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The Feuerstein Schools – Guidelines

I. Introduction

Comprehensive multi-faceted, Feuerstein's psycho-educational approach long ago ceased to be a mere educational technique or assessment method – today it comprises a rich philosophy, a solid research foundation and innumerable applications. The International Center has received countless appeals for information regarding the question of what a 'Feuerstein' School should look like. The numerous challenges faced by modern youth place a heavy burden on educational systems. The situation is far from satisfactory. This short article will receive full expression in the book being written on this important issue and for this reason it was written more as a guideline or a pointer rather than a detailed program. This is why we do not intend to draw comparisons to other models existent in this field. It is our hope that these pages will challenge readers to give serious thought to the issues discussed.

II. The educational goals of the 'Feuerstein School'

The school's major goal is to produce people with a high ability to change and adapt, based on high level thinking and learning skills, i.e. men and women able to adapt optimally to the demands of life and the rules of society while still preserving a sense of tradition and values.

III. The major emphasis

The 'Feuerstein School's' major stress is process-orientated rather than product-orientated, in other words one of its major goals is to produce thinking people who have control over their thinking processes and are able to adapt them to the requirements of tasks before them.

IV. Today's teachers

Today's teachers are under-empowered. Their weakness stems not from a lack of motivation or skills, but is caused rather by the fact that they have been enfeebled by culture due to a number of different factors such as social status, salary, training, etc. There is, however, one factor in particular that made teachers' position weaker. Modern societies invest more and more resources in assessment and student labeling rather than in their educational advancement. We certainly do not mean to say that this is done out of evil intent – it is out of an explicit outlook that seeks to detect genetic-hereditary-cerebral roots to students' difficulties. Terms such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, etc., all sorts of 'dys', permeate school culture and the result is predictable. The teacher is pushed aside and his/her place is taken by other professionals who are specialists in diagnosing and labeling. Unfortunately, ethnic, in fact near-racist definitions have invaded our world (e.g. *The Bell Curve*, Richard Herrnstein, 1994) and they determine that there are groups of the population that cannot really be educated to a high level. Some dwell on socio-economic conditions, sometimes the reasons are 'internal' and at others they are 'external-environmental' but the common denominator is the fact that in the current cultural atmosphere teachers lack the belief that they can modify their students. The student's declared deficiency is more powerful than his/her educational abilities. The primary change

that must come about is the teachers' basic standpoint towards education. Teachers must study Feuerstein's theory of **Structural Cognitive Modifiability (SCM)** whose major axiom is a belief in human modifiability. This viewpoint, standpoint or belief should become a starting point for teacher's activity. Teachers are meant to change students – change their intelligence, their propensities and their emotions. This identity gives teachers the strength and motivation to accomplish their mission so teachers must know and believe that every child can do it.

V. Teachers' toolbox

A teacher's identity and his/her propensity is not enough, they must know how to implement their new identity, how to put into action that latent assurance that 'every child can do it'. And now we come to the most confounding absurdity (there is no better word to describe such foolishness) of the current educational viewpoint. Schools teach a lot of 'languages' – mathematics is a sort of 'language' and not just those who will become mathematicians learn it. All students study math and lots of it. In my opinion children in Western societies study some 1,200 hours of math over 12 school years. Why so much? Because math is an essential language of technology and science. We study grammar and foreign languages, we study computers and all those are types of languages that will open up opportunities enabling one to control different areas of knowledge. However, most astonishingly, there is one language that we completely disregard – the language of thinking and learning. Why do we understand that mathematics has to be taught? And why English? And why don't we understand that children must be taught to compare, gather data, understand questions and instructions, be precise – to what extent and when – to control their behavior, make hypotheses and check them, organize information and break it up, and many other learning and thinking skills. Were we born with them? Our answer is, NO! They must be acquired, just as math is acquired.

We demand our children's progress from teachers yet we fail to give those teachers the basic tools to do so. We pack them full of information but fail to ensure that they have the tools to organize, internalize and retrieve when needed. The 'Feuerstein School' ensures that all its teachers have learned the theory of **Mediated Learning Experience (MLE)**, that they know the basic language of thinking and learning and that they know how to identify students' problems and how to fill the gaps. They also know how to teach subject matter while taking into account cognitive processes essential for optimal assimilation.

In short, teachers at the 'Feuerstein School' have a sound knowledge of the language of learning and thinking and they make use of it across subjects – in fact there is no subject not based on this infrastructure.

VI. The syllabus

It is not sufficient to train teachers in English language – they will also have to teach English, and by the same token, it is not enough to train teachers in the 'language of thinking', they will have to train students in the 'language of thinking'. Feuerstein cast the principles of his theory in a series of tools, constructing a comprehensive, methodological study program for the teaching of the 'language of thinking'. The program is named **Instrumental Enrichment (IE)** and it consists of two parts –

Instrumental Enrichment – Basic intended for use with young children and **Instrumental Enrichment – Classic** suitable for older children and adults. It is made up of hundreds of worksheets ('pen and paper' tasks), which teach students, and in fact teachers too, a wide range of **learning and thinking skills**. In this way the program teaches temporal and spatial perception, comprehension of instructions, classification, comparison, analysis and synthesis, spatial organization, deduction, mathematical thinking, analogical thinking, the meaning of relations and how they are formed and used, question asking and using questions to create understanding, etc. The program is not taught, but rather **mediated** by the teacher. The theory of **Mediated Learning Experience** was mentioned above. This theory defines the most effective process for teaching thinking and learning skills, known as '**mediation**'. In this process, instead of teaching the student by frontal methods, the teacher encourages the student to think independently. In this process the teacher does not just teach the principle, he/she also actively bridges it to many other areas. For example **mediation** of the processes of analysis and synthesis will not just include teaching this principle, but will also link it to a range of subjects, demonstrating the principle by solving a complex problem in algebra or working out a complicated sentence in a passage of literature. Examples are given with consideration of complex social and economic situations. In other words, the principle is not taught to the student without the student turning it into a content-laden, active matter closely linked to all subjects. The **Instrumental Enrichment Program** has been researched extensively and its effectiveness has been proved over and over again for the last 40 years in a large number of countries, cultures and levels of functioning.

VII. Are math and literature learnt at the School?

Certainly, but with a few important differences:

- a. Students come to math and English lessons equipped with a toolbox of thinking and learning skills.
- b. The teacher **bridges** principles learnt in the IE lessons to different subject lessons taught at the School. Feuerstein likens this to the following parable: The river of thinking has two banks. One is the bank of content and the other is the process. Thinking and learning skills must be taught separately from content. However bridges must be erected over the river to link the learning skills to the content and incorporate them.
- c. The content lessons become more **mediated**, in other words instead of the teacher giving the lesson in a frontal manner, he/she teaches in a mediated way, teaching the students to **think** out the subject rather than just memorizing it or just understanding it.

VIII. Tests, grades, diplomas

- a. The structure of the Feuerstein School: Each subject has three grades. One reflects the student's level of command of the subjects learnt; another reflects the student's modifiability – whether he/she showed progress in a particular subject over the year and to what extent; and the third reflects the level of the

- student's command of his/her learning and thinking skills in that subject.
- b. Let's imagine the following scenario: Three students attend the same 5th grade class. John scored 80 in command of knowledge but just 50 on modifiability as he has received that score for quite some time. On command of basic skills he got 70 as his command of them is average, he has many more thinking failures than lack of knowledge failures. Rachel, on the other hand, got just 60 on content but 80 on thinking and learning skills. She certainly knows how to interpret the subject but she did not put enough of an effort into acquiring knowledge. Shelley got a low 60 on knowledge but 90 on modifiability, because her previous score was 30. In other words, the battery of tests (not detailed here) focuses on creating a broad, incisive and in-depth picture of the process.
- c. One of the most important questions here is the **mediation of a feeling of competence**. The goal of all these scores and results is to create a true feeling of competence in the students and for this reason the different results are mediated to the student and he/she will understand the internal system of considerations used to arrive at a score.

IX. Who are the students?

Today schools put much emphasis on classification. The reason for this is that they are weak. It is much easier to teach 'talented' (what exactly is 'talented' ?) students and to teach a homogenous classroom. But as soon as a school strengthens its teachers, reinforces the cognitive infrastructure of its students, the teachers and the staff are filled with belief and the responsibility of advancing the intelligence of their students rather than just their level of knowledge. Such a school can also take in weaker students and help them to make the most significant progress.

X. Behavior and motivation

The basic approach of Feuerstein's theories is that emotions, motivation and behavior have to be approached from a cognitive angle. The answer to questions: "Why are you getting upset for nothing?", or "Why are you beating up a helpless boy?", or "Why do I have to put so much time into studying?" is embedded in the cognitive dimension. Insufficient thinking and learning skills will cause difficulties in these areas so teachers' approach in teaching students must emphasize the cognitive aspect underlying the basis of the students' behavior and emotions.

There are two additional advantages in stressing the cognitive aspect. One is more communicative than the truly emotional-motivational one. The cognitive factor is more stable than the emotional one. To summarize, the study of IE should have an impact on the ability to hold a conversation in emotional and motivational areas, so

teachers who learnt to **mediate** will use those skills to deal with those areas. We will complete this passage with the following example: A student was sent to the principal over and over again for his bad behavior and each time the principal gave him a more severe punishment, but nothing helped. The **mediating** principal understood that he was dealing with a student who had an **episodic grasp of reality**, i.e. the student failed to connect his own past experiences to his present events. Rather than scolding and punishing the student, the principal will mediate to him the connection between past and present and will attempt to create appropriate understanding in him.

XI. Integrating people with special needs

The setting is an integrative school. Mainstreaming is not just a moral and educational value, but also a factor that advances and accelerates the school's main mission. If integration has been carried out satisfactorily, the school has aroused a process of learning and reorganization to take in mainstreamed students. This, in itself, assures the dynamic approach of the school staff.

XII. What is the 'Feuerstein School'?

The 'Feuerstein School' is characterized by the active, dynamic attitude of its staff. Their approach is process-orientated rather than product-orientated. The school creates a **logical, rational dialogue** with its students on any subject and it strives to obtain every student's success, and, possibly the most important words in this whole article – the Feuerstein School is characterized in its belief in the human being.