

This year, I've been looking into Spelling in Writing as part of a coaching course undertaken with the AIS, and which continues next year. It hasn't been a solitary journey. I am really grateful to Penny Ryder who has been willing to explore spelling with me over the year. Together, we've collected data from our year 3 cohort, interpreted past Naplan data in-depth and read and discussed various journal articles on best practice. We also trialled new approaches with our classes that emphasise morphemes, spelling analogies and etymology in team-teaching contexts and individually. We also visited and interviewed teachers in a primary school in Canberra who are piloting a holistic approach to spelling instruction. I am also grateful to the year 3 team (Loretta and Tom) who have been generous in allowing time with their classes to collect data from across the cohort.

At our school, the need to investigate best practice approaches to Spelling was first recognised by the leadership team. The coaching course presented an opportunity for the school to pursue this end.

***Collaborative change is exciting but it can also be experienced as a kind of chaos.***

Change, no matter how big or small, is a kind of chaos, where things can seem 'up in the air' and unsettling before a new direction is established. Collaborative change can appear particularly 'messy' because it is not a clear path. It is a path of discovery.

It is, however, much more beneficial in the long run, as people come to understand the need for change themselves and are agents in devising new ways forward.

Identifying a need for change, opens up the proverbial can of worms. If we need to change, how do we do that in the best possible way? This can lead to a time of confusion, resistance and even conflict as the agents of change (teaching staff and leaders) grapple with ways for change to happen. We discovered that ideas about best practice can be conflicting, that there are anxieties about which is the best one.

## Research question: How can we make stronger connections between spelling and writing?

- ▶ *“ When readers have both an extensive vocabulary and can spell these words without conscious effort, they are able to concentrate most effectively on composing.”*
- ▶ *“Teachers need to build knowledge about words, sentences and paragraphing as well as to improve their understanding of those linguistic devices that aid coherence and cohesion.” (Building up from words)*

Faulkner, V., Ravalland, J., Hunter, J., (2010), Caught in the Middle: improving writing in the middle and upper primary years, Edith Cowan University

## The 'spell-check' dilemma: Spelling as vocabulary

- ▶ *“The average school student learns between 5 to 10 words per day, a total of between 2,000 and 4,000 during primary and high school; however, a marked difference between the vocabulary knowledge of children from high and low socio-economic backgrounds has been well-documented (Berne & Blachowicz, 2008). This would suggest that the teaching of vocabulary is an equity issue and deserving of teachers’ time and energy.”*

Daffern, T. and Mackenzie, N., (2015), Building strong writers: Creating a balance between the authorial and secretarial elements of writing, *Literacy Learning: The Middle Years*, 23 (1)

## 2015: Building a Foundation

Building philosophy: confidence through shared rationale

Building knowledge: confidence from understanding



### 3 objectives (or learning intentions) for today.

#### Ideas to take with you:

1. **To consider the need:** building on phonics for a more meaningful spelling language approach
2. **To explore the context:** best practice spelling and literacy approaches.
3. **To contemplate the 'how to':** what a more holistic and contextualised approach might look like in our classes

We can consider how much spelling, and the teaching of literacy as a whole should be about pulling apart to look at the small building blocks and how much we should be putting things into their meaningful/ useful/ applicable contexts.

## **Building Philosophy:** What does Best Practice in Spelling Look Like?

- ACARA- through all Literature, Language and Literacy strands
- Words connect learning across the Reading to Writing continuum
- Emerging from Interesting Literature
- Focus on broadening vocabulary
- Explicit and Sequential
- Balanced (Etymological, Morphemic, Phonological, Visual)



### **What does Best Practice in Spelling Look Like?**

As I was thinking about best practice with Penny and then also with my year 4 planning team, I realised there were lots of competing commercial phonics programmes on offer. Looking at Words Your Way and Word Shark, arose from a need we saw coming from our lowest spellers and a despondency about their lack of progress. I got yet another perspective from, Emma Johnston-Robinson's input with her EALD background was fascinating. I have also spoken at length with the senior school learning support expert, Julia Davies-Duff who is a strong advocate for Jolly Phonics.

I guess what I discovered really quickly is that finding our what best practice looks like is complex. At first, I thought taking on Spelling was going to be a bit pedestrian and boring, really because what I wanted to explore was writing. But very soon, I realised Spelling wasn't boring at all. In fact, it was a hot bed of controversy and everywhere I looked there were passionate advocates for one method or another. It seemed also that no two schools agreed on exactly how to teach spelling. Best practice wasn't going to show itself without a fight. It was hidden.

A really unhelpful aspect of the phonics debate is its polarised position to whole language. One side would characterise the other thus: reckless immersion in literature without explicit skills instruction or conversely, reducing words to grunts, hisses and tonal inflections with little meaning or context.

- **Emerging from rich literature** – Taught in the context of rich, quality and authentic literature
- **Authentic**- Skills-based and give students (even from a young age) the guiding principles for how the English language works.
- **Balanced** - Use Etymological, Phonological (oral), Morphemic, Visual (all of these are actually inextricably linked)
- **Orthographic**- (Seeing patterns that unlock many words at once)
- **Explicit**- While it is important to differentiate, it is important that students don't become lost in individual and uncontextualised spelling programmes

**Teach the story of words-** *By unlocking the background story of one word either through orthography, morphology or etymology, students can learn to spell many words at once. Stories help students make sense of spelling while also giving them a rich cultural and international understanding of words.*

What are we aiming for?

To teach our students the patterns and systems used in spelling.

Morphemes should be our starting point. The language of root words, base words and affixes. This leads to discussion about phonics (preside- president). Is phonics the right way to link words, particularly for our EALD speakers who may pronounce words differently to us?

The story of words unlocks the meaning and spellings of other words

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Word origins transcends the parochial constructs of local and accent. Word origins give spelling an international context, meaning

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- Sitting at the Feet of Authors

## Building Knowledge

### What's working:

- ✓ Quality Literature-based
- ✓ Integrated
- ✓ Assessment procedures that children aspire to
- ✓ Etymological studies (examples used: -ism/ -age/ angle)
- ✓ Dictation (flexible language but also an area for challenge/ experimentation)
- ✓ Being engaged interested teachers, learning alongside the students (which etymology study does)

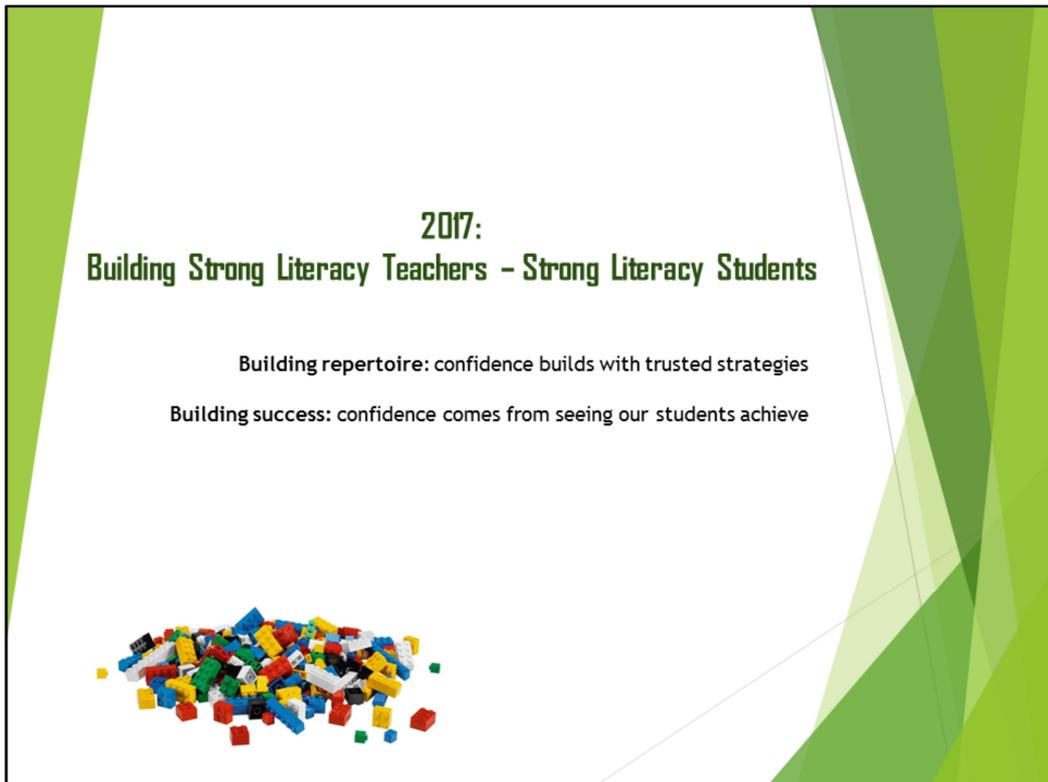
### Challenges:

- Mixing it up, marrying THRASS carefully with new direction
- Shift away from focus on single phonemes to broader phonological, orthographical and etymological approach for years 3-6
- Move away from spelling lists and towards literature-based emphasis

## The place of spelling in writing

- ▶ Secretarial elements of writing (spelling, handwriting/ keyboard, punctuation) vs Authorial elements of writing
- ▶ Lessened pressure on working memory
- ▶ Correlation to success in writing
- ▶ Skills vs Meaning (or rather, how do we teach skills in a meaningful way?)
- ▶ Connection to grammar





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## Building Repertoire

### Strategies:

*Engaging  
Challenging  
Builds success*

*Word Cline  
Membean.com  
Morpheme Building  
Synonym Words in Advertising  
'Words in the Wild'  
'What's so special about the word..'*



### Language is ORAL and CULTURAL.

When we first learn how to speak, words are at first enjoyable sounds but they are soon signifiers too (book, shoe, mum, dad, teddy)

Language is highly sensitive to accent, to place and time. Spellings (vocabulary) reflect the people who use them.

I prefer to think of phonics as just 'oral language' and spelling as 'vocabulary.'

The only foundation to begin with building a met-understanding and language for talking about language is to start with meaning. The morphemes or meaning parts in words are the best place to start. Many experts agree on this.

Take the word 'action' (act- verb, ion- the suffix added to turn the verb into a noun. The phonemic part 'sh' doesn't make any sense on its own, except to understand it is a random consequence, over time of putting these parts together. The discussion of phonics and sounds quickly arise out of a focus on morphemes. Word origins then come out at the extension end. Phonics as remedial. Etymology is extension and for students in year 3 onwards.

**Language is ORGANIC and changes. It is living and breathing as much as the people**

who use them together over time.

Words are also artifacts. If they were objects they'd be in museums, but fortunately, instead they are artifacts that we use every day and which we change with usage.

*Pronunciation-*

*Would/ should*

*What/ where/when*

*Consider how a word like 'because', is slowly becoming more acceptable as just 'cause'. And while this may not be acceptable in formal language now, history shows that changes like this, while at first frowned on, become acceptable over time. Last year, I had a mini debate with my class, Janine Hudson and I think I even dragged Kathy Johnston into it, about the pronunciation of Tuesday.*

*I insisted on 'T-y-oo-s-day'. Everyone else insisted it was 'Choos-sday'. I had to accept that pronunciation is changing and an over-pronunciation of Tuesday just makes one look school maam-ish. Language is changing.*

*Meanings change too.*

*Meaning- inhabitable*

***Awful – used to mean 'full of awe' and not means 'horrible' (awful first meant full of awe, probably then, to mean scary, and has finally come to mean terrible)***

***Phonics on its own is not enough to develop confident knowledgeable language users. Phonics makes little sense on its own but must interrelate with the other determinants of language (the meaning parts- root words, base words and affixes).***

**[A]ll change, even very large and powerful change, begins when a few people start talking with one another about something they care about.**

*- Margaret J. Wheatley*

## Dictation: a framework for building writing

- ▶ Music classroom model (experimenting with the 'gradual release' framework)
- ▶ Listening, reciting, improvising, composing
- ▶ Sitting at the feet of the model writer
- ▶ Words in the wild
- ▶ Words, sentences, paragraphs, genre



## 2015: Year 3



### **3 objectives (or learning intentions) for today.**

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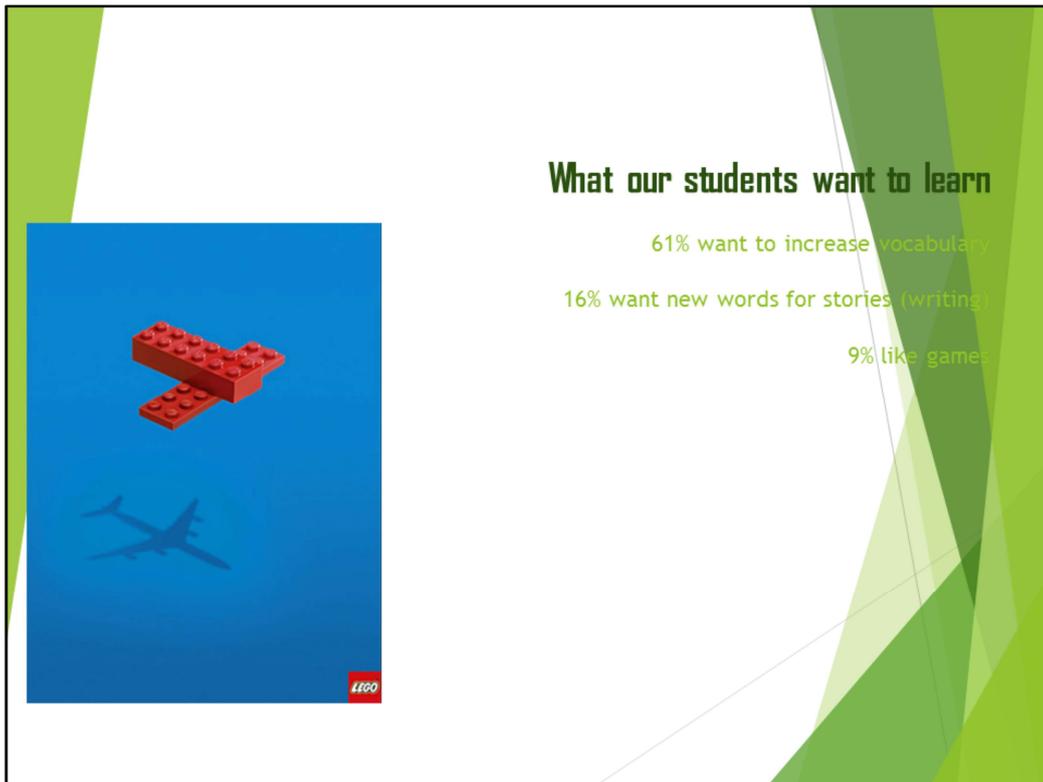


Naplan Results 2011-15 (trend data)	South Australian Spelling Test (Feb v Nov)	Dictation (Feb v Nov)	Student Self - Reflection
✓ On average and above average in most questions (Spelling)	✓ Almost all students improved. (Scored above age standard)	✓ Most students improved	✓ Students were more articulate about strategies by Nov
× Weakness: Use of "precise and challenging vocabulary" (Writing)	× Weakness: Few used clear strategies (eg. syllable counting, THRASS chart). Almost entirely memory/ visual T&E	× Weakness: Morphemes. (Eg, All but 1 student could write 'plan', however, 57% couldn't spell 'planned')	× Weakness: Most students could only articulate one strategy.
✓ Spelling words depending on single phoneme dilemmas (eg. 'swan') ✓ Strongest result this year (Hawthorn effect?)	✓ Most students could spell the first 30 words ✓ One third could spell 'material' and 'different'	✓ Punctuation was almost entirely accurate (noticeably poor in Feb)	✓ Most of the top spellers articulated more complex methods for spelling strategies (looking for patterns, roots, etc)
× Weakness: Spelling complex and compound words (eg. rainbow)	× Weakness: (In Nov) 15% still couldn't spell "friend" 39% still couldn't spell "women" 64% still couldn't spell "beautiful"	× Weakness: (In Nov) While only 8 students couldn't spell 'beg', 31 students couldn't apply the morpheme to spell, 'begged'	× Lowest spellers were almost entirely dependent on 'sounding out' and none of these referred to looking for orthographic patterns

Looked at all the results across Naplan which highlighted strengths and weaknesses with many aspects of spelling, including grammatical verb tense and vocabulary.

We found a range of things:

- Breadth of vocabulary was low in writing (using precise and descriptive words)
- Mostly on average or above average
- Spelling of complex and compound words
- Morpheme weakness (so that all but 1 student could write plan whereas 57% couldn't write 'planned')
- Lowest spellers only rely on phonics
- Top spellers rely on a range of strategies
- (micro lesson in Morphemes- misspelled **mis-spell-ed**)



### **CGS Year 3 Spelling Study 2015**

SA Spelling test (Feb/ Nov)

PAT-R test (Feb/ Aug)

Dictation (morphemic/ verb tense tested)

Naplan

78 students participated (mixed ability)

#### **Defining features of Bottom 15%:**

*rated themselves as having low confidence in spelling*

*Scored poorly in multiple tests (Naplan, Pat-R, SA, dict)*

*Almost all the poor spellers (with only one exception) rely on only one strategy (Almost all being phonemic).*

*Only one student in this bunch replied that they also think about syllables*

*Only 2 of them said that their parent would/could help with thrass*

#### **Defining features of Top 15%:**

*Rated themselves as having high confidence*

*Scored well across multiple tests (Naplan, Pat-R, SA, dict)*

*Almost all use **several strategies** beyond phonemic*

*Their strategies include morphemes, roots, trial and error, orthography (looking for patterns)*

*All scored perfectly in dictation (demonstrating flexibility and mastery over verb tenses, punctuation etc)*

*Most were able to clearly articulate their strategies (clearly aware of the thinking behind their success in spelling)*

**Features across the whole grade:**

*Just over half the cohort were advanced for their age (according to the SA Spelling standardised test).*

*Close to half of the students named phonics as their sole strategy for solving difficult words*

**Strategies for Spelling**

Students were asked to say what strategies they rely on when they are spelling harder words.

**19** did not answer,

**31** rely solely on phonemic (answering either 'Thrass', 'Sounding out' or 'Chunking' (**12** of these gave the commercial brand name, 'Thrass' as a verb to talk about what they do)

Of the **31** students who answered that phonics is their only strategy, 21 were in the below average range.

**In other words, 71% of students who rely solely on phonics fall short of the average.**

**11** students referred to visual memory (and/or phonics). Of these students, 6 students fell beneath the cohort average.

Putting sounds/ visual memory together, it means that out of 42 students 27 fall below the average. (64%)

**Only 17 students** referred to strategies beyond phonemic and sight word memory. (These students mentioned looking for spelling analogies, patterns, root words, generalisations). Of these, 15 beat the average, and 11 of these scored in the top 2% of the cohort in the PAT-R and SA testing.

In other words, there is a strong correlation between success in spelling and being able to use strategies beyond phonics and visual memory.

**Of the 32 students who were above the average, 22 use methods other than phonics. But only 12 in the cohort used more than phonic/ visual memory. 42% of these 12 used complex strategies.**

## Why I like Spelling (In their own words)...

*"That you spell to write"- Andy*

*"I like words that are long. I don't like words that are easy" -Michael*

*"You can write to your friends"- Dougal*

*"I like how I am challenged"- Oscar*

*"That you can communicate"- Alec*

*"The difficulty and the problem-solving" -Noah*

*"It means you can express yourself"- Isaac*

*"Finding new words for my stories"- Josh*



Students answered the question, "What do you most like about Spelling?" They weren't given any prompts or multiple choice. The overwhelming message from the boys was that they want it to be interesting, challenging and to equip them for their writing. It was interesting that less than 10% of students said that they most liked games. This reinforces the pedagogical view that students want their learning to be useful, helpful and contextualised.

Conversely, many disliked making errors (this would be negatively reinforced by weekly testing), being too easy and also disliked spelling being "slow" and repetitive.

### **Conclusion:**

The assumption that Spelling is an area of natural aptitude or purely about visual memory is debunked when you see the range of strategies being articulated by the very top spellers

The kind of learning the boys enjoy the most is the kind of learning that is best practice. Word origins, morphemic, orthography, extends knowledge and skills beyond purely phonemic approach. Phonemic is very important, but it should lead on quickly to syllables and then larger orthographic components.

Synonyms, antonyms, etc also extend student knowledge and word usage.

Overwhelmingly, the boys articulated a preference for the parts of spelling lessons

which promote an intrinsic love of words (word knowledge, difficulty, intrinsic enjoyment, (application to own writing). **Well over half the** students liked spelling for this reason (63%). Fewer students preferred the rote/ non-meaning related aspects (sounding) and even for games, which is surprising.

They did, however have a strong dislike against getting things 'wrong', which means weekly spelling testing would be a disincentive, whereas learning about words for their own sake is intrinsically motivating.

Also, a dislike of "tricks" in words, particularly for the students who rely on phonics alone, the 'silent letters' were an area of frustration.





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## Building Success: Building confidence

Students said:

*"At the start of the year, I could not spell difficult words or use complex vocabulary in writing but now I can."*

*"As I learned spelling, my teacher taught me more complex vocabulary in my writing."*

*"Over the year we have become better writers by practising spelling with [my teacher]"*

*"I have been a good speller throughout my life but I think year 6 has been a big step for my spelling."*



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## What we learned from the students this year

*“What do you like most or find most useful about Spelling?”*

- ▶ 43% - for writing (*2.5 times more than year 3*)
- ▶ 33%- for improved vocabulary (*half year 3*)
- ▶ 24%- seeing success

## What we learned from the students this year

- ▶ *All 3 of our classes demonstrated measurable improvements in standardised spelling over the year (PAT-R testing). Together, our classes achieved an above average stanine improvement.*
- ▶ *All 3 of our classes demonstrated measurable improvement in Spelling in their writing over the year (dictations; '15-minute writing samples' a 'Spell-it' writing analysis assessment)*
- ▶ *One teacher had highest improvement rate in their cohort; another of the teachers had second highest rate of improvement in their cohort.\**
- ▶ *More than 85% of students rely on a range of strategies. More than half use a 'meaning'-based strategy such as morphemes*

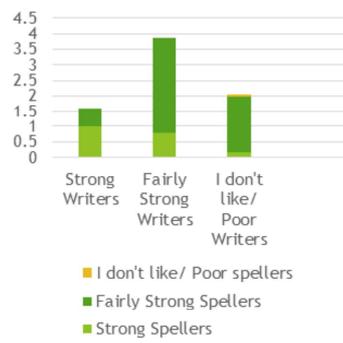
*\*Pat-R testing, compared to average stanine improvement*

## Strategies Students Use

### Range of Strategies

- ▶ 33% rely on morphemes to spell
- ▶ 27% on sounds/ THRASS
- ▶ 24% on visual memory
- ▶ 15% on syllables

Correlations to Confidence



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## The great value of peer mentoring and action research

- ▶ I am developing in my capacity as a teacher who can explicitly teach spelling strategies, including phonemic awareness and morphological knowledge. We have met regularly to discuss what has been successful in our own experiences and to share ideas which has also been beneficial to my professional development.
- ▶ Personally I have learnt to implement activities, on a daily basis, that are relevant to the context of our Inquiry and Literacy topics. This in turn has led to a real development in the quality of written responses I am reading from my students.
- ▶ Throughout the year I have been inspired to approach the teaching of language in more depth, with renewed enjoyment and greater awareness of what makes a successful literacy lesson or unit.
- ▶ I've been supported with really valuable current resources, ideas, feedback and discussion. It has been about a willingness to help children explore our language, make connections with their understanding, link in to authentic and meaningful texts and above all leave children with a lifelong love of the English language