



Rocket Phonics First Steps



Evaluating the impact on
learners and teachers in
early years education

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Introduction



For every child to have the best start in life, and the best chance of success for the future, they need the building blocks for learning. Recent research published by Ofsted highlights the crucial role played by Early Years settings in addressing any gaps in children's early education and development, and enabling 'school readiness' at the end of children's reception year, helping to overcome the disadvantages of social inequality. This means that Early Years providers are under more pressure than ever to deliver high quality provision. This is against a challenging backdrop for many Early Years providers which are seeing growing numbers of children with developmental delays, additional learning needs, and the ongoing impact of the pandemic on children's social, emotional and mental wellbeing.

Because language is the foundation of children's thinking and learning, it is prioritised as one of the three 'prime' areas in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) phase of Communication and language. Early Years providers are encouraged to scrutinise their programmes of learning to ensure they are ambitious, well-planned and carefully sequenced so all children make the best possible progress. 'Best Start in Life' highlights the 'lifelong benefits' of early literacy provision in which children experience stories, rhymes, songs and book-led play alongside more structured interactions in which staff support language and vocabulary acquisition, as well as developing phonological awareness.¹



Although Ofsted does not inspect or comment on the quality of phonics provision in nursery, most Early Years providers start teaching phonics in pre-Reception as part of their language-rich provision. And although it isn't mandatory to use a commercial Systematic Synthetic Phonics (SSP) Programme, from Reception, schools are judged on programme 'fidelity', in other words, the rigour and consistency with which staff follow their chosen programme to ensure that children meet expectations in phonics and literacy.

The challenge is ensuring that early phonics provision is structured, progressive and ambitious, while also remaining true to the principles of child-centred, play-based learning.

¹Best Start in life part 2: the 3 prime areas of learning published by Ofsted, October 2024



What is the purpose of this report?



We know that many Early Years providers are looking at how to:

- Strengthen the quality of their literacy provision
- Prepare children for Reception
- Support those with speech and language delays
- Upskill staff and boost their confidence.

This report shares the experiences of schools involved in trialling Rocket Phonics First Steps, and sets out what this means for those considering adopting a new SSP programme for children in Early Years.

The report draws on qualitative data from 11 UK primary schools with EYFS provision, one special school and one independent standalone nursery. All opted into taking part in research interviews to share their experiences as 'early adopters' of Rocket Phonics First Steps. Research participants included SLT members responsible for their school's literacy or phonics curriculum and practitioners delivering the programme. In total, 15 participants contributed their feedback to this report. For a full list of school names, please see Appendix A.

Five of the schools in this study represented two Trusts (Shireland Collegiate Academy Trust and Wellspring Academy Trust), where their role as early adopters of the programme has informed and positively influenced further take-up in other schools in those Trusts.

The research aimed to:

- Explore why Early Years settings have adopted Rocket Phonics First Steps.
- Understand how the programme is being used with pre-Reception children.
- Evaluate the ease with which schools were able to implement and use Rocket Phonics First Steps.
- Rate the impact of Rocket Phonics First Steps across key areas.
- Capture attitudes towards the programme, and how it impacted on teachers' confidence and enjoyment in teaching phonics.
- Investigate children's reactions to the programme.

About Rocket Phonics

First Steps



Rocket Phonics First Steps is one of Hachette Learning's Rocket Phonics programmes, a validated Systematic Synthetic Phonics (SSP) teaching programme that provides structured and progressive learning. Covering Phases 1 and 2 of Letters and Sounds, Rocket Phonics First Steps aims to build the literacy foundations for progression into Reception. The programme takes a holistic approach to developing children's early language and communication by focusing on speaking and listening, nurturing a love of stories, and supporting phonemic awareness.

Sounds are introduced progressively in the order of natural speech development, drawing on multiple studies carried out by speech therapists and child development experts across the UK. It's well-documented that young children find certain 'speech sounds' easier to say than others², and the sequence in which sounds are introduced through Rocket Phonics First Steps is informed by this evidence. This means that children's exposure to sounds through the programme matches their developmental 'readiness'.

The programme is informed by an understanding of how children learn: through play, exploration, and short, interactive practitioner-led sessions to model and introduce new skills and learning.

Children's emergent language skills are scaffolded by rhythm and rhyme. Independent academic research³ on children's development of emergent literacy skills reveals that explicitly teaching rhythmic patterning of speech (also known as prosodic sensitivity) helps with literacy development. In addition to including familiar and well-loved nursery rhymes and ditties, the programme also offers a bank of Speech Rhythm activities which are embedded into the weekly lesson plans. Teaching prosodic sensitivity may give children a developmental advantage in their acquisition of skills such as vocabulary knowledge, phonological and morphological awareness, and may help prevent and overcome literacy difficulties or delays⁴ leading to improved outcomes when children start school.

Training for practitioners is provided in CPD videos included in the online platform or through bespoke paid-for training with literacy consultants.



²NHS, 'Speech sounds', Speech, language and communication, November 2023. (<https://cambspborochildrenshealth.nhs.uk/speech-language-and-communication/speech-sounds/>)

³Critten, S. et al., 'A longitudinal investigation of prosodic sensitivity and emergent literacy', Reading and Writing, volume 24, pages 371-389, published online 21 July 2020 by Springer.

⁴Coventry University, 'Improving global literacy outcomes through speech rhythms', 2021 impact case study, carried out by Prof. Clare Wood et al.

What did practitioners say?

Rocket Phonics First Steps works. Across the research sample, all participants, including SLT and nursery practitioners, said that they could see an impact on children's progress and development across a range of areas. *"We've seen the benefit on children's acquisition of phonics sounds and how they're learning and retaining those, developing phoneme grapheme correspondence which means they're readier to start a formal programme [in Reception]"*.



The structure and progression mean that practitioners can **identify children who are struggling with a sound** and quickly put in place additional support. *"...the order of the speech sounds ... follows their development which helps their communication and language. I've seen an impact already with children who need support around the pronunciations of those sounds."*



Compared with children who were joining Reception from settings which had not used it, pupils who had followed Rocket Phonics First Steps were **more secure in their learning**, and familiar with the routine of a structured daily phonics session. *"[Colleagues in Reception] said they could see a huge difference in those children that had done it the year before in comparison to those that come in from external nurseries that had never done it before."*



Adopting Rocket Phonics First Steps has **boosted staff confidence** through the provision of practical training and easy-to-use resources. The daily lesson plans provide clear step-by-step support, and the consistent structure makes it easy to embed it into their provision. *"We have that confidence – we're doing this in nursery and we know what we're doing."*



It's flexible and can be adapted for different settings and the needs of a wide range of children. *"You can take as much or little as you want from it, to suit your setting and particular children. You could cut it down or go as far as you like. I tend to use most of it."*

Rocket Phonics First Steps is more than just a phonics programme: it is based on an **holistic approach to developing speech and language**. *"We love the fact it's a phonics programme and language programme combined... it's your vocab, it's your writing, your understanding, your comprehension, it's all the [elements]. They all draw together."*



Why did pre-schools choose Rocket Phonics First Steps?

Settings wanted to improve the quality of their provision:

Rocket Phonics First Steps replaced a mixture of legacy programmes, including Letters and Sounds from the Department for Education (DfE), which is no longer validated. These were typically supplemented with an ad hoc selection of resources practitioners had compiled.

Participants said that although they were delivering a daily phonics session, they wanted to strengthen the quality and structure of their phonics programme, offering clear progression through pre-Reception.

“In nursery before adopting First Steps, we used Letters and Sounds but have always been keen on pre-school being as prepared for school as possible so we always did phonics as a standalone lesson. When First Steps was launched we were keen to adopt it.” [Rachel]

“Pre-adoption, we just used phase 1 of Letters and Sounds. When we transferred to Rocket Phonics there wasn’t anything for nursery. Then we were relieved when it was published because of the consistency. We wanted them to have that foundation.” [Sadia]

Half said that either due to **high or rising numbers of EAL children, or the increase in those with Speech and Language needs, they were looking for a programme with a clear, step-by-step approach** to teaching sounds and introducing new words with visual cues.

“When children come in, they have very low starting points.... Their speech is very poor, and we’re often starting from scratch. First Steps is progressive and linked to speech sounds and it’s great to have the sounds linked to words. Exposing them to vocabulary through sounds is very useful.” [Sadia]

In some settings, **staff lacked confidence in planning and teaching phonics**. Because Rocket Phonics First Steps is comprehensive and includes structured planning and teaching support, staff felt reassured that it would develop the skills and confidence children needed to successfully transition into Reception.

“Before using First Steps, we were a little bit lost. We started with SATPIN but we didn’t do the scope of sounds we do now so it was just repeated over and over so it was nowhere near the level and depth we do now. So in that respect it’s been fantastic. The children now go into Reception with a really good foundation.” [Jane]

Participants said that they felt reassured that **the programme was aligned with their Early Years ethos and approach**, and is more than just a phonics scheme: it also supports children’s language development and love of books.

“What we really like about First Steps is that it combines speaking and listening programmes with Letters and Sounds. Children get different things regardless of where they are developmentally and it prepares them for Reception. They know what to expect when they start in Reception.” [Laura]

Teachers at an all-through special school whose students have a range of cognitive and physical disabilities said the **recommendation to trial and adopt Rocket Phonics First Steps had been made by another special school** in their Trust. Both schools were reviewing their phonics offering in response to Ofsted’s expectations for SEND students, reiterated in the DfE’s 2023 Reading Framework⁵. They were looking for a scheme which developed phonological awareness amongst students of all ages who are not yet ready to progress onto the Reception programme of study.

Although not all participants in the research were the purchasing decision-makers at their school or setting, they supported and endorsed their school or Trust’s choice of Rocket Phonics First Steps and believed that it had benefitted their children through strengthening their provision and supporting their professional practice.

⁵The Reading Framework makes several references to the importance of ensuring that SEND students benefit from systematic synthetic phonics teaching, noting that “pupils with identified SEND (Section 5) who struggle to decode and read words ‘at a glance’ are likely to derive most benefit from direct reading instruction that focuses on systematic synthetic phonics.” [page 20]



Ease of use



Adopting a multi-component programme with digital and printed resources can be daunting, requiring staff to rethink their planning, delivery and teaching strategies.

- **Rocket Phonics First Steps is underpinned with training videos delivered by the programme author, Abigail Steel, who also has her own YouTube channel.**
- **Additional in-person or virtual training is available.**
- **Ongoing support is offered through a Facebook group, and programme specialists who respond to emailed enquiries.**

When asked to relay their approach to familiarising staff with the programme, and using the resources to deliver sessions, participants were very positive about the 'onboarding' process.

All praised the training videos, describing them as easy to follow, accessible, and the right length. All said they had used the videos.

"The videos were well done. The training is in snippets rather than one long training session so you can watch it in bite-sized pieces." [Rebecca]

"I used the videos to see what Abigail [Steel] said about the scheme structure, and she tells you how to implement it, so it gives you a bit more confidence. Although the actual resources – like the weekly plans – are very supportive so it's all there." [Jane]

Settings took a collaborative approach to getting to grips with the programme, often setting aside an 'inset' day to introduce Rocket Phonics First Steps and watch some of the videos to ensure staff understood the approach and felt confident about using the resources.

Several Nursery, Literacy or Phonics leads said that they had first 'modelled' how to deliver a phonics session to colleagues in the Early Years team, who had then been observed as they delivered their own sessions.

"I'd have all my team observing me. And then I slowly started with my room lead being the next person to start doing bits of the planning and bits of the leading, and then it was another member of staff who was in full time and slowly built it up so that the staff felt really confident in leading those sessions. I think because it's got so many engaging aspects, the staff have just taken it on really easily." [Lisa/Amy]

A few teachers or leaders said that they or colleagues had taken up in person or virtual training sessions, which had explained the programme in far greater depth, and covered off questions asked by participants. Additional support was available through a Facebook group, and email support.

"...you always felt that there was support available and that you had the opportunity just to ask those questions that crop up." [Jen]

There was also praise for the in-scheme support through the teachers' guide with lessons plans, and the intuitive design of the programme's various components.

"...with the teacher notes it's really simple. The lesson plans and objectives, the resources you need – how to introduce it with a puppet then the flashcards for the sound, then the ditty so it flows really nicely." [Clare]

In one pre-school, the phonics and the nursery phase leads agreed that a key factor in overcoming any 'barriers' to adoption had been the immediate impact on children's progress and engagement from the very first sessions. Because staff could see the benefit, they were much more motivated to invest time in familiarising themselves with the programme.

"...the staff were so reassured with the responses and the engagement from the children ...that they were ... invested in on boarding. So it was like it sold itself as you could see the results before your eyes, week by week..." [Lisa]

Participants were asked to scale Rocket Phonics First Steps' 'Ease of implementation and use'. Ten said it was 'very easy', four said it was 'easy', and one practitioner whose setting had started using it only a month or two prior to the interview rated it as moderately easy, admitting that they 'weren't quite there yet'.

Implementing Rocket Phonics First Steps



The Rocket Phonics First Steps programme provides 36 weeks of teaching materials, but nurseries or pre-schools aren't required to start using it from the start of the school year or cover all the units. Formal phonics teaching is not mandated in Foundation Stage 1 (FS1), and children are not expected to have achieved the Early Learning Goals (ELGs) in the EYFS Framework until the end of their Reception year.

Participants described a range of approaches to implementing Rocket Phonics First Steps, reflecting the diversity of provision in the Early Years sector.

Most started using the programme in the first term of the school year, but others after an initial settling in period. Those with staggered intakes acknowledged that this meant that some children missed the start, so it was important to keep recapping prior learning with the flashcards. Where settings had a separate morning and afternoon intake or children who were there all day, but for half the week only, they would run the sessions twice a day.

Some ran mixed age sessions, which could include children in pre-Reception and Reception being taught together. For example, in one setting, there are only two practitioners which means that if the Teaching Assistant (TA) isn't available, the nursery

"...when we do the electronic flashcards it works well because it shows the letter and picture on one side then the word on the other. So quite often the nursery children will be asked to tell me what the sound is, then I flip the card and the Reception children read the word." [Rebecca]



children join the Reception class.

The flexible provision in some schools also meant that Reception children working below their age-related expectation could join the nursery phonics session. In two of the larger settings, the nursery classes are split into two groups, allowing children who need more support on specific sounds to work at a slower pace.

Most agreed that it was important to start with very short sessions of under 10 minutes and progressively build up to longer sessions as children's stamina and concentration increased.

In one setting, participants said that their mid-January assessment had picked up that some children hadn't retained the earlier learning, so she had paused the introduction of new sounds, and revisited some of the earlier sessions.

"I like as the lead the flexibility that we've got to be able to do that." [Amy]

Across the sample, participants believed that this flexibility to adapt and modify the programme is necessary. It doesn't affect the integrity or value of the programme and reflects the guidance in *Development Matters*⁶ in acknowledging 'professional judgement' when designing and delivering an EYFS curriculum.

"So to begin with the sessions start off really short and to the point and just picking ...what works for you. And then as the children then are with us for longer and they can sit for longer periods of time... then you can make the sessions a bit longer. [The sessions are] really easy to adapt so you can adapt them to all different needs and abilities." [Jen]

⁶Development Matters, Non-statutory curriculum guidance for the early years foundation stage, published online by the Department for Education in 2020, revised in September 2023, pages 4 and 5.



Delivering Rocket Phonics First Steps

Recent guidance from Ofsted states that: “Sometimes it will be appropriate to show or tell children what to do through explicit teaching. For example, when they are learning something for the first time. This may be followed by opportunities for children to use and apply this new knowledge through play. At other times, it may be appropriate for children to explore something through play first and for the practitioner to intervene with guidance at appropriate points. Judging what to teach and when to teach it is a key part of a practitioner’s role, and the curriculum acts as the framework on which to base those decisions.”⁷

This closely resembles the approach adopted by the pre-schools and nursery settings in this sample.

- **Most schools follow the weekly plans closely, with practitioners using the daily plans to guide their session structure.**
- **The ‘sound of the week’ is reinforced through settings’ continuous provision, with children accessing the resources independently or in supported interactions.**
- **Most participants were using their ‘professional judgement’ based on observations to assess the children’s progress; a few were using the assessment guidance provided with Rocket Phonics First Steps. However schools are in their early stages of adoption, and some noted that they intended to start using the programme’s assessment resources.**
- **The activity books in which children can practice phoneme grapheme correspondence through mark-making and early writing are available in some settings for children who are ready.**
- **Likewise, the way in which settings used the reading books varied. Some ran guided sessions, others used them 1:1; some chose also to send them home.**

Although schools adopted various approaches to implementing the programme in their timetabling, nearly all the schools in the research sample followed the daily and weekly plans closely for delivery. “I would say we follow the lesson plans closely. I try to touch on all the aspects. They’re really useful and a good structure.” [Tally]

⁷Ofsted ‘Best start in life part 1: setting the scene’, published online in October 2024. (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/best-start-in-life-a-research-review-for-early-years/best-start-in-life-part-1-setting-the-scene#early-years-curriculum-and-pedagogy>)



Teachers and phase/phonics leads described the planning as being ‘helpfully presented’, and easy for TAs or non-qualified practitioners to follow. The four-part teaching and learning cycle is pacy and interactive, and keeps children engaged and focused. Each unit follows a consistent five-day teaching sequence, which is clearly supported with resources. This means that staff and children know what to expect each session. “They’re not sat and getting bored.” [Jane]

The resources are also available in their ‘continuous provision’ to reinforce the learning through structured play and early mark making. Examples include:

- **Setting up a phonics station in the reading area with a box of items reinforcing the sound of the week.** *“So for this week it’s ‘oo’ as in Moon. So we’ve got some spoons in there and then things that they can use like a chef’s outfit, so they can pretend to cook and use the spoon.” [Jen]*
- **Linking food and snacks to the sound of the week:** *“...all of our snacks for the week started with ‘p’, so we had pineapple and passion fruit and then the children had a go at making the popcorn repeating the ‘p’.” [Amy]*
- **Encouraging the children to explore the resources used in the session in their own play.** *“...if they’ve learned ‘n’, the sound card might be there and we might have the objects representing the pictures.” [Laura]*

Although the majority of schools described an ‘assessment for learning’ approach, following a structured programme made it easier to identify and intervene quickly when appropriate. “Because there’s so much opportunity to hear [them] I can tell if they’re missing any of the first sounds, and I make notes and those having difficulties or who need a bit longer, we do a little intervention group with further games.” [Clare]

Overall, participants described their approach as play-based and multi-sensory, with continuous provision themed around the sound of the week, in line with the guidance in the daily lesson plans which practitioners enriched with their own ideas and experience.

Evidence of enjoyment amongst teachers and children

Children learn best when they are happy, engaged and motivated. One of the key themes of Best Start in Life is that when children enjoy their early education, they are more likely to thrive, make progress and develop positive attitudes to learning.

When asked to scale children's reaction during Rocket Phonics First Steps phonics sessions, 12 out of 13 rated it as 'enjoyable' or 'very enjoyable'.⁸

SLT who had observed sessions or participants who were relaying feedback from others who'd carried out observations reported:

Children's excitement at demonstrating their knowledge of the sounds.

Their ability to listen, focus and concentrate.

Joyfulness during sessions between practitioner and children.

A sense of purpose arising from the routine of a daily session which followed a structured, predictable approach.

"Children love structure. An unstructured environment can play havoc with a lot of them and stress them. For those with SEND, structure is an anchor. It gives them comfort to know it's happening every day. The session is predictable. They know what they will do." [Rebecca]

Participants attributed children's enjoyment to:

The ditties, songs and rhymes on the interactive Big Book, which they, too, as practitioners enjoyed.

The stories, which children can relate to. Children like the characters, recalling what had happened previously, and they look forward to finding out what will happen next.

The interactive or printed flashcards with picture mnemonics to prompt children's recall of sounds.

⁸One participant gave a neutral rating, saying "We've implemented it, we follow it, and we love it, but we wish it could be supplemented with even more activities and games. You can never have enough..." [Sadia]

When children are learning through singing, actions and interactions, they're able to concentrate and focus for longer. "...when they're doing things, it keeps their attention for longer. The flashcards, the little ditties with actions that they love doing, then the nursery rhymes which they have to get up [for so we can] do the actions. It's a lot of involvement for them." [Clare] This was echoed by others. "They're desperate to come to the front and click the buttons [on the interactive big book] It's been really engaging for them." [Amy and Lisa]

Most participants agreed that the ditties are a firm favourite amongst their children.

"...our favourite bit is the ditties. ... as soon as the video closes, then the children just want to carry on doing it. So we end up doing it a few times and we're like, let's do it in a big voice then using a quiet voice. Tell the person next to you; tell the person to the other side of you and they just love doing it. So yeah, the ditties have worked really well." [Amy & Lisa]

Ultimately, practitioners' own passion, excitement and ability to make learning fun is the key ingredient for success, but importantly, all the participants in the research believe that the programme's resources enhance their practice and enable them to put the joy into learning.

"When the Improvement Officer observed it being used, they commented on the children's joy of phonics, and teachers' enjoyment of teaching it." [Sian]





Impact and efficacy

The impact on outcomes of any education programme is contingent on how it is used, the skill and expertise of the practitioners, and needs of the pupils themselves, making it difficult to attribute specific gains or changes to a new programme. Notwithstanding this, all 15 research participants believed that adopting Rocket Phonics First Steps had resulted in a positive impact across a range of areas.

Since adopting Rocket Phonics First Steps:

All said that all children's enjoyment of stories had improved.

14 out of 15 participants said all children's confidence in speaking and their verbal communication had grown. "The way it's developed their confidence in speaking is huge..." [Sian] One, who'd very recently adopted the programme, wasn't sure of the impact yet.

13 out of 15 had seen a positive impact on all children's general ability to listen and understand. One wasn't sure, and one said that some, but not all, children were better able to do so.

13 said all children had shown progress in their phonemic awareness. Two who worked in a special school said that due to their disabilities, some students continued to struggle with hearing the sounds in words.





13 had seen progress in children's phoneme grapheme correspondence. Again, in the special school students' disabilities present additional challenges.

13 had seen an impact on their children's overall language development. One said not all had improved, and one said that because the children at her setting have very low starting points, it was difficult to gauge.

T1 said that all children had acquired new vocabulary. One said it wasn't possible to attribute the improvement just to Rocket Phonics First Steps, one said it was too soon to tell, and two participants in a special school said that some students' disabilities were a barrier to learning new words.

T1 said that amongst children who were developmentally ready to start writing, they could see an impact on their letter formation. There is no formal requirement for children in FS1 to write letters, and some participants said some pupils didn't yet have the motor skills to grip a pencil, and that this wasn't a priority for their setting. In the special school, students were 'mark making', but not yet writing.

All participants working in Early Years settings said that Rocket Phonics First Steps prepares children for Reception and underpins the ELGs which they will be expected to meet at the end of Reception.



Inclusivity and suitability for all children

Amongst the schools which participated in this research, just over half said that they had a high or rising proportion of EAL children, with two saying that EAL children made up most or all of their children on roll. Just under half said their setting or school was in an area of high economic deprivation. And nearly all, including those in more affluent areas, said there was an increase in the number of children with speech and language delays. Participants talked about children with 'very low starting points' in language and communication, and the importance of immersing them in a book and language-rich environment.

Participants said that EAL children respond well to Rocket Phonics First Steps. The visual approach scaffolds their understanding, and the rhymes and ditties make the language more memorable. EAL parents who themselves may struggle with English are able to reinforce their child's phonemic development by using the digital resources with audio support at home. One participant described uploading videos of staff using the resources onto their Learning Platform, Tapestry, for parents to watch.

"...we upload a video ... and we do the action, the ditty and the nursery rhyme to go with it so that we can ask parents to consolidate what they've done in preschool. ... And we've had so many videos on Tapestry of the children practicing with their parents at home and they're singing all the ditties." [Lisa/Amy]

Practitioners said that **those with SEND or significant speech delays participate by listening and watching.**

"Even the SEND and non-verbal children will go and get the cards. They love looking at the pictures. It appeals to them. Even the ones with more profound needs will look and listen. They show an enjoyment in listening even if they can't join in. They're still on board and listening and looking." [Jane] One participant said in her school, Rocket Phonics First Steps is used in Reception alongside Rocket Phonics for children with SEND or who have just arrived in the UK without speaking any English.

Although not designed as a SEND programme, Rocket Phonics First Steps is being used with older students in a special school. All have Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) following a diagnosis of severe cognitive and/or physical disabilities. The practitioners using the programme say it is engaging for students including those who are non-verbal who can clap, tap or track the rhymes and ditties. "They like the activities." [Megan] Using a screen with interactive elements is effective in engaging older students who are 'screen motivated', but who also benefit from being able to increase the volume and zoom in to increase the visibility. **Since adopting Rocket Phonics First Steps they've seen an impact on students' confidence in communicating**, even if their disabilities are a barrier to vocalisation.

Only one participant who had recently started using the programme questioned its suitability for children with significant delays and a high proportion of speech and language difficulties. All others believed that it was accessible for all or most of their children and could cite examples of accelerated progress in developing phonological awareness and building children's confidence in speaking and writing.

Conclusion

This research has shown that adopting Rocket Phonics First Steps has **delivered a range of benefits, improving the quality of pre-schools' phonics provision, supporting all children in developing the foundations of phonics and literacy, and boosting the confidence of staff.** This has not been at the expense of a child-centred Early Years ethos. All the participants in this sample used Rocket Phonics First Steps to add richness to their provision, new opportunities to develop language and communication, and improve children's early learning experiences to prepare them for the transition into Reception.

Although it's not a requirement for children in FS1 to start reading words, in some settings teachers have been astounded to see the 'phenomenal' progress that some have made. "I still remember the first child that ever read a CVC word and I was blown away [they could do that] at the age of three. That's incredible." [Jen]

Amongst the sample were five schools from two Trusts. Based on the experiences of the 'early adopter' schools, others in the Trust are signing up to trial the programme in their Early Years provision. "...we had all the phonics leads from the other primary schools within our Trust come over to our school and observe Amy in pre-school because I was banging on about how amazing it was. It just showed such good practice that some literally went back that same day and signed up." [Lisa]

This report is drawn from teacher observations and testimonials, and in the absence of quantitative data at this early development stage, indicates that the programme is highly valued, liked, and endorsed by a range of practitioners who are passionately enthusiastic about the impact on their children.

"...we were really keen to have a programme that doesn't feel like it's moving away from what nursery is all about in terms of keeping the child centred approach of nursery provision [which is] about that exploration and play and enjoyment and children coming and having fun." [Katie]

"I want to say it's fantastic. The children have embraced everything. All I have is positives. The structure is wonderful. We do it after the morning songs and it's seamless." [Jane]

"Having worked in schools without a phonics programme in nursery and having experienced [Rocket Phonics First Steps] it's a no-brainer to have it." [Sian]

Appendix A: About the schools

Pre-schools in this research sample reflect the diversity of provision in the Early Years sector.

The age range of children on roll varied. One setting took children from 18 months, some after their second birthday, and others only once they had turned three. Most said that children then progressed through to Reception at the same school, with one teaching pre-Reception and Reception in mixed age provision. While some children attended only morning or afternoon sessions, others were at the setting all day, but were not necessarily full time.

Some settings had staggered intakes through the year, while others predominantly took children from September, with a top up intake in January if they had places.

The variety of catchment areas also varied across the research sample. Just over half said that they had a high or rising proportion of EAL children, with two saying that EAL children made up most or all of their children on roll. Just under half said their setting or school was in an area of high economic deprivation. And nearly all, including those in more affluent areas, said there was an increase in the number of children with speech and language delays.

Students at the special school range from 2-19 years old, and have profound medical and physical disabilities affecting their speech and/or learning, or gross and fine motor skills.

Our thanks go to participants at these schools, pre-schools and nursery settings who very kindly shared their experiences of using Rocket Phonics First Steps in an interview with our researcher.

Schools and participants

- Laura, Class teacher and Phonics and Early Years Lead at Woodlands Primary School
- Rebecca, Early Years Teacher and Early Reading and Phonics Leader at The Boyle & Petyt Primary School
- Sadia, Early Years Phonics Lead at Boarshaw Community Primary School
- Jane, Nursery class teacher at Ebor Gardens Primary Academy, part of Wellspring Academy Trust
- Katie, Principal & Jen, Nursery class teacher at The Forest Academy, part of Wellspring Academy Trust
- Kim, English and Phonics Lead & Megan, Assistant Headteacher at Frederick Holmes School
- Rachel, Assistant Headteacher, Early Years Lead & SENCo at Warton Nethersole's CE Primary School
- Clare, Preschool Teaching Assistant at St. Barnabas CE First and Middle School
- Rachel, Deputy Manager at Little Honeybees (standalone nursery)
- Lisa, Phonics Coordinator and KS1 Literacy Lead, & Amy, Preschool Lead and Early Years SENCo at Woodland Grange Primary School
- Tally, Nursery class teacher at Wednesfield Technology Primary, part of Shireland Collegiate Academy Trust
- Fran, Nursery teacher at Tameside Primary Academy, part of Shireland Collegiate Academy Trust
- Sian, Vice Principal at Wallbrook Primary Academy, part of Shireland Collegiate Academy Trust



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