

Rudolf Steiner on Teaching Left-Handed Children

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Rudolf Steiner's position on the pedagogical treatment of left-handed children has been much misunderstood over the years. This is partly due to the obscurity of the references. Steiner's indications concerning the pedagogical treatment of left-handed children are buried among the transcriptions of his spoken indications on education. They are not in written works or essays. Some of them were only officially published in English in 1998, and others remain unavailable to this day. The "telephone effect" also contributes to this misunderstanding. When a complex statement is retold from memory through a chain of three or four people, it is inevitably simplified and altered, and this appears to be the case with several misunderstandings that circulate to this day in Waldorf school circles.

Contrary to what we occasionally hear, Steiner did not advocate switching left-handed children to make them right-handed. Steiner's actual position, detailed below, was that ambidextrous children younger than nine should be encouraged to write with one dominant hand, preferably the right. His remarks were made under specific circumstances, and with a number of qualifiers.

Some advocates of left-handedness maintain that such a switch is improper, and even that it constitutes child abuse. The most extreme variation of this argument is that anything that interferes in any way with the inclinations of children to write with whichever hand they prefer is abusive. This position raises the question: Does any pedagogical treatment whatsoever that interferes with a child's natural inclination to do anything also constitute child abuse? Or is this only true when considering the writing hand? Since much education consists of guiding and modifying children's natural inclinations, I do not believe that it

is reasonable to reject Steiner's position outright. That said, Steiner's statements deserve scrutiny.

Steiner's Indications

Steiner's complete statements on left-handedness in children come from the following sources: the two volumes in English (three volumes in German) of Faculty Meetings (GA 300 a, b, and c), volume 309 of the complete works (translated as *The Roots of Education*; the translation, however, is lacking the question and answer section that contains the statement on left-handedness), and the lecture cycle published as *The Renewal of Education*.

The most reliable summary of Steiner's views is most likely found in the untranslated portion of *The Roots of Education*. This is a word-for-word stenographic reconstruction of Steiner's direct

answer to the question. It is also chronologically the last of Steiner's indications on the subject. From the question and answer session following the lecture of April 15, 1924:

Question: How is one to introduce writing to left-handed children?

Rudolf Steiner: With left-handed children it is necessary that you attempt to do as much as possible to change them into right-handed children. Only, if you notice in practice that it is not working at all, then naturally you must then work with their left-handedness. But what we really want is that such left-handed children become right-handed ones; this is usually successful, especially in the case of writing, longhand writing. It is naturally necessary that one closely observe the child that one is attempting to switch from left-handed to right-handed writing; observe how subtly, at a certain stage, when he or she has made an effort for a time, a certain fluidity arises in the manipulation of ideas. Observe

Rudolf Steiner's comments on dominance and on switching children from left- to right-handedness are more thoughtful and complex than many teachers believe.

also how the child under certain circumstances continually stumbles over his or her speech due to thinking too fast, and the like. You must observe this with the greatest care and then make the child him- or herself aware of such things, because the relationship between the development of the arm and hands and the development of the speech center in the brain is considerably more important to the development of the whole human being than we generally think. Many other things besides this have an influence on whether a child is left- or right-handed.¹

This quotation shows how easy it would be to misunderstand Steiner's position. If we look only at the first sentence, it would appear that Steiner intended teachers to forcibly switch all left-handed children. But Steiner's actual position is not nearly that simple, and in practice could even leave a child to write with the left hand. Notice also Steiner's basic approach—the emphasis on close observation, the warning to discontinue if the treatment is not working, and the clearly stated pedagogical goals. Prescient, too, is Steiner's observation of the relationship between fine motor skills and cognitive development, an area that is just beginning to come into prominence eighty years later.

The next quotations are taken from the volumes *Faculty Meetings with Rudolf Steiner*. The contents of these volumes belong to the least reliable portion of Rudolf Steiner's works. What we read is a translation of a summary by an editor of the notes of some of the people who attended the faculty meetings. These are not word-for-word stenographic recordings, and not anything Steiner ever reviewed himself. Editors Erich Gabert and Hans Rudolf Niederhäuser, working at the Steiner Archive, constructed these volumes using primarily the notes of Dr. Karl Schubert, one of the founding teachers at the first Waldorf School, and complemented by the notes of other participants. As Gabert and Niederhäuser note in their preface, "...the notes all have a very fragmented quality. The editors' task was to position the fragments so that they support one another, thus giving the most complete picture possible." Heavy editing went into the

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reconstruction of Steiner's statements, and these are not at all his actual words. There was considerable debate whether or not even to publish them, but, since even less complete versions were circulating, the Archives decided to proceed.

A teacher asks about writing with the left-hand.

Dr. Steiner: In general, you will find that those children who have spiritual tendencies can write without difficulty as they will, left- or right-handed. Children who are materialistically oriented will become addled by writing with both hands. There is a reason for right-handedness. In our materialistic age, children who are left-handed will become idiotic if they alternately use both hands. That is a very questionable thing to do in those circumstances that involve reasoning, but there is no problem in drawing. You can allow them to draw with either hand.²

Note that the state Steiner wishes to avoid is writing with both hands, not writing exclusively with the left. If this quotation accurately reflects Steiner's position, it would clearly be preferred by Steiner that a left-handed child remain exclusively left-handed in his or her writing than that he or she start writing occasionally with the right hand. This statement is quite a bit shorter than the answer of April 15, 1924; it may well be abridged, missing qualifiers and explanations. Further, we should note that the phrasing is a bit harsher than is typical of Steiner—particularly the word "idiotic" seems atypical. Concluding anything from such fragmentary indications is difficult.

A question about piano playing sheds a bit more light:

A music teacher: I would like to ask about learning to play the piano in connection with using both hands.

Dr. Steiner: That is a very correct perception. It is true that it is possible to correct left-handedness quite easily through practicing the piano. That is something we need to keep in mind. We should always correct left-handedness. However, in this connection, we should also take the child's temperament into account so

that melancholics give the right hand preference. You can easily find a tendency with them to play with the left hand. We should emphasize the left hand with the choleric. With phlegmatics you should see to it that they use both hands in balance, and the same is true for the sanguines. That is very important. It would also be an advantage if you tried as much as possible to train children away from simply mechanical feeling when playing the piano, but have them learn to play the keys as such. They should learn to feel the various places on the piano up and down, right and left, so that they feel the piano itself. It is also a good idea to have them play without any written music, at least in the beginning.³

The answer already indicates that the question is incomplete. What is a correct conception? Inasmuch as we can reconstruct the thought process from this fragmentary source, Steiner appears to be addressing lateral dominance issues in general, indicating that piano playing has a beneficial effect especially for the left-handed. He also appears to be warning that in observing handedness, the educator should be aware of the possible influence of temperament on the diagnosis. Steiner also gives general tips on piano instruction. This paragraph in particular seems to be abbreviated.

Here is Steiner's later answer to a more direct question: A teacher asks whether the tendency towards left-handedness should be broken.

Dr. Steiner: In general, yes. At the younger ages, approximately before the age of nine, you can accustom left-handed children to right-handedness at school. You should not do that only if it would have a damaging effect, which is very seldom the case. [See the faculty meeting of December 18, 1923. The notes of one teacher at the December meeting relate the following: "That [the need to switch to the right hand for writing] is not true for clearly left-handed people. Those who are clearly left-handed should be allowed to write with their left hand."] Children are not a sum of things, but exponentially complicated. If you attempt to create symmetry between the right and left with the children, and you exercise both hands in balance, that can lead to weak-mindedness later in life.

The phenomenon of left-handedness is clearly karmic, and, in connection with karma, it is

one of karmic weakness. Allow me to give an example: People who overworked in their previous life, so that they did too much, not just physically or intellectually, but, in general, spiritually, within their soul or feeling, will enter the succeeding life with an intense weakness. That person will be unable to overcome the karmic weakness in the lower human being. (The part of the human being that results from the life between death and a new birth is particularly concentrated in the lower human being, whereas the part that comes from the previous earthly life is concentrated more in the head.) So, what would otherwise be strongly developed becomes weak, and the left leg and left hand are relied upon as a crutch. The preference for the left hand results in the right side of the brain, instead of the left, being used in speech.

If you give in to that too much, then that weakness may perhaps remain for a later, a third earthly life. If you do not give in, then the weakness is brought into balance.

If you make a child do everything equally well with the right and left hands, writing, drawing, work and so forth, the inner human being will be neutralized. Then the I and the astral body are so far removed that the person becomes quite lethargic in later life. Without any intervention, the etheric body is stronger toward the left than the right, and the astral body is more developed toward the right than the left. That is something you may not ignore; you should pay attention to it. However, we may not attempt a simple mechanical balance. The most naive thing you can do is to have as a goal that the children should work with both hands equally well. A desire for a balanced development of both hands arises from today's complete misunderstanding of the nature of the human being.⁴

This is the second longest passage on the subject. Even if these words are not an oversimplification in the notes of the participants, and accurately reflect Steiner's actual statements, it is important to note Steiner's caveat, consistent with the Hippocratic Oath: First, do no harm.

A final quotation from the Faculty Meetings:

A teacher: S.J. in the 7th grade is doing better writing with her left hand than with her right.

Dr. Steiner: You should remind her that she should write only with her right hand. You could try having her lift her left leg so that she hops around on her right leg, that is, have her jump around on her right leg with her left leg drawn up close to her. She is ambidextrous.

If there are children who are clearly left-handed, you'll need to decide. That is something you can observe. You need to look at the left hand. With real left-handed children the right hand appears as though exchanged; the left hand looks like the right hand in that it has more lines than the right hand (Footnote: The notes of one of the teachers contained the following: "That is not true for clearly left-handed people. Those who are clearly left-handed should be allowed to write with the left hand."⁵)

This could also be done through the eyes. You could have children who are really left-handed raise the right hand and look at it with both eyes. Observe how their eyes cross as they move their gaze up their arm until they reach the right hand and then move their gaze back. Then have them stretch their arm. Do that three times.⁶

In this quotation Steiner is again specifically addressing ambidexterity. This is clear even through the fragmentary notes of the participants, each of whom appears to have understood the ideas in his or her own way. Steiner's recommendation is specifically for one student, known personally to him. His diagnosis is that this student is ambidextrous, and for that reason should be encouraged to write with the left hand. Steiner further gives indications to the teachers as to how they are to distinguish true left-handedness from ambidexterity. Like the other passages, it shows a great deal of flexibility in Steiner's approach to the whole question of how to handle children who use the left hand for writing.

Rudolf Steiner made the following remarks during a series of lectures to an audience of public school teachers in Basel, Switzerland. This quotation is from the lecture of May 7, 1920. Again the remarks deal primarily with the question of

ambidexterity, and not specifically left-handedness.

Now I come to a question I have often been asked and that has some significance, namely, the question of left-handedness or ambidexterity.

[I]t would clearly be preferable to Steiner that a left-handed child remain exclusively left-handed in his or her writing than that he or she start writing occasionally with the right hand.

Right-handedness has become a general human habit that we use for writing and other tasks. It is certainly appropriate to extend that by making the left hand, in a sense, more dexterous. That has a certain justification. When we discuss such things, however, our discussion will bear fruit only if we have some deeper insight into the conditions of human life. When we move into a period in which the entire human being should be awakened, when we move into a period in which, in

addition to the capacities for abstraction that are so well developed today, the feeling for culture and a capacity to feel as well as act would play a role, we will be able to speak quite differently about many questions than we can now. If education continues as it is today, so that people are always stuck in abstractions (materialism is precisely what is stuck in abstractions) and education does not help us to understand the material through the spiritual then, after a time, you will become convinced that teaching people to use both hands for writing will trap them in a kind of mental weakness. That results in part from how we are today as human beings, and how we presently use the right hand to a much greater extent than the left. The fact that the whole human being is not completely symmetrically formed also plays a part, particularly in regard to certain organs. When we use both hands to write, for example, this has a deep effect upon the entire human organism.

I would not speak about such things had I not done considerable research in this area and had I not tried, for example, to understand what it means to use the left hand. When people develop a capacity for observing the human being, they will be able to determine through experimenting what it means to use the left hand. When human beings reach a certain level of independence of the spirit and soul from the physical body, it is good to use the left hand; but the dependence of modern

people upon the physical body causes a tremendous revolution in the physical body itself when the left hand is used in the same manner, for example, in writing, as the right. One of the most important points in this regard is that this would stress the right side of the body, the right side of the brain, beyond what modern people can normally tolerate. When people have been taught according to the methods and educational principles we have discussed here, then they may also be ambidextrous. In modern society, we may not simply go on to using both hands. These are things I can say from experience. Statistics would certainly support what I have said today.⁷

These stenographically reconstructed statements were not revised by Steiner, but there is little reason to doubt that they accurately represent his words. Consistent with his other statements on the subject, Steiner strongly objects to ambidexterity, either natural or acquired, and gives a number of explanations for this view. He also hints at the significance of the larger issue of laterality in the entire body. Most interesting is the statement, repeated a week later, that students properly educated in the Waldorf school method would be able to write with the left hand without any harmful effects.

Neuroscience and Steiner's View

As far as I have been able to determine, neuroscience as a whole does not have anything close to a unified opinion on brain-dominance issues. Left-handedness is an aspect of laterality.⁸ No one is purely right-handed or left-handed, but one side is generally dominant, and this has a relationship to the hemisphere of the brain involved. Further, the causes of left-handedness are not known.⁹ Nor is there an agreement on the significance of laterality.

The brain center for articulate speech was located in 1861 by Paul Broca (1824–80) as the third convolution of the left frontal lobe.¹⁰ This

prompted much research into identifying centers for other cortical functions,¹¹ research that continues to this day. After much investigation, it has been determined that there is no one-to-one correspondence between handedness and lateralization of higher cortical functions in the brain. Despite the absence of a strong form of correspondence, a weak form is evident, in that “close to 99 percent of right-handed people... [and] at least 60 percent of left-handed and ambidextrous people... have left-hemisphere language” localization of higher cortical functions. The significance of this is not understood.

Summing up research on switching, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* notes, “The consistency with which children use one hand in preference to the other increases with age, at least through the preschool years and probably longer.” That is, the preference is gradually built during the early years when the brain is still developing most, and becomes increasingly set. “Most children can be trained to use and to prefer the right hand for any

activity, and many have been so trained without obvious harmful effects.... The wisdom of interfering with a child's spontaneous preference, however, has been questioned.”¹²

Although the origin, purpose, and significance of laterality are not completely understood, anthroposophists would prob-

ably see much of the research as confirming Steiner's model. For example, Steiner's statement above—“Without any intervention, the etheric body is stronger toward the left than the right, and the astral body is more developed toward the right than the left”¹³—appears to be confirmed by research into laterality, such as, “The left hemisphere also appears to be more involved than the right in the programming of complex sequences of movement and in some aspects of awareness of one's own body.”¹⁴ These are largely functions related more to the etheric body, while “The right hemisphere, then, appears to be specialized for some aspects of higher-level visual perception,

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spatial orientation, and route finding (sense of direction)...”,¹⁵ indicating aspects with more of a relationship to the astral body.

Steiner seemed to be indicating that in issues of laterality, a left-hand dominance for writing will subsequently have an influence on characteristics of developing thinking. That is, what hand we write with as young children will influence the development of our ability to think. An interesting area of inquiry is the relationship between environmental influences and brain development. Whether students use the left or right hand for writing would be considered an environmental influence on neurological development. At least one study found that it does. The study examined the question of whether neurological development can be influenced by pedagogical treatment, and specifically just the type of treatment that Steiner indicated by telling teachers to encourage left-dominant children to write with their right hand. The study found:

Results indicate reading skill performance is dependent on the relationship between hand preference and the direction of brain asymmetry. Right-handed students whose left temporal plane was larger than the right demonstrated superior reading skills when they came from an average or high socio-economic environment. Right-handed children with reversed asymmetry were at risk for reading failure, especially if they came from a poor family.¹⁶

This study does not definitively answer any questions, but it does indicate that there is indeed a relationship among how children write, the way their brains develop, and their subsequent cognitive abilities.

In summary, neuroscientific research does not provide a definitive answer to either clearly support or refute Steiner’s recommendations. Indications are mixed; however, there is some evidence to indicate that Steiner’s recommendations may have practical benefit.

Conclusion

Steiner’s recommendations are not easily summarized, and can appear at first glance to be somewhat contradictory. In all cases he recommended that ambidextrous children be encouraged to write with only one hand, preferably the right. Further, he warned that intentionally training children in ambidextrous writing would be harmful. Truly left-handed children (and he gave a few tests for determining true left-handedness) should be allowed to write with the left hand. Other children who simply prefer writing with the left hand should be encouraged to switch to the right, with a few caveats. Steiner was careful to repeat that any switching should never harm the child, and that the teacher must pay close attention to the child before, during, and after the intervention to properly evaluate the effects. Finally, Steiner gave detailed explanations for why the issue was important, explanations that have not been contradicted by subsequent advances in neuroscience, though neither have they been confirmed. In the end, Steiner’s position on the pedagogical treatment of left-handed children is not a policy or a doctrine, but a set of indications for educators to study and contemplate as they consider individualized solutions for individual students.

Endnotes

1. Rudolf Steiner. "Anthroposophische Pädagogik und ihre Voraussetzungen." Dornach: Rudolf Steiner-Nachlassverwaltung, 1972. Page 90. (GA 309. Unrevised stenographic reconstruction of the actual words of Rudolf Steiner. Translated by Daniel Hides. Published in English as *The Roots of Education*; the English edition is missing the Question and Answer section that contains the statement on left-handedness.)
2. Rudolf Steiner. *Faculty Meetings with Rudolf Steiner*. Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press 1998. Page 100. Translated by Robert F. Lathe and Nancy Parsons Whittaker from the German (GA 300a,b,c).
3. *Ibid.*, 345–346.
4. *Ibid.*, 635–636.
5. In other words, only cross dominant left-handed children were to be taught to write with the right hand.
6. *Ibid.*, 695–696.
7. Rudolf Steiner. *The Renewal of Education*. Great Barrington, MA: Anthroposophic Press, 2001. Page 213. (GA 301).
8. "Some authors believe such laterality is inherited; others, that the child is trained to it; and still others, that biases are initiated in an infant during pregnancy by some organization of intrauterine forces, such as those producing twinning, or some extrauterine environmental influences. It is possible all three hypotheses are, in some measure, correct." "Laterality." *Encyclopedia Britannica 2002 Deluxe Edition*. CD-ROM. New York: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2002.
9. *Ibid.*
10. "Laterality." *Encyclopedia Britannica 2002 Deluxe Edition*. CD-ROM. New York: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2002.
11. "Human Nervous System: Higher Cerebral Functions." *Encyclopedia Britannica 2002 Deluxe Edition*. CD-ROM. New York: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2002.
12. "Laterality." *Encyclopedia Britannica 2002 Deluxe Edition*. CD-ROM. New York: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2002.
13. Rudolf Steiner. *Faculty Meetings with Rudolf Steiner*. Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press 1998. Page 635-636. Translated by Robert F. Lathe and Nancy Parsons Whittaker from the German (GA 300a,b,c).
14. "Laterality." *Encyclopedia Britannica 2002 Deluxe Edition*. CD-ROM. New York: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2002.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Ramey, Paul E. "UF Study: Brain Structure May Play Role In Children's Ability To Learn To Read." University of Florida. 2 Nov. 1998. 20 Jun. 2005 <<http://www.napa.ufl.edu/98news/reading.htm>>.

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