Handwriting Instruction: An Analysis of Perspectives from Three Elementary Teachers

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Abstract

Handwriting is an essential skill for learners, but advancements with technology have greatly altered perceptions towards handwriting and handwriting instruction. This study sought to determine the current state of handwriting through an exploratory analysis of the teaching experiences of three practicing elementary teachers with varying experiences. A qualitative phenomenological research design was utilized that collected data through structured interviews. Analysis of data produced three interconnected themes (School Culture/Team Approach, Handwriting Pedagogy, and Personal/Professional Perspective), which led to implications that reinforced the need for a larger and deeper analysis of handwriting and handwriting instruction among educators.

Throughout history, handwriting has been an essential skill for all learners and children often developed penmanship with the manuscript style of handwriting during their early schooling years (Arnold, 1933). Cursive handwriting has been in existence since early in the 20th century; however, it was originally an important distinction for educated individuals and often reserved solely for ornate purposes (Supon, 2009). Manuscript was the preferred approach for handwriting instruction due to its "simplified style" (Enstrom, 1969, p. 51), and its ability to attend to "the needs of early written expression" and "later situations where exactness is at a premium" (p. 55). Bell (1968) advocated that the manuscript style of handwriting was critically important because it was the style of handwriting used with visual representations (e.g., maps, charts, signs, labels, and graphs) and important written documents.

Manuscript handwriting requires the constant lifting of a writing tool, thereby leading to issues with legibility among older writers (Arnold, 1933). Arnold, and later, Enstrom (1969) advised that once writers develop proficiency with the manuscript handwriting, schools should transition handwriting instruction to focus upon cursive handwriting in order to enable writers to develop legibility, as well as speed and efficiency with handwriting tasks. Schools tend to transition handwriting instruction from manuscript to cursive during later elementary grades (Wallace & Schomar, 1994); however, Armitage and Ratzlaff (1985) maintained that cursive handwriting instruction should not be withheld from students until they master neatness with manuscript. Groff (1960) surmised that the timing during which schools typically transition

handwriting instruction from manuscript to cursive is more likely rooted in tradition rather than students' performance with handwriting.

Most recently, advancements with digital technologies and attention to students' development with 21st century literacies has greatly altered perceptions regarding manuscript and cursive handwriting instruction (Supon, 2009). Supon reported that teachers spend a decreasing amount of instructional time with handwriting instruction, particularly cursive writing. In an effort to develop students' proficiency with 21st century literacies, teachers are now encouraged to supplant writing tasks that were once composed by hand with the integration of digital tools (McAdams, 2013). However, Sheffield (1996) emphasized the importance of maintaining handwriting instruction within schools because (a) handwriting provides a route for information to enter memory through kinesthetic means, (b) writers are able to focus more on thinking beyond skills associated with handwriting, and (c) written documents are often judged by the quality of the writer's handwriting.

Benefits of Handwriting Instruction
Many studies have shown correlations between (a) good handwriting and improved academic performance and (b) the production of quality work and fluency with handwriting (Bennett, 2009). Since handwriting is a fine motor skill, teachers must employ effective instructional techniques for students to consolidate the acquisition of handwriting skills through significant practice (Blazer, 2010). Blazer (2010) contended that when students are taught cursive handwriting in a positive and informative way, they (a) concurrently develop reading, communication, and fine motor skills; (b) demonstrate stronger fluidity of thought in written communication; (c) and have a more efficient way to write. With this in mind, Stainthorp (2006) asserted that a student who is able to write quickly and legibly is more likely to demonstrate cognitive capacity within their written compositions.

Students who use cursive handwriting also tend to receive higher grades (Blazer, 2010). Studies have shown that when students use cursive handwriting on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), they tend to receive higher scores than students who use manuscript handwriting. While handwriting in cursive is important, Blazer (2010) stressed that it is equally important students are able to read cursive handwriting. Otherwise, students may lack the ability to read and interpret critical pieces of literature, such as historical documents.

Current State of Handwriting
Numerous factors have affected the current state of handwriting instruction within schools (Stainthorp, 2006). Due to the rapid growth and reliance with technology, the use of handwriting, particularly cursive handwriting, has diminished (Bennett, 2009). Digital tools, such as the computer are threatening to replace pen and paper. Students' development of keyboarding skills has taken priority over students' development of cursive handwriting skills because typing is viewed as a more relevant and efficient skill than cursive handwriting (Blazer, 2010). Advocates of typing have also maintained that typing allows students to focus upon the planning of writing, proper use of grammar, and the composition of writing, rather than the mechanics of handwriting, such as how to form letters correctly.

Cursive handwriting may also be extremely difficult and problematic for some students, such students who are left-handed, students with special needs, and even students who are

second language learners (Supon, 2009). Since cursive handwriting instruction is minimal, teachers are challenged to meet the needs of students who struggle with development of cursive handwriting skills. According to Bennett (2009), most teachers spend less than 15 minutes a day teaching handwriting skills. Arslan and Ilgin (2010) also reported that many teachers and students feel that handwriting is merely an obligatory curricular component and do not consider it as important as other curricular components, such as reading or math.

In order to teach cursive handwriting effectively, teachers must be skilled with cursive handwriting and have pedagogical understandings about handwriting instruction (Arslan & Ilgin, 2010). For many prospective, preservice teachers enrolled in teacher preparation programs, handwriting pedagogy is a single topic within one three-hour course. In a study conducted with certified elementary teachers, Blazer (2010) reported that only 12% of those surveyed had taken an undergraduate course that addressed how to teach cursive handwriting.

Many researchers have argued that manuscript handwriting is easier to learn than cursive handwriting (Blazer, 2010). These researchers have also contended that the transition from manuscript handwriting to cursive handwriting interferes with students' development of proper handwriting skills. Therefore, in order for students to master any style of handwriting, teachers must provide an appropriate amount of instructional time, as well as time for students to practice handwriting skills. Unfortunately, the current amount of instructional time spent on handwriting instruction is not enough for students to develop proficiency or mastery of handwriting skills. As a result, many students are left to their own devices and develop a hybrid form of handwriting that incorporates both manuscript and cursive elements.

Curricular Requirements for Handwriting
Different standards exist for handwriting at both the national and state levels. At the national level, the Common Core State Standards specify standards for manuscript handwriting regarding legibility in the English Language Arts Standards for kindergarten and first grade (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2014). In Texas, the current English Language Arts Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (ELAR TEKS) specified the following expectations for handwriting:

- Kindergarten: form upper- and lower-case letters legibly using the basic conventions of print (left-to-right and top-to-bottom progression);
- First Grade: form upper- and lower-case letters legibly using the basic conventions of print (left-to-right and top-to-bottom progression), including spacing between words and sentences;
- Second Grade: write legibly leaving appropriate margins for readability;
- Third Grade: write legibly in cursive script with spacing between words in a sentence; and
- Fourth Grade: write legibly by selecting cursive script or manuscript printing as appropriate (Texas Education Agency, 2009).

As a teacher educator and beginning teacher, we wanted to explore the state of handwriting through the perspectives of practicing teachers. We noted the presence of one handwriting expectation in English language arts standards used at a national level by many states, however, it only focused on legibility in kindergarten and first grade. We also noted the

presence of student expectations for handwriting in our state-level English language arts standards, which were much more comprehensive than the Common Core State Standards. However, there are no student expectations articulated for grade levels beyond fourth grade. Although there is much literature regarding the benefits of handwriting instruction (e.g., Bennett, 2009; Blazer, 2010; Stainthorp, 2006), the literature also describes the decline in attention to handwriting instruction due to increased use of technology (Bennett, 2009). The purpose of this study was to explore how practicing teachers address handwriting instruction, as well as how each perceives handwriting instruction both personally and professionally.

Methods

This research study employed a qualitative phenomenological design that collected data from three participants through structured interviews. Due to time constraints, purposive selection of participants was recruited from the professional teacher connections of the authors. The participants each held an active Texas teaching certificate and had a variety of teaching experiences at the elementary level. Selected participants were assigned pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality (i.e., Cathy, Maria, Desiree).

Due to logistical considerations, such as time and location of participants, the authors determined that email would be an efficient medium for data collection. Participants were each sent an electronic copy of the researcher-created Interview Protocol (see Figure 1 below) via email, which consisted of closed- and open-ended questions related to the history of their career in education, their teaching experiences with handwriting instruction, professional insights regarding handwriting and students' application of handwriting, and personal perspectives regarding the state of cursive handwriting.

I.	Describe handwriting instruction throughout your teaching experiences. What styles did you teach (manuscript or cursive)? What methodologies/curricular tools did you use? What were the handwriting expectations for students?
II.	Will you please share your professional insights regarding handwriting and students' application of handwriting in their schoolwork? What styles do students select for writing (manuscript or cursive)? What is the state of handwriting among students?
III.	Will you please share your perspective regarding that state of cursive handwriting? Is teaching/learning cursive handwriting important?

Figure 1: Interview Questions

To ensure reliability and validity further, data analyses entailed the identification and categorization of themes in participants' responses through the following coding techniques as they related to the research questions. Participants' completed Interview Protocols consisting of 308, 255, and 420 words, respectively. Interview Protocols were reviewed, and open coding was used initially to label concepts and categories present in the data. Interview protocols were then

reviewed again and axial coding was used to confirm the accuracy of codes, as well as the connections between them. During axial coding, like codes were grouped together into themes. Finally, codes within each theme were reviewed to identify the presence of any sub-themes.

Findings

There were three participants in this study:

- Cathy - a current kindergarten teacher whose teaching experiences spanned four years: two years in kindergarten, one year in first grade, and one year in second grade.
- Maria - a current fourth grade teacher who has taught fourth grade for the past 13 years.
- Desiree - a current fourth grade teacher whose teaching experiences spanned 20 years: two years in Pre-Kindergarten, three years in second grade, two years in first grade, and thirteen years in fourth grade.

Three themes emerged during analyses of data: (a) School Culture/Team Approach, (b) Handwriting Pedagogy, and (c) Personal/Professional Perspective. These three themes were also interconnected. For example, Cathy identified several specific handwriting skills (Handwriting Pedagogy) as she described approaches of teams at schools of which she was member (School Culture/Team Approach). Although themes sometimes overlapped, the authors deemed it necessary to code themes separately. In keeping with the example described above, Cathy's team experiences are ideal because her team functioned with development of specific handwriting skills as goals for their instruction. However, the authors understand that while teams often have a common approach, their goals may not move students forward in their learning of required knowledge and skills. For instance, a fourth grade team might omit handwriting instruction. This example demonstrates a team approach, but it does not align with the curricular requirements specified in the ELAR TEKS. Therefore, keeping themes separate allowed the authors to preserve all insights provided through collected data.

Theme One: School Culture/Team Approach

Cathy explicitly referred to school culture when she wrote, "Handwriting is important at our school" and later added that a permeating mindset among all stakeholders at the school (i.e., administrators, teachers, and paraprofessionals) was to ensure that "handwriting is where it is readable more or less." Cathy was able to identify a specific goal for handwriting that was accepted and valued by all stakeholders at her school campus.

Similarly, all three participants identified specific team approaches experienced during handwriting instruction with their respective team members. Cathy's kindergarten and first grade team experiences focused upon (a) manuscript handwriting instruction; (b) letter formation; (c) pencil grip; (d) spacing between letters, words, and sentences; (e) writing words; and (f) writing sentences. Cathy clarified that instruction with these skills was appropriate to each grade level and followed a gradual progression of development. Cathy also stated that time was allotted for students to practice handwriting each day.

Desiree's team experiences focused upon specific handwriting styles. Desiree shared that D'Nealian manuscript was used among her team of pre-kindergarten teachers because "it was considered to be the closest to cursive handwriting and would help students move from printing

to cursive more easily." In this same manner, Desiree noted, "2nd graders were expected to learn cursive writing" because "they were expected to use cursive in third grade." Desiree also included that her second grade team taught cursive handwriting with a "handwriting workbook with a set curriculum" and expected their students to "use cursive for all spelling work." On the contrary, Desiree's fourth grade team members did not have a collective preference for style of handwriting. Desiree wrote that students were "encouraged to write legibly" because her fourth grade team wanted "students to be able to focus more on their content of their writing rather than the formation of their writing."

Maria's fourth grade team experiences mirrored those of Desiree's. Maria echoed that the only handwriting expectation for fourth graders was "legibility," and she added that students were "encouraged to use either manuscript or cursive." Maria stated that students were asked to make their selection for handwriting style based upon "the one that is the least time consuming," "offers them the most ease," and was the "most legible."

Theme Two: Handwriting Pedagogy
Analysis of data presented two subthemes for the theme of Handwriting Pedagogy. They were: Knowledge of Handwriting Skills and Specific Pedagogical Techniques.

Knowledge of Handwriting Skills. In Cathy's responses, her knowledge of handwriting skills for students consisted of legibility, proper letter formation, spacing between words and sentences, and appropriate pencil grip. Maria and Desiree both only specified legibility as an essential handwriting skill for students.

Specific Pedagogical Techniques. Cathy described several specific pedagogical components that fostered students' development with handwriting. She stated that handwriting was "practiced on a daily basis . . . with pencils and writing journals." Cathy also shared that handwriting "can be difficult for left-handed students," and she has made accommodations for students who struggled with handwriting, such as providing "pencil grips for students who had a hard time holding their pencils."

Maria wrote, "I have never used classroom instructional time for handwriting." However, she expressed much concern with legibility. She also wrote, "If a student is having a difficult time writing legibly, they are to practice their handwriting at home for homework. When mastery is displayed in the classroom, they no longer are assigned handwriting homework."

Desiree described numerous specific pedagogical techniques for each of the grade levels that she has teaching experience. With prekindergarten students, Desiree shared that she "used a variety of tactile methods often found in Montessori settings, such as shaving cream, sand paper, ands crayons." When teaching this grade level, Desiree also incorporated activities that built students' fine motor skills, such as "building with Legos, molding with play dough, and lacing shoes." Desiree also ensured that "large markers and fat pencils as writing utensils" were available to prekindergarten students. When teaching second grade, Desiree had "cutting activities" to assist students' in building fine motor skills, and she assigned "handwriting practice pages found online for at home practice" with her fourth grade students who "still did not demonstrate a command of fine motor skills."

Theme Three: Personal/Professional Perspective

Cathy voiced several personal and professional perspectives regarding handwriting. She emphasized that handwriting was "important" and believed it was essential for students to be proficient with handwriting skills by the fourth grade due to the requirement of two writing compositions on the state standardized writing assessment. Cathy also shared that over the last couple of years she had "heard complaints from the upper grades" about the lack of legibility with students' handwriting. Although Cathy has never taught cursive writing, she stated, "It is important that cursive writing be taught. At what grade level, I am not sure. Cursive writing is still very much a part of the business world today, and it is important that students and young adults are able to read it."

Maria also voiced several personal and professional perspectives regarding handwriting. She stated, "The only expectation for my students is legibility." Maria also wrote, "With increased pressure to student performance in state testing, there is limited time left for handwriting practice." Maria attributed the legibility of a students' handwriting to "the intrinsic motivation of the individual," but she also noted, "Girls tend to give more attention to handwriting than boys" who "tend to quickly jot things down." Maria does not feel that cursive handwriting instruction is necessary and sees it "becoming archaic" due to "technology."

Desiree's personal and professional perspectives were very similar to those of Maria. She wrote:

> At this time in our culture with the great emphasis on using technology, the need for cursive writing has become an antiquated format. Students' use of a computer keyboard and the speed and accuracy of typing their responses has moved to the forefront for written communication.
>
> With the number of student expectations I am responsible for teaching, using classroom time to practice the skill of cursive handwriting has less importance to me as a classroom teacher. My goal for my students is that they can express their thoughts in a legible manner to be an effective communicator when using paper and pencil.

Implications

The purpose of this study was to explore handwriting instruction through the teaching experiences of three practicing elementary classroom teachers. Three interconnected themes emerged during analyses of data (i.e., School Culture/Team Approach, Handwriting Pedagogy, and Personal/Professional Perspective). Within each theme, the experiences of these teachers have suggested implications for educators and education stakeholders regarding handwriting instruction and point to the need for a more comprehensive study.

Within the theme of School Culture/Team Approach, Cathy referred to the culture within a school. Peterson and Deal (1998) defined school culture as "the underground stream of norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals that has built up over time as people work together, solve problems, and confront challenges" (p. 28). A school's culture is shaped by its leaders (i.e., administrators, teachers, parents) and is very influential towards the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of people within the school. School cultures can be either positive or negative, and fortunately, Cathy has experienced a positive school culture that was supportive of students' handwriting development. Studies have shown that a positive school culture can potentially affect teachers' instructional practices (Hongboontri & Keawkhong, 2014) and students' academic performance (MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2009).

To prevent classroom teachers working in isolation, much literature has also advocated that schools increase collaboration among teachers within teams (Tharp & Gallimore, 1998). Within the theme of School Culture/Team Approach, all three participants described the strong presence of a collaborative mindset among their grade level teaching teams. For example, (a) Cathy articulated specific skills that her kindergarten team focused upon developing, (b) Desiree noted that her prekindergarten grade team used a specific style of manuscript handwriting for a specific purpose, and (c) both Desiree and Maria stated that legibility was the general expectation for students' handwriting among their respective fourth grade teaching teams. Desiree further described how the collaborative teaching efforts of the second grade team with cursive handwriting helped prepare students for the handwriting expectations of the next grade level's team of teachers. Aguilar (2012) affirmed that strong teacher teams are vital to retain and sustain a school's teaching professionals and create an environment that fosters peer learning among colleagues.

Within the theme of Handwriting Pedagogy, two subthemes emerged: Knowledge of Handwriting Skills and Specific Pedagogical Techniques. Each participant expressed specific knowledge of handwriting skills that they focused upon during instruction, and all expressions were aligned with the appropriate ELAR TEKS (Texas Education Agency, 2009). With respect to specific pedagogical techniques, Cathy and Desiree both described several instructional methods and tools they used with their students in prekindergarten, kindergarten, and second grade. This aligns with Graham's (2010) assertion that explicit instruction with handwriting should take place with incidental methods (e.g., providing time for practice, modeling proper techniques) on a frequent basis in order to foster students' development with handwriting. However, Maria and Desiree both noted that handwriting instruction was obsolete at the fourth grade level, although they each made accommodations for students who struggled with handwriting development. Although the handwriting instruction described by all three participants were aligned with corresponding ELAR TEKS, Blazer (2010) contended that the current amount of instructional time spent on handwriting instruction was not enough for students to develop proficiency or mastery of handwriting skills.

Finally, within the theme of Personal/Professional Perspective, Cathy's comments regarding the expectations for legibility with students' handwriting among teachers in the upper elementary grade levels were attuned with Maria's and Desiree's teaching experiences at the fourth grade level. This data suggested that teachers viewed explicit handwriting instruction as an expectation only for teachers in the early elementary grade levels. Hence, students should arrive at fourth grade as legible writers. Interestingly, Cathy stressed the importance of handwriting with both younger and older students, while Desiree and Maria felt that legibility was the only priority among older students. Desiree and Maria also indicated that technical skills for writing, such as keyboarding, were of more significance than learning cursive handwriting, which they referred to as "antiquated" and "archaic."

The findings and implications for this study are not generalizable, and it is strongly recommended that this study be replicated with a larger number of teachers who teach varying grade levels. This study was solely intended to be exploratory and gain initial insights into the current state of handwriting instruction through the elementary grade level teaching experiences of Cathy, Desiree, and Maria. Their perceptions have shown that a much deeper analysis is needed to find a more thorough understanding of handwriting and handwriting instruction among educators.

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