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THE TEACHING OF WRITING

By Eileen Hutchins

Teaching the first letters to children of six or seven years old is a happy experience. Even those who already know their alphabet are delighted to follow the curve of the W in the flow of the wave and the rearing form of the snake in the S. It is not hard for them to remember letters that are taught through pictures, and they enjoy expressing them in vivid colours in their books. The real difficulty comes later, when the step has to be taken from letters to words, and when the forms and pictures have to be associated with particular sounds. At this stage it is worthwhile for the teacher to ponder upon the development of writing through the course of the ages; for a deeper understanding of the history that lies behind these apparently arbitrary marks, called letters, guides us in building the bridge from the learning of the alphabet to the comprehension of words and sentences.

In teaching writing we should concern ourselves not so much with the shapes of the individual letters as with the powers of understanding and movement that are called forth. We need to consider what happens in the soul life of the child when it is shown a number of meaningless signs and is told that these stand for well-known words. Or again, what happens in the bodily development when pages have to be filled with squiggly black marks. Long ago mankind had not acquired the capacities for writing and reading. Whatever forces we use to-day for these attainments could be directed to other ends, and thus the powers of picture thinking and of the spoken word were much more vivid. Only those who had gone through the strictest training so that the living quality of thought and feeling should not be lost in the abstract signs, were allowed to write. The teachers of old would have been horrified if the art of writing had been used as it is today for utterly trivial ends. Only that which was most lofty and sacred was worthy of being expressed, and a scribe could even be put to death if a mistake were made in transcribing the holy texts. Children when they learn to write today should also be given the impression that wonderful meanings are hidden in letters and words and that these should be written with beauty and devotion.

Speech and thought precede the written word and different qualities of thought or speech find different degrees of expression in the various alphabets. Some reveal most strongly the picture quality of thought, like the Egyptian hieroglyphics. Others are more concerned with its force and movement. For instance, in the cuneiform writing of the Chaldean epoch there is no picture quality. The wedge-shaped letters remind us of little arrows that shoot straight to the mark. The Chaldeans felt the will-element of speech that pierced the hearer with the power to hurt or heal. In the Greek alphabet we find that the growing, forming power of sound is represented. There is something plastic in the Greek letters, and we can often feel their connections with the movements of Eurythmy.

There is one ancient script that seems to have no connection with picture or sound, and this is the Ogham alphabet of the Celts. It was divorced from symbol and form, not because it was purely abstract and empty of content, but because the wisdom expressed was so sacred that none who were uninitiated must guess its meaning. The series of cuts or notches could give no hint of the mysteries they had to impart. The study of the Ogham letters is very illuminating for the teacher who would like to penetrate the processes that lie behind the forming of an alphabet. The first five letters of this script are formed by a series of scratches, one, two, three, four or five, below and at right angles to a line; the next five by a similar series above a line; the next set are drawn across a line at an acute angle, and so on. No ancient alphabet appears so lifeless; yet all the letters had names, and the one who knew these knew something of their significance. Robert Graves in his book *The White Goddess* has tried to penetrate the mysteries of the Ogham letters. They all had the names of trees, and he concludes that they express what he calls a "seasonal tree magic." The first letter is named "birch," the second "rowan," the third "ash," and so on. There are thirteen important consonants, and he relates these to the thirteen lunar months in the solar year, while the five vowels are more connected with trees related to the planets. The Druids preferred to express their alphabet by a kind of deaf and dumb language upon the fingers and only transferred movements to notches on stone or wood when they had to communicate with those who were not present. Each finger was felt to have its special quality. The thumb was the most able to sense love, the first finger knowledge, the middle finger was able to foretell the weather, the fourth finger diagnosed illness, and the fifth finger was able to divine death or make a corpse to speak. We need not accept all Robert Graves' conclusions as valid, but he has understood that the living qualities of the trees and the seasons of the year in which they attain their strongest forces are related to the qualities of the sounds to which they give their names. We also know through Eurythmy that each consonant has its special quality in connection with the passage of the sun through the twelve groups of stars. And through the nature of their sounds, consonants can work in an enlivening or a soothing way upon the soul life of the child. We learn through Eurythmy also that each sound has its right and necessary form.

Picture, movement and sound—all these lie behind the letters which have now become conventional signs, and children should feel the presence of these powers when they learn to write. Most teachers find that children differ very much in their abilities to grasp what they learn. Some more readily relate themselves to the picture element, while others are more aware of the sound. A few can form their letters very beautifully without waking to any consciousness of either picture or sound. In my own first grade I had several outstanding examples.

One little boy had a marvelous sense of colour and drew the most beautifully formed letters; but if I asked him for a word beginning with the sound "t," he would as likely as not reply "goat" or "pig." For a long time he could not relate words beginning with the same sound. On the other hand, there was a little girl who loved the story and the pictures of the snake and the fish; but when she came to draw them, her snake was a series of nervous jerks and her fish was more like a sausage exploding in a pan. She had no ability to control the form of what she really understood quite well. She was, however, very musical, and had no difficulty in providing a string of words beginning with any sound she was given. A third child who came from a farm could copy his letters with lovely curves and tender colours, but he lived in a dream and never remembered what any of them meant.

We should bear all these types in mind, and, in the teaching of the letters, pictures, movement and sound must all play their part so that the different children become harmonized.

As far as the pictures are concerned, every teacher should make his own, but it is better, I think, to give those which imply movement than those that are static. The snake, the fish and the wave are all good from this point of view. For "R" the picture of a horse is more alive than that of a house, although it is very tempting to draw a pretty little cottage with two high chimneys. For "G" a goose looking back over its tail is more comical and appealing than an open gate leading into a garden.

While the children are busy developing their letters, a good deal of attention should be paid to form for its own sake. In many round games and exercises they can run straight and curved lines, and it is a good practice to let them draw or write these on a large scale, perhaps with a wet mop on the floor or a rake in the sand pit. Nearly every main lesson I used to allow some of the children in my own first grade to come in turn to draw on the blackboard. They could choose their own colours to make strong straight lines or bold curves, and soon they gained confidence and could draw with strength and certainty.

As children learn to know their letters, copying of writing should go hand in hand with words or verses which they already know by heart. Then gradually the writing takes on meaning for them. . Nursery rhymes are very helpful in the first writing lessons, for children suddenly recognise with the great joy of discovery the familiar words emerging from a whole series of jumbled letters. It is inadvisable to make special sentences of very simple words so that writing may be easy for them, for this is really boring and gives them the feeling that writing has not anything very important to say. They should keep best books, and their work in these should be a very serious and solemn affair. At the same time, as soon as children begin to recognise words I think it is helpful to give them dictations of tiny phrases which they know by heart, where the letters follow the sounds fairly closely, Thus they have continual practice in listening. Children readily accept the inconsistency in spelling. The teacher can explain that every word is like a family; and just as most families have babies or old grannies who do not do any work, so most words have letters that do not make any sound. Also just as their fathers sometimes like a change from the office and choose to dig in the garden, some letters like to change their work. "C" will sometimes do the work of the king "K," but sometimes it prefers to make the sound of the snake. English spelling is certainly a handicap to quick progress in writing and reading; but perhaps it is a saving grace for the English who so love to take life easily and judge from the standpoint of common sense, that in their spelling they cannot for a single moment feel secure. Perhaps they also owe to their spelling and their involved tables of measure and weight that they are very rarely pedantic.

The chief aid to the grasp of the sound in letters should be Eurythmy. It is best if a class teacher can work closely with a Eurythmist so that as the children learn to write they can also experience how movement and form are created in accordance with sound, and how poetry, which paints word pictures for the eye of the soul, can also be expressed in movement which

calls to the spirit to dance.

It is a strenuous task for the teacher to help his class to unfold all the powers which lie behind the forming of the letters; but it is wonderfully worth while. Perhaps the greatest reward comes when a child whose faculties seemed to lie dormant suddenly begins to awake. The writing which was so crippled and ugly grows in beauty and strength; and the eyes which looked puzzled and fearful shine with a new light. Mayall of us who teach writing and reading take it as seriously as those masters of olden times.

-Eileen Hutchins

Eileen Hutchins was a teacher at Elmfield School near Stourbridge, England. Her article is reprinted with the kind permission of Child and Man.