Literacy: Foundations for writing success

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Bookmark: Introducing Early Writing

Alex Quigley [00:00:17]
I'm delighted to introduce the latest episode of our Education Endowment Foundation Evidence into Action podcast. This podcast is on foundations for early writing. We're going to speak to experts in the field and brilliant practitioners who are rethinking, reflecting and practicing writing. And I'm delighted to reintroduce my co-host, Chloe Butlin. Chloe, tell us a little bit about yourself.

Chloe Butlin [00:00:43]
Hi, Alex. Thank you. Yeah, my name's Chloe Butlin. I'm the literacy content and engagement specialist at the EEF. Yeah, really excited for today's podcast that writing really has been on the agenda for lots of schools and leaders recently, and excited to hear from our expert voice and practitioners.

Alex Quigley [00:01:02]
Lovely. So I'm delighted to introduce our first guest, Clare Sealy, OBE, who's Head of Education Improvement in the state of Guernsey, but also has lots of background experience in England too. Clare, can you tell us a bit about your background and also why writing such an area of both expertise and interest for yourself?

Clare Sealy [00:01:21]
So, as Alex said, I now work in Guernsey and have done that working in Education Improvement for the last seven years. Previous to that, I was a primary school teacher and then head teacher in Tower Hamlets in East London, in two schools generally. I also worked as a school improvement partner a bit as well. Why writing is a really interesting question. The more I got into educational research, which probably was like in the last 12 years or so of my career, the more I realized that there was a bit of a black hole around any training that I'd had really about writing, which is not to say I'd had none, but when I compared it to reading, far more CPD about reading. And where I had had it about writing, it was very procedural, as in do it like this, as opposed to here's, let's develop everyone's mental model and what the research says. about writing. So the more I learned about things like cognitive load and the more about the importance of a carefully sequenced curriculum, the more I asked, where's writing in all of this? So that's why writing.

Bookmark: Rethinking Writing Instruction

Alex Quigley [00:02:45]
Yeah. And was there a point where you think, oh, actually, I'm rethinking what I might have considered how writing should be taught or the general kind of prevailing trends of what's happening with writing?

Clare Sealy [00:02:58]
Well, I think it's more, to be honest, I hadn't really thought about it in that sort of global, why aren't we thinking about writing way until relatively recently. And actually, and in fact, I've written a book with Dr. Tim Mills called How I Wish I'd Taught Writing. And the two of us, we're both in our 60s. So we've both been teaching a long, long time. And we're both going, how is it that this hasn't been given an emphasis? And how is it that we were both blown by the winds of Edufashion for decades and the winds have blown us one way and then the other and then the other? And I don't think we're alone on that. I don't think Tim and I are these terrible teachers who just failed. That's just how it was.

Alex Quigley [00:03:41]
Yeah, I think you've captured that point about the incompleteness of writing and because it's not had the attention of reading. We've just been given these partial visions of what it could be. The evidence has been kind of pretty empty in some areas in terms of what teachers consider they should know and do. So it's no surprise that these kind of trends have come and gone. Hopefully, we are in a position where maybe a fuller picture is emerging and there's a better understanding about writing. And to pick up one area, so writing is complex. One thing that I think perhaps is better understood more recently has been a focus on transcription. Do you think that this is an area that's getting the right level of attention? Are we in danger of that kind of partial view of things and emphasizing it too much? What's your perspective on this kind of trend that's emphasizing transcription and the value of that?

Clare Sealy [00:04:40]
So it's definitely a really important thing and the evidence base is really secure. that if we don't teach children to become fluent and automatic with transcription, be that spelling or the sort of handwriting or typing that mainly handwriting, that we're doing them disservice and they're enablers of later creativity. However, this could go the same way of everything else and become a fixation and that's all we do rather than seeing writing is It just is really complex and has lots of moving parts. That's why we need a really planned curriculum for it so that we touch all of the moving parts rather than, oh, it's all about transcription or it's all about spelling or it's all about genre or it's all about audience awareness. It's about all of those things and we can't teach them all at once.

Bookmark: Balancing Transcription And Composition

Chloe Butlin [00:05:36]
Yes, Claire, on that as well, I think that danger that you've talked about about that kind of isolated and a fixation on one area, what would you say could kind of complement that focus on transcription in terms of building pupils' composition skills alongside that?

Clare Sealy [00:05:53]
Well, I think, I mean, so know what the knowledge is. and then know how you're going to take children on a journey. So it's all about a journey from the technical, which is going to enable the creative. And don't try and do one half and not the other. You need to do both, but you can't do both all the time. Sometimes we need to work on isolation. It might be on our handwriting, it might be on our spelling, it might be on the features of scientific writing, for example. So we do need to work in isolation, but it's got to go somewhere. It's for a reason. It's so that at some point we can produce an authentic piece of writing.

Alex Quigley [00:06:30]
And I wonder about, OK, with the writing process, how might the likes of editing, revising, planning, how might that sync up in your eyes with the sentence instruction? Do you feel like they can, again, marry together for this fuller picture?

Clare Sealy [00:06:46]
I think that when we're editing, we're doing it at two different levels. So if you're doing a sentence level piece of work and you're isolating that for now, ready to integrate it later, you're editing. That's literally about your word choice. Why have I chosen this word, not that word? So and having lots of talk about that, lots of the teacher thinking out loud if they're modelling. But then we also need to be able to edit at a like more whole text, more cohesive texts. So therefore, we also need to build in that when children are ready for it. But there's nothing wrong with young, very young children. Like a whole text for them can be just a series of sentences. You know, a simple picture book like Dear Zoo is in effect, I don't know how many sentences it is, like 12 sentences maybe? It is literally 12 sentences, but it tells a story. So we do need to also build that in, probably at a different point in our curriculum.

Bookmark: Oral Language And Editing

Clare Sealy [00:07:47]
So that we do, we're zooming in on the sentence, but then later we're zooming on the whole text, but not thinking, oh, that we always have to do these long whole texts when children are very young and very at the beginning. They can still write a whole text as in a complete story, but can be really short.

Chloe Butlin [00:08:05]
Do you think oral language plays an important role, especially in that those kind of that early writing as you were just talking about?

Clare Sealy [00:08:11]
Yeah, definitely. Oral writing is really important. It's really, it's really important that we don't think though, that oral language is like written language is simply a transcription of oral language. I mean, it is when they're very, very little in the beginning, but actually how we write and how we speak. So the idiom we use when we speak and the idiom we use when we write are quite different. Sentences really only exist in written form. So oral language is really important as a step, but then we need to be able to translate our oral language into written idiom. This is part of actually the editing process as well-being able to verbalize your thoughts and then recast that into more sentence-based idiom. And then this is the joy of writing, unlike speaking, is that you can edit it and nobody ever knows that your thoughts weren't totally coherent first time. So you can have a thought jot down some notes, maybe put on a whiteboard, then I'm going to change that word. I'm going to make that a little bit more polished. I'm going to do all of that sort of stuff. So yeah, that the journey from spoken idiom to the written idiom is really integral to the writing process and part of that editing actually.

Alex Quigley [00:09:41]
That's a really, it's a really great example of that word integrate again, that kind of how sometimes we need to isolate talking and kind of generating ideas, but then integrate that into the writing process. And it feels like, again, centres level instruction doesn't exist on its own. You can integrate it into the editing process and that's where it works best.

Bookmark: Writing For The Reader

Alex Quigley [00:10:01]
If I can simplify it with a final question, what would you like to see more of in terms of the teaching and writing? And what would you like to see a bit less of? Because we talked about these big swinging trends and maybe we're getting a better, more stable, fuller picture, but what would you like to see a bit more of and a bit less of?

Clare Sealy [00:10:20]
I think the key thing I'd like to see more of is awareness of the reader. Why are we doing this? Why are we doing this grammar? Why are we doing this handwriting? Why are we doing this paragraph structure? Why are we doing this grammatical structure? Whatever it is, why are we doing that? We're doing that because at the end of the day, we want to make our writing clearer and more interesting for the reader. And, you know, it's a specific reader. As the children get older into upper key stage two, it's not just a generic reader. It's a reader who's reading, who wants to read a story, who wants to read a scientific non-phonological report maybe, or wants to read a persuasive argument. So we need to know what our reader is expecting and shape that way. So awareness of the reader. without going mad like the beginning of my career, which is like all we ever thought about without giving anyone the tools to actually do it well.

Clare Sealy [00:11:12]
So I think what I want to see less of is people focusing too much on one thing to the exclusion of all the other

moving parts. Having said that, maybe if you're doing transcription, balance that with also doing something on audience awareness. If you're doing audience awareness, maybe balance that with something on the text structure. I mean, all these things need to link anyway.

Alex Quigley [00:11:39]
Yeah, that's a really nice kind of final point because again, it exemplifies your point around isolate two or three key areas for sustained practice and for teaching knowledge building and practice as well, and then integrate them. And you're right, there's no kind of quick fixes there. One of the first points you made is the complexity of writing, which is what makes it brilliant, but also it means that for teacher knowledge, for teacher practice, it's going to take time. And Claire, thank you for writing sensibly, but also communicating so cogently and skillfully in this podcast. Big thank you.

Clare Sealy [00:12:13]
My pleasure.

Bookmark: Why The Curriculum Changed

Alex Quigley [00:12:14]
I'm delighted to introduce our practitioner guests, Helen Crowther and Holly Ashton. Helen and Holly are both from the same school, writing and the development of writing curriculum, something that they've been doing brilliantly. So we want to hear all about that. But first, Helen, do you want to just talk a little bit about your background and Holly too?

Helen Crowther [00:12:35]
Yeah, so I'm Helen Crowther. I'm the executive principal at the Greetland Academy in Halifax, West Yorkshire. I also am the strategic lead for the English hub that's attached to our school that we've had for about the past seven years or so.

Holly Ashton [00:12:50]
I'm Holly Ashton. I'm the vice principal at the school and I'm also a literacy specialist for the English Hub.

Alex Quigley [00:12:56]
And you've made some really skilled adaptations to your writing curriculum. Where did you start with that and why did you think about making those changes?

Helen Crowther [00:13:05]
Writing has always been that burning issue across any school. I think you'd be far pushed to find a primary school that didn't have writing on their school improvement plan in some way or another, whether it's improving those children at the top end, getting greater depth, whether it's improving GLD and basic writing. And I think as a profession, it's just been one of those areas that is harder to teach. There's a lot more out there about reading. There's been a big movement with reading, particularly as the English hubs came along around in particular decodable reading and phonics. And there wasn't the same level of information out there for schools around how to make writing better. And I think as a school, our writing outcomes are very strong. Actually, we are very proud of our English curriculum, but we weren't getting 100% when our children leave us in year six. Not all of them meet the required standard.

Helen Crowther [00:14:03]
And one of the things we were really picking up, and I'm a year six teacher by trade as well, and Holly also taught in year six for many years, was by the time children came into year six, and you'll hear this time and time again from teachers, was why don't they put full stops on the end of sentences? Why are they making such basic spelling

errors of keywords, high frequency words that they should know? So I suppose it's born from there, but we've all been, my school included, asking children to write too much too soon and to do complex tasks when they're not ready to. So that cognitive load is just off the scale. So it came from that, if I'm honest. And then a bit and being brave enough, and I do use the word brave, to have a bit of head space and take a bit of time to then think, so what does this look like? Because we could have instantly the next day sent one of those famous head teacher emails out and said, everyone stop, you're going to teach handwriting, you're going to teach like this, you're going to teach spelling like this. And that's not how we implement things, is it?

Bookmark: Implementing Writing Improvements

Helen Crowther [00:15:08]
You think about the EEF implementation guidance report, that's not going to be effective or have impact. So it gave us that initial dialogue, gave us time as leaders to look at further research, to look at what would work for us, to make some brave decisions around things like our timetables, around what we would have traditionally called an English lesson. and to basically almost replan the whole English curriculum for children.

Alex Quigley [00:15:33]
But there's been a lot of questions in schools that have actually been quite challenging. Well, what are we doing and why are we doing it? And the EEF, we commissioned a whole round of evidence on writing and practice reviews because it is underexplored compared to early reading, as you've stated. So it is a place where I think a lot of school leaders and teachers are feeling quite vulnerable. So I think your story will really chime with them. Chloe, you're probably interested in some of the specifics about some of those changes, I imagine.

Chloe Butlin [00:16:00]
Yeah, I was just thinking, how did you bring staff with you along the way?

Helen Crowther [00:16:05]
Part of it is through training and high quality training for those staff and coaching and follow up around what we're asking them to implement.

Holly Ashton [00:16:14]
But luckily I was the reception teacher, so because I was part of that initial discussion and we had that thinking time together, that initial implementation and that trial, couldn't you? The trialness of that, I was able to physically do myself and we have leaders here. We're very much, we do what we expect. So we're on the ground, we're in classes.

Helen Crowther [00:16:37]
It was also the teachers being able to see the benefit. So, and we'll probably come at some point to talking about the impact that we've seen so far of this, but even the benefit in terms of stopping doing things that frustrated them for a long time.

Holly Ashton [00:16:49]
We also thought about rolling it, didn't we? So we didn't stop and change everything at once. We did start with reception. from like January onwards a couple of years ago. And then as we were more secure in that understanding and the idea and where we were going, we then built on that in year one and we shared that practice and then we built on that in year two.

Helen Crowther [00:17:11]
What's really helped as well, and Holly won't sing her own praises, but Holly has done this to the nth degree is a big part of our transcription curriculum is dictation, is dictating sentences, captions, words, even letters. Purely

that the children know both phonetically and where they're at in our transcription continuum. And that is a real skill coming up with those sentences off the top of your head and thinking, hang on, that child doesn't know this sound yet or doesn't know these letters. So they are planned out for our teachers. And we still, as we were working through this, every so often someone would go, oh, you put that sentence in Holly and actually the children don't know this sound yet. And she'd quickly change the document again.

Bookmark: Building A Structured Writing Approach

Helen Crowther [00:17:55]
I think we're on version 12, 12 of our transcription document. But that it gave the teachers the support they needed. It removed their cognitive load, I suppose. They understood the theory behind it. We'd done a lot of work in our staff training sessions around why. we're going to teach writing this way and what the evidence says, but it just removed that additional layer of having to think about these effective sentences so that the children could practice the skills that we knew they had.

Chloe Butlin [00:18:26]
Yeah, you've talked really passionately there about like bringing everyone along on the journey and like implementation, but I'm really interested in, you know, like we talked about too much too soon. Like what does that stripped back writing curriculum actually look like? You mentioned transcription. What does that kind of sentence level writing practice look like as well?

Holly Ashton [00:18:47]
So in practice, it's a very deliberate, structured approach to writing. And we really thought about that strong emphasis lower down on that transcription skills and sentence level instruction. And we've kind of taken those principles of decodable reading in phonics and that real systematic approach and applied it to writing in exactly the same way. But instead of starting with the code, we start with letter families. So we really think about letter formation, how it's explicitly taught. It's in families. So children are learning those similar movements and building that fluency. As they become automatic in letters, they learn more letters, therefore we can increase that into words. But we're really conscious that they're only writing with the letters that they can form, not just the sounds that they know. And that was the difference. So as they build those letters, we can then write words. As we build more words, we can then write captions and then we're moving then into that sentence level. And that is done through dictation because it has to be done really carefully planned and it allows them to apply their transcription in a really highly scaffolded way because it takes miles and miles of practise for that to become permanent.

Helen Crowther [00:20:06]
Just like it does with reading. You put in the reading miles, you put in the writing miles. I think what's important with that dictation is that it interweaves the grammar as well. So as the children know more and more of this code, both with their transcription skills and their phonics, It's not just sentences, it's questions. It's learning to expand a noun phrase so that we're hitting all those kind of technical elements of writing.

Bookmark: Oral Composition And Practice

Helen Crowther [00:20:32]
That's not the only way we teach English. So if we talk about kind of the structure of our lessons in particularly think about year one and year two, we've moved away from a literacy hour or English lesson or whatever schools may call it, we have phonics. And phonics is where we learn to read and decode. We have transcription, and that is where we learn letter formation and to spell when we've got enough of both. And then we have oral composition at the same time. So our children are still writing in inverted commas, but they're doing it orally at a much higher level whilst their transcriptional skills catch up.

Holly Ashton [00:21:17]
That oral rehearsal is really, really important. And that's where we build vocabulary and that really strong sentence structure. And then that becomes more fluent. So they're able to speak it, therefore eventually they're able to write it.

Alex Quigley [00:21:32]
Lovely. That's a really, really concrete, kind of clearly explained set of approaches you're taking there. And you did mention, Helen, the point about kind of signs of impact. Can you tell us a little bit more about those early signs?

Helen Crowther [00:21:46]
Yeah, I think the first thing from my point of view that stood out, and it was the same thing that I've seen and the same argument I've given over the need for phonics and phonics schemes is that enjoyment in writing because they are succeeding. So I remember when the DFE announced that everyone should potentially have a validated phonics scheme or at least a good phonics scheme. And there was uproar on Twitter around, well, what about enjoyment for reading? They're just reading books that say pat, pat, pat. But actually, we saw children succeeding and therefore really wanting to read the words pat, pat, pat. And it's exactly the same with the writing. You've not got, which we've all had, we've been classroom teachers. Those children sat there going, I don't know what to write. I can't remember. What do I do? Do I use a capital letter? That when pretty much overnight and their ability to hold a sentence is the other thing that's quite surprised us. And again, it's because we're reducing that cognitive load. They're not having to, how do I hold my pencil? How should I be sat? How do I spell that? Do I need a capital letter? They're just automatic in what they do.

Bookmark: Early Impact On Young Writers

Holly Ashton [00:22:56]
Yeah, because we've really thought about the system of how these things build, and they do build over time, firstly, very discreetly, and then they start coming together. One of the biggest things that we talk to, which has been harder to capture, has been that When the adult goes, right, off you go to write, there isn't five hands go, I don't know what to do. They all have those ideas. And we've seen real bespoke fetes as well, the variety of ideas now, those children are coming up with all sorts.

Helen Crowther [00:23:27]
Because they've still been doing that all of composition. That hasn't gone. Still writing for a purpose.

Holly Ashton [00:23:33]
Yes, definitely.

Helen Crowther [00:23:34]
Albeit orally. So yeah, we've we've definitely.

Holly Ashton [00:23:37]
And then in year 2, now we see the impact of vocabulary. Yes. So lower down the school, you know, in year in reception we're able to use dawdled because we've really thought about tiddler and pulled out that word there. And then We are seeing the impact of teaching these words coming out in year two when they're now able to write that down. So we heard it orally in reception, sorry, in story maps and drawings. But now it's becoming written in those stories in year two.

Helen Crowther [00:24:06]
The other impact that we're noticing or impact on us as professionals is our knowledge of what the children can and can't do and where their barriers might be. So I reflect on previous sort of pupil progress discussions when we

didn't teach this way and we'd come along and everyone would say this child's working at the expected standard, this child's working above, this child's working below and it doesn't really. mean anything, to be honest. That doesn't tell me much. Whereas now we are having conversations about where they are on the transcription continuum, where they are in the phonics continuum, how they're doing orally. And it helps you, one, pick up potential actual need that may need some kind of external support outside agencies and pick up where you might target really bespoke intervention at the exact thing that that child needs. speech and language come out. So we're much more forensic now in understanding our children's ability to write and that wasn't there before if I'm being honest.

Bookmark: Assessment And Targeted Support

Holly Ashton [00:25:07]
And then we really about the scaffold that we could put in place as well so those children that are struggling. we've thought, well, actually, they just need more practice. We need to slow it down a little bit and over-practice this.

Helen Crowther [00:25:20]
And that's being brave, isn't it? Yeah. You're still writing a curly caterpillar letter. But if it stay going, and you can see that if it's coming from the leaders and you are giving your teachers the permission, that that is better than racing ahead and then forming all the letters incorrectly in that letter family. then you will see the impact. You just have to hold your nerves a little bit.

Holly Ashton [00:25:42]
I also felt really proud in October, going right back to the beginning of the year when we handed up year two to year three, and year three wrote their first paragraph about Ironman. And I remember the year three teacher coming to me and going, Oh my goodness, guess how many full stops and capital letters I've had to correct? And she was like, Zero. And I was like. We're winning.

Alex Quigley [00:26:01]
No, that's lovely to hear. And I love the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow you teased with the no issues I think a lot of teachers have ears pricked up. I think I like the point as well around the precision of assessment that you've been able to develop and the permission you were talking about for teachers. There's a professional judgment here. Writing's a really tricky thing to teach. It's a really tricky thing to learn. And you've described that so brilliantly. So a big thank you. Yeah, a big thank you for your time, Helen and Holly, and just really appreciate your openness and the brilliant work you're clearly doing. Thank you. So Chloe, that was really great to listen to Claire and then listen to Helen and Holly about the rewriting of their writing curriculum. And it really strikes me that there's an element where colleagues are rethinking about writing, reflecting hard about how the evidence seems to have shifted, practise probably seems to have shifted. And, you know, lots, lots to think about. What's the one thing that stood out for you from those interviews?

Bookmark: Key Lessons For Writing Development

Chloe Butlin [00:27:07]
Yeah, I think Alex, just hearing from Helen and Holly, like go back to that kind of moment, that light bulb moment that made them rethink their writing curriculum. They didn't have that, you know, knee jerk response. They said, they talked, didn't they, about we're not just going to send an e-mail to staff and, you know, tomorrow we're focusing on transcription. They spoke really carefully, really sensitively about the the kind of bringing staff along the way and having those extended brave conversations that maybe challenged some of the staff's assumptions about writing as well. And then necessarily kind of zooming in on one aspect of writing to then carefully sequence

that PD and implementation and like looking ahead like those early signs of impact, really excited to see what they do next with writing.

Alex Quigley [00:27:54]
Yeah, it really did stand out, that reflective process. I think early writing's always been tricky, less focus on it in primary schools in particular, less support, less fewer resources on that. In the last year, EEF commissioning around on writing was in part trying to be responsive to that gap. I want to go back to some of the reflections Claire had because I think she's obviously done a lot of thinking and played a lot of support in her leadership role for writing. And she talked about isolating some specific writing practices and then integrating them together. I think that's a match also with what we heard from Helen and Holly in terms of how they've taken step by step approaches. Writing can feel a bit overwhelming, too many different things to think about, but I think that isolate then integrate feels like a helpful lens on looking for writing development, particularly for young writers, but not exclusively. Hearing from primary colleagues does make me think, oh, parallel issues in key stage three as well.

Alex Quigley [00:28:59]
But there's a real clear thread, that real thought an emphasis that's gone on to writing in the last year is quite new in the system, but it's really good to see because writing is such a foundational skill. It's so important for school success. So let's draw it together at that point and just say thank you to all of our listeners for pursuing it to the end. And we look forward to you subscribing and following the podcast. We've got lots more in the pipeline ready to share with you. So thank you again.