Left-handedness
A Call for Research

Douglas Gerwin

Should left-handed children be trained to write with their right hand? An article in the most recent issue of *Erziehungskunst*,[1] the German-language journal on Waldorf education, again challenges the practice of some Waldorf elementary school teachers and therapists who encourage children to learn writing and form drawing solely with the right hand.

G. B., who graduated about five years ago from the original Waldorf school in Stuttgart, Germany, writes in the journal that according to neurological research, even a gentle approach to changing writing from one hand to the other can result in long-term neurological and psychological problems. "The retraining of writing by left-handed pupils is no longer responsible. It is to be rejected and discontinued," he says.

G. B., a student of political science and economics at the University of Potsdam, is himself a lefty who was trained to become a right-handed writer. In his article, he cites the research of Barbara Sattler, who claims that the conversion of left-handed writers can lead to complex functional disturbances, blockages, and undue burden on the cerebral system. "This can in turn lead to disturbances in the powers of memory and concentration, spatial disorientation (left-right uncertainties), greater exhaustion, stuttering, psychological instability, and many other primary and secondary consequences," G. B. writes.

In her collection of essays entitled *Education as Preventive Medicine: A Salutogenic Approach*, Michaela Glöckler, Head of the Medical Section at the Goetheanum, dismisses Sattler's findings, saying, "it is not a question of reversing a child's left-handedness. This is an ever-recurring misunderstanding. The concern is purely directed toward accustoming the child to the right hand in scholastic matters, meaning, to manage writing and form drawing with the right hand. Nothing whatsoever is changed in regard to the dominance of one side over the other in the child's brain."[2] G. B. insists, however, that even in cases limited to the change-over of writing, lasting confusion can result.

Because this practice of retraining the hand touches on deep considerations of the child's destiny and development, the Research Institute would like to initiate some field research into this question. We invite our readers to share with us their experience and findings. What effects can be observed in left-handed pupils who are retrained in their writing? What evidence is there to link the activity of writing to the development of the brain and nervous system? Which factors and special circumstances make this retraining problematic or inadvisable?

We would like to hear especially from teachers in the early grades or physicians and therapists who work with this age group. But we also welcome comments from those who are privy to the "long view" over many years' retrospect—for instance, adults who as children were retrained in their writing hand. Our hope is to stimulate observations, insights, and new perspectives on this controversy. Please direct your comments to:

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Endnotes

1. G. B., "Zur Umschulung des Schreibens bei Linkshaendern," in *Erziehungskunst*, Volume 70, # 2, February 2006, pp. 138–145.

2. Michaela Glöckler, *Education as Preventive Medicine: A Salutogenic Approach*, Fair Oaks, CA: Rudolf Steiner College Press, 2002, p. 88.