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Professor Reuven Feuerstein: A personal remembrance from a very grateful mother

By HANNAH BROWN
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Feuerstein was a clinical, developmental and cognitive psychologist renowned for his work in proving that intelligence is not fixed but modifiable.

‘Reuven, why do you need your glasses?’ my son Danny asked Prof. Reuven Feuerstein the first time they met, in the summer of 2003.

‘Because I’m an old man,’ said the professor, one of Jerusalem’s most recognizable figures with his black beret and long beard, who passed away on Tuesday at the age of 92.

Since I heard of the professor’s death, I’ve replayed this exchange in my mind, because although it might not seem like a remarkable conversation between a young boy with autism and a teacher, it was the beginning of what became a most beautiful friendship and partnership between my son and Reuven, and between my family and the Feuerstein Institute, officially known by its more formal name, the International Center for the Advancement of Learning Potential in Jerusalem.

Feuerstein was a clinical, developmental and cognitive psychologist renowned for his groundbreaking work in demonstrating that intelligence is not fixed but modifiable.

In 1992, Feuerstein was awarded the Israel Prize for Social Sciences.

In 2012, he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

At his funeral on Wednesday his body lay in the courtyard at the Feuerstein Institute, as he was lauded as a great man whose drive teach special-needs children changed thousands of lives around the world.

‘He was the Einstein of education,’ said Prof. Pnina Klein of Bar Ilan University, and perhaps that said it all.

Education Minister Shay Piron, Rabbi Haim Druckman, Yoram Raviv of President Peres’ office and others spoke of Feuerstein’s contributions, while Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat echoed the feelings of many in the crowd when he said, ‘Professor Feuerstein completely changed my world view.’

Feuerstein’s children – Rabbi Refael Feuerstein, Daniel Feuerstein, Aharon Feuerstein and Noa Schwartz – all spoke, mourning their father, and two of his grandchildren, one of whom has Down Syndrome, gave moving tributes.

‘He never gave up on a child,’ said Aharon, who also spoke of his father’s time in a work camp during World War II and his father’s marriage to Berta, who died in 2003.

For more than 50 years, and in over 80 countries, Professor Feuerstein’s theories and applied systems have been implemented in both clinical and classroom settings. Professor Feuerstein’s theory on the malleability of intelligence has led to more than 2 000 scientific research studies and countless case studies with various

intelligence has led to more than 2,000 scientific research studies and countless case studies with various populations.

Families from every continent other than Antarctica have been flocking to Jerusalem for years, to give their children – who have autism, Down Syndrome and other types of mental retardation, brain injuries, strokes, and dozens of rare neurological conditions – treatment that could substantially improve their ability to learn, communicate and live independently.

The problems the children came in with were different, but the method guided Feuerstein and his therapists to find the best way to reach everyone. Virtually every family I've seen in the waiting room in the decade since I brought my son to the Institute has observed substantive improvement in their children's abilities. He and his staff didn't only teach our children.

They taught us how to help our children learn, and in the process empowered us and gave us hope.

Among the theories and applied systems that Professor Feuerstein developed are Structural Cognitive Modifiability, Mediated Learning Experience, (MLE), Cognitive Map, Dynamic Assessment: Learning Propensity Assessment Device (LPAD), Instrumental Enrichment Tools (IE), and Shaped Modifying Environments (SME). These tools and approaches provide educators and therapists with the ability to systematically develop the cognitive functioning of students and patients.

Feuerstein was born in Romania in 1921, and was one of nine siblings.

He attended the Teachers College of Bucharest and studied psychology at the Onesco College in Bucharest before being forced to flee for his life following the Nazi invasion of Romania. After settling in Mandate Palestine in 1945, he taught child survivors of the Holocaust until 1948.

Feuerstein returned to Europe to complete degrees in General and Clinical Psychology at the University of Geneva, where he studied under Andre Rey and Jean Piaget. In 1970, Feuerstein earned his PhD in Developmental Psychology at the University of Sorbonne, France. His major areas of study were Developmental, Clinical and Cognitive Psychology.

In the 1950s and 60s Feuerstein served as the director of Psychological Services of Youth Aliyah in Europe. In this capacity, he was responsible assessing young immigrants and assigning them to various educational programs in Israel.

He discovered that when standard IQ tests were administered to Moroccan Jewish children they did poorly, but if they were guided through the question-answer format by a mediator, the children's performance improved dramatically.

This experience made Feuerstein question current beliefs regarding the stability of intelligence, and posit that cultural differences in learning styles were the real issue.

He developed new methods of evaluation and new teaching tools that searched for cognitive flexibility (the ability to learn) and built on those abilities.

He founded the Institute for the Enhancement of Learning Potential as a research institute in 1964 and it became a treatment center for children and young adults in 1989.

My son's experience with the professor and his method mirrors the relationship that thousands and thousands of children and adults with all types of disabilities had with Feuerstein. There are few people who have so directly touched and improved so many people's lives in such a profound way.

The initial conversation between my son, who was then seven and had diagnosed with autism at the age of three, shocked me because this was the first time he had uttered a complete, original sentence (not one he had heard in a book or video and was repeating) in years. In fact, it may well have been the longest and most coherent sentence that he had ever spoken in his life.

There is much about Professor Feuerstein and his accomplishments that I, a cynical reporter trained in New York, would never have believed had I not seen it with my own eyes. Danny pulled that sentence out of a hidden part of his brain because the professor looked at him and was present with him in a way no adult had been until then.

Danny completely connected to the professor, and this unlocked his mind in some way. Many parents will tell you their children had a similar experience with the professor.

I didn't know it then, but this exchange, and the sudden, almost miraculous blossoming of my son's language skills, was a pure expression of Feuerstein's brilliant and complex method. Essentially, it boils down to figuring out why each child has difficulty learning and to find a way to explain things – Feuerstein called it mediation – so that the child can understand them. This is the rare method that looks at each child's strengths as well as weaknesses to understand how he or she learns. Slowly, incrementally, the child's cognition begins to change and tasks and concepts he could not understand before start to make sense. By the end of a year of this therapy, the incremental changes add up to meaningful, lasting improvements.

Feuerstein therapists use a set of tools called Instrumental Enrichment to change the way children and students learn.

However, many of those who come to the Feuerstein Institute seeking treatment are far from ready to sit and learn from the Instrumental Enrichment workbooks when they arrive. My son, at seven, could not even play with a single toy for more than 10 seconds, let alone do complex exercises involving organizing and finding shapes in groups of dots, typically the first workbook therapists use.

Until a few years ago when his health began to fade, the professor was closely involved in every student's treatment and he was always interested in my son.

Danny quickly learned that Reuven, as the children always called him, kept great quantities of candies in his desk. But in addition to sweets, Danny received a much more substantive gift from the professor.

Under Feuerstein's guidance, the staff spent the better part of decade investing a great deal of time, energy and skill teaching my son first to play with each toy for a few minutes at a time, then to spend entire sessions playing with one or two toys.

Gradually, Danny developed what is called "functional play": instead of simply rolling a car back and forth, he would put a car into a garage, take it to a toy car wash, and build bridges and tunnels out of books. He became interested in the books, and began to study children's encyclopedias at a table guided by a therapist. He internalized the therapists' mediation and his motivation changed. He actually wanted to play in a more focused, varied way. Only after years was he able to sit still and work the Instrumental Enrichment tools, but when he was ready, he was eager to learn. He still is.

Had we not had the good luck to find Professor Feuerstein when we did I am convinced that my son, who at the age of seven was given to wild and frequent tantrums, would be institutionalized in a restrictive setting today. While my son still faces many challenges, he is able to speak for himself and has learned so many skills that would have been only a dream without the professor's contributions to his life.

Like many parents of children who came to the Feuerstein Institute, I shed tears at the funeral. I met a family whose son had severe epilepsy and had half of his brain removed, but then was taught by Professor Feuerstein to read Hebrew in just a few weeks – it seems incredible but it's true – and I saw them crying today, too. So will the French family who were told that their child was hopelessly autistic and then were astounded when the boy learned to talk in just a few weeks at the center. There will be grief in Kenya, Buenos Aires, London, Paris, Japan and most other countries around the globe as Professor Feuerstein's family sits shiva for him.

One of the professor's sons, Rabbi Rafi Feuerstein, is the vice-chairman of the Institute, and will guide the staff through this sad and difficult transition.

But while they will be many tears of grief, they will also be even more tears of gratitude. And tears of love.

Because love was at the center of Professor Feuerstein's method. One of its tenets was that there must be a warm, trusting relationship between the therapist and the child. It might seem like common sense, but that building block anchored one of the most innovative and useful educational methods the world has ever known. On that day when my little boy wanted to talk to an old man about his glasses, I sensed that Danny had begun an extraordinary journey with an extraordinary guide. And although Professor Feuerstein will no longer be physically present, his spirit will live on in every classroom where a child like my son is given the gift of learning how to understand and love the world.

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