Good handwriting is vital to literacy

A recent study has investigated the links between handwriting and other literacy skills in young children, finding that handwriting automaticity, or fluency, predicted writing quality and reading skills a year later.

The researchers warn that a shift to "paperless schools" does not have strong empirical support and that it could potentially have a negative impact on students' literacy.

Dr Anabela Malpique of Murdoch University and associate professor Deborah Pino-Pasternak of University of Canberra conducted the study, which involved 154 students and 24 teachers across seven Perth schools. They wanted to understand the effect handwriting automaticity has on children's later literacy skills.

"A growing body of research argues specific cognitive benefits of handwriting during early childhood, including brain development, working memory, translation of thought-to-script, and overall writing quality and production."

Despite the widespread use of technology and the current digital literacy agenda, handwriting plays a unique and fundamental role in writing development. Anecdotally described as "thinking with a pencil", handwriting involves the integration of visual-perceptual, fine and gross motor skills with cognition

While it might be tempting to dismiss the importance of handwriting as simply cosmetic, handwriting in fact underpins many higher functions of writing.

The researchers note that poor handwriting automaticity hinders vocabulary selection, ideation and revision, while also affecting motivation, writing development and, in turn, academic success.

Automatic letter writing has been found to be the best unique predictor of the writing skills of early developing writers, theoretically supported by the notion that the translation of ideas into written text relies heavily on the writers' ability to retrieve alphabet letters in memory and produce these letter forms efficiently, legibly, and automatically.

Handwriting plays a fundamental role in writing development. (Supplied)

Of particular concern to the researchers were the teaching practices reported. Year 1 students spent less than 50 minutes per day practicing writing, which is the minimum recommended, while across the board there was great variability in the time students spent on writing. Writing time and instruction ranged from 30 to 120 minutes per week.

The researchers also note that Australian teachers may be focusing too much on basic skills rather than teaching writing processes such as planning for writing and learning strategies to revise the quality of their texts.

"This may be problematic since research with primary students suggests that writing instruction in early education should include the teaching of basic writing skills and the teaching of writing processes in the same instructional protocol."

The researchers conducting the research were also assisted by Dr Magda Sofia Roberto, their statistical consultant.

For more information contact Dr Malpique at a.malpique@murdoch.edu.au or associate professor Pino-Pasternak at deborah.pino-pasternak@canberra.edu.au.

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