

## Turning the tide of hemispheric shift: the case of non-conscious learning

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This is an article about the ever-deeper descent of the Western world into extreme left-hemisphericity, both through government-controlled state education and the recently revealed double-bind of public schools. Hope of reversing extreme left-hemispheric brain dominance comes from the new style of education in Finland based on a system of paraconscious learning developed by Bulgarian psychiatrist Georgi Lozanov.

**Keywords:** Iain McGilchrist; hemisphericity; paraconscious learning; Georgi Lozanov; Finland; peripheral perception; startle reflex

This article follows on from one that I wrote previously for *Self & Society* (Hooper Hansen, 2016) on a talk given by Iain McGilchrist, author of *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (2009). McGilchrist charted and explained the shift of dominance from right to left hemisphere in the Western mind that he considers a major factor in today's warfare and destruction of habitat, concluding that it has long passed the point of being reversible. In his talk, he showed how much this situation had developed since his book was first published. Since his talk, the tunnel vision of bureaucrats has narrowed further, as testified, for instance, by Mo Stewart's book *Cash Not Care* (Stewart, 2016), which describes the almost insane double-binds the UK government has created for the poor, such as abolishing the Employment and Support Allowance that enables and encourages disabled people to seek work.

In the therapeutic world, the shift into the left hemisphere became evident with the movement away from traditional (right-hemispheric) psychoanalytic approaches that dig deeply to unearth ancient emotional material, towards cognitive therapies developed from reframing techniques introduced by Richard Bandler and John Grinder, which instead shift the client's world-view. This undoubtedly 'works' much faster than psychoanalysis, but there is a risk of leaving unresolved emotional issues buried even deeper. Psychotherapists themselves tend to be well-balanced people because their job is to work with the emotional dimension, which necessarily keeps the right brain in ascendance. I often wonder if therapists are aware of just how different their language and behaviour are from that of the rest of us non-therapists.

As McGilchrist showed, we move deeper every day into left-hemispheric dominance: the world of baby monitors, iPhones, obsessive observation and regulation. Toys like Lego that could be used to make anything have morphed into specialized

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sets with microscopic components. Screens dominate all environments, shallowing communication into text message and Facebook. The vital developmental ‘work’ of children that used to take place outdoors has diminished to the point where neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp attributed the epidemic of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) to the body’s feeling of play deficit (e.g. Panksepp, 2007). We now have an epidemic of autism, an abnormality that occurs in the second trimester of development in the womb as the foetus adjusts to what it is receiving from the mother and her environment.<sup>1</sup>

The language we use grows progressively more self-important and less meaningful, coining new words from old such as ‘neoliberalism’. This is, in fact, profoundly *unliberal*, being confined to economic calculation and introducing a new kind of calculative thought, best described as pure ‘left-brainery’. Nevertheless, the British right brain put up a fight to escape the labyrinthine bureaucracy of the European Union (EU) with its armies of clerical staff and entire trains ferrying documents between cities to regulate in precise detail the crop remit and permitted fertilisers to be used by farmers in absurdly diverse landscapes. The former Greek cabinet minister Yanis Varoufakis now travels around Europe explaining the bureaucratic tangles that are unintentionally strangling EU member states, imploring them to stay and sort it out rather than leave.

Education has played a major role in hemispheric shift, but we cannot blame school teachers: their profession was taken over long ago in the UK by politicians, beginning with Margaret Thatcher who emphasized the need to shape a ‘workforce’. Although rational positivism officially died more than 100 years ago with the discovery of Max Planck and Niels Bohr that what appears to be matter is in fact 99.99% empty space and electrical spin, the political-educational world remains firmly rational-positivist, and its approach to learning conveyor-belt reductive. Teachers must do as they are told and conform with the assessment system forced upon them. Failure to comply will threaten the school’s Ofsted rating (Office for Standards in Education, which replaced the once teacher-elected Inspectorate, designed to help, not control). The ultimate punishment is to put the school into ‘special measures’.

Computers crept into schools initially to deal with regulation, enabling teachers to complete the required daily pupil assessments. But children love them because they bring an illusion of intimacy and agency; they are now an established presence, and homework is done online. Tragically, the ubiquity of wifi has introduced a new health threat of ‘electro-sensitivity’, acknowledged in North America but not yet in the UK. It incubates over many years, and at least one apparently related child suicide has already occurred in this country.<sup>2</sup> Because of this recently recognized health threat, many countries have withdrawn wifi from early or all educational establishments, but the UK steadfastly denies that the problem exists.<sup>3</sup> However, if education could be persuaded to look in the opposite direction, it might become the means to a restoration of balance.

### **National hemispheric differences**

Is there such a phenomenon? In 2008, then UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown succeeded in forcing children into school at age four, with the aim of getting mothers back to work. When thousands of childminders protested and eventually resigned (Adams & Adams, 2011), Brown happily let them go because he knew that they

would be replaced by more obedient others – which they were. But when Italian leader Silvio Berlusconi tried the same in Italy, all carers nationwide united in protest and he backed down. This happened because the Italians value their children more, being right-brained and more emotionally aware. Brain dominance is related to, and reflected by, language: vowels are normally received in the right hemisphere, and consonants in the more analytical left. Languages that rely upon vowels to make grammatical distinctions, such as Spanish and Italian, are emphasizing right-hemispheric activity, while those that make distinctions through consonants and particles (such as German and English) are prioritizing the left. Take the verb ‘to eat’:

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|--------------------|----------|-----------|---------|----------|---------|-----------|
| <b>In Italian:</b> | mangio   | mangiamo  | mangi   | mangiate | mangia  | mangiono  |
| <b>In German:</b>  | ich esse | wir essen | du isst | Sie esst | er isst | sie essen |

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While hemisphericity is as widely distributed in Italy as it is in Germany, the two countries are very different culturally: the world turns to Italy for inspiration in art and design, and to Germany for reliable machinery and industrial efficiency. However, these two nations, which could be said to represent opposite hemispheric extremes, have both been unusually creative and productive in music; Germany has a particularly brilliant tradition. This is because music and sound are a major means to restoring the balance of the brain when it becomes over-active in either direction. After a hard day in the office, an evening with Mozart rebalances the mind.

Tonal languages, such as Chinese and Japanese, are an exception to the rule. They differentiate between otherwise identical phonemes by variations of tone: flat, rising or falling. But these distinctions are so complex that they require the analytical skills of the left hemisphere, which therefore has to take over the reception of vowels. This different way of using the brain no doubt contributes to ‘oriental inscrutability’. The Eastern mind is said to be more holistic, weighted towards the right, while the Western is more analytical, which results in different social behaviour, corporate organization and political structure. Chinese and Japanese huddle together in groups, whereas Westerners are more individualistic, with ‘loners’ who take pride in their difference. While the Western world favours democratic government, totalitarianism is a more natural choice in the East (see Nisbett, 2003). The point of all this is to show that there are great differences between populations.

When national groups become seriously unbalanced, things start to happen that help to tip the scales. An example that I found very exciting was the revelation that appeared in the work of Nick Duffell, later in collaboration with Thurstine Basset, shortly before the issue of the UK European referendum arose, of the emotional damage inflicted on children, particularly boys, by ‘public’ boarding schools (Duffell & Basset, 2016). This began the unravelling of a whole cluster of questions accumulated in the British mind over many generations. For me, it cast light upon the strange dilemma of my ex-husband as to whether he should aim for bishop or judge: he was not thinking of the nature of the profession but only of pathways to leadership! The bringing together of McGilchrist with Duffell and Basset also explained the loutish and vocally violent behaviour of politicians at this time, and the fact that failure to join in the naming and shaming will be perceived as weakness rather than strength.

As here in the UK the ruling Conservative Party has sunk into blatant exploitation of the oppressed, making no attempt to disguise their action, the despised are rising in fury, together with their unions, bullied educators and an impoverished National Health Service. It is worth noting that Iain McGilchrist, who described in some detail the terrible right-hemispheric solutions reached during the French Revolution, has made his home for what he evidently anticipates to be an apocalyptic period of history on a remote Scottish island. But the people's choice of leader to oppose this domination of the feeling-free left hemisphere is one who represents the right in its higher aspects – Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn.

A useful description of the kinds of errors into which (left-hemispheric) rational positivism falls can be found in Rupert Sheldrake's book *The Science Delusion* (2012), which explains that materialism has simply been taken for granted, fixed by sensory perception in the unconscious and never subjected to empirical proof! At the end of each chapter, Sheldrake poses 'Questions for Materialists', followed by a short summary that exposes the metaphor on which that particular belief is based.

Educational methodology evolved in a similar way, following Darwin's metaphor of competition, perhaps 'fixed by sensory perception in the unconscious' but subsequently retracted, but sadly too late. Today, in the most expensive schools in England and throughout public education, minds are kept closed by a state of constant mild anxiety and competition against those who might otherwise have been friends, reinforced by frequent pupil testing. Former Education Secretary Michael Gove has been hoist by his own petard. The *Cambridge Review*, once arbiter of everything educational, has been unable to come up with any alternative (Alexander, 2009); and Rudolf Steiner and Waldorf education (e.g. Petrash, 2003), which have the alternative, is largely ignored.

### **The education revolution in Finland**

Here follows an example of one country that has found a brilliant solution to the left-hemisphericity problem through education. The Finns are an extraordinarily disciplined, efficient and hard-working nation, which they attribute to the rigours of a harsh climate, with a very long winter and, in the summer, the midnight sun. Their climate brings the problem of 'seasonal affective disorder' (or SAD) in the winter, and difficulties with daylight throughout summer nights. Melatonin, which affects the nightly repair of body tissue, is secreted only when darkness falls. Without that repair, the body ages and sends out distress signals such as anxiety. Finnish hotels therefore have very heavy summer curtains, but this is something that is not noticed by or known to everyone; there is an alcohol problem. Another issue is the Russian neighbours who from time to time modify the contour of the shared border to gobble up a fanciable estate, and there is very little that can be done about it. The traditional way of coping with life is to toughen up by swimming in the nearest lake every day through winter as well as summer. The new Finnish way is through enlightened education.

Many years ago, a 10-year trial was conducted in junior high schools in Helsinki of the work of Georgi Lozanov, a Bulgarian psychiatrist and neurologist, who was the first to map a methodology for teaching specifically to the non-conscious as opposed to the conscious mind. This involves overloading the conscious mind to distract it from the learning task, which can then take place beyond the restrictions of the

conscious mind. In effect, this simulates nature's way of learning, which is through play and activity. Roberto Assagioli described the different dynamics of this mental process in his discussion of will in *The Act of Will* (1993), and later gave an example of *How to Learn Languages through the Unconscious* (*Come si imparano le lingue per l'inconscio*, 1968). Essentially, while the conscious mind reacts to the fight-or-flight alarm response, the unconscious is attracted by the opposite, all that gives pleasure: beautiful, colourful, animated, witty, strange/curious and all that is emotionally moving – i.e. all that broadens the mind – as opposed to fight-or-flight consciousness, which narrows the mind,

Dr Lozanov discovered his book in Florence (on my own bookshelf!) and proclaimed, 'He thinks just as I do!'. He was there to give a course attended by teachers from all over the world, including a number of Finns. I like to think that the influence of that course was instrumental in shaping Finnish education today.

Classroom conditions for non-conscious learning have to be very different from those of conscious learning because success depends on opening the mind as widely as possible, priming it for relaxed hyper-concentration, similar to that of martial arts, and ensuring that it remains active at all times. As in martial arts, mental activation relies upon physical relaxation. The one bodily response that must never be provoked is the startle reflex, which narrows the mind for escape. But the competitive classroom relies on the startle reflex, which is on 'alert' most of the time, majorly contributing to the exhaustion that children feel at the end of a day. By contrast, stimulation in the Lozanov classroom is largely through peripheral perception, with the mind in a state of diffused awareness. Peripheral perception involves the non-conscious mind, which can take in infinitely more than the conscious mind, and is far more instrumental in memory. Classroom conditions are relaxed, playful and non-judgmental so as to hold the mind in this expanded state.

Finnish education is free from government interference. Private education is against the law and the teaching profession has high social status and total autonomy. All teachers are graduates, usually with a master's degree. As in Scandinavia, children too have greater autonomy than is usual in other countries.

The classroom day is shorter than ours but there is frequent physical activity and an outdoor break every 45 minutes throughout the day, even in conditions of ice and snow. Focus is on finding ways to learn that render children happy and able to think for themselves, necessarily including arts, poetry, music-making, singing and nature walks. All these things would be an indication to me that the principal target is para-conscious learning, not conscious learning. Arts fall flat in a rationalistic environment because the mind is too narrowed to respond to them. Their role in the Lozanov method is to unlock any psychological restriction and uphold the paradoxical relaxed response in which pre-conscious processing<sup>4</sup> can expand, allowing the mind to stretch to full capacity, juggling a host of ideas and images simultaneously. Philosophers George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their highly influential book *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) demonstrated that we naturally think in this way, using images and metaphors rather than logical sequences. On this view, logic is actually a limitation of mind, not, as rationalism would have us believe, an extension. Learning in this global way requires frequent breaks (which the Finns provide) because the mind will continue to process the material while the students chat and play, whereas another class, with new learning, would overlay that activity. Long periods of study are actually counterproductive.

All aspects of children's development are addressed – physical, social and emotional as well as intellectual. All children are considered equal: there is no hot-housing but, instead, groupwork, teamwork, and listening to and showing compassion for others. There is no homework because the brain 'needs to relax' after a day at school (Lozanov's only homework is to scan the text at speed before going to bed, which places it in mind as a whole picture and keeps it active), and there is no competition, either among children or among schools.

Finland does enjoy the luxury of small classes, which enables them to have two groups working side by side in the same room with two teachers, the gifted and talented alongside those with special needs, so that all keep in touch with the same areas of learning. At age 15, children have the option to progress to vocational schools. Teachers collaborate closely to map the best pathway for each child, and resolve any problems as soon as possible.

There is a high level of trust and respect between parents and teachers and very warm relationships between students and teachers, who genuinely believe that the child's work is to play. Nevertheless, the Finns continue to achieve among the highest academic standards in the world, surpassed only by Asian countries who work very long hours, expect parents to enforce school discipline and homework, and focus entirely on high academic achievement.

The Finns' success is based on love for children and recognition of their differences and needs; teachers put the children's happiness, social integration and sense of self-worth before any external factors. This is the opposite of schooling in England, which is now one of the lowest achievers, having descended in the world league tables in proportion to the amount of government interference and control.<sup>5</sup> Constant competition rules out compassion, and the weak go to the wall. A horrifying example of its left-brainery is that between 2014 and 2015, over 50,414 families in poverty were *fined* more than £50 by then Education Secretary Michael Gove's department because their children missed one or more school days. Another was his 'Troops for Teachers' initiative that invited ex-soldiers to bring children back in line.

I was intrigued by the teachers I met during the Lozanov trial, who always seemed to take what I would regard as a right-hemispheric approach to their work. Rather than explaining their classroom work to me in a theoretical way, they chose to foreground the factors most significant to them: the activities they organized and demonstrations they gave to help children understand the subject, including scientific concepts, before they were presented theoretically.

Emotionally as well as intellectually engaged in the children's progress, they remarked upon how their own understanding was constantly enriched and their teaching improved by how the children responded; it was clearly their expectation to learn from the children. It was also evident that they kept in close touch with one another, exchanging and exploring ideas and experiences, seeing themselves as privileged to be part of the experiment and allowing themselves to be transformed; indeed, many said that their lives had been permanently changed. They loved Lozanov's use of suggestion rather than direct presentation, an elegant and economical way of eliciting from the student while also upholding the multidimensionality of mind.

The point of this story is to show how the Finns have learnt to hold the brain in a judicious balance so that the heart and right brain become the agent, while the strengths of the left brain are used in service to the right. There must have been a time when their schools, like ours, regarded all that is non-conscious as 'automatic',

and focused solely on the conscious mind. But the teachers, unrestricted by government control, learnt from the children's needs. Perhaps we can collectively learn from those of the dispossessed and suffering refugees heading in our direction, to shift perspective and begin the journey back towards brain balance.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes

1. Explained by Dr Peter Fenwick at a Scientific & Medical Network gathering in 2010.
2. In 2015, 15-year-old Jenny Fry complained of increasingly painful reactions to the wifi router in her classroom. This condition had begun in 2012, but the school did not investigate or try to mitigate her suffering. After being given a detention in the classroom, she hanged herself in woodland near her home. There was no investigation of this incident and no compassionate response, even to her parents (Gye, 2015).
3. When in 2015 a 10-year-old New Zealand boy, Ethan Wyman, died after an 11-month battle with brain cancer due to sleeping for several months with an iPhone under his pillow switched on, the New Zealand government explicitly addressed wifi in schools (e.g. Waters, 2015). Wifi is banned from all education in Switzerland, Luxembourg, Finland and Scandinavia, and from early years education in Germany and France.
4. The rich domain of pre-conscious processing, infinitely more voluminous than that of conscious thinking, was explored by N.F. Dixon in his iconic book of the same name in 1981.
5. Intervention began under former UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who referred to education of the 'workforce'. By the end of the subsequent Tony Blair regime, England was shown to have dropped from 3rd to 19th in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), which compared 45 countries (as reported in the *Times Educational Supplement*, 30 November 2007, no. 4765).

### Notes on contributor



Grethe Hooper Hansen left school teaching in search of more effective methods in EFL, English as a Foreign Language, and chose Suggestopedia, the creation of medical doctor Georgi Lozanov. After working in Italy and bringing Dr Lozanov to Florence, she became head of SEAL (the Society for Effective Affective Learning), an international organization founded to explore Lozanov's work, which is becoming comprehensible only now as the Western world wakes up to the limitations of scientific materialism.

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