

***“To investigate the use, capacity and infrastructure of schools’ spelling curriculum plans as inherent in the development of literacy” .***

***Purpose:*** *To reach some conclusion about the status and relevance of spelling in current literacy programmes as compared to traditional methods .*

### ***Executive Summary***

*Keith Williamson, principal of Clifton Terrace school, Nelson, secured one of the Primary Principals’ Sabbatical Awards for 2007 . This was taken up during Term II.*

*The proposal was to visit up to 40 schools in an area from the Hutt Valley to as far south as Invercargill . Set questions were to be asked of the literacy leader and/or including the principal .*

### ***Background***

*After working in an office from age 15 years , then Teachers’ College, apart from a year as Probationary Assistant in 1964, all teaching roles were as senior teacher equivalent or higher, in all types of schools from primary, full-primary, intermediate and an area school , then principal for 34+ years. Universities have had sabbatical leave seemingly forever for all levels of staff. Other countries have had access for all teachers from ECE to tertiary . As my mother used to say about Lotto, “If you’re not in, you can’t win !” Having had only 6 days sick leave in 46 years I decided to apply for a sabbatical to achieve a worthwhile break and to pursue an interest in what appeared to be an area being overlooked in schools.*

*With the inept introduction of Graves’ work\* in the early 1980’s, and since then, I have held concerns for where literacy and spelling especially were heading .  
( \*Graves’ work was fine. It was the lack of support from the then Department of Education with guidance in terms of professional development that was the concern . Teachers were expected to implement the principles, but there was no training offered ! Yet, the expectation was there that the programme should be happening . It didn’t ! )*

*Only in recent years have I seen evidence of successful writing. This was with the support of excellent local advisors in literacy. However, during my travels I did see the best, the*

*most complete, and successful English programme of my teaching career. Wendy Bamford and her team at Wanaka School have the place buzzing with language using Kate Lloyd's "Sounds Alive" and "Words Alive".*

*Schools will not be identified other than the very positive one above.*

*40 schools received a request letter for me to visit*

*18 schools were visited*

*11 did not reply with any acknowledgement*

*8 replied saying, "We don't have a spelling programme."*

*3 responded indicating that they were "rejigging" their English ( and spelling ) plan .*

*18 schools were visited within these regions ; The Hutt Valley, Christchurch, Timaru, Oamaru, Dunedin, Invercargill, Central Otago and of course, Nelson ! Time was spent on professional reading, but the lack of depth in research was disappointing . My first visit in Christchurch was a bad start for me. It was pouring with rain. Not being comfortable with my sense of direction, I set out an hour early . Despite that, I was very late after realising the main south road at Lincoln was past where I was meant to be heading ! That lead-on to being late at my second school too. What a start ! Expenses were restricted to actual petrol costs only (not PSA rates ).*

*Outcomes of this sabbatical will be shared with the host schools and published as per expectations of the award conditions. Clifton Terrace School will benefit significantly as a result of the experience .*

### **GENERAL REPORT**

***The opinions and observations expressed in this report are the writer's and do not involve any other professional or Board of Trustees' input .***

### **Questions and Responses :**

- 1. Do you have a school-wide spelling programme ?  
The majority answered in the affirmative, adding that the varied levels of the school had different programmes .  
Many had used spelling as achievement targets for 2006 / 2007 .*

2. *Is spelling in your school a separate strand ?*  
**The majority of schools indicated it was a separate strand.**  
**Most had separate programmes of Word Study and these were based on texts such as :**  
**The revised Schonnell; Joy Allcock ; Letterland ; “Jolly Phonics” .**
3. *What philosophical stance does your school have towards spelling as a separate entity ?*  
**27 % indicated that spelling was not truly separate and was focal to not only the writing programme but also integral to reading . Word lists were popular with most schools, but the sourcing of these varied from individual children’s written work, to word lists such as “The Essential Word List”, “Families of Words from Schonnell” etc.**
4. *Is spelling embedded in writing or done separately ?*  
**The schools which had evidence, from multiple measures, (of success in spelling) had significant emphasis on timetabled Word Study .**
5. *Where do you rank spelling as a part-curriculum focus ?*  
**83% of schools ranked spelling as a very high priority, stand-alone subject area.**
6. *Why do you have a separate spelling programme ?*
- \* **We want children’s spelling to improve and believe that to be the way!**
  - \* **It enables children to see and understand patterns.**
  - \* **Children can focus on lessons in word structure.**
  - \* **Good spelling enhances quality communication.**
  - \* **It meets parents’ expectations / requirements .**
  - \* **Messages are more easily understood .**
  - \* **Spelling is an essential tool of literacy .**
  - \* **Where would any other “laissez-faire” attitude lead ?**
7. *How does your spelling programme meet children’s needs / assess children’s needs / meet their requirements ?*
- \* **We develop a solid basic sight vocabulary .**
  - \* **Our recent evaluation has lead to a major review.**
  - \* **Essential spelling skills ARE essential spelling skills !**
  - \* **Our spelling programme is reviewed every two years .**
  - \* **Children are tested in a formal setting at least twice per annum as well as ongoing impressions informed from writing, folios, etc.**

- \* **Term tests on “levels” ... Revised Arvidson / Allcock’s, etc.**
- \* **Our syndicates complete regular rubrics .**
- \* **Grouping in spelling, in any class, is essential .**
- \* **We have a sound homework programme, prepared in conjunction with parent consultation, and have “Goal Cards”.**
- \* **Overall, tests were common : Pretos; De’Ath; Allcock; and two schools’ own updated versions of Arvidson.**

8. *Do different levels of the school ( junior, etc.) have different programmes ?*

<b>Different</b>	<b>Same basic principles</b>	<b>Two levels</b>	<b>All Joy Allcock</b>
<b>62%</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>6%</b>

9. *How do teachers plan for spelling ?*

<b>A school long-term planning expectation</b>	<b>A daily planning diary</b>	<b>Tracking sheet</b>	<b>Teacher’s own decision</b>
<b>33%</b>	<b>45%</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>11%</b>

10. *Has your school ever evaluated the effectiveness of the school*

<i>programme ?</i>	
<b>Regular evaluation :</b>	<b>( Every two years ) 56%</b>
<b>When relevant :</b>	<b>11%</b>
<b>As part of our English reviews :</b>	<b>22 %</b>
<b>Never :</b>	<b>11%</b>

11. *Does your school follow a commercially-produced programme ?*

* <b>Spelling Under Scrutiny ( Joy Allcock )</b>	<b>34%</b>
* <b>Schonnell : ( Revised / updated version :</b>	<b>18%</b>
* <b>Amalgam of best practice :</b>	<b>12%</b>
* <b>Arvidson ( Revised ) :</b>	<b>12%</b>
* <b>Jolly Phonics ( Junior school )</b>	<b>6%</b>
* <b>Spell Write :</b>	<b>6%</b>
* <b>No :</b>	<b>6%</b>
* <b>‘Spelling Alive’ / ‘Words Alive’ :</b>	<b>6%</b>
* <b>‘You Can Spell’</b>	<b>6%</b>

12. *How do you guide teachers in your school as to what are appropriate*

skills they need to be teaching children about word-form and language ?

- \* **No guidance :** 18%
- \* **Programme / Long-term Plan :** 43%
- \* **Advisor for P.D. session :** 6%
- \* **Left to syndicate leaders :** 11%
- \* **“Spelling Under Scrutiny” ( Text) :** 16%
- \* **Work backwards from assessment outcomes :** 6%

13. How much time do the different levels of the school devote to spelling programmes , per day ?

<b>Junior</b>	<b>Middle</b>	<b>Senior</b>
<b>20 minutes</b>	<b>10 - 15 minutes</b>	<b>15 - 20 minutes</b>
	<b>83%</b>	<b>83%</b>

**No time : 17%**

14. Do children have lists of words ? Do they learn these ?

Are they tested ? How are they tested ?

Is there evidence to show this accumulated knowledge translates into daily writing ?

- \* **Lists of words :** 89%
- \* **Learn these :** 89%
- \* **Tested by teacher :** 66%      **Tested by a ‘buddy’ :** 23%
- \* **Not tested :** 11%

**Lists of words are group-based .**

## **EVIDENCE**

**This was the hardest question for the respondents to answer.**

- \* **Very hard to determine :** 6%
- \* **Comparison of learned words with daily writing :** 6%
- \* **Ongoing cumulative impressions :** 56%  
( This included folio evidence and book evidence )
- \* **Nothing with integrity . Presumption only :** 33%

\* **“ The evidence varies according to the child !”**

15. *Is there a difference between spelling and word study ?*

\* **Yes : 56% \* No : 22% \* Cross-linked : 22%**

16. *Is there a consistent approach to teaching spelling across*

*your school ?*

\* **Yes : 78% \* No : 22%**

17. *Have you modified your approach in the past few years and, if*

*so :*

(i) *What problem were you trying to fix ?*

**17 % Nothing wrong**  
**6% Crowded curriculum**  
**11% Regular review**  
**11% The need for modification**  
**28% To improve writing**

(ii) *What evidence did you base this on ?*

**22% Achievement data**  
**50% Ongoing cumulative impressions**  
**17% No evidence**  
**11% Planning**

(iii) *What about the particular programme, that you use, led*

*you to believe it would suit your needs ?*

**28% “Spelling Under Scrutiny” ( Feedback / logic )**  
**17% Sequential development / skills-based**  
**17% Staff had ‘ownership’**  
**( Only rote-learning prior to change )**

(iv) *How do you measure the success of your spelling programme ?*

*i.e. in specific testing or in analysis of pupil writing .*

**22% Regular analytical review / rubrics**  
**22% Ongoing cumulative impressions**  
**22% Testing / Multiple measures**  
**22% Cumulative records ( Folios, etc. )**  
**12% Nothing**

18. *Assuming a school didn't have a formal spelling programme :*

*Would children learn to spell ?*

**Yes : 48%**

**No : 52%**

19. *Do you think we learn to spell in the same way we learn to read ?*

**Yes : 58%**

**No : 31%**

**“Partly” : 11%**

**“Need phoneme awareness.”**

**“More complicated process.”**

**“Encoding.”**

20. *Is there more to spelling than learning lists of words ?*

**Yes : 94%**

**No : 6%**

21. *Should spelling be taught ?*

**Yes : 94%**

**No : 6%**

**“ A disservice not to !”**

22. *Does correct spelling really matter ?*

**Yes : 100%**

23. *What is the role of ‘text-type’ spelling ?*

**23%      *An appropriate genre for the appropriate environment.***

**17%      *A “fun” spelling activity.  
Relevant to purpose.  
Convenience; economy of time and scale.***

**17%      *No place in schools .  
Unsure.  
It's O.K. !  
A different ‘register’ dependent on who you're talking to !***

## **IMPLICATIONS**

- \* ***A number of schools did not have any spelling identified and / or a separate strand in their School's English Plan for the subject of spelling as a separate entity .***
- \* ***Schools should give recognition to spelling as a subject profile.***
- \* ***The Ministry of Education's curriculum unit should be alerted to this oversight / downgrading of spelling as an important stand-alone subject within the English curriculum.***
- \* ***There is sound evidence that those schools with solid and very regular spelling programmes also have very high levels of success indicators for achievement in writing outcomes .***
- \* ***The spelling skills developed, with a solid understanding of word structure, provide an important baseline for life-long learning .***
- \* ***An important generalisation was staff belief/ staff ownership of a school spelling plan. Its implementation is primary to success .***
- \* ***Schools which did not have any spelling-focussed programme, let alone as a separate strand, were unable to link outcomes to their writing programme .***
- \* ***Spelling is deemed important by most schools .***
- \* ***Traditional pedagogy and methodology are making a resurgence in the teaching of spelling .***
- \* ***Different designs of programme are required for different levels of the school.***
- \* ***Schools need a system which will assist teachers to plan, prepare and assess for an effective spelling programme of teaching and learning.***
- \* ***Spelling programmes require adaptation to provide success for all pupils.***
- \* ***A spelling programme should identify individual pupil's needs and enable feedback to pupils for maintenance and consolidation .***



- \* ***Spelling is the excellent base-line for excellent writing outcomes .***
- \* ***Daily word-study should be an expectation.  
( 4 days out of 5 in any given week . )***
- \* ***ONE SCHOOL WAS HAVING OUTSTANDING SUCCESS WITH DAILY  
( 4 week-days out-o-five ) DICTATION !***
- \* ***Though not always norm-referenced, there are a variety of very good tests available .***
- \* ***Successful spelling programmes have high parent involvement to assist learning ; homework, ‘buddy-testing’ , parental oversight, peer-oversight, and intrinsic motivation.***
- \* ***Grouping within classes for spelling is essential .***
- \* ***Some schools use a device called a “Spell Master” to enhance spelling.***
- \* ***Thesauruses are common in more senior classes .***

## **CONCLUSIONS**

- 1. That high calibre, systematic spelling programmes assist in, and promote , high quality outcomes for children’s writing .**
- 2. Spelling is most valuable as a separate strand in terms of regular structured lessons, leading on to the transdisciplinary aspects of and integration with writing.**
- 3. In schools with buoyant writing programmes, there is an impression that there is a movement towards more traditional, but up-dated, methodologies . e.g. Schonell**

4. **The ultimate evidence and indicators of successful teaching and learning in spelling, and the outcomes in writing, are assessed by teachers' "ongoing cumulative impressions" .**
5. **Successful schools, in terms of writing, have school-wide spelling programmes, with variations for the applicable levels of the school.**
6. **Successful schools have harnessed parental underpinning of learning and for the reinforcement of spelling lists / words .**

### **References**

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