Interim evaluation report:
The Reading Planet Rocket Phonics programme 2021–2023 impact trial

Independent outcome evaluation by Dr Helen L Breadmore, Associate Professor Psychology in Education, School of Education, University of Birmingham and process evaluation by Professor Clare Wood, School of Social Sciences, Nottingham Trent University

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Introduction

This interim findings report outlines the results of the first year of a two-year impact trial of Reading Planet Rocket Phonics on Reception (YR) and Year 1 (Y1) pupil’s reading attainment. The impact trial set out to understand what makes the Reading Planet Rocket Phonics programme work well. Schools self-selected to use Reading Planet Rocket Phonics or to act as business-as-usual controls. Albeit the sample had limited the power to detect significant differences between control and intervention conditions, this pilot trial set out not only to measure the size of the effect on reading attainment and phonics knowledge, but also to provide preliminary evidence of whether schools were able to implement the programme as intended, and to understand which features of implementation make the programme effective.
Prior to DfE validation, early trials were conducted during the development of the programme in 2020–2021. These offered promising evidence of the suitability of the programme for early literacy instruction. These trials focused on gathering classroom feedback to improve the effectiveness of the reading and teaching materials in development.

Further case studies and testimonials from schools and MATs during 2021–2022 highlighted that teachers and school leaders observed improvements in attainment and pupil engagement with reading. These can be accessed here.

In parallel, an impact trial was commissioned with two independent evaluators exploring the impact of the Reading Planet Rocket Phonics programme. The outcome evaluation set out to measure whether changes in attainment might be attributed specifically to the programme, through direct measurement of the impact on phonics knowledge and reading attainment. The process evaluation set out to gauge fidelity to the programme and to provide insights into the experience of implementing Rocket Phonics in the trial schools. This trial started in September 2021 and will run over two academic years, finishing in July 2023.

As is typical for a trial of this type, progress of pupils exposed to the ‘intervention’ (Reading Planet Rocket Phonics) is compared to those in a ‘business-as-usual control’ condition (i.e., receiving normal teaching). The impact of the first year of the trial was assessed by examining the reading attainment and phonics knowledge of YR and Y1 pupils in 13 schools which had self-selected to use the new Reading Planet Rocket Phonics programme and comparing this to 7 business-as-usual control schools.

Background to trialling

The scope of this interim evaluation report

This interim evaluation report focuses on measuring the impact of the programme during the first year of implementation of Reading Planet Rocket Phonics across two separate cohorts – YR and Y1 – using attainment data and teacher interviews, surveys and observations. The YR cohort started the programme from the beginning, and Y1 came into the programme mid-way through, after a year of being in and out of school due to disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

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The Reading Planet Rocket Phonics programme includes an assessment of phonics knowledge which was used as an outcome measure and administered as a baseline before the programme started, and at the end of the programme. Performance on the national phonics screening check at the end of Y1 also provided a measure of phonics knowledge.

Reading attainment was measured using the standardised New Progress in Reading Assessment (New PiRA) test administered in the second half of each academic term (except for Autumn YR, where no assessment is available).

• In YR a total of 867 participants from 20 schools were included in analyses testing the reliability and validity of in-programme assessments (361 from control schools and 506 from Rocket Phonics schools).

• In Y1 a total of 857 participants from 20 schools were included in analyses testing the reliability and validity of in-programme assessments (332 from control schools and 525 from Rocket Phonics schools).

A more detailed analysis of the outcome data underlying the findings in this interim report can be found here. The summary is below.

**Reception**

Results from the YR cohort showed promising signs of progress in both reading attainment and phonics knowledge when receiving the Reading Planet Rocket Phonics programme which appeared to exceed that of control schools.

Overall, there was a trend for pupils in Reading Planet Rocket Phonics schools to perform better than controls on all outcome measures. This difference did not reach statistical significance (possibly because of the relatively small and variable sample sizes in control and intervention conditions). Nonetheless, the magnitude of the effect was large. This difference in the reading attainment (measured on the New PiRA tests) can be meaningfully described as equating to pupils using Reading Planet Rocket Phonics attaining around 5 or 6 standardised scores more than pupils in the control schools (on average). In terms of reading age differences, it equates to a few months’ difference in spring, and a 10-month difference by the summer. The chart opposite illustrates the difference.

**Year 1**

Results from Y1 were varied and difficult to draw conclusions from – Y1 pupils had experienced disruption to their education in YR due to the Covid-19 pandemic and therefore were likely to be starting Y1 with gaps in their phonics knowledge and reading attainment that is not usual for this year group, and had only started the Rocket Phonics programme in Y1, rather than YR, so had not followed it with fidelity for two years as the programme intended.
Interim findings from the process evaluation

In addition to the outcome data, a process evaluation was carried out to provide insights into:

- the background context of phonics implementation in both the Reading Planet Rocket Phonics and control schools
- what was happening in practice in the Reading Planet Rocket Phonics schools
- what the teachers thought of it
- how it compared to previous phonics programmes or approaches adopted by the schools who were participating in the trial.

Summary of findings

It was noted that at the outset, the schools embarking on the Reading Planet Rocket Phonics programme were ‘broadly comparable’ with the controls schools in teacher confidence and processes in teaching phonics and reading, with the exception of the control schools being more likely to use guided reading sessions and slightly shorter phonics sessions. The main difference at outset was that teachers in the control schools had double the median years of teaching experience both overall and within their specific year groups.

The summary of findings uses information from these various sources to provide an account of how well the Reading Planet Rocket Phonics approach was received and implemented.

- All Reading Planet Rocket Phonics staff who completed the survey:
  - rated the success of the resources for their children highly: 100% of responses indicating that they were either very successful (22/26) or reasonably successful (4/26).
  - agreed that they would recommend the programme to other schools.

Methods

The methods used were:

- an anonymous survey of staff in both the Reading Planet Rocket Phonics schools and the control schools. This survey provided information on the experience level of staff delivering the teaching, their confidence in delivering phonics and in teaching reading, the approaches they took to their teaching, and other relevant information. These surveys were distributed at the beginning of the academic year and were repeated at the end of the academic year, so that changes in confidence etc could be tracked across the year.
- interviews with the schools participating in the trial.
- observations of Reading Planet Rocket Phonics lessons in term 3. Four trial schools participated in this.
The children love the big book (digital) with the small sound effects e.g. turning the page, words in ovals/lozenges. The big book has been very good for extending vocabulary.

The way in which the Target Reader books match up with the phonics scheme is remarkable. The fact that every child in the class has access to the same reading book and that this is also accessed digitally is wonderful. The children have enjoyed reading this year and have made fabulous progress. It is a truly awesome scheme and I am very grateful for the fact that we have been chosen as a school to trial it.

The children had the opportunity to apply the skills in every lesson, which I liked. I also liked the use of the challenging vocabulary with the children. I also liked how all children learnt new sounds at same pace together, despite ability.

I like how we can adapt as we need for different children. Slower pace has enabled many lower ability children to keep up with new sounds.

The booklet is a fantastic way to see and monitor children’s progress in phonics, and is a lovely resource for the children to take pride in.

All the resources for Rocket Phonics are engaging, phonetically decodable and exciting. I truly credit the success of our children and their enthusiasm around phonics to the resources provided.

It’s a very easy scheme to follow and requires little work in terms of planning.

The print resources are excellent. There have been some occasions where logging on to Rising Stars has been difficult.

Keeping the whole class together has not been the best for my lowest SEND children ... although they had daily interventions it was too much for them on top of the phase 3 sounds they needed to work on.

The school that had the strongest outcomes for their pupils in both YR and Y1 was also observed to have the strongest understanding of the programme and the best implementation based on interviews and class observation. The school in question is located in a low SES area, with a high number of pupil premium pupils, low levels of parental engagement and a history of outcomes significantly below national averages. A case study about this school can be found here.

One teacher found aspects of the implementation challenging as she had struggled to match the pace and content of the sessions to suit a particularly wide range of lower attainers in a cohort with high pupil mobility. Feedback such as this has been used to understand where schools may be finding difficulties in implementation, in order to enhance and highlight guidance and training – particularly for teaching slower learners and platform improvements are underway to improve the online experience.

Rising Stars is available to all schools in England and there is an abundance of qualitative feedback from staff who completed the survey praised the integration of the different elements of the scheme, the structure of it and the resources.

Staff were also asked to indicate which were the best or most successful elements of the programme. Many comments centred on the pace, structure and the integration of different elements across the programme, as well as the mastery approach of all children learning together to keep up not catch up.

Qualitative feedback from staff who completed the survey praised the integration of the different elements of the scheme, the structure of it and the resources.

Staff were also asked whether they had found anything challenging or difficult to deliver. The challenges that some centred around technical difficulties or some difficulties maintaining the whole class approach with SEND pupils.

The school that had the strongest outcomes for their pupils in both YR and Y1 was also observed to have the strongest understanding of the programme and the best implementation based on interviews and class observation. The school in question is located in a low SES area, with a high number of pupil premium pupils, low levels of parental engagement and a history of outcomes significantly below national averages. A case study about this school can be found here.

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We continue to trial and review new ideas and materials constantly monitoring how well they work for teachers and pupils.

If you would like to share your experiences of using our resources or services, or if you are interested in helping with research or trialling of future products, please contact Kate Mayhew at kate.mayhew@hoddereducation.co.uk

Next steps
The ongoing trial in the academic year 2022–23 will examine the impact of the Reading Planet Rocket Phonics programme in Y1 after pupils have completed the full YR programme and a full report will be available in Autumn term next year.

About us
Rising Stars is part of the Hodder Education Group which includes:

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