

Teaching fully cursive writing in Reception: a discussion document

I write as a teacher with more than forty years of experience in primary classrooms, subject leadership and management. Many of those years have been with the youngest children in school, including Nursery. I have been involved in Literacy education at local, national and international levels and have a particular passion for the teaching of handwriting. This includes providing training for schools on behalf of the NHA and as an independent consultant. I also support some individual children with handwriting problems within a London primary school. The impetus for this article is my concerns with the practice adopted in some schools of introducing the teaching of 'fully cursive' handwriting with 'lead in' or 'entry' strokes from the beginning of the Reception year (ages 4 -5 years).

In England, the curriculum begins with the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) 0-5 years, followed by the National Curriculum which is divided into Key Stages 1-4. The National Curriculum for English (2014) places high importance on teaching handwriting and confirms the importance of achieving automaticity, so that the child's higher processes of thinking can be released to work on compositional skills, rather than be consumed by the motor, sensory and perception demands of transcription.

Good early practice in handwriting teaching seeks to establish secure foundations from the beginning then to practise, refine and extend skills. Continuity and consistency are essential factors in helping children retain movement patterns. Those advocating the early teaching of fully cursive with 'lead in' or 'entry' strokes (see Fig.1 below), wish to establish this practice from school entry (Reception) so that children do not have to alter movement patterns at a later stage. Whilst this model sounds plausible and is successful with some children, my concern is that it is unsupported pedagogically, is unnecessary and creates failure in some of the youngest and most vulnerable children. I will proceed to outline my reasons:

Early writers

Some children will be already reading and writing letters when they start Reception, including those attending Nursery classes in the same school. The letters they use, and

those in the wider print environment, are not likely to have entry strokes. What are the implications for continuity and consistency?

Statutory requirements:

There are *no* requirements to teach fully cursive writing either in the EYFS or in the National Curriculum. Indeed, the National Curriculum for English places emphasis on the acquisition of letter shape, space and size *before* joins are taught and delivers clear messages that some letters are best left un-joined.

For Year 2 pupils (6-7 years), the requirements include the following:

Year 2 Statutory guidance

In writing, pupils should be able to form individual letters correctly, so establishing good handwriting habits from the beginning.

Pupils should be taught to:

- form lower-case letters of the correct *size* relative to one another
- *start* using some of the diagonal and horizontal strokes needed to join letters and understand which letters, when adjacent to one another, are best left un-joined.

Year 2 Notes and guidance: non-statutory

Pupils should revise and practise correct letter formation frequently.

They should be taught to write with a joined style as soon as they can securely form letters with the correct orientation.

And for Years 3-4 (ages 7-9)

Lower Key Stage 2 Programme of Study (Statutory requirements)

Pupils should be taught to:

- use the diagonal and horizontal strokes that are needed to join letters and
- understand which letters, when adjacent to one another, *are best left un-joined*.

The National Curriculum reflects the position that there is no evidence supporting the notion that schemes which use ‘lead in’ strokes and fully cursive writing, are in any way superior to those in which letters start at the top and join with an exit stroke. Although ‘lead in strokes’ are taught widely in other European countries, there is an important age difference for when formal writing is introduced, i.e. at around 7 years of age, as opposed to 4-5 years in England.

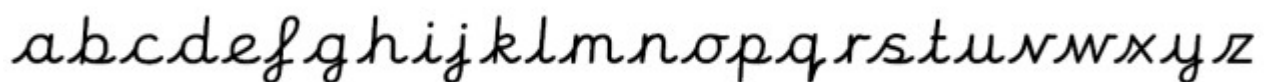


Fig.1. Example of cursive letterforms with entry and exit strokes

Developmental factors

Handwriting is a complex perceptual–motor skill that is dependent upon the maturation and integration of a number of cognitive, perceptual and motor skills (see Fig.2 below).

Achievement demands the orchestration of multiple skills involving the eyes, arms, hands, memory, posture and body control as well as managing pencil, paper and following instructions.

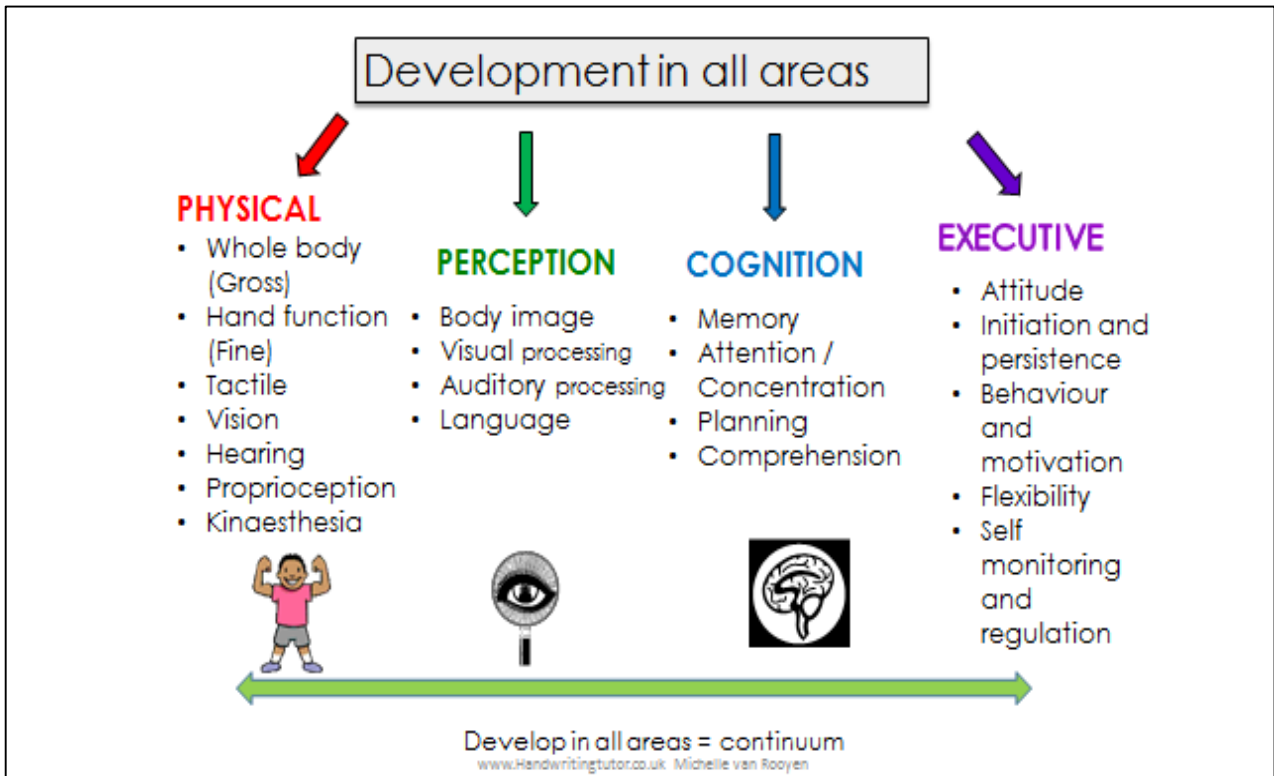


Fig.2. Areas of development underpinning handwriting (Michelle van Rooyen)

This is no easy task for very young, especially those ‘summer born’ children who are still only four years of age for most of their Reception year. At the end of that year, the Early Learning Goals set demanding benchmarks of attainment. Assessment of handwriting is to be found in Goals 4 and 10, which include these requirements:

Early Learning Goal 4 Writing:

Expected descriptors

- They also write some irregular common words.
- They write sentences which can be read by themselves and others. Some words are spelt correctly and others are phonetically plausible.

Exceeding descriptors

- They use key features of narrative in their own writing.

Early Learning Goal 10 Physical: Moving and handling

Expected descriptors

Children show good control and co-ordination in large and small movements.

They handle equipment and tools effectively, including pencils for writing.

Exceeding descriptors

- They hold paper in position and use their preferred hand for writing, using a correct pencil grip.
- They are beginning to be able to write on lines and control letter size

Fig. 3. Extracts from Early Learning Goals 4 and 10

There is, quite simply, enough to do without adding extra requirements. The importance of the *Foundation* stage is in the name! Foundation skills in handwriting should be focused on *all* of the areas outlined in Fig.1. Practitioners need to be fully aware that the premature rush to get children 'joining their writing' when prerequisite skills are immature, may leave a legacy of handwriting problems that will be difficult to reverse at a later stage.

The development of the right oblique stroke necessary for entry strokes is emerging between the ages of 4 -5. Children with delayed development are likely to struggle to achieve this movement and experience frustration.

The Beery – Buktenica Developmental Test of Visual- Motor Integration

Writing readiness can be guided by the child's ability to write these first 8 to 9 shapes as these form the foundations of all letters and numbers.

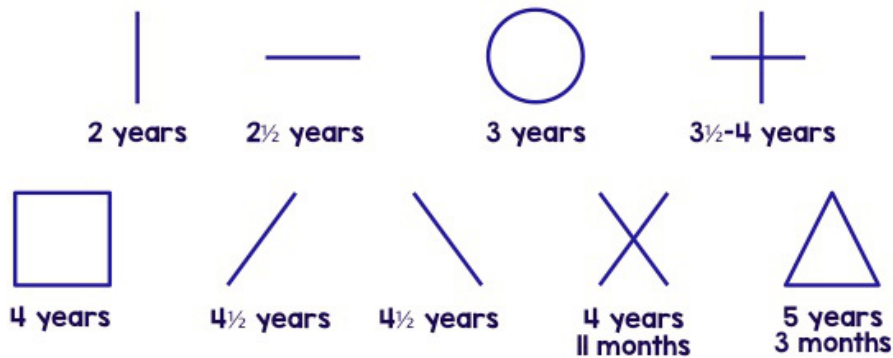


Fig. 4. From VMI Administration, Scoring and Teaching Manual. 6th Edition (Beery, 2010) (summarised by Michelle van Rooyen)

For many children in our schools and their teachers, the writing demands of EYFS pose a huge challenge. The letterforms used need to be as simple and fail-proof as possible, with letters taught in 'formation families which reflect the motor patterns required to write them. Moreover, these letters are similar to those found in texts, unlike those with entry strokes which can look quite different. Joining, whenever it is seen to be desirable, can be taught quite simply using the exit strokes of these letter forms.

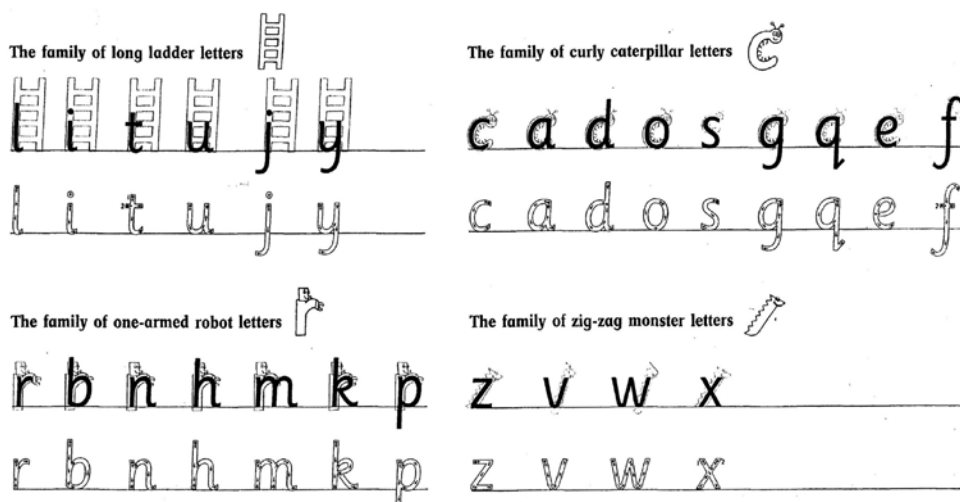


Fig. 5. Letter formation families (from 'Penpals for Handwriting', Cambridge, 2010)

Children with Special Educational Needs

The requirement to join at 4-5 years places a heavy burden on children who may already be struggling to establish basic handwriting skills, especially some of the 'summer born' and those with developmental coordination difficulties. Such children may want to be doing the same as their peers and will create their own joined script. Below is one example of writing by a child with such problems at the end of Year 1. He has received considerable support and encouragement in both years, but the demands of joining before he was developmentally ready has left a legacy of confusion.

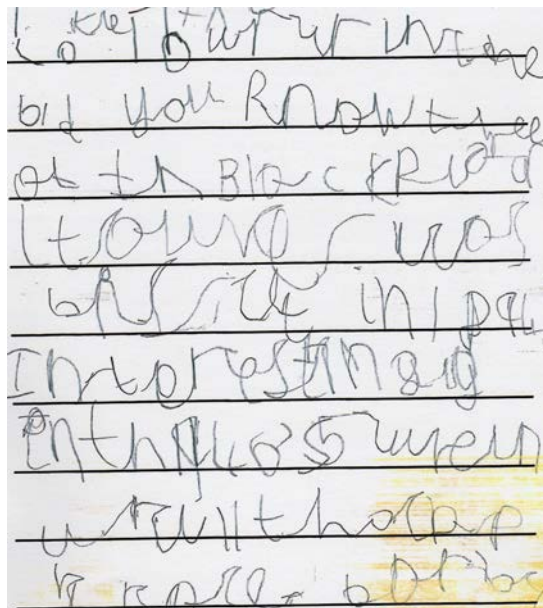


Fig 6. Example of writing by a child at the end of Year 1 showing confusions with joining

In Conclusion

Handwriting teaching in many English schools is a subject of concern. There is a widespread lack of professional development in this field. Newly qualified teachers often start with little or no knowledge of the subject and there is inadequate understanding of the skills that underpin sustained development. There are frustrating contradictions between the expectations in the EYFS and the National Curriculum documents coupled with pressure on schools to achieve ambitious early outcomes. Recent government advice on how to teach handwriting has been scarce. There was excellent advice in '*Developing Early Writing*', Section 3 (DfES, 2001) but in most schools this publication has been buried in the tsunami of other initiatives. Also widely unknown is the helpful circular, *Developing*

handwriting (2009). The EYFS publication '*Mark Making Matters*' 2008, contained helpful advice, but omitted specific guidance about teaching letterforms.

In this climate, it is all too easy for practitioners to 'fast forward' to what appears to be accelerated progress and ignore signs of un-readiness. The focus of the Reception year should be to foster and strengthen the areas of development which provide the basis for long-term success in handwriting and to identify those children who need extra provision to strengthen their skills. There is a pressing need for teachers to 'hurry slowly' when growing young writers!

Pam Hulme

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