

Vienna, 20 June 2012

Success for Viennese pilot project:

Children who have been taught motor skills are a class ahead when it comes to learning to write!

It's not the letters themselves but the actual process of writing that counts

From the first wobbly stroke to the alphabet – hard work for children who are just starting school! Experienced member of government Brigitte Buschek from the Vienna Municipal Education Authority is quite clear: “In primary school, children often have problems with writing and these can develop into problems with school itself!” A scientific pilot project performed at three primary schools in Vienna demonstrates that this does not have to be the case. The claim:

alternative methods help children learn to write with ease.

“Flowing writing is a combination of controlled style and high speed”, explains scientist Dr Christian Marquardt. The key element for writing novices is thus to acquire the motor skills needed to produce legible writing. However, the observations he has made over decades of research reveal that, in everyday school life, too much emphasis is unfortunately placed on attractive handwriting. With unnecessary results. “Children try to write as accurately as possible, their muscles tense as they do so, and they take a very long time to make individual movements, often merely copying the letters. Their motor skills fall by the wayside. If children learnt to write the way they learn to walk, they would start by falling down a few times! Neat writing would come later – but without any conscious effort, simply as a result of improving the quality of movement.” It is imperative that we rethink our approach: “We need different methods so that children can later write effortlessly, fluidly and legibly!”

A plea that is welcomed by Dr Margit Heissenberger, Head of the Pädagogische Hochschule in Vienna: “We assume that problems with writing are partly due to the methods used when teaching children how to write!”

The Pädagogische Hochschule in Vienna carried out a companion study to the pilot project.

150 children take part in pilot project

In close co-operation with educationalists from the 23rd district of Vienna, Dr Marquardt used a special computer program to analyse the writing skills and range of movements of 150 children several times during the school year and initiated concepts for writing more easily. Teachers integrated motor control exercises in writing lessons at least once per week.

And the effort certainly paid off: compared with the control classes, children demonstrated quicker and more flowing writing skills and exercised less pressure when writing.

Conclusion: children who have been taught motor skills are a class ahead when it comes to learning to write!

Companion study by the Pädagogische Hochschule in Vienna – children have more fun writing!

In parallel, the Pädagogische Hochschule in Vienna talked to educationalists, pupils and parents. Conclusion: children had more fun writing, some 95 percent of educationalists and parents confirmed the clearly positive effect of writing training. Education expert Dr Heissenberger said: “Today’s writing lessons still focus predominantly on the traditional and formal standard lettering. We will incorporate the research results into the many different areas of teacher education and training.”

The results also convince Brigitte Buschek from the Municipal Education Authority: “The sooner we start to teach children the motor skills, i.e. the right movements, the better the results will be in schools. I believe we should start in the kindergarten.”

Commitment for the future

Sebastian Schwanhäüßer, Managing Director of the STABILO family business and initiator of this pilot project, is convinced “that this Viennese pilot project has been a success for all those involved”. For years, STABILO has been involved in an intense dialogue with scientists and educationalists. “We have learnt a lot and, in recent years, have developed a series of ergonomic pencils for learners. We have also developed a range of teaching materials. We should like to continue to work in this field and for the findings from the sensorimotor study to be introduced in lessons nationwide”, says Sebastian Schwanhäüßer, so summarising the aim of the manufacturer of writing instruments.

For many years, **Dr Christian Marquardt** has been researching the basic motor skills of writing. He did his doctorate at the Faculty for Medical Psychology at the LMU Munich, focussing on kinematic movement analysis. He has been a member of the clinical neuropsychology development team at the Munich-Bogenhausen hospital since 1990. Together with his team, Dr Marquardt has developed a computer program that analyses motor skills when writing (SchreibCoach).

Note for the editor

STABILO International is a subgroup of Schwanhäußer Industrie Holding. The group turnover was 462 million euros in the 2010/11 fiscal year (as of June 30); of this, writing implements account for 160 million euros. Globally, the company has a workforce of 4,280 employees.

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