

Educational optimism

by Michael Felten*, Germany



Michael Felten.
(Picture ma)

Optimism is something that the struggling education system could really do with right now. And *Alfred Adler*, the founder of *individual psychology*, would have a lot to offer in this respect. His experience-based thesis is that every child, no matter how troubled their background may be, can change

their learning behaviour and social skills at school and develop them in a positive way. However, this requires steadfast and knowledgeable teachers who sensitively understand each child's learning style, encourage and challenge them individually, and strengthen their attachment to a pro-social class community.

It is immediately apparent that this would be a complete reversal of what has become common practice in the educational landscape in recent years.

Keyword: competence nitpicking. How much valuable teaching time is often wasted on fine-tuning internal school curricula!

Keyword: self-learning idyll. How the fashionable narrative of self-regulated learning ignores the fact that this is often only superficial and minimises demands – and particularly disadvantages weaker pupils!

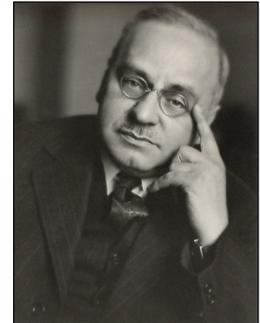
Keyword: reductionist education. Spelling is simplified, homework is reduced, wrong answers are accepted as half right – yet we need difficulties to grow, and only practice makes perfect!

And then there is this amateurish approach to dealing with disruption: "Difficult" pupils are too quickly labelled as problem children – or put on medication. Not to mention the – now sobered – enthusiasm for inclusion.

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What would Alfred Adler, who was involved in the reformation of the school system in Red Vienna 100 years ago, advise today's schools?

You could call it attachment-based school pedagogy: don't tinker unnecessarily with structures and systems, but make sure there is enough teaching staff –



Alfred Adler, 1870–1937. (Picture ma)

and that they are well trained as sensitive leaders, especially on the relationship level.

Teachers should be able to impart specialist knowledge in a sustainable manner, but they must also be able to encourage children appropriately in their learning, understand any learning difficulties they may have and show them ways out of unfavourable behaviour patterns. Such communicative and diagnostic skills are a fine art – and they are regularly neglected in teacher training.

The progress that Adler's depth psychology brought to education was that pupils' intelligence and character were no longer seen as static, unchangeable, but dynamic: It became possible to understand why a child had developed a particular lifestyle and learning style – and why they then presented themselves at school as a swot or lazybones, a troublemaker or an outsider.

This insight enabled teachers to uncover previously misunderstood – and therefore reflexive – misconceptions, erroneous self-images and unfavourable inner goals in their pupils and encourage them to take more constructive steps and adopt a different approach.

"Children are not bad by nature but have developed like that because they thought they had to be like that in order to succeed", wrote Adler. Progress is made when you don't fight with "problem children" but look kindly at their patterns and channel their energy in useful directions. Teachers who have mastered this skill are less at the mercy of chronic "troublemakers" of all kinds and can guide them in more meaningful directions.

What's more, there are simply fewer disruptions in the lessons of such teachers. This is because adults who enjoy leading are better at motivating adolescents who are latently unmotivated to learn – at least more so than educators who constantly say “please” to children or leave them to “work independently” without supervision. Adler advocated a teaching approach that combines authority and empathy – something that is confirmed by modern developmental psychology and teaching research.

Schools do not need to be completely rethought or even completely changed. Much would be gained if they were properly equipped and practises were based on research. Shouldn't many more schools choose Alfred Adler as their namesake and role model?

(Translation “Swiss Standpoint”)

Literature: <http://alfred-adler-panorama.info/>



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