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Facts concerning handwriting

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Is handwriting on the brink of extinction? Experts demand better encouragement

Writing by hand is no longer compulsory for primary school pupils in most of the U.S. States. Many American children learn how to write only with the keyboard. Handwriting is also being pushed back in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Experts demand to improve its promotion at schools. And that with good reason: There is a close connection between writing with one's hand and the ability to learn.

New national curricula for schools have triggered heated discussions in the USA about handwriting. To teach a cursive handwriting is no longer compulsory in this curriculum which has already been ratified by 45 of the 50 states. The new Common Core State Standards allow American schools to decide themselves how they teach reading and writing. The consequence is that a few tradition-conscious American educational institutions still offer cursive, most others don't, reports the newspaper Washington Post.

“The cursive handwriting, once considered a mainstay of American elementary education, has been slowly disappearing from classrooms for years. Now, with most states adopting new national standards that don't require such instruction, cursive could soon be eliminated from most public schools”, the newspaper predicts. More and more schools focus on computers during their lessons and with that on writing with a keyboard. Reason for Washington Post to comment: „For many students, cursive is becoming as foreign as ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics.“

But now resistance stirs against this development. A few states, among them California, Georgia, Massachusetts and Idaho, are trying to save cursive in schools with bills. And the National Association of State Boards of Education, an association with representatives of state school boards, also doesn't want to stand on the sidelines any longer and see cursive dying in the USA. They started an information campaign which should reveal the advantages. They put special emphasis on the proven strong coherence between writing with one's hand and learning success.

Even though in Germany there is still the precept in the curriculum of the standing conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany, that children are to learn a legible and fluent hand writing in primary schools, the problem that handwriting is being pushed back has also reached German schools. The Bavarian teachers association (Bayerischer Lehrer- und Lehrerinnenverband – BLLV) recently lamented that even primary school pupils have more and more difficulties to write in a fluent and legible way. "In the era of computers and mobile phones one is keying more than practising how to write. This doesn't stay without consequences, handwriting degenerates to a minor matter", says BLLV president Klaus Wenzel. He demanded: "We can't accept the creeping loss of this important and fundamental cultural asset."

The association culture and education (Verband Bildung und Erziehung – VBE) takes the same line. It recently warned of neglecting the pleasure in writing during the process of learning to write at entry level and during the whole primary school years. An „appealing and very legible writing“ can't be so easily dismissed as unimportant, says Michael Gomolzig, spokesman of the state association Baden-Wurtemberg. According to him, a third of the boys and ten percent of the girls have an unreadable handwriting by the end of elementary school years. More has to be done to prevent this. „Of course, schools shouldn't return to strict calligraphy drill, but still they should work on it to show the advantages of a more legible writing and to intensely foster an appealing type face as a manifestation of individuality“, emphasises the teacher representative.

The findings of the VBE are confirmed by a survey which the writing instrument manufacturer STABILO based in Nuremberg has conducted among teachers. How do your pupils write on average? Only a mean value of 3,1 based on a scale from one ("very legible") to five ("illegible") was reached among the interviewed teachers teaching at higher institutes of education. 84 percent of them (even 98 percent of surveyed primary school teachers) view "general problems with motor skills, concentration etc." as a reason for an illegible handwriting, two thirds (primary school teachers: 80 percent) blame the "increasing usage of

computers, mobile phones, etc.", whereby mainly boys stand out with bad handwriting. And yet almost 80 percent of surveyed teachers teaching at higher institutes of education think that a more legible handwriting of their pupils is "important" or even "very important", especially concerning their future occupational career.

Results from school entry examinations suggest that those difficulties among a part of children already arise during preschool times. According to a current survey in Thuringia, for example, every tenth child starting school shows shortcomings in fine motor skills.

"At school, everybody says there are problems with writing and have been for a long time. Teachers lament that children don't have the motor skills and that there's a lack of attention for this matter. Parents are helpless and pupils are frustrated", says motor skill researcher Dr. Christian Marquardt, scientific advisory committee at the recently founded Schreibmotorik Institut in Heroldsberg (view interview), which should push the research on this matter forward. This finding has fuelled a debate on the introduction of a new "literary archetype" (instead of the fonts to date taught "Lateinische Ausgangsschrift – Latin standard lettering", "Schul Ausgangsschrift – basic lettering at schools" and "Vereinfachte Ausgangsschrift – simplified basic lettering") and its possible effects to ease difficulties.

But why shouldn't we say goodbye to the curriculum of the standing conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany that children in primary schools have to learn "a legible and fluent handwriting" in the first place and instead teach them how to use keyboards at an early stage? "This would have grave disadvantages, for most of the children", says Dr. Guido Nottbusch, professor for pedagogics at Potsdam University. There is a close connection between writing with one's hand and learning. At best for a very small group of pupils who have grave motor skill problems, that is with physical restrictions for handwriting, writing with keyboards could be of help. Nottbusch says: "It is unthinkable to eliminate the process of learning to write with one's hand."

Indeed several studies exist which prove that children learn how to read and write (this includes spelling) more easily if they learn handwriting – a lot better than if they only type the letters with a keyboard. Even more so: There are hints that there is a correlation between learning how to write with one's hand and the ability to write texts. That ultimately the whole language development is fostered by handwriting, not least because of early sense of achievement which is possible because of one's own handwriting. From a pedagogic psychological view it is precisely the high demand for motor, planning and linguistic processes while writing a text manually which justifies the indispensability of handwriting," states a

current study about the "Meaning of handwriting in the context of digitisation" by the Fraunhofer Institut.

Prof. Nottbusch also predicted that in his opinion writing with a keyboard would rather become extinct than writing with a pen. The possibility to gather texts electronically has indeed improved and expanded. So it is foreseeable that soon there will be practical voice recording and processing programs which can put dictated sentences into writing. But this would rather replace the keyboards than repress handwriting. Writing with one's hand needs such little technical support that you always can do it everywhere, quietly, unobtrusively and quickly. "This will never completely be replaced", thinks Nottbusch.

How much learning to write with one's hand and the general learning efficiency have in common is also suggested by a study which addresses the correlation between fine motor skill deficits and underachievement of talented primary-school pupils and confirms it. The study says: "Pupils with fine motor skill deficits show an averagely low trust in their own school performance." And: "Pupils with fine motor skill deficits are prone to inattentive work." The authors of the study conclude: "You can train fine motor skills, at best with systematic development plans as early as pre-school age. From a pedagogic point of view it would be a tragedy if the failure to exhaust the learning potentials of gifted pupils depended on their poor fine motor skills of all things." Or in other words: A better writing support would help solve many a problem at primary school.