Helping Handwriting Shine

Good handwriting is not solely about presentation. The evidence suggests that if handwriting is slow or effortful then children are less able to think about the content of their writing. Therefore, it is important to focus on developing a fast and accurate handwriting style. This project aims to train teachers (Y2) and teaching assistants (Y5) to use approaches normally used by occupational therapists to improve handwriting. The approach explicitly teaches children to plan, do and then critically reflect on their performance. For example, handwriting is modelled, and children then create plans to write common 2- and 3-letter combinations (e.g. ‘ar’, ‘ti’ and ‘se’) efficiently. These activities aim to develop an automatic and efficient handwriting style.

The project will be led by a team from the University of Leeds, but they will draw on expertise from a range of partners. This includes a school experienced in leading professional development.

This project forms part of the North East Primary Literacy Campaign where handwriting has consistently emerged as a high-priority for schools.

Why are we funding it?

There is general evidence that approaches which aim to improve the accuracy and fluency of children’s handwriting can improve both the presentation, quantity and quality of children’s writing. This has been shown by a number of evaluations, including RCTs, and summarised in systematic reviews and meta-analyses.

It is thought that slow or effortful handwriting takes most of children’s focus. Therefore, by making handwriting more fluent children are able to focus more on the content of what they write. There is also wider evidence of benefits of good handwriting: for example, studies consistently show that poor handwriting can bias readers’ judgements about the ideas in a text. Children with slow handwriting can also have problems completing standardised assessments within the allotted time.

This trial will build on the EEF’s primary literacy guidance, which highlights the need to develop an accurate and fluent handwriting style.

How are we evaluating it?

A team from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) have been appointed to conduct an efficacy trial. The trial will test two versions: a universal approach in Year 2 and a targeted approach in Year 5. The universal approach will be tested through a two-arm randomised controlled trial, with schools allocated to treatment or a business as usual control from 100 settings. All schools receiving the treatment in Year 2 will also receive treatment for half of their Year 5 students who are identified as having poor handwriting, while the other half will act as a business as usual control.

The primary outcome for the trial will be a measure of writing composition (i.e. the content of students’ writing). Assessing writing is challenging so we have decided to use a novel approach called comparative judgement, which will provide quicker, more accurate and cheaper results than traditional approaches. Comparative judgement uses a series of pairwise comparisons to establish a measurement scale.
The evaluation will also include a thorough implementation and process evaluation, which will include a measure of children’s writing speed as this is a key component of how the approach is thought to improve writing composition.

When will the evaluation report be due?

The evaluation report will be published in Summer 2020.