

1 Allambie Heights Public School, Sydney, Australia

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1. Context

Allambie Heights Public School is located on the Northern Beaches of Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. It is a Kindergarten^{*2} to Year 6 school for students aged five to twelve years. The school is

“committed to the pursuit of high academic achievement in a safe, secure, and caring learning environment. The programs offered are diverse, and challenge and inspire our students. Students, parents and staff work in partnership to create a vibrant learning community. Literacy, numeracy and technology are emphasized within learning programs”³.

The school motto, ‘Ever Aim High’, “underpins the school’s strong belief that each child needs to be recognized for their own achievements, celebrating success [both at] a school and personal level”⁴. As a Positive Behavior for Learning school, the school values of respect, responsibility, and resilience are key to the success of our school community. We currently have 514 students and 51 staff in our school. Four students identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and 14% of students come from a language background other than English. The school is in a high socio-economic area with a Family Occupation and Education

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2. An explanation for terms followed by an asterisk can be found in the glossary; <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2022.55.1367>

3. <https://myschool.edu.au/>

4. <https://myschool.edu.au/>

How to cite: Helsloot, A. (2022). Allambie Heights Public School, Sydney, Australia. In A. Beaven, A. Comas-Quinn & N. Hinton (Eds), *Systematic synthetic phonics: case studies from Sounds-Write practitioners* (pp. 11-22). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2022.55.1355>

Index⁵ (FOEI) of 17. The school Index of Community and Socio-Educational Advantage* is 1,112.

2. Implementation

In 2017, as a school leadership team, we evaluated different synthetic phonics programs as part of writing our 2018-2020 school plan. From analyzing NAPLAN (National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy*) and school data we recognized that we needed to increase the number of students in Year 3, Year 5, and Year 7 achieving in the top two bands and demonstrating expected growth in NAPLAN reading and writing. Our research led us to understand that there is strong “evidence that systematic synthetic phonics, taught in the first years of a child’s education, gives children [the] building blocks they need to read and understand words, [and supports] children’s attainment of a [high] standard of reading”⁶. Furthermore, we could see from examining Scarborough’s Reading Rope⁷, the need to improve our teaching of the word-recognition strand. This led us to evaluate different synthetic phonics programs and to choose Sounds-Write. Sounds-Write was the program selected by our leadership team because of its use of explicit direct instruction, which is best suited to our morning literacy focus that encompasses guided, modeled, and independent learning. The progression and pace of the Sounds-Write teaching sequence was also more favorable than the other programs reviewed as it could be incorporated into classroom teaching and learning and support programs.

Sounds-Write became a key program in our 2018-2020 school plan with the commitment to train teachers and implement the program from Kindergarten to Year 3.

5. The FOEI is a school-level index of educational disadvantage related to socio-economic background. FOEI values range from 0 to approximately 300, with higher FOEI scores indicating higher levels of need (that is, lower socio-economic status).

6. <http://docplayer.net/25181924-A-practical-guide-to-synthetic-phonics.html?>

7. <https://dyslexiaida.org/scarboroughs-reading-rope-a-groundbreaking-infographic/>

We started our Sounds-Write journey in 2018. During that year, twenty staff members across the school including the Principal, Deputy Principal, and two Assistant Principals attended the 4-day face-to-face training. Implementation of the program began in learning and support programs from the beginning of 2018 and from Kindergarten to Year 3 classes in Term 3. Training continued in 2019 for all Kindergarten to Year 3 teachers.

A scope and sequence* was developed from Kindergarten to the end of Term 3 of Year 3 to teach the Initial* and Extended Code* and introduce polysyllabic words. Full implementation across all Kindergarten to Year 3 classrooms and Kindergarten to Year 6 learning and support programs started in the 2019 school year. All Kindergarten to Year 3 classes have four 20-25 minute Sound-Write sessions a week. Further support has been given to identified students through additional Tier* 2 and Tier 3 interventions using Sounds-Write. These small group and individual withdrawal lessons have a twenty-minute focus on Sounds-Write and a twenty-minute focus on reading comprehension and fluency.

By the end of the 2020 school year, 42 staff across the school had completed the Sounds-Write training course. To ensure consistency across the school, all new teaching staff train in Sounds-Write. With current Covid-19 restrictions, staff now train online. This consistency allows staff and students to utilize the potential of the program to benefit all learners. Additionally, in 2020, three teachers completed the refresher course to review and improve the delivery of Sounds-Write. Teachers felt this course helped to support their confidence and deepened their knowledge of teaching Sounds-Write. The refresher course also led to deeper discussions between Kindergarten to Year 2 staff about the transfer of sound knowledge from short-term memory to long-term memory for recall, particularly with spelling. These discussions led to a change in practice regarding the review and assessment of sounds in retrospect to determine this transfer of knowledge.

Our future goal is to extend our use of Sounds-Write to improve the way we teach spelling and vocabulary in Year 3 to Year 6. In 2020, the first group of six

teachers completed the ‘Teaching Vocabulary in Year 3 to Year 6’ course, and in 2021 a further six teachers completed this training. We are now revising our Year 3 to Year 6 scope and sequence and developing a bank of lessons to accompany this scope and sequence to ensure a consistent approach for all students in all classes.

3. Specific case study

The 58 students in this case study are currently in Year 2, 2021. They are our first cohort who have followed the Sound-Write program since they started Kindergarten in 2019. This is their third year of following the program. During this time all students have received four 20-25 minute whole-class Sounds-Write sessions a week.

Further support has been given to identified students through the Sounds-Write learning and support program. In this program, four identified students attend a 40-minute small group session Monday to Thursday. This small group of students have a 20-minute focus on Sounds-Write and a 20-minute focus on reading comprehension and fluency.

3.1. 2019 – Kindergarten

Across the year, ten students (17%) attended additional Sounds-Write support lessons in Kindergarten. Four students benefited from one term of support, three students had two terms of support, one student had three terms of support and two students had four terms of support. The students attending the support program in Kindergarten consolidated Initial Code units, which had previously been taught during the classroom program.

Moving into Year 1, seven of these students required continued Sounds-Write learning support, two students did not require further learning support after Kindergarten, while one student was withdrawn from the support program by

parents as they do not believe learning support is essential. This student continued their development of phonics through the class Sounds-Write sessions.

3.2. 2020 – Year 1

Across the new school year, seven original support program students attended additional Sounds-Write support sessions in Year 1. They were joined by a newly enrolled student who had not been exposed to a synthetic phonics approach at their previous school. This equates to 12% of the cohort attending learning support. Three students benefited from one term of support, three students had two terms of support, one student had three terms of support, and one student had four terms of support. The students attending the support program in Year 1 consolidated the bridging unit and Extended Code units, which had previously been taught during the classroom program.

During the first Covid-19 lockdown in March-May 2020, which forced schools to be closed for seven weeks, we continued to teach Sounds-Write sessions to the whole class and to intervention groups through Zoom sessions and recorded videos. Although not as intensive, results at the end of the year showed that students had continued to make expected progress in reading and spelling.

Moving into Year 2, three of these students required continued Sounds-Write learning support, four students have transitioned to a broader literacy support program, and one student did not require further learning support after Year 1.

3.3. 2021 – Year 2

Across the new school year, three original support program students attend additional Sounds-Write support lessons in Year 2. This equates to 5% of the cohort attending Sounds-Write learning support. Three students benefited from three terms of support, two terms of face-to-face support, and one term of online support through Zoom and recorded videos due to the whole of Term 3 being in a Covid-19 lockdown. The students attending the support program in Year 2

consolidate the Extended Code units which have previously been taught during the classroom program.

Our Sounds-Write learning support program is funded by two department-funded positions – Learning and Support Teacher and Literacy and Numeracy Intervention Teacher (previously specified as Reading Recovery). Combined, the teacher is employed four days per week and was one of our first teachers trained in Sounds-Write in 2018.

Our future plans include the implementation of a Year 4 to Year 6 program, revising the Extended Code and including the new Sounds-Write list of the most frequent 3,000 words in English sorted by unit. This would be combined with using the knowledge gained from the Sounds-Write ‘Teaching vocabulary in Year 3 to Year 6’ courses. We intend to have a revised Year 3 to Year 6 spelling scope and sequence and a bank of lessons ready for implementation for the start of the 2022 school year.

4. Evaluation

We have evaluated the program by looking at data from standardized tests such as the Year 1 phonics screening and the whole school Young’s *Parallel Spelling Tests*⁸. We also looked at PM and Fountas and Pinnell benchmark reading assessments⁸ to determine instructional and independent reading levels for fluency and comprehension. Additionally, the Interview Schedule for Students (Daffern & Critten, 2019⁹) (see [Table 1](#)) was completed in 2021 to assist in the evaluation of the impact of Sounds-Write across Year 2 to Year 6.

8. PM and Fountas and Pinnell benchmark assessments determine students’ independent and instructional reading levels. In using these one-on-one assessments, teachers are able to observe and quantify student reading behaviors, engage students in comprehension conversations that go beyond retelling, monitor a student’s reading fluency, and make informed decisions that connect assessment to responsive teaching. These assessments are part of a suite of assessments used by teachers to support the reading development of all students.

9. Daffern, T. & Critten, S. (2019). Student and teacher perspectives on spelling. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*; 42(1), 40-57

Table 1. Spelling interview questions (Daffern & Critten, 2019, p. 56)

Key questions	Possible probes
When you write a word, but are not sure how to spell it, what do you do?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What if this happens in a spelling test/when writing a story/some other piece of writing? • What if you cannot use a dictionary, or you cannot ask someone, or you cannot use the computer spell-check? • What do you do with words that you can spell easily?
Can you give me some tips, ideas, or strategies that may help someone become better at spelling?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kinds of strategies does your teacher show you in class?
I am going to ask you to write a word/few words/sentence. As you write, think about how you are spelling each word. Write the word ____, and think aloud while you write.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What goes through your mind when you write the word ____. • What other kinds of words might you use for this strategy (for example, 'sounding out')? Can you give me some examples?
Here is a word (display a word that the student either correctly or incorrectly wrote). Tell me as much as you can about the spelling of this word?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there any interesting features that you notice about the word and the letters in it? • Do you think this word is correctly spelled? How do you know if the word is correct/incorrect?
What do you find easy/hard about spelling? Why?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you give me some examples of when spelling is easy/hard?

The spelling interviews were carried out with a third of each cohort from Year 2 to Year 6 to ascertain which strategies students were using to spell difficult or unfamiliar words. The spelling interviews demonstrated that students in Year 2 use the strategies they have learned from Sounds-Write to segment, blend, and divide words into syllables, whereas students in the older years relied on memorizing or guessing words. The knowledge that Year 2 students had gained, including the understanding of the schwas, has had a significant impact on their ability to spell unknown words. These students started the Sounds-Write program at the start of Kindergarten in 2019. Conversely, students in Year 3 to Year 6 were able to segment and blend to some extent, however, they were still

relying on memorizing words and less effective strategies, such as silent letters, bossy ‘e’, and spelling rules and exceptions. These students have had varying exposure to Sounds-Write as it has been implemented across the school.

For example, when asked “When you write a word but are not sure how to spell it, what do you do?”, these were some of the answers Year 2 students gave.

“Break it up into sounds and syllables.”

“Sound it out, break it up, put it back together.”

“Spellings can have a different sound, like c and s.”

The answers given by students in Year 5 were very different.

“Write it then experiment by adding letters or taking them away.”

“Just have a guess.”

“Sometimes I highlight it to come baäck to it and hopefully it comes into my head later.”

When spelling the word ‘cattle’, Year 2 students made the following observations.

“I wondered what spelling of /l/ it would be: ‘el’ or ‘le’... ‘le’ looks right.”

“I wondered if it is a ‘tt’ or ‘t’... I remembered it was tt.”

“I said the sounds as I wrote the word. I think it’s tt.”

“I think it has an ‘e’ in there for the ‘ugh’ (schwa) sound. It is an ll not an l.”

When spelling ‘favourite’, Year 6 students commented.

“I memorize words to spell them.”

“I remember ‘our’ is in the middle.”

“I try different spellings and write it down.”

The Young’s *Parallel Spelling Tests* results from December 2020 show that 93% of students in Kindergarten and Year 1, who have received consistent Sounds-

Write teaching from the start of their schooling in Kindergarten, are spelling at or above chronological age (see Table 2). This is significantly higher than the percentage of students in Year 2 to Year 5 who are spelling at or above their chronological age (77% to 87%). These students in Year 2 to Year 5 have not been explicitly taught Sounds-Write from the beginning of their schooling. Indeed, in these older years, the percentage of students whose spelling ages are more than 6 months below their chronological age is substantially higher, ranging from 9% to 17%.

Table 2. Whole school Young's *Parallel Spelling Tests* assessment data – December 2020

	Kindergarten 57 students		Year 1 58 students		Year 2 87 students		Year 3 62 students		Year 4 88 students		Year 5 64 students	
At or above chronological age	53	93%	54	93%	67	77%	54	87%	69	78%	54	85%
<6 months below	3	5%	3	5%	6	7%	2	3%	4	5%	4	6%
>6 months below	1	2%	1	2%	14	16%	6	10%	15	17%	6	9%

The Year 1 Phonics Screening Check¹⁰ results (Table 3) showed that 85% of students were on track, 12% (seven students) needed monitoring and 3% (two students) needed intervention. These nine students had already been identified through school-based assessments and had received or were receiving learning support.

10. The Year 1 Phonics Screening is a New South Wales Department of Education assessment implemented across the Year 1 classrooms in all public schools. The purpose of the assessment is to monitor students who may need additional support in their acquisition of their phonics knowledge. The format and the reporting of the assessment is determined by the Department of Education.

Table 3. Year 1 Phonics Screening Check results

Phonics proficiency	Number of students	% of students
	58	
on track	49	85%
carefully monitor	7	12%
support required	2	3%

Results from PM and Fountas and Pinnell benchmark reading assessments¹¹ (Table 4) show that 86% of students had exceeded the expected level by the end of 2020 (Year 1 Term 4), but, for the same cohort, the percentage of students exceeding the expected level had climbed to 93% by July 2021 (Year 2 Term 2). The fact that more students exceeded the expected target by mid-Year 2 compared to their performance in Year 1 shows that student achievement in reading comprehension and fluency had grown in this cohort because of their stronger skills in segmenting, blending, and phoneme manipulation developed through continued rigorous Sounds-Write teaching.

Table 4. Year 1 2020 and Year 2 2021 reading comprehension and fluency benchmark assessment data

	Year 1 Term 4 (level 18)	Year 2 Term 2 (level 22)
exceeded expected target	86%	93%
at expected target	6%	1%
below expected target	8%	3%

5. Recommendations

The Sounds-Write training gives teachers an excellent background knowledge in linguistic phonics and a deep understanding of how students learn to read. The course is expertly taught, lessons are modeled, and teachers are given practical

11. This is a reading target set for the Northern Sydney Region of the NSW Department of Education and a benchmark level for schools to ascertain the effectiveness of their teaching of reading. This data is not collected by the NSW Department of Education and comparable data can only be evaluated at school level, grade-by-grade.

experience and feedback on teaching different lessons. Our teachers have come away with renewed confidence in teaching students to read, using an evidence-based approach. The consistency of having all teachers trained and using the same program gives a coherent approach to the teaching of reading and spelling from Kindergarten to Year 3. Reading is taught explicitly, and students quickly demonstrate confidence and success in being able to segment and blend taught sounds as they develop reading fluency and comprehension.

Sounds-Write has also been incredibly successful at improving our students' spelling skills. It has had a positive impact on the quality of student writing as students are able to achieve automaticity in spelling and so focus more on the content of their writing.

We understand from evaluating our data the importance of following the program with fidelity and ensuring that all our teachers from Kindergarten to Year 6 are Sounds-Write trained. Regular reviews and the opportunity to undertake refresher training and coaching sessions will support the consistency and quality of the Sounds-Write instruction in every classroom and for every intervention group. Observations, refresher courses, and coaching sessions not only benefit our staff, they also assist our program evaluation and lead to changes identified to enhance the delivery of Sounds-Write across the school.

Using the Sounds-Write program as a part of our Kindergarten to Year 6 literacy support program provides students still acquiring the skills in units taught in the classroom program to revise and consolidate their learning. This small group intervention has made a huge difference to students who are below grade average and who would possibly not be making improvements with their reading and spelling if they were not being explicitly taught using an evidence-based program like Sounds-Write.

Our focus now is to continue this into Year 3 to Year 6 and develop students' phonological, orthographic, and morphological knowledge. Twelve teachers have now trained in the 'Teaching vocabulary in Year 3 to Year 6' course. We are now reviewing our spelling scope and sequence for Year 4 to Year 6 and

creating a bank of lessons on teaching spelling from this program supported by the Sounds-Write list of the most frequent 3,000 words in English, sorted by Sounds-Write unit.

Further challenges moving forward include the impact of our second Covid-19 lockdown in 2021, which saw students miss 13 weeks of school. We will need to closely monitor students on their return to school to determine the impact of learning from home and we will use formative and summative assessments to guide the teaching and learning of Sounds-Write in our classrooms and the learning support program. Year 2 students will return to face-to-face teaching in Week 4 of Term 4, meaning they will have completed our learning from home program for thirteen of the 40 weeks of the school year.



Published by Research-publishing.net, a not-for-profit association
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Systematic synthetic phonics: case studies from Sounds-Write practitioners
Edited by Ana Beaven, Anna Comas-Quinn, and Naomi Hinton

Publication date: 2022/05/09

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Typeset by Research-publishing.net
Cover layout by © 2022 Laura Walker

ISBN13: 978-2-38372-001-0 (Ebook, PDF, colour)
ISBN13: 978-2-38372-002-7 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)
ISBN13: 978-2-38372-000-3 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)
Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: mai 2022.
