

A RESEARCH INTO WRITING DIFFICULTIES FACED BY BASIC PUPILS AT ST. PETER'S R/C PRIMARY SCHOOL IN GHANA

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ABSTRACT

This study was carried out to assist pupils in St. Peter's R/C Primary School to improve upon their handwriting. Thirty-three pupils were selected for the study. Interviews and their responses were analysed. Observation and test was also conducted to collect data from pupils. Interventions which were put in place were. Firstly, weekly activities in teaching handwriting were put in place which was supervised by the researcher. The work was marked and scored. Again, test items were administered and those who performed below average were given the needed attention. Moreover, it was recommended that, in teaching handwriting, teachers should employ different approaches, techniques and use of varied models in teaching and learning of handwriting especially at the primary level.

Keywords: Writing, Handwriting, Writing difficulties, Basic Pupils.

1. Introduction

'Handwriting is an art of writing using the hand and a writing instrument'. This is a definition derived from the Longman Active Dictionary, Student Edition (1999). At different times in history, the quality of handwriting has varied considerably. Ancient Roman Handwriting style comprised of Roman cursive and more calligraphic rustic capitals, the letter of which forms the basis of modern capital letters and was used in the stone inscriptions. Writing instrument and materials were easy to come by. One's ability to write a way that is both legible and efficient affects school performance and academic advancement because writing is the primary means for students to communicate and display what has been learnt to their teacher. At times, in examination, people with legible and efficient handwriting are awarded some marks and when another person's handwriting is not legible and efficient, examiners find it very difficult to read and understand what they are saying.

Legible handwriting is also necessary for people to carry out academic activities but difficulties with handwriting on the other hand can interfere with related writing process such as planning and generating ideas. Practice of teaching handwriting is centred largely on issues relating to form and quality. It involved what was called the synthetic method of writing in which horizontal lines, vertical lines, oblique and curves were mastered and combined in letters which in turn were used in writing words.

In my experience at St. Peter's R/C Primary School in Bompata, a market community within the Kumasi Metropolis in the Ashanti Region of Ghana, it came to light that pupils suffer from defects of handwriting. The ability to write well is not only a hallmark of literacy, but also an essential aid to individual progress and there is a growing interest in the world today as to the most effective method of teaching children to write legibly. Many of the basic problems involved in handwriting have been studied for centuries and much have been learned about difficulties in learning to write well. In this regard, at Bompata, I saw that many basic three pupils have problems with handwriting so I decided to embark on a research in engaging them in early preparatory writing activities in order to improve upon their handwriting.

2. Literature Review

This chapter takes a look at the related literature on the topic; “What is writing?” In the Blackwell Encyclopaedia, Florian Coulmas defines writing as a set of visible or tactile signs used to represent units of language in systematic way with the purpose of recording messages which can be retrieved by everyone who knows the language in question and the rules by virtue of which its units are encoded in the writing system.

According to the World Book Encyclopaedia, “writing is a system of human communication by means of visual symbols or signs”. In the world’s writing system Peter T. Daniels defines writing as “a system of more or less permanent marks used to represent an utterance in such a way that it can be recovered more or less exactly without the intervention of the utterer”.

Microsoft Encarta Kids 2007 defines writing as “a method of communication”. It uses marks that we see and understand, the marks we use to write English are the letters of the alphabet. They stand for sounds.

2.1 Importance of Handwriting

Handwriting is an important functional task used frequently in every grade beginning in kindergarten. Children are expected to gain skills gradually in handwriting legibility as formal instruction is introduced in the kindergarten and first – grade curriculum. Marr D. And Cermak, S (2002).

According to Steve Ciraham, Professor of education at the University of Maryland College Park, “.....the researcher found that pupils’ handwriting lessons produced grammatical sentences much more fluidly than their counterparts in the control group.

.....A growing number of studies suggest that handwriting may play a bigger role in the writing process than is commonly believed. “If you have to stop and think about how to form a particular letter, that increases the likelihood that you are going to lose something you might hold in your working memory? Said Mr. Graham” (Viadero, D. 2001).

Children in elementary school spend 31% to 60% of each academic day on fine motor task including handwriting. Handwriting is the primary way for these students to communicate with and display what has been learned to the teacher. In the classroom environment, elementary school students use handwriting in almost all subject areas and are graded on their written output. Past studies showed that when teachers were given papers to evaluate, varying only in their degree of legibility, the papers with better handwriting received better grade. Hammer Schmidt, S. L. Sudsawas, P. (2004)

Typically, elementary school children spend up to half their school day engaged in writing task, some of which (e.g. paper and pencil test) are performed under constraint of time. Therefore, a child’s ability to write in a manner that is both legible and efficient directly affects his or her school performance and academic advancement Rosenblum, S. and Weiss (2003).

Legible handwriting is necessary for children to carry out academic activities, and difficulties with handwriting can interfere with related writing process such as planning and generating ideas. “One of the most serious effects of poor handwriting occurs when the quality of handwriting detracts from the student’s ability to convey information and ideas” (Handley – More, Deitz, Billingsley and Cogins, 2003)

Handwriting is one of the most important skills that children acquire and use throughout the school years as part of their occupation as students. When handwritings are deficient children suffer various consequences related to their academic performance and social interaction, thus limiting their successful participation in everyday school activities (Preminger, Weiss and Weintraub, 2004).

Research, Tierney and Shanahan (1991) has begun to show that writing leads to improved reading achievement, reading leads to better writing performance. Pearson and Tierney, (1984) said writing is a constructive process. That is, it helps in achieving better grades when taught to be understanding of the learner.

2.1.1 General Information on the Teaching of Handwriting

Direct Kinesthetic steps to teaching handwriting leaves nothing to chance in developing writing skills to its highest level. Essentially, all children learn to write more expeditiously using kinesthetic technique. Because kinaesthetic learning is such a strong learning channel and so reliable, all children need to assimilate accurate information of alphabet to a point that forming these letters require low conscious effort Sheffield B. (1996)

The goal of direct treatment is for child's writing to become automatic and about letters formulation and can produce adequate volume of work in an expected period of time without undue fatigue. Practice with letter formulation is certainly a necessary component of remediation. In addition, the child's motor skills and sensory processing abilities that contribute to and are considered to underline good handwriting are important to consider Iseng, Cermek (1993).

Jewel and Karan, opined Knowledge of letters was the single best predictor of reading success.....children learn to discriminate letters by their distinctive visual features rather than holistically. Research suggests that when the child is learning to visually discriminate between letters, visually similar letters should be taught in isolation before they are contrasted. Adams suggests that teaching upper case letters separately from lowercase also reduce visual confusion. Writing letters help children focus on the visual features of each, particularly when their formation is emphasized. Writing approaches that teach letters in groups with distinctive labels and visual clues are ideas for this, teaching formation. Jewell, Karen (1991).

In 1948, the international conference on public education made the following conclusion regarding the teaching of handwriting. "Writing is not only an educational technique but also a means of expression and an art which should combine personal style with the maximum elegance and that the purpose of teaching handwriting is, to enable every child to write as well as he is able to at a reasonable speed".

The modern method teaching handwriting therefore places emphasis on the learner, the child and needs rather on form and quality. The following are the five widely accepted principles or practice in the modern teaching of handwriting.

- a. The learner is the chief focus of attention, and many adjustments are made in teaching procedures in recognition of individual differences.
- b. Preliminary training is provided to promote increased readiness for writing whenever it is needed.
- c. Initial writing experiences tend to be based on words as contrasted with word element.
- d. A simplified form of writing is used in preference to cursive writing during early school years in most countries using an alphabet language and to some extent in other countries.
- e. Skill in handwriting develops slowly as a result of both maturation and practice. (CCEUCC 2000)

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

The study was an action research. Action research is an extended form of case study in that it studies a particular population to improve or solve the problem with an appropriate intervention. In the study, the performance of a class of pupils was studied and identified to be poor and an intervention of using early writing preparatory activity was designed by the researcher to assist the pupils improve their performance in handwriting at St. Peter's R/C Primary School.

3.2 Population and Sample Selection

The research was carried out in St. Peter's R/C Primary School in Bompata in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. A sample of thirty-three students made up of thirteen boys and twenty girls was used for the study. This constituted basic two class. Their ages ranged between seven and eight years. A purposive sampling method was used based on the fact that, the researcher was assigned to handle that class. Since action research focused on designing an intervention to solving problems in specific situation, the basic two class is deemed appropriate for the purpose of the study. It becomes imperative for the researcher to stick to the basic two pupils for this study so that he could design an appropriate intervention to assist pupils to improve on their performance in handwriting..

3.3 Research Instrument

Test

A pre-test and post-test were organised for pupils to assess their performance as well as the evidence and causes of pupils' problems in handwriting. It consisted a sentence which had some ascenders and descenders. The sentence was writing boldly and legibly on the chalkboard for the pupils to write in their writing books for five time. Thirty minutes was given for its completion. The pupils were made to sit in the order as their names were arranged in the class register. After the books were collected, it was marked and scored to a maximum point of ten. The purpose of the post-test was to find out the effectiveness of the intervention employed by the researcher.

The same sentence was given and this time around thirty minutes was allocated for its completed.

Interview

Interviews were organised for the other teachers in the school which focused on pupils' problem and needs in teaching and learning handwriting. The interview was used at the pre-intervention stage. The purposes of the interview at the pre-intervention stage were to find out the evidence and causes of pupils' problems in handwriting. The researcher informed the teachers two days ahead of the interview that will be conducted as well as the purpose of the exercise. The researcher noted and recorded their various responses.

Observation

The researcher conducted an observation at the pre-intervention and intervention stages. The purpose of the pre-intervention stage was to find out the evidence and the causes of pupils' handwriting problems while at the intervention stage, he was to correct certain mistakes pupils made when writing. The researcher observed the pupils' handwriting in class exercise, assignment and test in order to examine and have a better idea of pupils' performance at the pre-intervention and intervention stages.

Pre-Intervention

The problem of teaching and learning handwriting in St Peter's Primary School was identified by the use of the instruments mentioned in the early stages of the methodology.

The evidence of this was gotten from the use of instruments such as observation, interview and test in the pre-intervention and post intervention. The researcher embarked on this, both on the teacher who handled the class. This revealed that the teachers and pupils were all beset with problems that contributed to poor performance in handwriting in the school. The problems included the following;

- a. Less practice by pupils
- b. Less practice by pupils
- c. Improper sequencing of technique in teaching and learning handwriting
- d. Sensory – motor integration dysfunction where pupils have poor motor control.
- e. Incorrect holding of the pencil and bad sitting posture when writing.

In coherence with the problems posed, a test was conducted by the researcher to find the truth of these problems. A sentence was written on the chalkboard clearly and neatly for pupils to write. For example;

They are playing ampe

The pupils were supposed to write the sentence five times in their books.

Explanation was given to pupils to be certain of what was to be done.

Half an hour was allowed for pupils to write the sentence. Pupils were given numbers in the order in which their names were written in the admission register. The books were collected and marked. During the test a personal observation was made by the researcher to ascertain the evidences of the problems and to do away with all prejudices.

Intervention

After the marking of pupils work, the researcher realised that most of the pupils wrote their words closely together without spacing them. Also, the letters and words were not legible and bold enough.

In addition to that, every problem mentioned previously in the pre-intervention was taken notice of by the researcher. As a result of these revelations, the researcher designed an intervention based on early preparatory writing activities. This was to last for four weeks. The researcher met the pupils three times a week for forty minutes a meeting.

Weekly Activities in Teaching Handwriting

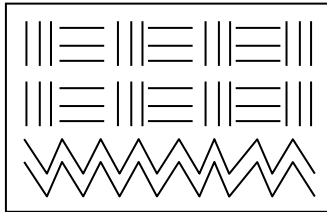
Week 1

The chief purpose here was to stimulate keen interest among pupils in learning to write and prepare them to acquire the requisite technique with reasonable ease. What was essential for this stage in sensory motor control.

Apparatus: Soft head pencil, drawing book 'G'.

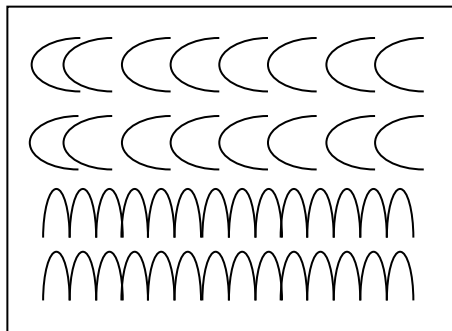
Step one

The researcher gave their drawing books to them and drew a pattern on the board for pupils to draw in their drawing books. The researcher went round to ensure that their sitting posture and grip of the pencil were right. He ensured that the right pattern was drawn. The researcher emphasized on their sitting posture and grip of the pencil. He offered help to those who were not able to do it. Below is the patter for practice.



Step two

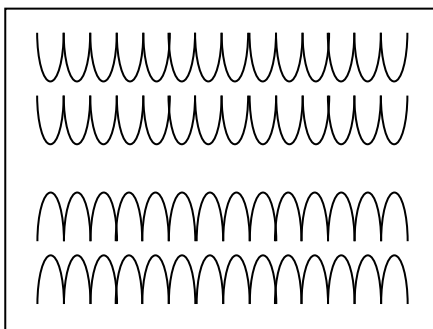
The research introduced the pupils to other sets of patterns for them to draw. He went round to help them on their sitting posture and grip of the pencil while making sure that the right patterns were drawn.



The researcher saw to it that the patterns were repeated several times in their drawing books to help improve their sensory motor coordination. He gave them their books for further practice in the house.

Step Three:

The researcher introduced them to other new patterns for pupils to practice. This time, the researcher allowed the pupils to do it without offering help while he went round to observe. Below is the pattern of the practice.



Later, the researcher collected their books and checked if they have finished work. He offered help to those who were not able to do it by assisting them to do it. He gave them their books to take it home and practice.

Week 2

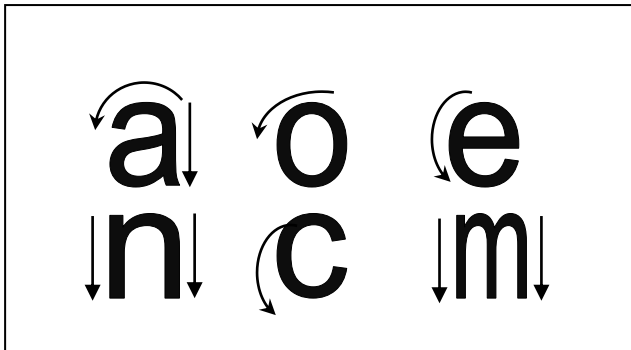
At this stage, as soon as pupils had acquired sufficient motor control, they were introduced to learning the simple

form of writing. The aim here involved the following:

- a. To deepen interest in writing
- b. To promote the orderly development of the required attitudes and skills.
- c. To encourage pupils in the use of handwriting for meeting needs and as an aid of learning and a means of self expression.

Apparatus: Soft lead pencil, drawing book and writing books A1.

The researcher became the model and wrote boldly and legibly on the chalkboard in the style in which the pupils were to learn to write. The researcher supplied them with their writing books. He took pupils through the writing of the small letters especially those that end on the base line such as 'm', 'n', 'o', 'c' which are easier to learn. The researcher demonstrated clearly how the letters are written.



Here, the researcher reemphasized that the number the pupils see on the arrows indicated where to begin the letters. The researcher at this point did not place too much emphasis on the letters produced by pupils. Pupils were asked to re-write these letters in their writing books while the researcher went round to ensure that the letters were reproduced correctly in their books.

Step 2

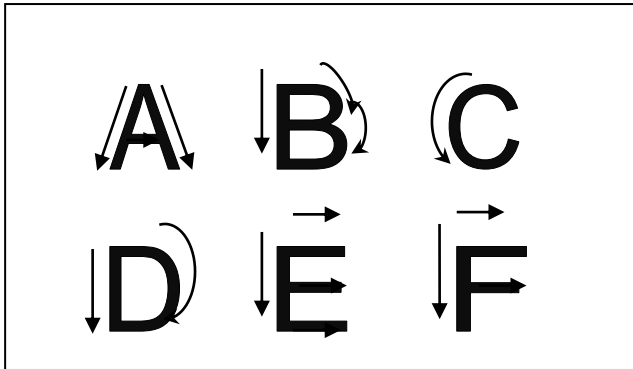
Here, the researcher turned his attention to letters which have extended tails as 'b', 'd', 'p', 'y'. He ensured that letters which had extended tails going upwards are written to touch the upper red border lines while those which extend downwards were written to touch the red boarder lines below.



The researcher went round to ensure that the right letters are reproduced at the appropriate place. He offered help to those who were not able to do it. He also observed carefully how the pupils extended the tail to touch the red border lines below and above respectively.

Step 3

The researcher collected the assignment, went through it and saw that there had been improvement. He later introduced them to the writing of the capital letters. The researcher wrote some letters on the chalkboard boldly and legibly, the assigned numbers to arrows to indicate the direction in which the pupils would begin writing the letters. Below are the letters:



Week 3

The researcher placed emphasis on improving the quality and speed of pupils' writing. The chief aims of the researcher teaching handwriting at this time included the following:

- To cultivate a growing interest and pride in achieving a good quality of writing
- To develop the attitude and skills required for writing clearly, legibly and with reasonable speed.
- To discover the reasons for individual's failure to make satisfactory progress in handwriting and to apply the necessary corrective.

Apparatus: Soft lead pencil, writing book A1, coloured chalk

Step 1

At this point, the researcher introduced the pupils to simple sentences which brought into display what they have observed. The researcher wrote the sentence on the board.

she is eating

He made them write the sentence five times in their writing books. The researcher emphasized on quality writing. He went round to observe and offered help to those who were finding it difficulty.

He saw that there has been an improvement

Week 4

The researcher emphasized improving the quality and speed of pupils' writing

Step 1

The researcher wrote a sentence on the chalkboard for example:

Ama is singing

He told them to write the sentence boldly and legibly in their writing books while he went round to observe and help those who were finding it difficult to do it. He later collected the books and marked it. The researcher gave out their books to them for the pupils to further try their hands on it in the house.

Step 2

The researcher took their books and looked at their assignment. He saw a massive improvement in their handwriting. The researcher again wrote the sentence below for pupils to write while he went round to

emphasize on the speed and quality of handwriting.

The cow is grazing

The researcher helped the few who were finding it difficult to do it by guiding them to write. After the pupils had finished with their writing he took the books and marked them.

In order to go through all these intervention lesson plans were prepared to take pupils through. Refer to appendix two.

Post Intervention

After the intervention, I conducted a post test for all the thirty-three pupils in the class. As in the pre-test, pupils were made to sit in the order in which their names were written in the attendance register. The same pre-test question was written out boldly, legibly and neatly on the chalkboard and the pupils were instructed to re-write the sentence in their writing books. Forty minutes was allowed.

The post test was to find out whether the intervention put in place had helped to improved the pupils' handwriting.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Pre-intervention Results

This chapter is concerned with subjecting all data collected from pre-test and post test to statistical analysis, interpretation and findings.

Thirty-three pupils took part in both pre-test and post-test and their scripts were scored out of ten points. This is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Pre-Test and Post-Test and their scripts were scored

Pupil's serial number	Pre-Test	Post-Test
01	1	5
02	1	2
03	2	2
04	3	7
05	1	3
06	5	8
07	5	5
08	1	9
09	2	7
10	2	5
11	2	4
12	7	8
13	3	7
14	0	3
15	2	7
16	5	8
17	0	2
18	3	3
19	4	4

20	1	5
21	1	2
22	3	7
23	1	2
24	1	4
25	8	10
26	6	3
27	6	6
28	4	6
29	4	6
30	4	4
31	5	9
32	6	6
33	2	4

Table 1 shows the raw scores of pupils in the pre-test and post-test. This was to investigate how effective the techniques used in teaching handwriting was.

Table 2: Frequency Table showing scores of pupils in pre-test

Scores (x)	Frequency	fx
0	3	0
1	8	8
2	6	12
3	4	12
4	4	16
5	4	20
6	2	12
7	1	7
8	1	8
9	0	0
10	0	0
	33	95

Table 2 shows that frequency of distribution of scores obtained by thirty-three pupils in the pre-test. The table reveals that only one pupil obtained eight marks, which represent the highest mark in the test.

Also, three pupils scored zero representing the lowest mark. Nobody scored the maximum of 10 marks. 75.8% of the pupils scored less than five. Again, mean score for the pre-test was 2.88.

Table 3: Frequency Table showing scores of pupils in the post – test

Scores (x)	Frequency	fx
0	3	0
1	8	0
2	6	10
3	4	12
4	4	20
5	4	20
6	2	24
7	1	35
8	1	24
9	0	18
10	0	10
	33	195

The post test scores given in the table above shows that one pupil scored the maximum points. It also shows that no pupils scored zero mark. 42.4% scored less than 5 marks which shows that there was a marked difference from the pre-test in which 75.8% scored less than 5 marks.

Also, the table shows that marks were distributed between 2 and 10.

The mean score for the post test was 5.90. Here too, the mean score for the post-test show an improvement over the mean score for the pre-test of 2.88.

The mean difference

It is the sum of the difference between the pre-test and post test divided by the number of pairs of pupils

$$\bar{D} = \frac{\sum D}{N}$$

Where \bar{D} = mean of the difference

$\sum D$ = sum of the difference of scores

N = number of pupils

Table 4: Awareness of techniques in teaching handwriting (teachers)

Techniques	Number of Respondents	Percentage(%)
Using flowing patterns	0	0
Writing letters in the alphabet	2	100
Total	2	100

It could be seen in table 4, out of all the respondents a greater percentage representing 100% of the respondents were conversant with writing letters of the alphabet as the only technique used in teaching handwriting.

This knowledge by responding further assures the researcher that, respondents did not know about the other techniques in teaching handwriting. Instead they know about the teaching of the letters of the alphabets and that did not have any effect on improving the pupils' handwriting. Total 2 100

Table 5: Awareness of the Causes of Poor Handwriting (Teachers)

Causes	Aware	Not aware
Inadequate	2	0
Less practice	2	0
Improper sequencing of technique in teaching	2	0
Poor motor control	2	0
Improper holding of writing materials	2	0

It is clear from table 5 that the total number of respondents expressed their awareness of some of the causes of poor handwriting in St. Peter's R/C Primary School three with a total number of two teachers as respondents which represented 100% of respondents were aware of those causes of poor handwriting in that class.

5. Summary

This research looked at engaging pupils in early preparatory writing activities in order to improve their handwriting. It involved thirty-three pupils in basic two from St. Peter's R/C Primary School at Bompata in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. The thirty-three pupils were taken through series of preparatory writing activities.

The pre-test and the post-test comparison group design were used. There was a pre-test followed by four weeks of intervention. The researcher met the pupils three times a week for the intervention, each lasting forty minutes. The pupils were helped to improve their handwriting and this reflected in the marks they obtained in the post – test.

6. Conclusion

A critical analysis of the results obtained from the pre-test and post-test revealed that the mean score of the post-test scored is significantly higher at 5.90 than the mean score of the pre-test score which is 2.88. This shows that pupils performed better when they were introduced to a variety of handwriting techniques. The pupils were helped to improve their handwriting and this reflected in their marks they obtained in the post-test. To conclude, the researcher would like to encourage individuals who want to research into this field to do well so that poor handwriting among pupils in basic schools will be reduced to the barest minimum.

7. Acknowledgments

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