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The Key Elements Of A Good Spelling Programme

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In 1997, with help from members of the Scottish Support for Learning Association (SSLA), I visited the Highlands and the Orkneys to present a series of lectures about the THRASS (Teaching Handwriting Reading And Spelling Skills) phonics programme, as it was then, and to do some demonstration lessons in mainstream and special schools. Today, the much improved THRASS programme is used in thousands of schools worldwide and, this year alone, Australian teachers will attend over four-hundred days of training - for a programme that first began life nearly twenty years ago! Last year, 2003, East Dunbartonshire classteachers, support teachers and classroom assistants became the first in Scotland to do the two days of accredited training, prior to implementing the programme in some of their schools.

In May 2004, the SSLA was represented at one of the two-day courses in East Dunbartonshire, which was attended by nearly fifty delegates (including those working with children that have a speech or language difficulty or a sensory difficulty, such as deafness). During the course, it was suggested that I might like to outline what I consider to be the key elements of a good spelling programme. So here goes:

I think that there are ten key elements in the whole-school implementation of a good spelling programme:

Firstly, spelling is only one of the skills in a school's literacy programme – alongside the skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing. Therefore, spelling should not be taught in isolation but embedded in early years activities that promote good speaking and listening skills – which form the foundation for good reading and writing skills later on. Ideally, this should involve the use of drama, based on reactions to pictures in the school's spelling

programme and the pictures in books, magazines and newspapers – along with experiencing the real thing in the environment! Manipulating picturecards, or pointing at pictures on a wallchart, to create compound words (e.g. light and house to create lighthouse) phrases (e.g. "Birds lay eggs"), sentences (e.g. "The bird, rabbit, cat, kitten, duck, dog, fish and dolphin are all animals"), stories (e.g. "The gate was stuck so the queen had to climb up a ladder and then step on to a chair before she could have a cup of coffee in the school") and arranging the picturecards in categories (or by pointing consecutively underneath pictures on a wallchart), such as "Animals" or "Things you can eat", also develops concentration, memory and intellect.

Secondly, written English is not a one-letter-makes-one-sound system so the units of the spelling programme should not be artificial 'letter-sounds' (so widely taught throughout the world) but the forty-four speech sounds (phonemes) of spoken English and the one-hundred-and-twenty keygraphemes (spelling-choices) of written English. From the very start of the literacy process young children are exposed to letters that "Come out of the changing room (the alphabet) on to the pitch as two-ers (digraphs), three-ers (trigraphs) and four-ers (quadgraphs or quads) or as one-ers (graphs) – and they can all represent different sounds!". For example, in the word 'my', as in "my mummy", "my daddy", "my teacher" and "my school", the letter 'y', a graph, has nothing to do with the sound heard at the start of "yes", "yellow" and "yacht" and in the words be, he, she and we the letter 'e' has nothing to do with the sound heard at the start of "egg", "elephant" and "exit". If the units of the spelling programme are 'letter-sounds', and children are able to read such words as 'my' and 'she', reading and spelling will be seen as unrelated activities because saying 'the' sounds will not create the words.

Thirdly, the twenty-six English lower-case letters have substitutes called capitals. Therefore, lower-case letters and capitals should always be identified by name – as is expected of good spellers, whether they be children or adults. That is, spelling is naming letters (the players that have come on to the pitch) in sequential order, visualised from left to right. Sometimes these letters may be capitals (having been sent on to the pitch from the subs' bench), to stand at the beginning of a sequence of lower-case letters or even to replace them all (e.g. Scotland and/or SCOTLAND). If one was to use the Shift Key on a computer keyboard, to use only capital letters to retype an account of an event, this would not change the sounds used in the words. The capitals are merely substitutes for the lower-case letters. Far too many children, worldwide, including in Scotland, think that capital letters are new graphemes (spelling choices) for phonemes (sounds) they have not been taught by their teachers e.g. spelling wait or weight as wAt, meet as mEt, right as rIt, yellow as yellO and farm as fRm. One thing is for sure, in terms of the prerequisites for good spelling, these spellings indicate that poor phonemic segmentation (the inability to hear the separate sounds) is not the problem!

Fourthly, from the outset natural links should be made between the forty-four phonemes and their graphemes by drawing attention to words commonly found in the environment. For example, the vowel digraph 'e' 'a' at the end of 'sea', 'tea' and 'pea' represents a different phoneme to that heard in the middle of 'bread', 'head' and 'dead' and also to that heard in the middle of 'great', 'break' and 'steak'. The search for natural links should also be extended to the names of people, places and products e.g. the same phoneme represented by the capital letters at the start of Jillian and Gillian, the different phonemes represented by the lower-case letter 't' (sometimes with an 'h') in Perth, Thurso and Montrose, and the different phonemes represented by the graphs 'o' and 'a' and the digraph 'o' 'a' in Scott's Porage Oats, respectively).

Fifthly, the spelling programme should not depend on children having to ignore the misleading advice that, when spelling, each sound has a specific lower-case letter – along with having to ignore any associated physical

actions, alliterative characters (such as "Alan Ant") and/or explanations (such as letters being 'silent', 'magic', 'soft', 'tricky' or 'irregular'). That is, there is no need for any 'Changeover Teaching', to help children change from artificial 'letter-sounds' to natural phonemes, or the unlearning of inappropriate behaviours or thinking. For example, there are twenty, not five, vowel phonemes in English. So what is the purpose of teaching children that there are only five vowels in English? If these children remain phoneme-deprived, their spelling skills will be limited - as they will not have access to the graphemes for these phonemes (that is, they will also be grapheme-deprived).

Sixthly, the spelling programme should be taught with continual reference to pictures, letters, keywords, phoneme-boxes (sound-boxes) and/or keygraphemes displayed on class and/or individual 'whole-picture' charts. Children, as was stated by the famous psychologist Jean Piaget, are constructivists – travellers trying to make sense of the world. The continual reference to 'whole-picture' charts helps children to make sense of the spelling process and does much to reduce or remove the feeling of 'learned helplessness' displayed by children confused by 'letter-sounds', that frequently leads to poor social behaviour, low self-esteem and academic depression.

Seventhly, the spelling programme should teach the skills in phases, using a staged interactive progression – which should be assessed by criterion-referenced tests (tests with observable standards of achievement). In some ways saying "She can't spell" or "His spelling is not so good", as many of us have done in the past, is analogous to taking a car to a garage only to be told, when you return at the end of the day, that it doesn't work. We know it doesn't work, what we want to know is which are the parts that need to be replaced or fixed. Similarly, we need to have evidence of the spelling skills that are in place, and working well, and those that are not! Ideally, these skills should be assessed by teachers and, where possible, independently by computer, and recorded on a profilecard.

Eighthly, the spelling programme should be cross-curricular. From the outset, phoneme-

grapheme comparisons should be made between words from different subject areas. For example, the 'g' at the start of the keyword 'giant' can be related to gel, gem, gender, gene, general, genesis, genital, gent, geranium, germ, Germany, gestation, gin, ginger, ginseng, gipsy, giraffe, gym, gypsum and gyroscope, to name but a few – which may all be spelt with a 'j' if the speller only makes analogy to the keyword 'jam'!

Ninthly, the spelling programme should teach lifelong word solving skills (phonographic metacognition) – all the more so if each of the children's teachers continue to refer to the same 'whole-picture' display of pictures, keywords and keygraphemes and uses the same terminology (e.g. phoneme, grapheme, graph, digraph, trigraph and quad).

Tenthly, the spelling programme should be able to be taught to children of all ages and abilities. Take, for example, the school's spelling procedure. Some teachers recommend that children use a 'Look, Cover, Write, Check' or 'Look, Say, Cover, Write, Check' procedure to learn the spellings of words. The problem with these procedures is that they do not require the child to identify each letter by name. Most dictionary definitions of the word 'spell' include some reference to "naming the letters in the correct order" so a school's spelling programme should encourage children to "name the letters in the correct order" (aloud or sub-vocally). For example, the THRASS Spelling Procedure is 'Say, NAME, Cover, Write, Check'.

SAY: Say the word.

NAME: Name the letters.

COVER: Cover the word.

WRITE: Write the word.

CHECK: Check the letters.

In the NAME stage, it is not necessary to name all the letters if a child is already able to visualise some of the letters. Children should only name the letters that they need to concentrate on/visualise - this will be all the more memorable if they overwrite (trace over) the letter or letters in the word, perhaps written in a personal spelling log or dictionary. Groups or classes should be encouraged to discuss which graphemes, or sequences of letters, need to be visualised e.g. the 'a' in was (a

graph), the 'a' 'i' in said (a digraph), the 'q' 'u' 'e' in mosque (a trigraph), the 'e' 'i' 'g' 'h' in weight (a quad) and the 'd' 'n' 'e' 's' in Wednesday (an NPS - a sequence of letters that are "Not Playing Sensibly" - the four letters do not represent only one phoneme). Children should be asked "Which letters do you think we need to concentrate on/visualise?" This procedure should be extended to teachers correcting spellings by underlining the grapheme, or letter string, that is wrong and then writing the correct grapheme, or letter string, above the incorrect letters. This would indicate to the child the part of the word that was wrong (and by deduction, the part of the word that was right) and when the word is written in a personal spelling log or dictionary, the actual letters that need to be overwritten (in order to develop accurate visualisation of the whole word).

In summary, children should be taught to understand that, at the phonics level, the process of spelling involves 'changing phonemes to graphemes' (that is, "Spelling is segmenting phonemes") and the process of reading involves 'changing graphemes to phonemes' (that is, "Reading is blending phonemes"). The children should be taught to understand that these two processes can be applied to both known and unknown words (especially the names of people, places, products and cross-curricular words). They should be taught that spelling errors are largely due to "Right phoneme but the wrong grapheme" (that is, the right sound but the wrong spelling choice) and reading errors are largely due to "Right grapheme but the wrong phoneme" (that is, the right spelling choice but the wrong sound). Whether a child writes a 'Wrong-Grapheme Word' or reads a 'Wrong-Phoneme Word' they should be encouraged to trace over (overwrite) the right grapheme on a class chart and/or an individual chart and name the right letter or letters (for a spelling error) or pronounce the right phoneme (for a reading error) - with the aim of being able to, in the future, visualise the right grapheme, or pronounce the right phoneme, with increased confidence that the word "Looks right!" or "Sounds right!", respectively.

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