

INTRODUCTION

Teachers and parents have shown an increasing interest in improving the quality of handwriting. Two of the major problems facing those searching for ways to improve handwriting are the lack of expertise and the limited availability of validated instructional materials. While we all might not agree with the label "national disgrace" that has been applied to the problem (Enstrom, 1970), there is certainly a feeling of inadequacy on the part of many concerned teachers. These teachers feel that their training has not equipped them to conduct a quality handwriting program.

A major reason for the lack of current instructional resources in handwriting was the move to teaching approaches which stressed the integration of handwriting instruction within curriculum areas. The emphasis shifted from writing as a product to writing as a process. "Traditionally, transcription skills (e.g., grammar, punctuation, spelling, handwriting) served as the focus for both regular education classroom teaching and experimental inquiry" (Lynch & Jones, 1988, page 74). But, as stated earlier, that focus shifted from the mechanics to the cognitive processes involved in planning, generating, and revising text. At the same time that this de-emphasis on specific handwriting lessons in the elementary schools has been occurring, there has also been a de-emphasis on handwriting instruction in teacher training programs (Nelli, 1982). As a result, Farris (1991) noted the following:

The decreased emphasis on handwriting in the elementary curriculum has raised ire among not only parents who are concerned with legibility but also junior and senior high teachers who simply cannot read their students' handwritten papers. Such sentiments have been echoed as well by the public at large (page 312).

Schools face credibility problems if they cannot deliver effective instruction in such a highly

visible, basic skill area as handwriting.

Today's teachers are facing new problems that affect handwriting instruction, such as the increasing number of special education students in the regular classroom. It is no longer sufficient for a teacher to be experienced in good developmental instructional procedures. He or she must also be well versed in effective corrective methods in order to handle students with learning difficulties.

Without adequate background in the field of handwriting instruction, a teacher could subscribe to misconceptions and malpractices of major and minor proportions. Inappropriate practices range from using handwriting practices left over from pen and ink days to assuming that the left-handed student can "work it out by himself in time." Assumptions that cursive is naturally faster than manuscript, that manuscript has to be taught first, and that tracing is an important method of handwriting instruction are three common misconceptions.

The following chapters will present instructional methods that have a firm base in research. Many of the practices presented have been field-tested in regular classrooms and with students with disabilities. While no promise is made to make the task of handwriting instruction easy, it is possible for a teacher to reduce unnecessary corrective instruction by following appropriate and well-sequenced instructional procedures.

The Goal of Handwriting Instruction

Modern handwriting instruction should not be confused with the penmanship drills of previous years. Penmanship drills were often more concerned with the development of a highly ornate and consistent form of handwriting. While the end product was often admired, it was, for many, difficult to attain and left little room for individual expression. Today instructional practices are more pragmatic and individualized. We want handwriting to be functional, i.e., we stress legibility and speed. Brown (1977) has noted:

. . . the primary goal in teaching penmanship is to produce efficiently a free flow of ideas or easily read thoughts onto paper with a minimum of attention to the mechanics of the art (pages 2-3).

The chapters which follow use this goal as a frame of reference. The techniques that are advocated are designed to be consistent with this goal and the research literature. Where the research is inconclusive, the authors have relied on many years of experience with students of all ages, abilities, disabilities, and on the advice of many talented teachers.