

DFES Report August 2001

Researcher: Penelope Allcock

Contact e-mail: Glenmayne@messages.co.uk

Geographical Area: Based on pilot study in Hampshire and extended nationally

Education sector: Secondary 11 – 16 years

What were my original aims?

Testing handwriting speed in the secondary school to achieve standardised figures.

Introduction

There are standardised tests for reading and spelling which can be used to show annual improvement and achievement levels based on average figures for each age group. For success in tests and examinations pupils also need to be able to write clearly and quickly so it is also important to measure and monitor progress in handwriting speed. I developed a test to measure handwriting speed in a pilot study at my school for an MA (SEN) dissertation at Middlesex University. During this year I have extended the use of the test to achieve standardised scores for handwriting speeds throughout the secondary school (11 – 16 years).

Methodology

1. Members of PATOSS were contacted via their newsletter and regional groups and were asked to test pupils handwriting speed using the set procedures refined in the pilot study (this can be found on the PATOSS website (www.patoss-dyslexia.org)). These scripts were duly sent to me for analysis.
2. Direct contact, in the form of personal visits, was made with three secondary schools and one junior school was contacted by phone to explain the handwriting test exercise. Handwriting and spelling analyses were also offered along with advice for improvement and the option to retest after two terms.

In what ways did I refine my aims?

Following consultation with my mentor, Professor Diane Montgomery I decided to use the handwriting test to measure the improvement in handwriting speed in the secondary school after suggesting interventions in cursive training, as well as collecting data on speed for the different age groups.

Research Processes

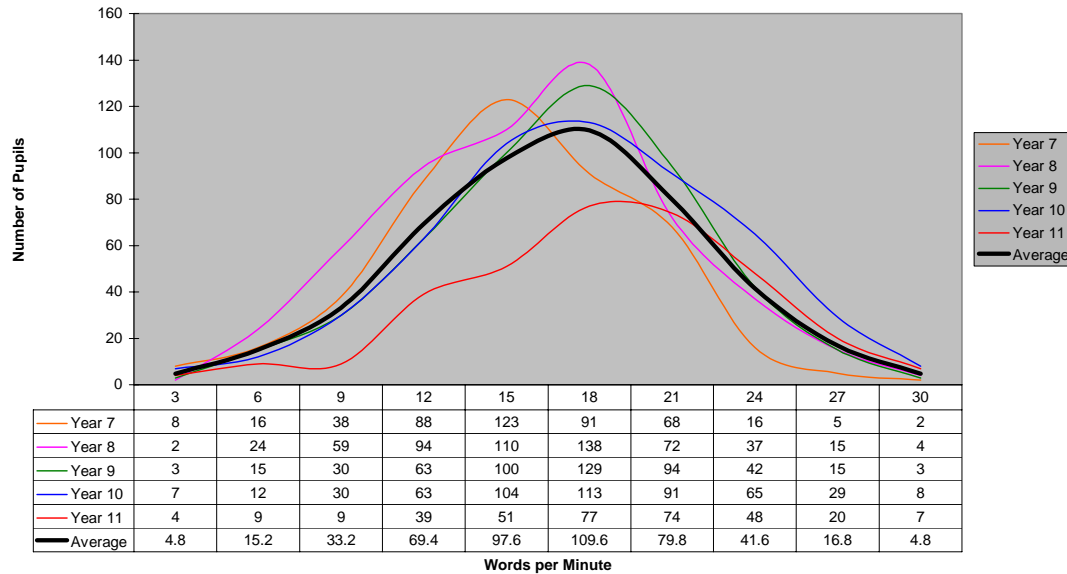
The members of PATOSS were supportive to my aim to collect data on handwriting speed and I received whole class test results from seven different schools in addition to scripts from pupils having individual tuition. There were also results from students over 16 years, and some from pupils below 11 years. The test is in use and it is recommended by Gill Backhouse in 'A Practical Guide: Providing For Candidates with Special Assessment Needs during GCE, VCE, GCSE and GNVQ.' It was difficult to find teachers from PATOSS who were able to test whole year groups and not just the pupils needing applications for special arrangements.

The second method of data retrieval (direct whole school contact) proved successful with one secondary and one junior school but neither school was prepared to retest in order to measure an improvement in handwriting speed. This was not a directly negative response but changes in staff and lack of time were the main problems.

At my own school the year seven literacy development group was tested in January, analysis was completed but pupil changes in groups was given as the reason for not measuring improvement in July 2001.

Results of Research

A Graph Comparing The Frequency of Words per Minute Against Number of Pupils For Years 7 to 11



Two thousand, seven hundred and one students aged between eleven and sixteen years spent twenty minutes writing and their handwriting speeds were calculated and recorded. The frequency chart above shows the distribution curves for the speeds of each year group and the curve for the whole group is shown in black.

The following table shows the averages for each year group and the speeds, which are 25% slower and could be used to identify pupils who will have problems keeping up with classwork and completing exams under timed conditions.

	Y7wd/min	Y8wd/min	Y9wd/min	Y10wd/min	Y11wd/min
Av.speed	13.9	14.6	15.7	16.3	16.9
25%slower	10.4	10.9	11.8	12.2	12.7

The average speeds improve with age but there appears to be most improvement from year 7 to year 9, perhaps as individual styles are still becoming established. From that age there is steady but less pronounced improvement.

Conclusions

- The handwriting styles and speeds of pupils at Key Stage 3 are still developing and could be improved with tuition, guidance and encouragement.
- Pupils writing at or below the average handwriting speed need to be able to summarise their notes, use key words and have appropriate study skills. Mind maps and other strategies could help them with recording.
- Pupils with slow handwriting should have IEPs so that they can be given special attention in supported classes and individual tuition if necessary.
- Extra time needed in examinations for pupils whose handwriting speed is >25% slower than average for the year group.

Questions for my future practice

- To what extent does success at school depend on pupils being able to keep up with the pace of activity in the classroom, which includes handwriting?

- Pupils with slow handwriting due to specific difficulties should be eligible for extra time in examinations. If this is given, to what extent is it beneficial?
- As time in school is so limited, is it fair to ask colleagues to take part in potentially time consuming studies, which may not be immediately beneficial?

Questions for my school

- Many pupils cannot listen and write at the same time because they are not fluent writers. How can the school be persuaded to institute annual writing speed tests for Year 7, followed by intervention for those in need?
- How can the school use the evidence of this study to support applications for extra time in examinations in the absence of a national policy?
- How can the school be persuaded that a whole school approach to writing difficulties is necessary to support dyslexic and dyspraxic students in the midst of so many new initiatives?
- What resources can the school provide to support and monitor pupils' progress when they have writing difficulties?

Questions for further research

- Is there a direct link between success in examinations and secondary schools with handwriting policies to improve style and speed of presentation?
- Can intervention to develop handwriting in Year 7 aid the natural improvement in handwriting speed and result in fewer pupils becoming disaffected in later years?

Acknowledgements:

Mentor: Professor D. Montgomery

Continued support from Gill Backhouse and the committee and members of PATOSS

Members of PATOSS who sent data, many thanks.

The Wavell School, Farnborough, Hants.

Folville Junior School, Leicester.