

Title: Developing a Collaborative Interdisciplinary Learning Community to Build the Capacity of Teachers on Evidence-informed Handwriting Teaching

Name: Michelle Bergin, with Annette Hardiman



Contact details: Michelle.bergin2@hse.ie

Relevant key words: Handwriting Teaching; Primary Schools; Capacity Building; Partnership Models of Practice; Shared Learning Community; Interdisciplinary

Summary:

A renewed focus on the importance of handwriting to overall literacy development is reflected in its inclusion in the new national primary language curriculum. The teaching of handwriting has been identified as a core concern of teachers (NCCA, 2014) however a recent consultation report called attention to the limited inclusion of handwriting instruction as a competency within teacher education (NCCA 2014). Research on writing instruction points to the need for explicit systematic teaching methods (Kennedy et al, 2012). Handwriting difficulties are the primary reason for referral to Occupational Therapy for school aged children (Case- Smith, 2014) who often experience lengthy waiting times. A growing body of research advocates for the delivery of more sustainable and equitable models of practice and collaborative working between education and health professionals to address children's handwriting difficulties (Christner, 2015., Missuna et al, 2015). Despite these calls, there has been limited implementation in practice (Patton et al, 2015).

This project aimed to develop a shared learning community to build capacity within schools to support children's handwriting development. The methods used in this project were guided by evidence informed capacity building and partnership models of practice. This required teachers, occupational therapists and educational psychologists to develop a shared understanding of best practice in terms of handwriting development, teaching practices and support strategies. This collaborative learning process involved engagement in different phases of the educational process (Klette, 2010).

The project achieved this objective through:

- The formal establishment of a regional handwriting forum involving an interdisciplinary professional learning community consisting of teachers, occupational therapists and educational psychologists.
- Engagement in a shared learning process applying research skills to review, evaluate, share and learn to engage with relevant international and national research alongside local issues concerning the teaching and learning of handwriting. The forum collaboratively explored best practice instructional and supportive methods to further build the capacity of colleagues also as a means of supporting evidence informed practice. Engagement in formal learning opportunities contributed to the development of a shared learning community.
- Dissemination of this learning using several methods; organisation of an interdisciplinary handwriting conference, development of school handwriting support resources and contributing to the development of in-school coaching workshops.

Evaluation of the forum's shared learning process identified positive findings including a perceived increase in knowledge of handwriting development, an increased ability to apply research to practice, benefits to practice of shared learning opportunities and strengthened inter-professional relationships. These findings reflect recent research describing relationship-building and knowledge translation as the most important distinguishing elements of collaborative practice models (Missiuna et al, 2015). The project identified factors that supported shared learning including organised opportunities, a shared learning space, clear objectives and shared interest topic, leadership, access to expert advice and practice based learning approaches.