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CHAPTER 1

You Are Human, You Are Modifiable

The Belief in Human Modifiability

Many letters arrive at the institute* asking for advice and help. One particular letter included a very peculiar request: Help to fulfill the will of a dying mother concerning her son Joel.** With all her heart she did not want her son to be permanently committed to custodial care in a large institution for people with severely retarded performance and behavioral problems. The boy had already been in and out of custodial care facilities many times. Each time he was released to his mother's care, Joel would make the family's life so difficult that he would be sent back to an institution. And yet, with the strong instincts of a mother who wishes to see her child happy, she felt that despite all the odds against the boy, her son could be saved from permanent custodial care.

Joel, age 16, was described as an "incurable" individual whose level of functioning precluded any attempts at independent living. Not only did he have very little capacity for communication, his speech was very impaired. Furthermore, both his short-term and long-term memory were extremely limited, and he had little or no ability to achieve autonomy over his own actions. All this was complicated by his irrational behavior—his inclination to steal stamps and bury them, or steal food and throw it away. Joel's outbursts of anger made him dangerous to have around, so much so that his intellectual impairments became secondary in importance to his aberrant behavior.

Yet at times this same boy could be docile and submissive, with a "yes" answer on his lips even before a question was completed. Joel also had some very interesting "islands" of competence. For instance, if given a drawing to copy, he would trace it on transparent paper with speed and precision. Working in a totally unsystematic way, jumping from one detail to another, he produced a final product that was surprisingly good. But given even the simplest figure to draw from scratch, such as a human face or body or a flower, he was totally unable to comply. The same was true when one attempted to overcome his limited

*The institute refers to Hadassah-WIZO-Canada Research Institute in Jerusalem, Israel.

**All names and identifiable characteristics have been changed throughout this book.

verbal ability. Even verbal repetition was difficult for him, and there were many words he was unable to produce even if they were voiced ten or twelve times.

The letter written by several members of Joel's community that conveyed Joel's mother's wish emphasized that very few of them believed that anything could be done to change the course of Joel's life. Yet, sensing the urgency of his mother's wish, they made a final plea for help to the institute—Joel's last chance. In reading this letter, we had the feeling that all they really expected to hear was that there was no chance for Joel's care and treatment at the institute, especially after they had fully described the difficulties they had encountered in arranging for Joel's placement in a foster home and a youth village.

Despite the odds against Joel, we wanted to assess his modifiability. To the credit of the people of his community, he was immediately brought to us in spite of their grave doubts that he could be helped. Once we started to assess him, we began to appreciate the reasons for their doubts!

His birth history was enough to discourage any attempt to produce changes. Joel was born prematurely, with a very low birth weight. Placed in an incubator immediately after his birth, he remained there for about three months. His vision, lungs, and brain were badly damaged due to a combination of prenatal trauma, premature birth, and a prolonged period in the incubator.

After his release from the hospital, Joel lived in various institutions, separated from his mother and family. Custodial care continued throughout most of his life except for a period during which he was cared for by his adoring grandmother.

When we started to assess Joel, it became clear that we were dealing with a multiply handicapped individual. His sensory-motor and other modalities were affected, and, due to a deficient environment, he was now severely disabled. Working with Joel revealed his attention span to be very short, and even when he appeared to attend, he was extremely slow to respond. We had to repeat the same instruction many times in order to get him to understand and complete a task. Enormous effort was required to get him to learn and memorize the simplest word or phrase. He manifested very little ability to initiate any behavior. Joel's assessment by one of the authors and a number of teachers lasted twenty days. By the end of that time we were able to see small beginnings of change. The belief that Joel was modifiable, despite all of his problems, enabled us to persist in our work. If it weren't for this belief, we would have given up.

Part of Joel's intervention program took him to a foster home group-care program where he was given an enormous amount of individualized mediation, that is, sensitive, focused, dynamic, interactive instruction. His foster parents became intimately involved with him, using every possible opportunity to create stimulating learning conditions. They would point things out to him, repeating words that he learned once but couldn't repeat. Their work elicited responses that had not been forthcoming before. Months of work were invested to get Joel to remember the days of the week and the months of the year, and to tell time.

The joy we experienced when Joel was able to count, without error, up to twenty may have been comparable with the feeling of parents who see their child receive a high school diploma. When he was able to imitate or initiate multisyllable words or reconstruct experiences, we felt that a good part of the battle had been won. Not that there were no regressions. There were plenty. And the regressions were sometimes very intense. For instance, in an outburst of anger, Joel crushed some of his room's furnishings with his bare hands. During such times it took a great deal of tenacity to make him aware of the damage he

Human Beings Are Modifiable

This belief points to the very nature of humankind. All human beings need to be considered as open systems, liable to be meaningfully modified by environmental intervention. Such a view contrasts sharply with the general hereditary view of achievement potential, which, in its extreme form, considers the ultimate level of an individual's functioning to be determined solely by his* genetic endowment. Consequently, little modifiability is expected.

Currently, there is an impressive body of evidence showing the vast possibilities of attaining meaningful alterations in the functioning of various groups of people, including those who have very severe disabilities. For example, data gathered by the authors in both clinical and experimental settings demonstrate that modifying people with many types of serious problems is possible.^{1,2}

The Individual I Am Educating Is Modifiable

A general belief in human modifiability does not necessarily reflect an educator's similar belief as related to the specific child—or adult—with whom he is dealing. Sometimes the characteristics of the individual, his level of functioning, his resistance to various environmental interventions, his level of acting-out or disruptive behavior, may seem to be at odds with a general belief in human modifiability. The way in which a particular individual reacts to intervention may cause the educator to consider modifiability as “nonapplicable” to the child with whom he is dealing. Such a negative belief may preclude the very activities needed to obtain modifiability. In order to activate and persist in long-term intervention despite experiences of failure, it is imperative that the educator's belief in human modifiability be a strong one and refer to a specific child.

I Am Capable of Modifying the Individual

This third proposition relates to the educator's feelings of adequacy and competency as an active, efficient force in producing modifiability in the child with whom he is dealing. Even when adhering to a general belief in human modifiability and to the modifiability of a specific child, some educators may find that the attainment of individual modifiability goals is beyond their own capacities. Such a perceived lack of competence can cause reformulation of the educator's general belief system about human modifiability. For instance, the child rather than the teacher will be “blamed” for a lack of educational progress. Paradoxically, the teacher who feels inadequate may avoid referring the child to someone who might be of help because he does not want to reveal his incapacity. Occasionally, every teacher encounters a child for whom he must get help from another professional, or whom he must even refer to another teacher. But if this happens often, particularly after receiving additional training, the teacher should strongly consider changing professions.

I Myself Am a Person Who May—and Has to—Be Modified

Full professional development can be obtained only if the educator makes a long-lasting investment in his self-modification. Professional complacency is detrimental to the educational interventional process since it glosses over the differences among children, their specific capacities and conditions, as well as many other sociocultural factors that