

2 Angel Oak Academy, London, England

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1. Context

Angel Oak Academy is a two-form*² entry mainstream primary school in Peckham, South East London. Students are from a wide range of minority ethnic backgrounds; 55% speak English as an Additional Language (EAL), and many enter school at an early stage of learning English. A large majority of students are supported by additional government funding, including 47.2% of 411 students currently on roll qualifying as eligible for free school meals* (compared to a national average of 23% across mainstream primary schools in England).

The predecessor school became an academy* within the STEP Academy Trust (a charitable trust with schools in areas of high social deprivation) in February 2015. In September 2015, following a recommendation from a STEP trustee, Angel Oak Academy began the process of implementing Sounds-Write.

2. Implementation

Before implementing Sounds-Write, the percentage of students achieving the threshold to pass the Phonics Screening Check* (PSC) (82%) was in line with the national average (77%), yet few students were scoring 40/40 on the PSC.

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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>

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Furthermore, too many students left Key Stage* 2 without being able to read (20%) or write (27%) at the expected standard. Phonics teaching did not continue beyond Year 1 regardless of whether the student was a proficient decoder and despite the fact that the PSC only assesses a fraction of the alphabetic code. It was not that phonics was not working – it was that the academy’s approach to teaching phonics, and the programme they were using, were not working.

Figure 1. Timeline of Sounds-Write staff training



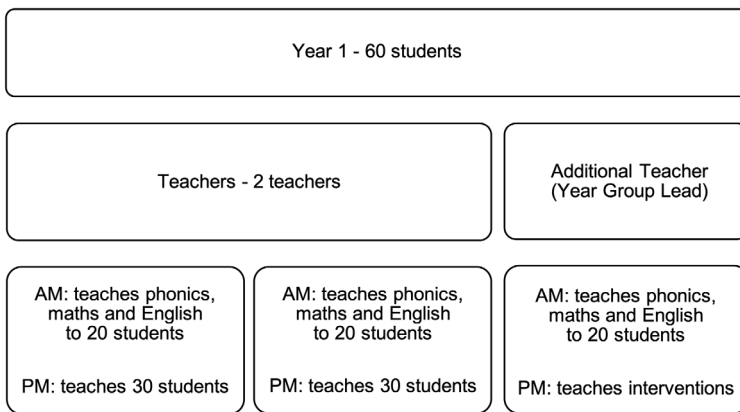
In autumn 2015, the Year 1 team attended the Sounds-Write’s 4-day face-to-face course (Figure 1). Using Sounds-Write’s Diagnostic Test, the team identified that the majority of the students were not proficient in segmenting, blending, and manipulating words with adjacent consonants. The team, therefore, decided to teach Sounds-Write’s Initial Code*, usually taught in Reception, before starting the Extended Code*. Unlike the previous approach, where students were split into attainment groups for phonics lessons, phonics was taught to the whole class with targeted interventions to support students who required additional practice, as recommended by Sounds-Write.

After the first year of implementation, the percentage of students who achieved the threshold to pass the PSC (79%) was still above the national average (74%). However, it was the notable improvement in students’ spelling, particularly of polysyllabic words, reported by the Year 1 teachers, which suggested that Sounds-Write was working. The school, therefore, decided to scale-up implementation by implementing Sounds-Write in Reception and Year 2.

At the same time, Angel Oak Academy implemented the three-teacher model (see Figure 2). The school uses the majority of its Pupil Premium Grant* (PPG) to run a three-teacher model throughout the school; three teachers are assigned

to each two-form entry year group. Students are taught in three groups of 20 for phonics, reading, English, and maths, and in the afternoon, students are split into two groups of 30 and the additional teacher leads interventions. Whole class phonics is taught in Reception and Key Stage 1, and students who require additional support benefit from same day 'keep-up' interventions at a separate time. Teachers also lead targeted 'catch-up' interventions for students with gaps in their phonemic awareness skills or code knowledge.

Figure 2. Three-teacher model



By summer 2017, data from academy-wide assessments showed that students in Key Stage 1 were achieving higher scores on decoding (word-recognition) assessments than students in Key Stage 2. The senior leadership team, therefore, agreed to trial teaching Sounds-Write in Years 3-6, where it was taught to the whole class for 30 minutes, three times per week. Much like in Reception and Key Stage 1, students who required further practice were supported by the additional teacher in the afternoons, attending either 'keep-up' or 'catch-up' interventions, alongside whole class lessons. This meant that by September 2018, all students in Key Stage 2 had worked through the Extended Code. The Key Stage 2 team, therefore, turned their attention to teaching the National Curriculum spelling objectives using the Sounds-Write language, methods, and

lessons. The teachers planned from centrally-adapted documents provided by the phonics lead³, based on the National Curriculum, which either categorised words by alternative spellings, alternative pronunciations, or by morpheme.

Today, Sounds-Write is fully implemented across the academy; it is taught daily in Reception and Key Stage 1, and three times a week in Key Stage 2. Sounds-Write's Initial Code is taught in Reception, and the majority of students achieve a good level of development at the end of Reception and enter Year 1 secure in their segmenting, blending, and manipulating skills. Sounds-Write's Extended Code is taught across Key Stage 1, alongside the morphemes from the National Curriculum spelling objectives for Years 1 and 2. In Year 3, students revisit the Extended Code at the polysyllabic level, before beginning the National Curriculum spelling objectives. In Years 4 and 5, students continue to work through the objectives, and in Year 6, students revise spelling objectives or analyse spellings in homophones.

The academy continues to use the majority of its Pupil Premium Grant to run a three-teacher model, so students in every year group are able to access 'keep-up' or 'catch-up' interventions where necessary, and new starters are supported in making rapid progress through one-to-one or small-group interventions.

3. Evaluation

Since implementing Sounds-Write across the academy, student attainment has risen in the Year 1 PSC. Since 2018, the vast majority of students in Year 1 (80-87%) have scored 40/40 on the PSC (Table 1). The students who are not ready to pass the PSC continue to be supported by daily targeted intervention teaching until they achieve the threshold – whether that be at the end of Year 2, or in Year 3.

3. <https://linguisticphonics.wordpress.com/phonics-from-eyfs-y6/>

Across the academy, students are assessed in phonemic awareness (Sounds-Write Diagnostic Test*), decoding (the Bryant test, 1975), and fluency (Dibels⁴), and students now reach end of Key Stage 2 expectations for reading fluency (127+ words correct per minute and 99% accuracy) much earlier than previous cohorts.

Table 1. Year 1 PSC – children achieving expected standard

2014	2015	2016 ^a	2017 ^b	2018	2019	2020
72%	82%	79%	89%	92%	92%	95%

^a The slight dip in results for 2016 may be due to the first term of Year 1 being spent on the Initial Code, which is typically taught in Reception, prior to starting the Extended Code.

^b Sounds-Write implemented in Year 1 during the 2016-17 academic year.

Table 2 below shows the percentage of students demonstrating decoding mastery before implementing Sounds-Write (2017), compared with the percentage of students demonstrating decoding mastery after one year of Sounds-Write lessons in Key Stage 2. Although spelling is not formally assessed with standardised testing, teachers continuously formatively assess and have anecdotally reported that students are much more confident spellers when compared to previous cohorts.

Table 2. Key Stage 2 – students demonstrating decoding mastery

	Decoding Mastery (The Bryant Test, 1975)	
	Pre 2017 Sounds-Write	2018 after one year of Sounds-Write
KS2 Students	22%	74%
PPG	28%	68%
Non-PPG	18%	78%
EAL	27%	80%
Non-EAL	18%	69%
SEND*	6%	41%
Non-SEND	26%	81%

4. Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills; <https://dibels.uoregon.edu/about-dibels>

The data in [Table 2](#) also shows that there was a substantial increase in SEND students who demonstrated decoding mastery after one year of Sounds-Write in Key Stage 2. This is particularly insightful, as too many students in English speaking schools become unnecessary ‘instructional casualties’, where the method of teaching does not lead to progress. Several students who had not mastered decoding via the previous phonics approach were able to do so after one year of whole class and intervention Sounds-Write lessons. All students continue to receive targeted intervention teaching until they demonstrate decoding mastery.

Interestingly, EAL students appear to have made more progress than their non-EAL peers. Further research would be required to understand this, and there may be a number of different factors at play, but one possible hypothesis is that some EAL students’ progress may be due to the stress and rhythm of their first language, which may match the English orthography more closely than the natural stress and rhythm of first-language English speakers. For example, some EAL students may pronounce English words with fewer *schwas* which is advantageous in spelling, and sometimes explains why students mispronounce words (e.g. pronouncing ‘mountain’ with emphasis on both syllables, unlike the first-language English speaker’s pronunciation of ‘**m**ountain’ with < ai > pronounced as /i/).

When inspected by Ofsted* in 2017, Angel Oak Academy was rated ‘Outstanding’ and the report deemed that “[a]ttainment in phonics is above average and rising. Pupils also make fast progress in developing wider reading skills. Many can interrogate texts and so gain deep meaning from what they are reading”.

However, there is still work to be done. The academy is aware that they must continue to develop their support for students who are eligible for Pupil Premium Grant, as the increase in decoding mastery for those who are non-PPG is much more substantial than those who are eligible for PPG. This is an ongoing priority for not only the academy but for all schools in the multi-academy trust.

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, teachers recorded mini-phonics lessons and set independent tasks to support students who were continuing their learning

at home. The academy made the decision to focus these Sounds-Write lessons on reviewing previously taught content to support retention, and when students returned to their classrooms, the team were confident that most students had retained most of the knowledge and skills that had been taught prior to partial and wider school closures. However, this has left the academy in a position where, at the beginning of the 2021-22 academic year, students were working approximately five to six months behind where previous cohorts would have been working in each school year. The academy will continue to teach Sounds-Write, as per its systematic structure, and continues to work towards supporting all students in mastering decoding and leaving primary school being able to read and spell fluently.

4. Recommendations

Angel Oak Academy has supported several other academies within STEP Academy Trust in implementing a whole school approach to teaching reading and spelling through Sounds-Write. The academy is one of the UK based Sounds-Write training schools, where open-mornings are hosted and support is provided to external schools.

Much of the advice and recommendations that the staff at Angel Oak Academy share with colleagues at other schools is based on either the successes or challenges they have experienced when implementing and developing their approach to using Sounds-Write for whole class and intervention teaching.

One major challenge was being able to release several members of staff to complete the 4-day face-to-face course. This meant that for one day per week, several members of staff would be off-site for their training. However, the new Sounds-Write Practitioners Online Training (SWPOT) course means that more practitioners can access the training at the same time; as the online course is asynchronous and leaders are able to release staff at different times and on different days across the week.

The key recommendations from Angel Oak Academy, based on their experience in implementing Sounds-Write, are as follows.

- Teach the programme with fidelity.
- Train all practitioners who are involved with the teaching of reading and writing.
- If budget allows, supplement the programme with matched decodable books (available at Sounds-Write or Phonic Books). If budget does not allow, then access the free, downloadable decodable texts, produced by Sounds-Write (made available to all Sounds-Write practitioners).
- The earlier you intervene with ‘keep-up’ interventions, the less likely the need for ‘catch-up’ interventions in the future.
- Support parents and carers by encouraging them to complete the free Sounds-Write course for parents and carers, and by hosting regular open-mornings and workshops in school.
- Invest in the professional development of your phonics coordinator, so that you have an in-house expert who can lead regular continuous professional development. You may also consider enrolling your phonics coordinator on some of the Sounds-Write masterclasses that have recently been introduced.



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