

Better Writing Leads to Better Writing

Lessons in penmanship and spelling result in improved composition skills.

By Debra Viadero

Adults may wince at painful childhood memories of penmanship lessons and spelling tests. A small but growing number of studies, however, suggest that systematically teaching handwriting and spelling might actually help some students write more and do it better.

“Most kids who are developing as writers are planning their writing as their pen hits the paper,” said Steve Graham, a special education professor at the University of Maryland College Park.

“If you have to switch your attention to figuring out how to spell a word, for example, that disrupts your planning process.”

The new research, which comes out of work by Mr. Graham and others, follows recent decades that saw a de-emphasis on formal spelling and handwriting instruction in the classroom.

A major thrust of the approaches of the past 30 years has been to save such instruction for “teachable moments” and embed it in real writing and reading activities.

But the newer findings suggest that teachers might want to rethink those ideas — at least for the worst spellers and writers in their classes.

The latest study in this body of research is a report slated to be published this year in the *Journal of Educational Psychology* by Mr. Graham and two colleagues, Karen R. Harris and Barbara Fink Chorzempa.

As part of that experiment, the researchers culled 60 grade 2 students with spelling problems from four schools in the Washington area. Half the children got extra lessons in mathematics, and half got the same amount of added instruction in spelling.

At the end of 48 lessons, the children in the second group had improved more than their spelling. They also wrote more fluent, better-constructed sentences and texts than the children who had received extra math lessons.

A caveat here, however. The spelling — but not the writing — benefits held up when the children were tested again six months later.

The study, built on earlier work that Mr. Graham did with Virginia W. Berninger, an educational psychology professor at the University of Washington in Seattle.

As part of that 1998 study, researchers also focused on the poorest spellers from grade 2 classrooms. The 128 children were divided into seven treatment groups and taught various spelling improvement strategies.

While students in several of the groups became better spellers at the end of 24 lessons, the students in only one group also became more fluent writers.

That group was the one that had received instruction in several different strategies.

Both Ms. Berninger and Mr. Graham, in similar kinds of studies involving handwriting, have documented the same phenomenon. Students with poor penmanship who are given handwriting lessons produce better, more fluent writing than counterparts who get no such instruction.

Ms. Berninger emphasized that the kind of handwriting and spelling lessons she has been testing are far different from the traditional drills that adults remember from childhood.

“Whenever we teach handwriting, we teach composing in the same lesson, and the same with spelling and reading,” she said. “We’ve really tried to build on the best contributions of all this research in brain research, process writing, and cognitive process.”

Both experts believe that early and explicit instruction in spelling and penmanship can stave off many problems later on in grade 3 and grade 4 when children tackle more complex writing tasks.

What’s more, they add, educators shouldn’t expect computers to solve all of their students’ “text transcription” problems. Keyboards can be slow going for beginning writers, they note.

Studies also show that computerized spell-checkers fail to catch about half of students’ misspellings.

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