Teaching assistants can improve numeracy and literacy when used effectively

Teaching assistants can improve literacy and numeracy skills when they are deployed well, according to the results of two randomised controlled trials published today by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF).

Research to date has suggested that students in a class with a teaching assistant did not, on average, perform better than those in a class with only a teacher. The new findings suggest that, when used to support specific pupils in small groups or through structured interventions, teaching assistants can be effective at improving attainment.

The reports are among the first group of results published by the EEF today. Together the six reports, which are based on trials with 6,800 pupils at 238 schools, represent a major new source of independent evidence to help schools narrow the attainment gap between rich and poor pupils. The EEF is currently trialling 66 further ways of improving standards for the poorest pupils in English schools.

Among the other reports published today is one that finds that students who participated in a four week academic summer school made progress in English, but did not in maths.

The findings on teaching assistants’ impact on literacy come from a trial of Switch-on Reading, a 10-week programme aimed at pupils in their first year of secondary school who did not achieve the expected levels in literacy at the end of primary school. The approach consists of one to one reading sessions lasting 20 minutes and is most commonly delivered by teaching assistants.

The trial, involving 308 pupils across 19 schools, was designed as a randomised controlled experiment. It found that, on average, pupils made an additional three months progress as a result of participating in the programme. Students eligible for free school meals and those previously struggling with reading made even greater additional progress.

An evaluation of Catch Up Numeracy, a scheme of one to one maths support for pupils aged from 6 to 11, also demonstrates the value of structured interventions. The programme of twice-weekly sessions delivered by teaching assistants was trialled with 324 pupils in 54 schools over 30 weeks. Three groups were compared: one which continued with normal lessons, one which participated in the scheme and one group which was given one to one attention without Catch Up Numeracy.

The report concludes that both Catch Up and one to one intervention lead to significant gains in learning, an average of three and four months’ additional progress respectively, compared to continuing with normal lessons. However, there was little evidence that the Catch Up approach provides additional gains over and above those from one to one teaching itself.

Future Foundations, a summer school providing literacy and numeracy catch-up for pupils aged 9 to 11, was also evaluated using a controlled randomised trial. 435 pupils participated in the trial which took place at three sites in London and the South East during the summer of 2013. Students attended for four weeks, following a specially designed curriculum taught by trained teachers in the mornings with sports and enrichment activities in the afternoons. The trial found that, on average, pupils made an additional two months progress in English as a result of attending the summer school but the same gain was not seen in maths.

Other findings from the reports suggest that:

- Small group teaching improves the writing skills of those struggling with literacy at the end of primary school.
- Structured interventions should be planned in school timetables at the beginning of the year to ensure they are given priority and status.
- Summer schools show evidence of promise for English, particularly for students eligible for free school meals.
and Year 5 pupils (10 year-olds).

These reports show that it is possible to conduct good quality evaluations of the different schemes available to schools and to use the results to inform practice. They will also help to inform the Sutton Trust-EEF Toolkit which more than a third of school leaders already use to decide how to spend the pupil premium funding for disadvantaged pupils.

The EEF will publish groups of reports throughout the year. Alongside the next group of reports the EEF will present guidance for schools on evidence-based approaches to supporting pupils struggling with literacy at the transition from primary to secondary.

Dr Kevan Collins, Chief Executive of the Education Endowment Foundation, said that:

“These evaluations represent the first step in building a secure evidence base for schools to draw upon to improve results for their poorest pupils. In the past many schools have struggled to train and support teaching assistants in ways which benefit children, particularly students from disadvantaged backgrounds. These studies suggest some promising ways to change that. The results show that when a groups of schools come together to test something we can generate knowledge which is hugely valuable to all schools.”

Sir Peter Lampl, chairman of the Education Endowment Foundation and the Sutton Trust, said:

“Finding the most effective ways to improve attainment for disadvantaged pupils requires rigorous research and evaluation to know what really works. In the past, we’ve had too many initiatives without hard evidence behind them. With today’s trial results, we are starting to enhance our knowledge about the most effective approaches to teaching and learning in schools. These findings will help schools focus on the most promising strategies.”

NOTES TO EDITORS

1. The Education Endowment Foundation is a charity set up in 2011 by the Sutton Trust as lead foundation in partnership with Impetus Trust, with a Department for Education grant of £125m. It is dedicated to breaking the link between family income and educational achievement. Since its launch the EEF has awarded £37.4 million to 72 projects working with over 500,000 pupils in over 2,300 schools across England.

2. The Teaching and Learning Toolkit is an accessible summary of educational research developed by the EEF in collaboration with the Sutton Trust and a team of academics at Durham University led by Professor Steve Higgins. The expanded Toolkit covers 34 topics and summarises research from over 10,000 studies. The Toolkit is a live resource which is regularly updated as new findings are published. To access the Toolkit please visit: https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/toolkit...

3. The full list of projects funded by EEF can be viewed at https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/project...