

**TEACHING CHILDREN TO WRITE
THROUGH ART**

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Third Edition
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Introduction

Very young children are primarily imitative. They perceive written letters and words initially as images and imitate the look of writing. If they see people reading in their environment, they will imitate the appearance of reading by sitting with an open book and moving their eyes or heads from side to side. They also notice very early, for example from watching adults read aloud to them from books, that writing contains meaning and relates to spoken language, and will mimic the purposes of writing by trying to use it to communicate. Educator and early advocate of 'unschooling', John Holt, describes a story 'written' by a five-year-old girl, in his 1967 book, *How Children Learn*:

It is a mass of letters, or letter-like shapes, arranged more or less roughly in lines on the page, but not in words, that is, groups of letters. These lines of scribbles mean nothing to us. But they meant a great deal to [her]; she meant to say something, and thought she was saying something, as she wrote them. ... She continued to write like this, though in time more of her symbol shapes were actual letters, and she grouped them more and more in word-like bunches. But she always *meant* something when she wrote them and always expected [someone] to know what she had "said".¹

Many children now won't experience this stage of imitative 'written communication', partly because literacy instruction begins at five, or even earlier. Their brain development has reached a stage where they can learn this kind of thing, and, from a scientific point of view, it seems logical to do it as soon as it becomes possible. In his book *Out of Our Minds*, Ken Robinson traces this logic to the Enlightenment when 'Rationalism and Empiricism opened up a "fissure" between the arts and sciences' and education became a science. This paradigm shift underlies the accepted nature of modern teaching principles and methods: starting earlier means getting ahead; everything should be taught explicitly and systematically; and nothing can be left to develop of its own accord.²

In Waldorf Education, we have always maintained that children have souls and bodies as well as brains, and that learning involves and affects all three; that a child's physical development is compromised if we bring intellectual teaching too early; that teaching is an art. We congratulate ourselves that we wait until the seventh year to begin formal schooling. But according to the principles of child development out of which Waldorf

¹ John Holt, *How Children Learn*, (2017) Hatchett Book Group, New York

² Ken Robinson, *Out of Our Minds: The Power of Being Creative* (2017), quoted in Liz Attwell, *A Drop of Light*,: *Educating for the A-ha Moment* (2020), Rudolf Steiner Press, Forest Row, p.12-13

Education arose, and on which much of our practice has been based for a hundred years, teaching children to read and write at seven is not ideal; they are still not ready. Rudolf Steiner, speaking in 1919:

If you consider the letters we use for reading and writing, you will realise that there is no connection between these letters and what seven-year-old children do naturally ... If we confront young children with these letters, we present them with something alien that in no way suits their nature.³

Convention and state expectations made it necessary in 1919, just as they do now, to introduce literacy teaching at an age not too far from what was generally considered normal, so a compromise was needed. Steiner suggested that, because at age seven the forming of the physical body reaches a certain completion, the life forces become free and can be used for learning, so it is less harmful if we can at least wait until then. But this is still a compromise; we cannot immediately unleash any kind of intellectually-devised scheme on children as soon as they reach their seventh year without doing any harm:

Let us be clear about what it really means to force something foreign into a child's organism ... people fail to perceive the damage done ... merely by introducing reading and writing to children in a wrong way.⁴

When reading this, we have to ask ourselves whether writing is really so foreign to seven-year-olds in the twenty-first century. From birth, their field of vision is perpetually filled with words, in advertising, signage and entertainment, labels, packaging and billboards, on shopfronts, screens, on buses and trains, at bus stops and stations. It is part of their environment and for most, their encounter with it is no longer the harsh confrontation it once was. The alien encounter, however, has not been eliminated entirely: it may no longer be with words themselves, but the system of alphabetic writing is very different in nature from the way young children experience the world. It is here that *how* we teach becomes significantly more important than *what* we teach, because although some children will be able to grasp its form and rules at seven, others will not; not because they have learning difficulties, but simply because they are not ready yet.

³ Rudolf Steiner, *The Spiritual Ground of Education*, (2004) Anthroposophic Press, New York. p.58-59

⁴ Rudolf Steiner, *The Spiritual Ground of Education*, (2004) Anthroposophic Press, New York. p.58-59

Beginning in 1954, the Zurich Longitudinal Studies⁵ investigated levels of maturity that can be measured at particular ages. The study demonstrates that individual trajectories of development are the norm: in any class of rising-seven-year-olds whose development is measured against age-related averages, there will be a range of about three years, and the range increases as the children get older. Put simply, in any class, some children are much further along in the measured aspects of their development than others, this is normal, and teachers need to take account of it. Reflecting in 2019 on their ongoing work, Swiss paediatrician Remo Largo writes:

Children want to learn independently. If experiences are forced on them their motivation to learn will be lost. ... they want experiences that will further their development, starting from the stage they have already reached.⁶

In light of this, it is problematic to generalise, as we so often do, about what a seven-year-old 'should' be able to do. Some rising-seven-year-olds will not have begun to move out of the imitative stage (although it is certain that many more of them will have than would be the case in a class of rising-five-year-olds); curiosity will have led most of them to learn to write and read their own name before they start school; many will have worked out for themselves that letters are symbols that represent particular sounds; some may have gone so far as to teach themselves to read. It is perhaps safe to assume that almost all know what writing and reading are; they see that they convey meaning and know that adults can interpret them. Consequently, learning to read and write is anticipated by most children with great excitement, perhaps even more so in Waldorf schools because the wait is longer.

It seems obvious that, however we decide to approach it, our teaching should not do anything to dampen this enthusiasm; it should not appear to the beginners as something difficult and complicated; neither should it seem dull and tedious to those who are 'further along'. It should meet them at whatever point they have reached, take hold of their enthusiasm and carry them forward, acknowledging and building on what they already know.

In spite of Largo's research and that of many other educators, current modes of education stand in stark contrast to this ideal. John Holt uses the

⁵ The goal of the Zurich Longitudinal Studies was to gain a better understanding of the norms of child development. [...] This ambitious research project involved a team of paediatricians, development specialists and biostatisticians, who recorded the development of more than 900 children from birth to early childhood. Detailed information about these studies can be found at www.largo-fitprinzip.com

⁶ Remo H. Largo, *The Right Life : Human individuality and its role in our development, health and happiness* (2019) Penguin Random House. p.67

example of speech to highlight what he sees as the mistakes inherent in modern systematic methods of teaching reading and writing:

Suppose we decided that we had to "teach" children to speak. How would we go about it? First, some committee of experts would analyze speech and break it down into a number of separate "speech skills." We would probably say that, since speech is made up of sounds, a child must be taught to make all the sounds of his language before he can be taught to speak the language itself. Doubtless we would list these sounds, easiest and commonest ones first, harder and rarer ones next. Then we would begin to teach infants these sounds, working our way down the list. Perhaps, in order not to "confuse" the child—"confuse" is an evil word to many educators—we would not let the child hear much ordinary speech, but would only expose him to the sounds we were trying to teach. Along with our sound list, we would have a syllable list and a word list.

When the child had learned to make all the sounds on the sound list, we would begin to teach him to combine the sounds into syllables. When he could say all the syllables on the syllable list, we would begin to teach him the words on our word list. At the same time, we would teach him the rules of grammar, by means of which he could combine these newly learned words into sentences. Everything would be planned, with nothing left to chance; there would be plenty of drill, review, and tests, to make sure that he had not forgotten anything.

Suppose we tried to do this; what would happen? What would happen, quite simply, is that most children, before they got very far, would become baffled, discouraged, humiliated, and fearful, and would quit trying to do what we asked them. If, outside of our classes, they lived a normal infant's life, many of them would probably ignore our "teaching" and learn to speak on their own. If not, if our control of their lives was complete (the dream of too many educators), they would take refuge in deliberate failure and silence, as so many of them do when the subject is reading.⁷

Holt goes on to cite a plan (thankfully abandoned before it reached the classrooms) in Chicago's public schools to teach, individually, two hundred and eighty-three separate reading skills that had been 'identified by experts'.⁸ I mention this only to illustrate how far systematic methods can go when they are devised without imagining what the child's experience

⁷ John Holt, *How Children Learn*, (2017) Hatchett Book Group, New York

⁸ John Holt, *How Children Learn*

will be. This exchange from the Q&A page of a synthetic phonics website⁹ further illustrates the point:

Q: Is it still OK to get children to think of words beginning with a particular sound?

A: No! The whole point of teaching synthetic phonics is to improve the children's reading and spelling. Thinking of words ... does not do this. Also, children are unlikely to generate words of the type you are currently teaching them to blend/segment. Eg if you are teaching simple CVCs containing 'ch' (eg 'chip'), a child might suggest 'cheese', 'chocolate', 'change' and these are totally inappropriate for their blending and segmenting skills at this point.¹⁰

Proponents of synthetic phonics will refer to research that shows that it produces better results than other methods of teaching literacy¹¹, which is why it has been adopted so widely in mainstream education. However, the validity of this claim depends on what we mean by 'better results' and 'literacy'.

Decoding and literal comprehension are the most rudimentary aspects of literacy; mastery of these skills does not in itself make us literate – does not make us readers and writers. The path to becoming truly literate is not linear; it is an intricately woven fabric of skills and sensitivities, most of which will only develop through extensive reading. So 'the stage they have already reached' will have a different quality for each child, and being 'further along' will mean many different things. For example, some parents read for pleasure, and read to their children every day. These children, whether they can decode or not, will have a better understanding of story structures, tropes and literary styles and are likely to understand and use a broader, richer vocabulary than children whose parents don't read. Others may be able to read and spell, but have few books in their homes and never see their parents reading. Because they don't have the example in the adults around them, they will less often opt for reading as a pastime, and their facility with written texts and literature will tend to remain at the

⁹ Synthetic phonics, also known as blended phonics or inductive phonics, is a method of teaching English reading which first teaches the letter sounds and then builds up to blending these sounds together to achieve full pronunciation of whole words.

¹⁰ Lesley Clark Synthetic Phonics <https://www.lesleyclarksyntheticphonics.co.uk/index.php/about/45-synthetic-phonics-faqs> Retrieved 12th June 2020

¹¹ A longitudinal study reported by Johnston and Watson (2005) found that a group taught by synthetic phonics had better spelling, word reading and comprehension than a group taught by analytic phonics. <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/14793/1/0023582.pdf>

decoding level.¹² Daily storytelling in the Kindergarten and Lower School classroom, as well as the oral nature of our teaching generally, will partly ameliorate this disparity, but it cannot close the gap completely.

Just as they are influenced by their parents' attitudes, the children we teach will experience our own relationship with reading and writing. If we see reading and writing as breaking words down into – or building them up out of – phonemes, this will be their picture. They might have fun doing it, but for those who have already worked out the system, these skills have no purpose and the activity is simply a game that reinforces the idea that literacy is something mechanical.

When we think about how to ensure that all children become literate, we have to be aware that, if we take all six- or seven-year-olds through a synthetic phonics programme, based on the belief that most of them won't learn to read unless we do,¹³ it denies all of them the opportunity to experience this as a personal discovery. Jean Piaget:

Each time one prematurely teaches a child something he could have discovered himself, that child is kept from inventing it and consequently from understanding it completely.¹⁴

Those children who can already read, or who get the idea right away, are frustrated and disappointed if they have to go through a programme of steps designed to lead them to what they have already worked out for themselves. The rest are denied the possibility of doing that. For all of them, the whole subject of reading and writing can become tainted with negative feelings. The children's long-term relationship with reading and writing is at stake here; what is lost through failing to develop the habit of reading for pleasure is immeasurable and will have life-long consequences. It is not enough to be *able* to read and write; we have to also make sure, as far as possible, that once they have the skills, children still *want* to read and write.

At the other end of the spectrum of learning theories from systematic teaching is 'unschooling'. It asserts that learning is as natural as breathing; many children teach themselves to read, and since literacy teaching begins at such an early age, it is impossible to be sure that most children who

¹² G. Kalb and J.C. van Ours, (2012) *Reading to Young Children: a head start in life*. <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/documents/about/research/readtoyoungchild.pdf>

¹³ From a phonics training: '*Many, but not all, children need explicit phonemic awareness instruction in order to become aware of the patterns they hear in spoken language.*' <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/teaching-phonics/5/steps/705213> retrieved 2nd April 2020

¹⁴ Jean Piaget, *The Language and Thought of the Child*, (1926) Part 2

grow up in a literate society would not do so, given time.¹⁵ Rudolf Steiner said that if we teach writing first, in most cases, reading will arise out of it 'almost naturally and without effort'.¹⁶ This view, and the laissez-faire approach to reading it implies, have at times been part of mainstream education, but in the current educational climate, they are considered too unpredictable, to the point of being irresponsible, and systematic programmes are now in vogue. These seem necessary when education is seen as training for a specific outcome, rather than as active engagement with learning; when the natural enthusiasm of children for learning is not harnessed or has already been extinguished. But systems that rely on memorisation and regurgitation instil habits and attitudes to learning that can persist into adulthood at the expense of the development of real thinking.

Self-initiated active thinking arises when we are genuinely engaged and interested. The significance of this activity goes far beyond the acquisition of literacy, numeracy or any other skills. It is the basis of individual freedom. Educational pragmatist, contemporary of Rudolf Steiner and 'arguably the most prominent American intellectual for the first half of the twentieth century'¹⁷ John Dewey writes:

The individual who has a question which, being really a question to him, instigates his curiosity, which feeds his eagerness for information that will help him cope with it, and who has at his command an equipment which will allow these interests to take effect, is intellectually free. Whatever initiative or imaginative vision he possesses will be called into play and control his impulses and habits. His own purposes will direct his actions. Otherwise, his seeming attention, his docility, his memorizings and reproductions, will partake of intellectual servility.¹⁸

I imagine this makes complete sense to most people, but we live in a society that assesses the quality of education through the acquisition of measurable literacy and numeracy skills. Free, creative thinking, however much it is valued, is expansive, often illogical, unpredictable, involves leaps of imagination and individual interpretation. When the aim of education is to ensure that children acquire specific, prescribed information and skills to

¹⁵ Annie Holmquist, *Children Will Teach Themselves to Read When They're Ready*, (2016) <https://fee.org/articles/children-will-teach-themselves-to-read-when-theyre-ready/>

¹⁶ Rudolf Steiner, *The Spiritual Ground of Education*, p.62

¹⁷ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dewey/>

¹⁸ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, Chapter 22 part 3

meet measurable targets at the 'right' age, it is hardly surprising that more controllable, systematic programmes of teaching are favoured.

My own experience suggests that the unschoolers are right – that most children would eventually teach themselves to read and write – although, partly for practical reasons, I didn't leave it entirely for the children to discover for themselves. I introduced some of the letters through art, as described in this book, and, more or less as soon as the pictures became letters, almost every child understood (if they didn't already) that each letter is a symbol¹⁹ that represents a specific sound,²⁰ and once they had linked some of the symbols to their sounds²¹, reading came as a sudden, wonderful realisation. I initiated and supported the process by teaching through art; they made the connections themselves, out of their enthusiasm, because they were allowed to.

The term 'teaching through art' in relation to Waldorf Education is widely misunderstood. A great deal of artwork is produced in Waldorf schools, and this is perhaps what has led to the perception that teaching through art means that the children produce art – beautiful books, paintings, craftwork, music, eurythmy – alongside their 'proper' work, or that we put pictures on the walls or blackboard in order to make the environment beautiful. Art is then seen as additional to another – potentially any other – form of teaching, but its value for academic learning is not recognised.

Teaching through art does not mean teaching *plus* art; it means making the arts – drawing, painting and modelling, stories, literature, poetry, eurythmy, music – the vehicle through which we teach everything. Rudolf Steiner explains why we would want to do this:

... pictures refuse to communicate themselves in the narrow, rationalistic way that is possible with concepts and ideas. People think that once a concept has been grasped they have got to the root of everything to which it is relevant. No such opinion is possible in the case of a picture, an imagination. A picture or an imagination works in a living way, like a living being itself. We may have come to know one aspect or another of a living person, but ever and again he will present new aspects to us. We shall not be satisfied, therefore, with definitions purporting to be comprehensive, but we shall endeavour to look for

¹⁹ Graphemes

²⁰ Phoneme/Grapheme correspondence

²¹ It's not necessary to introduce every letter individually; most of the children will have realised what's happening after ten or twelve.

characteristics which contribute to the picture from different angles, giving us increasing knowledge of the person in question.²²

It is for this reason that Hegel considered art to be the most important medium through which we can understand the world and thereby develop as human beings: through it, we can bring ideas into relationship with each other in freedom.²³ John Dewey called art 'the most effective mode of communication that exists'.²⁴ These great thinkers, who were not averse to expressing their ideas in intellectual concepts, recognised the characteristic of art that makes it an ideal vehicle for education: a work of art is not definitive; it characterises; it doesn't force its ideas on us but presents itself as something we can come to know; it renders more, the more we engage with it.

When we teach with images and with imagination ... children take as much instruction as they can bear. A relationship arises like that between eating and being satisfied. ... a child will not eat more than is bearable, spiritually, because the organism spontaneously rejects what a child cannot bear.²⁵

If we approach writing first through stories, recitation, imaginations and drawing, we provide a bridge over which young children can cross, from 'what they do naturally', i.e. draw the forms of writing out of imitation, to this 'something alien that in no way suits their nature'²⁶ i.e. the system and conventions of written language. If we do this, they will come to know written language in something like the way it originally developed in human culture: as picture writing first. In doing so, they will have a deeper understanding of what it actually is, where it came from and how it came to be as it is now. They can form an inner connection with it.

The earliest forms of writing, Sumerian cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphs, were pictorial, and were used for four thousand years before an alphabetic system was devised. Alphabetic systems of writing are seen as signifiers of more advanced civilisations, but picture writing has its own special qualities, and over those four thousand years, they developed in ingenious ways to convey complex and subtle feelings and ideas. For

²² Rudolf Steiner, *Whitsun and its connection with the Ascension*, (1923) <https://wn.rsarchive.org/GA/GA0224/19230507p01.html>

²³ Hegel's *Aesthetic Theory* in Seth Tichenor, *Hegel on Art and aesthetics*, (2011) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Twb9JgLG_Hg

²⁴ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, (2017) Dancing Unicorn Books, USA

²⁵ Rudolf Steiner, *The Spiritual Ground of Education*, p.70

²⁶ Rudolf Steiner, *The Spiritual Ground of Education*, (2004) Anthroposophic Press, New York. p.58-59

example, the pictograms for the name 'Rameses' include the symbol for the sun—Ra—and for rise or rebirth—Mas—which convey the sound of the name, but also the qualities of rebirth and the sun; in his written name is the image, the idea, of the sun reborn. In this way, more could be conveyed than just the sound of the word; a relationship was created by placing images beside each other, and from this arose a new idea or concept that could be 'read' and interpreted depending on the reader's ability or will to perceive it. This is the special power of pictures; they work on many levels and depend on and enable our active response to reveal their layers of meaning.

In education, when an idea is presented in a picture, a story, a poem, a song, descriptive language of any kind, drama, music etc., the children receive, understand and respond to it in individual ways. This, by its very nature, is adaptive teaching, because what each child learns is not—cannot be—prescribed, defined or limited. Teaching through art creates an opportunity for learning that doesn't exclude anyone and has unlimited depth for those who look for it; it doesn't leave anyone behind, but neither does it hold anyone back. This is particularly significant when we remember that individual developmental trajectories are the norm.

Over time, the indications that Rudolf Steiner gave about stages of child development have become fixed in a conventional so-called 'Waldorf curriculum' that was never his intention, and which, if applied dogmatically, does not take into account the range of needs and abilities, or the different cultural, familial, religious, lingual and socio-economic backgrounds that are to be found in every class today.

This is further compounded by pressure, and even requirements, from official bodies to conform to mainstream educational norms which have their own age-related expectations.²⁷ It has serious implications for Waldorf Education if we bow to that pressure without consciously reviewing and transforming our practice in light of what we know about child development, what we observe as the needs of individual children, and what we know about the effect on children of different subjects, activities and ways of teaching. Perhaps it is possible to teach synthetic phonics through art, but even if not, if it has to be done, it must be done out of this understanding. It is these things, not a particular curriculum content or teaching method, that characterise Waldorf Education.

²⁷ At the time of writing, there is a requirement to teach literacy through synthetic phonics in schools in the UK. This is a requirement of the Ofsted inspection framework 2019 and applies to Waldorf schools that are inspected by Ofsted. Independent schools inspected by the Independent Schools Inspectorate are not required to do so.

A presentation of writing and language through art will meet children at different stages of development. They will all be immersed in the narrative and imagery of the stories, the musicality of poems and songs, and the practical activities of drawing pictures, forms and letters. If a child does not understand how written language works at first, he will still learn to draw the letters and to write beautifully. The Class Teacher system allows the concepts to be brought again later, in different ways, until he can take them in. The child who has already grasped the concepts will usually still need to practise forming the letters and develop her handwriting, but she will also be able to write freely out of herself, and opportunities can be given for her to do this. Differentiating tasks in this way should be a normal part of teaching any group of children.

The basic principles on which this book is based, then, are that, by teaching through art, all children can learn to write and be given the opportunity to discover how to read by themselves; that this should be allowed to happen because it is the best way to develop functional literacy skills while also fostering a feeling for the beauty of language and a love of reading; that systematic teaching of reading should only be used when it doesn't happen by itself. Our observation skills, understanding of child development and a feeling of responsibility for the children in our care, if taken seriously and properly developed, will ensure that children who don't or can't make this discovery for themselves don't go unnoticed.

When we teach through art in this way, our aim is still that all children become functionally literate, but this objective is only part of the much broader purposes of education, which we should not be willing to sacrifice for the sake of early reading. When lesson content is given orally, as it is in Waldorf schools, there is no particular urgency for children to be able to read in order to access the curriculum. This, of course, is not the case in most schools, and the idea that children can take their time over learning to read and write is anathema to current mainstream educational practice. Many of the struggles we have in communicating to the wider educational community what we do in Waldorf Education spring from mutual misunderstanding. Our different picture of human development inevitably leads us to different conclusions about what it means to educate, and different ideas and methods of teaching arise from these different points of view. Very often we are talking at cross purposes with other educators and parents because of unacknowledged assumptions made on both sides. Partly for this reason, there is a growing tendency for Waldorf teachers to conform to mainstream expectations and methods because it is easier to swim with the tide. This is especially so when our understanding of our own practice is inadequate. Too often Waldorf teachers go through the motions of established 'Waldorf' practice, and fiercely defend it, without

understanding the principles on which it has been built. Waldorf education does not need to manifest in any particular way. Rudolf Steiner:

If you go into one of the first classes, you will see writing taught through painting and drawing; ...[in another] first class and you will see something different; this teacher allows the children to run round in a kind of eurythmy, getting them to experience the form through their bodily movements ... And it is possible to do this in a third or fourth way. ... every teacher must present lessons as an individual. Just as life appears in manifold variety, so, too, teaching based on life will take different forms. ... If you lay down abstract principles, you expect to find the same activities in every classroom. If your principles are taken from life, you know that life is varied and that the same thing can be done in different ways.²⁸

Without this understanding, practice is not renewed or varied and becomes obsolete, and when it is questioned, we have no basis from which to argue its validity. We can waste a lot of energy trying to protect our traditional practices from compromise when it is our principles that need defending.

My purpose in writing this is to provide, through practical methods whose efficacy can be experienced directly, an understanding of what it means to teach through art, and a sound rationale for doing so. What follows is a practical description of the way I have taught children to write and read through art – specifically in my case, using drawing, storytelling, recitation and movement – with an accompanying commentary based on the ideas outlined above. The children first learned to draw the letters as forms; the letters became writing; reading arose from writing more or less spontaneously, and where it didn't – for two children in my case – I gave individual support in ways that suited each child²⁹. It is not *the* way to teach writing, it is just *a* way. The principles applied here can and should be interpreted freely, depending on the resourcefulness, talents, interests and imagination of teachers and of the children they teach.

Amanda Bell
November 2020

²⁸ Rudolf Steiner, *The Spiritual Ground of Education*, p.62

²⁹ There are many well documented strategies, widely available. Different children need different approaches.

Stories and Poetry

Before writing and reading have any relevance for children, there is speech, and the oral tradition that is the origin of all literature. Children learn to speak and understand their mother tongue by living in its environment and absorbing it. They need a rich, vivid experience of language, in the form of conversation, stories, rhymes and songs from the very beginning, simply in order to come into a relationship with their own language, and this continues when they start school.

The fairy tales that were gathered by the Brothers Grimm in the German-speaking world were recommended by Rudolf Steiner for the youngest children in the Waldorf School. Although they are German stories, their themes are universally human in character and speak to things that lie beyond cultural distinctions.

The 'European' fairy tales are ... images of the striving, searching, stumbling, and ultimately victorious human being. True fairy tales in the way that we want them in a Waldorf school are consequently stories about the developing human being. They are images the children relate to as evolving human beings.³⁰

Many of these fairy tales exist in various forms in other cultures, and local versions should be sought wherever possible, so that the setting – the seasons, plants, food, animals – is familiar. This is important for young children. By the same token, we have to consider the variety of cultures now represented in the home lives of a typical modern school community. Even if they were born and have grown up in this place, in a globalised world where a 'when in Rome' attitude is redundant, for children whose families originate in other parts of the world, it is likely that the culture of their parents or grandparents is reflected in the food they eat, the clothes they wear, the festivals they celebrate and the stories they tell. All of this is part of a class's collective picture of their home surroundings.

As fairy tales are universal, it would be ideal to select stories from all around the world. The contents of the most famous fairy tales are often



³⁰ Gilbert van Kerckhoven quoted in Serene Fong, (2017) *Developing a Waldorf Curriculum in Asia*. <https://serenehealingstories.files.wordpress.com/2019/02/developing-a-waldorf-curriculum-in-asia-thesis-serene-fong.pdf>

found, in one form or another, in legends, mythologies and folklore of all different cultures ... In our multi-cultured classrooms, it would be good when selecting stories, to have representations from all the different continents, and especially the cultures of the families in the class, in order to build the class community and so that each child may feel that their heritage or ethnicity is acknowledged and valued.³¹

We also have to take into account prevailing attitudes to social and political issues. Before they were written down, these stories naturally transformed with changing ways of thinking as they were told and retold through many generations. Fixed in print almost two hundred years ago, they are now seen as inviolable by some and obsolete by others, because of perceived gender, racial or social stereotypes, or because they seem to condone violence, and these are values we would rather not pass on to our children.



However, the fact that these stories exist in cultures worldwide should alert us to their deeper significance, and there are enough of them that we can choose the ones that don't offend our twenty-first century sensibilities, or, more positively, the ones that best speak to the demographic of our school communities. If we can swap the race or gender of the protagonists, perhaps stop short of the ubiquitous marriage sometimes, without losing what is important about these stories, we should do so, but to sanitise them, or dismiss them entirely, would be to deny our children an important part of their cultural heritage.

Fairy tales – the proper kind, those original Brothers Grimm tales . . . unsanitised by censorship and unsweetened by American retellings – affirm what children intuitively know to be true but are gradually taught to forget, then to dread: that the terrible and the terrific spring from the same source, and that what grants life its beauty and magic is not the absence of terror and tumult but the grace and elegance with which we navigate the gauntlet. ... because evil stems from intellectual and

³¹ Serene Fong, (2017) *Developing a Waldorf Curriculum in Asia*.

emotional stuntedness and is the one form of poverty that should be shunned.³²

The narrative arcs of these stories provide a deep connection to fundamental human soul experiences, but also to the literary culture of which they are part. Through them, children develop a relationship with story structures and tropes: the hero's journey; the rule of three; the youngest/simplest succeeding where the older/cleverer fails; the situation/problem/solving/outcome form; structures that they will encounter everywhere in literature and popular culture as they grow up.



As well as fairy tales and folk tales, young children should have stories about their immediate surroundings: the plants that grow around them, the animals they see every day, and the man-made environment. These stories form the basis of science, history and geography education and belong to the Home Surroundings lessons, whose purpose is:

...to lay a foundation in the souls of the children, to create threads of feeling – heart connections – between them and the world in which they live, so that they see it first as something of which they are part, rather than as a curiosity to be squinted at through a microscope or entertained by from a screen.³³

For obvious reasons, these stories are best written and told by the children's own teacher or parents. True stories from your own childhood have a special charm and power for young children. As they get older, different stories are needed.

Eight-year-olds remain in a largely self-created psychological landscape, developed from the imagination and inner life. They are more alert to what happens around them ... In contrast to the wholeness of the previous year, in Class 2, a mood of contrast or

³² Maria Popova, *The Importance of Being Scared: Polish Nobel Laureate Wisława Szymborska on Fairy Tales and the Necessity of Fear*, (April 12th 2016), Brainpickings, <https://www.brainpickings.org/2016/04/22/wislawa-szymborska-fairy-tales-fear/> Retrieved March 29th 2020

³³ Amanda Bell, *The Home Surroundings Main Lesson*, (2010) <https://www.lulu.com/shop/amanda-bell/the-home-surroundings-main-lesson/paperback/product-20490560.html>

polarisation often surfaces, which can be seen in the way the children relate to one another. Stories of contrasting human qualities portrayed by holy people and saints in legends and by animals in fables can be told to help children through this stage.³⁴

At the same time, we should not forget that the children in a class will always be at different stages of development. The selection of appropriate stories is the responsibility of the teacher and should not be based on a fixed idea of 'what we do' in any particular class, but on the children we have in front of us. It could be that you need to bring fables in Class 1, or continue fairy tales into Class 2 or beyond. Collections like 'The King of Ireland's Son',³⁵ which combines traditional Irish folk tales with humour into a single story are ideal for spanning the needs of a class where some children still need fairy tales, while others need a longer, continuing narrative. Sometimes it's more a matter of how the story is told.

Good storytelling, then, is a vital element in helping children become literate and thus is a basic teaching skill and one in which, as with everything we do, the developmental stage of the children has to be considered.

In the first few years of school, the child cannot yet respond to anything that is *too soulful*. When telling a fairytale, for example, we can discover that the 'dramatic' element is alien to a young child and that he is only touched by more neutral realities.³⁶

You can imagine the effect on a small child of saying, in a dramatic voice "... and she was made to dance in the red-hot shoes until she fell down dead."³⁷ On the other hand, my own matter-of-fact telling of the story that ends with this line elicited from one satisfied seven-year-old boy the one-word comment: "Good." Not because he approved of or even really pictured the violence, but simply because good had overcome evil, and that was just as it should be.

Although your rendering³⁸ should not be dramatic, it is very important that the stories you tell to the children contain vivid imagery and use beautiful language (we are working with the lyric quality) including vocabulary and expressions that the children won't understand right away. Fairy tales often

³⁴ Serene Fong, (2017) *Developing a Waldorf Curriculum in Asia*

³⁵ Padraic Colum, *The King of Ireland's Son*, (1999) Floris Classics, Edinburgh

³⁶ Christof Wiechert, *Solving the Riddle of the Child*, (2018) Verlag am Goetheanum, Dornach, Switzerland.

³⁷ The last line of Little Snow White, Grimm's Fairy Tales.

³⁸ Stories are much better *told* to young children, not read.

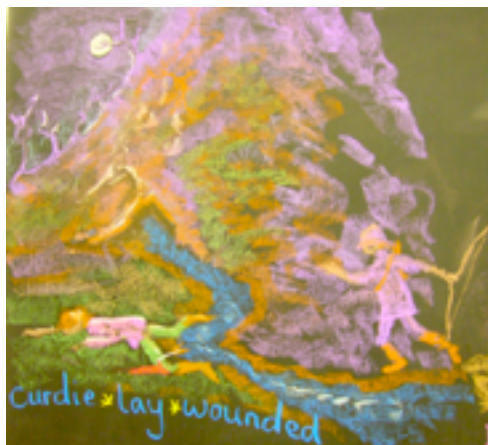
contain very sophisticated language, but the children understand them, even in Kindergarten, because if they are told well, and engage the imagination, the children can infer meaning from context, tone of voice, gesture and feeling, all of which are essential aspects of being literate. For the same reason, you should not be afraid to have them recite poems that contain unfamiliar words and expressions.

As well as the feeling for language, the mood and meaning of what is conveyed through stories needs to be considered. Think about the best time of year for telling a particular story. For example, *The Six Swans* at Easter time, because it contains qualities of sacrifice and compassion appropriate at this time of year, or *Baba Yaga* or *East of the Sun* – stories of courage – at Michaelmas time. A study of the festivals, including those from different cultures where the universal gesture of the season is reflected, will help in choosing appropriate stories.³⁹

Daily recitation gives the children a feeling for the rhythms and musicality of poetry and speech. The children's spoken vocabulary and sense for grammar will develop through this oral education, which is the only mode of teaching for young children in Waldorf schools; everything is taught through speaking and listening, so there is no urgent need for the children to learn to read in order to access the curriculum. Meanwhile, they are

developing these speech and comprehension skills long before they can write and read, which means that, when they do, they can bypass simple (dull) readers and start right away with books that match in quality the stories they have been hearing since they were small.

When they are thoroughly learnt, the poems and songs that the children know by heart provide material for their first pieces of writing.



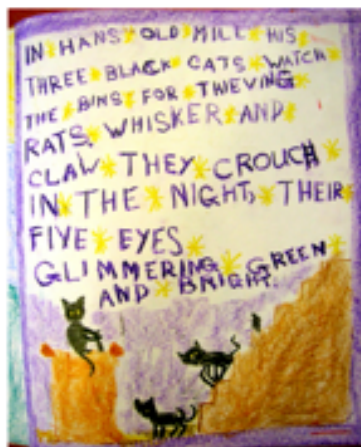
³⁹ See Rudolf Steiner's *The Festivals and their Meaning*: <https://wn.rsarchive.org/search=mode?query=festivals+and+their+meaning&mode=title> but also festivals from other cultures celebrated in your class or school.

Recitation in Class 1

Teachers of young children need to learn poems by heart and bring them with meaningful gestures that express their mood, meaning, rhythm, repetition etc. All of this needs careful preparation.

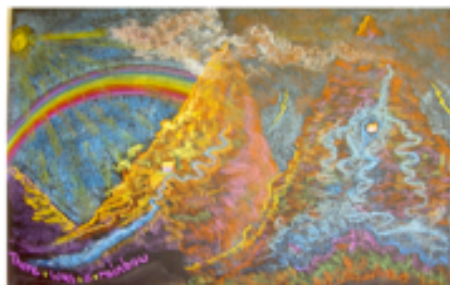
- Work with recitation of beautiful poems - perhaps three or four each day - in a circle where the children can all see you and each other - so that the children also learn them by heart.
- When they can recite a poem without you, let them.
- Then sometimes put them in smaller groups to speak and listen to each other in turn, so that you can hear everyone speaking.
- Mix abilities in each group, but sometimes put the most able together to give them the opportunity to go beyond what the class as a whole can manage.
- You can also make little plays out of longer poems.
- It works well to prepare four or five poems at the beginning of term, and introduce them one at a time through the first week or two, each with a short introduction, e.g. introduce 'Mice' by Rose Fyleman by saying 'I saw a mouse yesterday. It was tiny and had bright black eyes ...' etc. This will pique the children's interest in the poem.
- Develop a sensitivity for when a poem's time is over (or when it doesn't work - that sometimes happens) and drop it. At the same time, introduce another one, and so on. You will have a growing repertoire from which to draw, leaving this one and adding that one when it seems right, varying the programme slightly every day.
- You can - should - weave in games and songs in the same way.

If you watch and listen you will learn a great deal about the children. Some will just follow the gestures, others will speak without gesturing, some will do neither, most will do both. Children respond in different ways and we need to learn to see what lives in each of them, but also to anticipate and plan beforehand how to engage everyone. A sense of humour and a certain lightness of mood is important.



Drawing from stories and poems

Drawing with children from stories and poems, building up the picture gradually, together, from what they have recalled, gives them another way to express the mental images they have created while listening to the stories.



Drawing skills need to be developed as much as writing, so the children should be guided in how to use materials, choose and blend colours, compose and build up a picture.



If you are drawing on a blackboard with chalk, what you are able to do will be very different from what the children can do with paper and crayons or pencils. If you practise with their materials beforehand, you will have a better understanding of how to guide them.

Some teachers prepare their blackboard drawings in the evening so that they are finished before the children arrive at school the next day. The children receive them as wonderful gifts from their teachers, but I question the value of doing this, simply because they can learn so much from watching and following the process. Rather than experiencing the drawings as something magical that appears overnight, they see them as something they can learn to do themselves - something achievable.

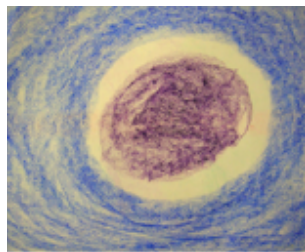


Blackboard drawing: from The Princess and The Goblin by George MacDonald. This drawing evolved over several weeks with the telling of the story in Class 2.

Children's drawings from top: From the poem The Witch by Eleanor Farjeon. Class 3. God speaking to Elijah from Class 3, and Thor from Class 4.

Form drawing

As has been said, we can approach writing first through drawing: the forms of the letters are drawn as pictures; the pictures become letters to which specific sounds are related, and these form writing through which we can convey meaning and communicate ideas. Form drawing, then, is the first stage in developing practical writing skills.



Form is a primary experience for very young children; they draw 'forms' quite naturally and spontaneously as part of the process of coming to terms with the organisation of the physical world. They are drawn to represent outwardly the forms and patterns they experience inwardly.

The [drawings] reveal the child writing dancingly in space; choreographies - lines of rhythmic-dynamic life. They are processes which condense out of primeval movement and finally come to rest in symbolical, geometrical forms.⁴⁰

As an educational activity, form drawing has a much wider remit than just helping children learn to write; its value for the developing child cannot be overstated. It is both diagnostic and therapeutic: through watching the children draw, we can see many things about the way they inhabit their bodies; how much control they have over the movement of their hands and how long this can be sustained; how they manage tools and materials; how clearly they can perceive and imagine the forms of things; how accurately they can translate these perceptions into drawings. At the same time, practice works on the development of all of these skills and faculties.⁴¹ Rosemary Gebert taught form drawing to children and trainee teachers for many years:

It's not easy to see the educational value of form drawing by looking at the children's drawings, for its effectiveness is realised in the process, not in the product. It is the act of drawing that educates, not the result.⁴²

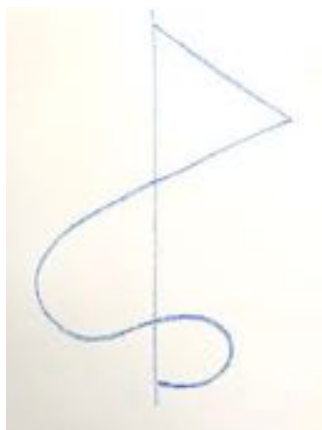
⁴⁰ Michaela Strauss, *Understanding Children's Drawings: Tracing the Path of Incarnation* (2007) Rudolf Steiner Press, Forest Row, England

⁴¹ We should be aware that copying forms from the blackboard only addresses the second of these two aspects: it will develop the children's ability to draw accurate forms, and when teaching children to write, this may be your primary aim.

⁴² Rosemary Gebert, *Form Drawing*, (1987) Child and Man, Volume 21, #1, Steiner Schools Fellowship, Forest Row, UK. This article gives a comprehensive overview of the kind of drawings suitable for children at different ages.

This being the case, it is not necessary, or even desirable, for the children to spend time producing beautifully coloured and finished drawings. The time is better used tracing the movement again and again, so that the child's arm 'learns' the movement of the form, and the drawing comes closer and closer to its true form.

Form drawing should start right at the beginning of Class 1 and continue with regular practice for the next three years at least, ideally longer. This, in addition to all the other benefits that have been mentioned and which continue, is the first stage in the development of beautiful handwriting, and should not be rushed.



A process for beginning form drawing

On the first day of school, you could start with something very simple. Begin by moving around the room in different ways, using a verse or song, 'gallop like a horse', 'run like a fox', 'hop like a rabbit', 'march like a soldier', finishing with 'walk like a king/queen'.

Then focus on walking 'like a king/queen', upright and stately. Walk in a straight line, while 'your courtiers' watch and perhaps bow as you go by. Then let them be the king, or queen, or both in pairs. They are still working out of imitation, so they will take on your gesture.

Then sit them down and move to the blackboard to draw 'how we walked'. Draw a vertical line, from top to bottom, carefully, confidently and as straight as you can. Tell them "The King/Queen walks straight to his throne and his courtiers make way for him".

Then call the children up, one by one, while the others watch, to draw the straightest line they can. Take note of how they approach the board and how they draw.

They can then practise on small blackboards, in sand, or on paper, and then perhaps put one into a form drawing book, although this is not necessary.



You can do the same, probably the next day, with a curve. Find a suitable image and have them run a curve and then draw it. Only a few of them need to draw it on the blackboard this time. It's best not to labour these things.

They should experience that curves are different from straight lines; there can be an infinite number of different curves, but a line is either straight or it's not. Think about suitable colours with which to draw them. Ask them to show you some curves and straight

lines in the classroom and outside. They will notice that straight lines hardly exist in nature.

Then you can combine curves with straight lines in forms.

In following lessons, you could focus on sharpening corners, drawing circles, anything that needs work. Think of images and movements that will conjure these qualities in the children's imagination before they draw. Drawings should be large, so that the children use and experience the form with their whole arm.

A method for practising forms



Although 'finished', coloured drawings are not necessary to the aims of form drawing, children enjoy producing something beautiful. It's a matter of prioritising what's important but also valuing the children's interest in their work. This method enables both the practice of drawing and improving a form, and producing a satisfying result for the child, using only one piece of paper.

First take a stick and block crayon in the same colour (a light colour such as yellow or light green works best) and a stick crayon in a darker colour. Although I do not advocate the indiscriminate use of wax block and stick crayons, they are ubiquitous in Waldorf schools and are actually ideal for this method. Using the lighter-coloured stick crayon, begin to sketch the form. Trace it over and over.

Some children will need to know how many times you want them to draw it. Between ten and twenty times is probably enough, by which time they should be drawing quickly and freely. If not, do it 'five more times', or whatever is needed.

As their hand and arm learns the movement, the line begins to flow naturally (You may need to guide an arm or two). The children know there is no need to get it right first time, so they will approach the task with confidence.

Next, take the darker stick crayon or pencil and draw the form just one last time. This is a bit daunting, but encourage them to swap colours quickly and draw it just as they have been doing. Again, one or two may need your guiding hand.

You leave the drawing as it is (I think the dynamic lines are beautiful), or they can use the lighter-coloured block crayon to colour around the form, and the sketchy lines disappear, leaving a clean form. I have used a purple Stabilo 'Woody' pencil for a smoother final line.



Some possible forms for Classes 1 and 2

Start with simple straight line and curve forms; add vertical symmetry, then horizontal symmetry later. Practise drawing the forms first before bringing them to the children; it will reveal difficulties that are not apparent until you draw them. Introduce them through movement as before.



Imagination

Imagination is the ability to create mental pictures, as we do when we hear stories, descriptions or explanations. If we work in the right way, by first engaging the child's senses of movement and balance, the process of form drawing can exercise this ability to make mental pictures.

The form is a moving line; the eye traces the form, just as the hand draws it. The line travels, and so can the children, by walking or running curves and loops, dancing in circles, marching in straight lines, jumping zig-zags, hopping or skipping. It's not important that they move the form precisely; a general feeling for its quality is all that's needed, and this can also be brought through words (see p.26).

Then we can trace the form they are going to draw in the air, with our whole arm, speaking about the quality of the line as we demonstrate it, and they can copy the movement in the air; with fingers on each other's backs, or in sand. At this stage, the form becomes more precise.

All of this activity enables the children to experience the quality of the form without seeing it. This is particularly important at this time, when visual perception dominates our experience of the world: we need to plan opportunities for the other senses to develop.

The children can then draw the form with chalk on a blackboard, on paper, or model it with plasticine, dough or clay, out of the impression made on them by the movement.

The important thing is that they go through the process of perceiving the quality and character of the movement,

Movement and Balance

Most children can tell when a form isn't quite right before they are able to draw it accurately. The same is true of adults, of course; we can see if a circle we've drawn freehand isn't perfect even though we can't draw a perfect one. Hermann Kirchner explains in his book 'Dynamic Drawing':

While our sense of vision registers the colour of a round surface, our sense of movement feels its way around the periphery. If the periphery is an exact circle, we have a harmonious experience that leads us unconsciously to cosmic laws. But if the circle is imperfect at a certain point, everyone will at once be aware of the flaw. Our sense of balance has been involved and our impulse to correct the inexact spot shows that we are slightly disturbed in the wellbeing of our life sense.

Young children don't see their 'inner forms' so clearly, and this ability to imagine the 'right' form is one of the faculties that can develop when forms are drawn out of movement without the 'shortcut' of visual information.

creating a mental image of the form as it was moved in space, and then translating that into a drawing. The fact that they don't 'get it right' doesn't matter. When we then draw the form with them, they can copy it with a deeper understanding of its qualities because they have experienced them.

In this process, the children are inwardly active in transforming movement into mental picture and then into drawing. The result will not necessarily be a more accurate drawing than they would have produced had they simply copied it from the blackboard, but they will have had a far richer experience, and their ability to form mental pictures - to imagine - will have been exercised and developed further.

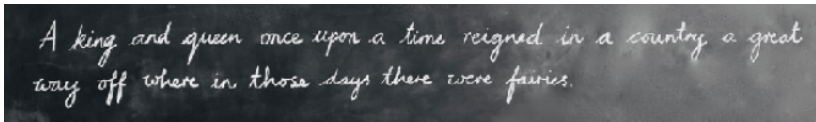


Beginning to write

When the children can draw forms with some control and accuracy, we can start to introduce them to the letters of the alphabet, through movement, gesture and drawing as already described with regard to form drawing; the process is the same.

All of them will have seen writing, of course (although it is increasingly possible that some may never have seen anybody writing by hand), and most of them will have tried to form letters before. Some of them may also be able to read already. However, there are aspects of the letters of the alphabet that none of them will have encountered yet, and we can approach our teaching with this in mind. In everything we do, there should be at the back of our minds the knowledge that there is much more that can be learned about everything than what appears on the surface. Different children will take in what we teach them in different ways.

Most children in Class 1 will have been eagerly anticipating learning to read and write for some time. We can focus their interest and give them an image of what they are striving for by showing them some adult writing first:



Write a long sentence from a story on the blackboard in your cursive handwriting - let them watch you do it, take care (practise privately first) but let it flow easily from your hand - and say something like:

"Your parents and teachers, your older brothers and sisters, can write like this. You can't read this yet, but I can. It says 'A king and queen once upon a time reigned in a country a great way off where in those days there were fairies'. It's the beginning of a story. When you're older, you'll be able to read it, and to write down your own thoughts and stories in beautiful words like this. In Class 1, you are going to start to learn how to do that."

The children who can already write will not be able to do it so beautifully, and those who can already read won't be able to read cursive handwriting, so you imbue everyone with a feeling of anticipation; they look forward to being able to write beautifully and approach the process with excitement and enthusiasm.

Learning to draw the letters

Preparation for introducing letters:

- Get to know the gesture of each sound. A good way to do this is through eurythmy. This is not something that you will teach explicitly to the children, but if an understanding or a feeling for it lies behind your teaching, their relationship with language will have a different quality.
- Read Rudolf Steiner's indications for introducing writing,⁴³ to better understand what you are bringing to the children.
- Practise drawing the capital, lower case printed and cursive letters. There is no prescribed form for handwriting, so you can design your own, but make sure the letters are distinct and relate to each other. Practise them on paper and on a blackboard so that you can write carefully but fluidly.
- Begin with the consonants. Decide which consonants you want to introduce to the children, and in what order. There is no need to introduce every one individually. One suggestion is to start with B, M and D, the first sounds most babies say (hence baba, mama, dada).
- Find stories that convey something of the gesture of the sound of the letter. You can make up your own stories - and you will need to in some cases - but I have found that folk and fairy tales, Grimms and others, which the children should hear anyway, seem better than anything and can be used for most of the consonants. For example:
 - Snow White and Rose Red for B: The form of the letter can be drawn from the bear; the gesture of the story is one of warmth and safety from the cold, which echoes the gesture of the 'B' sound. The story also has many words in it that have that sound - brown, bear, broom, brush, bird, beat, back.
 - The White Snake for S: The shape of the snake of course can be an 'S'; the snake in the story, when eaten, bestows magical powers, and the sound it represents has a relationship with magic.
 - The Firebird for F: The firebird can be formed into an 'F' shape, and the story (it has many versions) includes words like fire, feather, fly, flight, fleeting, father, follow, faraway and find. The gesture of the 'F' sound is airy, fiery and swift-moving.



⁴³ In *Practical Advice to Teachers*, particularly lectures 1, 4 and 5; in *The Spiritual Ground of Education*, lecture 5; Collected indications in *Karl Stockmeyer's Curriculum for Waldorf Schools*



In telling the story, remember what you are trying to convey to the children, i.e. the quality, character and sound symbolised by a particular letter⁴⁴. You want them to connect the sound and quality with the form of that symbol, so be aware that, if there are other, more memorable (surprising, funny) elements in the story, or in the way you tell it, these are what the children will focus on and remember. Prepare the story with this in mind.

The purpose of the stories is to bring something quite alien - the idea that letters are symbols that represent specific sounds in speech - to the children, through imagination and drawing, which are more akin to their nature at the age of seven. It is not necessary to tell a story for each letter; sometimes an image is enough:



"You have seen a fish, haven't you? Try to remember what the fish looked like when you saw it. If I do this on the blackboard, it looks very like a fish, doesn't it." [See sketch on left.]

"Imagine you wanted to say 'fish.' ...

Now try not to say 'fish,' but only

start to say it. ... "f-f-f." "There, you see, you have started to say 'fish.' Now suppose people in ancient times gradually began to simplify this sign [see right sketch]. When you start to say 'fish,' 'f-f-f,' you express this in writing by making only this sign. People call this sign *f*. So you have learned that what you express by saying 'fish' begins with *f*. Now you write it down as *f*. Whenever you start writing 'fish,' you breathe *f-f-f* with your breath. So you learn the sign for when you start to say 'fish.'"⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Phoneme/Grapheme correspondence, but also the quality and gesture of the sound.

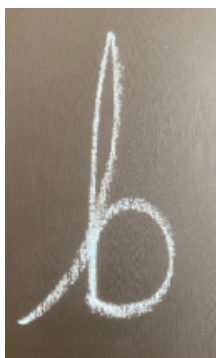
⁴⁵ Rudolf Steiner, *Practical Advice to Teachers*, (2000) Anthroposophic Press, Great Barrington, MA. P.3

This process is very similar to the one described in the two Rudyard Kipling stories *How the First Letter was Made* and *How the Alphabet was Made*. They are an excellent resource, but tell them in your own words or make up your own version; as with most children's stories from the late 19th/early 20th century, the language in which they are written is intellectual rather than descriptive.



Whether you tell a story or bring an image from the children's experience, or work through movement, the next step is to draw (literally and figuratively) the form of the letter out of the story, image or movement, and practise it, using crayons or soft pencils, paint, chalk, on large pieces of paper, blackboards, using the whole arm, as drawings; form it using plasticine or clay; draw it in sand; again and again, until the correct form can be made freely, with a fluid movement.

You must never neglect to write the letter forms in such a way that they are seen to arise from pictures, and you must always take into account that the consonants can be explained as pictures of external objects, but never the vowels.⁴⁶



⁴⁶ Rudolf Steiner, *Practical Advice to Teachers*, p.67

The vowels

In some languages, the vowels are not written. Although marks have been introduced – in Arabic and Hebrew, for example – originally, the ‘missing’ vowel sound, was intuited from the meaning, context or preceding or following sounds, or was known from speech.⁴⁷ We do this in English when we pronounce the ‘O’ differently in words like ‘women’, ‘mother’ and ‘clothes’. We can also intuit when to use a K or a C at the beginning of a word from the sounds that follow: K is usually followed by i or e (‘sharp’ sounds, in keeping with the form of the letter K) and C by a, o or u (‘rounder’ sounds, also appropriate), unless it makes a ‘s’ sound. Where this is not the case, we are usually dealing with words that come from another language, like ‘kangaroo’ or ‘kaftan’.

These are not rules, but rather demand a certain sensitivity to language, which is another aspect of literacy that should be allowed to develop by itself, so that the children become aware of and relish this growing capacity of qualitative discernment within themselves. We can facilitate this by being aware of these subtle qualities and expressing them in the language we use, the way we tell stories and the poems we choose. The process the children go through in making this kind of discovery develops a faculty in them that is not used when spelling rules are taught and only have to be remembered and applied.

This sensitive and flexible approach to English vowels is also practical because the sounds each vowel or combination of vowels⁴⁸ represents are manifold and inconsistent.

Vowels also need a different treatment because they have a different quality and purpose, and we want the children to perceive the distinction for the sake of their feeling relationship with language.

Your point of departure for the vowels is that they always render the inner being of human beings and their relationship to the external world.⁴⁹

Whereas consonants can be introduced as pictures of *things*, vowels have a relationship with the feeling life and should be introduced through ‘soul gestures’ like wonder, warmth, gratitude or separation. As with the consonants, the eurhythmgy gestures are invaluable in bringing the quality of the vowel sounds to children.

⁴⁷ Text language uses vowel-less words like *srsly*, *thx*, *k*. See: <https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/64730/some-srs-bsns-are-words-without-vowels-rlly-more-efficient>

⁴⁸ Vowel digraphs such as ‘oi’, ‘ai’, ‘ea’, ‘ee’, ‘oo’, ‘oa’, ‘ou’, ‘ei’, ‘ie’

⁴⁹ Rudolf Steiner, *Practical Advice to Teachers*, p.67

A process for introducing the vowels

In the week before Christmas in Class 1, I introduced the vowels, one each day, through advent stories. I called them 'the singing letters'.

For A I brought the story of the annunciation. It has a quality of wonder appropriate to the 'Ah' sound. The form of the kneeling Mary evoked the form of the letter.



For O, I told a story about Mary and Joseph sleeping in a field on their way to Bethlehem. The sheep gathered around Mary in a circle to keep her warm, expressing the gesture of 'O'.

For E, there was no room at the inn. The form of the letter E was a three-bar gate that kept them out, suggesting the gesture of separation that is 'Eh'.

For I, Joseph stood upright all night and kept watch over Mary and the baby. The upright form of Joseph formed the letter, and the gesture of wakefulness is appropriate to the gesture of the sound 'Ee'. The most appropriate word to convey the meaning of the gesture is 'I', as in 'I am', and I wanted to bring something of that quality, but in English 'I' doesn't make that sharp 'ee' sound as it does in 'Ich', but combines 'ah' and 'ee' in a diphthong. I used the phrase 'Joseph said I will keep watch', which contains the sound 'ee' but also the word 'I'.

For U, the angels appeared and the holy family looked up and gave thanks for the baby and their safety. The letter U was the angels' gesture of upraised arms and wings, and the gesture of thanks streaming upwards is the right gesture for the sound 'oo'.

We had been drawing the consonants in blue on a yellow background; I reversed this for the vowels to emphasise that these were something different.



Practice

The children should start to practise writing as soon as they have learned some letters. There is no need to limit them to the letters that have been introduced, but until they can read, they should write things - poems and songs - that they have been reciting or singing for some time and know by heart. This is very important for the development of reading, because they know what they are writing and can 'read' it straight away. At first, one line of a poem per day is enough writing, and this can increase as they become more proficient. It can be written on the blackboard, or on a piece of paper, for them to copy. Some children get lost when they have to look repeatedly from the blackboard to the paper, so take that into consideration and offer both. The advantage of writing on the blackboard is that the children will watch and notice how you do it.

At this stage, because they don't know the convention, or their spatial awareness is not developed enough, or because it's sometimes not easy to hear in speech where one word ends and the next begins, the children won't usually leave a space between words. They can put a star there, using a contrasting colour, until they can manage without. At some point they will write their texts leaving spaces and then go back and put the stars in afterwards. Then they can stop drawing the stars. Borders are also useful to stop them from writing off the edge of the page, but again they don't need to continue to use them if they serve no purpose.

Upper and lower case letters can be introduced at the same time, but if you decide not to do that, the children can write in capital letters for a short time before learning the lower case letters. They can be introduced, either way, as the 'little brothers and sisters' of the capital letters, or through some other imaginative connection that helps the children relate each capital to its lower case version.



Relating the letters to their sounds

- Draw each consonant on a piece of A5 card. Draw each one in its various forms: as a capital, a lower case letter, a cursive letter, a printed letter in different typefaces (especially a and g). Include Th, Sh, and Ch
- Compose short phrases featuring the sound of each consonant, for example:

Billy Button bought a beautiful buttery biscuit
Davy Doldrum dreamed he drove a dreadful dragon
Matthew Medlock missed the magical mountains
Larry Lawrence loved to leap with his long legs
Gaffer Gilpin grabbed the gleaming golden goose
Kerry Kimble kindly kissed his kitten Kelvin
Francis Fribble found a fabulous forgotten filly
Zoe Zephyr zoomed to the zebra zone at the zoo
Queen Quintle asked queer questions in the quiz
Nanny Nelly nipped naughty Neville in the night
Cathy Carter carefully caught a cold clammy catfish
Susie Simpson saw a silvery swordfish swimming
Wendle Warner wished Wednesdays would be warmer
Polly Parker preferred pesto pasta to potatoes
Hazel Henderson had to hang her hankies hurriedly
Jonathan Jenkins jogged just to jumble his jellybeans
Rachel Raines rowed to reach the ragged rocks
Tony Thompson tried to trip the two-twenty train
Valerie Vesper vainly viewed her violet velvet vest
Sheila Shaw should have sheltered from the shower
Thackeray Thimble thought thankfully of Thursdays
Charlie Chipham chopped his chocolate up with chillies

- Show the cards in a changing order each day and say the corresponding phrase with the children until they can do it by themselves and relate the forms to the sounds.
- Don't vary the colour, shape or size of the cards or you won't know whether children are relating the sounds to those things, rather than to the letters.



The Minister's Cat and other games

Letter cards can be used to play a memory game, or 'snap', where you have to match different versions of the same letter - capital, lower case, printed, cursive, different fonts.

You can also play 'The Minister's Cat':

- Sit in a circle and have a bean bag or something similar to pass around.
- Choose a letter card, in this case B, show it and say *'The Minister's Cat is a beautiful cat'*. Then pass the bean bag to the next person.
- The next person, on receiving the bean bag, could say *'The Minister's Cat is a black cat'* or *'The Minister's Cat is a bouncy cat'* and so on, round the circle.
- Don't put children on the spot if they use the wrong letter at first or struggle to find a word, just say *'Try again'* once, and then move on, or say *'We'll come back to you'* or *'Tell me when you've thought of a word'*, and move on.
- Send the bean bag in different directions each time and change the letter card on each round at first; more or less often as they get older.
- Later, sometimes throw the bean bag randomly to people in the circle so that they have to think fast.
- The phrase demands an adjective, but you have to be clear in your mind what's important today: that they know the sound or that they know the difference between a noun and an adjective? You also need to adjust your expectations as the children get older, and always for each individual child.
- You can also write the letters on the blackboard of course or just say its name or sound.

As they get older, you can play this game in different ways, for example, ask them to hear the sound at the end of the word, or in the middle.

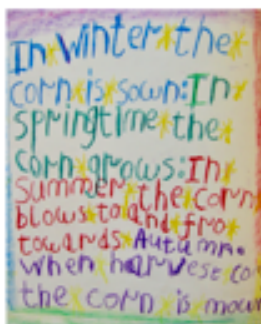
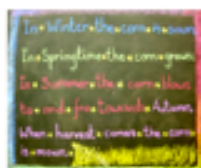
You could ask them for words with a theme, e.g. 'wintery' words, in which case you wouldn't assign a letter.

You can also use it to collect adjectives for a piece of writing.



Writing practice

- The children should practise forming, orientating and spacing their writing, working with poems, songs and rhymes they know by heart, as has already been said.
- They should be using a thick, strong – coloured pencil – Stabilo 'Woody', Lyra or Stockmar pencils are ideal - to write with. Graphite is a bit sad at this stage. A thick pencil will encourage them to keep their writing fairly large while they are still practising.
- There should be some situations where they don't need to, but they should also gradually develop the ability to write in straight lines.
- Practising using lined paper is helpful. Draw the lines yourself – wide and in three sections for 'ground, sky and underground' (baseline, risers and descenders) – and photocopy onto A3 cartridge paper for the children to use.
- In 'best', for the children who find this difficult, you can put dots at each side of the paper so that they know where to start and have something to aim for on the other side.
- Don't spend too long writing in capitals; it may not be necessary at all if you introduce both upper and lower case letters at the same time.
- Make sure the children have lots of time to practise forming – *drawing* – their letters properly and beautifully, before and after they start writing.
- At first, their writing will usually be large - sometimes only two or three words on a page - but it will gradually get smaller. What matters is that it's well-formed.
- Later, when writing whole poems on the blackboard or on paper for them to copy before everyone can read, write each line in a different colour so that they don't get lost.



Cursive writing

Lower case letters can be introduced from the beginning in their cursive form, but before they start writing texts in cursive, the children need to practise running forms so that they feel the flow and rhythm of writing without taking the pencil off the paper.



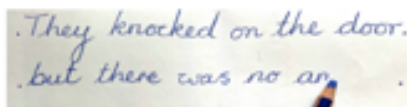
Look for regularity in the forms and make sure they can manage this before moving on to practising letters and words.



As they become more skilled, they can do this smaller, on commercially produced lined paper designed specifically for practising handwriting.



Practise one letter at a time at first, because writing words will interfere with the rhythm and flow; they will keep stopping to check the spelling or to separate the words. When they're ready, put two or three letters together, making sure they have practised all of the letters and know how to connect them with each other before moving on to writing words.



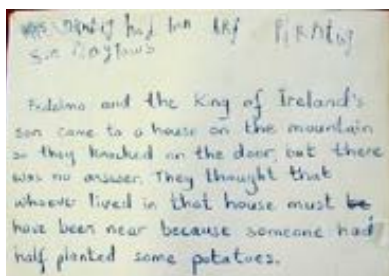
This requires a lot of concentration, so it's best done in short periods of 10 - 15 minutes at the beginning or end of a lesson.

Writing their own texts

During the 'recall'⁵⁰ part of the Main Lesson, the children will tell you what they have made of what you told them yesterday. If you focus on one part of the story and get them to recall it in detail by asking specific questions, e.g. *"Did the prince walk straight up to the palace?"* Or *"What was the thorn hedge like?"* rather than *"What happened next?"*, they will be able to write their own short texts quite early on - towards the end of Class 1 or from the beginning of Class 2.



Choose a short section of the story yourself and build it up together with the children. Make sure you have heard something from everyone most days. Then allow them to write freely and phonetically, without worrying about spelling, and then read them what they have written. They will be amazed and delighted that you can read it.



This work can be done in a rough writing book so that they don't become precious about the way it looks; that is not the purpose of this exercise. Then you can write out their texts for them with correct spelling and punctuation, and they can copy it into 'best'.

As with the poems they know by heart, they know what they have

written, so they can read it as they write, and they are interested because it's their own work, so as they copy your corrected version, they notice and learn how to spell the words they have chosen to use.

During this task, children who really struggle with writing can be asked to tell you what they want to write, while you write it out for them. Again, it's a matter of being clear in your own mind what the purpose of the task is. If it's composition, as long as the child has composed the text and told it to you, the purpose has been fulfilled if you write it out for him. If, however, the purpose is to practise working out spellings, then working one-to-one with the child to help him write one sentence himself would be better.

⁵⁰ Content given in one lesson - e.g. a story - is recalled by the children the next day, before moving on to new material. The material for any day's work is always the recalled, digested content from the previous day. The subject of recall takes us away from the present topic and deserves an essay of its own.

The King of Ireland ^{was} thinking
 fo Fedelna to come but a
 owl ladid on the wote
 tank. Wel i dont want to go
 to a nisty plas that he
 wel will go just in case so

The King of Ireland's son was thinking
 fo Fedelna to come but an owl
 ladid on the wote tank. "Well
 I don't want to go to a nisty
 place" he thought. "Well I
 will go just in case" so he clapped
 out and followed the owl and it
 in case is a house. The owl
 turned and fo a nisty plas
 thought it was Fedelna but it wasn't.
 She said to him "come in
 and see" and he went in
 and he was

When you have a child who can compose sentences well but struggles physically with writing, you can pair her with a competent writer. One of them tells the story and the other writes it down.

The children should begin this activity of composing texts within strong boundaries (*this* part of the story) before they become aware of 'correct' spelling because, once they start to want to - or think they have to - spell correctly, they will begin to restrict the vocabulary they use to words they can spell correctly, which limits their creativity.

If they are asked to compose their own texts once or twice a week during a writing block, (more if they can manage it) the quality of their writing and spelling will improve rapidly. You can already see in the examples here the correct use of 'ng', of most vowels, consonant blends like 'st', 'nt', 'ft' and 'th'. There is also an erroneous use of 'wh' in 'whos' (was) which shows that this child recognises that combination in other short, common words like 'who' 'what' and 'where' and is trying it out in 'was', which is completely understandable and shows a sensitivity to language.

That night when the King
 son ~~was~~ went into
 his watertank to
 sleep he did not mind
~~because~~ because he
 knew that Fedelna would

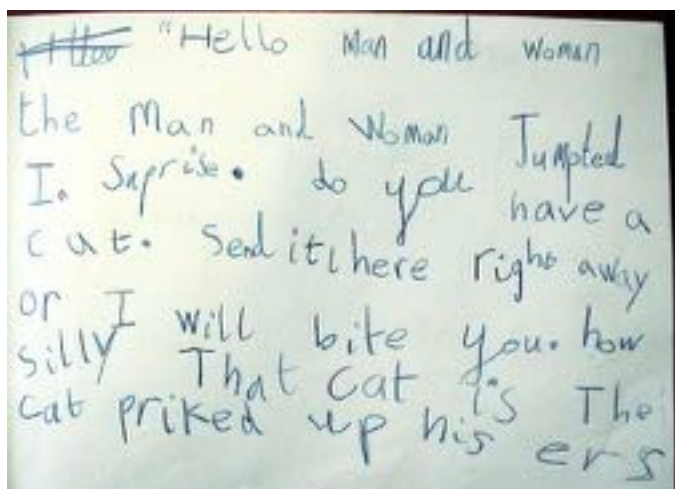
come and ~~teach~~ teach
 him into the
~~soft~~ soft bed and
 let him sleep ~~and~~
 and so he watid and
 watid and he watid

In the third example, you can see the use of 'ght' and the correct spelling of 'knew', 'come' and 'because'. It also seems that she really didn't want anyone to see her mistakes, which tells us something else about her.

You can also see from these texts that two children have asked how to spell the words 'would' and 'because', neither of which is difficult to spell phonetically. They have asked for those words (and not 'someone' or 'waited') because they already know that they have irregular spellings, even if they don't yet know what those spellings are.

None of these things has been taught explicitly. The children have learned them through writing what they already know by heart, and from reading.

There is clearly a wide range of spelling knowledge in the class (these texts were written by four different children in the same Class 2 in the same block) but not so much in the complexity and beauty of their compositions. Phrases like *'She said to him "come in" said she'* and *'So he waited and waited and he waited'* have a musical quality that echoes the oral character of fairy tales. The children will bring that unselfconsciously into their writing at this age, but the ability to compose texts of this quality is a gift that belongs to early childhood; it will disappear after a year or so, as they approach the tenth year⁵¹, and will have to be developed again consciously when they are older.



⁵¹ Rudolf Steiner once used the term 'crossing the Rubicon' to describe the change in consciousness that happens as children approach the age of ten. Since then it has come into common parlance in Waldorf Education. Its quality is one of entering a new phase of life without the possibility of returning.

Spelling and marking

The concept of 'correct spelling' is a convention that came about relatively recently. Rudolf Steiner, speaking in 1919, referred to it as:

... a rather unfree aspect of our lives, an aspect that ought to play no part in education. Only a few decades ago it was so pronounced that the more enlightened teachers were infuriated. Standard German spelling ... was to be introduced. This meant that the state ... actually laid down the law on spelling. The result is just what you might expect. This ... has robbed us of much that might still have revealed a feeling for the more intimate aspects of the German language. Seeing only today's abstract spelling, people have lost much in written German of what used to live in the German language.⁵²

For centuries, people spelled words as they heard them, and if we allow children to do this at first, using their own phonetic spelling, we can learn a great deal about how they think by observing how they choose and sound out the words they want to use.

If people, once they had learned to write, were allowed to put down what they heard from others just as they heard it (or what came from within them), their spelling would be extremely varied, exceedingly individualised. This would make communication more difficult, but it would be extraordinarily interesting.⁵³

When a child spells the word 'answer' 'rns'⁵⁴, we can hear that she is using the name of the letter 'R' and the sounds of 'N' and 'S' (S pronounced 'suh') to form the word. All the sounds are there and in the right order, so we know that she can hear them and knows which letters to use to make those sounds. The same child writes 'potatoes' as 'ptaytows', confirming that she hears all elements of the word in the right sequence and is working out the spelling by bringing what she hears together with what she has learned. So although the spelling is incorrect and not as developed as her classmates in terms of conventional spelling, we can see her process at work and it makes complete sense. What's missing is word recognition: she doesn't yet recognise that 'rns' doesn't look like other words and so probably doesn't exist. This faculty will develop through reading, so it's important for this girl that reading is something she wants to do.

⁵² Rudolf Steiner, *Practical Advice to Teachers*, p.73-74

⁵³ Rudolf Steiner, *Practical Advice to Teachers*, p.73-74

⁵⁴ see the child's text on p.42

That said, conventional spelling, of course, is a necessary part of the children's education for social and practical reasons. The point is that young children should not be made to feel that their own spelling is *wrong*, only that *this* is the way adults have decided to do it, and we should have respect for what has been developed in human culture by other people. Through this, much more is nurtured in children than simply the ability to spell.

Our task is to develop not only our own individuality in community with others but also our social impulses and feelings. A great deal of what could be revealed as our own individuality is expunged in what we have to develop for the sake of living together with others. We should feel that this is so; we should be taught to feel that we do such a thing purely for social reasons. Therefore when you begin to orient your writing lessons toward spelling, your starting point must be a quite specific set of feelings. You will again and again have to point out to the children ... that they are themselves growing up into a world already formed and waiting to receive them, and that therefore they must take notice of what is already there. This is the point of view from which children must be introduced to subjects like correct spelling. Spelling lessons must run parallel with developing feelings of respect and esteem for what their predecessors have established. Spelling must not be taught as an abstraction, as though it existed as an absolute on the basis of some divine ... law. You must develop in the children the feeling that the grown-ups whom we are to respect spell like this, and we ought to follow their example.⁵⁵

Children want to spell and write like adults do, and the ability to spell develops with reading and writing. If a child learns how to spell 'hand', for example, rather than have him learn a list of words with similar spellings, better to allow him to realise for himself that 'land', 'band' and 'stand' should be spelled in a similar way. The same goes for more complex spellings like 'light', 'sight' and 'might'. A child will also quickly learn that 'kite', 'white' and 'bite' have a different spelling form, even though they sound the same. Later, they may sense the qualitative distinction, but for now they readily accept that this, like so much else, is just 'how it is.'

In taking this step to extrapolate from one case to another, the children have to bring their will into their thinking. We only think when confronted with a problem⁵⁶, and for the sake of their whole development as

⁵⁵ Rudolf Steiner, *Practical Advice to Teachers*, p.73

⁵⁶ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*.

independent human beings, we should provide frequent opportunities for this sort of problem-solving.

In the same way, we always need to be aware of the children who struggle and support them in the right way. This means identifying and helping them find ways to negotiate the hurdles they encounter, rather than removing the hurdles completely.

There should be no expectation that the children's spelling or grammar will be perfect when they are very young, and not every mistake needs to be pointed out. Apart from correcting their texts in rough before they copy them out, it is better not to put marks in their books. If they have taken care to make their work beautiful, it would be counterproductive to write on it. You can draw their attention to mistakes - if they don't mention them first - when

they show you their books, and suggest corrections, while being sensitive to what each child can manage. You should look at their books daily, preferably together with the child. If this is not possible with larger classes, make sure you do so with every child at least once a week. If work is not finished, a post-it note on the page will alert them; it is important that they see things through.

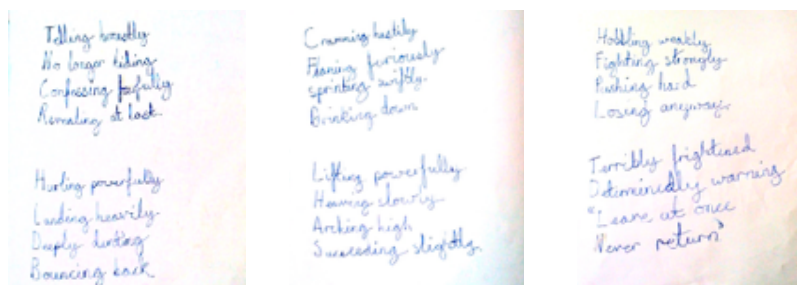
As they get older and more competent in their writing, in Class 3 or 4, for most children, you will usually only have to correct the occasional word. When mistakes are the result of carelessness, or if you know you have corrected the same word two or three times, just underline it and the child will have to work out for himself what the problem is, or look it up; once their reading is fluent you should teach them how to use a dictionary. Children can also correct each other's work, or compose texts together.



A developing relationship with language

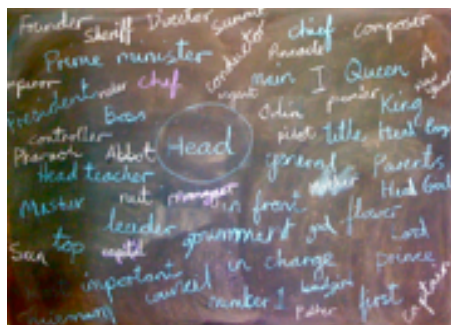
The children's relationship with language will develop through reading, composing their own texts, continuing storytelling and recitation of poetry, as well as through discussion during recall, and conversation. I found that, between Class 2 and Class 5, they wanted to write and produced increasingly long and detailed texts out of the stories without any prompting from me. The ability to summarise and edit will develop later.

When they are ready, we can begin to draw their attention to what already lives in their speech: grammar and punctuation. The exercise below challenged the children in Class 4 to write a poem about a part of the story - Thor and Utgard Loki - using only verbs and adverbs. We spent some time recalling the story and collecting relevant verbs and adverbs first, and they discovered adverbial phrases and prepositions in the process.



From the beginning, when we collected words for a piece of writing I would always write the verbs, nouns, adjectives and adverbs in their own colours. Without my needing to explain it, they began to see the relationship between the words written in red or those in green. After a while, or when I saw that a certain child was beginning to understand what I was doing, I would ask, when someone suggested a word, "What colour should I use to write it?" When we came to look at grammar in Class 4, they already knew what these different kinds of words were, and I only had to name them.

Drawing again on Norse mythology for material, they can learn about verb tenses through the three Norns: Urd speaks of the past; Verdandi of the present and Skuld can tell the future.



Sometimes, in any block, I would put a word in the middle of the blackboard and ask the children to tell me - or come to the board and write for themselves - 'words or phrases that mean the same thing'. This leads them to think about the word in many different ways, and to make connections to associated ideas, so that they come to a deeper understanding of its meaning. 'Head' is from the 'Man and Animal' Main Lesson in Class 4; 'Growth' is from Botany in Class 5.



In the Physics block in Class 6, we used 'Light' and 'Dark'; 'Hot' and 'Cold'. I also brought this as an exercise in a Class 12 Philosophy lesson to illustrate one of Hegel's ideas.



We did something similar in Class 4 to collect words for verses about Niflheim and Muspelheim the lands of ice and fire, and Midgard, the land in between, where human beings live.

The idea that life can only exist in this place of balance between extremes is reflected again in this exercise from a Class 6

Physics block on 'Heat'. This time I asked the children to place words where they thought they belonged between 'hot' and 'cold'. There was a lot of discussion, and they discovered that some words, like 'hate' and 'evil', belong at both extremes. They also added their own words that arose in the discussion.



Also in Class 6 Physics the children were asked to sit in silence for ten minutes and write down everything they could hear. They then tried to find language to describe the sounds as accurately as possible and composed lines of poetry inspired by a section of Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself' called 'Now I will do nothing but listen'. I wrote some of their best lines on the blackboard and each child chose a selection to form his own collaborative poem.

In Class 7, we had a dedicated creative writing block. In the first week, the children sat outside for twenty minutes every morning and wrote down what they noticed, using all of their senses. They then worked for a week on a piece of descriptive writing, receiving daily feedback, learning to edit and to find better words and ways to express what they had perceived. They treated a small natural object - something like a stone, shell or pine cone - in the same way.⁵⁷

As well as daily recitation, which I did in my classes every day from Class 1 to Class 8, you can work with speech through Birthday or Report verses. These are written or chosen for individual children who recite their own verses, alone if possible, once a week, often on the day of the week on which they were born. Sometimes the verses are given each year in the end of year report, and sometimes on the child's birthday.

⁵⁷ A good resource for this block: Dorit Winter, *The Art and Science of Teaching Composition*, (2014) Waldorf publications, New York

Reading

I have called this book 'Teaching Children to Write through Art' because, as I said in the introduction, I believe writing is what needs to be taught, while reading will mostly develop by itself. But reading and writing are interdependent; one cannot exist without the other, so reading comes with writing and we need to think about it. The difference in progress with use and understanding of language, vocabulary, spelling and creativity in writing is very marked between children who read for pleasure and those who don't. Most children who have not learned to think of it as a chore, will become avid readers, and their writing skills and spelling will develop quickly. If not, it will take longer and require more explicit teaching.

As has been said, writing what they know by heart is probably the most useful tool in learning to read, and this can extend to stories. Listening to stories (or recordings of them) until they know them well will enable them to 'read' much longer texts. I don't suggest that you do this at school, but it can be encouraged at home for children who don't naturally take to reading. One of my own children 'learned' the whole of 'Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets' from a recording during the summer at the end of Class 1 and then read the book from cover to cover. After that, he could and did read anything. He had also by-passed the simple, early readers that would not have inspired him to read and would probably have put him off completely. Our children have high expectations of literature because they hear stories every day.

Most children's spoken vocabulary and facility with language will be richer and more complex at six or seven than it was at four or five, so we also have to take this into account. Just because they are new to reading doesn't mean they will be satisfied with the content of readers designed for much younger children. If we begin literacy teaching in the seventh year, we have to meet the higher expectations of older children and give them material that engages their interest.

If we provide good books that the children will enjoy, and a regular quiet space in the school day for them to just read whatever they like, they are much more likely to develop the habit of reading. Ask colleagues for recommendations and create a library in your classroom. The challenge of a series like Lemony Snicket's *Series of Unfortunate Events* appealed to my classes around Class 3, as well as *Harry Potter*, of course – at least the first three books.

For the early stages of reading, the Dr Seuss⁵⁸ books are excellent; they are funny, clever and use repetition, rhythm and rhyme in an enjoyable way. They were written in response to a problem that, in the 1950s, was beginning to arise from a visually-orientated culture of mass entertainment that is infinitely more pervasive now:

Reading has to compete for the interest of children with television, radio, movies, comic books, magazines and sports. Above all with television. The printed word has to compete at every turn with pictures, on both screens and printed pages. This is hard competition because most commonplace pictures demand only the act of looking, while words, to mean anything, demand an act of imagination.⁵⁹

Today, gaming and social media will replace reading for many more children when they reach an age when they can access these things independently. If the books we give our children can't compete with what entertainment technologies offer, they won't want to read. But if their first books inspire their imagination, it's a very small step from Dr Seuss to J. K. Rowling to Philip Pullman, or whatever the prevailing passion is, and suddenly the whole world of literature is open to them. They discover other worlds, other lives, other thoughts, ideas, experiences and imaginations. Crucially for each of them as individuals, as well as for the future of humanity, they experience the world through the eyes, and the words, of their fellow human beings.

⁵⁸ Theodor Geisel, writing as Dr. Seuss, created *The Cat in the Hat* books partly in response to a 1954 Life magazine article by John Hersey entitled "Why Do Students Bog Down on First R? A Local Committee Sheds Light on a National Problem: Reading" that criticised the 'dull' books that were given to primary school children.

⁵⁹ John Hersey, "Why Do Students bog down on First R? A Local Committee Sheds Light on a National Problem: Reading", Life Magazine, 24th May 1954.

The Future

These indications are given at a certain time, and in a certain place. They will not always hold true. Children are influenced by the environment in which they grow up, and in the twenty-first century, they are increasingly aware of the adult world, of adult opinions and attitudes; they are increasingly exposed to adult entertainment, news events, advertising, media of all kinds, and the globalisation of culture inevitably changes the way they see and engage with the world.

I am writing in London in the summer of 2020, while a global pandemic has given me time to stop and reflect. There is no way of knowing if this will end and the world will return to 'normal', or if we will have forgotten what 'normal' is and everything will have changed irrevocably. If you are reading this in 2025 or 2030, or in another part of the world, it is very likely that much of the material I have recommended here is obsolete. However, the basic principles which underlie these recommendations will remain; every class will still be made up of children at a wide – perhaps wider – range of different stages in their development; an approach to education through art will, in principle, still provide what each of them needs; its efficacy in each situation will still depend on the will of creative and imaginative teachers, always and everywhere, to learn to recognise the changing consciousness of the children in their care, their individual interests and motivation, and to create and recreate material for them and equip them to engage whole-heartedly with the new and ever-changing world in which their futures lie.

Some stories to tell and poems for recitation

These stories are mostly from the British Isles. If you are in another part of the world, look for traditional local stories. Serene Fong has collected a list of traditional tales from all over East and South East Asia and India and organised them according to suitability for each class. Her rationale will also help when selecting stories from other places. <https://serenehealingstories.files.wordpress.com/2019/02/developing-a-waldorf-curriculum-in-asia-thesis-serene-fong.pdf>

Traditional stories for Class 1

- Andrew Lang's Fairy books of many colours (stories collected in the British Isles) <https://fairytalez.com>
- Irish fairy Tales by James Stephens
- Traditional Scottish Fairy and Folk Tales <https://fairytalez.com/region/scottish/>
- Traditional Welsh Fairy and Folk Tales <https://fairytalez.com/region/welsh/>
- English Fairy Tales by Joseph Jacobs
- The Frenzied Prince by Padraic Colum (Traditional Irish tales)
- Alan Garner's Book of English fairy Tales
- Collected Folk Tales by Alan Garner
- Grimms Fairy Tales

Stories and chapter books for Class 2

- Aesop's Fables
- Fables by Jean de La Fontaine
- Just So Stories by Rudyard Kipling
- Ten Saints by Eleanor Farjeon
- Elsie Piddock skips in her sleep by Eleanor Farjeon
- The Sea Baby by Eleanor Farjeon
- The Little White Horse by Elizabeth Goudge
- The Princess and the Goblin by George MacDonald
- The Princess and Curdie by George MacDonald
- Little House in the Big Woods by Laura Ingalls Wilder
- The King of Ireland's Son by Padraic Colum

- Animal Stories chosen and arranged and in part rewritten by Walter de la Mare
- The Boy who was Apprenticed to an Enchanter by Padraic Colum
- The Island of the Mighty by Padraic Colum
- Robin of Sherwood by Michael Morpurgo
- A Book of Princesses by Sally Patrick Johnson
- Hans Andersen's Fairy Tales

Poems for Class 1

I recommend the complete poems of Walter de la Mare as an invaluable resource for Classes 1 - 3 and beyond. Also The Faber Book of Children's verse.

By Walter de la Mare

- Tired Tim
- Five Eyes
- Someone
- The Horseman
- The Sea Boy
- The Barber's

By Rose Fyleman

- Mice
- The peacocks sweep the fairies' rooms

By Emily Dickinson

- I'll tell you how the sun rose
- The bee is not afraid of me

Others

- The little birds have burst their shells by James Stevens
- The Cat and the Moon by W.B. Yeats
- Secret Song by Margaret Wise Brown
- A Walk in Spring by K.C. Lart
- The Kind Mousie by Natalie Joan
- The Knight by Molly de Havas
- The Spider by C. T. Owen

Poems for Class 2

By Walter de la Mare

- Then
- Berries
- Off the Ground
- The Lost Shoe
- The Mocking Fairy
- The Ship of Rio
- Sam

By Robert Louis Stevenson

- Windy Nights
- Winter-time

By A. A. Milne

- The King's Breakfast
- Wind on the Hill

By Katherine Mansfield

- Autumn Evening
- Winter

Others

- Fairies by William Allingham
- October's Party by George Cooper
- Summer Stars by Carl Sandburg

Some traditional and anonymous poems and songs for Classes 1&2

Busy

1 busy housekeeper beating the rug
2 busy housekeepers having a hug
3 busy housekeepers washing the socks
4 busy housekeepers winding the clocks
5 busy housekeepers kneading the dough
6 busy housekeepers stubbing their toes
7 busy housekeepers sweeping the floor
8 busy housekeepers closing the door
9 busy housekeepers dusting the shelves
10 busy housekeepers tidying themselves
11 busy housekeepers stirring the stew
12 busy housekeepers with nothing left to do.

Traditional

Digging down

Digging down in deepest dungeon darkness
Gleeful goblins glimpse the glittering gold
Heaving high a hundred heavy hammers
Clash and clang in columned caverns cold.

Lifted lanterns light where long they labour
Shifting shadows shudder where they shine
Ceaselessly they search for seams of silver
Melted moonlight in the mountain mine.

Anon

Three jolly gentlemen

Three jolly gentlemen in coats of red
Rode their horses up to bed
Three jolly gentlemen snored till morn
Their horses chomping the golden corn
Three jolly gentlemen at break of day
Went litter clatter down the stairs
And galloped away.

Anon

The Farmer is sowing the corn,
In the field he is sowing the corn.
The Reaper is cutting the hay
In the meadow she's cutting the hay.
The Gardener is digging the ground,
In the garden she's digging the ground.
The Woodman is chopping a tree,
In the forest he's chopping a tree.
The Fisher is drawing his nets,
From the sea he is drawing his nets.
The builder is laying his bricks,
In the wall he is laying his bricks.
The cobbler is mending my shoes,
In her shop she is mending my shoes.
The miller is grinding the grain,
In the mill he is grinding the grain.
The baker is kneading the dough,
In the kitchen she's kneading the dough.
The mother is rocking her child,
Rocking her child in her arms.

Traditional

Three Little Mice

Three little mice walked into town,
Their coats were grey, their eyes were brown.
Three little mice went down the street,
With woollen slippers upon their feet.
Three little mice sat down to dine
On curranty bread and gooseberry wine.
Three little mice ate on and on
Till every crumb of the bread was gone.
Three little mice, when the feast was done,
Crept home quietly one by one.
Three little mice went straight to bed
And dreamed of crumbly, curranty bread.

Anon

The Key of the Kingdom

This is the key of the kingdom.
In that kingdom there is a city
In that city is a town
In that town there is a street
In that street there winds a lane
In that lane there is a yard
In that yard there stands a house
In that house there waits a room
In that room an empty bed
And on that bed a basket -
A basket of sweet flowers
Of flowers, of flowers
A basket of sweet flowers.
Flowers in a basket
Basket on the bed
Bed in the chamber
Chamber in the house
House in the weedy yard
Yard in the winding lane
Lane in the broad street
Street in the high town
Town in the city
City in the kingdom
This is the key of the kingdom
Of the kingdom, this is the key.

Traditional

Digging

Whenever we take our spades to dig,
A Robin comes along;
He sits upon a little twig
And sings a little song.
Or, if the trees are rather far,
He does not stay alone,
But comes up close to where we are
And bobs upon a stone.

Anon

If I were oh so very tall
I'd walk among the trees
And bend to pick the topmost leaf
As easily as you please.

If I were oh so very small
I'd hide myself away
And creep into a buttercup
To spend the summer's day.

Anon

The Rattlin' Bog (song)

O, ro, the rattlin' bog
The bog down in the valley-o
O, ro, the rattlin' bog
The bog down in the valley-o
Well in the bog there was a hole
A rare hole, and a rattlin' hole
Hole in the bog
And the bog down in the valley-o
O, ro, the rattlin' bog
The bog down in the valley-o
O, ro, the rattlin' bog
The bog down in the valley-o
Well in that hole there was a tree
A rare tree, and a rattlin' tree
Tree in the hole
And the hole in the bog
And the bog down in the valley-o
O, ro, the rattlin' bog
The bog down in the valley-o
O, ro, the rattlin' bog
The bog down in the valley-o
On that tree there was a branch
A rare branch, and a rattlin' branch
Branch on the tree
And the tree in the hole
And the hole in the bog
And the bog down in the valley-o
O, ro, the rattlin' bog

The bog down in the valley-o
 O, ro, the rattlin' bog
 The bog down in the valley-o
 And on that branch there was a twig
 A rare twig, and a rattlin' twig
 Twig on the branch
 And the branch on the tree
 And the tree in the hole
 And the hole in the bog
 And the bog down in the valley-o
 O, ro, the rattlin' bog
 The bog down in the valley-o
 O, ro, the rattlin' bog
 The bog down in the valley-o
 (And so on - leaf on the twig, bug on the leaf, spot on the bug, speck on the
 spot, glint on the speck, as far as you want to go)

Traditional Irish

Listen here (slightly different words): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aLHuu3Ygvns>

Refrain

O ro the rat - tin' bog, the bog down in the val - ley, o
 O ro the rat - tin' bog, the bog down in the val - ley, o
 t And in that bog there was a tree, A rare tree, and a
 rat - tin' tree, And the tree in the bog, and the bog down in the val - ley, o

D.C. after

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