced as a professional learning initiative within the school over the course of a school year. It was acknowledged that a focus on spelling needed to be grounded within teachers’ classrooms. It was therefore appropriate that significant opportunity was made for teachers to focus on this professional learning agenda within the context of their own and other teacher’s classrooms. Throughout all the activities, processes and partnerships, the teachers were provided with support to implement and trial new ideas with professional guidance, assistance and encouragement from ‘experts’ within the school site.

The professional learning experience began with acknowledgement of each teacher’s attitudes, understandings and practices to do with spelling. The importance of understanding where the teachers were at with their professional understandings was acknowledged in the initial stages of the project where the focus was on individual teachers and their classroom practice. Once these varying positions and understandings had been identified, it was then

appropriate to develop an agenda for the whole school and move forward as one collective professional body.

Relationships between and among the researchers and classroom teachers, and the executive teacher, were a key component in the development of the whole school approach to spelling. The relationships amongst those involved within this professional development initiative were of paramount importance, particularly between the researchers, the executive teacher, and each of the teachers. Open communication between those involved was vital to allow for a sense of connectedness to develop amongst the participants, creating in turn a community and professional support network. Figure 6 presents a representation of the relationship between the 'experts' (the researchers and executive teacher) and the other classroom teachers. The emphasis is on the reciprocity that was in constant action in the give-and-take nature of professional interactions.

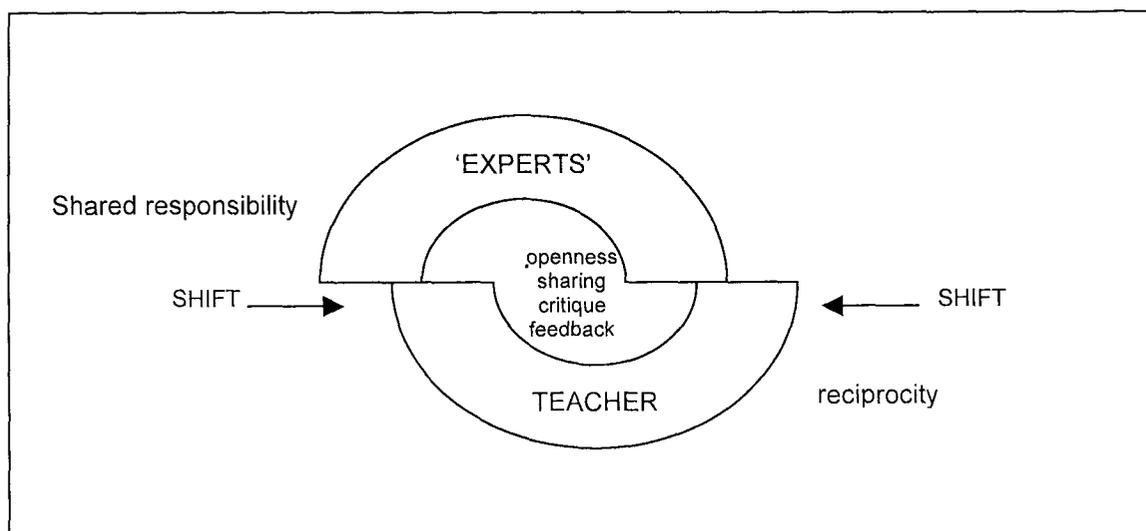


Figure 6: The relationship between 'experts' and teachers

## Conclusion

The development of a whole school approach to spelling in this school site appeared to be successful as there was a shared responsibility as all those engaged moved towards a common goal. Professional input and guidance was provided, and each professional was encouraged, respected and valued to contribute and be part of the professional learning experience. Reciprocity was constantly in action as give-and-take relationships supported the shared endeavour as ownership and responsibility for the whole school approach to spelling was

shared. The structures, activities, processes and people partnerships these teachers interacted with in this professional learning experience supported them in their professional growth.

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