

# **Changing Minds and Brains— The Legacy of Reuven Feuerstein**

Higher Thinking and Cognition  
Through Mediated Learning

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## Prologue

Much of what we have learned about mediated learning experience (MLE) and the potential for cognitive modifiability has come to us through our working with children and adults. The relationship is reciprocal . . . as we help them, we constantly learn about and adapt our theories and techniques. Here, we offer two somewhat contrasting experiences of mediated learning with children, families, and students that will frame our discussion and reflections in this book—one from the classroom and one from our clinical experience.

### MEDIATED LEARNING EXPERIENCE IN THE CLASSROOM

Students in the 4th grade of an inner-city American school district were learning *Instrumental Enrichment* (IE) as part of their curriculum. The program brings mediated learning experience into the developing and strengthening of cognitive functions. These were students from minority groups and low-income families. They were students who were functioning below their expected grade placements, and for whom the general society does not hold out much hope with respect to advanced educational achievement. This was the reason why the school district had brought *Instrumental Enrichment* into their curriculum: to overcome their deficits and enhance their learning experience. They had one period each day of Instrumental Enrichment, that the teacher then bridged into the larger curriculum, integrating the concepts, vocabulary, and learning strategies acquired into their learning of reading, writing, mathematics, and other content—geography, science, literature, history, and so on.

One morning, a substitute teacher came to the classroom. It was announced that their regular teacher was ill, and would be out for an extended period of time. The students then asked: “Will you teach us IE?” When the new teacher responded “What is IE?” the students conferred among themselves, and sent a delegation to the office of the principal. To the principal they said: “We don’t want this teacher. Send this teacher away. We need a

teacher who will teach us IE. Send us a teacher who will teach us IE. It is very important to us. It helps us with our learning of all other subjects!”

This from 4th grade, low-functioning learners! We offer a number of observations: The IE teacher had mediated them well, so they understood how their learning of strategies and concepts would help all their other learning; they had a sense of their power and potential to learn; they had a conscious awareness of both the importance and potential of their learning; and they were able to make relationships between the cognitive processes involved in learning and academic proficiency. We will leave the reader to consider the nature of the relationships that these young learners appeared to have incorporated, and speculate about the effect on their current and later learning as well as their future cognitive potential.

We believe that reflects the essence of mediated learning experience, which we address throughout this book, that answers these speculations and responds to these observations and others!

### **MEDIATING THE SPECIAL NEEDS OF A CHILD**

David was adopted by parents who were very busy, very high-functioning international business executives. They traveled constantly, sometimes taking David with them and sometimes leaving him for extended periods of time with caregivers. Some of the caregivers were either inadequate or harmful. At the time David was brought to me, he was 10 years old and extremely low-functioning. He had almost no language and very limited interactional skills. His parents' travel schedule precluded extended placement in any educational or day care settings, and those who had assessed and observed him previously concluded that he was severely retarded, and they made recommendations accordingly.

I spent part of 2 weeks observing him, literally getting down on the floor with him as he ran a small toy car back and forth making *zoom, zoom, zoom* noises, seemingly endlessly. One had to be very observant for the small signs of recognition and relating—watching his eyes slowly focus on me, orienting himself very so slightly to my body posture, following my actions as I emitted sounds, and the like.

On the basis of these observations, I overruled the recommendations of the specialists and pushed David's parents not to place him in an institution for severely retarded children. Rather, I found a foster home for him, with foster parents who were prepared to accept him, place him in, and fight for the most normalized environment possible, and who would be amenable

to consultation from myself and others whom I sent to them to maintain David in a family and school environment. Over the next 5 to 6 years, we monitored and adapted his program. It was a struggle, with much need to renew energy and reinforce both signs of progress and make adjustments to get him back on track. We taught the foster parents both how to work with and how to make demands on the teachers. Sometimes we had to “back-track” and place David in a classroom of younger peers, or provide short-term, intensive “pull-out” exposure—for example, when he was not making adequate progress in reading, or when he acted antisocially due to language limitations or frustration with tasks that were too demanding.

Fortunately, the school placements and the teachers with whom we worked were open to making adjustments and became supportive mediators, taking cues from the foster parents whom we trained and the consultants we brought into the environment. Slowly, his parents began to see the progress, began to spend more time with him (interrupting their business travel schedules), and both experience his changes (and potential) and get gratification from spending time with him. This reveals an important “truth” about being parents: Once we see ourselves as “good parents” and our children respond to us positively, we experience the natural pleasure that being parents entails.

Eventually, David completed high school in an almost fully normalized environment, and joined the army after his school completion with his peer group. In the army, he became quite proficient, continued his learning, and eventually became a noncommissioned officer with great responsibility. Many years later, when David was the commander of an honor guard at the funeral of one of my nephews, it gave me added comfort as we looked into each other’s faces and recognized our relationship, but he maintained his duty and confirmed his sense of purpose, control, and mastery of his life.

The destiny of this seemingly severely retarded individual, who would have been relegated to an institutional life and would have had no hope for fulfilling his family’s expectations and joining his community as a contributing member, was modified by the application of mediated learning experience. Over time, with much energy and engagement and the involvement of many educators, professionals, and members of the larger community, his human potential was realized.