

Supporting schools to implement an evidence-based and effective approach to teaching spelling

**Tessa Daffern, Kate Hogg,
Nicole Callaway, Heath
Wild and Sharon Kelly**

Learning to spell is complex, takes time and is dependent on instruction. Teaching spelling effectively is equally complex yet essential to supporting students' literacy learning throughout school. This article shares insights from two case studies focused on supporting schools with evidence-based and effective assessment and instruction in spelling. The first case study describes a large-scale professional learning initiative involving 72 Australian schools. The second describes the subsequent journey that one of those schools embarked on towards whole-school evidence-based and effective assessment and teaching of spelling skills.

Spelling proficiency matters

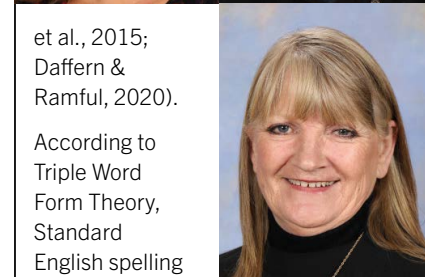
Spelling matters for the reader and the writer. Accurate spelling ensures that an intended message is conveyed with clarity. A proficient speller can focus their attention on expressing their ideas and using precise and varied vocabulary when creating

written texts (Daffern & Mackenzie, 2020; Sumner et al., 2016). If a text contains spelling mistakes, it can hinder comprehension, may lead to confusion and misinterpretation, and can influence a reader's perception of the writer's literacy skills and attention to detail (Pan et al., 2021; Varnhagen, 2000).

Spelling proficiency is associated with academic success. Critically, spelling proficiency needs to be an instructional priority in schools because it supports students in learning to read and write (Graham & Santangelo, 2014; Ouellette et al., 2017). Students experiencing persistent challenges with spelling may become less motivated to read and write, and may subsequently become disengaged with learning across the curriculum (Daffern & Critten, 2019; Daffern & Mackenzie, 2020).

Assessing and teaching the components of spelling

Instruction in spelling is best informed by a spelling error analysis measure that has been empirically tested to ensure the test words, type of response task, sub-lexical error analysis items and corresponding subscales are robust, reliable and valid. Published research on assessment and instruction in spelling provides empirical validation of Triple Word Form Theory, its accompanying assessments, including the Components of Spelling Tests, and instructional approach (see, for example, Daffern, 2017; Daffern & Fleet, 2021; Daffern



et al., 2015;
Daffern &
Ramful, 2020).

According to
Triple Word
Form Theory,
Standard
English spelling
encompasses
three word
forms as seen in Table 1.

Triple Word Form Theory assumes that the phonological, orthographic and morphological word forms can develop concurrently from the early years of learning to write. However, learning is largely contingent on the quality of assessment and instruction. When provided with explicit, systematic and targeted instruction informed by error

Phonological	The study of phonemes, including manipulating and segmenting phonemes in words. A speller needs to apply their phonological knowledge accurately and efficiently when spelling words by integrating their knowledge of phoneme-grapheme correspondences.
Orthographic	Knowing the plausible graphemes for each phoneme. It also entails recognising that some graphemes are dependent on the position of their corresponding phoneme in a word and knowing that certain graphemes can be explained by their etymology (origin).
Morphological	The study of morphemes as well as the generalisations for combining morphemes (i.e., how to add a prefix or suffix to a base or root). Understanding the etymology of morphemes can also form part of morphological instruction.

Table 1. Triple Word Form Theory

analysis data, students can learn to use and integrate the phonological, orthographic and morphological components of spelling with increasing efficiency, accuracy and autonomy.

Supporting schools with evidence-based assessment and instruction in spelling

Case study one: Professional Learning Pathway (PLP) on assessing and teaching spelling

In a large-scale professional learning initiative, 72 Australian public schools participated in a Professional Learning Pathway (PLP) on assessing and teaching spelling in the early years of school, designed and delivered by Daffern. Data were collected (with

signed consent) from 290 participating teachers and their students ($n = 2,436$) in Foundation to Grade 2 (aged between 6.5 to 8 years).

The PLP duration was approximately half a school year. Educators attended webinars and viewed pre-recorded videos presented by the first author. They also participated in collaborative lesson planning, trialling lessons in response to spelling error analysis data, and engaged in structured reflections.

Spelling assessment: using error analysis

A core component of teachers' learning in the PLP was centred on the linguistics of spelling and analysing spelling errors using the Components of Spelling Test for the Early Years (CoSTEY)

(now in its 2nd edition: Daffern, 2023b). Informed by Triple Word Form Theory, the CoSTEY is a diagnostic and comparative assessment with Australian norms. Statistical reliability testing of the CoSTEY revealed robust levels of internal consistency (0.951 to 0.970; Daffern, 2022). The CoSTEY includes 26 linguistic constructs across three component tests (Phonological, Orthographic and Morphological). Table 2 provides a suggested assessment schedule for the CoSTEY in school contexts. Supporting information about assessing spelling in the early years was made available to the participating teachers. For an example, see information video <https://youtu.be/8dtXNYkfJVg>.

The [online version of the CoSTEY](#) (Daffern, 2020) provides automatically generated error analysis data, saving teachers considerable time while yielding comprehensive, reliable and normed data. The online version analyses 255 sub-lexical items across 174 words that students spell to dictation, and it provides colour-coded instructional recommendations mapped from the error analysis to enhance its diagnostic utility. When using the CoSTEY, teachers refer to the data alongside their adopted phonics sequence (ideally aligned with decodable texts they are using), to provide targeted instruction in both spelling and reading. Teachers also flexibly use the corresponding [CoSTEY manual](#) (Daffern, 2023) to support their teaching. The

Grade	Timeframe	CoSTEY Component Tests	Purpose		
			Comparative	Diagnostic	Longitudinal
Foundation	Semester 2: Term 3	Phonological (Part A only)	✓	✓	
Grade 1	Semester 1: Term 1	Phonological (A & B)	✓	✓	✓
		Orthographic (A & B)	✓	✓	
		Morphological	✓	✓	
Grade 2	Semester 1: Term 1	Phonological (A & B)	✓	✓	✓
		Orthographic (A & B)	✓	✓	✓
		Morphological	✓	✓	✓

Table 2. Suggested assessment schedule using the CoSTEY

		Syllabification (7 items)	Phonemic knowledge (14 items)	Onset/Rime (10 items)	Spelling conventions (14 items)	Total Score (45 items)
Pre-PLP	Raw mean (SD)	4.70 (0.24)	8.03 (0.26)	9.0 (0.04)	8.44 (0.19)	30.18 (0.24)
	Mean %	67	57	90	60	67
Post-PLP	Raw mean (SD)	5.29 (0.39)	11.78 (0.38)	9.22 (0.26)	10.39 (0.40)	36.3 (6.77)
	Mean %	76	79	92	74	79

Table 3. Teachers' linguistic knowledge ($n = 290$), pre- and post-PLP scores

manual includes extensive instructional activities, follow-up assessments and explicit teaching guides aligned with the assessment codes. Activities are also designed to encourage reading and writing connections to be made when teaching spelling.

Teachers' linguistic knowledge

At the commencement and conclusion of the PLP, the participating teachers were assessed on their linguistic knowledge. They responded to 45 questions, adapted from existing measures (Carreker et al., 2010; Puliatte & Ehri, 2018; Stark et al., 2016). The pre-PLP results informed the design and delivery of the professional learning and helped to gauge the impact of teachers' learning. Although mean scores were low to begin with (see Table 2, Pre-PLP scores), particularly in phonemic knowledge, there was considerable improvement in teacher's learning (see Table 2, Post-PLP).

The teachers also responded to open-ended questions about their instructional practices prior to commencing the PLP. A combination of phonics instruction and rote learning methods (whole-word learning using *Look-Say-Cover-Write-Check* activities) were the most reported teaching practices. Given the observed low levels of linguistic knowledge (see Table 3), particularly in phonemic awareness, explicit and accurate phonics instruction was likely minimal and/or compromised.

The instructional approach: Explicit, targeted and systematic teaching of the spelling components

Following the PLP, participating schools trialled an instructional approach informed by Triple Word Form Theory and developed by Daffern (see Figure 1). The approach involved:

- Using the CoSTEY as a valid and reliable spelling error analysis measure grounded in Triple Word Form Theory;
- Explicitly teaching strategies and generalisations based on the CoSTEY error analysis data;
- Including phonological, orthographic and morphological strategies regularly (ideally each week);
- Providing opportunities for spaced and cumulative learning (learning the phonology, orthography and morphology of a small group of words, one step at a time, spaced over a series of lesson);

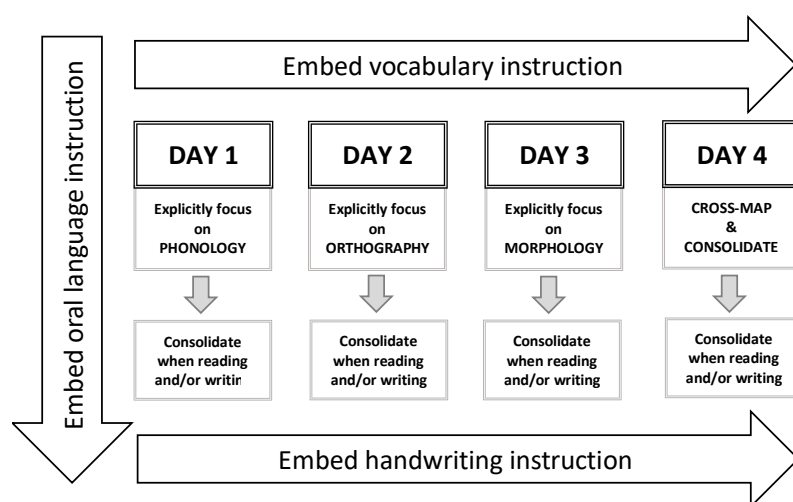


Figure 1. Structuring an evidence-based and effective instructional approach to teaching spelling

Note. Figure 1 used with permission from Daffern, T (2021 & 2023a,b).

- Using metalanguage when modelling, and encouraging students to use taught metalanguage;
- Selecting words that are relevant to the teaching focus, and including words to expand students vocabulary;
- Including short, sharp and focused explicit teaching episodes (ideally 4 times a week);
- Providing ample, targeted consolidation in a range of contexts;
- Integrating daily handwriting instruction when teaching spelling;
- Ensuring learning intentions are visible;
- Providing immediate, corrective, specific and ongoing feedback.

Post-PLP insights from participating educators

At the conclusion of the PLP, the teachers shared insights on implementing an explicit, structured and targeted approach to teaching the components of spelling. Through a process of inductive content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Sproule, 2006; Willis, 2006), four themes emerged as detailed in Table 4.

Case study two: Showcasing the journey to spelling success at Burke Ward Public School

Burke Ward Public School is located in the Far West of New South Wales in the regional centre of Broken Hill. The school caters for students from Foundation to Grade 6 and approximately 33 percent of students identify as coming from an Aboriginal background. The school caters to

students from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds with an average Family Occupational and Educational Index of 162. The school's two Multi Category classes and the town's primary tutorial centre class support students with diverse abilities, in addition to the school's nine mainstream classes. The school has a mix of aspiring leaders, experienced, established, and beginning teachers.

Spelling instruction at Burke Ward Public School prior to the PLP

Burke Ward Public School recognised a need to improve their instructional approach to spelling. Prior to their involvement in the large-scale PLP, teaching spelling was considered to be ad hoc and the 'poor cousin' of reading and writing. Spelling was taught as a 'stand-alone subject' delivered in small groups at the end of 'guided reading lessons', particularly in Foundation to Grade 3.

Teachers in Grades 1 and 2 used assessments and teaching resources that do not align with *Triple Word Form Theory* which included inventories from *Words Their Way* (Bear et al., 2012) and 'word study' activities using *Word Matters* (Fountas & Pinnell, 1998). Each week, teachers in Grades 3 to 6 provided their students with word lists and a 'spelling rule' to learn. Students were also given personal words to learn, including words they may have incorrectly spelled in their writing. Testing was completed each week and required peer marking. Students completed activities from a 'spelling contract' with a choice of activities to complete

such as rainbow writing, putting words in a sentence and dictionary meanings. There was little consistency across classes in terms of teachers' pedagogy, including the use of metalanguage.

Burke Ward's shift to evidence-based spelling instruction

Since 2021, Burke Ward Public School has implemented an evidence-based approach to teaching spelling across

Theme 1: Explicit and data-informed teaching can increase student engagement, motivation and confidence when learning to spell.

Examples of comments from the teachers:

- *Students are more engaged and enthusiastic about spelling. They love being word detectives!*
- *Students are more engaged in learning which is targeted to their specific needs.*
- *Students ... feel more confident when spelling unfamiliar words independently.*

Theme 2: Explicit and data-informed teaching can improve students' metalanguage and spelling

Examples of comments from the teachers:

- *Evidence of improved spelling skills can be observed in their independent writing.*
- *My students are developing better strategies for spelling and also understanding and using the metalanguage of spelling.*
- *There has been a very positive impact on the learning of our students. They're much more aware of how words are created and are using the metalanguage of spelling on a daily basis.*
- *My students are more conscious of the spelling and trying to transfer all the knowledge gained in writing regularly.*
- *The students have transferred their knowledge and skills into reading and writing.*

Theme 3: The CoSTEY enables teachers to reliably identify and address students' learning needs in spelling.

Examples of comments from the teachers:

- *The CoSTEY provides such a great insight into what the students need to work on. I've also learnt how to differentiate for the different ability levels.*
- *The thorough assessment task ... showed me lots of gaps I wasn't aware of for my students and how I can target these gaps.*
- *The CoSTEY allowed for targeted explicit teaching.*
- *Our teaching is more focused on students' needs due to the analysis of the CoSTEY and therefore spelling is more targeted.*
- *The CoSTEY analysis has allowed me to target areas for students with quick results.*

Theme 4: Professional learning that is collaborative, research-informed, reflective and sustained can enable increased pedagogical content knowledge, engagement and confidence in teaching spelling.

Examples of comments from the teachers:

- *As a team, we carefully looked at the data and created lessons that were a direct result of the data. It has also highlighted a 'where to next' focus for our school.*
- *I have shared lessons with my team to gain feedback from the lessons and to provide some context for other*
- *The professional conversations about the linguistics of spelling have been amazing!*
- *The PLP has helped the teachers involved in being able to implement different activities when teaching spelling to help a variety of students. We have also been able to reflect on the common areas that came up as mistakes and make them a priority for revision.*

Table 4: Post-PLP insights from participating educators

the whole school. This has included the use of the online CoSTEY (Grades 1 and 2) and CoST (Grades 3 to 6) as part of their literacy assessment schedule and instructional approach.

An ongoing professional learning support structure has been implemented for the teachers during this time. This has been particularly necessary due to staff turn-over each year. Each school term, teaching teams have met with the school executive team and Daffern to interpret the CoSTEY and CoST error analysis data, and plan targeted lessons (see Tables 5 and 6 for examples of deidentified, truncated overall component score data). Teachers have regularly evaluated their teaching and student learning using the data to make objective and systematic instructional decisions. The CoSTEY and CoST data have provided a reliable source of evidence of student learning, enabling teachers to review and adjust their teaching priorities as needed. Where minimal progress of learning for a particular student was observed, the school has considered probable contributing factors and implemented appropriate and context-specific intervention.

Specialist coaching, workshops and lesson observations have been part of this journey. The school has not only focused on teaching spelling as a discreet literacy skill, but also in the context of reading and creating written texts. Examples of some recorded lesson observations can be accessed via the links below.

Lesson demonstration 1: Explicitly teaching the inflected suffix -ing

<https://youtu.be/CoGZ6RUNNk0?si=epp1Ik0m8ueirsSz>



Lesson demonstration 2: Explicitly teaching the inflected suffix -ed

https://youtu.be/cX7JmJl6A_E?si=DyvDjcrsaGerg4AK



	Phonological growth %	Orthographic growth %	Morphological growth %
Student 1	19	0	0
Student 2	8	2	0
Student 3	23	12	4
Student 4	42	8	7
Student 5	23	18	2
Student 6	35	8	6
Student 7	33	8	15
Student 8	31	24	13
Student 9	2	4	9
Student 10	2	18	16
Student 11	54	14	11
Student 12	34	8	16
Student 13	40	28	18
Group mean %	27	12	9

Table 5. Sample CoSTEY longitudinal data for Grade 1 (2021) to Grade 2 (2022)

Note. Raw scores for each component are converted to percentages for ease of interpretation. Complete data are shown, capturing only those students who completed the CoSTEY in consecutive years.

Lesson demonstration 3: Explicitly teaching the derivational suffixes -ance and -ence

<https://youtu.be/qZyZJBQH1Bw?si=1-QpmdsAiyDXds4v>



Changing the status quo in spelling assessment and instruction takes courage, wisdom and persistence. For some teachers, the journey has been challenging, but their willingness to continually improve their practice and embrace an evidence-based instructional approach is testament to their commitment to improving student outcomes. Examples of some teacher reflections are listed below:

- I initially felt overwhelmed by the content as it was a new approach for me to teaching spelling, and I

struggled to feel as though I could present it to students. Learning that it is better to go at a slower pace to ensure deeper understanding makes me feel better.

- As I get more familiar with Triple Word Form Theory, I'm beginning to see how I can integrate spelling with other syllabus focus areas.
- The individualised data from the CoST is a fantastic support and has helped to determine 'where to next' for spelling for individual students. I feel like I am still learning to find the best balance between using the individual data and building a whole class program. The CoST Teacher Dashboard will help with this.

The teachers have also observed the impact of using metalanguage accurately and consistently across all the school grades. Metalanguage can help students learn the structure of written words, as one teacher observed:

- During a lesson in Term 4, a Kindergarten student (first year of school) was learning about trigraphs.
- During the lesson, the student noticed a word with four letters to represent a phoneme and asked if it was a 'square graph'. It was explained to the student that the grapheme is called a 'quadgraph' because of the four letters that represent one phoneme like in the letters 'eigh' in the word 'eight'.

The impact of Burke Ward's commitment to building teacher capacity and implementing an evidence-

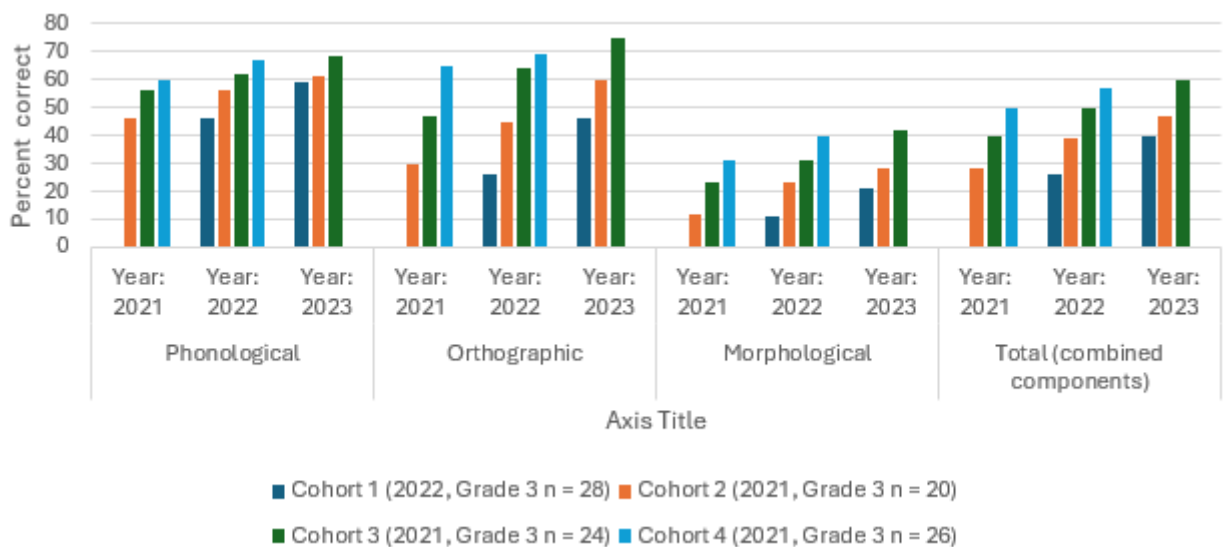


Figure 2. Summary of CoST: Grades 3 to 6 longitudinal data involving four cohorts of students (2021 to 2023)

Note. Raw scores for each component are converted to percentages for ease of interpretation. Complete data are shown, capturing only those students who completed the CoST in consecutive years.



Figure 3. Foundation (Kindergarten) teacher uses a handwriting scaffold when teaching spelling

What am I?
 I am (red) x red and black
 with dots.
 I have wings.
 I have six legs.
 I eat aphids.
 I have thin wings.
 I live in leaves.

Figure 5c. Draft 2

The Cubs went to the beach to swim and do somersaults.
 The Cubs were drowning and Rainbow Bear wasn't paying attention.
 Rainbow Bear dived in the ocean to save the Cubs.

Figure 4a. Draft 1

The Cubs went to the beach to swim and do somersaults.
 The Cubs were drowning and Rainbow Bear wasn't paying attention.
 Rainbow Bear dived in the ocean to save the Cubs.

Figure 4b. Draft 2

The Cubs went to the beach to swim and do somersaults.
 The Cubs were drowning and Rainbow Bear wasn't paying attention.
 Rainbow Bear dived in the ocean to save the Cubs.

Figure 4c (Published text)

Figures 4a-c. A Foundation student's writing: from drafting to publishing: 'Rainbow Bear' by Grace

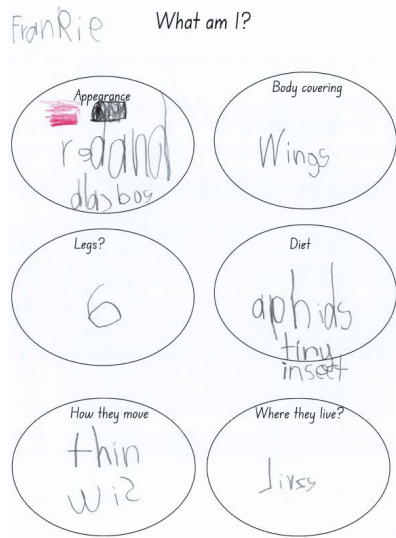


Figure 5a. Plan

I'm red and black with dots.
 I have wings.
 I have six legs.
 I eat aphids.
 I have thin wings.
 I live in leaves.

Figure 5b. Draft 1

What am I?
 I am red and black with dots.
 I have six legs.
 I eat aphids.
 I have thin wings.
 I live on leaves.

Figure 5.d. Published text



Figure 5e. Published illustration

Figures 5a-e. A Foundation student's writing: from planning to drafting and publishing: 'What am I?' by Frankie

based instructional approach has had a positive impact on students' motivation and confidence to learn.

Teachers have also integrated handwriting instruction when teaching spelling, using scaffolds such as coloured dotted third lines (see Figure 3). Expectations in the quality and quantity of students' writing have increased, with writing occurring daily and encompassing multiple phases of the writing process to include planning, drafting, proofreading, editing, and publishing (see Figures 4 and 5). Qualitative improvements have not only been observed in spelling, but also in students' handwriting, reading, stamina for writing, willingness to use a broader range of vocabulary when writing, and overall quality of written texts.

Concluding remarks

A key component of an evidence-based and effective approach to teaching spelling requires alignment between valid and reliable spelling error analysis data and explicit instruction in the spelling components as underpinned by Triple Word Form Theory. Changing a pedagogical approach can be complex and it takes time to see tangible benefits. Nonetheless, it is possible in the presence of sustained school leadership and a shared vision; specialised coaching delivered directly to teachers; quality assessment and teaching resources; collaborative instructional planning; and structured evaluations of practice. Strong pedagogical content knowledge is central to student outcomes. Improvements to initial teacher education programs will also help to further address observed gaps in literacy instructional practices across Australia (Louden et al., 2023) so that teachers can enter the profession adequately equipped to implement evidence-based literacy instruction.

Further information about the online CoST and online CoSTEY including instructional videos and dashboards, can be found at the following links: <https://www.youtube.com/@tessadaffern1621> and www.tessadaffern.com.

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About the Authors

Dr Tessa Daffern is an Adjunct Associate Professor in the School of Education SOLAR Lab at La Trobe University and Co-director of Literacy Education Solutions. Her research has largely focused on the development and validation of spelling assessments and instructional resources. Tessa has also contributed to education as a Highly Accomplished Teacher and school leader, academic, curriculum advisor, and keynote speaker. Tessa is passionate about supporting school educators with evidence-based and effective spelling assessment and instruction.

Email: tessa@daff.net.au

Website: www.tessadaffern.com

Contributors from Burke Ward Public School

Kate Hogg is school Principal and has 20 years' experience teaching across multiple primary schools in Broken Hill, NSW. Prior to her appointment as Principal, Kate was an Instructional Leader (2014 to 2020).

Nicole Callaway is an Assistant Principal. Nicole has worked with students from kindergarten to year 6 and has over 10 years experience teaching in the Far West of NSW.

Heath Wild is an Assistant Principal, Curriculum and Instruction. Heath has experience teaching students in early intervention contexts through to high

school settings with a focus on meeting the diverse needs of learners using explicit teaching delivered through trauma-informed practices.

Sharon Kelly is an Assistant Principal, Curriculum and Instruction. Sharon draws on 30 years of experience working in various schools in the Far West of NSW, as a classroom teacher, specialist consultant, mentor and instructional leader.

Conflict of interest

Dr. Tessa Daffern is the author of the CoSTEY and CoST and receives financial benefits related to their sales. Copyrighted images have been reproduced with permission. Dr Tessa Daffern received some funding from the NSW Department of Education for providing initial professional learning, and from Burke Ward Public School for providing ongoing coaching.