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What you could say when you're asked...

Why don't you give children spelling tests or lists of words to learn?

- What I've noticed – and what the research says too – is that when children learn words just for a spelling test they often don't transfer it to their writing. That means that many children can get 8 or 10 out of 10 for a spelling test but the next week or next month, might not spell that same word correctly when they're writing. That's because learning words for a test makes a weak connection in the brain and it only stays in the short-term memory. To stick in the long-term memory, we know it's better not to rely on spelling tests.
- Spelling tests don't actually teach children to be active, careful spellers. The learning often stays in the short-term memory and is pruned away by the brain because it's not used or it's not meaningful enough to the brain to make a strong connection. Tests only test spelling, not teach it.
- I've been reading some research about learning to spell that was done by the University of Canberra (Dr Tessa Daffern). The researcher found that children who were struggling with spelling only had one bit of spelling knowledge and therefore only one way to figure out how to spell a word – to sound out. Those children who were confident, accurate spellers had a range – or repertoire – of understandings about how words work and could use all of these to problem solve spelling. This is why I teach a lot of different strategies and not just one way to learn a word. I don't want any of the children to get stuck and only have one strategy that lets them down too often.
- It's really inefficient to learn words because there are so many 1000s of words in the English language. It's much more effective to develop a range of understandings about English words and strategies for spelling.
- We start by sparking their curiosity about words. When anyone is curious about something they want to learn more about it and the learning is more likely to 'stick'. So we do a lot of talking, thinking and wondering about words and how they work.
- It's important for children to build a repertoire of knowledge about English spelling because it's not a phonetically regular language. We teach children to learn about the history of words and why they might be spelt a certain way, the meaningful parts and how to manipulate them, the phonics of words, the visual patterns that are most likely in English, words that have been imported from other languages and also to proof read their own writing. Spelling tests don't teach any of these things so I want to spend our precious learning time doing other kinds of learning that I know will help.

