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MEDIATED LEARNING

Part 2: Mediated learning and its application in teaching children from Roma settlements

"Have faith because there is hope."

"Don't give them fish, don't give them fishing rods! Teach them how these rods are made and how they are used. Only then will you save them ..."

"An ideal environment will not solve anything; it will rather go wrong."

"If you are not prepared to look at your pupils' strengths, don't touch their weaknesses."

"A goal of education is to assist growth toward greater complexity and integration and to assist in the process of self-organization - to modify individuals' capacity to modify themselves."

"The child grows into the expectations of her parents ..."

Reuven Feuerstein¹

Success at school is often not only conditioned by the actual level of individual child's cognitive functions, but also by the biological conditions. However, a no less important determinant is the socio-cultural context in which the teaching and learning is conducted.

For decades, the empirical findings have confirmed that the child's life chances also depend on his or her social background. Lev Semionovich Vygotsky was one of the first authors who emphasized the social and cultural conditionality of the development of the human mind.

¹ "Reuven Feuerstein is one of a handful of educational thinkers and practitioners who has made a significant, lasting contribution to our understanding of human learning." —Howard Gardner, Harvard Graduate School of Education



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For many years, several authors have also been drawing attention to the economic, social and moral implications of children in Slovakia not having equal opportunities and fair chances in education, especially from two aspects: belonging to the lowest social class and being of Roma origin.

Slovakia gives a chance to all but the poorest

Libor Melioris, January 25, 2018 SME (shortened)

Talent and abilities are distributed about equally in society. There is no reason why success or failure should be inherited from generation to generation. The explanation for failure of children from low-income families at school is, as a result, therefore, of a lack of resources and opportunities for education and training together with only a limited number of positive patterns (rules) and incentives.

Beside the fact that this state (Slovakia) is simply unfair, it is also inefficient because it cannot fully exploit the potential of all its members. In addition, international comparisons show that in countries with high social mobility, citizens' overall satisfaction with their quality of life is higher than in countries with lower mobility. Violent crime rates are also lower in countries with higher mobility.

The likelihood that a child of a long-term unemployed parent will be unemployed for more than two years is four times higher than that of a child of parents who have been employed. Parents' poverty transmits steplessly from one generation to a next one, and many gifted children from the poorest families do not get a chance to apply their talents.

Primary schools are not for the poor

Kristína Visolajská, POSTOJ, 10/23/2017

The Slovak Constitution guarantees the same right to education for all children. Since all children have the opportunity and duty to go to school, we take this right as unqualified. I also used to take it that way, but only until my kids started going to school and I took a deeper look into the school system. Then it practically showed me how it really works. Although education in our country is free, it is nevertheless highly dependent on parents' income or assets, even if a child attends a primary school. Even though the basic precondition for pulling a person out of a socially disadvantaged environment is to give him education.



Pupils have to have the workbooks, that cost between 30 and 40 euros per year (including one for a foreign language) and while this may not be a large amount for a middle class family over a year, it is a lot of money for a poor and multi-child family.

Pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds almost never have a computer at home, so they do not do their computer science homework, they are not used to working with information and they cannot use the Internet to search materials for projects. Thus, their knowledge and results in these subjects are automatically poor.

Another example are trips and excursions. The primary school in Gelnica organizes five to ten trips a year and parents pay for them. Naturally, children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds do not go on any of such excursions or trips, they spend this time at school.

In the afternoon, most children attend the school club, but this does not apply to children from a socially weaker environment. The fee for a school club is paid by parents and although it is only a few euros a month, they have to pay or their children cannot attend. Extracurricular activities are organized by the school club, and these are fully paid by the state. If a child cannot attend the school club after the morning classes, he cannot attend extracurricular activities which can support the development of a child's talent.

The psychological effect of this reality on a child is enormous. In Slovakia, children from such an environment are disadvantaged from day one at school. On their first day, they are placed into an extra category, which means lacking something and/or not going somewhere. The child then easily acquires the impression that he is a second-class person.

According to the headmaster of the primary school in Gelnica, Bibiána Krajníková, the state, if it wants to give them a chance for a full education, should pay for these activities to enable all children to attend them.

Krajníková, as well as a former teacher of Teach for Slovakia Igor André, considers the community centers in municipalities and towns, where children could spend their time after the morning classes and where they can work with their parents and learn hygiene habits, etc., to be the key. Without the social work, carried out in community centers, there will be no significant educational progress for children from socially disadvantaged communities. Increasing the amount of state funds for the children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds is likely to meet with the reluctance of the majority. However, let us consider how much unemployment benefits would cost throughout the lives



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of these children when they grow up. Their behavioral patterns are likely to pass from one generation to the next. Isn't it much more effective to invest in education of the children, who will later return all the money back in higher taxes? Funds should be therefore directed to schools, where the money would not be wasted, and also to social work carried out, ideally, in community centers.

It is profoundly immoral for us to lose thousands of talents a year, just because the parents of these children do not have the assets, the ability, or the will, to invest in their children's education.

If we are looking for an answer as to how to support and enhance the school performance of children from families with lower socio-economic status, one of the options is through mediated learning. A possible cause of lower school outcomes and the overall failure of children from lower background is their *lack of experience of mediated learning*, resulting in deficit cognitive functions.



In literature, the theory of mediated learning is associated with the name of Reuven Feuerstein. As a student of Jean Piaget, Reuven Feuerstein's theory stated that "the intelligence is not 'fixed', but rather modifiable" and can be modified through mediated learning and mediated interventions. While the "Piagetian" theory looked at a child as a small explorer who learns primarily through direct contact with the

phenomena, objects and environment surrounding him, according to Feuerstein, the child learns in interaction with the objects. Feuerstein paid more attention to the so-called "significant" important adults, who care for children. Feuerstein understands the direct forms of learning as a second form of learning. Significant important persons, according to Feuerstein, are in early years of a child, primarily parents, and later these are other important persons close to the child - relatives, siblings, later teachers or more experienced peers. These important second persons mediate the child's learning. "Adults, for example, select..., emphasize... or interpret the situations, objects, phenomena, or events that appear in the child's world."² However, not every child has sufficient experience with mediated

² Málková, G.: Sprostředkované učení (Mediated Learning. How to teach pupils think and learn). (2009). Portál, p. 16



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learning at home. Only those children who have had such an opportunity are able to later "take the advantage" from the direct forms of learning.

Children without sufficient experience of mediated learning have not been given the opportunity to learn how to learn. As a result, they have deficit cognitive functions. As stated by Věra Pokorná (2006), these children are more impulsive in thinking and acting; they are not capable to structure information, they are not able to think ahead the strategy or to plan steps how to solve the task and they are not able to learn from their own mistakes. However, their failure is not based on low intelligence, but on underdeveloped cognitive skills.

From the pedagogical diagnostics of a pupil from the Roma settlement in Velká Ida, zero grade, 6 years old, 2013:

Attention, concentration, and attention time are weakened, he focuses only on the tasks he can do. You can motivate him on more demanding work, but he needs support from an adult person. Often, he performs the tasks without planning and impulsively. He can gain more from individual mediation, as during the collective mediation he tends to escape. Fine motor skills and graphomotorics are underdeveloped, inaccurate grip persists; he holds a pencil by four fingers. He manages better coloring the pictures, but often he works very fast and does not pay attention to details. Among children he communicates in Romani language, in school with teachers in Slovak language, which is a foreign language for him.

A positive aspect of the mediated learning theory is that the deficit functions can be stimulated. Feuerstein created a program of Instrumental Enrichment (FIE), which is based on Structural Cognitive Modifiability (SCM) and on the application of Mediated Learning Experience (MLE). "The Feuerstein Instrumental Enrichment (FIE) program is a strategy for the development of a learner's cognitive structures."³ "The FIE program has two major goals serving two main populations: (1) enrichment of the individual's repertoire of cognitive strategies leading to more efficient learning and problem solving, and (2) the remediation of deficient cognitive functions and development of strategies in

³ Feuerstein, R., Feuerstein, R., Falik, L., Rand, Y.: The Feuerstein Instrumental Enrichment Program. (2006). ICELP Publications, p. 1



individuals with impaired performance.”⁴ SCM is based on the knowledge that a human beings change throughout all their lives. Feuerstein describes “the human being as the outcome of a *triple ontogeny*: the biological, the socio-cultural, and Mediated Learning Experience.”⁵ We all are modifiable and we can develop ourselves throughout our lives. Feuerstein argues that the environment in which the individual grows is very important, because thinking and learning are based on our ability to structure the environment (time or other phenomena, events or objects). “Individuals learn by way of two main modalities: direct exposure to stimuli and MLE.”⁶ “In MLE interaction, ..., learning is carried out by means of an experienced adult, usually the parent, who interposes himself or herself between the child and the world of stimuli.The mediator presents stimuli to the children by modifying their frequency, order, intensity, and context; by arousing in the children curiosity, vigilance, and perceptual acuity; and by trying to improve and/or create in the child the cognitive functions required for temporal, spatial, and cause–effect relationships.”⁷

The authors of a successful concept "Bridges out of Poverty" from "aha! Process" respect and emphasize the significant position and importance of mediated learning. Bridges out of Poverty is an effective concept, supporting the social work with and education of individuals from poverty. In addition, this concept helps to improve the professionalism, expertise and sensibilization of staff working with people in poverty, regardless of their nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender and age. The following figure shows the factors that affect the development of human cognitive functions⁸.

⁴ Feuerstein, R., Feuerstein, R., Falik, L., Rand, Y.: The Feuerstein Instrumental Enrichment Program. (2006). ICELP Publications, p. 1

⁵ Feuerstein, R., Feuerstein, R., Falik, L., Rand, Y.: The Feuerstein Instrumental Enrichment Program. (2006). ICELP Publications, p. 53

⁶ Tzuriel, D.: Mediated Learning Experience and Cognitive Modifiability. (2013). Journal of Cognitive Education and Psychology, Volume 12, Number 1, Springer Publishing Company, p. 59 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1891/1945-8959.12.1.59>)

⁷ Tzuriel, D.: Mediated Learning Experience and Cognitive Modifiability. (2013). Journal of Cognitive Education and Psychology, Volume 12, Number 1, Springer Publishing Company, p. 61 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1891/1945-8959.12.1.59>)

⁸ http://www.pegasjournal.eu/files/Pegas1_2016_11.pdf

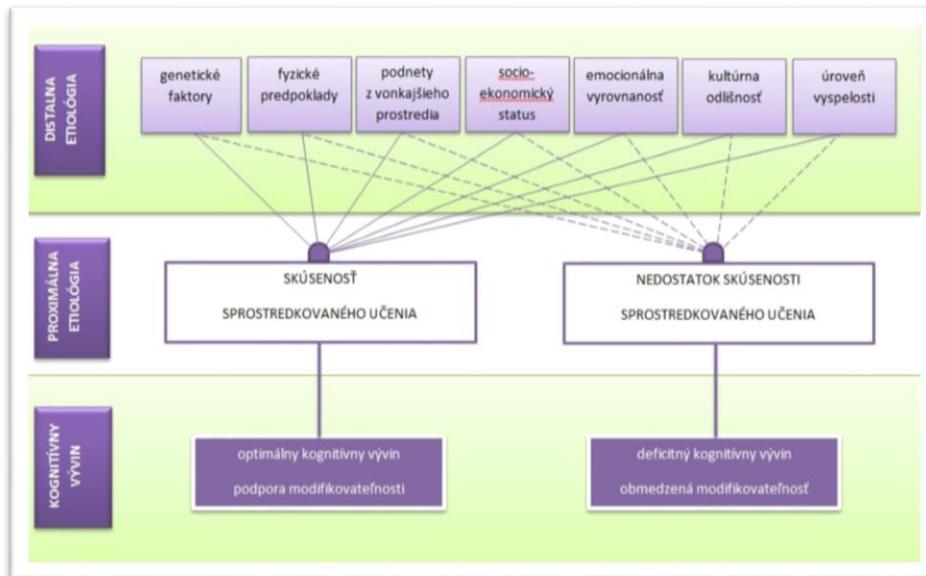


Fig. 1 Distal and proximal etiological factors affecting the development of cognitive functions

But how does the child's social background relate to his or her cognitive deficits? The model of mediated learning is based on the socio-cultural context of the learning process. Based on this model, the child's social environment is very important, as are the people around the child, the so called important or "significant" adults. Not all significant adults (in the first position are parents) can or may want to mediate learning for the child for either objective or subjective reasons.

Feuerstein states that some events, such as wars, toxic stress may be dangerous for development of children but it is the family itself that may also be problematic. A family, which experiences a lot of suffering and adversity, which struggles everyday for survival is not able to convey the knowledge to the child (families in material need and/or socially excluded families). Such parents are unable to sensitively perceive and adequately satisfy the child's developmental needs. The child has fewer opportunities for mediated learning and is dependent only on another form of learning - direct learning.

There are factors that significantly affect the learning potential of a child from poverty. David C. Berliner's study *Poverty and Potential* lists six factors that 'significantly affect children's health and



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learning potential: (1) low birth weight and non-genetic prenatal effects, (2) insufficient health, dental and eye care, (3) lack of food, (4) environmental pollution, (5) family relationships and stress, and (6) habitat and community characteristics.

Non-profit organization, ETP Slovakia (ETP) in its community centers, located close to poor Roma settlements, and operated in partnership with local partners (municipality, church, primary and secondary schools, non-profit organizations, volunteers), applies the comprehensive approach, i.e.: teaches three to six-year-olds in pre-school clubs, sets up after-school clubs for primary school pupils, tutors middle school pupils in the afternoon, provides middle class mentors, who help their protégés with homework and to integrate into high school and society in general. During summer holidays, in cooperation with volunteers from Slovakia and abroad, ETP organizes daily summer camps in community centers and week-long camps in beautiful countryside, outside of the children's home environment. The Feuerstein's Instrumental Enrichment lecturers teach children from poor Roma settlements.

Hillbilly Elegy (Family and Culture Chronicle in Crisis)

VANCE., J., D .: *Hillbilly Elegy*. Publisher TATRAN, Bratislava, 2017, p. 10

"I was one of those kids with a grim future. I almost failed out of high school. I nearly gave in to the deep anger and resentment harbored by everyone around me. Today people look at me, at my job and my Ivy League credentials, and assume that I'm some sort of genius, that only a truly extraordinary person could have made it to where I am today. With all due respect to those people, I think that theory is a load of bullshit. Whatever talents I have, I almost squandered until a handful of loving people rescued me."



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