



Impact of phonics instruction for older pupils

A summary of published research* by Dr Timothy Mills

This study set out to test whether addressing hidden decoding gaps through systematic phonics instruction would improve reading outcomes for older pupils not classed as struggling readers.

Key questions

- Can older primary pupils who do not present as struggling readers improve their basic decoding skills through systematic phonics instruction?
- If decoding skills improve, does this lead to improvements in reading fluency and comprehension?

Overall results

The study found that the **pupils who had received Sounds-Write phonics interventions made significantly greater gains in decoding skills, word recognition, fluency, spelling, and comprehension** compared to the comparison group.

The findings suggest that continued phonics instruction in Key Stage 2 can address code deficits, enhance fluency, and support comprehension, even for non-struggling readers.

Method

The study focused on older pupils (ages 9–11) with deficits in basic decoding skills but not formally classified as ‘struggling readers’.

The research employed a quasi-experimental approach, using a convenience sample from four English schools.

Pupils were assessed at the start of Year 5 (autumn 2017) and again after three and a half terms (autumn 2018) in four key areas: basic decoding skills, automatic word recognition, reading fluency (rate and accuracy), and reading comprehension.



4 schools



7 classrooms



125 pupils

Sample

125 Year 5 pupils were divided into two groups:

- 91 pupils from 5 classrooms in 2 schools: This group received three 30-minute Sounds-Write sessions per week for three and a half terms, with one of the weekly sessions dedicated to spelling.
- 34 pupils from 2 classrooms in the other 2 schools: This comparison group followed the standard reading curriculum without any additional phonics teaching.

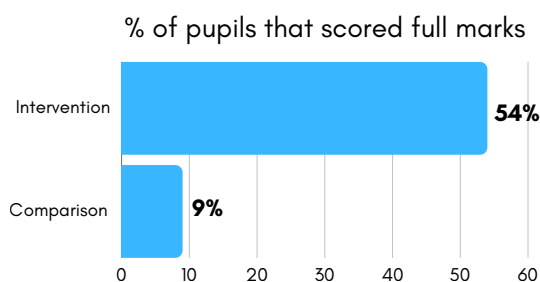
The four schools in the study belonged to the same Trust and used similar reading instruction and curricula. KS2 reading results had been below national average in all four schools in the two years before the study, and three of the schools had been placed in ‘Special Measures’ by Ofsted** in the previous five years. Indices of deprivation in these four schools were double the national average.

*Mills, Timothy (2024) ‘Can Older Pupils, Who Do Not Present as Struggling Readers, Improve Their Basic Decoding Skills Through Systematic Phonics Instruction and What Effect Does This Have on Their Reading Fluency and Comprehension?’, *International Journal of Teaching and Learning Sciences* 1(4): 108.

** England’s Office for Standards in Education



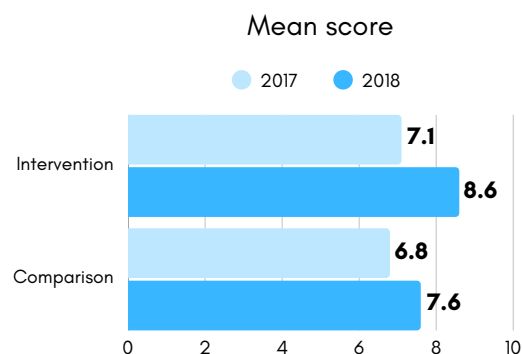
Decoding skills



Whilst all pupils improved their decoding skills, those in the Sounds-Write intervention made significantly greater gains.

54% of pupils in the Sounds-Write intervention group scored full marks in the autumn 2018 Bryant test compared to 9% of pupils in the comparison group.

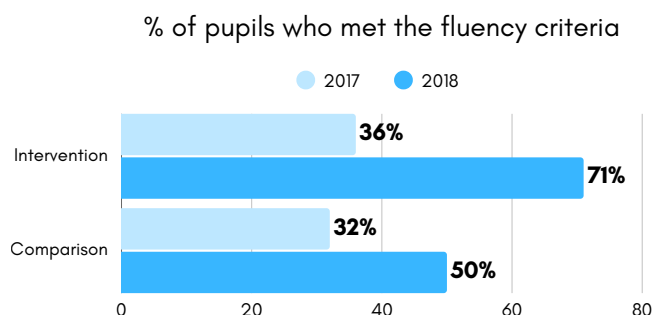
Automatic word recognition



Automatic word recognition improved in both groups, but those in the Sounds-Write intervention made significantly greater gains, indicating that phonics instruction in KS2 enhances orthographic processing.

Mean score in the ASUWRI test increased 1.5 points in the Sounds-Write intervention group, almost twice the 0.8 increase in the comparison group.

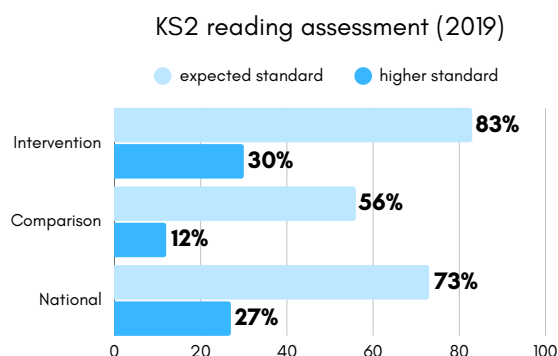
Reading fluency



Reading fluency improved in both groups, but those in the Sounds-Write intervention group made substantially stronger gains in the DIBELS test.

The percentage of pupils that met the fluency criteria rose 35 points, from 36% to 71%, in the Sounds-Write intervention group, but only 18 points, from 32% to 50%, in the comparison group.

Reading comprehension



Pupils in the Sounds-Write intervention group were much more likely to achieve or exceed expected standards in both PiRA and KS2 reading assessments.

83% of pupils in the Sounds-Write intervention achieved the expected standard in KS2 reading, 10 points above the national average. In the comparison group, only 56% of pupils achieved the expected standard, 17 points below the national average.

Conclusions

- The findings challenge the view that phonics instruction is ineffective for older pupils.
- Pupils can appear fluent but still have gaps in their decoding knowledge.
- These gaps limit reading efficiency and comprehension, especially as texts become more complex.
- There are strong correlations between decoding and word reading, fluency and comprehension.
- Strengthening decoding supports fluency and comprehension, not just word reading.

Recommendations

- Screen pupils beyond the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check to identify lingering decoding gaps.
- Provide systematic phonics instruction to older pupils where deficits exist.
- Train upper-primary teachers in phonics and word-attack strategies, not just early years staff.

