

## Spelling: Simple as ABC?

### **Developing Whole School Approaches to differentiated spelling instruction to improve student spelling.**

Marianne Schubert

#### *Abstract*

*Nationally and globally, communities value spelling as a literate practice. In this trial project, four schools develop strategies for improving student spelling and increasing teacher knowledge of spelling. Teachers explored effective ways to assess, plan for and teach spelling to meet target the needs of individuals and groups within their class. All four schools were selected for a trial project based on their different community profiles. Each school had to have identified a need to improve spelling across their school through analysis of school data. To be part of the project, he schools also needed to have a leadership team including at least one administrator and one teaching staff member. Because of the differences in school factors, each leadership team approached the implementation process in different ways to suit their staff and student populations. The presentation at Australian Literacy Educators' Association 2009 National Conference and this paper briefly outline the processes and outcomes from these schools.*

## **Why spelling?**

Spelling has been a significant aspect of State and National Testing programs. The community, media and political parties highly value spelling as a key aspect of an educated society. Schools and teachers in Queensland are determined to improve the spelling results of the children in this state. Spelling has been identified by many schools as a significant aspect of National Literacy Tests that they wish to address.

## **Project Goals**

This project had two deceptively simple goals:

1. to increase teacher knowledge of spelling teaching
2. to improve student spelling outcomes.

Improving student spelling outcomes relied on increasing teacher knowledge about teaching and assessing spelling. In this project increasing teacher knowledge of spelling teaching meant increasing their understanding of:

- spelling knowledges (alphabetic, pattern and meaning)
- spelling development
- aspects of spelling and associated metalanguage
- analysis of spelling errors and item demand
- planning for differentiated spelling instruction based on assessed needs.

## **School selection**

Each of the schools approached to take part in the Spelling project, had analysed their school's systemic data and identified spelling as an area of need. Schools were selected to provide a cross section of the types of schools within Greater Brisbane Region. Schools selected for the project also needed an active literacy leadership team to manage and run the school processes after an initial input by the Regional Literacy Manager. The trial was undertaken with the intent of sharing the practices of the project schools with others in the region. By having four diverse schools managing the implementation of the project, we have developed four varied models for implementation. Schools can select the model that best suits their site and school community.

### **School A**

School A is located in a rapidly changing suburb in the outer areas of the region. This once rural area, 40 kilometres from Brisbane CBD, is now a booming urban area with housing mushrooming across the suburb. The school has grown from under 300 students to over 900 in five years. The rapid growth has also meant an ever growing and changing staff group. In a very short time the staff had changed from a small group of experienced teachers to the current diverse mix of experienced to first year teachers. The school engaged in this project to begin to develop a cohesive approach to spelling in the school. The administration team wanted to build teacher ownership in the process while collaboratively developing a whole school spelling program.

The Head of Curriculum in School A took a significant leadership role in the project supported by the two Deputies and the Principal. All teachers from Prep to Year 7 were expected to participate in the project. New staff were required to take on board the school's spelling processes and continue the work with their class including differentiated instruction and final assessments.

#### School B

School B is an established school, close to the Brisbane CBD. The population is mostly middle to high SES. Staffing is relatively stable with a high proportion of experienced teachers. This school was interested in developing a whole school approach to teaching spelling.

The Principal, Deputy and Head of Curriculum supported their Learning Support Teacher to implement the processes and assist teachers to manage the assessment and teaching required during the project. Several teachers at School A did not wish to proceed with the project requirements following the introductory session. Only teachers wishing to fully commit to the process participated in the project at this school. The project results appear to indicate that having only teachers who would commit to the assessment, planning for diverse groups and organising classroom strategies had a very positive effect on the overall class and school results at this site.

#### School C

School C is a purpose built Education Queensland P-12 College in an outer Brisbane suburb. The school has over 1000 students from Prep to year 12. In the early and middle phases of the school, students are organised in multi-age pods with several teachers responsible for the pod of children.

The project was supported by the Head of Curriculum who began management of the project. A teacher within the project group also took on a project leadership role throughout the year. The teachers in the project were drawn from the lower primary and middle primary groups. Staff participating in the project self nominated to trial the processes. Over time, other teaching teams saw the positive effect of the project work on student learning and began to use the assessment and teaching practices of the project group.

#### School D

School D is a well established school close to Brisbane CBD. The school draws from a wide range of SES groups with a significant number of students who have English as a Second Language. There are many experienced teachers on staff and few staff changes during the year. The school leadership team were looking for an approach to spelling that could cater for the diverse needs of the students attending the school. The school team had identified spelling as a significant area of concern following analysis of systemic testing data.

The Deputy of School D took a significant role in leading the project team. The Learning Support teacher and a year three teacher were part of an active project leadership team. At School D all teachers from years one to seven were required to participate in all aspects of the project.

## Project processes

1. School leaders met with the Regional Literacy Manager to discuss the anticipated outcomes of the project and the school responsibilities and tasks if they decided to participate. Each school started and finished the project at different times in the year. Each school participated for no more than nine months.
2. Before beginning the project, schools needed to make available *Spelling: Improving Student Learning Outcomes* CD (1999) and one copy of *Words Their Way* (2007) per year level. Before the first session, all participating teachers were required to read the *Words Their Way* (2007 or 2004) Chapter one (spelling knowledge and spelling developmental stages) and Chapter two (spelling assessment and administration instructions for a class spelling inventory).
3. School participants attended an introductory session to explore their current knowledge of spelling development and spelling item demand. The Spelling inventories in *Words their Way* (2004) were introduced and discussed. Teaching teams planned which inventory they would be using. Time was allocated for participants to ask the facilitator questions before administering the inventories with the children in their classrooms.
4. Participants needed to administer the *Words their Way* (2004) inventory appropriate for their class group. Teachers then had to analyse the results from their class to decide the current phase of development of each child. Preparatory year teachers were required to observe and analyse the writing samples of each child and decide on their phase of development. All teachers needed to record each student's phase of development on a class data sheet. The class data sheet identified fifteen phases from Early Emergent phase to Late Derivational phase as described in *Words their Way* (2004 and 2007). This recording sheet would provide the pre-project phase data. The class data sheet would also be used to plan student spelling groups for explicit teaching related to their identified spelling needs. The same class data sheet was also use to record post-project inventory data at the end of the year.
5. Another session was held at each school to ensure the pre-project data had been gathered by each participating teacher. A few teaching resources in *Words Their Way* (2004) and *Spelling: Improving Learning Outcomes* (2000) were shared to begin the process of planning for the different groups in each class group. An expectation of 10 minutes per day of explicit word study was explained. The 10 minutes sessions would target the developmental needs of each spelling group. From this point, each school determined the best way to support their teachers.
6. A final data collection session was held at each school to gather information about the progress of the students and evaluate the teachers' perceptions about the project.

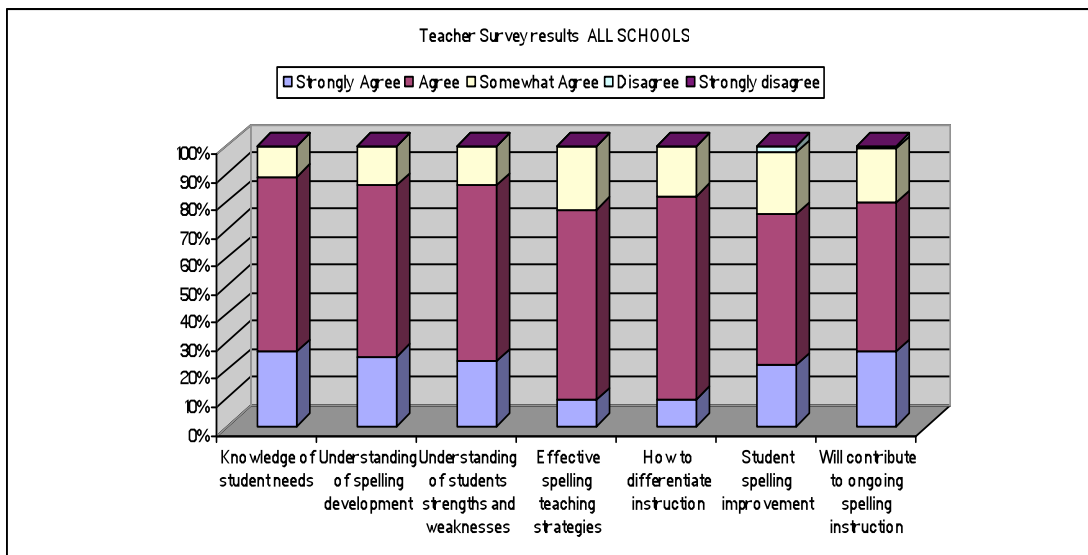
## Project Findings

Graphs presented in this article are a summary of the data gathered from all of the schools. Each school was provided with their own school data to allow for on-going conversations within their school context. There were some instances of significant difference between schools and between class groups. Some classes or cohort groups showed substantial improvement within the project timelines. Project leaders frequently identified pedagogy as a probable factor for significant growth and positive cohort data.

### Teacher evaluation data

Teachers rated their level of agreement, from strongly agree to strongly disagree, to the following statements:

1. Participation in this project increased my knowledge of my students' spelling knowledge and strategies.
2. Participation in this project increased my understanding of spelling development.
3. Participation in this project increased my understanding of my students' strengths and weaknesses in spelling.
4. Participation in this project increased my knowledge of effective spelling teaching strategies.
5. Participation in this project increased my understanding of how to differentiate spelling instruction.
6. Participation in this project demonstrated improvement in spelling outcomes by my students.
7. Participation in this project will contribute to my ongoing spelling teaching.



The graph shows a substantial acknowledgement of the positive influence the project has had on teacher knowledge.

### Improvement scale data

A pre- and post spelling assessment was administered with all students using the *Words Their Way (2004)* inventories. Teachers were required to identify the phase of development for each student on both assessments.

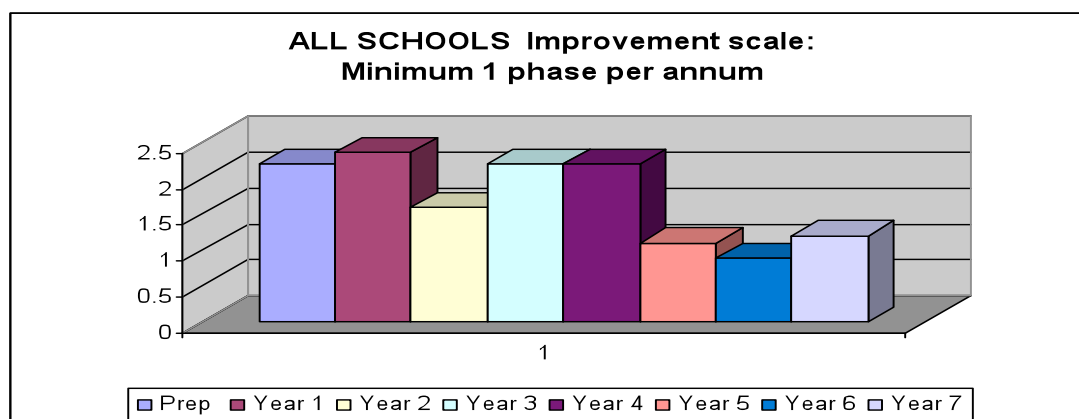
*Words Their Way (2004)* identifies five stages of development: Emergent, Letter Alphabetic, Within-word Pattern, Syllable/Affix and Derivational. Each of the stages has an Early, Middle and Late phase within the stage e.g. early emergent, middle emergent and late emergent.

Emergent			Letter Alphabetic			With-in Word			Syllable/ Affix			Derivational		
E	M	L	E	M	L	E	M	L	E	M	L	E	M	L

Thus, there are fifteen developmental gradients described. Using state testing expectations, it was estimated that by year nine students should be at late derivational phase. There are ten years of schooling from Prep to year nine in Queensland. Therefore a one to one and a half phase improvement would be an appropriate expectation for spelling improvement in a twelve month period. This improvement gradient appeared to be comparable with State testing frameworks described in the next section. Each school participated in the project for approximately nine months, so a one phase average improvement was decided as a reasonable improvement for the nine month period of the project.

Emergent			Letter Alphabetic			With-in Word			Syllable/ Affix			Derivational		
E	M	L	E	M	L	E	M	L	E	M	L	E	M	L
		Prep	Yr1	Yr2	Yr3	Yr4			Yr5	Yr6	Yr7	Yr8	Yr9	

The graph below shows the improvement of students in various year levels during the nine months of the project.



Most year levels achieved at least the one phase of improvement. The graph shows some improvements well in advance of one phase. This graph provides valid evidence of improvement in student spelling.

At school D one of the project leaders is a year three teacher. She worked very hard with her year level colleagues to ensure a strong program was in place. Their year level was rewarded with an improvement of nearly 3 phases. This was exceptional improvement and well above the results from the same year level in the other schools.

Another important piece of evidence from the school improvement scales came from the School B. School B provided data only from teachers who had committed to fully implementing the daily spelling instruction. The students at this school showed marked improvement above the norm in all year levels.

Another significant piece of data came from School D. The high English as a Second Language population of school D, also showed significant improvements during this project. This demonstrated that the explicit teaching appropriate to the learners needs apparently worked as well for ESL learners as for SAE speaking students.

#### Meeting expectations data

An expectations table was devised based on Queensland 2007 years 3, 5 and 7 Literacy Testing Program spelling marking guides. The prep, year one and two expectations were added through consultation with QSA Testing officers and over 100 early years teachers.

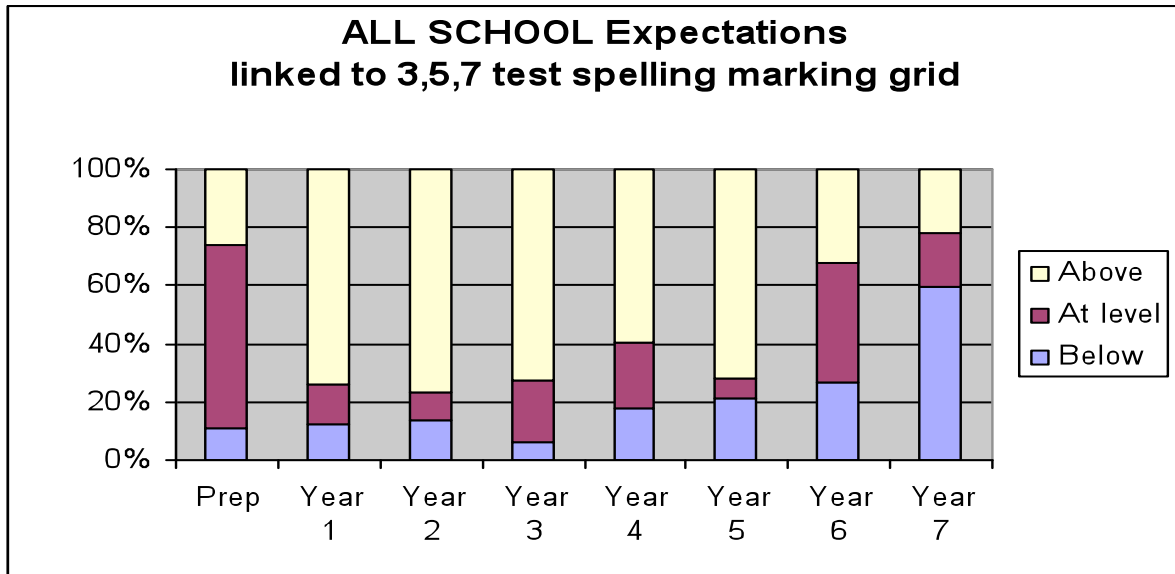
Prep	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Late Emergent Early Alphabetic	Middle Alphabetic	Late Alphabetic	Early and Middle Within word	Late Within word	Middle Syllable/ Affix	Late Syllable/ Affix	Early Derivation

#### Meeting Expectations

The Meeting Expectations graphs provided information a process to track student, class and school improvement. The data was used as a stimulus for significant discussions related to student spelling performance. The expectations were established from the QSA State Literacy Test spelling marking grid. The graphs show the percentage of students at, below or above the expected phase for their year level.

Each school had varied outcomes on this measure, however the lower year levels generally performed similarly across all schools. The year 3 results in one school were well above those in the others, making the overall data very positive for this year level. Class by class data in each school was also reasonably consistent in most schools. Where there was significant difference in class by class data, school leaders identified highly effective teachers as a likely reason for significantly better results than other classes.

While the overall data for the middle and upper primary years show a similar pattern there were significant differences in school performances in these year levels. The lower overall performance of upper primary students was of concern for each school with data submitted in these year levels. On-going monitoring and data collection may help explore the influences on the results from this project.



#### Other data

Project leaders met at the end of the projects to discuss the strength, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to continuing the work begin during the project.

#### Strengths

All schools indicated that the participating staff had developed a high level of professional dialogue and sharing related to spelling. There was a significant benefit in having a common language to talk about children's spelling. Teachers were more able to identify the demands of spelling assessments including NAPLAN test items. Teachers were keen to map growth of student learning.

#### Weaknesses

There was concern expressed about how to assist staff to differentiate spelling instruction. Some leaders were questioning the need for more than just the targeted spelling instruction for each group.

#### Opportunities

Each school identified the ways they intended to continue the processes begun during the project. These included development of a whole school spelling program. Sessions to be included in staff meetings to celebrate and share good ideas to continue effective practices.

#### Threats

The time taken to analyse the spelling inventories was the main concern for several teachers. In two schools a teacher or support person did the initial analysis of the inventories for many participating staff. This is not sustainable. Empowering teachers to analyse their own class data helps to understand each student's needs and strengths. The Fourth version of *Words Their Way* (2007) has a computer generated data collection program that may assist this process. Changing staffing is also a threat to success as it can alter the shared nature of the knowledge and processes being developed in the school.

### **Where to from here?**

Each school has continued working with the processes undertaken in this project. Refinement and revision of what else is needed to on improve the first year of implementation. The region has begun sharing the project processes and outcomes with schools and clusters. One of the school based project leaders is currently working with literacy leaders to share the positive outcomes of this project at a variety of professional learning forums.

Bear, D., Invernizzi, M., Templeton, S. and Johnson, F. (2004) *Words Their Way: Word Study for Phonics, Vocabulary, and Spelling Instruction, Third Edition*. Prentice Hall, New York.

Bear, D., Invernizzi, M., Templeton, S. and Johnson, F. (2007) *Words Their Way: Word Study for Phonics, Vocabulary, and Spelling Instruction, 4th Edition*. Prentice Hall, New York.

*QLD Spelling: Improving Learning Outcomes* (2000) Department of Education Queensland, Queensland Catholic Education Commission and The Association of Independent Schools of Queensland Inc, 2000);