Rapid Phonics

Key Conclusions

1. Rapid Phonics was not found to have a noticeable impact on the primary outcome measure of reading comprehension at the end of the intervention.

2. There was a small improvement in the secondary outcome of decoding, but this did not reach statistical significance.

3. Conducting the intervention during the last term of Year 6 and the first term of Year 7 was not the most settled period as there were many disruptions in the school environment and conditions may not have been best suited for the children to respond optimally to tutoring.

4. Continuing the intervention from primary to secondary schools can be logistically problematic, with a number of children transferring to schools outside the project or changing secondary school soon after arrival.

5. An area of further research would be to employ the intervention in one continuous period at an earlier point in primary school, using a larger sample size and with more focus on children receiving free school meals and upon SEN.

What is the impact?

No positive effect size was found for the primary outcome of reading comprehension. A small positive effect size was found for the other secondary outcome of non-word reading, but not for the secondary outcome of single word reading. None of the measures were found to be statistically significant, suggesting that we do not have sufficient evidence to confidently conclude that the observed effect was caused by the programme rather than occurring by chance.

As a result, it is not clear that Rapid Phonics is an effective intervention for improving reading comprehension for pupils who have not achieved the expected level of attainment in literacy at the end of primary school, when delivered across the primary/secondary transition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GROUP</th>
<th>NO. OF PUPILS</th>
<th>EFFECT SIZE (95% CONFIDENCE INTERVALS)</th>
<th>ESTIMATED MONTHS’ PROGRESS</th>
<th>EVIDENCE STRENGTH</th>
<th>COST</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intervention vs control (all pupils)</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>-0.05 (-0.34, 0.25)</td>
<td>-1 month</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>££££</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention vs control (FSM only)</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>-0.07 (-0.36, 0.23)</td>
<td>-1 month</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>££££</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How secure is the finding?

The existing evidence based on phonics training suggests that it is beneficial for young beginner readers but may be less so for older readers. Evaluations of a precursor of the Rapid Phonics intervention, Sound Discovery, suggest it is an effective intervention for beginner readers when used for catch-up in the early stages of formal reading instruction, however these evaluations did not include a control group. This is the first independent evaluation of the programme, and the first to use a randomised controlled trial methodology.

The evaluation was set up as an efficacy trial, randomly allocating 201 pupils in 22 primary schools to an intervention group or a waitlist control group. The developer led the recruitment and retention of the schools, was
responsible for the training, and oversaw the provision of the intervention. Efficacy trials seek to test interventions in the best possible conditions to see if they hold promise. The minimal detectable effect size was relatively large (0.32) which impacts on the overall security of the trial.

Intention to treat analysis was used (i.e. pupils were compared in the groups to which they were originally randomly assigned); blinded invigilation and marking of test papers was undertaken; and appropriate analysis (multi-level modelling) was used to enable school effects to be taken into account.

Bias may have been introduced by two secondary schools declining to take part in the intervention. The overall attrition rate from the primary outcome was low (11%) and was similar between intervention and control groups. The process evaluation suggested that the intervention had been delivered with a high level of fidelity to the programme as designed by the developer.

To view the project’s evaluation protocol click here.

How much does it cost?

Based on teaching five groups per school, each containing four pupils, the estimated cost of the intervention per child is approximately £205, including starter packs for both primary and secondary schools and teacher time to deliver the intervention. This per-pupil cost will vary according to the number of classes and pupils who require the intervention, and future costs will be less given the upfront investment in materials.