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Process Evaluation of Rocket Phonics Implementation

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1. Purpose

The purpose of this process evaluation is to provide insights into the reasons why the implementation of Rocket Phonics in the years 2021-22 and 22-23 was observed to be either successful or unsuccessful. The analysis of the randomised control trial data reported separately provides formal evidence of the efficacy of the resources when implemented by teachers, following the training provided relative to a comparison group of schools using other resources. In this report, we consider the evidence that helps us to understand the wider background context of phonics implementation in both the Rocket Phonics and control schools in both years: what was happening in practice in Rocket Phonics schools, what the teachers thought of it, and how it compared to previous phonic programmes or approaches adopted by the schools who were participating in the trial. By considering information collected in both years we can also consider the impact that experience of using the resources may have had on satisfaction with the programme and how it has been implemented.

2. Methodology

Three primary sources of evidence were collected and analysed.

An anonymous survey of staff who were involved in delivering Rocket Phonics at their schools in 2021/22, which was compared to a similar survey undertaken by schools who were using other systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) approaches to teaching this year. 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 21/22 academic year, and were repeated at the end of that academic year, and at the end of the 22/23 academic year, so that changes in confidence etc could be tracked over time, and again compared to the changes happening in non-Rocket Phonics schools.

Four schools agreed to have one of their Rocket Phonic Lessons observed in Term 3 of 2021/22. One of these was with a reception cohort, and the others were with Year 1 pupils. Three lessons were blending lessons, and one was a segmenting lesson. All four of these schools also contributed to the interviews indicated above. Prof. Wood observed the training session provided to schools on 25th March 2021 so that in classroom practice (both observed and reported during interviews) could be understood in relation to key principles of teaching and implementation communicated during the training.

Finally, all Rocket Phonics schools who were participating in the trial were invited to take part in an interview with Violeta Baikousi. In 2021/22 four schools participated in interviews undertaken during the second half of Term 1, and four more participated in interviews during the second half of Term 3. One of the interviewees from Term 1 also took part in a Term 3 interview, and another school was unavailable for an interview, but responded to the interview questions via email, taking the total number of schools providing data in Term 3 to six. In 2022/23, eight schools participated in interviews in Term 3 of that year.

The following sections integrate information from these various sources to provide an account of how well the Rocket Phonics approach was implemented, what staff thought of the resources and approach, areas where there was dissatisfaction or difficulty with

implementation, how the implementation compared with that of staff delivering other systematic synthetic programmes (SSPs) at other schools and overall how positively the programme was seen by teachers.

3. Findings

How Similar were the two Cohorts of Schools / Teachers at the Start of the project?

To help us to interpret the results of the randomised control trial data it is important that we understand the characteristics of the staff involved in the Rocket Phonics trial, and consider how similar or different they were to staff at schools who were teaching at the control schools. At the beginning of the 2021/22 school year there were 25 fully or partially completed surveys received from staff at control (i.e. non Rocket Phonics schools) and 66 from staff at Rocket Phonics schools. In the control schools 72% of the responses were from teachers, and 28% from TAs compared to 57.6% of teachers and 42.4% TAs in the Rocket Phonics trial schools.

Table 1 summarises key similarities and differences across the two cohorts of schools. They are broadly comparable although it should be noted that the staff in the control schools have more experience in general and also in teaching Year 1 or reception (as applicable). The control schools have a history of shorter phonic sessions and of being more likely to use Guided Reading, but the Rocket Phonics cohort tend to read to their children 1-to-1 more often than the control schools, and have a slightly lower percentage of parents who read regularly with their children at home. Both sets of respondents rated the quality of previous phonics training similarly, and had similar confidence levels in terms of teaching reading and phonics, although it is noted that the Rocket Phonics respondents, who were less experienced than the Control schools' staff, reported a slightly lower confidence level to teach reading (see Table 1). Both sets of schools were comparable in terms of perceived frequency with which parents were understood to read to their children at least four times a week.

Table 1: Summary Comparison of Rocket Phonics and Control Schools on Key Metrics in Sept 2021

	Rocket Phonics	Control (non Rocket Phonics)
Median Years of Experience in Role	5 Years (0-29)	10 Years (1-42)
% Teaching Reception	50	44
% Teaching Year 1	50	53
Median Years' Experience Teaching that Year Group	3 Years (0-16)	(6 Years 0-21)
Median Class Size	27	29
Median Year Cohort Size	46	30
Children Taught Phonics Every Day?	98.5%	100%
Duration of a Typical Phonics Session	30 (15-60)	20 (15-30)
Guided Reading Included?	83.3%	92.0%
How Often Do Children Read to Teacher 1-to-1?	More than once a week (45.5%)	Once a Week (44%)
Teach phonics in small groups, whole class or both?	25.8% Small Group 21.2% Whole Class 45.5% Both	24% Small Groups 36% Whole Class 32% Both
Quality of Reading Scheme Training	6/10	7/10
Quality of Phonics Training	7/10	7.5/10
Confidence to Teach Reading	7/10	8/10
Confidence to Teach Phonics	8/10	8/10
% of children who were read to at least 4 times a week at home	30%	40%

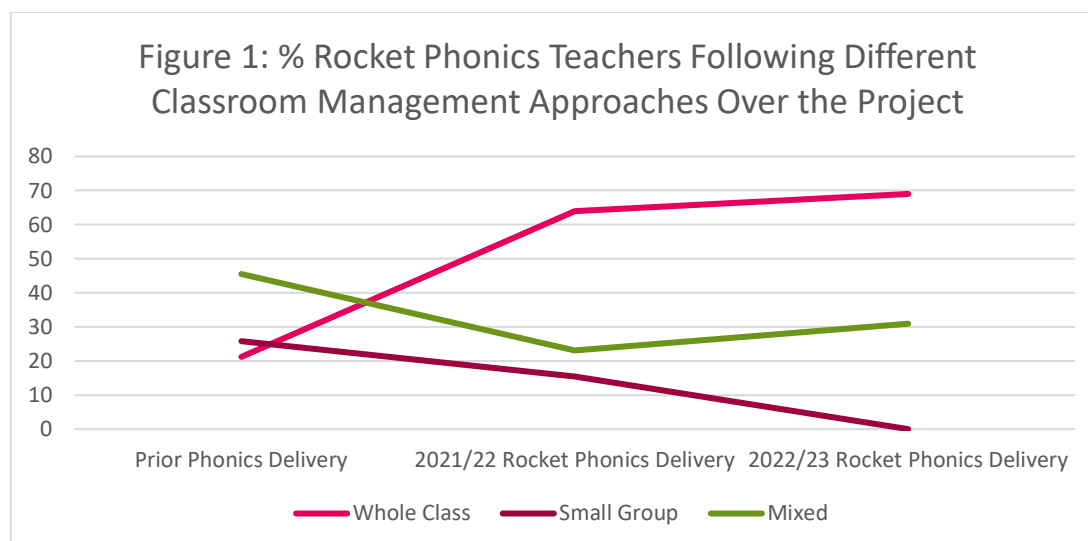
Fidelity

A key element of a process analysis is consideration of what implementation looked like in practice, and the extent to which schools in the Rocket Phonics trial were following training and guidance that had been provided to them during training sessions and in teacher resources. We were particularly concerned to consider the extent to which the sessions were being delivered in the format and frequency detailed in the training, and that the content and pace were also being followed as directed.

Lessons observed in 2021/22 showed that both the teachers and the children understood the principles of the sessions well. The children were well rehearsed in the structure of the lessons and knew what to expect, such that the children could explain what was happening in their phonics session on a given day (i.e. segmenting, blending or tricky words) and knew the format that each of these lessons would take. The children were observed to show a good level of independence and confidence, and differentiation was managed well in the majority of schools observed. At the end of that school year 26 questionnaires were received back from staff from Rocket Phonics trial schools. All of these schools (100%) reported that they taught phonics everyday, and 24/26 reported that they used guided reading. Consistent with the responses from the beginning of the year, most staff reported reading one-to-one with their children more than once a week. Not all staff delivering Rocket Phonics attended or viewed the training that was provided (22/26 did), but all (100%) confirmed that they had received the resources from Rising Stars [Hodder Education] in good time.

All staff involved in the second year of the Rocket Phonics trial in 2022/23 attended or viewed the training that was provided, with the majority having watched the course of videos by Abigail Steel and 15/29 having received in situ training by the Rising Stars [Hodder Education] team. 19/29 Teachers viewed a combination of the different types of training provided, with more prevalent being the course of videos by Abigail Steel, the webinars and/or the CPD training videos. However, very few reported requesting additional support from Abigail Steel, with the majority feeling that their needs and queries were covered by going through the training materials and the teachers' guide.

The training provided emphasised a whole class approach to phonics delivery. In the first year of this trial only 16/26 reported that this was what they actually did. In the second year of the trial compliance was much improved, with the majority of staff adopting the whole class report (see Figure 1).



At the end of the 2022/23 school year, 28/29 of the teachers reported that they taught phonics every day. Moreover, most staff (20/29) noted reading one-to-one with their children one to three times per week, while 5/29 heard their children read more than three times per week and only 4 teachers reported hearing children read individually less than once per week.

Key Comparisons with Control Schools on Characteristics of Phonics Lessons

In this section we consider data from the survey administered in July 2023 to further consider whether Rocket Phonics trial schools were distinctive from control schools in their implementation of phonics delivery in ways that were consistent with the training. Table 2 summarises this comparison.

Table 2: Summary Comparison of Rocket Phonics Trial Schools and Control Schools on Key Metrics in July 2023

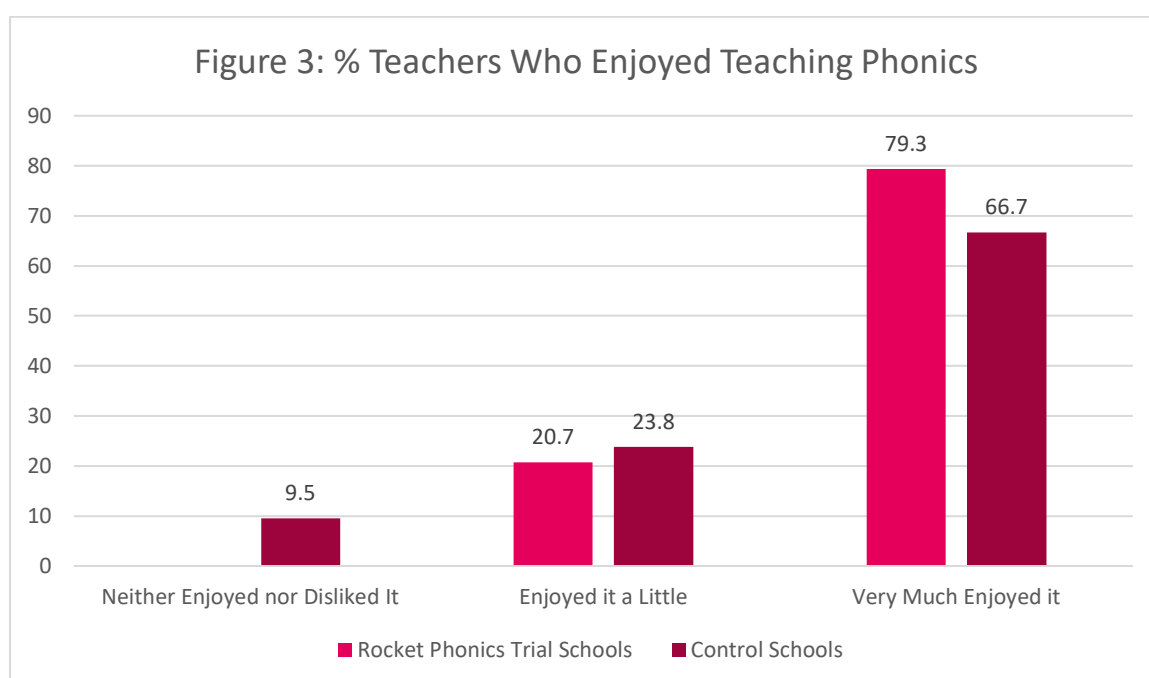
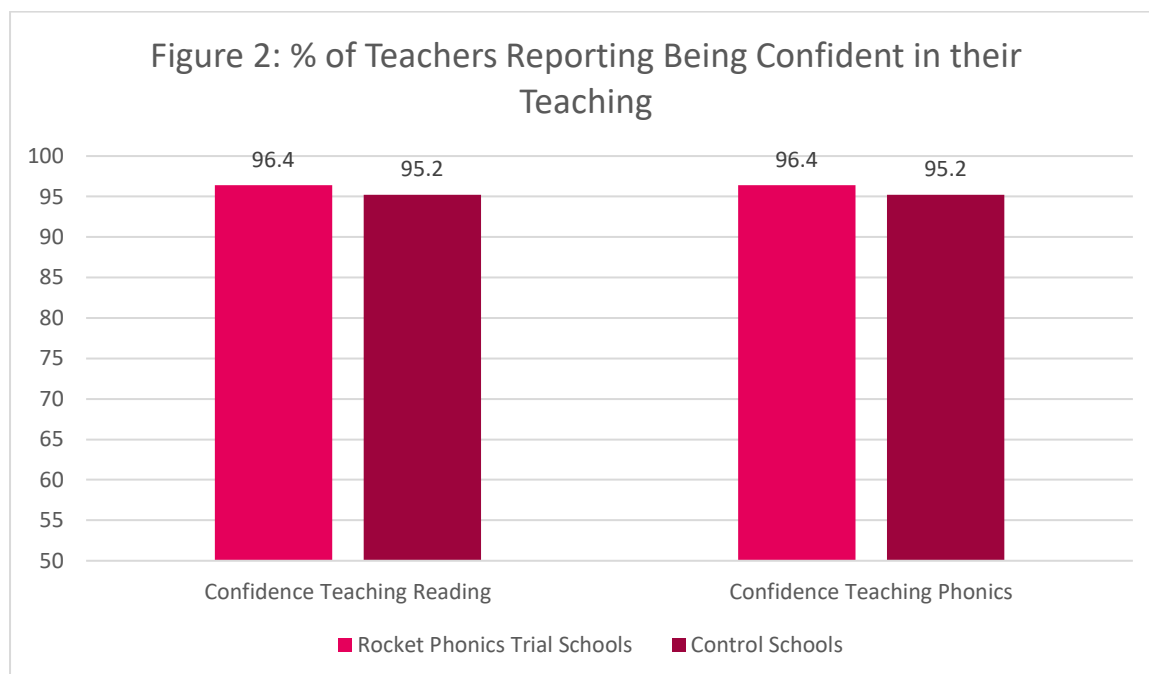
	Rocket Phonics Trial Schools	Control Schools
Children Taught Phonics Every Day?	97%	100%
Duration of a Typical Phonics Session	35' (25'-60')	30' (15'-45')
Guided Reading Included?	68%	43%
How Often Do Children Read to 1-to-1?	One to three times/week (69%) More than three times (17.2%)	One to three times/week (61%) More than three times (0%)

Teach phonics in small groups, whole class, or both?	0% Small Group 69% Whole Class 31% Both	19% Small Groups 23% Whole Class 57% Both
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Table 2 shows that staff at Rocket Phonics trial schools were more likely to follow a whole class approach in their Phonics lesson compared to controls, and the lessons were typically longer than those reported by teachers in the control schools. The format of a Rocket Phonics lesson is designed to maximize the opportunities for teachers to hear children read individually, and this was reflected in the survey data on how often the children read 1-2-1 with their teacher. We also see evidence that the majority of the trial schools were now using whole class approaches to teach reading, or a mixture of whole class with some small group work done in addition. This contrasted with the profile of lesson formats reported by the control schools, where small group work continued to feature strongly.

Enjoyment and Confidence

The teachers in the Rocket Phonics trial schools reported similar but slightly higher levels of confidence in their teaching of reading and phonics as the teachers in the control schools who were using other phonics resources and schemes (see Figure 2). However, the Rocket Phonics teachers reported higher levels of enjoyment in their teaching of phonics relative to the control schools (Figure 3).



During the interviews and lesson observations it was also clear that the Rocket Phonics sessions were highly enjoyable for the children, who engaged well with the resources both during the whole class and self-directed study elements of the lessons.

“They enjoy it. They like the stories, the books. I think they like kind of, you know, the pictures and the animation is quite cartoon-like, isn't it? And as I said, they like the booklets because they know how it is structured and so yeah, I've enjoyed it as well.”

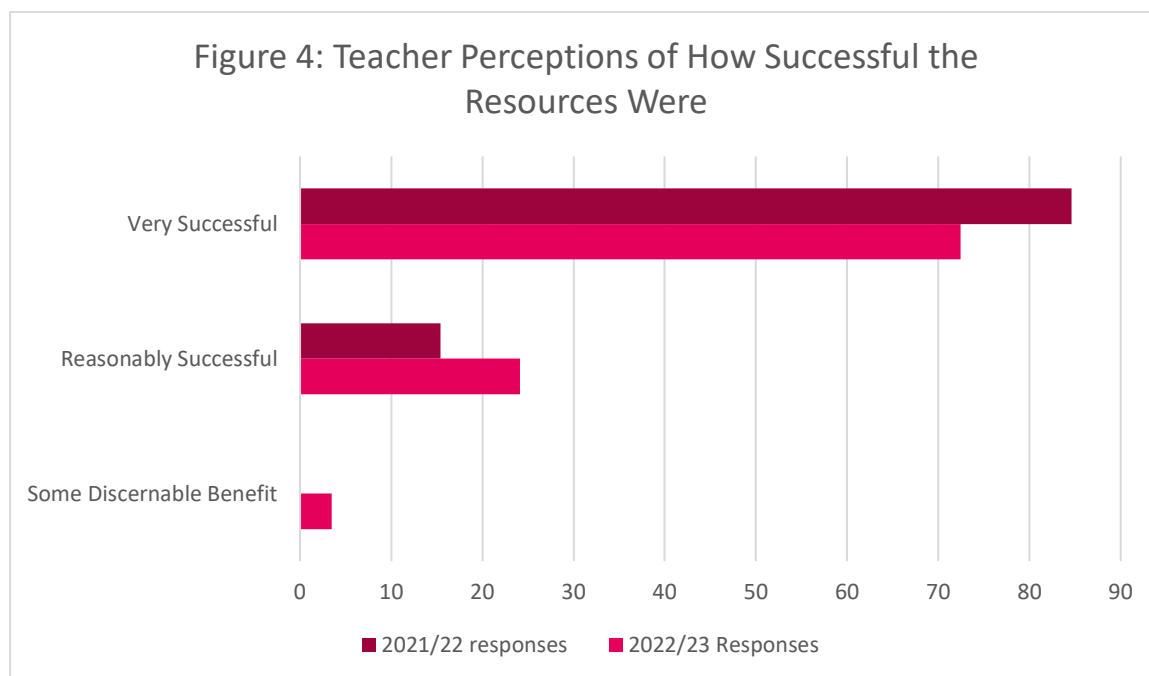
“The children love them [the Big Books]. The stories are really engaging and my class currently they love hearing the storyteller read it as well. So my children that are taught last year used to like me to read the story. This year they say no, we want the storyteller and that's absolutely fine. I don't mind it saves my voice, but they really love the fact that there is the storyteller element there because it's so engaging. It's got the sound effects, they love reading the little lozenges and everything like that as well. They have a really good time with it.”

“The stories are lovely. They're really engaging with children, love them. We love them. Again. We use both. We use the digital and the print, so they're in really good habits of reading one of those as a follow up, if they're finished their phonics activity earlier, they'll go and get one of the target practice readers.”

“They really enjoy it and I found at the start of the year the children already knew exactly what they were doing. They already had a year going through the pupil practice booklets, and even though they are different and they get increasingly harder as they get into year one they already knew the structure. They know exactly what they needed to do when they came up.”

Teacher Satisfaction with Rocket Phonics Resources

Staff rated the success of the resources for their children highly, with 100% of responses in both years of the trial indicating that they felt that the resources were successful or beneficial to the children's learning in some way (see Figure 4).



During the interviews the teachers praised the high quality of resources provided, which they found well-designed, engaging, and interesting. Most comments related to the element of fun Rocket Phonics has introduced into learning, with all teachers reporting an increased level of participation in the lesson even among the less confident in phonics children. All staff attributed students' engagement to Rocket Phonics' materials. It is worth noting that all resources (pupil practice booklet, rocket phonics readers, target practice readers, big book, flashcards, sound mats) received equally favourable comments, with the majority reporting that all the resources have been embedded well within their class and endorsed by the students. Below are a selection of verbatim quotes from trial school staff who were interviewed that are representative of the comments as a whole.

Big Books

"Teaching with the Big books is something that as a school we absolutely love. The children love the teachers love and we love the sound lozenges and each day the children are really excited to listen to the next page of the book and they're excited to spot the sound that they're being taught that day. And you know, they listen really carefully to it and they really enjoy the stories. And there's also really good opportunities for vocab to discuss vocabulary in there and a lot of new vocabulary comes up in those big books, and that's really nice, you know, to have that whole class discussion of what the words mean."

Reading Scheme Books

"I think in so many cases before, the reading books you had was so different to the scheme you were teaching or and the quality of the books is huge. You know, actually the quality... there are other schemes whose reading books just aren't that great. They've done it for phonics rather than we said for creating that for another reason. I really feel like there is a really big emphasis on the love of reading and high-quality books."

Pupil Practice Books

"I've gotta be honest. When I first saw them, when I saw them in reception and year one, I thought, Oh my God, they're never gonna understand these. They're never gonna get to do that. And it's just, it's amazing to watch them adapt to it. And like the repetitiveness of it helps them self-teach, not self-teach, self-learn or get through it when they're independently working. So the pupil practice books are really, really good. The pace is fast and yet they're coping with it."

Integration of Resources

"it's the cohesion of it is the fact that everything marries up. That is such a big thing, and the fact it flows so nicely. Yeah, from reception through year two, I think that for me is the biggest thing. I think it's everything. Everything is sort of included like I just said everything phonics-related, parts of the games in my room is rocket phonics. So they've just got this clear cohesion between everything. So what's in their books is also on the wall is also on their phonics maps."

Teacher Guides

"Yes, I've used the teacher's guides religiously, so they are very, very useful ... You've got a chance to go back and look at things very, very quickly. So yeah, they are very, very useful tool. Just the progression sequence that in there is very, very useful. And I like the overview of the weekly plans and the daily plans are very, very helpful, especially if you've got somebody who's new to phonics, who's never taught it before. That is really useful to dip into."

A 'Complete Resource'

"Yeah, I think it's just a much more complete resource. It's got everything. So you don't have to, you know, deliver 1 aspect of this program, but then take assessments from elsewhere or use something else to do something else. It's all there. Everything you could need for it is there. We've got the pupil practice booklets, we've got the reading books, we've got target practice readers, you know, we've got all the online digital things. It's all there."

Trial school staff praised the consistency, the slow pace, and the repetitive pedagogy of the Rocket Phonics approach which enabled students' confidence growth and encouraged independent and mastery learning. Moreover, some of the comments related to the higher learning expectations that Rocket Phonics has set in comparison to schemes previously adopted, with some teachers attributing their students' improvement to the higher learning goals set through this scheme.

Cohesion of Programme Across Years

"Yeah. So I feel like the children love it. They get used to it. It's consistent throughout school. So they know the sounds, they know exactly what they're doing. And it's the consistencies, the lessons are the same. The practice workbooks are the same. They know their extension activities very well. So there's no time wasted. It flows very, very well and they know going from year one to two, this is what we're doing from reception to year one. They know what they're doing. So that works very well and I feel like it's had a big a bigger impact on the reading."

Pupil Progress

"And I've taught year-one children for a few years now and I noticed a big difference in the year ones that came up this year [who had completed Rocket Phonics in reception] than I had in my previous years...they knew a lot more sounds because they did learn more sounds than they would if it was letters and sounds, for example, like tricky words and things, they were just more confident, and their reading level seems to be higher, when they came up to us. And just because of you, your magic!"

Time Saving

"It's just the sheer enjoyment of having a story linked on phonics without having to try and without for us actually, without having to go and find things to really engage the session. The hook is there and is there every day for us without having to kind of find additional resources or make things. And you know, time is precious. Time is short for us teachers and having them there, I think all absolutely love them because they're really engaged."

Pupil Engagement

"And I think it just, and particularly with boys, often being harder to engage in reading. Yeah, that is nice. And the non-fiction books about space and animals and yeah. And the thing is that really grab their attention they they're rims; they pick it up and they want to read it not just ask them 'you need to pick a reading book choose one'. There's actually something they want to go and read and I think that's a massive difference maker particularly from what we had previously I think you know a lot of the books we had before were you know they were perfectly adequate in terms of teaching children to read but a lot of them didn't have that kind of engagement factor for children."

Support from the Rising Stars [Hodder Education] Team

During the interviews, all the teachers highlighted the importance of having someone to liaise with their schools throughout the year. The teachers seemed rather satisfied with the support they received from [the Hodder Education School Engagement Manager] and Abigail Steel and attributed their improved confidence in delivery to the open communication established with the Rising Stars [Hodder Education] team. Most of the teachers referred to the problem-solving strategies provided in a timely and effective way by Rising Stars [Hodder Education]. Others seemed to highly value the tailored support they received.

“[The Hodder Education School Engagement Manager] is always at the end of the keyboard. She's very, very helpful. So [she] really helped. And Abigail Steele has been fantastic as well. So I feel like that kind of balanced it out in the end because we had such good support from them. So now I feel very confident with the rocket phonics. I feel like I know what I'm doing with it now and so I feel like next year it would be even better when we deliver it in school. Your first year, you don't know what you're doing and I felt like I didn't really know what I was doing. I was trying to find my feet. So I feel like next year it would work even better and I feel like I've familiarized myself now enough with the resources. And Abigail has also emailed out a lot of information that I've used and I feel like it's embedded now. So I feel like we are in a place now where it's just part of the school and we've kind of made it our own.”

“[The Hodder Education School Engagement Manager] has been amazing .. she was really good at signposting us to the people that we needed, you know, and ordering of all the booklets and everything we need and then Abigail Steel has been great and came in a lot last year and gave us the training and she, you know, yeah, her found it really, you know, the teams been really good to sort of liaise with in terms of what we need”.

“So I wasn't involved at the beginning and wasn't aware of the program. So it was quite difficult to get my head around it and plus the fact I'm a year six teacher. This is my normal area of learning, so the EYFS and phonics is something that's like I've actually retaught myself. But the people, [The Hodder Education School Engagement Manager] has been an absolute godsend on any e-mail. The local [Hodder Education] representatives have been really helpful.”

“If you need anything, you just send them an e-mail and they do get back to you really quickly. So if we've ever not been sure about anything or not being able to find anything, we just we know where to go and you know that support is brilliant as a school when you especially when you're starting something new.”

Difficulties and Challenges

Relatively few difficulties were reported, although there were some, and the support from the Rising Stars [Hodder Education] team was typically sufficient to overcome these. One of the key challenges included getting the whole staff on board if they have been trained in an alternative SSP:

“So it's been really, really good. I mean, at first staff are a little bit not sure about the scheme. You know when you change something people don't always like change, but I think now that we've done it for two years we are really enjoying it and everyone really loves, you know, they enjoy teaching it.”

Some staff mentioned having some initial uncertainty about how to approach using the scheme either SEND pupils or where they had a cohort of pupils who were starting behind where they should be:

“I think it wasn't very clear at the beginning about how we could go back to then go forward if you know what I mean and you know like so we went back to the sounds that they didn't know and we covered them. That wasn't very clear until probably just before, just after Christmas when we had a webinar. I think it was with Abigail Steel and can't remember the other lady from rocket phonics now .. eerm we spoke about it and, you know, it was kind of given. Yes, you can do that because we were a bit worried that we weren't able to and that kind of side to it. So it kind of you know, making it clear that you know, yes, you've got the program and a typical child should follow it this way, but adapting it for you do know your children who are retaining sounds is OK as well.”

Some staff commented on experiencing some difficulties with the digital aspects of the resources, but noted that where glitches were experienced these were quickly remedied:

“And things have been taken on board and with the technology side of it, there have been a few errors we've noticed in some of the online resources that I've flagged up and some have been sorted really quickly, which is great. No, I don't think we have I think any issues of how they've taken to them, they've responded really quickly to.”

Some reported that they would have preferred the teacher guidance to be available as a print resource as well as a digital format, as this would be easier to dip in and out of.

Overall, the pedagogic aspects of the programme were praised but there was some criticism. One respondent indicated that they preferred a faster pace of lessons to that adopted as part of the mastery-based approach within Rocket Phonics. Another mentioned that they felt that termly and yearly expectations for the children were not entirely clear to them. A couple of comments picked up on the coverage of sounds compared to what they expected based on other schemes:

“I like it but I was trained in [another SSP]... I like lots of elements of it but not sure of all the sound coverage.”

“Some of the higher-obtaining sounds (above former phase 5) have confused our children and these sounds are not in other schemes, meaning the phonics screening doesn't always include them. These would be much better being introduced in year 2 when the children are more mature and able to deal with 4 different variations of the same sound.”

4. Conclusions

Implementation of Rocket Phonics was found to be true to the training in the majority of trial school sites in both years of the project, although the evidence suggests that implementation was much more straightforward and consistent in the second year of the trial, where the children who had participated in reception the previous year were already familiar with the RP approach. There was also more evidence of whole-class teaching compared to the first year of implementation.

Resources were rated as high quality, engaging and enjoyable for staff and children by the vast majority of trial school users, who also felt that their students were making good progress.

Staff confidence was high in the teaching of both reading and phonics, but there was evidence that Rocket Phonics trial teachers enjoyed teaching phonics more than staff at control schools.

The daily and weekly routines of the sessions were quickly understood by the children who were observed to work well during whole class and self-guided activities. This level of predictability fostered an independent and self-regulated approach to learning during the phonics sessions, which in turn freed up teacher time to hear children read individually.

The level of integration across rocket phonics and reading planet resources was particularly valued, and the structure of the programme was praised.

Teacher training, support and guidance was rated by teachers as both timely and effective.

Challenges to implementation related to some confusion around how best to start pupils if they were starting lower than expected, and how to differentiate effectively for SEND pupils in a whole class context. However, again support from the Rising Stars [Hodder Education] team generally resolved these queries. A more persistent challenge came from where teachers were already trained and well-rehearsed in another SSP which they were confident in, and were therefore resistant to deviating from. This manifested itself in concerns about pace (Rocket Phonics is seen as a slower paced programme because of its mastery-based approach) and inclusion of more 'advanced' GPCs with younger children. It should be noted that these were elements that other teachers praised about the programme.

Ongoing support from [The Hodder Education School Engagement Manager], Abigail Steel and local [Hodder Education] Teams appears to be important for ensuring a 'safe landing' of the scheme and for onboarding teachers and other staff who may have been used to using other schemes, or who may not have taught phonics in recent years and need that additional level of support and guidance.