

THE LEFT-HANDED DYSLEXIC – DISADVANTAGED TWICE? A POLICY FOR TEACHING LEFT-HANDED PUPILS

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In a recent dissertation I completed for a Masters of Education degree with the University of Wales, Bangor, I posed the question- 'Is the left-handed dyslexic disadvantaged twice?' As a result of my research I found that not only are dyslexics disadvantaged in life but so too are left-handers. If there are disadvantages to being left-handed and also to being dyslexic then the left-handed dyslexic must be disadvantaged twice?

Research has shown that around 10% of the population is dyslexic and around 10% is left-handed. More boys having been noted in research studies as dyslexic or left-handed than girls and there is a high percentage of left-handers amongst dyslexics. In my school study 1% of the school population was left-handed and dyslexic.

To be able to help this small but important minority of left-handed dyslexics it is important first to address the problems associated with left-handedness. No school policy existed to deal with this. Indeed, left-handedness is not classed as a learning difficulty in any education act and has not been recognised by any education authority. I worked on the development of a school policy for teaching left-handed pupils, to encourage teachers to give more thought to planning and resources for left-handers. I hope this may be of use to other schools.

POLICY ON LEFT-HANDEDNESS

Although left-handedness is not recognised as a category of Special Needs by the Government, it is widely accepted that left-handed children may need extra support due to difficulties they may incur in writing or undertaking other tasks.

Left-handers have often been found to be clumsy and have poor motor skills. As the world is geared for the more common right-hander, left-handers can have problems with motor skills involving equipment and working situations in the school, at home, in the community or in the workplace. Research by Coren and Halpern (1991) found that left-handers are more likely to suffer personal injury as a consequence of trying to adapt to a right-handed world.

The main difficulty for left-handers seems to be in writing. Many left-handers experience difficulties in producing neat, clear and legible handwriting.

Left-handed writers can have difficulty with their work due to:

- adopting unusual or poor pen grip
- awkward hand position
- smudging
- unsuitable writing equipment
- wrong position of the paper
- awkward sitting position
- untidy, unreadable writing
- slow speed of processing writing

Guidelines for Teaching Left-handers in the Classroom

Many of these guidelines can be considered conversely to help the right-hander. These are only guidelines of what would be best in an ideal situation.

Seating arrangements

- Left-handers should sit on the left-hand side of right-handers, so that their writing arms do not clash.
- They should sit to the right-hand side of the mid-line of their own space, allowing plenty of room for writing.
- Left-handers may benefit from having their work raised by leaning on a ring-binder folder, sloping board or sloping desk. Their paper should be slanting to the right, clockwise (right-handers -anti-clockwise). The writing can then be away from the body and sloping forwards.
- The pupil may need a higher than normal chair to see over their hand. The seat should slope slightly forwards and the writing surface down towards the body. Feet should be placed flat on the floor with space for knees between seating and writing surface. Footrests can be used for small children.
- Discourage pupils from sitting with their body twisted or from bending too low over their work. Ensure that left-handers can see the board without twisting.
- For left-handers using computers consider repositioning the mouse to the left.
- Workstations or conference/lecture style desks with a right-handed rest may be very difficult for left-handers to use.
- Lighting within the classroom should be in such a position for the left (or right-hander) so it is not shadowing their work.

Specialist equipment

- Left-handed scissors, rulers, compasses, sharpeners, pen nibs and tools, sports equipment or musical instruments may be necessary for some pupils.
- Beware that some equipment might be dangerous for left-handers to use if they are struggling with flexes or controls on the wrong side for them.

Handwriting

- Some pupils may benefit from handwriting lessons.
- Word-processing can be of benefit for those with handwriting problems.
- **Soft** pencil leads are recommended for left-handers. They do not dig into the paper. Non-smudge free-flowing modern pens, such as fibre tips or thick pens with **rubber grips** are best. Metallic, fine or slippery pen barrels are not recommended as these will cause pupils to grip more tightly and dig into the paper.
- Pupils who grip their pens too tightly, cause finger fatigue and calluses on their fingers. While a firmer control may improve the writing for some, others need to be encouraged to relax.
- Many pupils, left or right-handed, do not hold their pen correctly. Encourage correct pen **hold**, away from the tip of the pen, up to two centimetres, so that the pupil can see what they are writing, between the thumb and index finger, with the pen resting on the second finger.
- Some pupils use the 'hook position' in writing, mainly left-handers but occasionally right-handers. This can lead to strain on the wrist. Encourage 'unhooking' by explaining why this would be preferable and getting them to feel the difference. Habits are hard to break - don't force them.
- The pen should point towards the left shoulder. The writing tool should be parallel with the paper edge. Always support the paper with the right hand. Lined paper helps the writer to space out their work and should be introduced early to a writer. Different pupils may require different line spacing.
- Individual portable whiteboards with wipeable pens can be a problem for left-handed pupils or left-handed teachers, as they tend to wipe off what they have written. Tilting the board to the right may help and angling the pen.
- Mirror writing or reversals may be signs of additional problems such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, or eye problems.
- Discourage small writing on the grounds that it encourages tight control and muscle fatigue.

Demonstrating

Demonstrating a task, craft or sport, stand opposite and face the left-hander. This means they can see a mirror image of themselves. The exception to this is in writing, as it may induce mirror writing. Therefore, it is necessary to work alongside them.

Speed of Processing

Left-handers tend to write more slowly because of a difference in processing information, or poor pen and paper control. They may need to stop and lift their arm more frequently to see their work so they may need longer to complete their work.

Stress and Self-Esteem

The pressure of a different hand preference and its accompanying difficulties, particularly if combined with other problems such as dyslexia, can take its toll on self-confidence and self-esteem causing stress, particularly if not recognised, understood or supported.

Should I discourage the child from writing with their left?

NO! Handedness is determined by the brain and not the hand. The decision about choice of hand should be left to the child who will 'elect' to write with the hand which works best with the brain. If a child is continuing to show mixed laterality, pass things to the middle of their body to enable them to form their own preferences.

Conclusion

It is important that all teachers identify left-handed pupils within their lessons and are aware of potential difficulties or dangers and possible strategies or support.

Use a positive approach to encourage left-handers who may not understand why they are struggling. Explain strategies and the support available.

Try to encourage good writing skills from an early age before bad habits are formed. This does not mean changing their preference.

There is no proof that left-handers differ from right-handers in intelligence. However, left-handedness may be present in addition to other educational difficulties. Therefore, if there are other associated concerns regarding a left-handed pupil, it is advisable to refer them to your special educational needs coordinator.

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