ALEA Doctoral Thesis Award 2017 – Winner

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Thesis Title: An Examination of Spelling Acquisition in the Middle and Upper Primary School Years

Thesis Citation: This doctoral study drew on data from 1,389 Australian students and their teachers in order to examine the teaching and learning of spelling across Years 3 to 6. Underpinned by Triple Word Form Theory (TWFT), the research began with a Pilot Study (n=198) to develop and test an innovative spelling assessment tool: the Components of Spelling Test (CoST). Reliability results demonstrated strong internal consistency in all three subscales of the CoST. A Major Study followed, adopting an explanatory sequential mixed methods design. Phase One aimed to: (i) understand the relationship between three language convention variables (spelling, grammar and punctuation) and written composition (n=819); (ii) examine students’ median performance levels of the phonological, orthographic and morphological components of spelling (n=1,198); and (iii) explore the relationships between performance in NAPLAN spelling and the CoST, for low-achieving spellers (n=237) compared with high-achieving spellers (n=275). Phase Two aimed to provide rich, descriptive comparisons of the spelling strategies used by low-achieving spellers and high-achieving spellers and explore how these interacted with instructional approaches.

In Phase One, results indicated that spelling, grammar and punctuation jointly influenced written composition, and that spelling was the main predictor. From Years 3 to 6, concurrent increases were found in the median performance levels of the phonological, orthographic and morphological subscale scores of the CoST, albeit to varying degrees. While year level differences in scores were significant, the effects for gender and the interaction of year level and gender were non-significant. Additionally, significant positive correlations between the NAPLAN spelling results and the three subscale scores of the CoST were observed. The results of Phase Two showed that high-achieving spellers are able to flexibly coordinate multiple linguistic processes while low-achieving spellers heavily rely on phonological processing. The findings suggest that spelling competency is not manifested in linear stages, and that explicit instruction in the coordination of phonological, orthographic and morphological processing is essential in enabling autonomous and accurate spelling.