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UNDERSTANDING FEUERSTEIN

Douglas K. Griffin, Ph.D.
Chief, Academic Education
The Correctional Service of Canada
Ottawa

Address to Hadassah-Wizo,
Ottawa, March 6, 1980
One of a series of documents published by the Education and Training Division of the Correctional Service of Canada, Ottawa, explaining the nature and role of correctional education.

Douglas K. Griffin, Ph.D.
Chief, Academic Education
The Correctional Service of Canada
340 Laurier Avenue West
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0P9 613-996-7345

Address to Hadassah-Wizo,
Ottawa, March 6, 1980
I'm willing to guess that Mark Twain would have said the same thing about the development of intelligence that he said about the weather: "Everybody talks about it, but nobody does anything about it". Reuven Feuerstein is somebody who has done something about it.

Reuven Feuerstein was born in Roumania something over sixty years ago. He went to Israel at the end of the Second World War, and worked with the young immigrants who had lost their families in Europe. Many of the adolescents he worked with were severely troubled youngsters, who had been traumatized by the horrors which had taken their parents from them. Their ability to deal with life had been impaired in serious ways. Through working with these youngsters, and trying to help them, Reuven Feuerstein began to define the nature of just what it is that enables people to cope with the world around them. What is it, in fact, that enables people to act intelligently?

Intelligence may reasonably be defined as the capacity to deal with the world, to deal with events, facts, situations, data, in a manner that enhances one's own and other people's human existence, and to do so efficiently.

Feuerstein discovered, in working with adolescents whose ability to adapt to life, and to deal with it was severely
impaired, some essential insights into the nature of intelligence. He developed these insights further through his study with Jean Piaget, in Geneva, his work with André Rey, his research in North Africa, and through twenty years of work with children and adolescents. Scarcely a day goes by that Reuven doesn't work with a child, wherever he is in the world. The financial support of Hadassah-Wizo of Canada has been an essential element of Feuerstein's work, and it is fitting that this work is now beginning to be applied in Canada, to help Canadian youngsters, since the on-going support has come from this country. Hadassah-Wizo should feel very proud of the help that they have provided over the years, and the rest of us express our appreciation for that.

Feuerstein's Theory of Intelligence

What did Reuven discover? Reuven calls his theory the theory of Cognitive Modiﬁability and Mediated Learning Experience. The term modifiability bears no connection to the term "modification" as it is used in behaviour modification, and it is perhaps unfortunate that the two words sound so similar. Cognitive Modiﬁability means essentially the changing of a person's cognitive, or thinking processes, as a result of new information and new input. A person who has developed his intelligence, or his ability to think, to an adequate degree, is
a person who is able to use new information in an efficient way, and adapt to new situations in ways that are appropriate for himself and for other people. What does that require? I will attempt to describe some of the things that are required, a little later.

The Two Broad Schools of Learning Theory

I am not a psychologist, and so I cannot claim to be an expert in all areas of psychological theory. I am an educator, and so I do try to be aware of the most important ideas related to learning. There are, in very general terms, two broad schools of thought which are loose in the world today, regarding learning theory. These are the cognitive, and the behaviourist schools. The cognitive school essentially believes that learning can be enhanced through an understanding of how thought processes operate, an understanding of what thinking consists of. The behaviourists essentially believe that learning can be controlled through controlling behaviour, since they define learning as new behaviour. Reuven Feuerstein represents, in my opinion, the most useful, and most highly developed state of the cognitive approach to learning. The cognitive approach is essentially European, and the behaviourist approach is essentially North American. Most schools of teacher training in Canada today still are wedded to behaviourist approaches to learning, and if you
think what I think you think about many teachers today, I need say no more than that.

**Philosophical Basis**

In North America it is fashionable to be hard-headed and practical. It is fashionable to deal with data and facts, rather than theory. It is certainly unfashionable to talk about philosophy, for goodness' sake. And yet, one really cannot avoid paying at least a passing reference to the underlying philosophy on which this approach is based. I want to say a few kind words about the philosophical approach known as "phenomenology".

Consider, for a moment, what we mean when we refer to a "thing". What is a thing? Is it a physical object, or is it something more than that? If my neighbour has a huge new gadget on his roof that spins around and goes beep, I may still not know what it is, even if I were to climb up on his roof and examine it with a magnifying glass. If his wife has a strange new object on her coffee table, I may not know whether it is an Egyptian sacrificial goblet, an ashtray, or a peace-offering after their last fight. If we were able to know what things are by looking at them, or able to know what has happened by knowing the event, the legal profession would be bankrupt. If a sweet young thing marries a rich old man who soon passes on to his
Maker, the fact of the old fellow's death may be easy to determine, but the sweet young thing's right to a healthy inheritance is another matter. We cannot say we know what has happened, unless we can name the event. Was it natural death? Was it accidental? Was it murder? The lawyers and the insurance company will want to know. The archeologist who digs up a bit of shard can very well see what he has in his hand. He can feel it, smell it, break it, scratch it, but he doesn't know what it is, unless he knows what the man who last owned it thought it was.

This is the essence of phenomenology. Phenomenology says that knowledge consists as much of ideas about things, as it does of the experience of the thing or the event, itself. This represents a theory of knowledge, or epistemology.

The cognitive psychologist takes this basic idea, and applies it to thought processes generally. The events of the physical world are too numerous, and too dazzling, to be dealt with directly. Events and things are not really knowable without the combination of an experience of them, and an idea about them. We deal with the world according to a mental screen which we apply to it. It is not simply a screen which prevents us from being exposed to millions of bits of data which are too numerous to deal with, but much more importantly, the screening
process is the action of applying meanings to experience. The meanings which we use, to combine with the event or the experience of the physical object, we draw from our own minds. We do not simply react to the world, respond to the world. Meaning is not implicit in objects and events. Rather, we must impose the meaning which is already in our own mind, on the events and objects which we experience, and in this sense we actually create the world we live in.

This is a very bald account, as they say, of what is really a very hairy story. There are many qualifications that I could state - I do not mean to say that the world is only what we decide it is; but I do believe, as the general theory states, that we cannot have knowledge without having meaning, and that meaning does not exist in the objective world itself; rather it is something we impose on the world. We impose it mentally on the world, which is why cognitive or thinking processes are the most important determinants of behaviour, as Reuven Feuerstein says.

The Importance of Cognitive Functions

This too, is a controversial statement. We have just survived the sixties, during which time we suffered a barrage of propaganda to the effect that intellectual operations are not as real as emotional ones. An army of oriental gurus is still beseeching us to shut off our minds, and not let them get between
us and "real" knowledge. This kind of talk is pure nonsense, as far as I am concerned. I believe that "real" knowledge must necessarily include thought. Knowledge consists of a combination of subjective meaning, and objective experience. Human knowledge cannot exist without the mind.

Let's get back to Reuven Feuerstein. What Reuven has done for us, is to describe, better than anybody else, in my opinion, how the mind goes about placing meaning on the world. He has identified the basic processes that must be used. More than that, he has actually developed a training program to help develop these abilities in people, to actually enable them to think better.

The Nature of Criminal Thinking

This is especially important for the teacher who is working in a prison. A few of us working in Canada's federal prison system have decided that criminal activity is largely the result of thinking. We believe that people commit crimes because they think about the world differently from you and me, and we also believe that a good educational program in a prison should try to do more than make a criminal a more efficient safecracker, or a more skillful fraud artist. We actually believe that an educational program in a prison should attempt to influence the way criminals think, so that they can come to see the world more
the way you and I do.

Reuven's theory as applied to criminals can be stated in the following way: criminals come to apply a different set of meanings to the world than you and I do, because they do not process information the way you and I do. They may not see, or attend to certain events, or characteristics of the situation. They may not have the required set of categories (meanings) in their mind, by which to identify things when they see them. They may be too impulsive, and so not seek the kind of detailed information that they need to have, in order to behave appropriately in a given situation. They may respond to inappropriate cues, and ignore important ones. They may see things from a faulty perspective. Even if they are able to gather the necessary information about the world, and to assign appropriate meanings to it, they may not have the repertoire of skills that are required to provide suitable responses to situations. Dr. Feuerstein's program provides for remediation at each of these three levels - called the input, elaboration, and output levels. Feuerstein describes deficiencies at each of the three levels, and provides help for each of them.

Mediation

Providing help to people who do not deal with the world adequately, Feuerstein calls Mediation. It has nothing to do
with labour disputes. Feuerstein believes that the young child cannot be expected to learn how to seek information and to use it, to apply appropriate meanings to it, and to develop an adequate range of responses to it, all by himself. This represents an extremely important departure from the approach of some behaviourists, who seek only to expose the child to as much stimulation as possible, and expect the child to make sense of it. It also differs sharply from the approach which teaches that the child must be left on his own to make his own sense of the world, and that to do anything more is to impose a false set of values on him. (I'm glad that I hear that a little less often these days, because I grew thoroughly sick of hearing it in the past.)

The mediation process is one whereby an adult - Feuerstein refers to an initiated adult, meaning one who is aware of the process he is engaging in - intervenes between the experience of objective events and things, and the child's reaction to them. The role of the adult is first, to help the child attend to relevant information. It's not enough for example, just to drive through a green light if a fleet of buses are crossing against the red. Secondly, the adult helps the child place appropriate meanings on experience - helps the child develop sufficient categories of kinds of meanings, to accomodate the
range of experiences that have to be dealt with. Thirdly, the adult helps the child develop an appropriate repertoire of responses to the various meaningful experiences which have happened to him.

Feuerstein tells us that for a large number of children these things are not done, or are not done adequately. The result of this, he says, is a child who is culturally deprived - that is, not that the child has acquired a culture that is depriving, but rather that he has been deprived of his own culture. Having failed to develop the necessary skills to seek and to attend to relevant information, and not having an adequate range of possible meanings to apply to the information when he does get it, and not having an appropriate repertoire of responses to situations, the child, the adolescent, has serious problems.

Feuerstein uses the term "bridging", by which he means that the abilities which are developed through Instrumental Enrichment are applied to other life situations. This helps the child, or adolescent, or adult, to function better at regular school work, and in society generally. An intelligent response to any situation requires good functioning at the input, elaborational and output levels.

We believe that this is relevant to many of the people who are being held in our federal prisons. Punishing these
people will provide little help. That's not what they need. Catering to their foolish and selfish whims will probably be worse. The provision of mediation sounds like an idea worth trying, and that is what we intend to do. (I should point out that the program is not yet being used in any federal prison. So far we have spent nearly $30,000.00 on teacher training materials to help them understand the rationale and the methodology of the approach, but the federal prison service spends $30,000.00 per year per inmate, so this figure should be seen in perspective.)

Feuerstein tells us that mediation can occur at any age. Where there has been a blockage of development at a certain age, Feuerstein believes that the blockage can be alleviated later, that the child has not been irreparably damaged by having missed a critical stage.

The mediation methods which help develop the kinds of processes that have been blocked, are paper and pencil exercises that can be done by groups, in the classroom. Teachers present the tasks, and then work individually with students. There are enough instruments developed to keep the child busy for two years.

Feuerstein's program of mediation (the Mediated Learning Experience) is called Instrumental Enrichment. Some music teachers write and ask how to enrich their instruments, but they
don't understand what it's about. The reason for the use of the word instrumental, is that the exercises themselves are designed to be instrumental in accomplishing something else, than the immediate content. The exercises are said to be content-free, because the content, the actual operations that the children, adolescents, or adults do, is not what we want them to retain.

Most material that is presented in school is treated as "content". That means that the child will be expected to reproduce it on the examination. This is not the case with Instrumental Enrichment, which, after all, is used in schools. (It is now used throughout Israel, and has been introduced to schools in Tenessee, Chicago, New York, and Toronto. The Minister for the Development of Intelligence of Venuzuela wants to introduce it into the schools of that country.)

The doing of the exercises that Dr. Feuerstein has developed, trains a person to plan, to seek relevant information, to apply names and categories, that is to say, meanings, to visual designs and pictures. The program requires sight, and hearing. I have never heard any discussion of the possibility of using it with blind or deaf children.

The exercises are designed to remediate the deficient cognitive functions, which Dr. Feuerstein has identified, and
which essentially are a more detailed description of what I have described above: problems of gathering information, applying meaning to it, and responding to it. The actual detailed list of these functions, and an understanding of them, represents for the teacher what many of them have considered the holy grail - the ideal, but unattainable - a practical, applied definition of intelligence, and how to develop it.

Dr. Feuerstein has now published two books, both of which are excellent. The first one describes the assessment program - the Learning Potential Assessment Device, which basically demonstrates the potential for learning which is often far greater than has been realized, in children with retarded performance. The second, Instrumental Enrichment, describes the intervention program. The books are hard to get, and are expensive - about $30.00 each. I suggest you have your library order them.

Dr. Feuerstein has shown us, I believe, the true nature of intelligence, and how it can be developed. It is typical of him, that he believes the most important element in one's work with retarded performers, is to believe that they can learn; that their intelligence can be developed. I once asked Reuven if there really was hope that the use of Instrumental Enrichment could
help federal offenders. He replied that it must be the teacher
who has hope, who has faith in the student, and then Instrumental
Enrichment can be effective.
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