

Handwriting in Florida's Public Schools

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Background

Handwriting is a basic writing skill which has received less attention by educators than basic skills in the areas of reading and mathematics. Several surveys of practices in the teaching of handwriting have been conducted over the past forty years. These surveys have investigated three main areas of concern: the adoption of published programs of handwriting instruction, the question of when formal handwriting instruction should begin, and the place in the curriculum for the transition from manuscript to cursive writing.

The response of the first concern has been that most school districts use a formal, published program to teach handwriting. An early survey of public and private schools in large cities showed that 65.4 percent of the schools used commercially prepared materials to teach handwriting (Polkinghorn, 1946). In a survey of 680 school districts in four midwestern states, King (1961) found that 70 percent reported using formal handwriting programs. Fourteen commercial programs were used, but two provided 89 percent of the materials. A survey in the state of Wisconsin at about the same time found 82 percent of the districts surveyed using a total of 19 commercially published systems (Herrick and Okada, 1963). All of the schools in Monmouth County, New Jersey followed planned commercial programs (Soltis, 1963). A more recent national survey yielding over 1000 responses found 83 percent of the supervisors surveyed reporting the use of

commercial programs (Barbe, 1976). Other writers have consistently reported that published systems are used in a majority of schools (Ahrens, 1971; Anderson, 1975; Powell, 1976). Zaner-Bloser has consistently been the most widely used system (Polkinghorn, 1946; Soltis, 1963).

A second question asked by surveys pertains to when formal instruction in handwriting begins. Polkinghorn (1946) found that 93 percent of the schools surveyed began instruction in the first grade. Internationally, formal handwriting instruction began in the first grade of primary school, although exceptions, such as Siam, began earlier (International Conference on Public Education, 1948).

More recently, Soltis (1963) found that 87 percent of the Monmouth County schools began formal instruction by the latter part of grade one. Similarly, Herrick and Okada (1963) reported that most schools started formal instruction at grade one. Barbe (1976), however, discovered that only 44 percent of his national sample had a readiness program prior to formal instruction in handwriting. Recent articles in the professional literature report that kindergarteners and preschoolers can learn to write (Neidermezer, 1973; Wright, 1975).

A third area of investigation has been the time for the transition from manuscript to cursive. Every survey has found that schools tend to teach manuscript first followed by cursive at the end of year two or the beginning of year three (Arnold, 1933; Polkinghorn, 1946; Hildreth, 1960; Herrick and Okada, 1963; Soltis, 1963; Anderson, 1965; Anderson, 1968; Huitt, 1972). However, the percentage of schools fitting this model varied among the surveys. Fifty percent reported a transition at this time in one study (Polkinghorn, 1946), 70 percent in another (Herrick and Okada, 1963), and 95 percent in a third survey (Soltis, 1963).

Only two studies explored the reasons which respondents gave for making the transition when they did. The experience of teachers was the most common

reason, followed by personal preference, research of others, teachers' own research, and parental pressure in the Polkinghorn study (1946). Barbe's supervisors reported student readiness as the most common reason (1976). Other writers attribute the transition time to tradition (Anderson, 1968; Ahrens, 1971).

As can be seen from the preceding review, there have been surveys at all levels (International Conference on Public Education, 1948), national (Piggot, 1958; Freeman, 1946; Polkinghorn, 1946; Herrick and Okada, 1963; Barbe, 1976), regional (King, 1961), county (Soltis, 1963), and city (How, 1964). No study has reported a survey undertaken in the southeast or in the state of Florida.

At present, there is renewed interest in the teaching of basis skills in Florida. Concern is begin expressed over the ways in which reading, writing, and arithmetic are being taught. Statewide testing programs are being adopted and minimal competence levels are being established for promotion from one grade to another. At times like these when goals are being established statewide and curricular recommendations are being made to teachers and school districts, it is helpful to know how the basic skills are currently being taught in our public schools. This study sought to determine how handwriting is being taught in Florida's public schools.

Procedures

In the spring of 1977 a seven item survey was developed to investigate current handwriting practices in Florida's public schools. The questionnaire covered the three main areas of focus which the majority of prior surveys had explored: published writing programs, the beginning of formal instruction, and the transition from manuscript to cursive. It drew heavily from the Barbe survey of 1974 (Barbe, 1976). Space was provided on the back of the form for comments. Figure 1 shows the questions asked in the survey.

Figure 1

QUESTIONS ASKED ON THE FLORIDA SURVEY

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1. Does your school district use a published system for teaching handwriting? If yes, which one? _____
- _____ Yes _____ in all classes
_____ in most classes
_____ in a few classes
- _____ No
2. Do the kindergarten classes in your county have a pre-writing skills program?
- _____ Yes _____ in all classes
_____ in most classes
_____ in a few classes
- _____ No
3. Do the kindergarten teachers in your county formally teach children how to write?
- _____ Yes _____ in all classes
_____ in most classes
_____ in a few classes
- _____ No
4. Do any of your schools introduce cursive instead of manuscript as the beginning method of handwriting?
- _____ Yes _____ in all classes
_____ in most classes
_____ in a few classes
- _____ No
5. At what grade do the students in your county make the transition from manuscript to cursive? (If this answer varies from class to class, place the grade in which the transition is usually made but indicate variation in comment section.)
- _____ Grade
Comment:
6. Why did you choose this particular grade level for the transition?
- _____ Research indicated this was the most appropriate time.
_____ This the the "traditional" time for the transition.
_____ Student readiness
_____ Administrative decision
_____ Other
Comment:
7. If research provided the basis for your decision in choosing this grade level for the transition, please cite the research used.

A questionnaire and a stamped, self-addressed envelop for return of the questionnaire were mailed to each county school district in the state of Florida in April, 1977. Fifty-five (82 percent) of the 67 counties responded, representing a larger response than any of the prior studies has reported. For example, Herrick and Okada received a 22 percent response nationally and a 70 percent response on their earlier study in Wisconsin (Herrick and Okada, 1963), and Freeman (1946) and Polkinghorn (1946) each received a 70 percent response. Only one out of the top 26 counties in population did not return the form, while several of the less populous counties failed to respond. The findings, therefore, represent the more populous counties in Florida, and, hence, the majority of pupils in Florida's schools.

The forms were completed by individuals holding 29 different titles. The highest percentage (36 percent) came from elementary supervisors or directors. Since supervisors and not teachers completed the questionnaire, the results indicate how supervisors perceive handwriting to be taught in their school systems and not necessarily how handwriting is being taught. The same is true for each of the other studies reported in the review.

Published Systems

The first question asked, "Does your school district use a published system for teaching handwriting? If yes, which one?"

Forty-nine counties (89 percent) reported using a published system in at least some classrooms. Sixteen (20 percent) used the published system in all classes; 24 (44 percent) used the system in most classes; one (2 percent) used it in only a few classes. Eight (15 percent) did not identify how widespread was the use of published systems. In six counties (11 percent) there was no countywide published system for teaching handwriting being used.

Table 1 shows which published handwriting materials are used in Florida counties. Clearly, Zaner-Bloser is the dominant system used if a district has an adopted series. Other writing systems, when used, tend to be supplemental to Zaner-Bloser.

Kindergarten Programs

The next two questions focused on the introduction of beginning writing instruction and any prewriting instruction to prepare children for learning to write. Responses to the question, "Do the kindergarten classes in your county have a prewriting skills program?" appear in Table 4. Almost all counties responding (47 to 70 percent) replied that they did in at least some of their classes. Twenty-eight counties (42 percent) reported a prewriting skills program in all kindergarten classes. A program existed in most classes in 14 counties (21 percent) and in a few classes in three counties (4 percent). Two counties did not specify how many kindergarten classes had a prewriting skills program. In eight counties (12 percent) no prewriting skills program was reported.

We asked if kindergarten teachers in each county taught children how to write. Results can be seen on Table 3.

A majority of counties reported that handwriting was taught to kindergarten children (42 counties or 61 percent). Formal handwriting was reported as taught in all kindergarten classes of 13 counties (21 percent), in most classes of 16 counties (24 percent), in a few classes of eight counties (12 percent) and in an unidentified number of classes in three counties (4 percent). The remaining 14 counties (21 percent) replied that their kindergarten teachers did not formally teach handwriting.

Three counties indicated that they had no prewriting skills program and no formal writing program in kindergarten. Five reported to have formal writing, but no writing readiness. In 11 counties there was a prewriting program only.

Table 1

PUBLISHED HANDWRITING MATERIALS USED IN
FLORIDA'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Published Systems	Number of Counties ^a
Zaner-Bloser	23
Bobbs Merrill	4
Palmer	4
Steck Vaughn	1
Open Court	1
Scott Foresman	1
Continental Press	1
Noble and Noble	1
Pierce McLeod	1
Lippincott	1
Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich	1

^a Some counties listed more than one system.

TABLE 2
KINDERGARTENS WITH PREWRITING SKILLS PROGRAMS

Skills Program	Percent of Counties
In All Classes	42%
In Most Classes	21%
In Few Classes	4%
Pre-Writing Skills Program But No. Classes Not Given	3%
No Pre-Writing Skills Program	12%
Information Not Available	18%

TABLE 3
KINDERGARTEN CHILDREN TAUGHT HOW TO WRITE

Skills Program	Percent of Counties
In All Classes	21%
In Most Classess	24%
In a Few Classes	12%
Formal Writing, But No. of Classes Not Given	4%
Not Taught	21%
Information Not Available	18%

Manuscript to Cursive

The third section of the questionnaire asked the degree to which manuscript and cursive were taught and at which grade levels. Only one county reported that cursive was introduced initially instead of manuscript. All other reporting counties introduced manuscript before cursive.

Table 4 shows the grade levels in which counties make the transition from manuscript to cursive. Five counties make the transition in second grade, 21 make the transition in third grade and the remaining 29 make the transition in both grades.

When asked why the decision to make the transition at that particular grade level had been made, some counties listed more than one reason. Over one-half (31 counties or 56 percent) cited student readiness as the reason for the transition being at the particular grade level. Twenty-two counties (40 percent) stated that this was the "traditional" time for transition. Research was checked as a reason by eight counties (15 percent) and five (9 percent) claimed it was an administrative decision. Three counties gave no reasons for their decision.

Discussion

These findings can be compared with other studies of practices in the teaching of handwriting, especially with the Barbe national study which was conducted in the spring of 1974.

The use of formal, published systems to teach handwriting seems to be slightly more prevalent in Florida (89 percent) than nationally (83 percent according to Barbe in 1974 and 82 percent according to Herrick and Okada in 1963). Barbe cautions, in his article, that supervisors are more likely to respond in terms of what they would like to see happening rather than what is actually happening. Our evidence would support Barbe's theory, especially since only 71 percent of the respondents named the published materials used and many of that

Table 4

GRADE LEVEL FOR TRANSITION TO CURSIVE

Grade Level	Number of Counties
2	5
Usually 2	6
2 or 3	7
Usually 3	16
3	21

group used several systems. Zaner-Bloser is the predominant program in Florida, a similar finding to that of Soltis (1963) and Polkinghorn, (1946).

Curriculum planners need to be aware of the widespread use of commercial programs, especially Zaner-Bloser. Decisions regarding competency levels or goals for instruction probably ought to be made in consultation with commercial publishers. Teachers and administrators need a rationale and strategy for deviating from an entrenched tradition.

The most noticeable differences between the Florida survey results and all of the previous survey findings pertain to initial instruction in handwriting. Only 44 percent of the national sample (Barbe, 1976) reported having a readiness for writing program, compared with Florida's 70 percent. Prewriting skills appear to have been recognized as important by more Florida school districts than by districts in the rest of the nation. However, as Barbe noted, kindergarten classes, particularly, are vulnerable to the push toward basic skills. No longer does a readiness program centered around play exist in most kindergarten classrooms. Rather, kindergartens are becoming miniature first grades. Sixty-one percent of Florida's counties reported formal handwriting instruction in kindergarten; five counties reported teaching only writing and not prewriting skills. No study prior to Barbe's mentioned teaching handwriting prior to first grade. We share Dr. Barbe's concern that handwriting instruction is being taught formally to too many youngsters before they have acquired the necessary physical, fine-motor coordination.

The transition from manuscript to cursive at the end of second grade and the beginning of the third grade appears in all of the studies. Florida teachers tend to help children make the transition at slightly older ages than those in the Barbe sample. Only 20 percent of Florida's districts usually make the transition at second grade, though many others report some classes in their districts make

the transition in the second grade. Nationally, 33.5 percent make the transition at the end of second grade (Barbe, 1976). In Florida 67 percent usually make the transition in the third grade compared with 47 percent nationally (Barbe, 1976).

More Florida supervisors (56 percent) listed student readiness as a factor influencing the decision of when to make the transfer. The national sample had 40 percent of the supervisors listing readiness (Barbe, 1976). It is somewhat surprising that so few Florida school districts (only 8) listed research as an influential factor in deciding when to make the transition. In 1946 research was a far more common reason for this curricular decision (25 percent listed research of others and 37 percent listed their own research) (Polkinghorn, 1946). The only Florida county which had read extensively in the research literature was the one county which uses cursive for initial handwriting instruction.

It should be a cause for concern that although the quantity of research data in handwriting has increased since 1946, schools in Florida are not making use of this research knowledge.

Although specific issues in the teaching of handwriting have not received an abundant amount of attention from educational researchers, there have been some studies which could benefit districts as they make decisions regarding their curriculum and methods. It is recommended that districts (a) make certain that there is a professional on their staff who is familiar with the research literature and who can provide leadership in curriculum and instruction in handwriting; and (b) conduct research studies in the area of handwriting to help determine the most successful ways of helping children become better and more fluent writers.

It is recommended that the Florida Department of Education look at both current practices in the state of Florida and at the research literature before mandating such criteria as minimum competence requirements at each grade level. The Department of Education should study the impact of its policies. For

example, has the Florida statewide testing program in basic skills resulted in formal instruction in basic skills at earlier ages? The trend toward teaching formal handwriting skills in kindergarten, especially to children lacking prewriting skills, is of particular concern.

Youngsters who are taught letter formation before they are ready to manipulate a pencil are likely to compensate for their lack of readiness using strategies which will make them either slow writers or illegible writers when they are older. Skipping over the writing readiness skills which were an integral part of the play oriented kindergarten, could contribute to frustration and poor writing skills for many youngsters.

As is typical of questionnaire surveys, the respondents report what they believe to be occurring. Their responses may not actually represent what is happening in their elementary schools for a number of reasons. The individual reporting is not likely to be thoroughly familiar with handwriting instruction procedures in every classroom in the county. Second, the questionnaire may have been completed in haste, without much thought given to the responses. Third, a question on the form could have been misinterpreted. Taking all of these possibilities for error into consideration, this study should be viewed as only an approximate summary of handwriting practices in Florida's public schools.

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