

New Zealand Primary Principals' Sabbatical Award Report

Jo McKay - Holy Family Catholic School Wanaka - Term 2 2019

To engage in a balance of professional learning reflection and rejuvenation with the focus on: How do I, as a school leader, best provide specialist teaching and/or provisions for students identified with Specific Learning Disorders (SLDs) in our school?

Background

For a number of years we have provided various interventions and programmes across the school to assist our 'At Risk' learners in Literacy and Numeracy. These learners were identified in our annual data as those at risk of not meeting expectations against the New Zealand Curriculum. We did not have specific diagnostic data and evidence to give us adequate information on the needs of these learners. We just 'knew' they were struggling but not 'why'.

These additional support programmes, such as, but not limited to; Reading Recovery, Steps, HPP, and traditional teacher aide support time in classrooms was used to assist with their implementation and was funded by our Board of Trustees in the hope that such interventions would make a difference to these learners across the school. As the school leader, I knew we had to do more, we could no longer wait for them to fail, we could not allow ourselves to take a chance with these learners and to guess at

what was going on for them. We needed to be explicit, direct and intentional in all aspects of their learning. We needed to be questioning; what was it that we wanted to do to ensure the provisions we were providing were adequate, purposeful, and made a difference to the achievement of our learners? We needed to ensure we were getting 'bang for our buck' and, if not, stop doing some of these things and look at alternative provisions to ensure that we are making a difference.

"Reading scientists now know that children simply *do not* learn to read by memorising whole words or guessing words from pictures, context and/or first letters. Children who seem to be doing this are actually taking the words apart and figuring out how the sounds and letters work, something many children can't do without explicit and direct instruction. Sounding out right through words should simply *not* be reserved as a strategy of last resort, as Reading Recovery's Dame Marie Clay recommended." (Clarke, 2019).

Our strategic plan consultation with our community at the end of 2017 for 2018 - 2020 provided us with the confirmation that, as a school, we would remain focused on providing high quality education for all of our learners. From this consultation we developed a Strategic Initiative based on the goal: 'A Responsive Curriculum, Effective Teaching and Opportunity to Learn' *Students learn, achieve and progress in the breadth and depth of the New Zealand Curriculum (ERO Evaluation Indicators, 2016)*

The Initiative for 2019 is: **Develop learning environments which are responsive to the needs of students at Holy Family Catholic School**, both in physical and academic environments.

We had started this journey in 2017 with the implementation of a one day programme called "Ignition". This programme is over and above what was already happening in classrooms for some of our learners

and is explicitly for our students who identify as Gifted and/or Talented. This provides us with an avenue to work alongside these students to really unpack and understand what their learning needs are and provide them with the opportunity to grow and develop with like minded students at a deeper level. What was interesting was that a number of these students were also presenting as Twice - Exceptional. This meant that a number of them had specific learning difficulties that needed addressing to be better able to fully access the curriculum in all areas.

This highlighted the need for us to investigate effective assessments to enable effective teaching strategies for students who present with an SLD such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, executive function issues etc.

From here, we moved our focus back to our learners who we knew were struggling in Literacy. As part of our professional development plan for 2019, we engaged the services of Carla McNeil from Learning Matters Ltd. to work with our staff in changing pedagogy and practice in the area of spelling across the school. Over time, we have observed from our achievement data, teacher inquiries and professional learning discussions that our students were not able to transfer spelling, which may have been taught in isolation, into their independent writing. This discovery has led us into looking at, and learning more about the links between spelling, reading and writing. We believe that a structured literacy approach will make the biggest difference. Increasing and monitoring pedagogy and practice in this area will enable us to take our students through the learning process of isolation - application - transference. (McNeil, 2018)

Purpose

The Ministry of Education teacher resource : *About Dyslexia, December 2008* states that “early identification in literacy difficulties, such as dyslexia, is critical because literacy is the foundation of much learning, in particular, academic learning. With early identification, young children can be supported to participate fully at school.” Early identification was the purpose of our next step.

We wanted to be able to identify and examine a screening tool for all our students on entry to school. This would enable us to know, from the outset, the strengths and weaknesses of every learner. We did not want to continue to wait until cracks started to appear down the track. To be honest, a wait to fail approach had been how it was for too long. We didn't have the professional capability as teachers to know and identify these areas. This is not something a teacher is trained to know; this is usually in the domain of specialist trained educators. For too long, the only children overcoming dyslexia were the ones who are born into families that have the resources to address the gap in their education, by working around the school system. The institutional failures we deal with today start in the teacher training programmes. This is something that needs addressing at policy level in this country.

In an ideal world, every child with signs of dyslexia would receive the gold standard of dyslexia diagnostic testing: one on one assessment from a highly trained diagnostics professional. Unfortunately, in the world we live in, relatively few have access to such care. Full assessments typically costs hundreds of dollars, and skilled professionals are usually based in the large centres throughout the country, often with waiting lists months long making them inaccessible to so many.

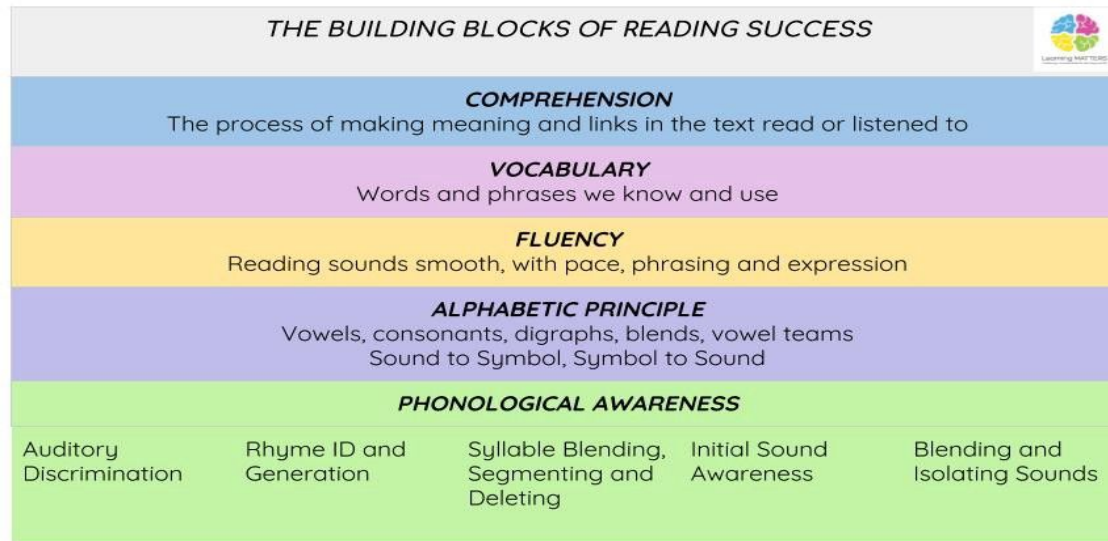
We can do better. We have to do better for the children who have no alternative.

The Ministry's handbooks *Effective Literacy Practice in Years 1-4* and *Effective Literacy Practice in Years 5-8* describe literacy acquisition and development as having three aspects: learning the code, making meaning and thinking critically. Learning the code is the aspect that appears to be most challenging for people who are dyslexic. In early years, this might be seen as a lack of phonological awareness.

This year our ultimate goal is to upskill our teachers to have a deeper and more complex knowledge of the teaching of phonological awareness and alphabetic principle, to be confident in knowing our learners on arrival and showing the progress of achievement through a model of direct instruction.

Professional Activity and Findings

The first step in our process has been determining our professional development and learning needs as staff and as a school team. We had to unpack the following chart provided by Carla McNeil from Learning Matters Ltd. and ensure this was sound for all teachers.



As mentioned, literacy acquisition and development has three aspects: learning the code, making meaning and thinking critically. Learning the code is critical for learners; it refers to the ability to decode and encode written forms of language. In order to learn the code, students must develop phonological awareness (the ability to become aware of the sounds (Phonemes) within spoken words) and an understanding of the alphabetic principle. Phonological awareness is essential for discovering the connections between sounds and letters and, therefore, for literacy development.

Research has shown that learning to spell and learning to read rely on much of the same underlying knowledge - such as the relationships between letters and sounds - and, not surprisingly, that spelling instruction can be designed to help children better understand that key knowledge, resulting in better reading (Moats, 2006).

Catherine Snow et al. (2005, p.86) summarised the real importance of spelling for reading as follows: "Spelling and reading build and rely on the same mental representation of a word. Knowing the spelling of a word makes the representation of it sturdy and accessible for fluent reading."

Alphabetic principle includes learning the names of the letters of the alphabet as well as understanding the following key concepts:

- We use letters to record sounds
- There are different ways to write sounds
- We can use more than one letter to write a sound.

Students with poor phonological awareness will probably not be able to make these discoveries for themselves and will need considerable support to use the alphabetic principle. Some students may be unable to link letter sounds they are trying to write or move past names when reading.

Historically we have assessed students for fluency and comprehension in reading therefore, those are the areas that we have specially focused our teaching around. Before the professional learning with Carla McNeil from Learning Matters Ltd. our teachers haven't *consistently* had shared knowledge, understandings and practice abilities in the two main areas that sit below fluency: phonological

awareness and the alphabetic principle. This has been a primary focus of our professional development to date.

Current research indicates phonological awareness is one of the biggest predictors of literacy success. Further to that, the teaching of the alphabetic principle, otherwise known as phonics, is crucial in building reading fluency (McNeil, 2019).

Once reading fluency is developed and students have less of a cognitive load (in terms of their reading abilities) we will get into higher levels of appropriate material that will enable us to further develop their vocabulary and lead into deeper comprehension/deeper learning.

We have now implemented an assessment tool provided by Learning Matters Ltd. to identify our students' diagnostic needs in all areas of phonological awareness. As a result of this and our critical analysis, our classroom teachers are honing those elements of phonological awareness to ensure our students have the necessary foundation skills to continue to move through the curriculum from a literacy perspective.

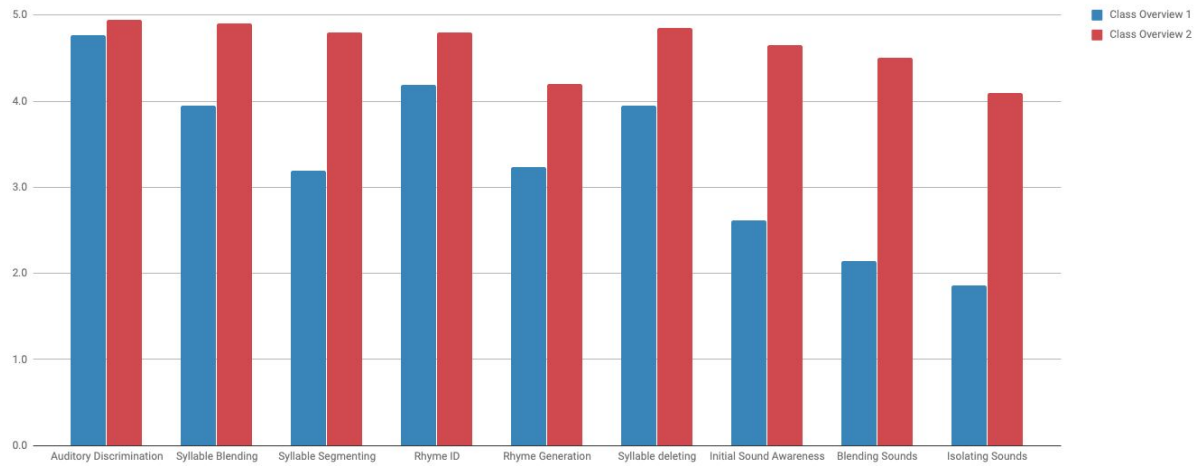
We have also implemented assessment tools in the area of alphabetic principle and our teachers are implementing direct teaching instruction around spelling to ensure that our children are able to reach into those higher-end areas of fluency, vocabulary and comprehension.

At this point in the year we have gathered qualitative information around teacher confidence and knowledge and student confidence and knowledge in terms of our professional learning.

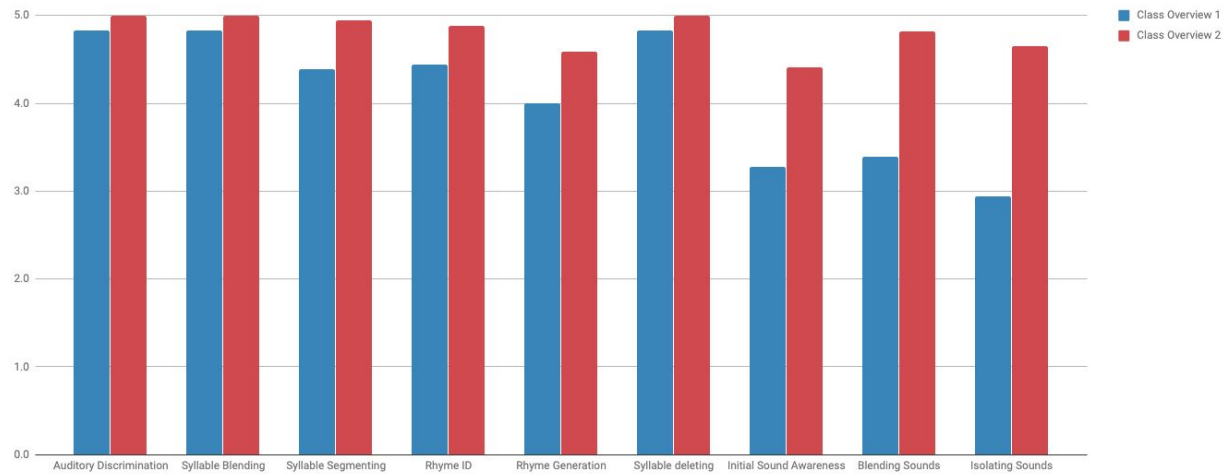
The quantitative data we have collected shows evidence of student gains in phonological awareness and the alphabetic principle in the first 6 months of this year.

Phonological Awareness February and June Data

Year 1-2 Tier 3 students LSSA

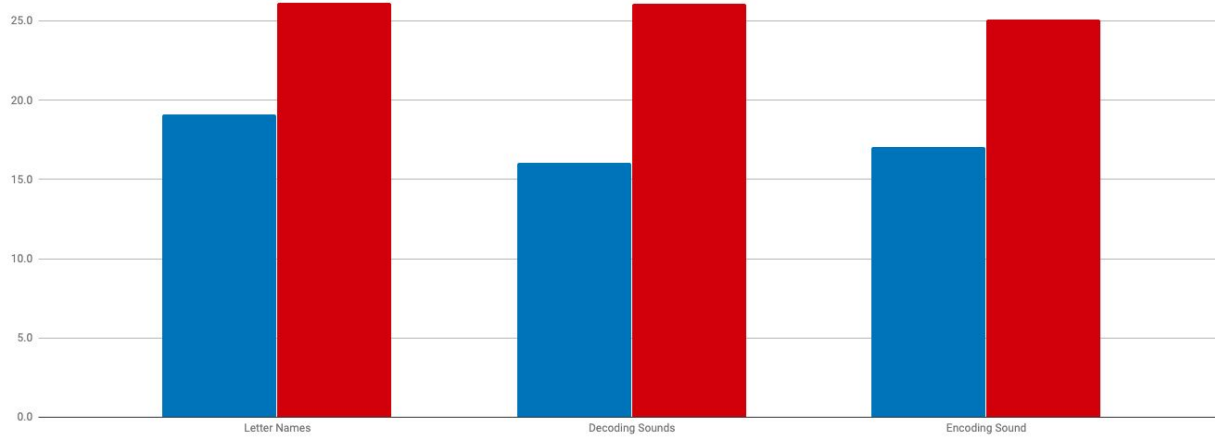


Year 3 & 4 Tier 3 students LSSA

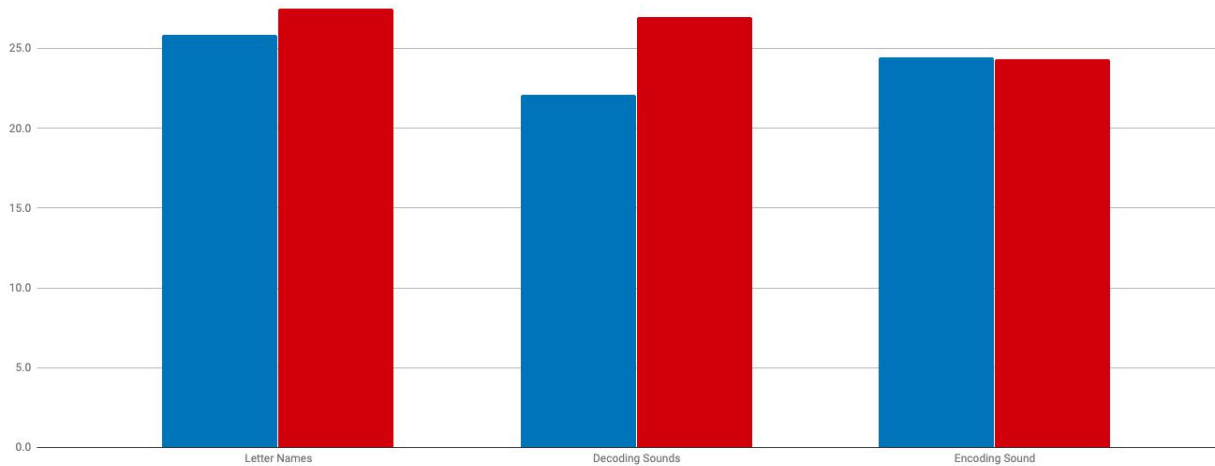


Sound to Symbol Association February and June Data

Year 1-2 Tier 3 students LSSA

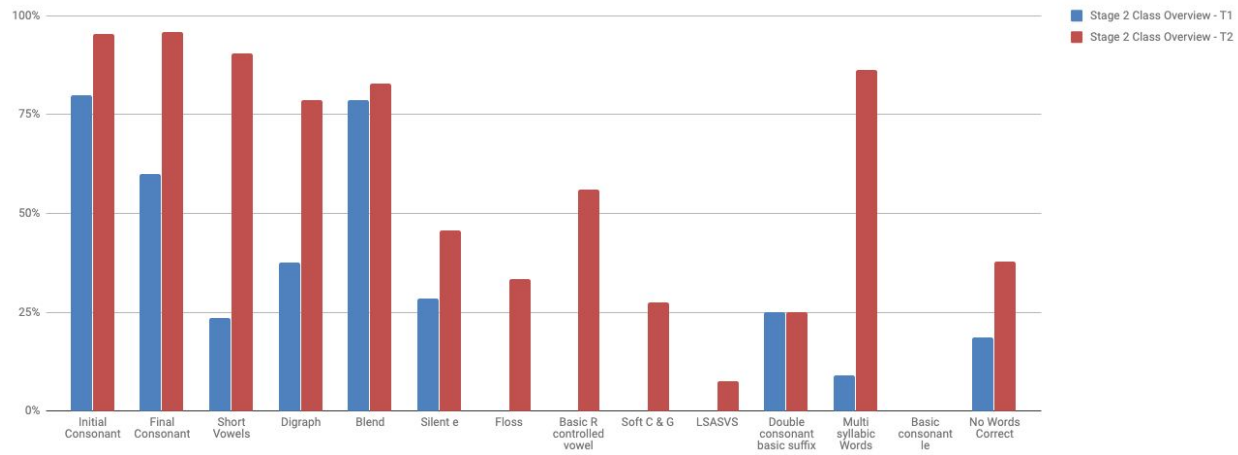


Year 3-4 Tier 3 students LSSA
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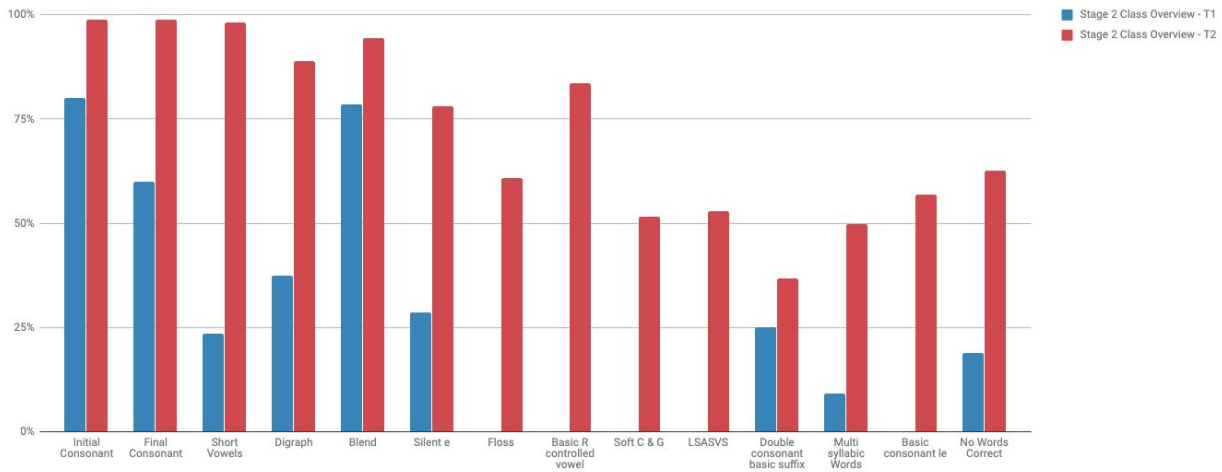


Spelling Concepts February and June Data.

Year 3 & 4 Tier 3 students Stage 2



Year 5-8 Tier 3 students Stage 2



We hypothesise that, as a result of the implementation of this professional learning, going into 2020 and 2021 we will see a significant increase in student achievement in our reading data and our writing data particularly around fluency and comprehension.

Teacher voice collected in the first six months using the assessment tool tells us:

- Broadened teacher knowledge of spelling rules and patterns.
- Consistent approach to spelling has given teachers the confidence to teach spelling everyday to maintain progress.
- Teachers have confidence in their approach because the assessment tool provides clear next steps.
- This is a structured and disciplined approach to stick to, **and the** children have to be disciplined too.
- Consistent approach across the school has been vital.
- Teachers are more confident because they like having a set order of steps for content and a scope and sequence for the delivery of spelling.
- Cumulative approach ensures that students are getting the right knowledge at the right time.
- Teachers like the fact that:
 - This is a no frills approach to teaching spelling.
 - There is not a lot of extra resources needed.
 - Phonological awareness knowledge and skills are being covered again and again.
- Teachers received positive feedback from Carla - model school, high achievers.
- A teacher who lacked confidence in the teaching of spelling has a changed mindset and a new found knowledge of the structure of language and how to teach this effectively to students.
- Teachers have improved their approach to direct instruction as a teaching strategy.

Teachers' perspective on their students' confidence and knowledge:

- Students are making significant progress in their phonological awareness.
- Teachers are impressed by how many children included spelling and strategies in their student voice reflection for the mid year report.
- Students are beginning to use some of the tools and strategies independently e.g. students sampling around the edge of their book by writing a word three different ways to see what looks right.
- Beginning to see transference of knowledge and skills across other subjects e.g. reading and writing.
- Tier 3 (priority) students are having a double hit of spelling and are feeling so much more confident as the interventions follow on behind the class programme content.
- Running records (reading test) have been done for the mid year reports and students have done much better than teachers thought they would, even with not as much time spent on traditional reading texts.

Student voice collected around confidence and knowledge (Years 5, 7 & 8 students) for the first six months tells us:

- I am way more confident, I used to think that all the easy words were hard and now I can spell all of them by using my tool hand.
- I like spelling because you can do fun words and play games and write silly sentences.
- I feel more confident spelling words and I will just try again by listening to the word and using my tool hand.
- I'm confident because I now have a good way to do it.

- Year 5 - We can now spell these words: characteristics, panther, citizenship, smother, productive.
- My attitude is better because before I didn't really understand and now I like it.
- Spelling has helped my attitude because working in a group is easier.
- All students think that the spelling lessons have helped them improve.
- Some felt that initially they needed help to revise the basics, but they are now wondering if they no longer require extra help.
- Things that helped students were breaking words into syllables, knowing the short vowel sounds, using their tool hand and how to conduct syllables.
- Knowing some of the spelling rules have helped.

Reimagining Specific Learning Difficulties through inclusive pedagogies and practice within the school setting has been a vital step for us to ensure success in what we are doing. We were looking at the current interventions within our school and noticing that we had a large number of students being removed from the school to attend private tutors to support the child's learning. This often challenges the school with a number of issues such as: attendance, communication, assessment, provision issues, intervention and support. One of our next steps will be to get alongside the private tutors in our community and share with them what our practice is, our expectations for them working with our children and develop a relationship whereby it is us who is referring students to them for additional intervention that complements the work we are doing in our school.

"For those struggling to keep pace with literacy, the curriculum and learning content can quickly become inaccessible. Intensive targeted teaching known as "intervention" or more positively known as 'learning support' is required to address literacy skills." (Marland, 2018).

Our school motto is 'Faith, Family, Future' and we work hard to foster a culture of 'belonging', which stems from being a member of a Family. This culture extends beyond the students to the teachers, the student teachers, the new teachers, the school families and the community. We have a clear vision that *all* the teachers have responsibility for *all* the students and this is something we are proud of and work hard to foster at all times.

Inclusive pedagogy and best practice literacy teaching promotes equitable outcomes. Inclusive pedagogical practices is concerned with empowerment, learning potential and skills development. Pro Learners are entitled to have meaningful and empowering educational experiences and learning, while also offering opportunities for learning support (Hall, 1997; MacDonald, 2009).

Early intervention is crucial to the long term preservation of the PURPOSE we have for our learners. We will do this by raising awareness of the needs of these learners, ensuring best practice literacy teaching that promotes equitable outcomes and ensuring our inclusive pedagogical practices is concerned with empowerment, learning potential and skills development and, most importantly, ensuring our teachers have true empathy-developing understanding leads to true acceptance (McNeil, 2019).

At Holy Family our spelling approach now follows the principles of structured literacy. It is diagnostic, explicit, systematic and structured school wide. This is the beginning of an exciting journey.

Conclusion

As with all initiatives, we are constantly reviewing and tweaking how things are done. We need to continue to be more strategic, cohesive, and really foster rich community engagement. As this sabbatical has progressed it became evident there were multiple threads that needed to be explored; an important one being to focus the engagement of our whanau. We still need to share what we are doing, share our new screening data, celebrate the successes and upskill our parents to assist in reinforcing learning at home. We need to remain focussed on this being a sustained change in practice that is embedded throughout the school to really reap the benefits down the track.

The purpose of this sabbatical was to look at the additional provisions that we as a school could provide to assure our stakeholders that we are fully responsive to the needs of our students' academic environments, through what we provide. I feel we are making great gains in our ability to do this and have a strong belief in the need for schools across the country to have diagnostic evidence, explicit, systematic and structured programmes for all learners. Our policy makers at national level need to step up and provide schools across the country with a screening tool to provide consistent and reliable information to assist us in working with priority learners and reduce our increasing under achievement 'tail' in our country.

Our strong strategic direction and focus on the development of teacher capability and capacity has helped us form a solid shared understanding to build on and we will continue to refine and work hard to ensure the provisions and intervention supports are structured, evidence based, explicit and systematic.

Acknowledgements

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- The Ministry of Education and the Study Award programme for allowing me to have the time to reflect and refresh over term 2 2019.
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- The amazing teaching and support staff at Holy Family who do a great job everyday, but especially in my absence, to ensure the best possible outcomes for our learners.
- The school leaders and professionals who shared their insights, best practice and incredible expertise with our team, especially Carla McNeil from Learning Matters Ltd. who assisted us on this journey.

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