

Independent research on the use and impact of Rising Stars Assessment Progress Tests

What did the research involve?

At the start of the autumn term 2014/15, Rising Stars commissioned Shift Learning, an independent research organisation specialising in the education sector, to carry out an evaluation study over a full academic year with schools using the recently published *Progress Tests* for reading; grammar, punctuation and spelling; mathematics; and science. The purpose of the research was to establish how schools were using the tests as they began to teach the new national curriculum and make the transition to assessment without levels, and to understand the impact the *Progress Tests* had on teaching and learning.

A total of 5 schools and 22 teachers took part, with small, medium and large schools from across England represented. Teachers from Years 1 to 6 participated in three in-depth telephone interviews over the course of a year. One Senior Leadership Team (SLT) member from each school also contributed to the research at the end of the summer term. From this, a number of key themes emerged, which are summarised in this overview.

Summary of findings

How were the Rising Stars Assessment Progress Tests being used in schools?

- The tests were being used in different ways in different schools, but the use was largely similar *within* each school, suggesting a whole-school approach to assessment.
- Most schools were found to be using the tests once per half term.
- Several schools were using the *Progress Tests* alongside other forms of assessment to help inform their judgements in the absence of national curriculum levels.

What were found to be the key benefits of the Progress Tests?

Schools reported the following key benefits to using the *Rising Stars Assessment Progress Tests*:

- The tests provided guidance for teachers on the content contained within the new programmes of study and the expectations of children within each year and key stage.
 - The tests helped to build teachers' confidence in assessing and measuring progress without levels.
 - Tests could be used to identify gaps in children's knowledge and understanding across the core subjects.

What impact did the Progress Tests have on teaching and learning?

The *Progress Tests* were found to be effective in the following ways:

- The results from the tests enabled teachers to target their teaching more effectively to ensure gaps in knowledge and understanding were addressed.
- Teachers reported that completing the tests helped to engage children in their own learning as they provided opportunities for peer and self-assessment.
- It was noted that children became more motivated to improve as they were able to see progress in a subject throughout the year.

Overall, teachers gave consistently high scores when asked how likely they would be to recommend the tests to a colleague from another school.



They're just simple to use, children like them... You can put your hands on them and they're just there; you're not rooting around for information. They're to the point and link really well.

KE, Years 5 and 6 teacher,
School 3



How were the *Progress Tests* being implemented and used in schools?

The research found that teachers used the *Rising Stars Assessment Progress Tests* in different ways across different schools, but *within* each school use was largely similar, suggesting that implementation was co-ordinated to some degree at a whole-school level. Most schools utilised the tests on a half-termly basis and found they could be integrated easily into other assessment practices. Teachers were generally using the tests alongside their own judgement to gauge pupil attainment and progress during the transition to an assessment system without national curriculum levels.

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It's just all there for you. It hits you straight away, the visual of it. It makes it easier for me to do things like report back to SLT. I could just go and say, 'Look, big gap there, big gap there'.

SL, Year 3, School 3 in reference to the Progress Trackers

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How were the *Progress Trackers* being used?

Use of the *Progress Trackers* depended on the tracking systems already in place in the school. Those who had invested in a complete tracking system for their school were generally entering the results of the tests straight into their system. Teachers using the *Progress Trackers* commented that they could see that pupils had made progress over the course of the year.

Implementation tips from teachers

Participants in the research study provided the following implementation tips for other teachers:

- **Use the tests as a guide to the curriculum at the beginning of the year.** This helps with curriculum planning and also ensures teachers are familiar with the tests before they use them.
- **Use the tests to identify gaps in learning and to adjust teaching and planning accordingly.** (Several teachers noted the wider benefits of this approach across the school, whereby gaps could be plugged throughout, leading to large-scale improvement.)
- **Make the tests a regular feature in lessons.** By embedding assessment within teaching and ensuring the tests are used regularly, pupils become more aware of their own progress and targets.

- **Use the tests in a way that suits your needs:** flexibility is key to successful implementation. This includes administering the tests to children in small groups and delivering the tests informally, particularly in classes where there's a wide spread of pupil ability.

"I would say using formal assessments is really good for being able to gauge where children are on their own without any support. The informal method gives me both an insight to where they are and some teaching time, rather than it just being assessment time."

HS, Years 1 and 2, School 2

What benefits did teachers and schools find when using the Progress Tests?

Throughout the research project, teachers noted the following key benefits of using the *Rising Stars Assessment Progress Tests*.

1 *As a guide to the new national curriculum and assessment without a framework of levels*

The majority of teachers felt the key benefit was that the tests gave a reliable indication of the expectations of the new curriculum and what that means for children.

Furthermore, several respondents said that the *Progress Tests* had taught them more about the content of the new curriculum and helped them to better understand why levels had been removed. Teachers noted that the tests reinforced the need to look more into the aspects of a subject that a child had been successful or unsuccessful with, to gain a more holistic view of how the child was doing. The teachers appreciated that in the long-term this may be a more beneficial way of approaching assessment than simply giving the child a number or a letter to indicate their performance.

2 *Helping to build teachers' confidence in assessing and measuring progress without levels*

A number of teachers noted that the tests were a reassuring confirmation of their own teacher assessment.

Both teachers and pupils became more familiar with the tests throughout the year. For teachers, greater experience in implementing the tests meant that they became more aware of what was expected of their pupils, adding to how effectively they could identify skills gaps and plan accordingly.

"They are pitched at the right level against the new national curriculum programmes of study. Therefore, they act as a good CPD tool for staff. Teachers can use them with children to assess understanding but more importantly identify gaps in learning and ensure their cohort of children is able to meet ALL of the demands of the curriculum. I also like the style of the questions which can then easily be replicated and teachers can ensure children can use and apply this across a range of methods and strategies."

Jon Smedley, Deputy Headteacher,
Mendell Primary School



The tests are very much in line with the new curriculum, and all of us as teachers are struggling to get to grips with the new curriculum, and trying to learn it, and trying to understand where it's pitched, and you look and think there's a very clear indication.

HS, Years 1 & 2, School 2



3 *For the identification of gaps in knowledge and understanding*

Respondents found that the *Rising Stars Assessment Progress Tests* gave a clear indication of weaknesses in pupils' knowledge, understanding and skill in relation to the requirements of the new curriculum. This view resonated across all three terms.

Teachers commented that having a clearer indication of what was required from the new national curriculum and where these gaps were allowed for a greater understanding of how to plan and prepare for lessons effectively.

"It might be they've got a real lack of understanding in a certain area, which the tests help to highlight, and I can go back and plug those gaps or those misunderstandings through my planning. That's for all subjects."

SR, Year 4, School 1

There was a general consensus amongst participants that more efficient and targeted lesson planning as a result of embedding the *Rising Stars Assessment Progress Tests* would likely have a positive impact on attainment.

What impact did the *Progress Tests* have after a year of use?

The research highlighted that use of the *Rising Stars Assessment Progress Tests* had many benefits for both teachers and pupils. In particular, it was noted that because the tests are well matched to the new curriculum and are easy to use, teachers were able to implement them easily and target their teaching more effectively as a result.

After a year of using the *Progress Tests* all teachers found that the materials were successfully supporting their use of various schemes of work, as the pitch and level of difficulty is appropriately aligned to the requirements of the new curriculum.

In addition, as the research project continued over the year it became possible to gain a qualitative sense of the impact that the *Progress Tests* have had on allowing teachers to assess the progress in pupil attainment. For example, one teacher reported the following improvement in English:

“Particularly in the reading, which we’ve done every term, we can see children who scored quite low on the earlier tests have scored quite high on the later tests, which are harder. So, they’ve showed really clearly that they’ve made good progress towards the Year 4 objectives.”
JE, Year 4, School 4

A large number of respondents emphasised the familiarity of taking tests as being beneficial for their pupils. Children not only became more aware of the content of the new curriculum, but also gained experience in test-taking. They thereby gained greater ownership of their own progress throughout the year, with some respondents also noting that pupils enjoyed collaborating with teachers to mark their work

and see their progress.

Regular use and collaboration with their teachers in some instances improved the confidence pupils had in themselves, with one respondent noting that their pupils were getting better results every week. This teacher believed that their pupils enjoyed seeing their progress, and an increased exposure to the content of the *Progress Tests* had a part to play in increasing engagement.

Will the schools continue to use the Progress Tests?

All schools reported that they would be using the *Progress Tests* in the next academic year.

Would participating schools recommend the Progress Tests to others?

Overall, teachers gave consistently high scores of 8 or more out of 10 when asked how likely they would be to recommend the tests to a colleague from another school.



We have really enjoyed using the Rising Stars material and I feel they definitely have a place within the curriculum. We will continue to use them and our children will continue to benefit from them.

Deputy Headteacher



In summary:

“Having spoken to the staff on a recent INSET day, I would say the Rising Stars Assessment Progress Tests have been a really useful support tool and scaffold during our first year of assessment without levels and on delivering a new curriculum. The coverage in the tests has obviously been linked to the objectives in the new curriculum. This has certainly helped us to pick out and fine tune any significant gaps in learning. Naturally this has then helped us to guide and inform our planning and consequently our teaching and learning. This has probably been the greatest benefit to us as a school. The tests have shown some progress during the course of the year which is always pleasing to see, too.”

SH, Assistant Headteacher, School 4, E-Survey