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## MEDIATED LEARNING

### Part 4: Mediated learning for people from poverty

If mediated learning is useful and its methods are more effective than the standard ways of teaching-learning, then this learning must also be beneficial to pupils, students and adults, regardless of their nationality, ethnicity, age, gender, religion, but also regardless of any social status and economic background. Feuerstein stated that FIE serves to remediate “different cognitive functions and develop strategies in individuals with impaired performance. This group includes individuals with a wide variety of etiologies ranging from genetic and organic causes to educational and socio-cultural effects.”

The question remains why we pay special attention to mediated learning especially in relation to teaching people from socially disadvantaged environments, from marginalized Roma communities, and particularly those of who are young.

A few very important facts are critical: brain development, the costs of a lack of mediated learning, life in generational poverty and the role of language.

#### **Brain Development**

It is accepted that the human brain experiences its greatest development in the youngest years. International research provides convincing evidence that during the pre-natal period and during first three years of child’s life the white cerebral cortex develops the most, the brain is influenced by new stimuli, including the addictions. If the brain is not being used, it loses its functionality. Early childhood interventions are, therefore, more than justified. But why are early childhood interventions so important for children living in poverty and even more so for children living in extreme generational poverty?



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The greatest numbers of children experiencing generational poverty in Slovakia live in segregated Roma communities, Roma settlements, Roma ghettos. In the environment of such ghettos, with low stimuli, they experience daily distress, material deprivation, often emotional poverty and toxic stress. Medical and sociological practitioners and experts at a conference on "The Impacts of Poverty and Childhood Deprivation on Life Chances" (Bratislava, 2018) describe the impact of poverty and deprivation on brain development, as well as on the child's thinking processes during the prenatal period and during the first three years of the child's life. Everyday life in poverty and persistent stress, has toxic effects on the brain and causes irreversible changes. Scientific studies have also shown the impact of childhood stress on increased adult morbidity.



The focus should be therefore on early intervention. A person born to poverty lives his/her life in concrete terms, concepts and mostly non-verbally. Life in the middle class and life of a work-environment is based on the use of abstract concepts and images with accompanying verbal (oral) explanations. Without well-thought-out abstract thinking, a

person from poverty is lost in a middle-class world and he/she can hardly integrate. The Feuerstein's method works helps to build mental models and strategies that support the ability to succeed in the abstract world. For people who have been born into a poor environment is very important to develop the ability to understand abstract concepts.

Feuerstein argues that it is possible to "have a brain and not have a mind." Some parts of an individual's abilities are inherited and other parts gradually develop due to the environment in which the individual grows up. However, the mind is only created by the environment. Cognitive neurologists say that about



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half of our abilities and characteristics are inherited, and the other half (both good and bad) are shaped by the environment<sup>1</sup>.

### **The impacts of missing mediated learning experience<sup>2</sup>**

Poor people living in an unpredictable, non-motivating environment, are captured by the present and its existential concrete problems, with no abstract ability to solve problems that take the future into account and are therefore without the ability to plan.

“If an individual lives in an unpredictable environment and does not have an abstract replica of reality, then . . .

The individual cannot plan.

If an individual cannot plan, then he/she cannot predict.

If an individual cannot predict, then he/she does not know cause and effect.

If an individual does not know cause and effect, then he/she cannot identify consequence.

If an individual cannot identify consequence, then he/she cannot control impulsivity.

If an individual cannot control impulsivity, then he/she has an inclination toward criminal- behavior...”<sup>3</sup>

If there is nobody to mediate the necessary important experiences to a learner, the learner does not have specific links in his mind. Feuerstein proved that the mind could be remediated, so fortunately, even in adulthood, these specific links in brain can be developed.

### **Missing links/mediations result in cognitive issues.**

1. *“Mediated focusing”*— The ability to focus attention and see objects in detail. The opposite of blurred and sweeping perceptions.
2. *“Mediated scheduling”*— Based on routine. The ability to schedule and plan ahead. The ability to represent the future abstractly and therefore set goals.

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<sup>1</sup> R.K. Payne, P. Devol, T. D. Smith: Bridges out of Poverty. (2010). Equilibria, Košice, p. 138

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 139 – 143

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 139



3. *“Mediation of positive anticipation”*— The ability to control the present for a happy representation of the future.
4. *“Mediation of inhibition and control”*— The ability to defer gratification, to think before acting, to control impulsiveness.
5. *“Mediated representation of the future”*— The ability to construe imaginatively a future scenario based on facts.
6. *“Mediation of verbal stimulation”*— The use of precise language for defining – and categorizing the environment.
7. *“Mediated precision”*— The ability to precisely define situations, things, people, etc., and use that precise thinking for problem-solving.

These missing links can lead to following possible cognitive disorders:<sup>4</sup>

- *Blurred and sweeping perceptions and the lack of a systematic method of exploration* (one does not have cognitive techniques to perform tasks and systematically complete them)
- *Impaired verbal tools* (the individual does not have a sufficient vocabulary to deal with the cognitive tasks. Many persons from poverty who rely solely on a casual language register do not use or have many prepositions or adverbs in their speech).
- *Impaired spatial orientation* (the inability to locate objects and persons within a space, an inability to determine the direction, position, size or shape of objects).
- *Impaired temporal orientation* time (an individual is unable to organize and measure his/her time, an individual attributes an event based on his/her emotional scope, not according to the actual measured time).
- *Impaired observation of constancies* is the inability of the brain to hold an object inside the head and keep the memory of the object constant. Objects change shape and size in the mind.
- *Lack of precision and accuracy in data-gathering* (an individual has difficulty in solving analytical questions and tasks because he/she is unable to get accurate and up-to-date data.
- *Inability to think about two objects or sources simultaneously and compare them.*

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 142-153



These facts explain behaviour of clients from the poorest social class. A natural consequence is that if no special attention is given to these people, their chances of successful completion of secondary education are greatly reduced. If, in addition to missing links in the minds of people from poverty and their subsequent cognitive disorders, we also add the six Berliner's factors, the statistics relating to unemployment and low educational attainments are much easier to understand.

According to the Atlas of Roma Communities (2013)<sup>5</sup>, only 0.3% of Roma in Slovakia have a university degree. Just 8.08% of the Roma population have completed secondary education (51.2% of the overall population in Slovakia). Only 28.52% of Roma have completed primary school.

### **Life in generational poverty<sup>6</sup>**

Professionals who work with people in poverty need to know the differences between situational and intergenerational poverty, including the main characteristics and behavioural features (consequences), *hidden rules* of people living in poverty, especially people living in extreme generational poverty. This knowledge is also important for the teaching-learning processes and the organizing the leisure activities for children and youth. Educational staff will be more effective in their work with children and young people from generation poverty if they understand the frameworks of poverty and its hidden rules. The hidden rules of poverty are part of the lives of children growing up in poverty. If this knowledge is neglected, teachers are more likely to experience burnout, a feeling of satiety, futility and uselessness without visible positive outcomes.

Situational poverty is a (usually temporary) status, when a person lacks resources due to particular adverse events (family death, chronic illness, household fire, ...).

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<sup>5</sup> Mušinka, A., Škobla, D., Hurrle, J., Matlovičová, K., Kling, J.: Atlas of Roma Communities in Slovakia. (2013). UNDP, Bratislava.

<sup>6</sup> In this chapter the texts from the following publications have been used:

Payne, R. K., DeVol, P., Smith, T. D.: Bridges out of Poverty. (2010). Equilibria, Košice, p. 55 – 66

DeVol, P.: Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin'-by-World. (2010). Equilibria, Košice, p. 50 – 60

Pollák, M., Mačáková, S., Mušinka, A., Hybáčková, B., Páleník, M.: From Poverty to Self-Sufficiency. (2018). ETP Slovakia, Košice, p. 48, 51, 52, 56, 61, 63, 81, 85, 87, 88, 90, 91, 93 – 99, 105, 112 – 113, 136



Generational poverty is a state of emergent need, in which at least two consecutive generations survive. Its behavioural patterns become visible sooner if the family associates mostly with people living in generational poverty. Generational poverty has its own culture, hidden rules and own value system. The key difference between a person in generational and a person in situational poverty is the way they think. In generational poverty, an individual believes that society is always owing him something. In situation poverty, pride and refusal to help prevail.

From our personal experience, we know that a middle-class individual who finds himself in situational poverty can get out in one to two years. He will be helped by acquaintances, his resources, stocks, experiences, education, skills, knowledge of middle class hidden rules and the usage of formal language.

A person born to generational poverty can get out in two to three generations. An individual breaks the cycle of generational poverty only in exceptional cases, for example, because of his talent (musicians, athletes...), his tenacity during the studies and the subsequent acquisition of a job or with the help of a tutor or sponsor who helps him financially and who is often also a mentor.

Among typical behavioural patterns present in generational poverty<sup>7</sup>:

- *Importance of personality*: Individual personality is what one brings to the setting— because money is not brought. The ability to entertain, tell stories, and have a sense of humour is highly valued.
- *Significance of entertainment*: When one can only merely survive, respite from such survival is important and entertainment brings respite.
- *Importance of relationships*: One only has people upon whom to rely, and those relationships are important to survival. One often has favourites.
- *Matriarchal structure*: The mother has the most powerful position in the society if she functions as a caretaker.
- *Oral-language tradition*: Casual register is used for everything.

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<sup>7</sup> Payne, R. K., DeVol, P., Smith, T. D.: Bridges out of Poverty. (2010). Equilibria, Košice, p. 59-60



- *Survival orientation*: Discussion of academic topics is generally not prized. There is little room for the abstract. Discussions centre around people and relationships. A job is about making enough money to survive. A job is not about a career (e.g., “I was looking for a job when I found this one”).
- *Importance of non-verbal/kinaesthetic communication*: Touch is used to communicate, as are space and non-verbal emotional information.
- *Ownership of people*: People are possessions. There is a great deal of fear and comment about leaving the culture and “getting above your raisings.”
- *Negative orientation*: Failure at anything is the source of stories and numerous belittling comments.
- *Discipline*: Punishment is about penance and forgiveness, not change.
- *Belief in fate*: Destiny and fate are the major tenets of the belief system. Choice is seldom considered.
- *Polarized thinking*: Options are hardly ever examined. Everything is polarized; it is one way or the other. These kinds of statements are common: “I quit” and “I can’t do it.”
- *Time*: Time occurs only in the present. The future does not exist except as a word. Time is flexible and not measured. Time is often assigned on the basis of the emotional significance and not the actual measured time.
- *Sense of humour*: A sense of humour is highly valued, as entertainment is one of the key aspects of poverty. Humour is almost always about people—either situations that people encounter or things people do to other people.
- *Lack of order/organization*: Many of the homes/apartments of people in poverty are unkempt and cluttered. Devices for organization (files, planners, etc.) don’t exist.
- *Lives in the moment—does not consider future ramifications*: Being proactive, setting goals, and planning ahead are not a part of generational poverty. Most of what occurs is reactive and in the moment. Future implications of present actions are seldom considered.

These patterns of behaviour are closely linked to the hidden rules of poverty, which are the parts of everyday life of poor people, independent of the place, location and state where they live, or from





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religious affiliation, nationality, age, gender, ... The basic behavioural features of a person from poverty (and more so in generational poverty) are derived from socio-economic relations. Therefore, their validity is universal and irrespective of time, latitude and longitude.

For a person from poverty, his closest relatives and acquaintances and his own community are his



greatest support. It is unimaginably difficult for him to give up this security and certainty. But if he/she does not break these strong ties, he/she will never escape from their socially and economically retrograde and gnawing environment. Success at school is determined by willingness to break these

ties and to enter the middle class world. If a person from poverty decides to do so, he will take the riskiest journey of his life. No wonder that many apparent daredevils come back after a while. We should not be surprised nor blame the individual. Condemnation of the *one-who-deserted* was and, still has been, the greatest punishment.

The consequences of the behavioural patterns and hidden rules of people living in generational poverty are already manifested in the behaviour of their children. Therefore, the teachers should expect the following manifestations:

- The children often get easily angry and in hurry leave the class or even the school. The current state of mind plays an important role, rather than the long-term effects on the future.
- If they love you, they will try hard and study.
- They do not solve problems by discussion, but rather with verbal or physical attacks.
- They use a simple vocabulary of a casual register, dialect or vernacular.
- When they are angry, they can't keep calm, they act impulsively.





- They have no problem to say whatever they wish, they have a sense of humour, they are entertainers.
- They are independent and do not like when someone talks to them in a "parental" tone.
- They often need time off and breaks.
- They need more space for their unique personality.
- They get used to favouring some people and prefer them from the others.
- They are very messy, they lose their teaching aids and their personal belongings easily.
- They'll give you a thousand reasons why something is missing somewhere, why they lost something.
- They will do only part of the school task.
- They have a problem to get ready for a work, to study.
- They can't keep track of their own behaviour.
- They don't know how to use polite words or polite behaviour.
- They don't like authority.
- They often jump into speech and contradict.

Feuerstein's method has helped children to manage impulsiveness, to acquire the ability to calm down, to concentrate, and work longer on the instruments (worksheets), gain internal motivation for work, taste and ability to learn and work with them, as well as the social and emotional skills needed to work in the collective and school environment.<sup>8</sup>

## The role of language

When a child from generational poverty enters elementary school for the first time he/she has multiple disadvantages, including the language expressions. Such a child does not speak the language used in school, nor does he/she communicate in a formal language register, but in a casual register, speaks with a dialect (or even his/her mother tongue is Romani) and in his/her verbal expressions dominate the behavioural patterns and hidden rules of the generational poverty in which he lives.

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<sup>8</sup> Mačáková, S., Heveriová, M., Šimková, S., Vavrinčík, M.: Učme sa učiť sa. (2015). ETP Slovensko, p. 45



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Language helps us to communicate with people and get along with them either for good or bad. According to Martin Joos, every world language has five language registers, or codes:

CODE/REGISTER	EXPLANATION
Frozen	Language that is always the same. For example: Lord's Prayer, wedding- vows, etc.
Formal	The standard sentence syntax and word choice of work and school. Has complete sentences and specific word choice.
Consultative	Formal register when used in conversation. Discourse pattern not quite as direct as formal register
Non-formal/ casual	Language between friends and is characterized by a 400- to 800-word vocabulary. Word choice is general and not specific. Conversation dependent upon non-verbal assists. Sentence syntax often incomplete.
Intimate	Language between lovers or twins. Language of sexual harassment

The majority of children learn how to talk during their first three years and their language experience is almost exclusively dependent on their closest family circle. The child adopts the language style and rules of conversation that are used within the family. Each family has its own language culture. In some families they talk more, in others less. In some families, the children are encouraged to engage in the discussion, in others not.

We have already mentioned that during the first three years the links are created within the child's brain. The more words are used by family members who are in contact with the child, the more links are created. The more stories a child listens to and the more his loved ones explain to him how things work, the more links are created. Research shows that children should listen regularly, every day, to fairy tales or stories to create these brain links.



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Children love to listen to the same story over and over again because they want to remember it all. They are trying to predict what's next. They do not like it if the adults "change/mix" the story, skip the page, or tell different sequences of events of the story.

The results of long-term work with children from segregated communities in the afternoon school clubs, including the application of Feuerstein's method or other appropriate teaching practices, show that children who regularly visit these clubs have acquired more vocabulary, the ability to describe pictures and to compare them, but also to identify and describe their feelings and emotions.

### **Mediating the learning process for children: what, why, how**

Parents can help their children to develop their brain-learning structures. They should use the mediated learning experience, which can also be called "learning how to learn".

If parents or important/significant adults want to encourage children to learn, to understand the world around them and to understand the relations between causes and consequences, they must explain these three steps to the children: what, why, how.

1. "What" will elucidate for the children the content of their deeds or their actions
2. "Why" helps them understand the meaning
3. "How" helps them to see alternative strategies or behaviour.



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The essence of this approach can be easily explained by the following example: a four-year-old boy stands on a bus seat and looks out the window. Father tells him:

WHAT	WHY	HOW
"You stand in the seat."	"When the bus moves forward, you can fall."	"So ... either kneel or sit down, or I will take on my arms."

Another father to his son:

WHAT	WHY	HOW
		"Stop and sit down!" (This he repeated countless times over the course of an hour.)

The learning process must consist of all three steps. Otherwise, we do not succeed to strengthen the structure of thinking processes of the child.