

The Theory of Mediated Learning Experiences (MLE): Orientation to The New Model of Our Child Development Research

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1. Background

In the early '90s, series of research exercises and psycho-social intervention programs have been observed as joint ventures of the University of Bergen, Norway and the University of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. In this initial phase, the experimental task of demonstrating the MLE's interactional principles in the homes and institutions of younger children was readily taken up by a team of researchers drawn from the Department of Educational Psychology and the Institute of Educational Research. In this first venture of applying psychological principles of interaction, promising results were observed in the selected experimental sites where generally the caretakers, irrespective of their education and socio-economic status, showed the capacity to be trained and consequently improve their quality of interaction with the children (Lakew, et al, 1992; Rye, 1991, 1992, & 1996; Tirusew, et al, 1996).

Currently housed in the Institute of Educational Research, our ongoing nation-wide research and training Project on child development in Ethiopia is on its way for a wider introduction and application of the precepts of the the MLE theory. But what is the MLE theory and how is it differentiated from the Piagetian thinking about child development? What is the historical basis of the theory? and what is our justification for the employment of the MLE principles in our current research Project despite the several other psychological theories we are usually fond of "talking" in our course offerings? These and

other questions would briefly be outlined for a brief introduction of this new psychological thinking in Ethiopia.

If we first look at the "historical development of the MLE theory", it basically developed out of the need to enrich some of the traditionally used Piagetian practices in child development. At its first stage of development, the focus of the mediated learning experiences paradigm was on the possibility of modifying the cognitive structures of retarded teenagers so that they could acquire the prerequisites of thinking, and develop their positive self-images as skilled, confident, and independent individuals (Feuerstein, R., & Hoffman, M.B., 1990). Feuerstein's conviction in cognitive modifiability appears to have been triggered by his experiences with traumatized and culturally impoverished Jewish children of the post second world war era, and by his experiences in the Piagetian school, which appeared to offer limited behavioral changes in its application.

Since its inception, the theory has been regarded as a breakthrough in research into cognitive development, and as an important guide for intervention programs (Feuerstein, R., Klein, P.S.,1991). To date, the theory is also being applied to several institutionalized and mentally retarded children. Furthermore, it has been extended to a large number of disadvantaged children in developing nations.

With regard to this latter group, the theory points to the need to overcome the threat of mental starvation to which most children of

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third world countries are exposed, not to mention their regular exposure to inadequate diet. Mental starvation is, according to the theory, a type of starvation resulting from poor mediation, assumed to prevail in the families and institutions of disadvantaged children. The characteristic cognitive feature of these children, as described by the author of the MISC program (Klein, P. S. 1991), is the lack of mental flexibility. This included the inability to discern things or ideas clearly, inability to appreciate or show interest, inability to make comparisons or relationships, and inability to construct reality distinctly and coherently. Klein further notes that this state of cognitive style is further exacerbated by migration, parental pressures, parental mobility, breakdown of extended family structures, and by increased pressure on the family to cope with the changing socio-economic conditions to maintain their culturally mediated values.

The essential point of the MLE theory is its assumption that the cognitive structures of these disadvantaged children can be modified and that their potentials can be realized despite the environmental/ecological or socio-cultural challenges they face. Naturally, this promising feature of the theory is liable to attract the attention of psychologists in third world countries, including Ethiopia, where the paradigm of child development in its indigenous form has not been contemplated except in the "blind transference of alien theories" with little regard for their imports to our cultural and contextual settings. Having stated thus far, the MLE theory and its practices, are briefly indicated as follows.

2. The MLE theory, as a theory of Basic Principles and Practices

Today, the principles and practices implied in the theory of mediated learning experiences, MLE, are observed not only in the western

cultures but also in such developing countries as Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Zimbabwe, and Ethiopia, just to name a few (Hundeide, 1991). This shows that the theory has earned its international and perhaps its universal significance. But what is MLE? The following brief presentation highlights the definition, the scope, and the practical features of the theory.

The theory of mediated learning experiences has most often been cited "as part of a wider theoretical framework, the theory of structural cognitive modifiability, (SCM)", developed by Reuven Feuerstein (Feuerstein, R., et al, 1991). The basic premise of the theory is the capacity of every individual to modify his/her cognitive structure "irrespective of the three major barriers of change: etiology, critical period, and severity of condition" (Feuerstein, R., & Feuerstein S, 1991, p. 13).

MLE is defined as "a quality of interaction between the organism and its environment. This quality is ensured by the interposition of an initiated, intentional human being who mediates the stimuli impinging on the organism". Similarly, Klein (1992) defines human mediation "as a conscious attempt of an adult to adjust his or her behavior and modify the environment in a way that will ensure that the child can benefit from it, that is, focus on it, perceive, or understand and respond".

The theory is basically understood as a bimodal perspective of cognitive development where both the direct exposure of the individual to stimuli as posited in the Piagetian theory of cognitive development, and the mediated learning experiences should coexist to ensure human modifiability. It is thus often argued that the direct-exposure approach of the Piagetian thinking of cognitive modifiability should have also explained why lower animals have not modified their cognitive structures despite their long history of direct and everyday confrontation with stimuli. In contrast to the Piagetian approach, however, the theory of

mediated learning experiences posits the possible modification of the cognitive structures of the individual child for enhanced "appetite, for knowledge", but mainly through human mediational roles.

Thus, in its departure from the more direct- and- individual- oriented Piagetian approach, MLE theory stresses its parallel role to contribute to the modifiability of a child's cognition through the interposition of adults who can help him/her to organize, expand, and competently interpret his/her world of meanings. Furthermore, the definition is also noted with some qualifying clauses implying that MLE is not the mere interposition of the adult to provide the accidental "do's" and "don't's" in interaction with the child, or a traditional direct teaching of skills to the child.

As Klein, (1992) characterizes it, "mediated learning, as distinct from direct learning through the senses, occurs when the environment is interpreted for the child by another person who understands the child's needs, interests, and capacities and who takes an active role in making components of that environment as well of the past and future experiences compatible with the child". It is also interpreted as not necessarily meaning verbal interaction only, as all modalities of interaction, gestural, kinetic, mimicry, and modeling can also constitute quality of interaction, provided that the mediator is conscious and well intentioned in the process. As a general note, MLE is richer and involves varied types of adult-child interactional processes which take into account some specific principles in order to "close the loop" of stimuli - mediator - mediatee relationships.

In the exposition of the "complete" principles of MLE, a series of 12 parameters divided into the salient and the reinforcing MLEs, is presented. The salient components are represented using the criteria of intentionality and reciprocity, mediation of meaning, and transcendence.

These three criteria are considered to be the basic criteria of MLE, and also to be common to all cultures, ethnic groups and socio-economic strata. The reinforcing parameters of MLE are, on the other hand, constituted in 9 criteria. These are, "mediation of feeling of competence, mediation of regulation and control of behavior, mediation of sharing behavior, mediation of individual and psychological differentiation, mediation of goal seeking, goal setting, and goal achieving behavior, mediation of challenge, the search for novelty and complexity, mediation of the awareness of the human being as a changing entity, mediation of the search for an optimistic alternative, and mediation of the feeling of belonging" (Op cit, 1991). In contrast to the salient components described above, the reinforcing ones are further considered to be task dependent and to vary from culture to culture.

3. The Five Parameters of MLE as Observed in the MISC Program

Klein (1988) justifying with empirical evidence, argues that these 12 parameters could be reduced to 5 criteria without losing their salient and reinforcing features. It appears that Klein has included the three salient components, without change, in the program of intervention known as MISC (an acronym for More Intelligent Sensitive Child), while apparently considering two other criteria to represent the 9 reinforcing parameters. These five condensed parameters as observed in the MISC program are defined as follows:

3.1. **Intentionality and Reciprocity**- deliberate acts of selecting, sequencing, exaggerating, accentuating of stimuli by the parent for the reciprocal response of the child through vocal, verbal or non-verbal forms of behavior.

3.2. **Mediation of Meaning**- acts of expressing affect by the parent in relation to objects, animals, concepts or values through facial

expressions, gestures, tone of voice, verbal expression of affect, classification, labeling and valuing of the child's or adult's experience.

3.3. Transcendence-- adult's acts directed toward the expansion of a child's cognitive awareness beyond the immediate need through explanation, comparison, contrast, etc, during parental interaction with the child.

3.4. Mediated Feelings of Competence--acts of adult's verbal and non-verbal expressions of satisfaction with the accomplishments of the child and,

3.5. Mediated Regulation of Behavior--acts of child's behavioral control by the adult through modeling, demonstration, and/or verbal suggestion (Klein, P.S.,1988; Klein & Hundeide, 1989).

4. The Facilitative Approach

The facilitative approach is a variant but a complementary approach to the meaningful application of the MLE program (the MISC) in a cultural context. It is also conceived as a "corrective approach" of the MLE program warning it to take heed of its cognitive posture. As Hundeide (1991, 1992, 1995 & 1996) suggests, the concept of facilitation implies that the care-giver already possesses caring skills which can be reactivated. Hundeide assumes that facilitation has to be more stressed in the MLE program of MISC.

Facilitation further implies that the MISC program could effectively be built on the universal concept of maternal relational patterns which are often observed with affect-laden behavioral dispositions toward the child. These universal maternal behavioral tendencies include maternal tendency to care, to understand, to empathize, to be sensitive, and to be positively in tune with the child's developmental needs. Consequently, the author suggests some mediated emotional principles to

be included with the existing five criteria of the MISC Program (Hundeide, 1993), for a comprehensive view of both the cognitive and emotive principles of interaction in the general tenet of the MLE theory.

Consequently, this revised version of the MLE theory is also applied in different cultures under the name of the International Child Development Program, and has in fact been suggested to be more applicable to the cultural scripts of parent-child interaction in developing countries, where affect-laden rather than the cognitive interactional styles tend to be more confidently mediated. Then what is ICDP in brief? The following is a brief sketch of the program.

4.1. The ICDP-MISC Program

The ICDP-Facilitation Program is actually an amalgam of the MISC Program, the Orion Method, and of other research concepts on early communication (Hundeide, 1993, 1995; Rye, 1985). In addition to the five principles of communication that are observed in the MISC program, the ICDP emphasizes the importance of noting and promoting maternal positivism and empathic communication with the child. The program observes the significance of the affective components to complete the definition of a mother-child transaction. The program is now in operation as an alternative to the MISC program. This alternative program is further considered to be simple, and easily applicable, because of its basic focus on the universal nature of maternal constructive attitude toward the child. Thus, the need to awaken this positive maternal sensitivity with the child is emphasized in the training of the program, encouraging care-givers to reactivate their care-giving and communicational systems naturally, and spontaneously and in accordance with the scripts of caregiver-child relationships that are culturally valued.

The author of this Program generally views that, maternal positivity and empathy are universal care-giving patterns that can be enhanced, despite the overbearing life situations of the parent. This would only be possible if the facilitation strategies are introduced with examples drawn from the cultural codes, values, and standards which the mother defines as good parent-child relational patterns. In its appeal to maternal expressivity, the program is actually a natural alternative to non-western transactional patterns where the socio-affective modes are the dominant cultural scripts (Katz, 1991) in contrast to the instrumental cognitive modes that characterize the western world (Nsamenang (1992). This is so because the non-western cultures are generally characterized to be expressive and thus "encourage human harmony with the environment through their socio-affective means of communication, while the instrumental cultures have been visualized as "carpentering" the environment for the child in order to promote cognitive development".

5. Some General Remarks on the MLE theory

Despite the significance of the MLE theory and its several programs to be used in any culture's belief-system and values, there are however some remarks in terms of its coverage, interpretation and application. In terms of its coverage, some critics state that they could detect certain "culturo-centric bias" in it when the issue regarding the cognitive development of especially the disadvantaged and/or the non-western children is taken up (Feuersten, R., & Feuerstein, S., 1991).

When the MLE theory is applied, some basic misunderstandings have also been noted, where the cognitive implications were usually emphasized instead of implications related to the total adaptational patterns (cognitive & psycho-social) of the child to the environment. Ironically several research reports have been noted reflecting this basic misunderstanding of

the theory, and usually reporting the link between such broad descriptors as " socio-economic status or ethnic group membership, and parenting skills and cognitive levels" (Lidz, C. S.,1991) instead of also incorporating the general adaptational outcome which the theory basically underscores. Some have also noted its "Cartesian stance", alleging that it does not see a human being in its niche and everyday context. According to this view (Bruner, 1986, 1990), there appears to be a split between the inner world of the individual, the cognitive operation, and the surrounding world and between the situational and contextual processes, meanings and discourse styles in which the individuals' mediation is based (Hundeide, 1996).

Despite these remarks on the theoretical and practical perspectives of MLE, there appears to be an overriding tendency to regard it as a theory of general adaptation instead of limiting it to mere cognition (Lidz 1991). Klein (1992) too, views the MLE theory as a theory that provides a link between the cognitive and the affective development of the child. Klein argues that MLE is not a partial theory losing sight of the total person, but rather a theory incorporating both the thinking and feeling aspects in the career's quality of interaction with the child: "Emotion is not the opposite of thinking, rather it is partially comprised of thinking and reason. Emotion does not exist in its own right, as a special and almost mystical sort of entity; it is rather an essential part of an entire sensing - moving - thinking - emotion complex" (Ellis, 1962, p. 47, quoted in Klein, 1992, p. 186).

There are in fact several other views pointing to the strength of the theory, despite its cognitive posture. Buchel (1991), in a review on theories of cognition, for instance, characterizes MLE as a comprehensive interactive model of man in contrast to the stunted view of man as most often observed in the several traditional psychological theories of development.

6. Conclusion

Generally, the MLE theory and its several programs (MISC, ICDP, etc.) are appealing frameworks for our Child Development Research and Psycho-Social Intervention Activities in Ethiopia. Hopefully, the application of the theory and its programs would foster the reactivation of healthy and productive parent/caregiver-child relational patterns in our culture. These frameworks are particularly appealing in so far as they are to reactivate caring patterns in accordance with the cultural scripts of interaction and the indigenous philosophies and belief systems of child care in Ethiopia.

Naturally, the reactivation of care-giving and interactional skills means the reawakening of the dormant value systems of parenting for the generation of maternal relational potential and the empowerment of parental care-giving skills through reference to daily examples of cultural mediation that could be extracted from the mediated cultural values in their abundance. Through our experiences gained in the application of the MISC program in the

homes of some disadvantaged families in Addis Ababa back in the early '90s, and through the comprehensive blend of both the principles of the MISC and the ICDP programs in our current nation-wide research and training endeavors, I strongly feel that the MLE theory and its practices would soon pay after its introduction and application to the several homes, ethnic groups, and school-institutions of Ethiopia.

It is also to be hoped that such theoretical and practical frameworks could play their major influential roles of creating "knowledge appetite" in the Ethiopian child at large for his/her better adaptive potentials in his/her ventures to face the increasing demands and challenges of the modern life in Ethiopia. Finally, it is also to be hoped that the creative adaptation of the MLE theory and programs would serve as a catalyst for the initiation of national and/or cultural paradigm for the explicit purpose of indigenizing psychological theories of child development (Kagitcibasi, 1992) and research perspective in Ethiopia.

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