

FILLING IN THE GAPS

Sabrina Sulliman shares her experiences of using Little Wandle Code to address gaps in phonics knowledge among her school's Y7s



Sabrina Sulliman is a Literacy and SEND Intervention Lead at Southfields Academy, London

Prior to becoming involved in the Little Wandle Code pilot, what schemes or interventions were you using to engage struggling readers at Southfields Academy?

I'd previously supported Y7 phonics classes where we were using a different phonics programme, and had found student engagement to be really quite poor because they'd encountered the same programme before, at primary school. They recognised it straight away.

These students were in an intervention group who had been withdrawn from mainstream English class. I remember walking the kids to their phonics lessons, and having to persuade them to enter the room once we got there because they felt so 'babied'. The only progress we were making was with those students who were actually willing to engage with the material, but even then there were limits to what we could do by effectively teaching them the exact same phonics programme twice.

We eventually stopped delivering phonics interventions altogether, since the only options available to us were other primary programmes which we knew would make our learners feel that they were being patronised. Even so, that still left us having to support these unconfident readers. We could see that

need was there and growing, particularly post-COVID, but there simply weren't any options to choose from.

How did you come to be involved in the Little Wandle Code pilot programme?

I was already familiar with the primary phonics programme, Little Wandle Letters and Sounds Revised. I was among a group of secondary teachers that had been invited to a demonstration of how it worked, and through that I got to hear how they'd started work on producing a secondary version called Little Wandle Code.

I immediately wanted to know more, because to me, the issue isn't with teaching phonics to secondary students *per se*, but with how

you pitch phonics to children who have already experienced primary school phonics. If all you can offer them is a repeat of something they've done before, it's never going to work. Plus, there's that additional barrier of secondary school English teachers generally not having been trained up as teachers of literacy.

The notion of being able to train secondary school teachers and support staff in delivering phonics seemed like quite a unique offer. Having that as part of a programme written specifically for secondary school learners made me really want to see it in action, so we accepted the offer of signing up for the pilot programme.

How would you characterise the level of need for secondary phonics education, based on what you've seen at Southfields Academy? Has it stayed at a consistent level? Has it been rising?

As a non-selective school, we have a huge range in terms of ability. When I first arrived, our phonics provision was delivered as a small group intervention, with the majority of those children having identified additional needs through what we used to call a Statement, or because they were relatively new to the country.

Now, if I look over the cohort of children engaging with our phonics interventions, they don't all have EHCPs, a recognised or diagnosed need, and won't necessarily be new to the

country. I think that nationally, the need has been growing because children are sadly disengaging with reading and literacy more widely.

That said, I can't imagine that it's necessarily the same picture across all secondary schools. For context, we have nearly 80 children with EHCPs in our school and there are two resource bases here – one for deaf children, and one for children with a speech and language or ASD diagnosis. There is a breadth to our intake, but equally, while phonics was once viewed as a form of SEND provision for children with additional needs it is no longer being delivered in a corner of the school to a small number of children.

We actually have a fairly large Little Wandle Code intervention cohort, which is why it's become a higher priority for curriculum time. Our delivery now involves not just

the English department, but also support from our pastoral team and some other teachers from across the curriculum, due to the impact that our phonics provision regularly has on students' overall progress.

Before, we were seeing relatively incremental progress – improvements of maybe around six months. Teachers won't necessarily see or feel that in their classrooms, but once children are making up to a year or more of progress in literacy, teachers will soon start telling you about students who are now writing much more in their assessments and other small, yet noticeable changes since the start of the year.

"They're starting to develop a relationship with books"

What's been your overall impression of the impact the programme has had?

If I compare the first year to the second in terms of staff buy-in, the results spoke for themselves.

We had more people trained up to deliver the programme this year than we had last year. When I've surveyed those staff who are delivering Little Wandle Code, they speak highly of not just the progress the children have made, but more than anything the *confidence* they now have.

With these children, it can be sad to see just how unwilling they are to participate across the curriculum. They don't write things down because they think they'll get the answers wrong. They sometimes know a word, but not the spelling, so they won't answer. They worry when it looks like a teacher might call on them to read something out to the class. Often, they'll want to go completely unnoticed in the classroom.

A lot of the feedback we've

received describes how some students have really come out of their shells, sometimes alongside improvements in their attendance.

Have you had any feedback from the students themselves?

Towards the end of the school year, I remember complimenting one of the girls in a Y7 phonics class for spelling out a word for another student, saying how brilliant it was and joking that she was helping me with my workload. And she said, really casually, "*Yeah, Miss – because I can.*" She wouldn't have said something like that at the start of the year, nor would she have helped her peer in

the way that she did. That's what sticks with me, and it's the detail I share with other teachers when

they join our phonics programme support team.

Statistically, some of the best progress we've seen has been among children with EHCPs who have, on average, made over a year's progress. I've also seen a rise in the number of books borrowed from the school library among this cohort, who would previously never have considered even visiting the library. You can really see the shift. They're starting to develop a relationship with books, in part thanks to the Little Wandle Code 'decodable anthologies' that collect together multiple short, accessible texts, but which outwardly just look like normal books.

I think they're amazing. They do a great job of hooking the kids, who barely notice how they're designed to be entirely decodable or the level of repetition. They're just *reading a book*, enjoying it and wanting to find out what happens next.

For more information about Little Wandle Code, visit littlewandlecode.org.uk



BEHIND THE CODE



Sarah Paxton, Programme Developer at Little Wandle,

unpacks some of the design decisions that went into the decodable anthologies published by Collins.

"Our starting point was these mustn't look like standard phonics books, which are typically printed in a larger format and are very slim. We wanted them to look and feel like the books their peers are reading, with eye-catching covers. Since phonics texts are naturally short, bringing multiple stories together into anthologies was a practical and effective solution.

The challenge was to include variety and avoid the 'one sentence and a big picture' layout typical of many phonics books. Some stories in the anthologies use a graphic novel format, allowing for minimal text while still filling the page in an age-appropriate way. Poetry sits alongside non-fiction that uses photography in a style more familiar to older readers, and the illustration styles in the fiction stories have been chosen with the same readers in mind.

We've tried to be thoughtful about what students want and need, providing stories that are both engaging and accessible."

