

4 Docklands Primary School, Melbourne, Australia

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1. Context

Our brand-new school, Docklands Primary School, opened in January 2021. Located in the heart of Melbourne, Australia, we are a state school for students in Foundation*² through to Year 6. At the time of this case study first being written, we had 255 students enrolled, but numbers continue to grow. We have a vibrant and diverse student community, with over 60% of our students speaking English as an additional language. Our students were born in 21 different countries, and there are at least thirteen different languages spoken at home.

As the English and Literacy Leader, I oversee curriculum, assessment, instruction, intervention, and professional learning in those domains. Part of that foundational work has involved ensuring staff are formally trained in Sounds-Write, and that the programme is implemented with consistency and fidelity across classrooms. We teach Sounds-Write in the first three years of school (Foundation-Year 2). Students receive 30 minutes of instruction daily and planning and delivery is consistent across year level classrooms. In 2021, there were six Foundation classes, two Year 1 classes, and one Year 2 class.

We are not considered a particularly advantaged or disadvantaged school, with an Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage* value close to the average of 1,000 (range of 800-1,200).

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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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2. Implementation

Given we are a brand-new school, Sounds-Write was only implemented in 2021. All teachers in Foundation-Year 2 (n=9) have completed the online training. Most teachers in the upper years and our education support/specialist staff have been trained too. The school Principal and Assistant Principal completed the face-to-face and online training respectively, prior to the school opening, and the English and Literacy Leader completed face-to-face training approximately two years prior to the school opening.

Sounds-Write is delivered as whole-class face-to-face instruction for 30-minutes every morning in Foundation-Year 2 classrooms. In addition, reading practice is provided via reading fluency lessons using decodable sentences and decodable readers, and dictation of words and sentences. Students also take home decodable readers (to read to parents/carers) along with a broad range of children's literature (for parents/carers to read-aloud or with the children), for further reading practice.

Given we had four lockdowns in 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, we had to provide online instruction during those periods. To do this, we used the Sounds-Write digital teaching resources and developed our own teaching materials (e.g. PowerPoint slides). The total amount of instruction per week online was less, reduced to more like 90 minutes per week compared to the usual 150 minutes per week. Online instruction was live whole-class instruction via Webex, with additional one-on-one reading practice with decodable readers whenever possible. Students were also assigned decodable readers via an e-Library. It should be noted that it was not possible for all students to join all online Sounds-Write lessons.

In 2021, Sounds-Write was used for whole-class Tier* 1 instruction, as per the Response to Intervention framework, but it was also used as top-up/supplementary instruction within classrooms in small groups when possible. It was also used as our Tier 2 intervention for students who do not achieve

benchmark scores on word-level reading and spelling assessments in Foundation-Year 2.

For context, the Response to Intervention framework is “a practice of providing high-quality instruction and interventions matched to student need, monitoring progress frequently to make decisions about changes in instruction or goals, and applying [student] response data to important educational decisions” (Batsche et al, 2005, p. 3)³. The primary goal is improved outcomes for all students, while the secondary goal is to identify learning difficulties or disabilities in a timely manner. It is a research-based instructional framework that provides “progressively intense instruction” (Hughes & Dexter, 2011, p. 4)⁴ based on student need. Tier 1 involves delivering high quality curriculum and using evidence-informed instructional methods. Tier 2 intervention involves small group instruction, and these interventions are considered to be an increased dose of Tier 1 instruction.

This case study is reporting on all students in Foundation-Year 2, aged five to eight years. In total, this is nine separate classes. These students were taught using Sounds-Write for four school terms, which is approximately 40 weeks of instruction, or one academic year. In Australia, the school year runs from the end of January through to the end of December. Having said that, instruction was interrupted by four periods of remote learning in 2021, and while we adopted the Sounds-Write programme from the start of the year, many staff did not complete the online training until April. This meant that the degree of teacher expertise and implementation varied across classrooms in Terms 1 and 2 of that year (the first 10-20 weeks of instruction).

As reported above, Sounds-Write was delivered as whole-class instruction for 30 minutes per day, in all nine classrooms. Many students in Years 1 and 2 required additional teaching as it became evident that they had missed aspects

3. Batsche, G., Elliott, J., Graden, J. L., Grimes, J., Kovaleski, J. F., Prasse, D., ... & Tilly III, W. D. (2005). *Response to intervention: policy considerations and implementation*. National Association of State Directors of Special Education.

4. Hughes, C. A., & Dexter, D. D. (2011). Response to intervention: a research-based summary. *Theory into practice*, 50(1), 4-11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2011.534909>

of systematic and explicit phonics instruction in their previous schools. Sixteen Year 1 and 2 students received Tier 2 intervention during 2021. Sessions were either two or three 30-minute sessions per week face-to-face, although intervention sessions continued in small groups online via Webex when possible during remote learning periods.

3. Evaluation

Detailed below are the evaluation tools we used to monitor student progress in word-level reading and spelling, and oral reading fluency.

3.1. Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS®)

It is important to note that students join us and leave us throughout the year, as there is some transience in our school community. This impacts how well we can interpret DIBELS data at single benchmark points for a few reasons: (1) the total number of students in each year level can change significantly between benchmarks, (2) students have varying degrees of instruction between benchmarks based on when they joined our school, and (3) even if cohort numbers remain relatively stable, the students included in those total numbers are not necessarily all the same students.

Data are therefore reported firstly as total students assessed at each benchmark (Table 1, Table 3, and Table 5), then only students who completed all three benchmarks across the year/completed the full academic year at our school, which is obviously a smaller sample (Table 2, Table 4, and Table 6).

It is also important to note that the second dataset (Table 2, Table 4, and Table 6), which reports on data obtained only from students who completed all three benchmarks and/or were part of the student cohorts for the complete academic year, is a better reflection of instructional impact over time than the first dataset (Table 1, Table 3, and Table 5), which reports on total students assessed.

Table 1. Total students assessed – Foundation (five to six year-olds): students at or above benchmark

Foundation	Nonsense word fluency – correct letter sounds (measured as number of sounds read correctly in one minute)	Nonsense word fluency – words read correctly (measured as number of two to six sound words read correctly in one minute)
March (n=97) After one month of instruction	65% (63)	36% (35)
June (n=112) After five months of instruction	71% (79)	84% (94)
November (n=108) After ten months of instruction	75% (81)	83% (90)

Table 2. Students who completed all benchmarks – Foundation (five to six year-olds): students at or above benchmark

Foundation	Nonsense word fluency – correct letter sounds (measured as number of sounds read correctly in one minute)	Nonsense word fluency – words read correctly (measured as number of two to six sound words read correctly in one minute)
March (n=89) After one month of instruction	63% (56)	35% (31)
June (n=89) After five months of instruction	74% (66)	88% (78)
November (n=89) After ten months of instruction	83% (74)	91% (81)

Teaching of Sounds-Write in Foundation commenced in February (just after the start of the school year in January), with all staff except one, who had completed the training prior to the start of the academic year, completing their training between February and April. Implementation and planning were strongly supported and supervised in Foundation classrooms. [Table 1](#) and [Table 2](#) show the

growth between March and June in Foundation, even with many students joining the cohort during that time. Students maintained or increased expected growth across the year, with the number of students meeting benchmarks by either staying the same or increasing across correct letter sounds and words read correctly.

In Foundation, students who completed all benchmarks (Table 2) progressed significantly from Benchmark 1 (March) to Benchmark 3 (November), with nonsense word reading (correct letter sounds) improving from 63% to 83%, while nonsense word reading (words recoded correctly) improved from 35% to 91%.

Foundation students did not access our Tier 2 intervention programme, as resources were allocated to catching up students in Years 1-6 who had not had systematic and explicit instruction in reading and spelling in their previous schools. From 2022, all staff will commence the school year trained in Sounds-Write, and Foundation students will access Tier 2 early intervention as required throughout the year. We are aiming for 90% of students at or above benchmark at March, June, and November timepoints in 2022. This is a realistic goal, if 2022 is not further interrupted by COVID-19.

Table 3. Total students assessed – Year 1 (six to seven year-olds): students at or above benchmark

Year 1	Nonsense word fluency – correct letter sounds (measured as number of sounds read correctly in one minute)	Nonsense word fluency – words read correctly (measured as number of two to six sound words read correctly in one minute)	Oral reading fluency (measured as words read correctly per minute – passages)
March (n=38) After one month of instruction	79% (30)	79% (30)	71% (27)
June (n=38) After five months of instruction	69% (26)	79% (30)	68% (26)
November (n=43) After ten months of instruction	74% (32)	84% (36)	74% (32)

Table 4. Students who completed all benchmarks – Year 1 (six to seven year-olds): students at or above benchmark

Year 1	Nonsense word fluency – correct letter sounds (measured as number of sounds read correctly in one minute)	Nonsense word fluency – words read correctly (measured as number two to six sound words read correctly in one minute)	Oral reading fluency (measured as words read correctly per minute – passages)
March (n=35) After one month of instruction	80% (28)	80% (28)	77% (27)
June (n=35) After five months of instruction	66% (23)	83% (29)	74% (26)
November (n=35) After ten months of instruction	80% (28)	89% (31)	77% (27)

In Year 1, students were receiving top-up instruction (whole-class and intervention groups) in code knowledge they had missed in their first year of schooling. This impacted the delivery of our scope and sequence*, with respect to content and pace. Despite this, from Benchmark 1 (March) to Benchmark 3 (November), 80% of students who completed all benchmarks (Table 4) remained able to meet the increasing benchmark standard on nonsense word reading (correct letter sounds) and oral reading fluency (words read correctly), and the number of students able to meet the nonsense word reading (words recoded correctly) benchmark increased from 80% to 89%.

Table 5 and Table 6 show the growth in Year 2 between the June and November benchmarks. The teaching of Sounds-Write with fidelity only really commenced from May once the teacher had completed training in April. It is clear how much this teaching has impacted students' learning in the second half of the year. This was despite students joining us with limited English language and prior exposure to systematic and explicit phonics teaching. With five to six months of high quality whole-class instruction (Tier 1) and top-up intervention (Tier 2 support), the majority finished the year at grade level.

Table 5. Total students assessed – Year 2 (seven to eight year-olds): students at or above benchmark

Year 2	Nonsense word fluency – correct letter sounds (measured as number of sounds read correctly in one minute)	Nonsense word fluency – words read correctly (measured as number of two to six sound words read correctly in one minute)	Oral reading fluency (measured as words read correctly per minute – passages)
March (n=14) After zero months of instruction ^a	79% (11)	64% (10)	71% (10)
June (n=20) After zero to one month of instruction ^a	45% (9)	50% (10)	50% (10)
November (n=27) After five to six months of instruction ^a	82% (22)	78% (21)	67% (18)

^aTeacher completed Sounds-Write training in April.

Table 6. Students who completed all benchmarks – Year 2 (seven to eight year-olds): students at or above benchmark

Year 2	Nonsense word fluency – correct letter sounds (measured as number of sounds read correctly in one minute)	Nonsense word fluency – words read correctly (measured as number of two to six sound words read correctly in one minute)	Oral reading fluency (measured as words read correctly per minute – passages)
March (n=14) After zero months of instruction ^b	79% (11)	64% (9)	71% (10)
June (n=14) After zero to one month of instruction ^b	57% (8)	64% (9)	57% (8)
November (n=14) After five to six months of instruction ^b	100% (14)	86% (12)	71% (10)

^bTeacher completed Sounds-Write training in April.

In Year 2, students were also receiving top-up instruction (whole-class and intervention groups), although Sounds-Write instruction did not formally commence until May, just before Benchmark 2 (June). From Benchmark 2 (June) to Benchmark 3 (November), students in Year 2 improved significantly across the board (see [Table 5](#) and [Table 6](#)). On the nonsense word reading (correct letter sounds) subtest, the percentage of students at or above benchmark improved from 57% to 100%. On nonsense word reading (words recoded correctly) and oral reading fluency (words read correctly), the percentages of students at or above benchmark improved from 64% to 86%, and 57% to 71% respectively.

3.2. Year 1 Phonics Screening Check (Australia⁵)

[Table 7](#) shows that 69% of our Year 1 students ‘passed’ the Australian Phonics Check, which means they scored at or above 28/40. These students are considered ‘fluent decoders’. Students with a score of 20-27 are considered ‘developing decoders’, and students with a score of 19 and below are considered ‘struggling decoders’. The average score for this cohort was 29.5/40. The Phonics Check currently is only mandated in one state in Australia (South Australia), but this gives us a local comparison. In South Australia, 43% of students passed in 2018, 52% passed in 2019, 63% passed in 2020, and 67% passed in 2021.

Table 7. Year 1 Phonics Screening Check results

Fluent decoders	Developing decoders	Struggling decoders
69%	18%	13%

We expect to see better results next year when our current Foundation cohort who have had Sounds-Write from the start of their first year of school move into Year 1. We expect even better results the following year (2023), when the 2022 Foundation cohort move into Year 1 after optimal instruction with all staff trained from the outset, and hopefully no further remote learning periods.

5. <https://literacyhub.edu.au/families/the-phonics-check.html>

3.3. MOTIf Diagnostic Spelling Tests⁶: spelling of sounds, nonsense words, and irregular words

The assessments shown on Table 8 were conducted in November, following almost a full year of schooling. Foundation and Year 1 cohorts had been taught via Sounds-Write since February (ten months of instruction/intervention), while the Year 2 cohort had been taught via Sounds-Write since May (five to six months of instruction/intervention).

Table 8. MOTIf Diagnostic Spelling Tests (% of students within or above the average range)

	Spelling of Sounds (DiSTs)	Spelling of Nonsense Words	Spelling of Irregular Words
Foundation	83%	59% within or above the average range for Year 1	
Year 1	76%	81%	83%
Year 2		80%	84%

Overall, 81% of our Foundation-Year 2 students are within or above the average range (as per MOTIf test norms) for their grade on spelling measures following their Sounds-Write instruction in 2021. This data is very pleasing, as independent application of knowledge on spelling tasks is perhaps one of the best measures of how effective the instruction has been.

When we collate and average student performances across word-level reading, oral reading fluency and word-level spelling assessments, 80% of our students performed at or above grade level by the end of 2021. We are thrilled with this progress, given the many challenges of starting a new school during a pandemic. We will be analysing longitudinal data to measure our effectiveness over time, once implementation of Sounds-Write is entirely consistent across year levels, and routine for all students from their first year with us. We look forward to improving on our first-year outcomes.

6. <https://www.motif.org.au/home/tests>

4. Recommendations

Training is essential for all staff if Sounds-Write is to be taught well and in a consistent manner. While the training is outstanding and comprehensive, ongoing work to support consistency and fidelity is essential. The job is never ‘done’.

What we have done and are doing:

- mapped out teaching of units across Foundation-Year 2 so staff are clear on what will be taught when (detailed scope and sequence);
- team planning via a consistent planning document outlining fortnightly instruction for each year level (i.e. which Sounds-Write lessons and which words/how many words across the ten days in the fortnight);
- modelling, observation, feedback, coaching, and goal setting;
- feedback on planning, pace, amount of content, and script adherence;
- regular leadership team walk-through to observe and provide year level feedback;
- professional learning on assessments which are designed to measure teacher effectiveness and student progress, and establishing clear links between what we are teaching and what we are assessing;
- supporting staff to conduct formative assessment and error correction daily; and
- supporting staff to evaluate assessment data and set goals for student learning.



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