



Children writing: shaping words, shaping thoughts

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Aims of the project

- To develop cursive writing from entry to support creative writing
- To consider gender issues in the use of this approach
- To summarise the impact of this approach

Dimensions of the study

Herne CE Infant School in Herne Bay in Kent is a three-form entry school catering for 270 children with the recent addition of a Nursery (2006). This study is based on the development of earlier school-based research carried out by a previous school colleague, Fiona Thomas, 'Une question de writing?' (TTA 1996/7). The whole school participated in this writing project from the very beginning and it has continued up to the present. References will be made to practices in YR and Y1 but for the purposes of this study our focus is Y2 during the period 2005 to 2007(8).

Summary of main findings

- Children developed writing skills, including cursive writing earlier than before, allowing creative opportunities to be explored in more advanced ways than previously
- The strategy benefited boys and girls including children with Additional Education Needs (AEN) and left-handed children
- Standards in Literacy improved
- Other schools/other LA's/ other settings are adopting our approach

Background and context

In the current educational climate writing remains a high priority area for improvement. At our school writing has been a high focus for many years following our exploration of the French system whereby the youngest children are introduced to 'graphisme' (the art of pattern making) before writing. We have developed the same fundamental principles in our own setting.

To us it made sense....Why not address writing skills at the earliest opportunity to ensure a smoother transition into a style of joined writing? Surely by focusing on this skill at the outset, the future benefits for children to concentrate on the creative aspects and not have to worry with the technicalities of changing their style of handwriting would result?

Could standards be improved? What would be the long-term implications?

These were all questions we asked ourselves initially as we began our journey to where we find ourselves now.

Teaching processes and strategies

Starting off

We began by identifying the basic patterns children needed to learn for letter formation and formulating a progressive teaching programme to ensure that these were taught systematically. Our links with France had offered us the opportunity to understand the benefits of gross motor development (whole body movements) in preparation for successful writing. This was pre the 'Brain Gym', 'Write Dance' period when gross motor programmes were only used for children with particular identified motor writing difficulties. Today this is part of our working educational practice but at that time this was the missing link between the children's experiences and formal recording and yet it was totally overlooked!

Involving the whole school

The whole school decided to go forward in this way; enthusiasm was so great and the logic seemed so right that each year group adapted their planning to adopt the fundamental principles of the approach. All year group teachers regardless of the children's earlier experiences began to review their planning and practice. YR, from the very earliest opportunity, began developing their writing skills in this way. Y1 and Y2 began to adapt their teaching, making due allowance for the fact that Y1 had already had one year and Y2 had already had two years of writing in a printed style.

We were all creative in our approach which involved preparing activities for the children as this was totally new at that time. The use of art, music and paper activities were re-focused with *graphisme* in mind.

Everyone believed that this would support the children in their writing experiences. It was a calculated risk that, based on previous evidence of success, we were prepared to take. All three year groups of three classes of 30 children began to change their approach and their experiences of writing.

Our practice with four-year olds

We emphasise the importance of developing gross motor movements identified for letter writing (e.g. the concept of circular, spiral, zig-zag movements) and incorporate the approach

into the practice for pre-writing for our 4-year olds. The children experience increased opportunities for physical activity of this nature in preparation for making movements on paper later. The focus shifts from writing in print to developing gross motor experiences and pattern work to aid improved formation and ultimately a cursive script from the outset.

By experiencing gross motor movements, kinaesthetic and pen activity work, our children begin to establish correct pattern development which leads to improved letter formation and writing of words and sentences in a cursive script. They establish good habits and do not repeat inaccuracies in their formation of letters, such as, writing an 'a' as a circle and a vertical line in two movements or an 'n' without the vertical line. We have all experienced children entering school writing in capitals or reversing numbers, and acknowledge the difficulty of breaking such habits.

Once children are engaged in the programme, the motor memory quickly becomes automatic. This is when the hand/eye movements work in conjunction with the brain and after a movement is repeated a few times, becomes habitual. It is therefore crucial that correct movements are established from the outset to avoid the need for relearning movements and consequently delaying the writing process.

Involving parents

Parents are informed at the outset of the school's policy and practice in relation to writing. All parents of new entrants to the school are invited to a session to discover our writing philosophy and experience some of the practical activities of the programme.

The findings

The main impacts on children's Literacy are described below.

National test data (including those from the most recent period 2005-7) at the end of KS1 have consistently shown:

- increased levels of L3 compared to the LA and National figures;
- attainment for girls and boys reflecting higher standards in relation to LA and National results; and
- AEN children achieving greater progress than LA and National results.

Our finding that pupils' writing skills have benefited from this approach to learning how to write are echoed in the school's Ofsted report of 2007:

- In YR standards in writing are above average
- Pupils achievements in writing are particularly impressive
- Pupil's writing is of high quality. It is frequently well-

structured and imaginative. Handwriting is fluent and joined

- The school has been particularly effective in developing pupils' writing skills



By the end of KS1 the children develop their creative writing at a much more detailed level than before. The focus is not the technicalities of handwriting but instead on developing creative thinking and the recording of this in a fluent, legible style. Secretarial aspects and content have both improved. Children form their letters more accurately allowing the combining of letters to be more automatic and flowing.

By Y2 pupils require less time to maintain the handwriting skills than in Year 1 and more time is freed up to develop creativity in writing. This has enabled us to pursue more advanced aspects of creative writing and incorporate aspects of KS2 programmes of study and literature to support Y2 writing.

The children are confident, motivated writers. They take pride in their individual abilities and in their contribution to the school's success. They are proud of their achievements and perceive themselves as authors and poets. Writing is a positive experience for all children regardless of gender. Boys particularly have benefited from the emphasis on physical experiences.

The children's concentration levels are high not only in writing activities but in other curriculum areas, such as Music and PE.

Individual weaknesses continue to be identified earlier and supported to reduce the need for further intervention. Few children require additional external intervention for motor movements (gross or fine).

We have shared our philosophy and practice across the county and nationally, resulting in numerous schools adopting the programme. Today the children continue to experience the high focus their writing achieves by the constant interest from visitors attending INSET mornings.

As an AST for Literacy I have provided extensive inset for over 200 schools/Early Years settings/LA/Teacher Training//AEN/TA groups. The comments and evaluations from the INSET participants provide positive feedback for us as a school.

Research methods

We collected data using a number of methods including:

- internal (whole school) writing moderation;
- external moderation in conjunction with other schools (Cluster KS1/2 and Secondary) and LA moderation (via national test analyses);

- comparative progress checks for individuals and groups using Foundation Stage Profiles and samples of work and end of KS1 results and work samples;
- national test results over a period of time; and
- feedback from children, colleagues, other staff and parents; and Inset evaluations.

Conclusion

Teaching the skills of handwriting using a cursive programme from entry has enabled our children to build the cursive script into their writing experiences without the need to re-learn later. In establishing cursive skills at the outset children are empowered to concentrate on creative writing in more depth at Y2 than previously.

Children are more motivated, have increased self-esteem and recognise themselves as writers. All children including boys and girls succeed better than before.

As well as improved standards in writing our approach allows our children an improved positive experience of early writing experiences which is paramount to future success. The staff continue to support this approach and are convinced of its benefits for the children.

Suggestions for further reading

TTA Research-Fiona Thomas, 'Une question de writing?' (Teacher Research Grant summary 1996/7)

Ofsted- Herne CE Infant Reports (1998), (2002), (2007)

www.ofsted.gov.uk

Ofsted publication (2003) *Yes he can: Schools where boys write well* Ofsted HMI 505



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