

Raising a Left-Brain Child in a Right-Brain World: Strategies for Helping Bright, Quirky, Socially Awkward Children to Thrive at Home and at School

by Katharine Beals, Trumpeter Books, 2009

Reviewed by Barry Garelick

Many school parents question the value of today's homework assignments. They rightly wonder whether their children are getting the education they need in order to succeed in college. For the most part, they are well-meaning parents who were educated from the 1950's through the 1970's in a different style—a style derided by the current power elite in graduate schools of education and school administration. They describe the schoolroom remembered by today's parents as: sitting in rows, facing front, listening passively to a teacher who talked to the blackboard, “memorizing by rote”, and thinking uncritically. In today's classrooms, students are given a minimal amount of instruction, and instead are presented with a question—say a math problem—told to form groups and work out an approach to solving the problem. Or if not a math problem, they are told to discuss an aspect of a book they are reading. Homework assignments are often art projects, in which students must construct dioramas of the climactic event of a story they read, or decorate a tissue box with German phrases to help them learn the language, or put together a family tree with photographs and label each with the Spanish term for their place in the family.

In *Raising a Left-brain Child in a Right-brain World*, Katharine Beals explores today's classrooms and describes in detail why this approach is particularly destructive and ineffective for students who are shy, awkward, introspective, linear and analytic thinkers. She is careful to explain that her use of the term “left brained” is her way of categorizing students who are linear thinkers—who process information by learning one thing at a time thoroughly before moving on to the next. (I use the term in the same fashion in this review.)

A particularly powerful passage at the beginning of the book describes the difficulties that left-brained children face and provides a stark and disturbing contrast with the traditional classrooms that the parents of these children remember:

Making matters worse is how today's informal discussions favor multiple solutions, personal opinions, and personal connections over single correct answers. In previous generations the best answer, exerting an absolute veto power, favored the studious over the merely charismatic; how that there is no best answer, extroversion is king. ... To fully appreciate the degree to which today's classrooms challenge our children, we should consider how they might have fared in more traditional schools. Imagine how much more at ease they might be in general, and how their attitudes toward school might improve, if they enjoyed the privacy of quietly listening to teachers lecture instead of having to talk to

classmates. ...Imagine if they could read to themselves instead of to a group, do math problems on their own, and find, in the classroom, a safe haven from school yard dynamics. (p. 23)

Beals takes care in describing the attributes of “left-brained children”—shy, socially awkward, introspective, analytical, and literal-minded—a group that includes those with Asperger’s Syndrome and the highly-functional autistic (HFA). Left-brained children benefit from being given explicit instruction in a subject area, and do well with written assignments that focus on the material learned. They are able to summarize what they have read and provide their thoughts on the subject covered in writing but are generally lost when given open ended assignments that relate to their personal feelings (e.g., “tell how you feel about the math problem we solved in class”, “relate the story we read to something about you”). They may not draw well, or they may lack the organizational skills necessary to create a diorama, or any of the many inquiry-based hands-on art oriented projects that integrate math, social studies, literature and science into one assignment as is the trend in classrooms across the country. The admonition to “be creative” is a meaningless instruction to the child who is used to analyzing one thing at a time, in order to build enough mastery to progress to the next step.

Parents of left-brained children are told that their child needs to participate more, that their child’s performance lags behind the other students in the class. And in fact, the children who are disposed to more right-brain-oriented activities seem to be able to hold their own in class discussions. Savvy in the way of telling just enough to satisfy the teacher but not give up anything too personal to run the risk of ridicule, the “right-brained” child flourishes in such classroom settings. Left-brain children are not so fortunate. While the parents lament that their children come up with brilliant analyses at the dinner table at night, or read far ahead of their grade level, their children cannot find the words at the right moment to hold their own in the roller derby of group activities in schools. Suffering from ostracism already because of their shyness, unsociability, and other afflictions, they suffer even more when asked to share anything personal in class. Yet this is what they are asked to do: they are asked to tell how they feel about a story, a math problem, relate an event in history to their personal lives.

The damage to these children also comes in no small part from the gateways and exclusions that are an inherent part of a right-brained classroom. These children’s lack of participation and reticence to “explain their reasoning” for a simple multiplication or addition problem, for example, may prevent them from entry to enrichment and honors classes, where they might finally find the challenge they need in a more structured setting. Beals relates the story of a 13-year-old boy who scored 23 in math on the ACT exam (a standardized college admission exam). The score was high enough to qualify him for courses at Northwestern University, according to Beals, but his middle-school teachers insisted that he couldn’t be that good at math because “on

the school's algebra placement test he filled out a chart incorrectly, exhibiting 'weak inferential thinking.'" (p. 123). It is a Catch-22. They cannot possibly get the grades they need to advance into courses that would do them the most good, because they are held to standards that are either inconsequential or for these children, difficult to achieve: interact socially, participate, come up with more than one way to solve a problem, explain their reasoning.

The right-brained classroom is particularly destructive in "reform math." A student unable to explain how he or she arrived at an answer may be labeled as limited to performing "mere calculations" rather than "higher level thinking". Today's reform math-oriented classrooms have shifted away from explicit demonstrations toward student-centered discussions, group activities, and written essays about math problems. Teaching standard algorithms has given way to multiple shortcuts, shifted from pure math to "real life" applications and "from mathematically challenging assignments to ones that are time-consuming for non-mathematical reasons." (p. 92).

Beals asserts that right-brained children also are hurt by these trends toward inquiry-based and student-centered education. While they may get good grades and recommendations, their education is sub-standard. It is a *mélange* of student-led, teacher-facilitated instruction in which there are no correct answers and process trumps content. Unless children get supplemental help via tutoring, learning centers, or their parents, they learn very little in school. Left-brained children are left out, and right-brained children are given little content and a false sense of accomplishment and ability.

This book is an invaluable guide for parents. It provides helpful advice for negotiating the school system and helping children socially outside of school as well. The book articulates the most accurate insights into the current trends of educational thinking that I have come across. It is a wake-up call for parents of both left- and right-brained children and should be required reading for all students—and teachers—in our schools of education.