EEF Blog: What makes effective literacy teaching?

Sir Kevan Collins introduces our new primary literacy guidance reports.

Good literacy skills provide us with the building blocks not just for academic success, but for fulfilling careers and rewarding lives. Yet despite our best efforts, a disadvantaged child in England is still more than twice as likely as their classmates from more advantaged homes to leave primary school without reaching the expected levels in reading and writing.

We think the best way to break this link between family income and educational attainment is through better use of evidence: looking at what has — and has not — worked in the past can put us in a much better place to judge what is likely to work in the future.

But it can be difficult to know where to start. There are thousands of studies of primary literacy teaching out there, most of which are presented in academic papers and journals. Teachers are inundated with information about programmes and training courses, all of which make claims about impact. How can anyone know which findings are the most secure, reliable, and relevant to their school and pupils?

To help, we’ve put together two guidance reports to support literacy teaching in Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2. To develop the recommendations, we reviewed the best available international research and consulted experts to arrive at key principles for effective literacy teaching.

Launched today, they offer practical and evidence-based recommendations that are relevant to all pupils and particularly to those struggling with their literacy. They focus on key areas where there is evidence that schools can use in order to make a significant difference to pupils’ learning and include:

- focusing on pupils’ speaking and listening skills by encouraging them to read books aloud and have conversations with their friends about them;
- a balanced and engaging approach to developing reading, which integrates both decoding and comprehension skills;
- promoting fluent written transcription skills by encouraging extensive and effective practice and explicitly teaching spelling;
- targeting teaching and support by accurately assessing pupil needs; and
- using high-quality structured interventions to help pupils who are struggling with their literacy.

These headlines will not come as a surprise. They are probably already a key priority in most schools. This means there are unlikely to be easy solutions or quick fixes. Using these guidance reports effectively, therefore, means digging deeper into the recommendations. To help we’ve produced several different resources, including an audit tool and discussion questions.

The recommendations from both reports are central to the EEF’s North East Primary Literacy Campaign, a five-year project and a £10m investment in the region, co-funded with Northern Rock Foundation. 880 primary schools in the North East will have the opportunity to work with local partners to use the guidance to improve their literacy teaching. Schools with large numbers of disadvantaged pupils will also receive direct funding to implement the most promising evidence-based literacy programmes.

We hope today’s report – and our ongoing literacy campaign – will go some way in building a reliable and self-improving primary school system which will ensure as many pupils as possible, regardless of social or geographic background, can read and write well.