

6 Merllyn Community Primary School, Bagillt, North Wales, United Kingdom

Tracy Jones¹

1. Context

Ysgol Merllyn (Merllyn Community Primary School) is located in the village of Bagillt in North Wales (UK), an old lead-mining village in a semi-rural location. It is a state primary with 150 students aged three to eleven, of which 26% are entitled to free school meals and 12% have English as an Additional Language (EAL). Transiency is 8% and 12% of students have Additional Learning Needs (ALN), including 8% with behavioral needs.

The school had previously taught the infants^{*2} (aged four to seven) using a synthetic phonics programme, however, there were many children coming through the infants who still did not have a secure knowledge of sound-spelling correspondences, and were not able to segment, blend, and manipulate phonemes. Many children in the juniors* required intervention due to poor reading and decoding skills.

2. Implementation

In 2018, our school was in contact with Three Bridges Primary School in Southall, London. We noticed that their children's reading was incredible. Children in the Reception class, aged four and five, were writing in sentences about the story they were learning about. The spelling was mostly accurate, and they were very

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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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confident readers. We noticed that nearly all children were passing the Phonics Screening Check* in Year 1 and enquired about how they were getting such good results. The head explained that they were using Sounds-Write and put us in touch with the team.

Sounds-Write was implemented initially in Reception, Year 1, and Year 2 from September 2018 (see Table 1). The teachers used the Sounds-Write Diagnostic Test to be able to identify the extent to which children knew their sound-spelling correspondences, and could segment, blend, and manipulate phonemes. In the second year of implementation, the Key Stage* 2 teachers and teaching assistants were trained and then assessed the juniors to identify gaps in code knowledge and skills. At this point, we ended any other literacy interventions to maintain fidelity to the programme and moved over to Sounds-Write.

Table 1. Timeline of staff training

May 2018	May 2019	June 2020	2020
Infants teachers 4-day face-to-face training	Infants teaching assistants and KS1 teachers 4-day face-to-face training	Headteacher and all other untrained teachers and teaching assistants online training	Online training for KS2 Years 3-6 programme

As soon as they are appointed, new teachers or teaching assistants are booked onto the next available Sounds-Write training course. Sounds-Write is delivered across the school with additional targeted support when necessary.

During the first Covid-19 lockdown starting March 2020, the teachers made videos of Sounds-Write lessons for the infant children and sent learning packs home. All parents and carers were encouraged to complete the free Sounds-Write Course for parents and carers to enable them to support their children. In Wales, children returned to school in June 2020 and the teachers carried out the diagnostic test to check if children had retained their code knowledge and skills. The data showed that the children had not lost their code knowledge and skills during this time of online teaching. Sounds-Write lessons continued as normal until the second lockdown in January-March 2021. The teachers

continued to record video lessons for the children. Children in the juniors who were on targeted support had one-to-one live Sounds-Write lessons daily. The juniors staff produced learning packs for the children to practise their code knowledge and skills. They also developed their word building, reading longer texts, and comprehension linked to a specific novel or story. Overall, there was approximately 80% engagement in home learning.

This case study discusses the tracking information for our current (2021) Year 3 class. They have been taught using Sounds-Write from Reception and have received targeted support and interventions when necessary and there was very good engagement in home learning. There are 20 children in the class. Although it is not a requirement in Wales, we carried out the Phonics Screening Check at the end of Year 1 and 90% of the children achieved a pass. Two children were receiving targeted support before lockdown (one EAL and one with specific difficulties in blending).

3. Evaluation

Once the children have been taught the Initial Code*, they progress onto the Extended Code*. The data in [Table 2](#) and [Table 3](#) shows the progress between November 2020 and September 2021 for the children who are currently in Year 3. These children were in Year 2 when the first part of the test was conducted ([Table 2](#)), seven months after the start of the pandemic.

The test evaluated the students' knowledge of sound-spelling correspondences in the Extended Code. The grey highlights in [Table 2](#) show that the children knew what sounds could be represented by these spellings. Note that Student 5 was an EAL student, new to English, Student 18 had struggled to retain any Initial Code knowledge and was receiving additional targeted support, and Student 14 had very poor attendance and had many challenges that impacted on learning.

In March 2020, the school closed for lockdown and the children did not return physically to school until September 2020. Diagnostic tests were carried out to

identify code knowledge and skills gaps. We then tiered the children depending on their needs and provided timetabled targeted support when necessary.

Although the Extended Code should start in Year 1, due to the lockdown, we did not want to introduce any new sounds until we had the cohort back, so we spent time revising and consolidating sounds and skills already taught.

By November 2020, this cohort had been taught Units 1 to 5 of the Extended Code. This diagnostic test was carried out as we were facing another national lockdown and we wanted to see what code knowledge and skills the children had retained.

Table 2. November 2020 (children in Year 2)

Students	sh	ck	th	ch	nn	er	ea	ay	oa	ai	ou	ee	ow	ir	ey	ie	aw	ew	oo	oi	ue	ui	au	oy	ur
1																									
2																									
3																									
4																									
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The second lockdown in Wales meant the children were learning from home from December 2020 to February 2021. During this lockdown, children receiving targeted support had one-to-one online Sounds-Write lessons, teachers were filming themselves teaching Sounds-Write and sending work home. Student 18 was in our childcare hub³ and received one-to-one sessions every day. This really helped him develop his code knowledge and skills (see [Table 3](#)) and over time he had a lot more confidence and was experiencing success. Student 5 was offered online one-to-one every day and also made very good progress (see [Table 3](#)).

The tests were done again early in September 2021 (see [Table 3](#)), when the children had returned from the summer holidays and were at the start of Year 3. The notes in the boxes in [Table 3](#) identify sound-letter correspondences that were not secure enough so needed some very short-term intensive intervention.

We attribute the progress made by the children to the pedagogy of Sounds-Write. Even with the continued disruption, the children continued to gain code knowledge and skills, which were now in their long-term memory. The diagnostic tests are designed to show exactly the weaker areas of code knowledge and skills and this ensures that the targeted provision is very specific to what needs more teaching.

The impact of Sounds-Write implementation, despite lockdowns and missed teaching and learning, is clear. Nearly all children entering the juniors are confident, skilled readers, their automatic decoding enables them to orthographically map words and free up working memory to focus on word meaning and comprehension. The disruption in learning has shown minimal impact as they move through the programme. The Year 3 teachers report this is the first year that there is real confidence in reading in a Year 3 cohort and they have good skills during guided reading sessions to decode unfamiliar words quickly.

3. Childcare hubs, mostly located in schools, provided critical childcare and education for the children of key workers (health, education, transport, etc.) during those periods of the pandemic when schools moved to online teaching in Wales.

Table 3. September 2021 (children in Year 3)

Students	sh	ck	th	ch	nn	er	ea	ay	oa	ai	ou	ee	ow	ir	ey	ie	aw	ew	oo	oi	ue	ui	au	oy	ur
1															ee					o					
2																									
3											ow		ow												
4																									
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7																									
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4. Recommendations

Implementing Sounds-Write in school needs careful planning, and it is necessary to ensure that there is a phonics lead who is absolutely committed to the role and trained on leading phonics. Our Phonics Lead has attended the Sounds-Write Masterclass: Leading Phonics and will regularly check into sessions to ensure staff are keeping to the scripts and there is fidelity to the programme across the school. In addition, our Phonics Lead regularly meets with the practitioners delivering phonics and interventions to discuss practice and progress. She will ensure sounds are said precisely and sound-spelling correspondences are being taught correctly and liaise where necessary with Speech and Language support

and EAL support. Before lockdown, she also held sessions for parents and carers to observe lessons in her classroom. In each Sounds-Write session over two weeks, three parents were invited in to watch and take part in the sessions.

The purpose of this was to ensure that if parents and carers wanted to support, they were teaching phoneme to grapheme at the same time and not in isolation. The parents were also encouraged to download the Sounds-Write app for home learning.

Introducing Sounds-Write in Reception is quite straightforward, however, as you move further up the school where the students have not had previous Sounds-Write teaching of the Initial Code, students' code knowledge and skills can be underdeveloped, but you do not necessarily want to start from the beginning. It will take at least a couple of years with older children to get them where they should be. We attempted to overcome this by initially carrying out the Diagnostic Test with all children. They had been taught with a different phonics scheme, but the code knowledge and skills were not embedded into long-term memory and some children were used to guessing. Some children were significantly behind, so in addition to whole-class lessons, they received daily intensive support in order to support their progress.

Although we do not have to use the Phonics Screening Check in Wales, we choose to use it in our school, as it gives us a comparison with England, where phonics teaching and learning is mandatory. In Wales, there is no requirement to use an accredited synthetic phonics scheme. This leaves schools with the autonomy to decide how reading is to be taught. This can be a challenge as children joining from other schools might not have the same code knowledge and skills as their cohort, and may require intensive support to bring them in line with their peers. Additionally, when transitioning to high schools (ages 12-19), children from different primary schools might have been taught different strategies, which may cause issues for the high schools.

Our school has been research-informed for many years and draws on effect sizes and the work of Professor John Hattie and the Visible Learning MetaX

database⁴, which has up-to-date information on worldwide research into strategies with the potential to accelerate learning. To understand the data, 0.4 is one year's growth in learning for one year's input, therefore our school looks to implement and measure the impact of strategies with a higher than 0.4 effect size. Current research shows that phonics instruction has an effect size of 0.57 and phonological awareness has an effect size of 0.75 (for comparison, the effect size of the Whole Language* approach to literacy development is 0.09). This indicates that children can potentially make fast progress by implementing phonics instruction and focusing on phonological awareness, as Sounds-Write does.

This year, as part of the new ALN reforms in Wales, we are providing targeted support for any children across the school who may need additional support to acquire age-appropriate reading skills and knowledge. We are using a response to intervention approach using a tiered system. Children are assessed and placed in Tier* 1, 2, and 3. Children on Tier 2 will receive at least three additional one-to-one or group interventions per week in order for them to be placed back in Tier 1, once they have caught up with their peers. Children in Tier 3 will generally require intense and additional support, in nearly all instances for wellbeing and emotional issues.

We are also planning to provide intensive support to Year 1 children, in addition to daily phonics lessons, who have missed much of their first two years due to Covid. This will include Sounds-Write whole-class lessons and five additional one-to-one or group interventions per week as they move from the Initial Code to the Extended Code until they have caught up. The impact of this additional support will be evaluated in December 2021.

4. <https://www.visiblelearningmetax.com/>



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