



## PROFESSIONAL MONOGRAPH SERIES

THE COMMUNITY SCHOOL ■ MONOGRAPH NUMBER EIGHT ■ APRIL 1996

# It's All "Right": The Challenge of Educating the "Right Brain" Child

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**D**uring my fourteen years as a teacher at Community School, I have encountered numerous children whose histories show long standing difficulties in learning to read and write. These valiant children are engaged in a never ending struggle to improve academic skills, to cope and to survive. Among them have been many who display talents, often extraordinary, in art, music, drama, dance, athletics and mechanical abilities. How do we exploit these talents to enhance self-esteem and how do we incorporate them in instruction to improve academic performance? The purpose of this article is to help develop a better understanding of these children and their educational needs.

The human brain is probably the most complexly organized matter in the universe. In their book, *Left Brain, Right Brain*, Sally Springer and Georg Deutsch state that although

most of us think of the brain as a single structure, it is actually divided into two parts called hemispheres. The left hemisphere has been found to operate in a logical, analytical manner in the production and understanding of language, and it appears to process input in a sequential mode. The right hemisphere appears to be responsible for certain spatial skills, artistic and musical abilities and to process information simultaneously and holistically. It has been suggested that everyone may be classified as a *right-brained* person or as a *left-brained* person, depending on which hemisphere guides the bulk of an individual's behavior.

An increasing number of studies completed in recent years have noted that many dyslexics show superior talents in certain right-brained, non-verbal skills. They show prominence in fields such as art, music, dance and drama. The

right brain inspires the creativity and imagination necessary for success in these areas. Many dyslexics display bodily-kinesthetic skills; they are great athletes, surgeons and crafts people. They are able to solve problems or construct products using the whole body or parts of the body. Other dyslexics have strong spatial abilities. They can visualize and remember real, concrete objects in space and maneuver using this model. They display talents as painters, sailors, inventors, engineers and sculptors.

Considering the fact that, school is never easy for the learning disabled child, it is particularly frustrating for the right-brained child who displays talents and excels in tasks not usually tested or evaluated at school. Educational reports often focus on the child's areas of need while failing to include any mention of special, right-brain abilities. Moreover, educational research has revealed that a healthy self-esteem, a composite of that essential sense of competence, worthiness and importance, is a prerequisite for learning. To develop a positive image as a learner, the right-brained child must feel valued for his strengths and talents. This development will promote and support the motivation and effort required for the long, hard task of *plugging away* at learning in problematic areas such as reading, writing and spelling.

Howard Gardner, in his article, *Developing the Spectrum of Human Intelligences*, presents a theory of multiple intelligences. He believes our traditional view of intelligence is narrow and misleading, puts too much emphasis on linguistics and logical-mathematical abilities and does not include a wide enough spectrum of capabilities. By studying linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences, Gardner proposes that the child's neuropsychological strengths could be better matched with appropriate teaching styles. Taking account of his seven types of intelligence could help identify

talents of learning disabled students that are not necessarily recognized by standard testing. Academic programs should then reflect aspects of intelligence now neglected.

As educators, we know that self-esteem tends to flourish when children are encouraged to recognize, develop and share their natural talents. Sharing their abilities enables children to evolve a sense of their own competence and value. For the right-brained child whose primary talents lie in areas other than academic, there are numerous, meaningful, rewarding contributions that can be made within the school environment. With proper planning, education and management, these contributions can lead to a more positive self-image as a learner, as well as the improvement of academic skills.

The challenge in writing this article was to limit my examples of talented students to just a few. Throughout the years, there have been many such children worth noting. For this discussion, I chose to illustrate two students who display different talents.

Let us begin with Billy, age 11, who is presently completing his fourth year in our Lower School. Test records indicate a bright child who entered our school as a non-reader, and with severe speech and language delays. While improvements have been noted, delays remain. I first met Billy this year in his English class, at which time I had several opportunities to work with him. While he generally completed all assigned tasks, at times he appeared despondent and would put his head on his desk. At other times, he would act out in negative ways and display an intolerance of his peers. As I learned later, these behaviors were a clear indication of his poor self-image as a worker and his frustration over failing to achieve on the level at which he is intellectually capable.

My second meeting with Billy stands out

in my mind. Billy completed his written assignment quickly and withdrew a large, white drawing paper from his desk to illustrate his writing. As he picked up his pencil and began to draw, his whole demeanor transformed, his body relaxed, his eyes sparkled; he looked so confident. As his pencil moved across the paper, I couldn't believe my eyes. I had been told that Billy was "good in art", but that was such an understatement. Billy was truly a gifted artist.

Now, let's consider Ricky, 14, who enters Community School at age 12. Records show a bright child with severe delays in reading and language skills, mathematics being an area of strength. I first observed Ricky when he was 12 and struggling in his reading class. His home-room teacher reported that Ricky displayed a poor self-image, often became involved in negative behaviors and was not as considerate of others as he should be. These behaviors, in her view, appeared to be directly related to his frustration at not making faster academic progress.

During Ricky's second year at our school, my schedule placed me in the gym during one of his physical education classes. I watched in amazement as Ricky performed on the court. He was a confident, cooperative and talented athlete. His spatial sense and bodily-kinesthetic abilities were superior. His athletic skills earned him positions on our basketball and softball teams as well as opportunities to assist our gym teacher.

At Community School, a wide variety of curriculum possibilities provide opportunities for achievement in non-academic pursuits. In addition to regularly scheduled art classes, artistic abilities are applied to enhance the appearance of classrooms, offices, hallways, and to create scenery for drama productions. Projects such as drawings, models, dioramas, murals and maps illustrate and reinforce the concepts and skills addressed in content areas. Our literary magazine

and yearbook provide an additional area for artistic expression and achievement.

Acting, musical and dancing abilities are highlighted within weekly drama sessions as well as during special performances and at our annual talent show. Classroom sing-alongs and trips to the theater further emphasize the integrity and value of these talents.

Children who display athletic abilities are recognized within our physical education program and are given opportunities to become members of various sports teams. Assisting the gym teacher and coaching younger students are additional options.

Our unique, weekly Workshop Program, in which students select from a menu of non-academic activities, encourages them to explore avenues of interest, express and demonstrate various right-brained abilities and possibly discover undetected talents. Such diverse activities as woodworking, embroidering, jujitsu, chess, cooking, calligraphy, drama and sports clinics incorporate a wide array of right-brained abilities, including artistic, dramatic, athletic and mechanical skills.

Additional opportunities to develop, utilize and share right-brained abilities are provided through membership in our school service squad. Squad members assist teachers, administrators, younger children, office personnel and our custodian in various endeavors, many of which enhance the value and appreciation of their right-brained talents.

In addition to encouraging positive learning attitudes, right-brained activities also promote the acquisition and reinforcement of academic concepts and skills. Reading plays in drama is often easier for our students than reading other forms of writing. The very structure of a script in terms of dialogue, length and format is

easier to read. It is also easier to identify plot, character and setting. Students who assist younger children with physical activities, art projects and games review various directions, rules and guidelines. This provides opportunities to reinforce sight vocabulary, apply phonetic principles and follow sequential order. Mathematical concepts and skills, including counting, measuring, estimating and calculating, are developed, reviewed and extended in various workshops and service activities. Many of these right-brained activities also help in the development of language skills (both expressive and receptive), improvement of auditory processing and expansion of vocabulary.

These Community School practices have proven beneficial for both Billy and Ricky. Billy's artistic talents are consistently being recognized and encouraged by his teachers. Furthermore, he has become the youngest student to join the staff of both our yearbook and literary magazine. This recognition has helped Billy become more confident as a learner. Negative behaviors are diminishing, and academic improvements continue to slowly develop.

The recognition and accomplishment that Ricky derived from his athletic abilities

have helped him develop a more positive attitude and a greater willingness to persevere in academic areas. He is working more diligently to improve reading, writing and spelling skills. His increasingly positive attitude and greater effort have combined to produce academic improvements.

Since the right-brained learner is better at processing visual images and non-verbal concepts than left-brained verbal information, we must provide an understanding, supportive environment, with ongoing opportunities for success. Each child must be recognized for his or her strengths as well as his or her efforts, so that he or she continues to expand the self-assurance and spirit needed to pursue learning. As each child's educational needs are met, he or she develops an appreciation of his or her uniqueness and pride in his or her accomplishments. Parents can play an important role in this process by encouraging their children to delight in their capabilities and by providing opportunities to shine at home and within the community. This enables the children to continue to develop a positive self-image and the motivation to achieve and succeed in spite of the difficulties encountered.

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