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FILM REVIEW

Original Minds

Directed by T. Weidlinger; produced by Moira Productions. Oley, PA: Bullfrog Films (2011).

Reviewed by Tracy Thorndike-Christ, Western Washington University

Original Minds paints a poignant and thought-provoking portrait of what it's like to learn and think in ways different from those valued and supported in typical classrooms. The film centers on the stories of five teenagers, all of whom have been classified as learning disabled, as they participate in a semester-long special class designed to teach them how the brain works and help them gain insight into their unique patterns of strengths and weaknesses. Parents, teachers, and other adults weigh in with their own perspectives, but the teens' own first person accounts of their frustrations with learning and schooling, and their increasing awareness of their own strengths take center stage in this provocative and inspiring film.

Kerrigan's thinking rarely follows a linear path. Attention to one idea rapidly brings a host of associations to mind, prompting him to turn inward to pursue deeper exploration of the connections he sees. In doing so, he loses track of what is happening in his immediate environment so frequently that his teacher complains that he's "not really grounded in reality." Kerrigan is extremely creative and an accomplished musician, poet, and artist. Through his growing awareness of how he thinks, he develops strategies to "trick himself" into paying attention in school. Unfortunately, implementation of these techniques looks like off-task behavior to many teachers.

Nattie has considerable difficulty with spatial processing and worries about getting lost when away from home or school. She struggles to interpret social cues, particularly those that are non-verbal. Witnessing her confusion and frustration as peers and adults comment in her presence about the inappropriateness of many of her social behaviors is heartbreaking. Nattie has developed quite sophisticated strategies to navigate her world, both physical and internal, by using words to help her "make sense of space." When she can "think aloud" she can talk herself through the demands of almost any task or situation.

Marshall is easily distracted. He reports that changes to his daily schedule mean that, "All Hell breaks out" and he, "can't remember anything." Due to his self-identified lack of organizational skills, Marshall loses more assignments than he turns in. According to his father, Marshall spends the majority of his life in "LaLa Land" and constant entreaties of "Marshall, focus!" are required to get anything accomplished. When engaged in sports, however, Marshall shows few signs of the distractibility that plagues him in the classroom and at home. As a member of his school's rowing team, Marshall is highly focused and on-task during practices and races and sufficiently organized to fully meet the expectations of his coach and teammates.

NeeNee was held back in 3rd grade and, because she is ashamed to be the oldest student in her class, typically skips school on her birthday. She struggles to write and listen at the same time, making note-taking in lecture-based classes impossible. NeeNee is highly social and well-loved by her classmates and family but reports that being labeled as someone with a learning disability makes her feel like an "outcast." She is frequently absent from school and laments her school failures by saying, "How can it be *so* wrong when I try *so* hard?" NeeNee is an expressive and talented dancer who has never missed a single class or practice at her community-based dance studio.

Deandre was placed in a pull-out special education classroom during middle school, following the death of his mother and while living in a physically and verbally abusive environment with extended family. While at one level rejecting the message from his family and the school that he is "stupid" and vowing to prove them wrong by going to college, at another level Deandre is afraid that they might be right. With a gift for music and poetry, Deandre has learned to compensate for his writing difficulties by expressing his ideas in the form of rap songs, writing down the lyrics, and then fleshing the ideas out in a way that conforms to the required format of his writing assignments.

Unlike many depictions of people with learning differences or disabilities, *Original Minds* manages to avoid evoking common stereotypes. While some moments in the film are painful to watch and others are uplifting, these students are portrayed neither as victims of their disabilities nor as heroes in overcoming their difficulties. Throughout the film, rather than serving as exemplars of diagnostic categories, each teen comes across as a real individual with a full complement of strengths and weaknesses. Indeed, so do all of the adults that populate their lives. Ultimately, that is the take-away message of the film—all people are, first and most importantly, individuals. Each of us has talents and challenges; looking for and fostering those strengths and feeling compassion for any difficulties in both ourselves and in others is inherently

worthwhile.

The DVD, in addition to the 57-minute final cut of the film, contains additional out-take footage of each student and a 30-page supplemental instructor's guide in PDF format to facilitate the use of the film in educational settings. Contained in the guide are descriptions of the STRANDS survey (Survey of Teenage Readiness and Neurodevelopmental Status), a tool utilized by the film's protagonists to help them gain greater understanding of their own "original minds;" background material about the different aspects of brain function (measured by the STRANDS) that provided the theoretical framework for the metacognitive work in which the students engaged; and text describing each of the student and his or her pattern of strengths and weaknesses. Each chapter concludes with thought-provoking questions that would make useful prompts for in-class discussions or independent reflective assignments. The guide concludes with a list of resource organizations and additional Internet resources to facilitate further independent research.