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LEFT-HANDEDNESS – A CAUSE FOR CONCERN?

Review by Linda Gan

INTRODUCTION

In his review of left-handedness Dacey (1989) notes that left-handers have been regarded with a certain amount of suspicion by society as a whole throughout the ages, viewed as rather unsavoury characters (perhaps even in league with the devil!) and by psychologists as educationally backward and anti-social. Burt (1937) for example, who provides the greatest insight into the position of left-handers during the first part of this century, considered them obstinate introverts, who declined to use their right hand to write with, not because they *couldn't*, but because they *wouldn't!* This link with educational backwardness and nonconformity possibly contributed to the inflexible attitude adopted by both parents and teachers at that time, towards forcing their children to use their right hand for writing and other manual tasks.

Psychological and educational research from the mid-fifties onwards however, investigating the educational implications and causes of left-handedness (Clark 1957, Annett 1983) and cognitive differences between right and left-handers, (Newland 1981, Sunseri 1982, Bower 1985) has helped to dispel such uncompromising attitudes. Society today no longer discourages left-handedness, but it is still debatable as to whether parents and educators actively encourage children to write with their preferred hand, and whether left-handed children are seen as needing specific help in school (Bentley and Stainthorp 1993).

This article will report on recent research in the U.K. and Singapore which investigates the incidence of left-handedness in schoolchildren today, and the attitudes to left-handers by educators and parents. The problems and provisions being made for left-handed children in school will also be discussed and ways in which teachers can specifically help the left-handers in their care.

REVIEW OF RESEARCH

Interest in the need of the left-hander in British schools arose as a result of the National Curriculum demands regarding children's handwriting skills. Bentley and Stainthorp (1993) found an increasing concern amongst teacher trainees and practising teachers about how they could help what they perceived, as an increasing number of left-handed children in their classes. In response to this concern they mounted a nationwide study in Britain to *investigate teacher and parental attitudes to left-handedness, the awareness that teachers had of left-handers, their needs in school, the difficulties that they exhibited and classroom practices regarding left-handed children.* The author replicated the Bentley and Stainthorp study in 1995 in local pre- and primary schools, with the same objectives in mind.

Research from the U.K. and Singapore report that on average, there are 3 left-handers in every primary class.

RESULTS

Incidence of left-handers

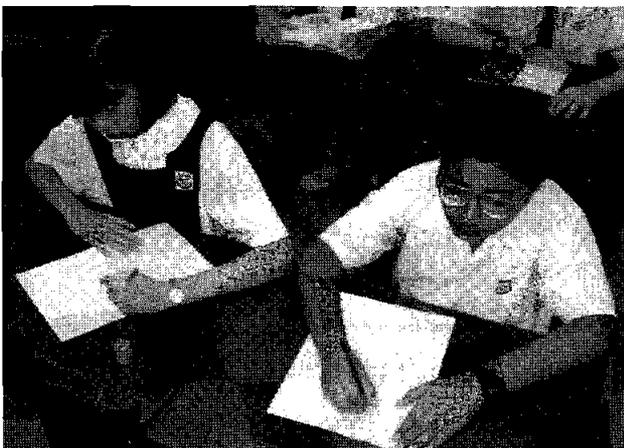
Bentley and Stainthorp (1993) found 13% of the children they sampled to be left-handed, with a slightly higher proportion of left-handed boys (14%) to girls (12%). On average this meant there were about 3 left-handers in any one class.

7% of the Singaporean sample were found to be left-handed (with a slightly higher percentage of these being preschool children), which amounts to about 3 left-handers per class. As in the U.K. the local study revealed a higher incidence of left-handed boys (9%) to girls (5%)

Awareness of teachers to the needs of the left-hander

Teachers in the U.K. study seemed to be aware of the potential problems facing left-handed children. 75% of them agreed that left-handedness created a special need for children, but only 50% considered it should be made a special teaching issue in the early years of schooling.

Slightly less than 20% of primary teachers in Singapore saw left-handedness as creating a special educational need,



This is an incorrect seating alignment for a left hander whose writing style is inhibited by the pupil sitting next to her.

whereas nearly twice as many preschool teachers regarded left-handedness as problematic and felt that it should be a special teaching issue in the early years. This concern is no doubt due to the problems these teachers face with their young children, who are fluctuating between left and right hand dominance during the preschool years (Clark 1974).

Making provisions for the left-hander

83% of teachers in the UK said they checked on the handedness of their pupils when they first entered their classes but apart from providing special scissors for left-handers, they had not made any further provisions or allowances for them in their general classroom routines (for example, ensuring that left-handers sat on the left-hand side of right-handers when seated together, and placing the mouse on the left hand side of the computer). 25% of the teachers had a specific policy for teaching handwriting to left-handers.

The study also discovered that teachers were generally unaware of the how they could help left-handers with their handwriting. All the Principals interviewed were in the throes of highlighting the needs of the left-handers in their school policy documents, and they all provided either universal or left-handed scissors.

In keeping with their concern about possible problems with left-handed preschoolers, 50% of the kindergarten teachers in Singapore admitted to checking on the handedness of the new pupils entering their classes, compared to only 25% of primary teachers. At the primary level the study revealed only limited provision and guidance was being offered

Local teachers seem to be unaware of left-handers' problems and only a few are making any provisions to help them.

to left-handed pupils. Not even basic considerations to ease left-handers' problems with the constant demands of paper and pencil tasks in the primary curriculum were being made: for example only 19% of the primary teachers ensured correct seating alignment for left-handers (eg. sitting at the left of the desk and sloping paper in a clockwise position).

No teachers thought a specific handwriting policy for left-handers was necessary. Although all 26 primary school Vice-Principals agreed that teachers should be aware of the needs of the left-handed children in their classes, and had specifically mentioned left-handed children in their school policies, only 7 advised their teachers about these needs and only 1 provided sets of left-handed scissors. However all, but one, requested further advice about guiding and helping left-handed children.

Teachers' perceptions of difficulties faced by left-handers

Producing inconsistent letter shapes and uncertainty about where to start writing on a page were ranked most highly by all teachers in both UK and Singapore when questioned about the difficulties faced by left-handers in their reading and writing skills development. Local kindergarten teachers also noted that left-right orientation and leaving spaces between

words also presented problems to their young left-handers.

Parents' attitudes and perceptions

In follow-up interviews in the UK with 6 parents of left-handers, all reported that they knew their children were left-handed before they were 2 but said this caused them no real concern in the child's early and school years. However, they were aware, in retrospect, that certain things had caused their children problems which they had attributed to clumsiness and not to being left-handed:

At home:

- *always knocking elbows with other children at table*
- *being much slower to dress themselves*
- *having problems with opening the old-fashioned round door handles*
- *turning taps on when they meant to turn them off*
- *using the 'wrong' eye to look through when trying to use a camera*

At school:

- *finding it difficult to use scissors to cut out*
- *leaving spaces between words*
- *turning the pages of a book awkwardly*

None of the parents felt that being left-handed had impeded their children's progress at school in any way and only 2 had tried to help their children overcome their difficulties with handwriting after the Principals had specifically called them in to advise them. The general opinion of these parents was that their children had just learned how to cope with being left-handed in a right-handed world.



This is the correct seating alignment for a left-hander. She is seated at the left of the desk. She is able to position her work slightly to the left of the midline, and has a clockwise slope to the paper.

The majority of the local parents said they didn't realise their children were left-handed until they were over 2. They were equally divided as to whether this caused them any concern and none had ever asked a teacher for advice regarding their child's left-handedness. The most common problems they noted their children had were confined mainly to those being experienced at school.

For example:

- drawing margins on the left side of their exercise books
- misspelling words (because left-handers block words whilst writing)
- typing on the computer
- writing Chinese characters

IMPLICATIONS

Bentley and Stainthorp (1993) concluded that little has changed in British teachers' attitudes to left-handedness and classroom practice over the past 18 years, other than a greater awareness by Principals and teachers that left-handers do need special help. In comparison teachers in Singapore seem to be relatively indifferent to the problems facing left-handers, especially primary teachers who, perhaps with the large numbers of children in their classes, find it difficult to cater to the needs of every child. It is encouraging to note though, that local school Principals have included left-handers in their school policy documents. It is obviously vital for such policy documents to contain clear, practical guidelines on how to help left-handed children in class and provide the necessary resources wherever necessary.

GUIDELINES FOR TEACHERS

1. Record the handedness of all pupils, with ongoing appraisals of left-handers' progress.
2. Seat left-handed pupils to the left of right handers.
3. Encourage them to slant their paper to the right when writing.
4. Place paper to the left of left-hander's midline.
5. Encourage left-handers to use a relaxed pencil grip (to avoid aches and left-handed 'hook' developing).
6. Raise their seating position if possible by placing a cushion on the seat.
7. Model letter movements for left-handed pupils with your left hand.
8. Monitor how they are forming their letters.
9. Encourage left-handers to use pencils and fountain pens - not ballpoints or biros.
10. Place the mouse to the left of the computer.
11. Provide left-handed scissors.

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