2013 National Partnerships: Literacy pedagogy

Focus: Extending student’s reflective and critical thinking skills in spelling and reading

Late in 2012, when reviewing data gathered during a range of literacy assessment including the 2012 NAPLAN, the leadership of our school noted areas of concern in students’ spelling and reading results. Whilst the information provided was limited due to the very small cohorts involved, the results showed a trend of limited improvement in the area of spelling and, to a lesser extent, reading. This was borne out in previous discussions with staff who felt our students were underperforming and were quite passive in the learning process and did not display reflective and critical thinking skills.

In creating our 2013 annual School Improvement Plan (ASIP), we decided a particular focus was needed in these areas and devised potential strategies to be implemented during the 2013 year. The process began with an audit of the existing Literacy and Spelling policies and resources. We compared the policy to the reality of what was occurring in the school and revised the policy and/or our procedures to reflect what we felt was more contemporary in regard to pedagogy.

As this process was occurring we were invited to participate in the National Partnerships Literacy Pedagogy professional development and felt this was a great opportunity to develop a small team of teachers who would be exposed to current thinking in the area of Literacy pedagogy with a view to this team trialing ideas/resources etc. and ultimately reporting to the staff about what learnings they had achieved.

Our ultimate goal was to facilitate the students in practising “authorship” in their writing, that is, we wanted our students to be reflective and actively involved in the writing process, particularly in spelling. We wanted our students to have a “tool belt” of strategies and the capacity to select the appropriate “tool for the job’ when reading and writing. This goal fitted under the overall school goal; students will become active, engaged and reflective learners.

Having attended the first two days of professional learning, we quickly decided that our focus on spelling skills was quite limiting. We could see that many of the concepts and skills we were being exposed to in regard to reading and writing could be easily transferred to the process of spelling. We revised our goal and looked for ways to help students transfer their skills in reading to spelling.

Our planning and teaching of literacy became a more “organic” process whereby we planned for explicit learning of skills but then “diarised” the many layers of learning that evolved from these experiences; one class in particular developed an inquiry approach to literacy where the teacher facilitated learning from points of need as they arose within each lesson, rather than from activities planned a week ahead. Separate reading and writing sessions gave way to a multi-layered approach to literacy; writing often became a response to written and digital texts and spelling foci became a more individual process-more a response to spelling errors within writing or an interest in particular words than a list of spelling words proposed for a particular grade level.
The National Partnerships professional learning, both the formal days and the school visits by the facilitator, Ellen Hauser, were very thought provoking and empowering. A brief list of some the strategies we implemented as a result are listed below:

- Developing consistent vocabulary across the school in regard to reading and spelling skills
- Implementation of staff learning walks to observe and analyse the learning environments across the school
- Modelling sessions and sharing of ideas etc. with other interested staff
- Provision and sharing of appropriate professional readings to all teachers
- Providing information to parents in the newsletter, information letters home and school displays
- Purchasing resources to aid individualized learning: whiteboards, magnetic letters, games etc.
- Provision and timetabling of I-pads and appropriate apps
- Provision of “Reading eggs’ program for all junior school students
- Withdrawal of all spelling texts from year 2-6 in 2013
- Timetabling specific PLT time for discussion of children at risk reading and spelling (both low and high achieving)
- Ensuring a word/spelling and reading focus activity was part of the ‘Home learning” grid
- The importance of handwriting became a particular focus after in-school staff professional learning session regarding its effect on reading and spelling ability and the detrimental effect of poor handwriting on spelling and reading development

Results:

Each of the three teachers involved in the focus group selected students whom they would track. All teachers reported that anecdotal observations showed a significant increase in critical and reflective behaviours (independent use of have-a-go pads, class charts/word lists, dictionaries etc.) and reading behaviours including decoding skills, fluency and comprehension and interest in reading (borrowing books form the library, discussing texts, reading ‘take-home’ books regularly etc.) showed good, and in some cases excellent, improvement. Results on formal spelling tests were generally pleasing with most students improving beyond expected gains but there were some students still critically at risk.

Future plans:

We have plans to once again audit our Literacy and spelling program and policies and revisit our ASIP to identify the next steps needed in this process. We have implemented additional assessments to assist in the diagnosis of deficits and high ability students and we will timetable regular professional development time to learn how to interpret and plan from data sources. PLT time will be used to “workshop” particular students or groups of students. Additional learning walks will be scheduled to critically observe the learning environments across the school. Spelling texts will be removed from the Foundation and grade one classes. Foundation class teachers (and possibly aides) will attend professional development days on Phonemic awareness and this program will be implemented in Term 1 of 2014. New staff will be mentored regarding the developments made in 2013.