

Qualitative learning interaction with pre-schoolers

Stimulating children's development with MISC

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Outline

Attention for special needs is currently strongly of interest in education. It would be a pity to reserve this care exclusively for the children with special needs. The aim is to enhance the level of teaching of every teacher, so that every child has advantage of this professionalisation process.

In pre-school education too the person of the teacher is of utmost importance for the development of every child. The way the teacher interacts with the children in class takes care that they enter the learning interaction. But what are the qualities of a good interaction style? On this question the Israeli professor, Pnina Klein, has done extensive research all over the world. She brought the findings together in MISC.

This article deals with her theory.

In a first paragraph we consider what MISC entails and why it is important. We also place it within the concept of mediation. Then we go deeper into the qualities of positive learning interactions. We close with three important messages about education.

When reading this article seemingly evident ideas are given a place within a larger framework. The challenge becomes reality for the reader who starts with pre-schoolers tomorrow.

1 Introduction

The child sits at a table and threads beads on a string according to a pattern on a card: four beads of different colours and forms in a recurring sequence, again and again. The beads are mixed together in a plastic box. There are no other beads than the ones she needs to use. The child works on diligently, looks carefully for the next bead, treads it with the others, checks every once in a while and looks for the next bead. When the string is full, she goes to the teacher and shows her work. The teacher approves of the work and says with enthusiasm: “Good work Evi, you’ve done a good job!”

A beautiful scene, like hundreds one can see in the average day of a preschool class. The child has done a good job. The teacher has observed Evi and has seen that she looked carefully, worked systematically, checked her work regularly and persisted with concentration until the end. The teacher saw and said it was good.

And what did Evi learn? We don’t know for sure. She carried out an assignment well. Was she familiar with this assignment already; was it, in other words, a repetition of what she’d done before? Was it a new assignment? Is Evi conscious of looking carefully, working systematically and checking her work? Does Evi know what she practiced and what she can do with these skills in the future? There is a little chance that she does; but the chance that she carried out the assignment without thinking about it too much is quite a lot bigger. The activity that took place is good, yet it is a missed chance to teach this child more than treading beads according to a certain pattern.

Which chance was missed here? The chance to build the teacher-child interaction into a complete learning interaction that transcends the activity. That is what MISC^o is about.

2 Why MISC?

Two stories:

^o *My late grandfather started working when he was fourteen. The First World War had just ceased and the people in the country hoped for a steady job. Working with the Railways for instance, was a dream. It was a feast when my grandfather could start out laying train tracks. He often told me how he used to work in storm or shine and how he – especially in storm – would stare at the signalling house in the distance. That’s where he wanted to be. Then he would be inside where it was warm. Grandfather took exams and succeeded to climb up to the position of signaller after ten years. That’s what he continued doing for the rest of his life. And he was proud of what he did. When signalling was automatised he decided it was time to let go. Years after he would still show the watch he was given at his retirement with pride ...*

^o *In 1994 I contacted an Israelian professor for the first time. We corresponded through letters and that went rather slow. At the end of each letter she would write: “Albert, when will you have a fax?” When I had bought a fax machine a couple of years later, my first fax went to her. “I have a fax!” After a couple of minutes her answer rolled out of my machine: “Albert, when will you have e-mail?” ...*

^o MISC is an English acronym that has two meanings. on the one hand ‘Mediational Intervention for Sensitizing Caregivers’. This meaning gives importance to the role of the caregiver. On the other hand ‘More Ontelligent and Sensitive child’. This meaning names the main goal of the program.

Two stories that clearly show our society has changed enormously. An ever increasing evolution makes it so that we cannot teach our children what they will need in the future anymore. Indeed, we don't know what later will look like. When I studied, there was no talk of computers and bank cards. Texts were written on stencils and had to be multiplied manually on the stencilling machine.

This evolution has serious consequences for education. The content becomes less important than the skills we can acquire through it. But there's more. Education will have to develop a 'system of needs' in children. A system of needs means that children need to develop an 'appetite for learning' that will help them to actively look for new learning experiences in the future. Children will need an increasingly flexible mind in their further life. With this in mind, MISC is a guide for the teacher in her group.

From what went before we can deduce that MISC transcends learning contents. It gives an answer to the question of how to work optimally with contents. In order to do that it starts from a deep respect for every culture and the unconditional belief that every culture has a sufficient offer to let children grow up to adulthood within that culture.

Like health care has found answers to an increasing number of physical limitations, cultural embedding offers an answer to mental needs. With this we indicate that MISC doesn't depend on methods or strategies, rather it is possible to integrate it in every 'society', including the pre-school society. However, MISC is important for the teacher too.

After working in special education, this year I returned to normal education, where I had been active for one and a half decades before. It was an interesting reunion. I noticed time didn't stand still in normal education. Even in pre-school a lot of things have changed: educational methods, the entrance of ICT, the use of screening lists for following up on children, etcetera. A large number of schools have been introduced to the 'child with special needs', especially in pre-school. At the same I saw how the number of questions teachers have raised noticeably. Not everyone feels ready for the many innovations. The fear that teachers need to be a specialist is strong: children with Down syndrome, with autism, with ADHD, with dyslexia, children from underprivileged backgrounds, with language deficiencies (school language as a second or third language), gifted children, and so on.

The ensuing insecurity is legitimate, but not necessary! Through truly qualitative interaction with pre-schoolers the teacher can give direction to what needs to happen, namely, the development of a flexible mind and a healthy learning appetite.

3 Stimulating development ≠ stimulating development

A study day for educators, linked to a learning materials fair ... In the great hall speakers are trying to convince the audience of their more or less new ideas. In smaller rooms and hallways of the building several firms show the newest things they have on the market to eager visitors. You name it, they have it; there is always a material or method to meet your needs. And I'm looking for what can help me tomorrow in my classroom, fun exercises and good materials.

A regular day in a big toy shop. I walk through the isles knowing that I have to hand in my list of materials to be purchased for the next school year at the next teachers' meeting. I've been given a maximum amount. Difficult to make a choice ...

Materials are good and necessary. Too many materials aren't. Children learn by interacting with stimuli which are built into a learning situation. Too many stimuli make for superficial perception, short work spans and a limited need for concentration and persistence. Stimulating development is often understood as offering a lot of stimuli. This is not true. Stimulating development is offering a portion of learning stimuli and taking the effort to let them grow into an effective learning moment. Pre-schoolers cannot do that by themselves. To reach that goal they need each other, but even more, their teacher. A surplus of stimuli can be counterproductive. It may frighten children and make them withdraw in their shells. The world overwhelms them. They see loads and little at the same time, because they cannot consider their perceptions and are overpowered by them. Hence they lose their enthusiasm for exploring and are quickly satisfied with an imprecise experience of their surroundings. These children are culturally deprived; they are ignorant of what is important or unimportant in their world. Their senses are not tuned in for accurate perception. Their need to compare, link and conclude doesn't develop sufficiently or only fragmentarily and they become disinterested in the world around them. They have a lack of learning appetite. So many things which will be important for continuously making the right choices later in life.

4 Every child needs a 'mediator'

If it is true that children mostly tend to learn from purposeful learning stimuli, and that these learning stimuli should be shaped into effective learning experiences, then the teacher's input is indispensable. Every method, every material – even the computer – will only deliver results when it's used at the right moment. That's where the teacher comes in. If the teacher consciously selects learning stimuli at the developmental level of the child and shapes them into a mediated learning experience, she performs as a mediator. (R. Feuerstein a.o.)

5 The qualities of mediated learning experience

Mediation is an active process. The mediator selects, emphasises, frames, gives meaning and situates learning stimuli in time and space. Mediation is a qualitative learning interaction between the pre-schooler and the teacher. The question that rises is which criteria turn a learning interaction into a mediated learning interaction for the child. The following criteria are recognised as universal qualitative norms to reach that goal.

5.1 Focussing – intentionality and reciprocity

Tom is a four year old. He has a hard time concentrating. I hear the teacher inviting him several times: "Tom, we're working here", "Look over here", "Is this car alright to play with too?" ...

Tom reacts to some of these prompts. He looks in her direction, comes over. But just as fast he disappears again; and the teacher has to start all over again...

Focussing is the attempt of the teacher to draw the child's attention to something in its surroundings – the intentionality – to set up a mediated learning interaction with that something.

There has to be clarity about the action of the teacher and about the reciprocity of the child. There is reciprocity if the child indicates physically, verbally or non-verbally that he is directed to the teacher's focussing.

Intentionality and reciprocity are inseparably connected. They create a feeling of sharing in the child; an openness for perceiving changes in the environment/surroundings. Hence it is important that the child feels the introduction of the learning stimulus is intentional, not coincidental. So the child expects something will happen with it. In connection with this Pnina Klein states explicitly: "It's all about matching between what the teacher sees the child is doing and how she reacts to that, with a response from the child to the teacher as result."

"Tom, we're working here. Listen carefully to what I tell about Peter Rabbit, because we will make a piece of art about the story." (Tom now knows what is expected and why it's important to listen carefully now.)

"Look over here. Do you see how the egg totally disappears in the flour when we kneed it into dough?" (Tom now knows what he has to look at within the activity. He is invited to perceive more accurately.)

"Is this car alright to play with too? You can carry sand with it and bring it to Fred. He can turn it into sand pies." (Tom sees possible ideas for play and the teacher indicates he can play together with Fred.)

Focussing requires a number of conditions to be fulfilled on the teacher's part:

- She is clear, in her verbal messages as well as in the non-verbal ones. There is no duplicity and it is plain to see what she expects.
- She selects learning stimuli with the child in mind. She knows that what she asks is within his capabilities. This means that the child can master what she asks by himself or, if not by himself, with a little support of the teacher or someone else. This condition requires a good knowledge of children's levels of development.
- Every part of the assignment is clear. The child does not only need an oversight of the whole, but also of information about the place of every part within the assignment.

Because of focussing a state of arousal which will lead the child to the activity is created in the child. He knows what is expected of him. He will develop the need to perceive more accurately, to interpret non-verbal signals and facial expressions from the teacher, to listen for the atmosphere expressed through language.

And more: the pre-schooler learns to share his learning experiences with his mediator. This will be of utmost importance for the development of his social skills. When the child has to cooperate in teamwork, whether it be in a leading or a participating role, it will be important that he can focus on what's at stake and how every team member acts within. The teacher's model influences the child's future behaviour strongly in this matter.

Every mediation criterion has traps. The most important in mediation of focussing is that the teacher attracts the child's attention, the child doesn't show reciprocity, and the teacher goes on with her work, assuming the child is back on task.

In mediation training I give several assignments to make teachers practise on focussing. One of these assignments is: "Today I speak only when I'm sure that the person who should hear me actually listens." The results often bewilder the participating teachers. They don't realise how often one speaks without having a real listener or without everybody paying attention. Just because of this the importance of focussing is unmistakable.

Children who, for whatever reason, need extra mediation of focussing tend to get less than their classmates rather quickly. The cause is understandable. The teacher focuses the child, the child shows hardly any reciprocity. The teacher has a limited amount of time and will be

inclined to fill herself what she expects from the child. Thinking the child cannot handle mediation is a second trap.

Fiona can close her coat by herself, but she still does this very slowly. The teacher wants to let her manage on her own. Fiona starts, but the other children are done with theirs already. Everybody has to wait for Fiona before they can leave for the playground or eating hall. The other children become impatient. The teacher sees them start fussing with each other, goes over to Fiona and helps her button up her coat. The group problem is solved, but Fiona did not accomplish what the teacher expected. Research has shown that the chance is big that the teacher will resort to buttoning Fiona's coat herself in the future, so nobody will have to wait for her to get ready. This way it will take longer for Fiona to finally succeed closing her own coat efficiently.

This trap lies in wait even more with children with a handicap, and it's one of the reasons why learned helplessness shows up regularly in these children.

A number of questions the teacher can ask herself to enhance focussing:

- Is the content I choose adequate for the child's developmental level?
- Do I have the attention of every child involved before I start my instruction or activity?
- Can I change something in my own attitude to enhance the involvement of the child(ren)?
- Do I know why the children stop paying attention?
- Do all children know what I expect from them?
- Are my non-verbal messages in concordance with my verbal ones?

5.2 Expanding

We speak of expanding when the teacher makes links between the learning stimulus to which the child reacts now and other objects or ideas while the learning interaction is taking place. The teacher does this by connecting the here and now with other experiences. She has different possibilities for doing this:

° The teacher can make associations between people, things and events.

Kyle bathes the doll. He takes very good care of her. The teacher joins him and tells him Mary's mother takes care of elderly people in a nursing home. There she bathes people who cannot bathe themselves anymore.

Kevin plays in the sandbox with a big lorry. The teacher asks him which toy he might use to fill the lorry with sand.

° The teacher models spontaneous comparison.

Four children make a puzzle at the table. The teacher joins them "What's the picture on your puzzle? Is that the same for everyone? Does every puzzle have the same number of pieces? What is your puzzle about?"

° The teacher links cause and results.

The children are painting. The teacher wants to teach them that by mixing colours, you get a new colour. The teacher will make this explicit, so the children will know this fact at the end of the activity.

Kevin helps Martin with his artwork. He holds the box on which Martin wants to stick all kinds of shapes. The teacher asks Martin why it's good that Kevin holds the box for him.

° The teacher situates an activity in space.

During a class visit to the doctor, the teacher discusses with the children why the doctor has a waiting room as well as a room to see patients.

The children have cooked spaghetti. The teacher asks them if they eat it at other times too, if anybody knows which country spaghetti comes from, ...

During a walk in the park Nancy notices that nothing grows under the big beach tree. The teacher tells the children to stand against the trunk and look straight up. They notice there's less light than beside the tree. (Notice in this example that different ways of expanding can be combined. In the last example a cause-relation link is included.)

°The teacher expands the activity in time.

During free play in the afternoon Céline tucks in the doll in her little bed. The teacher says little children need to take a nap in the afternoon. She also tells Céline that when she was smaller, she also would take a nap in the afternoon.

Elsie tells her little brother will be baptised. She enthusiastically relates about the preparations for the feast. The teacher shares with the children how she celebrated the baptism of her children and how in her family the baptism dress is passed on. Even her mother had worn it when she was a baby.

°The teacher helps the children recall something from their memories.

The children have circle time. The teacher shows them a new book about Spot. Some time earlier in the year she has used another book from the same series. Through questions she tries to recall the previous time they talked about Spot. "Who remembers this darling's name? What did we learn about him then? Do you remember who else was in the book?, ..."

°The teacher helps children find explanations.

While telling the story of Little Red Riding Hood the teacher asks several questions. "Why does Little Red Riding Hood go visit her grandmother? How come the Big Bad Wolf drowns? ..."

Mediation of expanding is very important for the child's cognitive development. By expanding the child transcends the here and now at a mental level. He is obliged to leave the concrete level and move on to a more abstract plain. We should not assume children do this by themselves. It is taught by example, modelled.

When Pnina Klein first organised workshops in Flanders and the Netherlands, she told the following:

"I brought you some good and some bad news. Let me start with the bad news: a baby is born with millions of brain cells. Every day, however, a number of those dies off, because they're not being used. That's the bad news. The good news is that man can achieve more and more with the remaining brain cells. That's why he has to use them. Most important is that he creates links between his brain cells; and between those links ... more connections. This way the baby will grow up to be an adult who'll be able to function on a high mental level."

Mediation of expanding is precisely the characteristic which provides these connections. Things, events and people become mutually connected, which leads to the child experiencing the world as a context and not as unrelated parts/bits. Through this mediation characteristic the child develops a need to understand the world that surrounds him.

But there's more. Through mediation of expanding the child transcends the urge for immediate satisfaction of his needs. He learns that there is more than what one can perceive directly and will learn to ask questions to get a grasp on the invisible. This way the basic curiosity of the child - which is necessary to continue his own journey of discovery - is stimulated.

The trap in mediation of expanding is expanding beyond the child's developmental level. That's why it's good to be alert for the child's reciprocity during mediation of expanding. The child's reciprocity will indicate whether he can keep up or not.

Important questions for the teacher are:

- Can the children do more than look and listen?
- Do I tell the children more than what is directly visible?
- Do I explain what happens/takes place?
- Do I encourage children to compare?
- Do I ask children to make connections and seek explanations?
- Do I stimulate the children at an abstract level?

5.3 Meaning and excitement

The teacher uses mediation of affecting when she expresses her appreciation of the stimulus. This way she lets the stimulus rise above the other stimuli which continuously enter the child's field of perception. The things which surround us – except for those which provide for our basic needs – have little meaning for the child, unless if someone in his surroundings gives them meaning. Again, it cannot be taken for granted that children stop and wonder. It's the teacher-mediator who gives meaning to stimuli.

Mediation of affecting is teaching values. Through giving meaning to a stimulus the teacher tells the children that the stimulus is valued. She can do this in a variety of ways:

◦ First, there's the teacher's own enthusiasm. When the teacher herself shows involvement with the stimulus; shows that she thinks it's worth while; that she's like to do something with it herself, the child will be inclined to enter the interaction. The teacher will express this enthusiasm verbally as well as non-verbally. Her face will speak volumes.

The teacher has prepared a crafts activity for mother's day. It's something new for her too. She has worked into the night to prepare different models and she's proud of the results. She expects a lot from this activity. The children will certainly love it. By thinking about the activity that way, there is a big chance that she will bring it to the children with enthusiasm. The children in turn will easily be instigated to give it their best.

◦ The teacher takes care that the elements she brings to the children's attention are named. Things exist when they have a name. The more direct the language, the clearer it is to the child. This makes for a better chance that the child really knows what is meant. For every young child it is equally important that he is named by his (real) name as often as possible.

"Put that box with scissors in the middle of the table" is better than "put that box over here". "Can you give me that?" should be replaced by "Can you give me that red drawing paper?"

◦ The teacher explains why she brings certain stimuli to the children's attention. It is good to form a habit of speaking short sentences in which both intention and meaning are made clear.

"Put on your coat (intention), it's raining outside (meaning)."

Pick some colours which go nicely together (intention), that way your painting will be even prettier (meaning)."

The advantage of this practice is that children also acquire some insight into the criteria that are connected to certain assignments or things:

A coat is used in bad weather.

Colours which go together well, make for a nice picture.

The teacher also has a clarifying function: she needs to explain why things are the way they are. In that sense mediation of expanding is a very appropriate method to give meaning to things. When a child notices that the content of a learning interaction is more than the immediately visible, he will learn to give more meaning to an activity.

Mediation of affecting develops the need in the child to live meaningful experiences. It is good to connect meaning to the culture. That way the child learns what is valued within his own culture, which rules he should adhere to. This gives him the opportunity to interact affectively with his world. Even in his later development (e.g. puberty) it will be important

that he learns how to discover and develop his own values both from his culture and from values which he's acquired in the early years of his life.

Mediation of affecting creates energy. The more meaning one can give to an activity, the more energy one will generate for it. This is also true for children. Furthermore mediation of affecting also creates a need in the child to value things and people in his surroundings.

The most important trap for the teacher-mediator is enthusiasm which has no connection with the stimulus or with the child. Most people – children included – cannot be active overenthusiastically all day. Here too, a careful selection of what is really important will be necessary.

Important questions for the teacher:

- Do I show enthusiasm for what I think is really important?
- In which way do I show this enthusiasm?
- Do I show my feelings to children?
- Do I name children by their proper names?
- Do I notice an affective involvement of the children in the learning activity?
- Do I show admiration and wonderment for the world around me?
- Do I explain sufficiently why I do things; ask things?

5.4 Feelings of competence and rewarding

When a teacher mediates feelings of competence, she shows her satisfaction about the child's actions and communicates which aspects of the child's action made her happy.

There's a considerable difference between competence and feelings of competence. The child doesn't always perform at the level the teacher believes he can. In her eyes he may perform below level. Quite often the teacher's belief in the child's competence is justified. It's not the competence that is the matter; it's the belief in one's own competence.

Feelings of competence are extremely important for young children for them to make full use of opportunities to develop further. It's the feeling one experiences when one knows one can do something before tackling the task. Without a feeling of competence chances are the task will be avoided (K. Greenberg). That is also true for learning situations. A child who feels that he will be able to accomplish the work starts it; in the other case he will develop avoidance strategies to ensure he can put the least possible energy into it. By making feelings of competence such a clear and absolute condition for learning, it becomes a key theme in the teacher's approach. She will make sure that children have this feeling and keep it. That's why she will implement mediation of feelings of competence as often as possible.

It is not so that all children have this feeling concerning all fields of development. It is amazing how many children have already been damaged in their belief in themselves.

To bring mediation of feelings of competence into practice one must attend to a number of rules:

°I make you competent.

In our Western civilisation it is not commonly accepted that people explicitly name their own qualities. Anyone who does so anyway is quickly seen as bigheaded or vain. Modesty is a grace. If this is the case, children will have to be told about their competences, because they see few people who model openness about their competences. That's why the teacher needs to say what the child does well and make sure that the child has actually heard it.

Applause for a child, a peacock corner (where a child can show off what he's good at), "see what I can" circle are all examples in which children's actions are confirmed.

°I clarify why I think you do well.

A child who lacks feelings of competence will not be inclined to believe the teacher right away when she calls him competent. He has decided for himself that he isn't good at this kind of activities and will not easily be convinced of the contrary. That's why the teacher names what she appreciates in the child's actions.

"What a lovely picture! Look, you used the whole page!"

"You've eaten well! You finished your whole plate. That's good!"

"I saw you playing together on the playground. It's nice to see you getting along so well."

Naming what was good results in the child not being able to deny it, but more: it teaches that there are criteria which make an activity into a well performed activity:

- to make a nice picture, you use the full page
- playing together nicely means you try to get along

°I am honest in my mediation

Stan is a child in the group who has some difficulties. It takes him a bit longer to understand things and his motor skills are less developed than the other children's. Chances are that if the teacher means well with Stan she will call things he does fantastic, even if he's rather clumsy. That doesn't work. Stan knows he's clumsy and will not believe the teacher in the future, not even when things are going really well.

This rule implies that the teacher specialises in 'good point analysis'. This means: developing an attitude of looking for what actually goes well and naming it, even if it's only part of the activity and the end result isn't quite up to standard.

While cleaning up Nell sets the dolls together nicely, but when she collects the puzzle pieces she mixes the two puzzles together. Both things are mentioned, what went good as well as what went wrong.

°I provide experiences of success.

The activities the teacher selects as well as the ones children choose for themselves need to lead to experiences of success. If things threaten to go wrong, the teacher needs to intervene, but the final experience must be a positive one. This means that the teacher sometimes will go very far in the help she gives to a particular child. An activity which – despite the necessary help – cannot lead to success is an inadequate activity for this child.

On the one hand this means that the teacher needs to make a good estimate of children's capabilities. On the other hand she needs to know about which are the basic skills for making the activity succeed.

The teacher doesn't have to wait till the child is successful to praise him. Mediation of feelings of competence starts with encouragement. The child sets to work and the teacher stands by him as his most ardent supporter. This not only gives energy to the child, it gives the teacher a chance to intervene if necessary.

The power of mediation of feelings of competence lies with developing the need in the child to continuously look for new experiences of success. The child will develop an attitude of self-evaluation and try to experience this pleasant feeling again in other situations.

The child will also like repeating certain activities because they gave him a pleasant feeling the previous time.

The major trap for the mediator is telling something is good without explaining why. Also the idea that she already is mediating feelings of competence is a trap for the teacher. Through everything she knows about education the teacher is convinced of the importance of mediation of feelings of competence. Being convinced, however, is often not the same as acting accordingly.. Research has shown that teachers in groups tend to redirect and intervene

preventively to make sure things run smoothly, rather than giving compliments in a clarifying way.

The most important questions for the teacher are:

- Do I give compliments?
- Do I encourage at the right moment?
- Does the child realise why he's successful?
- During preparation of an activity is my concern that every child will be able to experience success?
- Do I show pleasure when a child experiences success?
- Am I intent on looking for what's good in children's actions?
- Am I honest in showing my appreciation?

5.5 Regulation of behaviour

We speak of mediation of regulation of behaviour when the teacher consciously points out the importance of 'thinking before doing' to the children; and also, when she calls their attention to thinking about the different steps to be taken in an activity to reach the established goal.

The teacher is a model for planning behaviour. She demonstrates, shows successive actions in connection to each other and to the goal and she situates them in time and space. She shows the children that there are activities in which different actions should be taken step by step (cf. putting together a puzzle) and others in which it is important to take different actions at the same time (cf. cooking). Her attitude teaches the children that they shouldn't be satisfied with the first solution popping up, rather she investigates with them which possible solutions are at hand and which would be best.

After exploring cookies from foreign countries the children can taste them. The teacher will make use of this opportunity to set the table properly. She will discuss with the children where they will set the table, for how many people, what needs to be put down first and what then, etc. She will point out that they do this before playtime, so they'll have had their cookie by then. She'll ask the children whether they still want their cookie before the playtime afterwards, ...

Mediation of regulation of behaviour develops a need in the child to put the brakes on his impulsivity, to plan, to act step by step and - in social situations – to think before acting. Another important consequence of this mediation characteristic is learning to work purposefully. A child who remains focussed on his purpose learns to stay focussed at the essence of his actions.

Another advantage of mediation of regulation of behaviour is that the child learns that a task doesn't necessarily go wrong because he cannot handle it, but maybe because he didn't plan well. This insight offers a possibility to start over again with a new plan, which may lead to experiences of success after all.

First the teacher will use short sentences in which she indicates to the children how best to perform a certain action. They're common sentences in which words about the 'how' of the action play a central role:

Close the tap firmly so it doesn't drip.

Speak softly to dolly so she becomes calm again.

Furthermore the teacher will often say out loud which successive actions she takes.

First I put a cloth on the table, then we put on our painting aprons and then I'll set water and paints on the table.

The teacher also asks the children how they approach a task or activity.

How will you start making your clay doll? What are you going to do first? How will you keep the clay soft so you can knead it? What do you need to know first before you can start setting the table?

The trap in mediation of regulation of behaviour is giving directions or orders. These turn children into good performers, but they don't learn to think along about the activity and thus won't develop any planning behaviour of their own.

The most important questions for the teacher are:

- Do I pay attention to every part of the child's acting?
- Do I create an atmosphere in which children can work quietly and with concentration?
- Do I have an eye for a good start of a child's action?
- Does the child have a view of different partial steps he will have to take?
- Do I take care that the child keeps working purposefully?
- Can I redirect children without having to take over the activity?
- How do I bring 'time' into the picture?
- Do I make connections between things with the children?
- Am I a good example of regulation of behaviour?

5.6 Mediation is more than using the criteria successively

Most of the time when mediators start out their attention is fixed on one or two criteria. Focussing and mediation of feelings of competence score high with teachers in early childhood. They really go for those characteristics. At the start of a training it is noticeable that these are the characteristics in which the teacher invests, but the success is rather limited. That is only logical. Creating a mediated learning experience is a qualitative interaction between the teacher and the child which does not run strictly according to certain rules or a set succession of actions. The only rule is that all five of the characteristics should be brought into the interaction. The order in which this takes place depends on the interaction itself. Some examples:

The teacher wants to focus the children on the weather outside in view of what they will wear to go to the playground:

Have a look outside. What kind of weather do we have? (focussing)

It's bad weather.

How do you know? (giving meaning)

It's raining.

What shall we wear to play outside then? (regulation of behaviour)

We need to wear our coats.

Very good. You know you have to put on your coat when the weather is bad. (feelings of competence)

And I have to button up as well. (regulation of behaviour from the child)

Why do you have to do that? (giving meaning)

Otherwise my jumper gets wet too.

You've thought it through very well. You best button up before you go outside. (feelings of competence) Do you have to put your coat on at other times too? (expanding)

When there's a lot of wind.

How can we see from our classroom whether the wind blows? (regulation of behaviour)

The tree bends over.

Is there any wind now? (focussing)

No, cause the tree's standing straight.

Good of you to notice that! It's good to look at the tree to see if there's any wind outside. (feelings of competence and regulation of behaviour)

....

A mediated learning experience doesn't have to start with focussing. An example:

The children have been playing in the sandbox for a while. The teacher walks over to two children who've built a sand castle.

What a beautiful building you've made. Look, every corner has a tower. (feelings of competence) What kind of building is that? (giving meaning)

A castle.

How wonderful, how did you manage to make it so pretty? (regulation of behaviour)

Lenny made the towers and I built the walls in between them.

So you first built the towers and then the walls? (regulation of behaviour)

Yes.

How did you get that great idea?

I saw it at the beach with mum and dad.

Oh, where did you go to the beach? (expanding)

In France.

Have you been to France too, Bart?

No.

How did you know how to build your castle? (regulation of behaviour)

Lenny told me.

Hey, you made good agreements then. It's nice when you work together like that. (feelings of competence) Are all towers the same? (focussing)

Yes.

How many did you build?

....

There's a chance that teachers who read the examples think they already have this kind of interaction often. This is possible, but the question remains if she is interacting like this consciously or routinely. For the child it is important that the teacher's actions are intentional. The teacher's goal is to build communication with the child which is as varied as possible while being focussed on a chosen theme. By extending the conversation from different mediation criteria she creates a chain of communication. The more extensive this chain, the more intense the learning moment. An extensive chain of communication cannot be reached by implementing the same mediation characteristics over and over again. A child who is solely focussed, will soon withdraw from the conversation and start looking for new stimuli by himself. A continuous flow of mediation of feelings of competence will quickly seem untruthful.

We also need to make a distinction between what we think we do and what we do in reality. Research has shown a number of interesting findings in this matter:

A day care worker, who was being trained in MISC, was filmed at home, during an interaction with three toddlers. What she did was excellent. She built beautiful chains of communication in which she included several mediation criteria. Afterwards her three young children returned from pre-school. Now there were six children she had to care for. The result? Not only did the number of mediated interaction with the three toddlers decrease (which is understandable), but even the total of mediated interactions decreased considerably. The woman resorted mainly to giving instructions and forgot almost completely about mediation of feelings of competence and expanding. This is easy to explain, but very important to realise. How then will it be in a group where twenty to thirty children are

constantly demanding the teacher's attention? Most of the time we see teachers spending a lot of effort and time on preventive actions aimed at making activities run smoothly. This preventive pre-structuring is not the same as mediation.

That's why it's important to distinguish a number of elements which will lead to effectively mediated learning experiences.

5.6.1 Developing a mediation style

We can distinguish two important mediation styles: 'providing with' and 'asking for'.

'Providing with' means the teacher shows, gives information, explains, tells, ... There are certain learning situations in which this style is very necessary, especially when dealing with completely new experiences.

'Asking for' on the other hand leaves the thinking work with the child. The teacher directs the child's thinking by asking questions, but the child has to do the actual thinking work. This mediation style coaches the child toward independent thinking and is a better stimulus for his cognitive development than the previous.

Qualitative mediation means a good balance between both styles. The child needs to be provided with the necessary knowledge to be able to answer questions independently.

5.6.2 Surface objectives and deep objectives

I enter the classroom and see children sitting in a circle around the teacher, who is telling from a book about colours. The story is about a pencil and a group of coloured pencils. The pencil shows how it evolves from simple scribbles to a very complex drawing. At a certain moment the coloured pencils draw a line and show their skills. The pencil takes over and tries to outdo the coloured pencils, but they too show themselves on their best side. At the end of the story they decide to work together. The children see how the pencils have to learn that too, but they reach the best result that way.

As viewer of this scene I see a storytelling situation in which a pencil and coloured pencils play the main roles. This is the teacher's surface objective: telling a story. But why does she use this book? And what does she want to discuss with the children? There are many possibilities:

- Every beginning is difficult. When you learn something new, you need to start out with the simple things.
- Working together gives better results.
- The teacher wants to show the variety of things you achieve with a pencil.
- Even on your own you can do great things.
- ...

These are the deeper objectives. These can only be deduced from the way the teacher brings the story into interaction. Where does she put an emphasis? Where does she expand? What does she name explicitly?

These deeper objectives are the most important ones. To be able to set them, the teacher will need to have a clear picture of the development of her group and of every child within it. What can bring this group of children, this child one step forward? By answering this question the teacher will develop mediated learning experiences more easily, because she knows what she wants to reach at a deeper level. This way the materials and the content are given meaning with a view of the child's needs and not the other way around.

5.6.3 Conditions for learning stimuli

Notwithstanding the fact that content and environment are of minor importance for building a mediated learning experience, they can contribute a great deal in organising a powerful learning environment.

The previous point means the content is there for the child. That's why the criteria for the content will be aimed at the child too. The three most important criteria are:

- ° The content is tuned in to the children's developmental age.

We make a clear distinction between the age and the developmental age. How children develop is easy to find in various books. But how this one child develops cannot be read anywhere except in the child. If the teacher 'reads' the child she'll notice that the child is above the average in some developmental domains, under the average in others. When choosing learning stimuli the teacher needs to take this into account.

- ° The content is worth while for the child.

When a group of children works with fruit, the reward is it can be eaten. A drawing is shown. Snow is explored and experienced, ...

'Experiencing' is more valuable than 'speaking about'. If the child experiences things which are 'worth while' he will be motivated again to be pulled along in new learning experiences.

- ° The content is natural.

A ball is something you play with in the first place, not to look at the pictures that are painted on it. This doesn't mean looking at the pictures is forbidden, but it does imply that the teacher realises that eventually it's best to play with the ball.

5.6.4 Creating a mediation environment

The environment too can be tackled to improve the learning situation.

A number of elements should be considered:

- ° The number of stimuli in the room.

In a pre-school classroom an inventory was made of all visible elements (so not what was in cupboards) The teacher quite amazed when she saw the typed list contained more than three pages of elements placed under each other. This made her realise there's a lot of possible distraction for the children in her classroom.

- ° Attention to clearness

Both the different parts of the classroom and the rules and agreements must be very clear. A predictable teacher who act consequentially makes for clearness. A deeper reason to strive for clearness is the fact that it provides safety for the child. This feeling of safety will invite him to walk untravelled roads, knowing that he can always fall back on a clear structure.

- ° An environment which permits differentiation

Differentiation can be about rules and agreements, the child's needs, the materials, the tempo as well as the place in which activities take place.

- ° A quiet working place

Peace comes from the person of the teacher, but also form the way the room is arranged, the succession of activities and the rules and agreements.

6 Last: three basic messages

Anybody reading the above can be flabbergasted by the different criteria for mediated learning interactions. Nothing works better to give low self-esteem. Pnina Klein says explicitly this isn't necessary. She gives two reasons for this:

First, not every interaction needs to be a mediated learning interaction, because that would be an impossible task for the teacher. On the contrary: the teacher will choose her moments of mediation carefully – in view of her deeper goals – and then invest in them totally.

She will however make sure that she continuously gives children these three basis messages:

° I share in your excitement:

Children are on a continuous voyage of discovery. They look for new experiences, take challenges. They are born that way. They can keep on developing this attitude or stifle it. Development takes place when children are stimulated in their discovering. A teacher who supports children in their voyage of discovery and who can be enthusiast about the discoveries they make, will stimulate them to continue their voyage. The child learns even more from this teacher attitude, namely: positive excitement can be shared. We may say that sharing the child's excitement over his experiences gives him permission to continue developing.

° I answer you questions

Different developmental psychologists claim that children are born as questioning beings. Sternberg notices that educators can take care that children keep asking questions or stop. The best way to teach a child not to ask questions, according to Sternberg, is making sure they don't receive an answer. Asking questions, however, often is the first step in their voyage of discovery. Children who don't ask questions anymore endure life; while a child who asks questions will interact with his environment actively and try to get a hold on it.

° I love you

Every educator, even the teacher in her group, often makes mistakes against educational theories and against what's good for this particular child. This is not disastrous. Children are flexible and happy to forgive. But there is one important condition: the child must know he is loved. This provides a feeling of safety and belonging. This message may seem sugary. However it implies earning the child's trust every day and keeping the belief in his developmental possibilities. And that is of utmost importance in children's lives: ***being surrounded by people who believe in them!***