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Reflecting on my introduction to SWI

Middle School Teacher, Literacy Lead

Calgary Girls' School

The teaching of spelling has always been a frustrating part of my job as a teacher. I have spent time working within different programs that encourage learners to follow a set of rules (that often have exceptions), sound words out, and memorize letter combinations. I have never felt like I was doing a good job of helping the learners in my classroom fully understand how words are formed and why they are structured in the way that they are. I suppose I have felt this way because I haven't had a full understanding.

Last June, I participated in a week of professional development with Pete at The Nueva School in San Mateo, California. During this week, I came to better understand that I can work with learners and help them come to understand the structure of words in a way that is ground in scientific inquiry, in a way that is exciting and makes sense and in a way that does not trick them. I knew before the week was over that this learning was so important for the entire staff at my school to take part in.

In October, Pete came and spent 3 days at the Calgary Girls' School and the learning that staff and students experienced was amazing. Speaking on a personal level, I can say that as a result of these two learning opportunities I have had to dig deeply into SWI, my practice has shifted. In my classroom learners are encouraged to investigate words and test their own hypotheses. We spend time together applying our understanding of the structure of words and using that understanding to form a more solid understanding of the content that we are learning. The understanding of the curricular concepts we are inquiring into is so much stronger because we are making deeply rooted connections between important words in multiple subjects. I am finding the learners in my classroom are growing in their capacity to understand the structure of words and find patterns among words. Their spelling is improving as a result because they are no longer guessing. Their writing is becoming stronger because their vocabulary is growing and they are excited about using the new words in their vocabulary.

Our school values inquiry based learning that allows learners to extend their understanding beyond just the walls of their classrooms. This approach to understanding words fits so perfectly with our ways of thinking and being. I am so excited about the fact that I finally have the tools in my toolbox to help the learners I work with form an understanding of the writing system through inquiry, to better understand the writing system and to understand that spelling is ground in meaning.