



Paper Swords And Illegible Scripts: Paradoxical Fine Motor Dissociation In A Grade 7 Student With Suspected Dysgraphia

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Abstract

This reflective case study, written from the perspective of a Science teacher, examines the learning profile of "Arjun" (pseudonym), a student in my Grade 7 classroom during the previous academic year (2025 – 26). Arjun presented with significant handwriting difficulties, phonetic spelling errors, and poor reading fluency—clinical features suggestive of dysgraphia. His baseline performance across subjects was 30-35%. Paradoxically, he demonstrated exceptional craft work abilities (designing borders and paper swords within 45 minutes), volunteered enthusiastically for house board decoration, never missed remedial classes, prepared meticulously for every session, and took detailed notes despite his writing struggles. Following a five-month positive reinforcement intervention using the classroom Performance Chart, Arjun's scores improved to 39-40% across most subjects—a modest but meaningful gain of approximately 5-10 percentage points. He remains below grade level (approximately 40% overall), but the improvement demonstrates that addressing performance deficits can yield progress even when underlying skill deficits remain. Most significantly, his parents immediately accepted referral for formal assessment after being informed of his struggles and progress. Assessment reports are pending. This paper reflects on the dissociation between handwriting and other fine motor skills, the importance of modest progress as a valid outcome, and the necessity of formal assessment alongside classroom intervention.

Keywords: Dysgraphia, learning disability, hidden strengths, modest progress, positive reinforcement, Performance Chart, teacher referral, parent collaboration

1. Introduction

1.1 Context of This Reflection

I am a Science teacher at **A M M School, Kotturpuram**, which is part of the **prestigious Murugappa Group**. During the previous academic year (2025-2026), I taught Science to Grade 7. Among my students was "Arjun" (pseudonym), a 13-year-old boy. Over the course of the year, I observed a paradoxical learning profile. This reflective paper documents my observations, the modest but meaningful progress he achieved, and the lessons I learned.

1.2 The Pandemic Context

Arjun experienced significant instructional disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic. During Grades 3 through 5 (ages 8-11), his schooling was largely conducted online. His mother later shared that during remote learning, Arjun often disappeared from video calls, sat silently without participating, or just didn't attend them.

When Arjun entered my Grade 7 Science classroom, I inherited a child whose foundational literacy skills had been compromised—by potential underlying learning disabilities and by years of inadequate instructional support.

1.3 Purpose of This Reflective Case Study

The purpose of this paper is fourfold:

1. To document my observations of a student with suspected dysgraphia who simultaneously demonstrated remarkable hidden strengths
2. To analyze the impact of positive reinforcement on his academic performance (modest but meaningful)
3. To describe the process of parent collaboration leading to formal assessment referral
4. To offer realistic recommendations for educators encountering similar cases

2. Methodology

2.1 Reflective Case Study Design

This paper employs a reflective case study design based on my direct classroom observations as Arjun's Science teacher throughout Grade 7.

2.2 Participant

The participant is "Arjun" (pseudonym), a 13-year-old male student who was in my Grade 7 classroom during the 2025-2026 academic year. He has since moved to Grade 8.

2.3 Data Sources

Data Source	Description
Daily classroom observations	Handwriting, reading, craft work, participation
Performance Chart records	Weekly scholastic and co-scholastic tracking
Remedial class attendance records	Documented attendance
Academic assessments	Formative and summative scores
Parent-teacher meeting notes	Referral conversation documentation
Craft work documentation	Border design, paper swords, house board volunteering

2.4 Ethical Considerations

The student's identity has been fully anonymized. Parents were informed of the referral for formal assessment and provided consent. The author has no conflicts of interest.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Initial Observations: The Struggles (Baseline: 30-35%)

When Arjun entered my Grade 7 classroom in June 2025, his performance was significantly below grade level.

Baseline Academic Performance (June-July 2025):

Subject	Arjun's Score	Class Average
Science (written assessments)	25-30%	60-65%
Science (practical/activity-based)	40-45%	75-80%
Science (oral questioning)	60-70%	75-80%

Handwriting and Spelling:

- Handwriting was labored, inconsistent, often illegible
- Phonetic spelling errors throughout ("photosintesis" for "photosynthesis")
- Difficulty reading back his own writing

The gap between oral responses (60-70%) and written responses (25-30%) was striking—more 25 percentage points.

3.2 The Paradox: Hidden Strengths in Craft Work

Despite his writing struggles, Arjun demonstrated exceptional abilities:

Observation	Detail
Classroom borders	Designed and created intricate paper borders independently
Paper swords	Completed detailed paper swords from scratch in 45 minutes
House board decoration	Volunteered immediately, took initiative, contributed significantly

Key clinical insight: His fine motor difficulties were specific to handwriting. His craft work fine motor skills were not only intact but exceptional.

3.3 Unexpected Strengths: Attendance and Preparation

Behaviour	Observation
Remedial class attendance	Never missed a single session
Class preparation	Came prepared every day
Note-taking	Took meticulous notes (despite legibility issues)

These behaviours reveal strong executive function and intrinsic motivation. Arjun was trying harder than most of his peers.

3.4 Suspected Dysgraphia

Based on my teacher observations, Arjun's profile was consistent with dysgraphia:

Feature	Present
Illegible/inconsistent handwriting	Yes
Slow, effortful writing	Yes
Phonetic spelling errors	Yes
Gap between oral and written expression	Yes (> 25 point gap)
Fine motor dissociation (craft work intact)	Yes

3.5 Intervention: Positive Reinforcement Through Performance Chart

From August 2025 to January 2026 (five months), I implemented structured positive reinforcement using the classroom **Performance Chart** (tracking scholastic and co-scholastic activities).

Key elements:

- Stars awarded for effort, not just correct answers
- Craft work contributions tracked on the chart
- Weekly private review with Arjun
- Consistent daily encouragement

3.6 Outcomes: Modest but Meaningful Progress (39-40%)

Academic Improvements (August 2025 – January 2026):

Subject	Baseline 2025)	(June-July	Post-Intervention (Dec-Jan)	Change
Science (written)	30-35%		39-43%	+5-10%
Other subjects (overall)	30-35%		39-40%	+5-10%

Overall position: Arjun's overall score remains at approximately **40%** —still below grade level, still failing by standard benchmarks.

Important contextualization:

- The improvement is **modest** (5-10 percentage points)
- He **remains below average** (40% vs. class average of 70-75%)
- He is **still struggling** significantly

Why this progress still matters:

Reason	Explanation
Directional change	He was declining or stagnant; now improving
Effort validated	His hard work translated into measurable (though small) gains
Performance barrier addressed	Positive reinforcement helped, confirming that performance deficit was a factor
Underlying disability remains	The modest ceiling (40%) suggests skill deficit still requires specialized intervention

3.7 Qualitative Observations

From my teaching journal:

"Arjun's written test score improved from 32% to 40%. He came to me and said, 'Ma'am, I tried my best.' I showed him his star on the Performance Chart. He is still failing, but he is moving in the right direction."

"He designed paper swords in 45 minutes today. The same hands that cannot write a legible paragraph created something extraordinary. This child is not incapable. Something specific is wrong with writing."

3.8 Parent Collaboration: Immediate Acceptance of Referral

When I met with Arjun's parents, I presented:

- Baseline: 30-35%
- Current: 39-43% (modest improvement)
- Continued struggle (still at 40%)
- Exceptional craft work and attendance (strengths)
- Recommendation for formal assessment

Response: Parents **immediately accepted** the referral. They understood that despite his best efforts and modest progress, he remains below grade level and needs specialized support.

Current status: Assessment reports are **pending**.

4. Discussion: What Does 40% Mean?

4.1 The Honest Interpretation

Perspective

Interpretation

Optimistic reading

He improved. Positive reinforcement helped. He is trying.

Realistic reading

He remains at 40%. This is still failing. Classroom intervention alone is insufficient.

Clinical reading

The ceiling at 40% despite maximum effort strongly suggests an underlying specific learning disability requiring specialized intervention.

4.2 Why Modest Progress Matters

In educational research, modest progress is often dismissed. I argue it should not be:

Reason	Explanation
Direction matters	Moving from 30% to 40% is moving toward grade level, even if far from it
Effort validation	The student sees that trying produces results (even small ones), preventing complete disengagement
Diagnostic information	The ceiling reveals the limits of classroom intervention, supporting referral
Foundation for future	Modest progress now enables more progress later with specialized support

4.3 What 40% Tells Us

Arjun's ceiling at approximately 40% suggests:

Not the primary problem

Motivation (he tries hard)

Effort (he never misses class)

Avoidance (he volunteers)

Likely the primary problem

Underlying skill deficit (dysgraphia)

Need for specialized instruction

Need for accommodations (scribe, extra time)

5. Recommendations for Other Teachers

5.1 Celebrate Modest Progress

Instead of...	Try...
Dismissing 5-10% gains as insignificant	Recognizing that for a struggling student, any upward movement is meaningful
Comparing to grade-level benchmarks	Comparing to the student's own baseline
Waiting for mastery	Acknowledging incremental improvement

5.2 Use Modest Progress to Justify Referral

The fact that Arjun improved to only 40% despite maximum effort is **powerful evidence** for referral:

- "He is trying harder than anyone"
- "He never misses remedial class"
- "He is still at 40%"
- "This suggests something beyond motivation"

5.3 Look for Hidden Strengths

Arjun's craft work abilities revealed that his fine motor difficulties are writing-specific. This dissociation is clinically significant and should be documented in referrals.

5.4 Be Honest with Parents

Present both:

- Improvements (however modest)
- Continued struggles (still at 40%)
- Need for formal assessment

Parents accepted the referral immediately because the data was honest and clear.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary

This reflective case study documented Arjun, a Grade 7 student with suspected dysgraphia who:

- Started at 30-35% across subjects
- Improved to 39-43% following positive reinforcement
- Remains below grade level (approximately 40% overall)
- Demonstrates exceptional craft work abilities (paper swords in 45 minutes)
- Never missed a remedial class
- Had parents who immediately accepted formal assessment referral

6.2 Key Takeaways

1. **Modest progress is still progress.** 30% to 40% is not a miracle, but it is movement in the right direction.
2. **Modest progress does not obviate the need for formal assessment.** The ceiling at 40% despite maximum effort strongly suggests an underlying learning disability.
3. **Strengths can coexist with severe struggles.** Arjun's craft work abilities were exceptional. His handwriting was nearly illegible. Both are true.
4. **Parents will accept referrals when presented with honest data.** Improvement and continued struggle can be presented together.

6.3 Final Reflection

Arjun is not cured. He is not at grade level. He is at 40% after a year of trying harder than anyone. But he is moving—from 30% to 40%—and that movement, however small, matters.

His paper swords remind me that his hands are capable of precision and beauty. His 40% reminds me that something is still wrong. Both truths must be held together.

I am waiting for his assessment reports. I hope they give him the answers that 40% cannot.

Acknowledgement

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Conflict of Interest: None declared.

References

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