

over each pupil and correct every error, your absence will encourage bad habits – which will be a disaster later on for expressive writing, not to mention speed. No, it's better to do joined writing, as long as it is well provided for.”

French teachers believe art and PE are closely linked to the teaching of handwriting.

Teachers believe in the importance of children performing shapes in PE and linking these to making marks and symbols in art. These are powerful tools for communicating meanings. For the French interviewees, the importance attached to *le graphisme* and its cross-curricular links, especially with PE and art, are obvious. In lessons, teachers engage children in differing physical activities, which are linked to the teaching of handwriting.

Performing shapes and making marks and symbols are seen as powerful tools for communicating.

There is a wide range of literature available to teachers in France that supports their understanding and the development of their teaching of handwriting.

In the literature much analysis is placed on looking at the theory and development of children's psychomotor skills and the links between these and handwriting. There appears to be little literature of this kind in England.

The synergy between schools, HEIs and LEAs aids the teaching of handwriting as a high priority in initial teacher training and in continuing professional development.

This interdependence connects through the training of student teachers who are educated and collectively assessed by all three agencies regularly. This coherent approach encourages and supports teachers engaging in research on the effectiveness of their teaching.

Questions and recommendations

- ★ *What can teachers in England usefully learn from practice in French schools?*
- ★ *Could the introduction of a concept such as le graphisme help pupils in England?*
- ★ *Do teachers know enough about the teaching of handwriting and its links with other subjects?*
- ★ *How can the range, volume and quality of literature be increased in England so that it could usefully inform practice?*
- ★ *How might the DfEE and the TTA encourage synergy between schools, HEIs and LEAs in the teaching of handwriting?*
- ★ *It is strongly recommended that teachers take note of the findings of this report and that further research activity is commissioned to develop advice within a staff development initiative.*

Further reading

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Une question de writing?

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AIM

To compare approaches to the teaching of writing and handwriting in England and France.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FOR THIS CASE STUDY

- ★ The teaching of handwriting is a high priority in French infant and junior schools.
- ★ French teachers and education professionals display a higher degree of knowledge of the principles underlying the teaching of handwriting.
- ★ In France joined handwriting is viewed as the facilitator to creative written expression. In England teaching handwriting and creative writing are seen as quite separate.
- ★ French teachers believe art and PE are closely linked to the teaching of handwriting.
- ★ There is a wide range of literature available to teachers in France that supports their understanding and the development of their teaching of handwriting.
- ★ The synergy between schools, HEIs and LEAs aids the teaching of handwriting as a high priority in initial teacher training and in continuing professional development.

A research project commissioned by the Teacher Training Agency as part of the Teacher Research Grant Scheme 1996/97

Background

Two years ago my school took a gamble, and challenged traditions and practices related to the teaching of writing in infant schools in England. Our pupils no longer follow the emergent writing model of expressing themselves through a hieroglyphical pre-writing phase. Nor does the teacher spend time acting as scribe to individual children who then “copy” her printed writing, often forming letters incorrectly in the process. Instead, the creative aspect of expressing children’s thoughts is, in the first instance, developed only orally. A longer time is devoted to developing the fine and gross motor skills needed for joined handwriting. Once these are in place we see a new quality in our children’s work, both in the communication of their thoughts and in their presentation – speed, spelling, punctuation and grammar. It is as though, having automated the hand, the children’s minds are “liberated” to release their ideas more effectively and creatively on paper. The results have delighted and amazed teachers in my school.

Why did we feel we needed to change the way we taught children to write?

External pressure – SCM analysis of SAT tests prompted the comment, “There is concern over creative writing and, for example, the over-use of stock phrases.” And at Key Stage 2 concerns were expressed with not only punctuation and grammar but also the narrow repertoire used in learning to write, including “use of shaky dialogue”. In 1996 Hawker said, “We feel children are capable of more colourful, creative use of language if they’re taught it.”

Internal pressure – Locally and nationally, secondary schools were expressing concern over standards of legibility, spelling and grammar, and the lack of speed in writing examination scripts. The following concerns were expressed about children’s handwriting in our school. “I wish more children would write more neatly.” “They seem to space their words so

badly.” “Why don’t kids write on the line?” “I don’t know why we bother with (separate) handwriting lessons – the kids always revert back to bad habits afterwards.” “I’m still getting reversals in Year 2!” In the SATs at Key Stage 1, the issue of joined handwriting

“The French are, in effect, saying that the ability to write takes precedence over reading.”

had also been discussed, and a move to a new infants’ building had generated an atmosphere of reflection and debate.

At the same time, while working on a Diploma in Curriculum Studies at Canterbury Christ Church College, I recalled some years earlier being inspired by reading some remarkable thank-you letters written by six- and seven-year-old children in France. How, I wondered, had such beautiful writing been achieved?

With my professional curiosity reawakened by the current debate in my school, I decided to investigate something of the French model. What I saw in French infant and primary schools proved to be an inspiration and a revelation, and I set about adopting some French ideas of good practice in my own class.

The eventual outcomes surpassed my expectations of what children of this age could achieve. I shared these results with colleagues and as a result, the whole staff were inspired to visit schools in northern France and they continue to do so. This culminated in the whole school changing its writing practice.

The Teacher Training Agency’s research initiative gave me the opportunity I sought to learn more about how the French teach handwriting and, following a successful application for funding, I developed and implemented a research strategy.

Methods

I approached the gathering of data in two ways:

- ★ *semi-structured interviews with academics, headteachers, teachers and education professionals in Kent and northern France;*
- ★ *a review of the literature in both countries on the teaching and development of handwriting.*

I chose the interviewees by matching their roles and specialisms as closely as possible with each other. As background to my main findings, I need to explain briefly the concept of *le graphisme*.

“It is as though, having automated the hand, the children’s minds are ‘liberated’ to release their ideas more effectively and creatively on paper.”

Le graphisme – what is it?

In France, a word one frequently hears in relation to the teaching of handwriting is *le graphisme*. The word does not really translate into English, the nearest equivalent being “the graphic act”. This has no obvious meaning for most British infant teachers. For French infant teachers, *le graphisme* is uppermost in their minds, in their planning and in their daily teaching. So what is it?

It is defined in *Le Programme* (equivalent to the National Curriculum) as *un geste délicat* (a delicate movement), *un acte complexe* (a complex action) and more significantly, *une activité essentielle*.

What does it entail?

Le graphisme involves theories and practices that aim to develop children’s:

- ★ *overall motor control – the ability to control one’s body;*
- ★ *fine motor control – the ability to fine-tune the movements of the arm, hand and fingers;*
- ★ *visual control – of the traces produced by the hand;*
- ★ *spatial control – of one’s body in space, an awareness of horizontality, verticality, and of how to transfer a movement on to paper.*

It requires a considerable amount of skill, knowledge, patience and sensitivity on the part of the teacher. There are strong cross-curricular links, especially with art, PE and music (*le graphisme* requires a certain degree of movement to a rhythm).

Les droits du peuple (the rights of the people) feature strongly in French education, where teachers believe it their mission to help pupils gain access to culture, notably through the arts. As the headteacher of a French primary school put it, “If our pupils can gain access to culture, they can communicate with anyone. And to do this, they need to be familiar with symbols – the symbols in writing, in reading, in art, in maths, in music. Therefore, we believe it is important to spend time learning about symbols and how to reproduce them.”

Teaching handwriting in France is a lengthy process, which may begin on school entry (by the age of three in France, when 98 per cent of children are in full-time education) and continue until the student is

eight or nine years old, when spatial awareness is refined to “the ability to organise accurately words or symbols on a page”.

Le graphisme is also allied to developing strong powers of concentration and memory and leads ultimately to pupils developing “les pouvoirs de communication”.

Main findings

In France there was a close, cohesive and shared cultural understanding among infant teachers. Their unanimous commitment to *le graphisme* within the school culture, to a national style of lettering (virtually unchanged since their own school days) and to an educational philosophy rich in cultural emphasis were impossible to ignore. Analysis of the interviews revealed six main differences between policy and practice in France and England.

The teaching of handwriting is a high priority in French infant and junior schools.

The French are, in effect, saying that the ability to write takes precedence over reading. As one French infant teacher put it, “Writing is harder – it asks more in terms of creativity, in grammar, punctuation and spelling – and demands more physically from the child.”

French teachers and education professionals display a higher degree of knowledge of the principles underlying the teaching of handwriting.

Kent teachers admitted to being somewhat ignorant about handwriting, feeling that there is a British tradition of such knowledge being “too specialist” and not really applicable or relevant to the average child. This is in marked contrast to the situation in France, where knowledge of the teaching of handwriting is seen as fundamental.

In France joined handwriting is viewed as the facilitator to creative written expression. In England teaching handwriting and creative writing are seen as quite separate.

This is best exemplified through the comments of a French special needs teacher: “It’s not a good idea to let young children do much printing. It causes ‘segmentation’ which makes the muscles stiffen up rather than letting a nice flowing rhythm develop. It may be easier to start with, but unless you can watch