How good a spell a re ya?

I watched the penultimate (spelt P E N U L T I M A T E) episode of the Great Australian Spelling Bee last night where pint size young students make many of us adults feel inadequate as they spell such words as ‘oscilloscope’ and ‘imperturbable’. It has taken off as a prime time television event and has been rating very high. When I checked on their Facebook page, they had over 11,000 likes. Chrissy Swan, one of the compères said, “I’m proud of it,” she says, “because it’s about intelligence and these kids have never been the star before. Often they’re the forgotten kids because they’re not winning races and all that sort of business. I’m really happy for them that they get the spotlight shone on them and I’m really happy for kids at home that they see that being clever is really cool.”

The ability to spell accurately is an important skill - even in the time of computerised spell checkers. Spelling and literacy are the cornerstone of education. If a learner cannot successfully spell words then they are less likely to succeed at formal learning. The NAPLAN results were recently released and I am pleased to say that at All Saints’ our Year 9 students average was upper Band 8 (the national average was on the border between 7 and 8) while in Year 7 our average was lower Band 8 (national average was lower Band 7). How do we improve on this? How is spelling taught?

No longer do teachers teach spelling by giving students a list on Monday and a test on Friday with practice in between. This type of drill and practice has earned traditional spelling instruction a reputation for being boring. That there is no big picture and no ultimate goal makes it all the more tedious. As soon as one spelling list is tested, another list takes its place. Now there is an alternative to traditional spelling instruction called “Word Study,” which is not based on the random memorisation of words. A word study programme is a cohesive approach that addresses word recognition, vocabulary, and phonics. As well as spelling, word study provides students with opportunities to investigate and understand the patterns in words.

Knowledge of these patterns means that students needn’t learn to spell one word at a time. Word study is also designed to build word knowledge that can be applied to both reading and spelling. Because it is closely tied to reading instruction, it also develops students’ abilities in phonics, word recognition, and vocabulary. Perhaps you may have missed it but August 31st to September 6th was National Literacy and Numeracy Week. Parents and carers can have a big impact on their children’s education. Over 40 years of research from around the world shows that when parents are involved in their child’s learning, it really can have a positive impact. You are the first and most important influence on your child’s values and attitudes toward school and learning. Creating a home environment that encourages a love of learning from an early age can help your child to do better at school.

How can parents help?

• Even if you don’t know a lot about what your child is learning in high school, try to continue helping them with homework. Look through the reading materials together, ask your child to show you their plan for getting an assignment done, their ideas and the timing involved, and ask what references the teacher expects. Just being there, expressing an interest and saying you want to help can make your child feel supported - even if you can’t help with the subject matter itself.

• Try to continue to read to, and with your child, and introduce more challenging books, articles or journals - you can try looking through the newspaper together or researching information on a topic of interest online.

• Talk about the things you read and watch together, e.g. “This article claims that … what do you think?” “That movie was interesting - what do you think it was about?”

• Let your child see you reading, researching, writing and viewing different materials: newspapers, emails, cookbooks, labels, instructions, signs, films, documentaries and websites.

At the very least see if you can out-spell them in the grand finale of the Great Spelling Bee Competition.

Mr Stewart Ross

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