

Vanessa Androutsopoulou's development work  
**Personalising the learning of spelling at the  
elementary school**  
within Athens College, Athens, Greece

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Vanessa was a 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher at the elementary school which is part of the prestigious Athens College run by the Hellenic American Educational Foundation.

Vanessa participated in a programme based on the principles of teacher leadership. At the beginning of the programme she had articulated her core values as follows:

...to help students participate more and enjoy the learning process. They must feel confident about themselves and believe that they can manage their difficulties. I would like my students to be independent learners, researchers, open-minded thinkers, knowledgeable and caring.

She identified a very down-to-earth problem – that many of her students were struggling with learning how to spell correctly – but approached it with clarity about her professional values and a sophisticated view of the goals of education.

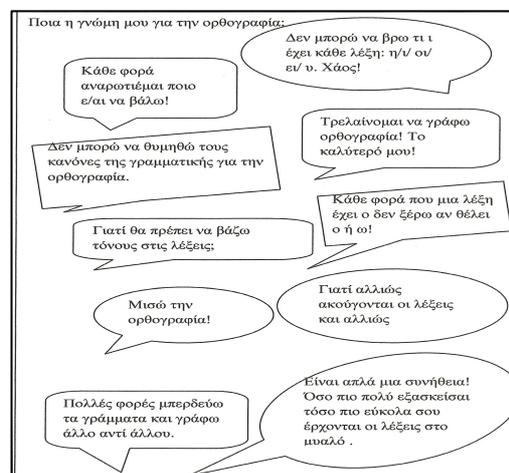
For many Greek teachers, the teaching of spelling follows a very prescriptive pattern. For example, students receive a list of 15-20 spellings to be learned on a Monday. A number of whole class strategies are used to support students in learning how to spell these words, such as crossword puzzles and repeated copying of the words. Students are then tested on their ability to spell these words on Friday. It was clear to Vanessa however, that whole-class strategies were ineffective because students do not all start from the same position and they learn in different ways. She decided that she would need to develop differentiated approaches to supporting her students' learning with regard to spelling.

Vanessa first turned to the literature to look for alternative methods of supporting the learning of spelling. She found the available research-based material daunting at first, but overcame this and began to enjoy the breadth of ideas which her reading was offering

her. She was particularly engaged by those studies which offered suggestions for practical classroom strategies (e.g. Keller, 2002; McMurray, 2006). She also found useful some research on the impact of differentiation (Tomlinson, 2001). Some of her reading challenged Vanessa's long-held assumptions, but she endeavoured to keep an open mind.

Vanessa became increasingly committed to the idea that a new approach was needed; one which takes due account of the differing needs of individual students. She emailed the other 4<sup>th</sup> grade teachers and set out her view of the problem; she invited them to meet with her after school to discuss it. At the meeting she proposed a collaborative approach. Following a good discussion about the potential benefits and obstacles, colleagues readily agreed to work with Vanessa to re-design the approach to teaching spelling to students in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

Meetings with colleagues were arranged on a regular basis under the banner of 'Differentiated Spelling Instruction'. The first task was to develop an action plan. The first stage of the plan was really diagnostic; they needed to determine the areas in which students were proficient and those in which they required additional support. Vanessa proposed that all 4th grade teachers use a common activity to teach spelling that would enable them to discuss the students' responses and engagement with the activity. The activity included a strategy for getting feedback by asking students to write comments in speech bubbles which were then projected onto the Interactive Whiteboard.



Another diagnostic tool involved a work sheet which featured the 'Thermo-evaluator' (MacCabe and Horsley, 2008). The students had to place a variety of words at the right place on the thermometer to indicate the level of difficulty.

Having undertaken this mapping exercise, the team developed new strategies for learning spelling, including differentiated spelling lists for students, rather than asking all students to learn the same words. They also developed particular strategies for those students who found spelling most challenging. These included using spelling partners who worked together to determine which strategies were most useful in learning new spellings. They engaged in peer-assessment by exchanging their notebooks and correcting each other's spellings.

One of the most successful strategies that Vanessa tried involved enabling her students to help create a digital dictionary in the form of a Wiki. Each student identified a letter and then a number of words that began with this letter. They searched for explanations and definitions for each of their chosen words and then drew illustrations to go with each one. All of this material was assembled on the Wiki so that the students could add to or correct each others' work. The final product was then shared with other 4<sup>th</sup> grade classes. Vanessa's students led the presentation which included advice about how to avoid spelling mistakes. The other students posed questions and joined in the discussion.

Vanessa and her colleagues trialled the new approaches and developed their own strategies to suit their particular students. However, they continued to meet to evaluate progress and often worked collaboratively on developing new ways forward. During these weekly meetings, they reviewed student progress and shared what they were learning from the project. They agreed to share accountability for key decisions and outcomes, whether positive or negative. The teachers found this collaborative approach very supportive and, through it, they gained the confidence to experiment and to challenge deeply-ingrained practices.

At one of their team meetings Vanessa and her colleagues evaluated the effectiveness of these new approaches. Students' scores on spelling tests had improved dramatically. Moreover, the teachers observed that the new activities both challenged and motivated students, providing opportunities for the development of alternative

strategies to underpin success. Vanessa and her colleagues concluded that the differentiated spelling programme allowed for differences in students' readiness to learn and was thus far more successful in scaffolding learning.

Clearly the main point of Vanessa's project was to improve students' spelling, but there were wider aims and some benefits that she hadn't predicted. She had wanted to disrupt her students' complacency through her own innovation. By taking risks herself she wanted to support her students in developing their risk-taking capacity. She had asked for the collaboration of her fellow 4<sup>th</sup> grade teachers because she wanted to improve the standard of spelling as a whole, but the effect of this was to build a much more collaborative professional culture in which colleagues developed the confidence to innovate and improve their practice. It was also notable that the students benefitted through the modelling of effective collaboration.

## References

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