

Later literacy success hinges on early handwriting lessons

31 July 2017, by Pepita Smyth

A new study has shown the far-reaching implications of handwriting skills in early childhood.

In an Australian first, Murdoch University researchers Dr Anabela Malpique, Dr Deborah Pino-Pasternak and PhD Candidate Debora Valcan examined the [handwriting](#) abilities of [children](#) prior to starting Year 1.

"Writing is a way of transforming and expressing ideas into language and we know that early handwriting automaticity, that is how effortlessly students can write letters, is a strong predictor of both writing fluency and quality," Dr Malpique said.

"Over the past few years we have seen a significant decline in literacy outcomes for Year 7 and Year 9 students in Australia.

"However, this is the first time researchers have examined the origins of these skills, back when children are learning their alphabet at the start of their school journey."

The Murdoch University researchers examined 177 kindergarten children enrolled in 23 classrooms from seven primary schools in Western Australia.

These students were monitored three times over 15 months to assess the development of their handwriting skills from the end of pre-primary and throughout Year 1.

"We were interested in learning about children's handwriting automaticity, which is the ability to access and retrieve all the letters of the alphabet and to write them automatically and legibly," Dr Pino-Pasternak added.

In this study, the team measured the variation in automaticity levels amongst the children at the end of Pre-Primary (first year of compulsory education in WA) and investigated the degree to which

existing variation could be explained by teacher's practices for writing instruction.

"We found that writing instruction in Australian classrooms is highly variable," Dr Malpique said.

"The Australian curriculum outlines that children are expected to develop skills like identifying and correctly forming letters, and learn to create short texts during pre-primary and Year 1.

"However, teachers are approaching this goal with very different strategies, with a big variation in how much time is spent on teaching writing and on the nature of the skills being taught, from turning sounds into letters to the planning of ideas to express in writing.

"This is significant because our results indicate that 20 per cent of the difference in children's level of handwriting automaticity could be attributed to the teacher's strategies in the classroom even when accounting for children's gender and reading skills."

The team is now looking at the students' development of writing skills across time points to understand these initial results further and hope to identify classroom-based practices that lead to improved writing skills in the next year.

The project forms part of a larger Australian Research Council DECRA project awarded to Dr Pino-Pasternak examining the development of children's independent learning skills, higher order thinking processes, and academic outcomes in the first two years of schooling in WA.

More information: Anabela Abreu Malpique et al. *Handwriting automaticity and writing instruction in Australian kindergarten: an exploratory study*, *Reading and Writing* (2017). DOI: [10.1007/s11145-017-9753-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11145-017-9753-1)

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