

— THE —
HANDWRITING
WARS

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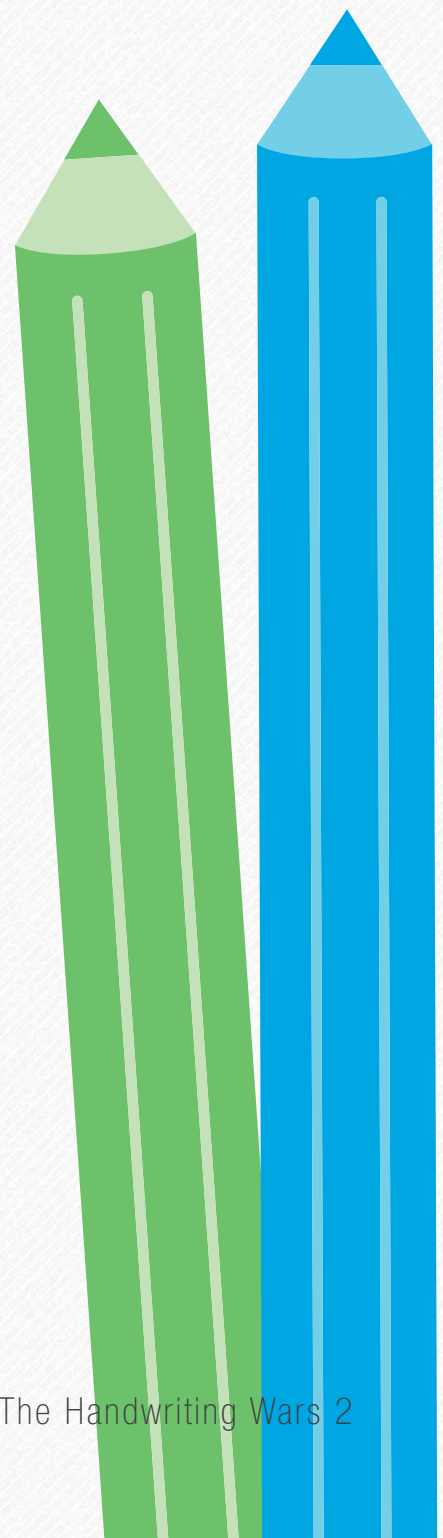
Dr. Kathleen Muzevich teaches reading and language arts methods courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels at Alvernia University. Before becoming a professor, she taught at the elementary, middle school, and high school levels and held various administrative positions, including assistant principal, elementary principal, reading supervisor, and assistant superintendent, during her 28 years in the Pennsylvania public school system. She does private consulting and regularly presents at local, state, and national conferences. Several of her articles on literacy topics have been published in Reading Today and The Reading Teacher. She resides in Reading, PA, with her miniature long-haired dachshund, Moose.



IN THE NOT TOO DISTANT PAST, LITERACY EDUCATORS ACROSS THE COUNTRY WERE HOTLY EMBROILED IN THE “READING WARS,”

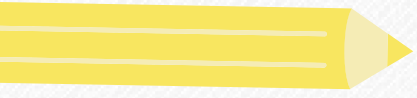
i.e., arguing the merits or lack thereof of the direct and explicit teaching of phonics. While that skirmish has resolved itself, there is concern that educators are now embarking on yet another conflict, the “handwriting wars.” It seems that schools are abandoning the direct and explicit teaching of handwriting in place of keyboarding or they cite a lack of instructional time because of pressures to prepare students for state assessments as cause for doing so.

In January 2012, at a Washington conference, proponents of handwriting instruction participated in what they billed as a “summit” to make the case for continued instruction in handwriting (Zubrzycki, J., 2012). Concern over diminishing instruction in handwriting, which these proponents referred to as a “lost art,” escalated with the adoption of the Common Core Standards (CCS) by all but four states (Zubrzycki, J., 2012). A review of the Common Core Standards reveals that keyboarding, but not handwriting, is mentioned, and printing upper case and lower case letters is listed only for kindergarten and first grade as a language convention for standard English (CCSI, 2010). However, as with phonics, there is a large body of research that supports the teaching of handwriting as a critical literacy foundation skill, some of which was brought forth at the summit.





Children who do not acquire skill with the automaticity of letter formation early on will struggle getting their thoughts on paper (Cahill, 2009).



If not properly taught letter formation, both manuscript and cursive, children will develop their own faulty habits of forming them which will result in “drawing” their letters rather than “writing” them. This then compromises speed letter memory and speed of writing which children need as they progress through the grades (Tompkins, 2009).



Graham & Weintraub (1996) confirm that teachers assign higher grades to students’ papers if the handwriting is legible, regardless of content.



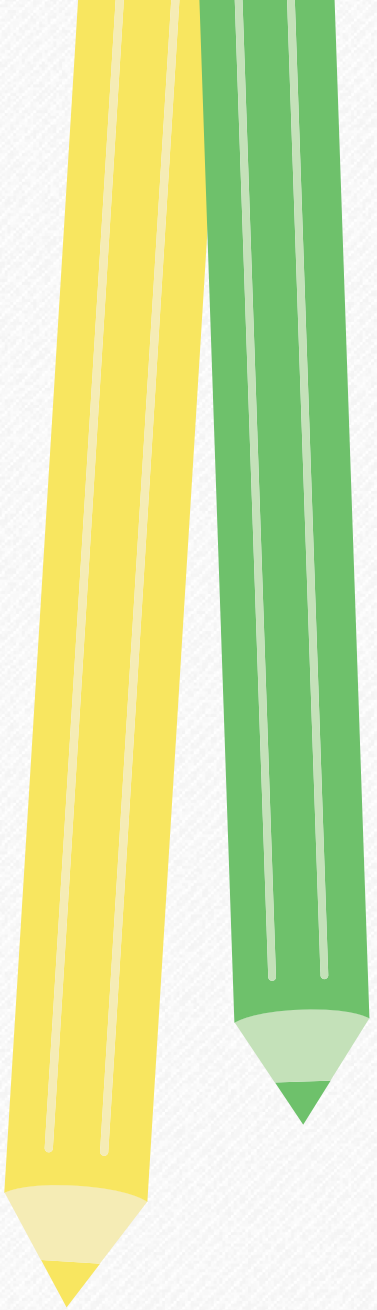
When children have to devote large amounts of working memory to the mechanical skills of letter formation, they have little cognitive capacity left for the generation of ideas and vocabulary selection (Graham, Berninger, Abbott, Abbott, & Whitaker, 1997; Medwell & Wray, 2007).



The physical, kinesthetic process of letter formation enhances composition skills (Berninger, Vaughan, Abbott, Abbott, Rogan, Brooks, Reed, & Graham, 1997).



Second, fourth, and sixth grade students wrote longer sentences and essays, and wrote them with greater speed, when using a pen as compared to keyboarding (Berninger, Abbott, Augsburger, & Garcia, 2009).



From the research, it is clear that elementary teachers and administrators may need to participate in grass roots efforts to ensure that handwriting instruction has its rightful place in the elementary curriculum. Without doing so, educators run the risk of creating another generation of students lacking in a critical foundation skill, i.e., handwriting. Just as children must acquire automaticity with phonics, i.e., letter/sound match, they must also acquire letter memory in order to form their letters with speed and facility. This ability to form letters accurately and efficiently must become so effortless that the skill literally goes “underground” in order to free up working memory space for other thought processes. If children have to expend large amounts of mental energy in the production of letter forms, they will have little energy left to focus their thoughts on the message they wish to convey.

In a literate society, penmanship is a very visible mark of one’s level of literacy and, as with spelling, people are often judged by a lack of skill in this area. Handwriting takes fine motor control and dexterity. Consider, as well, that teaching children the correct way to hold a pencil early on and giving them practice writing within lines may decrease the need for occupational therapy. Even though the Common Core Standards (CCSS, 2010) place minimal emphasis on this foundation skill, it should not prevent schools from adopting a strong stance on the importance of handwriting at all levels and including it as part of daily instruction in all elementary classrooms. There will always be time to do what is important.

SUGGESTIONS FOR RETURNING HANDWRITING INSTRUCTION TO ITS RIGHTFUL PLACE IN THE CURRICULUM INCLUDE:



Provide staff development in the proper techniques and methodology for teaching both manuscript and cursive handwriting for those teachers who need a refresher course.



Engage in conversations with institutions of higher education to insist that pre-service teachers learn how to teach handwriting in their reading/language arts methods courses.



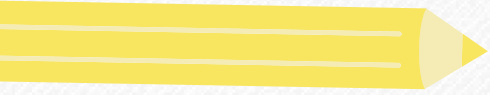
Devote 15-20 minutes daily to handwriting instruction that focuses on modeling for children the correct way to form the basic strokes for manuscript (straight lines and circles) and cursive (over curves, under curves, and slant lines) that make up the letters.



Provide distributive and cumulative practice by having children write frequently in all content areas, as well as engage in repeated writings of short sentences or paragraphs to gain writing fluency, in much the same way children do repeated readings of the same passage to gain reading fluency.



Give children immediate, corrective feedback and engage them in self-reflection and evaluation of their own letter formations.



Inform parents about the importance of handwriting and enlist their support in insisting that this skill remain in the curriculum.



Do teach keyboarding; children need facility with this skill, as well, but do so after they have gained considerable control over written letter formation.

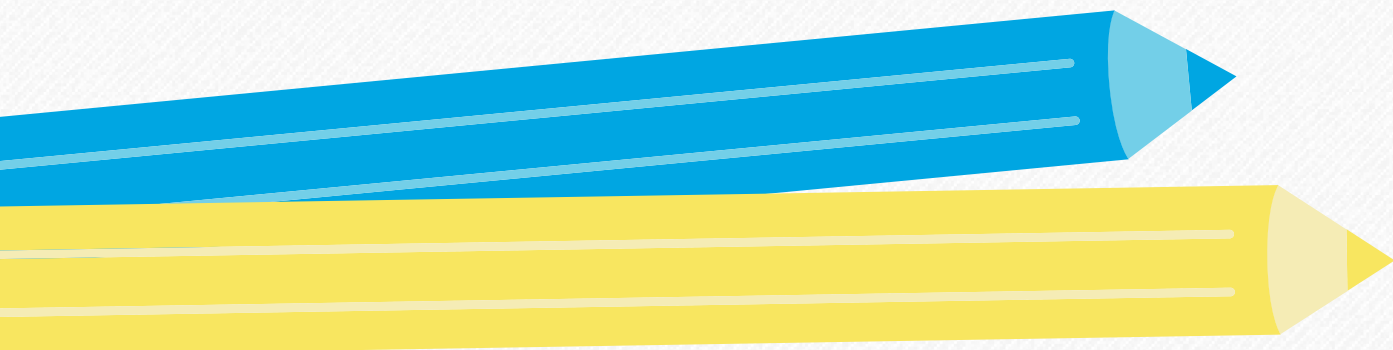


Consider replacing some whiteboards in the classroom with traditional slate chalkboards. Because of the slippery surfaces of white boards and Smart Boards, precision and control of letter formation is often lost when writing on these surfaces. The friction of chalk on slate produces a much better product if using these tools for modeling and practice.

TEACHING HANDWRITING VERSUS KEYBOARDING SHOULD NOT BE AN ALL OR NOTHING PROPOSITION.

Children need skill and facility with both. Students who must expend considerable mental effort to “hunt and peck” for letters on a keyboard will also have little working memory remaining for the ideas they wish to convey in their written message. Even if they do have knowledge of the keyboard layout due to texting, texting requires skilled thumbs rather than finger dexterity with all ten digits, and text messages are often short or written with acronyms, e.g., LOL for laughing out loud. Additionally, text messages are frequently lacking in proper capitalization, punctuation, spelling, and sentence structure. And, handwriting instruction also includes the proper formation of numbers. In most elementary classrooms, children are still required to complete math problems using pencil and paper.

Because there is so much research available regarding the importance of handwriting as a critical foundation skill, as well as how it contributes to literacy development, it should not be ignored. Literacy educators can do much to prevent the “handwriting wars” from escalating by returning this lost art to its rightful place in the elementary curriculum so that it includes a balance of both handwriting and keyboarding instruction.



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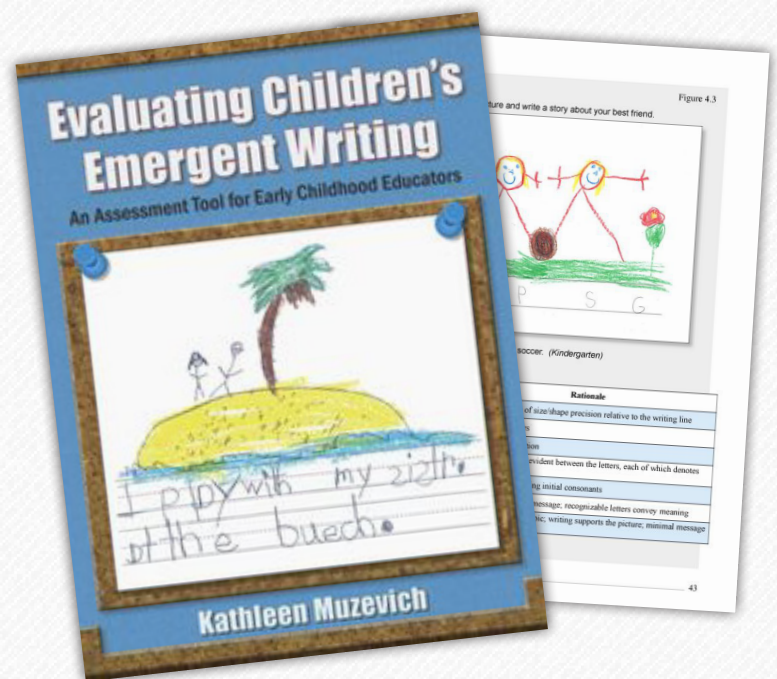
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