

Shaping Modifying Environments*

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At least in Western society, most out-of-home group care settings for children and youth have been established to deal with what are viewed as developmental problems and/or needs within these age groups. Thus, we are familiar with such facilities for young people designated as dependent and neglected, emotionally disturbed, retarded, delinquent, and the like. In each case, there is presumed to be a problem that the setting is expected, insofar as possible, to help to repair by changing the young people in specified directions.

Other group care programs tend to be viewed differently, but the basic paradigm holds for most of them as well. Many elite, independent boarding schools, for example, exist largely to prepare their students for effective lives at the so-called higher levels of society (Cookson & Persell, 1985). Many less elite ones exist to serve young people who, if their parents were less privileged, would be assigned to the kinds of facilities cited above. In fact, independent schools are arrayed along a continuum in this respect, all sharing the mission of intervening to influence the development of young people in ways that their home communities are unable and/or unwilling to do. Even regular schools and summer camps with a developmental educational orientation can be viewed from this perspective (Arieli, Beker & Kashti, 1990).

In practice, however, at least in programs serving primarily the disadvantaged, the commitment to change often remains at the level of lip-service or, at best, looks to superficial, quantitative measures that have usually proven not to be sustainable beyond the period of residence in the program (Beker & Feuerstein, 1989b; Whittaker, Overstreet, Grasso, Tripodi & Boylan, 1988). It is relatively easy, for example, to “institutionalize” residents so that they demonstrate improved behavior in the setting, but carry-over to the home community – the “real world” – is much more difficult. Likewise, it is relatively easy to enhance their academic performance under controlled conditions, but it is much more difficult to put them on an enhanced learning trajectory that can be sustained.

Largely as the result of such failures – or limited successes – group care programs have been criticized and, increasingly, closed in recent years. In this context, it seems fair and even essential to ask whether these generally unimpressive results simply reflect incompetent leadership; whether they are, as many would have us believe, intrinsic in some way to the group care setting in our society; or whether they represent a conceptual failure – the failure of the field to conceptualize its goals and approaches broadly and sharply enough to permit them to accomplish the task for which they have been established. Essentially this to help young people who have particular kinds of problems to establish themselves on a new and more effective developmental course.

From the perspective of the present authors, the problem has many of its roots on the conceptual level, in that most dominant models of group care have addressed these

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issues inadequately if at all. The idea of the Modifying Environment (Beker & Feuerstein, 1989b, 1990) represents an attempt to define and fill this gap, and the present article examines the approach in the context of existing notions of custodial care, the therapeutic milieu, the total institution, the powerful environment, and challenge or adventure-based programming.

The conceptual analysis and practice suggestions offered below should be viewed as the authors' "thinking-in-process" that seeks, in the spirit of Kurt Lewin's dictum that there is nothing as practical as a good theory, to undergird practice in group care with clear theoretical foundations geared specifically to group care enterprise. It is hoped that, through successive approximation, the field may produce the kind of conceptual framework that can enhance practice in group care settings, and that the present "working paper" will stimulate thinking in that direction. Toward these ends, the authors encourage field testing of the ideas presented and invite reactions, criticism, and alternative suggestions through correspondence, publication, and the like, to be incorporated in subsequent formulations as may be indicated.

The Modifying Environment

Active Modification vs. Passive Acceptance

The Modifying Environment is viewed as at one end of an ideological and programmatic continuum ranging from active modification to passive acceptance, as these have been described by Feuerstein (1970) in the context of mental retardation, although the basic notion is much more broadly applicable. In brief, the idea is that many group care settings – their often elegant pretensions to the contrary notwithstanding – provide passive-acceptant environments in which little fundamental change is required of their charges. Cosmetic changes may be sought and heralded (and may, in a few cases, be all that can realistically be projected), but students with greater potential who learn to "get by" and not "make trouble" are rarely "hassled" (Beker, 1989b), even if the result is dominance by peer group or peer-staff alliances that undermine stated goals (Polsky, 1962). This may reflect an underlying conviction on the part of staff and/or administration that significant change is impossible anyway, problems of leadership and morale, or broader, ideological issues, among other possibilities.

The active-modificational approach, on the other hand, the basis of the Modifying Environment, is rooted in the assumption that fundamental change can be stimulated by planned, active intervention that

... systematically makes demands on those within it for cognitive, emotional, and social modification in the context of their existing levels of development, skill, etc. It does not "accept the student where he (or she) is," but it does "start where the student is," building on existing competencies while providing for needed feelings of security. As competency and performance improve, demands rise accordingly, thus establishing ever higher levels of functioning. Whatever the specific setting the task is to establish and maintain a modifying environment appropriate to the needs of the particular clientele being served. (Beker & Feuerstein, 1989b)

The objective, it should be emphasized, is not simply that students should be able to do specific tasks better, but that they should do them differently in ways that will better enable them to approach and master other tasks of the same kind in the future, as is detailed by Beker and Feuerstein (1990). This, the cognitive dimension, is viewed as fundamental, particularly in modern society where so many individual choices must be made with regard to emotional and social expression (Beker, 1989a; Beker & Feuerstein, 1989a). Thus, they learn to adapt, establishing cognitive and emotional flexibility and the capacity to modify their own thinking, feelings, and behavior in response to internal and external conditions (Beker, 1989b).

Maier (1987) has characterized this kind of development as second-order change or “transformational” learning, which “involves a nonlinear progression, a transformation from one state to another” (p. 17). First-order change, on the other hand, he describes as “incremental, a linear progression to do more or less, better, faster, or with greater accuracy.” By analogy, “water becoming warmer or colder ... is a first-order change. Water turning into ice or steam constitutes a second-order change” (p. 17). Even an implicitly passive acceptant environment tends to retard second-order change by not supporting or encouraging it.

Basic Components of the Modifying Environment

Beker and Feuerstein (1989b, 1990) identify and describe four basic components of Modifying Environments. Two of these are ideological: Expectations on the part of those in the setting that its students can succeed in achieving the desired growth; and Importance, the conviction that these are the most important tasks of the program. The other two are Resources, both tangible and intangible, and Individualized Process, which includes ongoing assessment and intervention prescription, the use and adaptation of the resources, and the worker's use of himself or herself with students.

Mediated Learning Experience

Although the four components just described are all crucial, it is through the interactions between staff and students, the Individualized Process, that the program is actually delivered. Here is where whatever is significant in the impact of the program will happen; here, in the graphic words of the old tire commercial, is “where the rubber meets the road.” The most significant component of what effective caregivers in Modifying Environments provide is what we define as Mediated Learning Experience (MLE), or Mediation, “an interaction in which another human, usually the adult caregiver, interprets the world to the child” (Feuerstein & Hoffman, 1982). As Feuerstein, Hoffman, Rand, Jensen, Tzuriel, & Hoffman (1986) describe it,

In a mediated learning experience, the adult caregiver interposes himself or herself between the child and the environment. The adult mediator intentionally filters and focuses the stimuli, ordering and organizing them, regulating their intensity, frequency, and sequence. Temporal, spatial, and causal relationships are created among them so as to link them to other stimuli that have preceded or will follow. The mediator thus creates, for and with the child, relationships among

stimuli that reinvoke the past and anticipate the future. Stimuli that were previously perceived by the child in an incidental way because of their randomized appearance will be perceived very differently once the mediator has organized them, and selected and emphasized their meaning. Once the child has experienced mediated learning interactions and learned to focus, observe and differentiate, he or she will spontaneously continue to interact with things actively rather than passively. (p. 50)

There is no great mystery about MLE; it has been used by mothers (and fathers) with their children for thousands of years, usually without their thinking about it. For reasons having to do with their parents as transmitters or themselves as receivers, however, many children have not experienced adequate Mediation; as a result, they have not developed the adaptational skills on which further developmental learning depends. Sometimes, functional or organic deficits in the children are at fault; many of these can be modified to the point where Mediation can be successful. In many cases, parental absence or malfunctioning due to economic or marital stress, mental or emotional difficulties, substance abuse, etc., are involved. Physical and/or cultural displacement, such as among refugee populations, are among other causes. In any event, a successful resolution depends on providing the needed Mediation through the parents when that is possible, or in some kind of substitute care when that is necessary.

Components of Mediated Learning Experience have been described by Beker and Feuerstein (1990) and, in greater depth, by Feuerstein, Rand, and Rynders (1988). Although the details presented there are beyond the scope of the present paper, the list includes the following: Intentionality and Reciprocity; Transcendence; Mediation of Meaning; Mediation of Feelings of Competence; Mediated Regulation and Control of Behavior; Mediated Sharing Behavior; Mediation of Individuation and Psychological Differentiation; Mediation of Goal Seeking, Goal Setting, Goal Planning and Achieving Behavior; Mediation of Challenge: The Search for Novelty and Complexity; Mediation of an Awareness of the Human Being as a Changing Entity; and Mediation of an Optimistic Alternative.

Philosophical Foundations

Decades ago, leading outdoor educator L. B. Sharp suggested that,

if we do not fill the time of a young person with things that are fun, exciting, and good for him (or her!), the youth will fill it with things that are fun, exciting, and not good for him (or her).

That may sound a bit quaint today, at least in some quarters, in light of contrary ideologies that have emerged in the interim, but it reflects a value system that assumes that adults are responsible for some selectivity in pursuing their tasks in educating the young.

In this context, it is worth recalling that even in the classical progressive education framework of John Dewey,

... the teacher did not observe passively or even stand by to offer assistance only when clearly needed by the child. The teacher's business is to determine how the discipline of life shall come to the child, to select the appropriate influences and to make sure learning situations are fully utilized. (Feuerstein & Hoffman, 1982, p. 49)

Deepening the point, Dewey (1965) himself stated,

I have heard of cases in which children are surrounded with objects and materials and then left entirely to themselves, the teacher being loath to suggest even what might be done with the materials lest freedom be infringed upon. Why, then, even supply materials since they are source of some suggestion or other. (p.71)

This is the perspective reflected by the Modifying Environment concept, together with the idea that child-rearing and education are responsible for the transmission of the young person's cultural heritage. The child who has been well socialized into his or her particular culture will be able to assess and adapt to a new one, should that become necessary; the one who has not will be unable to find roots anywhere, because the concept, fundamental to culture, that things and events have meanings beyond their intrinsic properties will be inaccessible. Thus, the idea that culture should not be imposed on the young so as not to impair their freedom to choose is misguided; it is only if they are given a cultural identity that they will be empowered So choose. Without it, they would be unable even to understand that such a choice exists to be made. Mediated Learning Experience, always in the context of each individual's cultural heritage, generates the process of cultural transmission (Feuerstein & Hoffman. 1982).

The Modifying Environment vs. Custodial Care

Custodial care, which was often the approach used by default in early residential programs, exists in many such facilities today, but rarely by design. More frequently, the prescribed regimen emphasizes planned, developmentally-oriented intervention, but the reality of the setting turns out to be largely custodial. Either way, benevolent custodial care provides almost a pure example of a passive-acceptant environment. This is not, it should be noted, to equate custodial care (or passive acceptance) with the kind of physically and emotionally abusive practices that have too often appeared in custodial and other kinds of group care settings, but such settings usually do not address much beyond the basic biological needs of their residents and the social control objectives of society.

Examining the dearth of truly developmentally-oriented programs in this field, at least in the United States, and the reasons for that situation, however, Perrow (1963, 1966) suggests that we might better seek to provide humane custodial care than attempt to deliver more ambitious and complicated services that we generally do not appear able to implement very well. Such care alone, he notes, might provide enough of a moratorium to enable residents to begin to reconstitute themselves and their lives in more productive ways.

From an active modification perspective, this is an inadequate response, although certainly better than condoning abuse and likely to serve some residents well. For most, however, only a true Modifying Environment with extensive adult mediation can address the need. Undoubtedly, in a humane group care program, at least some of the adults will provide effective mediation; it “comes naturally” to effective parents and to many others. Conceptually and practically, however, it is widely recognized in the field that if we are seeking to build an effective program “on purpose” rather than by accident, custodial models are inadequate.

The Modifying Environment and the Therapeutic Milieu

The concept of the “therapeutic milieu” (Bettelheim & Sylvester, 1948; Redl, 1959; Trieschman, 1969) – and the “therapeutic community,” more closely linked to programs serving adults (Jones, 1953, 1956) – represent early attempts to view the group care environment itself as a tool in working with residential program clientele. It encompassed both meeting basic security needs and providing a variety of interventions designed to enhance emotional and social developmental processes; less attention appears to have been given to cognitive deficits, although these are sometimes fundamental. Although individualization in the traditional therapeutic milieu was perhaps less formalized and systematic, it was clearly part of the model. At its best, the therapeutic milieu is clearly an Active Modification strategy, at least in the emotional and social domains.

That this potential often goes unrealized may reflect more a difference of emphasis than anything else. The focus in the therapeutic milieu tends to be on establishing a particular kind of environment, as specified in the model, which is assumed to have the desired effects. The Modifying Environment, on the other hand, tends to define itself through assessment and intervention with individual students (whether individually or in groups); thus, the quality control tends to be applied closer to the actual “product.” In addition, the therapeutic milieu is frequently viewed as a treatment model; active modification is more of an educational approach. Nonetheless, the therapeutic milieu and the Modifying Environment have much in common and certainly offer perspectives that, while differing in emphasis, can be seen as compatible and mutually reinforcing.

The Modifying Environment and the Total Institution

Goffman’s (1961) concept of the total institution, it should be noted at the outset, is descriptive rather than prescriptive and, therefore, not directly parallel to the Modifying Environment. However, his identification and elaboration of “a variety of demoralizing and depersonalizing processes in such settings that appeared to be linked to their ‘underlying structural design’ ” (Baker & Feuerstein, 1989b) suggests that the broad establishment of successful Modifying Environments would require major change in existing programs.

The consistency that it can provide has been viewed by some as a major strength of the total environment, although the actual experience of residents in dealing with individual staff members and institutional subsystems (e.g., residence, school, clinic, work supervisors, administration, etc.) may reflect more variation than seems evident from outside. Eisikovits and Eisikovits (1980) suggest that such variation should be built in structurally, so as to avoid some of the iatrogenic consequences of total environments, especially the tendency of residents to become institutionalized to the point where they are unable to function in society. From the perspective of the Modifying Environment, this is important also because of the need for heterogeneity if one is to develop increased flexibility and competence in dealing with new situations (Beker & Feuerstein, 1990).

Thus, the kinds of total environments described (not advocated) by Goffman (1961) are oriented, at least conceptually and usually in practice, toward keeping people in – spatially, temporarily, and psychologically. Modifying Environments are oriented toward turning them out (the pun is instructive) as soon as possible – as soon, that is, as they are *almost* ready, because continued progress depends on maintaining just enough challenge, rather than allowing residents to languish in a situation that they have already mastered – or, of course, in one that reduces their opportunities to learn personal differentiation and the like. Thus, the total environment takes students backward; the Modifying Environment moves them forward. The total environment focuses on the setting; the Modifying Environment focuses on the student in the setting, which is viewed as context. Yet this conceptualization is critical in highlighting the pitfalls to which group care is subject if alertness sags. Eternal vigilance, to coin a phrase, is the price of modification!

The Modifying Environment and the Powerful Environment

Largely as a result of the isolation from other influences that it entails and the resulting consistency that that makes possible in its interaction with residents – that is, its very totality – the total environment has been viewed as a potent medium for change in human behavior. Some are wary of its effects — a powerful tool can do a great deal of damage – but Wolins (1974) has reported research suggesting that such “powerful environments” can be effective agents of positive developmental change. Based on his research, he proposes six criteria for such programs, some of which are examined more fully by Beker and Feuerstein (1989b) in the light of subsequent thinking and research. Here, they are reviewed in relation to the notion of the Modifying Environment.

1. *Positive Expectations* on the part of the staff with regard to children and youth in group care, including belief in the modifiability of human personality and behavior in later childhood and adolescence. It is readily apparent that this notion is close if not identical to the first stated component of the Modifying Environment, Expectations.

2. *Permanency of Commitment*, that is, the acceptance of responsibility for the young people involved until they reach maturity. Here, the comparison with the Modifying Environment concept is more complicated. For Wolins (1974), the powerful environment encompassed time as well as space – although it did not exclude outside contacts (see item 3) – and was oriented toward normalization within the particular social context involved, at least until maturity, be it a children's institution, a kibbutz,

etc. For the Modifying Environment, the emphasis is different, as the arena in which normalization is sought broadens to include increasingly complex, demanding, and regular settings as the increasing competence of the student permits. Therefore, within the limits of basic security needs, the objective is to move the student through each experience and setting as expeditiously as his or her progress permits.

3. *Social Integration within the Larger Milieu*, including both the community that is the residential center itself and the "outside" community of which it is a part. Here, the two models again converge, agreeing on the importance of normalizing experience in development. The difference, if items 2 and 3 are considered together, is that Wolins would place somewhat more emphasis on the importance of maintaining a stable quasi-home setting until the student reaches maturity. This distinction may be a reflection of the particular population with which the Wolins research was concerned rather than any significant conceptual disparity. The Modifying Environment perspective would view it as something of a side issue, to be resolved for each student on an individual basis in accordance with what would best meet his or her needs and would provide the most fruitful setting for active modification to be implemented. Metaphorically, the Powerful Environment seeks fundamentally to provide a surrogate Home; the Modifying Environment, a sophisticated specialized School.

4. *Peer Impact Respected by the Staff*, who view the peer group as (at least potentially) a legitimate and healthy developmental resource in influencing the development of children and youth in group care toward maturity, and who work with it accordingly. Although the Modifying Environment perspective lays heavy stress on the importance of mediation by adults, even in working with adolescents, where developmental deficits of various kinds are involved, it also recognizes the importance of the peer group and peer support in the process. To the extent that a group culture supportive of the program objectives can be developed, the group and individual peers can serve as powerful amplifiers of mediated learning. Particularly with adolescents, this is viewed as a necessary but not sufficient condition for most successful modification and constitutes a major reason why it is important that students be continually placed in heterogeneous settings where significant numbers of their colleagues are operating at a modestly higher level (Beker & Feuerstein, 1990).

5. *Socially Constructive Work* to be performed by the young people in care is given a major role in the program, to develop both feelings of ownership and a sense (and reality) of competence and being needed. Here again, there is no contradiction, although the Modifying Environment perspective would view the cognitive components of the work in the context of the level of functioning of each individual student as critical. From the emotional/social perspective, the developmental role and importance of work seem to be well established (Beker & Durkin, 1989).

6. *An Overarching Ideology* provides, in Wolins' (1974) words, a "moral anchorage" that is needed by many of the young people who find their way into group care settings. In the Modifying Environment, it can also be viewed as providing the motivational element – the energy – needed by staff and students alike in a situation when such taxing effort is required of each – and let there be no mistake that developing and maintaining a successful Modifying Environment does make significant demands on all involved.

Not all of the critical components of Modifying Environments presented above, it should be noted, are reflected in these criteria for the Powerful Environment as presented by Wolins (1974). As we have seen, the need for positive Expectations or

belief in the feasibility of the task is a common element, but Importance, Resources, and Individual Process are not directly reflected in the Powerful Environment criteria. The difference appears to be one of focus, in that the Powerful Environment describes a setting, whereas the Modifying Environment is more existentially based, having its roots in the experience of the students involved. In practice, they might not look very different; as a conceptual model, however, the Modifying Environment has a more explicit student-centered focus, which may help to frame program development and specific interventions alike in the most productive terms.

Wolins (1974) also suggests that the criteria he lists may present difficulties for the American group care practitioner for reasons rooted in American ideologies and political predilections:

Adherence to traditional interpretations of Freudian theory predisposes him toward familial rather than group substitutes. This also precludes clear separation and social integration of institutional children. He is cautious about peer influences, believing that in adolescence they are directed away from or against adult values. Historically he has had an abhorrence of child labor since it evokes in him images of English spinning mills and American sweatshops. He fears strong ideology because in a pluralistic environment it leads to disagreement, which our society, operating under the “unity-in-diversity” motto, has yet to harness successfully to productive purposes, (p. 289)

Granted that at least some of these barriers may have weakened since the words were published originally in 1969, it still appears that the Modifying Environment approach might prove to have less difficulty on these grounds, and its emphasis on prescriptive, technical efficiency might contribute even more to its acceptance.

The Modifying Environment and Adventure-Based or Challenge Programming

Particularly in recent years, a wide variety of programs have been initiated under these rubrics, particularly for adolescents, designed to appeal to their need for excitement and risk-taking in the effort to stimulate second-order developmental change. In many ways, these approximate most closely the idea of the Modifying Environment, although the latter might tend to put somewhat more emphasis on individual needs and less on the specific program modality, e.g., sailing, mountain-climbing, etc. But the two approaches do reflect similar perspectives and could undoubtedly be successfully merged in many settings.

Toward A Working Conceptual Model For Building Effective Group Care Environments

In one sense, it may be inappropriate to compare the Modifying Environment with the other conceptual models that have been cited. The former is an individually, experientially-oriented, prescriptive approach to group care, designed to be applied wherever the need to stimulate second-order developmental change is identified, whereas some of the others tend to be descriptive approaches to understanding group care program environments, most of which appear to be associated with success. Yet this distinction is exactly the point: the Modifying Environment model begins with the developmental needs of the individual together with the interventions they require and builds its ecological structure around that; others frequently begin with the description of the environment itself. Thus, they may not preclude but rather assume many of the essential ingredients that should be the conscious focus in effective program building and implementation.

It should be noted that this is not to say that the others are necessarily less potent, or even different except, perhaps, in their utility in specifying and implementing intervention strategies attuned to individuals' developmental needs. That is, however, the job of a conceptual model, and the question is, Which is the most powerful formulation, alone or in combination with others, to guide successful practice in this field, where success appears to have been so elusive?

Where Do We Go From Here?

It seems clear that this formulation and others need more explicit testing, and appropriate instruments for that purpose are currently under development. Exemplary programs will be used as initial criteria, using some of the kinds of variables that have been proposed by Whittaker et al, (1988) and others. Ultimately, however, it will be necessary to mount controlled, longitudinal follow-ups that can match program components – the four listed above, various kinds of Mediated Learning Experience, etc. – with student outcomes in terms of successful adaptation in the real world – where the rubber meets the road.

Some indication regarding the possible direction of the follow-up studies is provided by the research conducted by Israeli National Insurance Institute (Inbar 2001). The research focused on 40 graduates of the residential program for young adults with special needs at the International Center for the Enhancement of Learning Potential in Jerusalem. The residential program was built on the principles of Modifying Environment and included mediated learning, Instrumental Enrichment, vocational training (caregivers to the elderly) and social integration. The National Insurance Institute's study evaluated the social and vocational integration of the young adults who graduated from this program between the years 1992-1998. It was discovered that the absolute majority of graduates at the present time are working at least 30 hours per week. In many cases the place of employment is a regular private business that has no special incentive for employing people with special needs. Ninety seven percent of the

parents consider their children's participation in the ICELP course as decisive for the improvement of their behavior and independence.

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Review Questions

1. What is the difference between “passive acceptance” and “active modifiability” approaches in the group care?
2. What is the difference between custodial care model and modifying environment?
3. What is the difference between a therapeutic milieu and modifying environment?
4. How the “total environment” model is different from modifying environment?
5. In which respects Wolins’ “powerful environments” are similar, and in which they are different from modifying environments?