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MEDIATED LEARNING

Part 6: Summary

When, in 2013, we started using the Feuerstein's method in voluntary afternoon school clubs for pupils from segregated Roma settlements, we believed that children from an “*otherwise stimulating environment*” would be able to significantly improve their cognitive abilities through an intensive, long-term training led by a supportive teacher, with kind personality, applying the transparent rules, and that the Roma children would catch up with their middle class peers.

Psychological testing undertaken by researchers from Charles University in Prague in 2015/2016, based on an agreement between the University and ETP Slovakia, revealed that the average mental age of 52 pupils from three segregated Roma settlements (Rankovce, Podsadek-Stará Ľubovňa and Veľká Ida) in Eastern Slovakia at the beginning of their first grade at primary school was just 46.8 months, i.e. 3.9 years¹. A child who has not reached the level of a school maturity and starts compulsory schooling will therefore encounter a barrier between his/her level and the level required by the school. From their first day at school, the basic conditions for a child's future success and school performance are thus not fulfilled. These pupils usually face misunderstanding from teachers, who are not aware of the children's home situation. The teachers legitimately make assumptions about pupils' schooling ability. The pupils then experience personal failures and frustrations, which contribute to their subjective feeling of disappointment at school. The school therefore becomes an unpleasant environment for the pupils and they often create an aversion to school and to formal education, but also to the world of the majority middle class population.

Roma children who have regularly attended the ETP Slovakia's afternoon Feuerstein's clubs, led by kind teachers from the majority population with positive attitudes towards the Roma, have better

¹ Mačáková, S., Réveszová, Z., Orságová, L., Pustulková, D., Fortunová, V., Pavlovská, S., Pilipčuková, N., Borzová, V.: Učíme sa učiť sa. (2016). ETP Slovensko, p. 65



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school results and less truancy than their peers from the same settlement who have not been attending the FIE afternoon classes. Children, who attend the FIE clubs feel safe and accepted. In addition to working with FIE worksheets, the clubs' teachers also organize cultural, social and sports activities and excursions for the children. These activities are the basis for the successful integration of children from segregated settlements into the economic, social and cultural life.

The Slovak Governance Institute, which undertook an external evaluation of the ETP FIE program in Veľká Ida, in 2015, reported: *"Taking into consideration the complications in random assigning of children to the FIE club and the control group, the results of quantitative evaluation of psychological tests are not unambiguous. They indicate, however, that faster development of cognitive skills was seen at children where the FIE method was applied (comparing with their peers in other classes)."*

One difference between the children, who got a chance to be educated by a trained and experienced FIE lecturer and those children who were not in a contact with the FIE method is particularly significant when we compare the number of children who had to repeat the school grade. Ten pupils out of the total number of 17 who have been exposed to the Feuerstein's method in Veľká Ida (either through the morning class led by the teacher, who is also a FIE lecturer or during the after-school FIE club) did not repeat any school grade. Of the remaining 12 pupils, who were not in a contact with the FIE method, not a single one made it to in the fifth grade. The pupils attending the club have also had excellent attendance, almost all have had zero unjustified hours.

In April and May 2018, psychologists compared cognitive skills of children who had attended FIE club for five years with the skills of children of the same age and from the same locality, but who had not attended any after-school activity. Their observations were as follows:

"Children involved in the FIE program had better work habits in terms of better attention - concentration, distribution, employability. They developed the basics of strategic thinking and were more engaged and dynamic. They managed to have their impulsiveness under better control. When supported and verbally encouraged, their performance improved (they were sometimes mistaken, but they did not resign). They enjoyed their success, which further motivated them to work harder."



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On the contrary:

“Children in the control group had a low-level or no working habits, decreased concentration and slowed psychomotor functioning. The verbal region was poorly developed, without the ability to develop ideas. Impulsiveness was a dominant behavioural trait. They gave the impression of being largely passive. Even after repeated mediation, they were unable to take advantage of the strategy offered. They managed to keep a hint in their memory only for a short time. Praise was met with the lack of emotional expression - no smile or pleasure.”

Successful verification of the efficiency and effectiveness of the Feuerstein’s method of Instrumental Enrichment in the education of pupils from segregated Roma settlements has created the premise for incorporating this innovative method when developing new national public policies and instruments for mainstream education. We believe that the Feuerstein method should be systemized into formal education from the earliest possible age and to be implemented for the longest possible time. The research study suggests that the greatest cognitive improvement was achieved in children who were youngest at the time of enrolment into the FIE club and the children who were exposed to the Feuerstein’s method instruments (handouts) for the longest time.

However, such a solution requires political will and, in particular, political courage. After six years of lobbying and advocating for mainstreaming of the Feuerstein's method into formal education, and after twenty years of advocating for other innovative instruments, which have proven to substantially improve housing conditions and increase the chances of gaining and retaining the employment for people born to marginalized Roma settlements, we know that in Slovakia there has not yet emerged a politician who would accept, address and deal with Roma integration and inclusion on a long term basis.

Another more realistic option for Slovakia seems to be the application of the Feuerstein's method in a school, community centre or in informal extracurricular club activities led by progressive teachers and pedagogues. These courageous and persistent pedagogues may use these innovative instruments in teaching smaller groups of fortunate pupils. At the end of the school year, and at the end of primary school attendance they will experience the joy from increasing the chances for these children to study in high schools and break the cycle of poverty.



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The photographs used in this publication were taken during 2017 and 2018 and are from Community Centers Stará Ľubovňa, Rankovce, Veľká Ida and Luník IX -Košice, where ETP Slovakia organizes afternoon FIE clubs for children aged 9-13.

