

# THE FEUERSTEIN APPROACH TO INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION AND RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

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**Abstract:** *This article considers what extent and how, the academic contribution in education of the Israeli scholar Reuven Feuerstein, helps us to develop the best practices to plan and acting in contexts where socio-educational inclusiveness is important. Feuerstein examined the conditions that allow for successful change and that enhance mental capacity, and consequently, the possibility to live within the societies with the active and participative approach. Today, interpersonal dynamics, precarious employment, migration in search of better living conditions and survival, drive the idea that it is no longer possible to think in terms of simple transmission of knowledge. Recognizing and working through meaning, values, relationships, cultural resources is an increasingly complex process. This approach allows the educator to connect actively with different learning needs, and at the same time, promoting the mental and emotional potentials of each person for a better future of our societies.*

**Key words:** *modifiability, mediation, intercultural, education, diversity.*

## 1. Introduction

In this article I consider to what extent, and how, the Israeli scholar Reuven Feuerstein's contribution to education theory and methodology helps us develop the best practices for planning and acting in contexts where socio-educational inclusiveness is important.

The theoretical foundations of Feuerstein are based on a deep belief in the cognitive potential of every human being, the ability to improve the mind's functioning and the belief that traumas, difficulties and "limitations" don't preclude a person from changing her own destiny. Feuerstein's approach is built on a faith in the potential of every human being and optimism about education's ability to help people realize their potential.

Based on the principle that every human being can change, and that quality educational practices are able to bring out that change in the best possible way, Feuerstein studied the cognitive aspects and functions of the mind in order to identify their processes and how they may be improved. The principles of modifiability are active in everyone, throughout life and in every situation, though they occur in different ways and with varying degrees of intensity. Feuerstein examined the conditions that allow for successful change and that

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enhance mental capacity. He also provided instructions on the working environment, the educational approach to be instituted and the use of practical exercises for identifying and overcoming any cognitive deficiencies. In his model of educational practice, mediation assumes a central role.

In this context, mediation refers to an intentional and active effort by the educator, whose aim is to best realize the potential of the individuals with whom she interacts and to gradually develop their autonomy to a level that is as full and complete as possible.

In education, mediation is known as a 'mediated learning experience'. It is the basis of transmitting culture and is often carried out unconsciously by educators. However, with mediation, Feuerstein promotes the importance of the educational relationship as an opportunity to improve thinking and feeling. His work establishes methods, strategies, selection criteria and practical suggestions that allow for awareness to be achieved and for the possibility to acquire and enhance those psycho-pedagogical skills needed to make one's educational approach more meaningful. In mediated learning, it is essential that educators are aware of their role and that they act according to certain criteria that positively affect the subjects' ability to structurally change their cognitive potential (Kopciowski, 2015). The Feuerstein's contribution has to address itself to the great changes which impose on education the processes of adaptation do its goals, its methods, its modality of presentation. All these changes are imposed on those of us who are concerned with the preparation of the new generation for the third millennium and the great requirements which this new area imposes on the individual, who is supposed to live, act and function within it. T

## **2. Early Sources of Feuerstein Approach**

The Feuerstein's education approach is a constant requirement for the thinking of the educator, caregiver and mediator, in order to create the adaptational conditions and the flexibility of the system which will address itself to the adaptational and modifiable needs of the individual's life (Feuerstein, Feuerstein, Falik, Rand, 2006).

If one would ask today about the "equipment" with which we have to endow the new generation, it is attempts to integrate into, to benefit from and, in certain extreme cases, even to survive, in such a rapidly modifying environment and culture, the answer is not to equip the individual with more ready-made problem solving behaviors. Rather, what is important and required from the individual is a propensity to modify himself in response to the requirements that are set up by the unpredictable and totally mutating changes in his life. What will become the most important requirement is modifiability. In this search for flexibility and changeability, when the individual can abandon at a given point the elements which he has learned in order to reach out to new ways of acting, to give up habits which has formed in early childhood in order to adhere to modalities of communication, or interaction which were previously totally alien to him, what he needs most is a capacity to modify himself.

Drawing on Vygotsky, Feuerstein recognizes the need for and responsibility of culture to aid in the development of mental and cognitive processes. For Vygotsky, cognitive processes are formed through social and cultural activities. Culture, and especially the way in which it is transmitted and taught, influences the quality of learning. Cultural-cognitive differences are produced by different systems and practices of education, as well as the particular educational and social methods that various groups experience and

transmit through intra- and inter-cultural relationships. Today, the theme of relationships between different cultures living together, or sharing a single social context, is explored in depth, through research that combines the development of thinking in cultural contexts and relationships between different cultures (Kozulin, 2009).

During our daily, concrete cultural experiences, as Vygotsky points out, the process of internalization and processing knowledge occurs. These processes lead to the construction of thought. Through dialogue one may communicate one's own thoughts to others, and hear their thoughts (Vygotsky, 1987).

### **3. The Mediated Learning Experience**

Feuerstein stresses that only by working through the simmering regions of the emotions and affections can the educator establish a quality relationship with the learner. By defining and validating emotions we identify with the universal character of a certain kind of educational relationship; a relationship that is truly oriented towards the development of a relationship between autonomous and creative minds.

In reflecting on the universal aspects of mediation, Feuerstein explains that, "...one of the great benefits of the experience of mediated learning is that it doesn't require parents to change their behavior, which is the result of a particular culture or the product of individual preferences, and replace it with a 'pre-packaged' program. [...] The mediated learning experience refers less to the *what*, and more to the *how* and *when*. [...] Because an interaction is transformed into a mediated learning experience, it must be given a particular quality: it must be able to influence the cognitive system of the child and produce in her a higher level of modifiability," (Feuerstein, Rand & Feuerstein, 2005 p. 33).

The mediator is not a specific professional figure. The task of the mediator is to choose a way of interacting with others even when her ordinary way of behaving is pushing her in another direction. And so the mediator must be, foremost, a mediator of herself, in as much as the mediator must elaborate the cognitive and emotional aspects necessary for another person's learning experiences to become possible. Mediating must therefore be a conscious choice, the expression of a deep motivation that stems from the need and the desire to ensure intellectual, cultural, emotional and spiritual experiences beyond what is experienced in everyday life.

In mediation, one educates for the development and liberation of the cognitive potential of every individual, because by "...mediating, one projects one's own existence into the future. Educational decisions cease to be directly dependent on the resolution of current problems, nor are they directed towards meeting immediate needs, but are based, rather, on a continuous assessment of the elements and values that one wants to convey" (ibid., p. 224). Each educational commitment is supported by a precise intention. This intention can be defined as the awareness that it is not only the contents of knowledge that are transmitted in education. The ways in which the mind organizes those contents, as well as values, cultural meanings, emotions and feelings are all also transmitted.

When our investment in education isn't deep enough, or isn't capable of influencing the structures of thought and feeling, our mental capacity is limited and expressed in an automatic way. Our full potential is never realized. The educator must ensure that the learner finds the way and means to build confidence in the educational relationship, that is, in the educator. This may be easier if the educator can make students feel that the learning relationship has been built and organized specifically for them, to give voice to

their wishes, their needs, their interests and expectations. This 'privileging of the relationship' gives students the security and openness to cognitive modifiability. Confidence in the educational relationship, encouraged by the mediator, has great potential for achieving educational success.

The criteria for mediation, *intentionality* and *reciprocity* being foremost, respond consistently to the development of an inclusive educational process. The mediated learning experience is intentionally directed towards effective, active and creative learning. It also produces a circularity of knowledge and experiences that are holistic and inclusive. The apparent asymmetry between educator and learner is not implemented in an oppositional and/or dualistic way. This is not a unidirectional give-and-take relationship but rather a circularity of experiences of feeling and thinking. While these take place in personal mental processes, the experiences are then socialized and organized through different forms of communication and active listening. With his model of the mediated learning experience, Feuerstein also explains the distinction between cognitive differences caused by cultural distance, and those caused by cultural deprivation.

Every culture has its own mediated learning systems that enable the transmission of knowledge, behavior, values and models from one generation to the next.

#### **4. Later Developments of Feuerstein Education**

Today, new frontiers of analysis and research concerning processes that allow the transmission of culture are certainly open. Knowledge acquisition is becoming faster, but also more anarchic; in many contexts, younger generations have more skills than older ones. It seems that the traditional relationship, where knowledge is passed "from father to son", has been inverted. In many cases, technological knowledge is confused with deep cultural knowledge, and has become a way to see and interpret reality. But we run the risk of confusing reality with virtual reality; that is, seeing reality for what it appears to be, and not what it is.

Today, communication and interpersonal dynamics, precarious employment, migration in search of better living conditions and survival, drive the idea that it is no longer possible to think in terms of simple transmission of knowledge. Recognizing and working through meaning, values, relationships, cultural resources is an increasingly complex process. This involves the ability to read and interpret environmental and behavioral signals, understand their meanings, and possessing the capacity to recognize their importance through a relational perspective.

The intentionality of cultural transmission, both tangible and intangible, to future generations, is understood as a continuous and active experience of knowledge. The concept of transmission should not be confused with a passive transfer of knowledge, as a "natural" assimilation of values and life experiences. It is precisely because cultural transmission has an impact on the operation of cognitive functions and integration with knowledge content that it is necessary for cultural heritage to be a crucial and active experience of knowledge by all and for all. Individuals who have adequate mediated learning experiences in their culture will develop more skills in transitioning to another culture. This is because mediated learning experiences help individuals develop skills of reflection and complex thought. They activate the conscious performance of cognitive functions, as well as problem solving. They also help build flexible socio-cultural categories that are important for the exchange and understanding of different experiences.

The learning potential of those who are deprived of such educational intentionality may be underdeveloped as these individuals do not know how to respond to change or relationships in new environments. This makes the transition from one culture to another, as well as the comprehension of the various elements of a new culture, even more problematic.

## 5. Conclusion

Therefore, in designing inclusive educational approaches and practices, we must distinguish properly between *cultural diversity* and *cultural deprivation*. The former refers to content, references, experiences, values and ideals that belong to a culture and are, by their nature, different because they originate in specific historical and social experiences. The latter, cultural deprivation, refers to a condition (always modifiable) that exists in individuals who have not had the opportunity to learn the knowledge passed down by their cultural heritage in an active, personal, participatory and engaging way. Those who have been deprived of mediated learning experiences in their own culture show a reduced potential for learning, and this makes the transition to each new life experience problematic. In situations of cultural deprivation it is possible to identify a certain kind of difficulty in relating to others, being able to listen to different opinions and seeing different points of view. "Immigration often results in a clash of cultures, particularly when people from different minority groups are confronted with the requirements of a dominant culture that is unfamiliar to them. Incompatibility between has an important bearing of the capacity of group members to adapt. If traditional means of cultural expression are not forested or appreciated in the dominant culture, they will be inappropriate, the cultural meanings will take on negative connotations, and the cultural and social unity of the group will be disrupted. [...] Parents give up on their power to affect their children's development, and the community as a whole relinquishes its responsibility to shape the future generation. Clearly, these attitudes will have a significant impact on the self-image, identification, socialization, and moral and cognitive development of the child" (Feuerstein, Feuerstein, Falik, Rand, 2006, p. 104).

Feuerstein has studied that one of the most important characteristics of immigration in Israel of the young people, has been its ability to respond to the challenges inherent in the enormous changes in population it witnessed in the course of its service. Despite the enormous amount of work entailed, youth immigration has manifested the constant capacity to rediscover the child behind the diversity in the rapidly changing succession of absorption. It has expressed its willingness to shun the routine in favor of a sincere attempt to do the best for a particular child or group belonging to a particular culture. It has always sought the way best to help a child become acculturated without imposing the culture upon him (Gottesmann, 1985).

Rigid and stereotyped judgments are made frequently. In many cases cultural deprivation can be accompanied by a deprivation of affection caused by an absence or an abandonment by the educator and/or reference points for the child, or by a lack of interest in her educational success. Traditions, rituals and symbols are also strong mediators. They elicit emotions go beyond the immediate meaning of the object, linking it to individual and collective history.

In reference to the second criterion, that is *transcendence*, mediation acts with a view of overcoming the logic of "here and now". Education must go beyond immediate

experience, because if it does not, it will undermine the very meaning of education, which is to enable a process of knowledge in the future. In this dimension of projective intentionality, the criterion of transcendence allows for the construction of principles and values that, in creating the habit of seeking out formal and abstract modes of thought, enhances the meaning of learning and continually improves the performance, both contextualized and not, of cognitive functions.

Through the development of these approaches it is possible to answer the question of how to integrate diversity in an original and active way. Feuerstein's approach is geared towards recognizing learning differences and specific potential. At the same time, it also allows us to identify for each learning type, from those who excel to those with serious disadvantages, the mediation that is best suited for developing the mind and a way of living that promotes joy and reciprocity. This approach allows the educator to connect actively with different learning needs, which are intertwined with other variables inherent in the learning process, such as social background and the characteristics of any given culture.

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