

## **The Handwriting of the School Child**

**<sup>1</sup>Dr. Dotsey Nelson Monday & <sup>2</sup>Dr. David Ackah,**

*<sup>1</sup>Head of Research Development & <sup>2</sup>President/Executive Director,*

*Institute of Project Management Professionals - IPMP*

*Email: [drdavidackah@gmail.com](mailto:drdavidackah@gmail.com) & [nelsonmonday@gmail.com](mailto:nelsonmonday@gmail.com)*

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The handwriting of any literate is as indispensable as the writer himself. The school children are often the first class of people to be engaged with writing exercises. They are usually taken through it with Beginner Lessons of 'scribbling', 'stroking', 'curving', etc. at their early stage in the Pre-School lessons. This tradition which has been known for centuries is gradually fading away into oblivion with the advent of computer printing and other scientific innovations which are being designed to suit written communication and of course replace and terminate the handwriting culture. This electronic means of printing (writing) is however not in any way a progression on the child's cognitive performance in the aspect of writing; rather it is a steep regression.

The child's brain cortex where activity is reinforced through the writing process now becomes redundant or less active as a result of disconnect between the brain faculty and the conscious activity of the hand which is no longer at the moment engaged in drawing of the various shapes of the writing symbols. Now the computer keys occupy the position of the work which ought to have been carried out by both the hand and the brain in the writing-exercise. In developing countries in Africa for example, many elementary schools have found the modern devices as an object of excuse for not adopting the traditional writing in their school curriculum. 'We are in a modern age' they say. So everybody wants to keep pace with what is in vogue. Considering the origin of handwriting, its evolutionary continuum, and the expositions of the relentless research work going on around the globe, experts have been able to deduce the inevitableness of the act of writing which is nearly being wrenched out of the bare hands of the promising child. These assertions may prompt us to ask some questions:

What is the origin of handwriting?

How did it develop to the level it has today? What scientific effect has the act of handwriting on the child that its discourse becomes so paramount? What is the adverse effect of the use of computer key boards in place of the handwriting on the child? How can teachers and parents rescue the children from this dilemma?

What is the origin of handwriting? Handwriting had begun in ancient civilization. The appropriate means for storing information order than the predominant verbal communication transcended simple drawings to a standardized system known as Pictograph, setting the pace for modern handwriting dating back to cultures like: the Sumerian, the Egyptian and the Kanji Chinese which were predominantly notable for the writing systems such as cuneiform that was developed around 3000 BC, hieroglyphs around 2800 BC and the Precursor around 1800 BC respectively. These innovations did not die with their inventors at their demise. A lot of improvements have taken place over the centuries and decades.

The evolution of handwriting continued from one form of writing to another. The Sumerian Cuneiform, which means wedge-shaped (in Latin), evolved into Ideographs, where a sign represented an idea. The Egyptian hieroglyphs developed to syllabic system. After the hieroglyphs, came the two cursive scripts, the hieratic (among the religious group) and demotic scripts (among other people) around 1500 BC and 500 BC. Later the Alphabet which at that time consisted of 22 vowels-less letters was developed by the Phoenicians. The Greeks eventually improved upon the arrangement of the Phoenicians alphabet by adding vowels to it and dropping some consonants. In the eighth century, the Capital Greek letter was developed whilst the lower case letter came up in the middle age. The trend continued until around 400 AD, the era of Celtic writing style otherwise known as the uncials in which letters were written within 1-inch square guides.

This was immensely adopted by the Christians at the period in copying and distribution of the Bible. The Greek alphabet became prominent as it was employed by the Romans in developing Latin writing by the fourth century AD. The Gothic writing (also known as black letter script), which evolved from Carolingian minuscule was later developed and gained dominance over others from 1200 AD until 1600 AD. Through this, the cursive form of writing, known as Cursive Humanistic, sprang up and was used throughout Europe. At this age, writing surface has moved from the Romans invention surfaces of stone tablet, clay, metal and papyrus to copy books. The development of Chinese and the Japanese writing systems were noticeable in East Asia. The Japanese writing developed from the Chinese characters and Chinese script called Kanji. In the nineteenth century, Penmanship which used to be taught earlier by the master penmen to adults as professional skills had been inculcated into the curriculum in American schools.

## **II. THE SCIENTIFIC EFFECT OF THE ACT OF HANDWRITING ON THE CHILD**

The scientific effect of the act of handwriting on a child or any other writer cannot be over emphasized. Researchers are discovering that writing by hand is more than just a way to communicate. Some physicians are even recommending that “handwriting could be a good cognitive exercise for baby boomers working to keep their minds sharp as they age”. Experts like Psychiatrists, Psychotherapists, Doctors, Anthropologists, Certified Nurses, Criminologists, Counselors, Qualified Detectives, Managers, Specialists in Human Resources, Teachers, Educators, Judicial expert’s analysts, etc are increasingly researching into this aspect for more latent information. Few years ago, Dr Derrick in India alluded to an experiment that the index finger which is used mostly when writing is the main connector of the blood flow stream system. Invariably the movement of the finger during writing activity has a relative effect on the writer.

Again, another study revealed that during writing, the multiple joints in the hand, the wrist, elbow, and shoulder undergo motor coordination. In the course of persistent practice, the handwriting becomes greatly automated through motor programmes stored in the motor memory. An expert once wrote in an article for parents and kids, “We write the way we think. It is really brain writing.”(Bill Hawatt, PhD Psychology).He continued, few simple adjustments in handwriting can help a child become more focused and organized, increase his memory and gain self – esteem. The following personalities have paid a significant attention to children’s handwriting for its inevitable role in them and the unborn generation: Professor Emeritus at Monterey Peninsula College and a Senator of the Academy of Arts and Sciences; Luxemburg, a professional Lecturer, author and consultant to management. “Researchers are finding that writing by hand is more than just a way to communicate,” Writes Gwendolyn Bounds for the Wall Street Journal “The practice helps with learning letters and shapes, can improve idea composition and expression, and may aid fine motor development.”

Steve Graham, professor of education at Vanderbilt University cites several studies indicating that good handwriting can take a generic classroom test score from the 50th percentile to the 84th percentile, while bad penmanship could tank it to the 16.th Over the years I have closely observed in my previous pupils that different children of high intelligence write in a particular way while different children of low intelligence write in another way. I have personally found from my persistent checks as I grew from the elementary school age when I was dependent up to my graduate hierarchy of self-dependence; that my handwriting, coupled with my signature change in form (the shape or angle of the written symbol), intensity (the pressure of the hand reflected by the ink flow) and altimetry (the height occupied by the written symbols) as I moved from one level of self-development and achievement to another.

This may not be your own case. Some individuals have been able to maintain a particular hand or handwriting style over a long period of time, which is also as a result of certain scientific factors that I would not be able to expound within the scope of this subject. Now look at this; while I was growing up in my early school age, at first I tried to copy my father’s signature but I later on had to drop it and developed mine. Something scientifically truly was latent and responsible for this behaviour at that time. I took a critical look at two groups of children in the classroom- the slow writer and the fast writer. Many in the past and even now have thought that a slow writer is a poor or dullard - pupil while a fast writer is a brilliant pupil but this has not always been the case.

A slow writer could be very brainy as much as, and even more than a fast writer. The speed at which the child writes is a reflection of the thinking and the learning culture of the child. That is, a slow thinker or a fast thinker. Both of

them can achieve the same result but may be at different times and with different methods. When a class test was conducted in some elementary schools between the fast writers and the slow writers, it was discovered that most of the fast writers completed before schedule while the slow writers were behind schedule. The result of the assessment showed that some of those who completed their work earlier made mistakes but had the working guide correctly stated while most of those behind schedule could not finish the exercise but were also able to state the working guide correctly. In a subsequent contest where the slow writers were allowed more time to work with it was found that most of them completed at the stipulated time and got the same answers as the fast writers.' In conclusion, the two groups could achieve the same result but at different times. We could be tempted to believe also that if these two groups of competitors were taught to use a machine, like the computer, for the task it would not be a surprise to record a keen competition between them as the computer may complement the weaknesses of the challenged learner.

However, the adverse effect of the use of computer key boards in place of the handwriting on the child is quite grave and enormous. While not disputing the innumerable benefits of the advent of computer as a technological advancement around the globe, we also need to expatiate on the demerits it is towing on our children and the educational sector. In one of my GTV Breakfast Show interviews-The Effect of Computers on the Handwriting of Children, I tried to stress on this aspect of the subject of a child's writing. My disposition was that "the work which could have been done by the brain of the child during writing is being done by the computer machine, thereby rendering the brain performance of the child for that task redundant. In other words it appears as if the thinking is being done by the machine instead of the child." This in a way is not the best for the yet developing child because, it implies that much attention, skills and development has been shifted to the machine which in this case is the child's helper and without the machine, no work would seem to had been done.

In fact I have discovered from my teaching experience that students who are so glued to the computer find difficulty in the spelling of words which are easily mastered by children in the elementary school. Why is this so? There is much reliance on the computer by the student for correction of spelling errors, of words which naturally could have been committed to memory. With the invention of the social media where Facebook, WhatsApp and others have gained the attention of the youths, the correct words' spellings are gradually eroding away for SMS versions among school children, and you could see things like these in their books: "cam/com" for 'come'; "fon" for 'phone'; "haus" for 'house'; "skul" for 'school'; "bred" for 'bread'; "cista" for 'sister' and so on. This alone is a war for teachers and educationists to combat. Again, students are beginning to lose interest in the writing of essays during English tests. They are addicted to 'googling' almost every topic from their phones, and also feel bored copying them into their books. There are several occasions where school children only copy works from the computer verbatim without even editing to suit the purpose at hand. This again is what I call total transference of brainwork to machine.

### **III. THE LOST ART OF HANDWRITING AND THE WAY FORWARD**

Some experts recently have made comments from their findings that:"The lost art of handwriting is a huge loss-in more ways than one. In today's modern world, which is over run by quick communication capabilities-emails, text, instant messages, group chats, social media posts and the list go on and on; it is rare to find good-old-fashioned handwritten communication. We don't even have to jot ourselves a quick reminder or manually add things to our calendar anymore. We have all but completely eliminated the art of handwriting."(Denise Hill). 'The art of handwritten notes has fallen short in today's quick-and-easy method of communication. Text messaging and social media messaging has numbed the excitement and personalization of conveying that social response -It's all too easy and sterile with no real sense and thoughtfulness."(Jenny Marchal).What is left is 'brain redundancy'- a state of effortlessness. Let us ask this question. Suppose there were no machines or they all developed fault at the most needful hour of the dependent child, will the 'task-less brain' in the erstwhile activity be very effective? Of course not! An experiment carried out on a basic school children in different classes some few years ago in order to compare the correlation of a child's confidence with his writing ability in an English class revealed that those children who were sure of what they were writing, wrote their letters boldly and clearly, while those who had doubts wrote with some of their letters fading and inconsistent with disorderly rhythm. This infers that there is a very important cognitive role of the handwriting in the learning activity of the child.

The rescue of children from this dilemma is a work for both parents and teachers. Parents should encourage their children to write at home. They should provide for their children all necessary writing materials that are helpful to them both at home and at school. Teachers on the other hand should take writing lessons very seriously and follow up on their students' performance in the subjects. Dictation and written composition should not be taken with levity. The computer type-writing which is also important should not outweigh that of the handwriting. Above all, stake-holders have a great role to play in encouraging the schools if this dream will be a reality.

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