

## VIDEO REVIEW

*The Mind of a Child: Working With Children Affected by Poverty, Racism and War*, 1995, Vancouver, British Columbia: Face to Face Media Society in association with the National Film Board of Canada. 59 minutes, 30 seconds. Colour, 1/2" VHS CDN \$39.95.

*The Mind of a Child* is a powerful video that illustrates some of the salient issues in Native education. The work of Israeli psychologist Reuben Feuerstein is used to advance an explanation for the learning problems experienced by some Native children in today's schools. Feuerstein's work provides a framework for a new interpretation of issues facing First Nations education, and also suggests constructive actions that might be taken to address these issues. The video does not include information on the long-term effects of the approaches demonstrated, but the scenes portraying teachers working with youth and the subsequent interviews with these teachers allow the viewer to make a personal judgement.

The film illustrates the commonalities of the experiences of Native students in Canada with Afro-American students in the United States, with Ethiopian refugees in Israel, and with Jewish child survivors of the Holocaust. It presents the views of six different teachers, all working with at-risk children. At times the video lacks continuity when trying to link these discrete groups. Adding to the disjointedness is the portrayal of children engaged in remedial problem-solving exercises designed by Feuerstein. Anyone unfamiliar with Feuerstein's work would not understand that the exercises are intended to remediate the cognitive processing difficulties of children who have been deprived of "mediated learning experiences". In Feuerstein's view, the role of parents is to mediate the world to their children by helping them deal with the multitude of stimuli they encounter. Each culture frames the means by which parents mediate the world for their children. Feuerstein believes that when cultures are devalued by a dominant group or when parents are prevented from raising their children in their accustomed way, then their group becomes, as stated in the video, "culturally dry" and parents believe that they have nothing of value to pass on to their children. The result is that children do not receive the mediation that they require, and in turn their cognitive processing is impaired.

The argument being advanced in the video is that Native communities have experienced the devaluing of their cultures and have been prevented from passing on their cultures by such measures as the removal of their children to residential schools. The result is that the children have not had the necessary experiences in mediation and are therefore deficient in cognitive processing. Without some understanding of Feuerstein's work, the images of children in the video solving the remedial problems are confusing and disjointed. An introduction to the theoretical basis of the exercises early in the film would help the viewer better understand the purpose of these portions of the film.

The film does not address several new issues in Native education: education for self-determination, with Native teachers, Native trustees, Native curriculum, and Native pedagogy. It merely talks about the weaknesses of early states of education and educational models from the past: residential schools and assimilationist public schools operated by non-Natives. The failure to recognize the uniqueness of Native education and the contributions of emerging educational models limit this video. If one accepts the premise that Native children are suffering from a lack of "mediated learning experiences" due to the interference their parents and grandparents have encountered in passing on their culture to successive generations, then clearly this provides one more argument for First Nations schools to devote considerable effort toward the preservation and practice of their cultures.

Currently, the value of different cultures is, at least officially, accepted by educators. In the 1960s, however, it was common to talk about minority students being culturally disadvantaged. It was erroneously contended that one's culture could disadvantage one from succeeding in the dominant culture. The video raises this issue of cultural deprivation. Feuerstein hypothesizes that if one learns one's own culture and traditions, one can readily learn about another culture, much like acquiring a second language. Feuerstein believes that every culture contains all of the elements that are necessary for the adequate emotional and cognitive development of children. The culture, language and traditions must be transmitted from one generation to another because if interrupted, the result is poor cognitive development in children. As mentioned above, Feuerstein contends that political interference such as that which resulted in the creation of the residential school system, interferes with the cognitive development of children.

The film does provide some powerful visual images of children in Indian residential schools, where the loneliness and isolation are dramatically shown. As well, the video demonstrates the destructive impact of the

negative messages sent to these children. The sequencing of the film is interesting, as once the salient features of Feuerstein's theories are outlined, in terms of the importance of the transmission of culture, the viewer then realizes the impact of separation on Native families through residential schools, and the effect of this destructive policy on subsequent generations.

Another valuable point made in the video is that educators often assume the learning problems of child members of assimilated groups are attributable to a lack of student intelligence rather than to cultural differences. The video states that too often minority students are perceived through an ingrained institutional attitude that they are not capable. Such an attitude prevents teachers from taking ownership of the "learning problem" as a teaching problem that good pedagogy can address.

The film shows clips from Washington, Vancouver, and Jerusalem as teachers work with at-risk students. Critical theorists would agree with the position of these teachers. They contend that these children, often viewed as ignorant, have "street smarts" and that an effective teacher finds ways to bring this knowledge into the classroom.

The video demonstrates how significant a role teachers can play in helping students "experience joy" and in making them feel confident, capable, and able. The message that one is left with is that teachers can make a difference, especially with at-risk students.

The video, which was produced and directed by Gary Marcuse, would be especially useful for pre-service teacher education and for inservicing practicing teachers.

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