

The Labor Market Consequences of Enforcing Right-Handedness: Sinister Results from an Educational Policy

Silke Anger

IAB Nuremberg, University of Bamberg, IZA Bonn

Guido Heineck*

University of Bamberg, IZA Bonn

Abstract

The use of the left hand for writing and other manual activities was considered as a „natural defect” in various societies for many centuries. Until the beginning of the 20th century, it was a common educational practice in most Western countries to – sometimes brutally – enforce right-handedness to spare children disadvantages in later life. Psychological and biological studies have delivered increasing knowledge that handedness conversion may lead to mental and physical problems of people who are natural left-handers, which led many countries to abandon handedness conversion at the beginning of the 20th century. And in fact, there was – and to date there is – no empirical evidence on whether enforcing right-handedness was successful in improving later life outcomes of this specific group of children.

Our study investigates whether this “childhood intervention policy” was successful in improving economic outcomes of natural left-handers in Germany, where handedness conversion was part of the educational policy up to the 1960s. Using rich data on working age individuals from the German Socio-Economic Panel study, we distinguish between three groups, the natural right-handers, the natural left-handers, and the “converted” left-handers, i.e. natural left-handers who use the right hand for writing. Focusing on labor market outcomes, we find that the earnings of natural left-handers in Germany do not differ significantly from those of right-handers. In contrast, converted left-handers suffer from substantial wages losses, even when controlling for a large number of socio-economic characteristics. Our results show that the group of converted left-handers performs less well in an ultra-short test on cognitive skills, but the wage differentials persist, even conditional on cognitive ability. We conclude that handedness conversion can be a massive interference for individuals’ physical and psychological development with long-term detrimental effects also on the labor market, which leads us to advice parents and teachers to refrain from trying to convert their left-handed child.

JEL codes: I21 · J31·

Keywords: handedness, earnings, cognitive skills

**Correspondence to:* University of Bamberg, Department of Economics, 96045 Bamberg, Germany, Tel.: +49 951 863-2600, E-mail: guido.heineck@uni-bamberg.de