



The AMIR program

The Israel Defense Forces give new opportunities to its soldiers from the Ethiopian community

Introduction

The program described below has been operating in Israel for nearly four years. It has radically changed the lives of nearly a thousand youngsters of Ethiopian origin as well as filling a large amount of people in Israel and all over the world with pride and giving them hope.

It all started with a negative public outcry protesting that for years a large proportion of Ethiopian immigrants to Israel and their children were being pushed to the margins of civil society and that when they enlisted in the army they were given the most poorly regarded and basic jobs such as drivers and cooks. The reason for this was their very low accomplishments on IDF psychometric screening tests which prevented them being sent to courses and highly regarded positions.

Following frequent protests, the IDF reached the conclusion that the system of screening used was discriminating against the Ethiopian immigrants and that a new screening system had to be found. The IDF screening department applied to ICELP and decided to implement the alternative screening method developed by Prof. Reuven Feuerstein, the cognitive dynamic assessment device entitled Learning Potential Assessment Device (LPAD). This article briefly summarizes the project, describing the 'educational product' that we are disseminating in South Africa and other countries.

The cornerstones of the program are as follows:

1. Cognitive-dynamic assessment (LPAD)
2. The Instrumental Enrichment Program (IE)
3. Mediated Learning Experience (MLE)

Each one these cornerstones will be described below.

Cognitive-dynamic assessment (LPAD)

LPAD is an assessment device that focuses on the appraisal of the subject's learning potential. Millions of subjects all over the world have been discriminated against by the existing culture-biased screening procedures. The the majority of the tests do not require any linguistic or academic knowledge, however, people from non-Western cultures find them difficult. One possibility to overcome this difficulty is to change the direction of the assessment from that of testing already existent cognitive functions and abilities to that of evaluation of learning potential.

The LPAD is based on Feuerstein's theory of Structural Cognitive Modifiability, which proposes that intelligence is dynamic and modifiable, not static or fixed. LPAD offers a viable alternative to static IQ type of tests, because it focuses on the learners' dynamic potential or propensity rather than their current performance level. The LPAD has an interactive nature with the evaluator actively mediating to the student in the process of assessment.

The goals and procedures of LPAD differ in principle from those of static assessment. The LPAD is process rather than product oriented, it investigates the learner's process of reasoning rather than the quantifiable answers. LPAD compares the learner's performance to his or her own performance at different times and different conditions, rather than to the age norm. LPAD evaluates individual learning propensity and cognitive modifiability rather than the current level of performance. LPAD actively produces in the learner a sample of cognitive changes and uses them for evaluation. The outcome of LPAD procedure is a descriptive profile of modifiability that includes the area of cognitive change and degree of change. On the basis of LPAD assessments recommendations are made regarding the psycho-educational intervention, which often includes the Instrumental Enrichment (FIE) program.

The group LPAD battery consists of instruments aimed at assessing cognitive and learning processes related to perception, attention, memory, problem-solving, and logical reasoning, including: Organization of Dots, Complex Figure Drawing Test, Diffuse Attention Test (Lahy), Positional Learning Test, Raven Standard Progressive Matrices, Set Variations B-8 to B-12, Set Variations I, Set Variations II, Representational Stencil Design Test (RSDT), Numerical Progressions, and Organizer.

Instrumental enrichment

Feuerstein's Instrumental Enrichment Program (FIE) is a cognitive intervention program that can be used both individually and in the group framework. The FIE program has been successfully used all over the world as a tool for the enhancement of learning potential and cognitive functioning of children and adults. For individuals with special needs, FIE is used as a remediation program; for regular and higher functioning learners FIE is a tool of cognitive enrichment. To date, the FIE program has been successfully used in the following frameworks:

Classroom use with regular, gifted and underachieving students (upper primary to high-school);

Learning enhancement programs for immigrant and cultural minority students;

Individual and small group remediation programs for special needs students;

Professional development programs in vocational training and for college students.

FIE was included in the package of educational reform programs recommended by the US Department of Education.

FIE as a classroom curriculum is aimed at enhancing the students' cognitive functions necessary for academic learning and achievement. The fundamental assumption of the program, based on Feuerstein's theory of Structural Cognitive Modifiability and Mediated Learning Experience is that intelligence is dynamic and modifiable, not static or fixed. Thus, the FIE program seeks to correct deficiencies in fundamental thinking skills, provides students with the concepts, skills, strategies, operations and techniques necessary to function as independent learners, increases

their motivation, develops students' metacognition, and in a word, helps students "learn how to learn."

FIE materials are organized into 14 instruments that comprise paper and pencil tasks aimed at such specific cognitive domains as analytic perception, orientation in space and time, comparison, classification, and more. Deliberately free of specific subject matter, the FIE tasks are intended to be more readily transferable to all educational and everyday life situations. The FIE program is mediated by a certified FIE teacher and can be implemented in the classroom setting or as an individual tutoring and remedial teaching device. The FIE materials and teacher manuals have received worldwide recognition and have been translated into 17 languages including all major European and some Asian languages. In addition, there is a Braille version of FIE tools for blind learners. For each of the FIE instruments there is a Teacher Guide. Educators become certified as FIE teachers after appropriate training.

FIE is the most researched of the various cognitive intervention programs. A complete Bibliography of FIE research includes hundreds of books, articles, reports, and doctoral dissertations. The Bibliography is accessible at the ICELP website: www.icelp.org. The basic text used in FIE training and implementation is Feuerstein R. et al (2006). *Creating and Enhancing Cognitive Modifiability: The Feuerstein Instrumental Enrichment Program*. Jerusalem: ICELP Press.

Mediated Learning Experience

Mediated Learning Experience (MLE) describes a special quality of interaction between a learner and a person, whom we shall call a "mediator". Feuerstein's theory of MLE identifies two basic forms of interaction: direct learning and mediated learning. Direct learning includes unmediated exposure of the organism to environmental stimuli, including objects, events, texts, pictures, and so on. The above diagram shows how the inclusion of a human mediator may change the situation of direct learning into that of mediated learning. The human mediator, intervenes in the learning process by placing him or herself between the learner and the stimulus and between the learner and the response. The mediator selects, changes, amplifies and interprets both the stimuli that come to the learner and the learner's responses. The absence of the necessary type or/and amount of MLE leads to the underdevelopment of the students' cognitive functions and direct learning strategies. On the other hand massive infusion of mediated learning may improve the situation and turn a student child into an independent and self-regulating learner. According to MLE theory, genetic, organic, experiential and socio-cultural factors constitute only distal determinants of the cognitive development. The type and amount of MLE constitute the proximal determinant that can substantially moderate the impact of proximal factors.

AMIR Project

At the end of 2005, the first group of IDF recruits from the Ethiopian community took part in a new project at the Education Corps base in Galilee, designed at the request of the Head of the Human Resources Division, to explore ways to upgrade the performance and contribution of these soldiers during their military service. The program was prepared by Rafi Feuerstein the vice-chairman of ICELP; and administered by Anat Kagan from ICELP and based on the cognitive intervention methods developed by Prof. Feuerstein and his colleagues. The initial pilot project

was so successful, that the eighth such *Amir* program has now taken place and the Human Resources Division has instructed the Education Corps to hold four *Amir* programs annually, in each recruitment session as of 2009.

The objective: *to enable recruits from the Ethiopian community to realize their potential during their military service, a potential which had not hitherto been recognized, because of their low scores in the conventional psychometric tests administered.*

The two stages of the program:

1). *to evaluate these soldiers according to their learning potential, established by the Feuerstein method, and direct them to training courses that had previously been closed to them.*

2). *to prepare the candidates for these higher-level courses by systematically teaching them thinking skills and learning strategies, with the help of Instrumental Enrichment, and then providing a support system during the courses.*

The program: new recruits, other than those directed to combat units, numbering 100-150 in each session, spend four weeks at the base. Following an assessment process over 2-3 days, by an ICELP team, using the Feuerstein Dynamic Assessment, they are streamed into small classes for 3 weeks of cognitive enrichment, comprising selected exercises from the Feuerstein Instrumental Enrichment program and the acquisition of learning strategies. On the basis of a second assessment and personal counseling interviews, in which the ICELP instructors also participate, the graduates are directed to the most appropriate training course, which will prepare them for their army career.

Thanks to the cognitive intervention provided by *Amir*, the recruits qualify to train for more challenging and meaningful military professions than were accessible to such soldiers in the past. From the first session, it became clear that these young men and women are as qualified as their peers to undertake challenging roles, as army social workers, medical orderlies, technicians, Intelligence personnel, instructors, producers in the Army Radio, and many also do well as non-commissioned officers and officers. The 80% success-rate is no different from that of the general average in the IDF.

Follow-up study shows that their performance in training and subsequently in their army career, has been no less successful than that of other groups, with the help of the learning skills and self-confidence acquired from *Amir*.

This project has led the IDF authorities to change their perception of the capacities of the Ethiopian soldier, while the *Amir* graduates, proud of their achievements, have discovered a new self-esteem and confidence in their abilities. The *Amir* program will thus have a far wider effect, impacting on the future studies, career and quality of life of these men and women, as an integrated part of Israeli society.

Project results

The follow-up study was conducted by comparing the achievements of the graduates of 2005 & 2006 AMIR programs (more than 200 recruits in each cohort) with that of other Ethiopians serving in the Army. The comparison parameters included:

- Training placement category
- Successful completion of the first year of service
- Incarceration rate
- Desertion rate
- AWOL rate

Significantly greater percent of AMIR graduates received higher level, professional military training than that of minority recruits who did not participate in the program.

AMIR graduates complete a year of service at a higher rate than other Ethiopian soldiers.

Lower incarceration rate among Amir graduates, decrease in 2006.

Lower AWOL rate among AMIR graduates.

(Insert Figs. 1,2,3 and 4)

Conclusion:

The follow-up study demonstrated that AMIR program is effective in:

- Accurately selecting minority recruits for higher-level professional training courses;
- Increasing the percent of soldiers successfully finishing the first year of service;
- Reducing the rate of desertions, AWOL and incarcerations.