

Jolimont Primary School: Breaking words down, building minds up

Identifying a lack of quality spelling programs for upper primary school students, Jolimont Primary looked to the past to build a new literacy framework



Shannon Meyerkort 1 week ago

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What is old becomes new again. Australian singer-songwriter Peter Allen sang about it in the 1970s. Mark Twain wrote about it in the late 1800s, and before that, it's referenced in the bible: "There is nothing new under the sun."

So, it should not come as a surprise that the solution to a current literacy problem might be found in ancient languages. More specifically, the shortfall of today's spelling programs can be rectified by understanding the morphology and etymology—or basis—of words.

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Jolimont Primary School Principal Barbra Iffla

In 2023, Barbara Iffla, Principal of [Jolimont Primary School](#), an independent school of around 420 students in the western suburbs of Perth, hosted a whole school professional development day on the Science of Reading. Running the sessions was Mandy Nayton, CEO of [Dyslexia-Speld Foundation \(DSF\)](#) Literacy and Clinical Services in Western Australia.

"During the event, staff interrogated Mandy about a different type of senior spelling program. They wanted something different to the more boring traditional programs, and explained their motivation and desire to find something new and engaging," explained Ms Iffla. "Mandy suggested that over the next year, we work with DSF to trial and provide feedback on the new morphology program they were designing called Word Origins."

With over thirty different nationalities at the school, Jolimont has always been committed to fostering an inclusive environment that values diversity. Staff are trained in several English as a second language strategies, and there have been specialist small group intervention classes for early years literacy learning for many years.

Yet, like in many primary settings across the country, while there are numerous high-quality phonics programs for the early years of primary education—where students are taught the relationship between phonemes and graphemes—staff realised that by the time students reached upper primary, there were few quality spelling programs that consolidated and then continued understanding the code.

"There wasn't a specific problem as such, as student achievement was either at or above similar socioeconomic schools. However, several staff wondered if a more holistic approach to word formation and morphology might be more impactful and fun" explained Associate Principal Rebecca Hartman. "There are many highly structured spelling programs for older children, but we were after a program which was motivating and engaging, not the run of the mill 'open your books to page five'...type of experience."

Piloting a new program

Being chosen to pilot the senior spelling program with a team of DSF literary specialists meant staff at Jolimont Primary collaborated in providing feedback on the program and training. Staff were also filmed for the Department's Centre of Excellence, sharing their innovative practices with teachers statewide, and presenting a Jolimont perspective at the DSF Conference. It wasn't the first time the school had been involved in high level learning, having been a Teacher Development School between 2016 and 2021 in the areas of maths, early childhood and HASS.

Early literacy had always been a strong focus of the school, with even the P&C playing a significant role by funding new resources to support phonics. But Ms Iffla knew it was important to find an equally impactful program for the upper primary students, thus leading to the partnership with DSF to trial the new Word Origins program.

"It's not enough to just practise spelling words and look them up in the dictionary," said Ms Nayton who has been involved in the field of literacy acquisition, instruction, and research for more than 30 years. "We know from the research available that in order to spell and use a word well, we need to know it at a deep level, across multiple layers. This is known as lexical quality, and it's evident that the better we know a word, the more likely it is that we will say it correctly, remember how to spell it and what it means, and use it confidently in our speech and writing.

"English is sometimes referred to as a promiscuous language as we have happily 'taken' words from all over the world, adopting the spelling patterns of the original language. This makes spelling even more complex. There are currently thought to be over 350 written languages incorporated into English as we know it today," Ms Nayton said.

Fortunately, over 60 percent of the words that students encounter in mid and upper primary are either Latin or Greek in origin. Both of these languages are regular, and hundreds of words can be built from one Latin root or base.

The pilot program at Jolimont was highly successful with positive feedback from both staff and students. "It has been amazing to partner to develop this program, and we are absolutely delighted with the result," said Ms Hartman. "The real surprise has been for us how much our students have taken to morphology like ducks to water, over 'traditional' spelling programs."



Image supplied by Jolimont Primary School

How Word Origins is different

Ms Iffla believes that for senior students, understanding the building blocks of words—known as morphemes—is just as important as learning phonics is for juniors. Knowing morphemes makes it easier for students to recognise, understand and spell related words.

Ms Nayton added: "Knowing the meaning of the words they are reading helps students to develop both phonic knowledge and fluency at a faster rate, and this knowledge of word meanings (the semantic value of a word) continues to play an essential role beyond phonics."

While Word Origins was initially designed as a whole class, Tier 1 program for students in Years 3 through 6, it can be adapted for use as an intervention program for older, struggling students. The resources have been carefully designed to ensure they are suitable for older students who have gaps in their knowledge of orthography, morphology, etymology and vocabulary.

Ms Hartman said she can see that the program is working. "The results across the board are most impressive, as students with a Specific Learning Disorder (SLD) diagnosis have made as much progress as their classmates."

Principal Iffla reiterated this, and highlighted students' enthusiasm for Word Origins. "The students have been highly engaged and motivated and found the program to be fun yet challenging. It's been wonderful to see their level of engagement and achievement level improve as their ability to build and understand complex morphology

grows. We even had a student decorate his bike using morphology for the Ride to School Day.”

Some root word examples:

Latin:

Aqua (water)—aqueduct, aquatic, aquarium

Scribe/script (write)—prescribe, describe, manuscript, inscribe

Greek:

Bio (life)—biography, biology, biodegradable

Chrono (time)—chronological, synchronise, chronic



Image supplied by Jolimont Primary School

Teacher perspective

While there are existing resources that highlight the importance of teaching the multiple layers of language, few offer a structured, step-by-step guide on how to effectively introduce these concepts. Even fewer provide daily lesson plans, instructional routines, and clear guidance for educators.

Word Origins was designed to fill this gap, offering educators a structured, systematic, and explicit approach to spelling and vocabulary instruction. At the same time, it prioritises engaging activities that keep students interested and motivated throughout the learning process.

Ms Iffla explained: "The teachers have thoroughly enjoyed the learning journey, collaborating with each other and DSF staff. They have found joy in watching the students have fun and understand morphology and word origins.

"While it's important to have a strong, motivated staff who are keen for change...the support from DSF, training and new resources have been fantastic, enabling a smooth transition and quick implementation of the program."

A new spelling era

Ms Nayton said that students have really enjoyed discovering the historical explanations that underlie English spelling.

"It's like being a detective— students are discovering clues that will help them to unlock the mysteries of the English language. The feedback from both students and teachers has been very positive. For example, one Year 6 student said: "I love morphology, and I feel super smart learning Latin and Anglo-Saxon roots!" while another student said: "I think learning about morphemes is a much more fun way to learn spelling than how we were before."

By tapping into the rich history of language, students and teachers can uncover the stories behind words. As evidenced at Jolimont Primary, Stories are a powerful tool for learning because they engage emotions, enhance memory and make complex ideas relatable. Word Origins harnesses the power of stories to transform the way students learn, remember... and spell.