



Triple R Teaching

What is a sound wall and do you really need one?

A sound wall is an alternative to what most of us are familiar with - a word wall. Word walls, of course, are when you have high frequency words posted on the wall, organized by first letter, and it's supposed to be a reference for students when reading and spelling.

The problem is that word walls often just become wallpaper because they're so hard for students to use. It's kind of like having students look up a word they can't spell in the dictionary.

Let's say a child is looking up the word "one," O-N-E. They're trying to figure out how to spell it, and they're looking on the word wall. Well, if they look on the wall, they're going to look under W for /w/. How about the word "the?" If they don't know that T-H represents /th/, how will they know where to find the word?

So many of us have had word walls, but didn't know what to do with them, and they sat mostly unused.

A sound wall is different because it actually displays the sounds, so students look up the sounds instead of the letters.

You might wonder, "How could that possibly work? How do you display sounds?" Well, you do that by displaying mouth pictures that show what the mouth does when it makes a particular sound, and you group like sounds together. You group the sounds that are made in the same part of the mouth. The fancy words for that are place and manner of articulation.

In addition to having that visual representation of the sound with the mouth picture, you have a key word picture so you can remember what sound the mouth makes. For

example, you might have a picture of two lips coming together and then a picture of a mouse, so we know that those two lips represent the sound /m/.

When you have a sound wall, you actually have two of them - one for the consonant sounds and one for the vowel sounds.

Now, do you need a sound wall? Is it a must have? No, it isn't, but it's a very useful tool for building phonemic awareness and teaching phoneme-grapheme correspondences. In other words, teaching the letters that represent particular sounds. Because in addition to having those pictures of the mouth and then the keyword picture, as you teach new graphemes (as you teach the letter or letters that represent particular sounds), you post them underneath the phoneme picture.

Now, as far as I know, there is no research that compares students taught to read with a sound wall and without, but you can know with confidence that it's a tool that's used to teach the things that are backed by research in the science of reading. I hope that at some point in your science of reading journey, you'll add a sound wall to your classroom.

Next week, I'll share five things to remember when getting started.

I have a free personal sound wall for you, something you can print as a reference for your students, and you can find that in the show notes, themeasuredmom.com/episode23.