



The case for early intervention: the impact of Reading Recovery on the phonics screening check

Introduction

Reading Recovery is an effective intervention for the lowest attaining six year olds who struggle to read. It is one of the few literacy interventions to have been extensively evaluated, both here in the UK and internationally (D'Agostino & Harmey, 2016). Based at the International Literacy Centre (ILC), UCL Institute of Education, Reading Recovery offers an accredited programme of one-to-one teaching to the lowest attaining children in schools where it is implemented. Each programme is tailored to the needs of the individual pupil and enables them to catch up with their peers within 12-20 weeks.

One question that to our knowledge has not yet been fully explored is the impact of Reading Recovery on the phonics screening check. Since its inception in 2012, the phonics screening check data has consistently shown that a large number of pupils struggle to meet the expected standard at the end of Year 1. In 2018 this stands at 18% of pupils

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/phonics-screening-check-and-key-stage-1-assessments-england-2018/national-curriculum-assessments-at-key-stage-1-and-phonics-screening-checks-in-england-2018>). As Reading Recovery targets the lowest attaining pupils, the ILC considered it important to explore the impact Reading Recovery might have on their attainment in the phonics screening test, using data Reading Recovery routinely collects.

Methods

Reading Recovery teachers submit annual data about pupils' background (age/ gender/ free school meals) and literacy achievement as measured by the British Ability Scales Word Reading Test (Elliot and Smith, 2011) and The Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (Clay, 2013) the International Literacy Centre. Data is also collected about pupils' performance on the Phonics Screening Check (PSC) and Key Stage 1 and 2 National Assessments. The PSC is a 40-word pseudo-word and real word decoding test administered at the end of school Year 1.

Researchers at the ILC and UCL's CREATE (Conducting Research, Evaluation And Trials in Education), Sinead Harmey and Jake Anders, used the Reading Recovery evaluation database to analyse outcomes from the national phonics screening check for three groups of pupils: children who had taken the check before they started Reading Recovery; those who were mid-way through their programme at the time of the check; or who took the check after they completed Reading Recovery.

In total the analysis explored the performance of 6, 023 pupils who took part in Reading Recovery in England on the PSC over two academic years, 2015/2016 and 2016/2017. There were 2,443 girls and 3,580 boys in the sample. 58% were eligible for Free School Meals. 28% spoke English as an additional language. All students with completed Reading Recovery programmes were included in the analysis, whether they were considered to have successfully reached the literacy levels of their peers or were referred back to their school for further support.

Findings

75% of children who participated in Reading Recovery prior to the PSC passed the screening check. For comparison, the percentage of all children nationally who passed the phonics check was 81% in both 2016 and 2017. Thus, these Reading Recovery pupils in the bottom 5-10% of readers when they were selected for Reading Recovery were performing only 6% below the national average after they completed their programme.

The percentage passing the phonics check fell to 45% if the children were part-way through their Reading Recovery programme when they took the PSC. In comparison, only 19% of the children who began Reading Recovery after they took the phonics check passed the PSC in Year 1.

	Reading Recovery prior to PSC	Reading Recovery during PSC	Reading Recovery after PSC
PSC Passed (%)	75	45	19
PSC Score (Mean/Standard Deviation)	32 (8.1)	25.9 (10.3)	18 (11.5)

There was a positive relationship between starting RR earlier and performance on the PSC, after controlling for initial reading level on the British Ability Scales.

What can we conclude?

An important criterion for selection in Reading Recovery is the severity of the child's difficulties; those who initially perform worst on the initial tests given to all the struggling readers in a class or year group will usually be selected to participate before those who do better. The researchers confirmed that the lowest attaining on the British Ability Scales Word Reading Test (Elliot and Smith, 2011) were indeed admitted to the programme first. (For an initial report see Harmey and Anders, 2018)

Further research is needed to clarify some of the issues the evaluation raised. Conference presentations and publication will ensure the current findings are submitted to the rigours of peer

review. Fuller exploration of the value of Reading Recovery as a targeted early intervention through an RCT or quasi-experimental design would be welcome. In the meanwhile, the impact of Reading Recovery on outcomes in the phonics screening test are a hopeful sign that progress can be made in reaching and remedying early literacy difficulties.

Harmey, S. & Anders, J. (2018). *An analysis of the performance of Reading Recovery students on the phonics*. Poster presented at the 25th Meeting of the Society for the Scientific Studies of Reading, Brighton, UK, available at <https://www.triplesr.org/analysis-performance-reading-recovery-students-phonics-screening-check>