

## Preference for and Achievement in Elementary School Subjects and Associated Personality Traits

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As one reads Adler and subsequent Adlerians, one discovers incidental statements and an occasional paper on the significance of preference for and achievement in elementary school subjects and the personality characteristics of children. Adler (1905, 1933, 1963) made several such statements to which we shall later refer. Dreikurs (1954, 1974), Dinkmeyer and Dreikurs (1963), Keimowitz and Ansbacher (1960), and Lieben (1967) have contributed articles on the subject to the Adlerian literature. In addition, other Adlerians (Beke, 1933; Bruck, 1946; Schuster, 1934; and Seidler, 1932, 1937) have explored the relationship between several school activities and various aspects of personality. The purpose of this paper is to comment on some of these findings and then to present some of our own impressions derived from clinical practice.

It is an incomplete theory; not all subjects are covered but only the more prominent ones. Since preference for or distaste for certain subjects may be related to various factors (e.g. lack of interest, poor instruction, no support for education at home), we do not suggest a direct, one-to-one relationship between personality traits and the enjoyment of certain school subjects, but merely indicate that certain ties may present themselves.

### **Conformity Subjects**

Elementary school subjects can be conceptualized as falling into several categories. Initially, we have the "conformity" subjects, spelling being the most notable. There are several characteristics that can be ascribed to spelling: (a) it is transmitted via authority (i.e. the teacher, parents, the spelling book) who says that a certain word is to be spelled in a particular manner; (b) there is only one way of spelling a word--you either spell it rightly or incorrectly. There are no partially right spellings; and (c) it often doesn't make any sense. Thus, there is no obvious, logical reason for spelling 'knife' with a 'k' or 'night' with a 'gh'. This prompted George Bernard Shaw to state that "fish" could also be spelled "ghoti" (gh=f, as in rough; o=i, as in women; ti=sh, as in action).

Children who wish to conform, to do the "right and proper" thing, usually perform well in spelling exercises. "Spelling difficulties are often based on this disregard of order (Dreikurs, 1974, p. 13)." Those youngsters who dislike spelling tend to be the overt rebels ("If it's supposed to be spelled that way, I'll spell it this way.") or the "free spirits" who spell as the spirit moves them. They might spell the same word correctly at the start of a sentence and

incorrectly at the end. In addition, children who try overly-hard to achieve the right answer often get the wrong one. In a similar vein, one might be extra cautious in dressing appropriately for the first day on a new job and arrive wearing two different shoes! Thus, spelling, requiring both accuracy and precision, may exhibit a youngster's individualistic manner of relating to order. "If one does not want to cooperate with the required order, spelling provides an area of resistance. (Dinkmeyer and Dreikurs, 1963, p. 64)."

A second subject requiring conformity is penmanship. Although the previously-taught Palmer method which exacted complete conformity and rigidity (e.g. one's arm had to be positioned in a particular manner on the desk) no longer holds sway, children even today, are taught correct and incorrect ways of writing e.g., some letters are written above the line, some below the line. In fact, most elementary school classrooms have written on the top of their blackboards, examples of each letter of the alphabet in perfect script.

In the training of handwriting skills the covert rebel will often do poorly. As Dreikurs (1971, p. 221) stated, "Poor script also reflects defiance of order. . . ." This is a task wherein, if one is intent on rebelling, one can avoid accepting the responsibility for his behavior: "It's my handwriting that's at fault not me." In other words, his hand is doing the writing, not him. In fact, we often say, "Oh, Johnny has a poor hand" when we find his script illegible. Educators trap themselves by referring to these children as having "poor visual-motor coordination" or "perceptual problems". Once so labelled, the youngster has another avenue for excusing his behavior and can defer all complaints to his lack of "fine coordination".

### **Problem-Solving Subjects**

There is another group of courses within the elementary school curriculum which we might refer to as the problem-solving subjects. Mathematics is the most obvious one. For this task an individual cannot take everything for granted as in spelling. He must figure the solutions out for himself. He is given certain rules of addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division but after that he is on his own. In order to be successful with mathematical tasks, one must be able to utilize past experiences to solve current problems. For example some children say they cannot do "word" problems. Whereas in the past they successfully added  $2+2=4$ , when asked, "How much are 2 apples and 2 apples?", they have difficulty arriving at an answer. Mathematical achievement also requires the ability to abstract from all the data, that part which is needed to solve the immediate problem. Thus, if you ask some children "How much is 3 times 5?", they must begin with 1 times 5 and work themselves up through the multiplication table, because they cannot abstract the required answer.

Those youngsters who enjoy and are successful with mathematical tasks are often self-reliant children who can "count" on themselves in order to solve their difficulties. Those who experience difficulties in this area "are most often pampered children who do not want to function independently, because of all subjects, arithmetic demands the greatest degree of independence. (Adler, 1963, p. 10)." Thus, youngsters who would rather evade their problems or find someone else to assume their responsibilities are usually not very adept with

mathematical tasks. Some children do perform well in mathematics but dislike it (like the neurotic who says, "I know  $2+2=4$ , but I can't stand it!"). These children are often well able to deal with their own life problems by themselves but try to take the easier route and get someone else to do it for them.

Two other types of children who often find mathematical tasks difficult are those who have had a bad start, i.e. "could not keep up in the beginning and have not been encouraged" (Adler, 1963, p. 10), and girls. One of society's academic myths is that girls are not gifted with regard to mathematical skills. This creates a strong prejudice against girls and serves to discourage them from the start.

Another academic area requiring problem-solving ability is grammar. Children are taught what nouns, verbs, compound sentences, phrases and clauses are, but it is then up to them to be able to parse and diagram sentences into their component parts of speech.

## **Reading**

Reading difficulty may also have its emotional components. When a child fails to read properly, he not only is deficient in this one area, but he sabotages the whole educational process. He rebels against the whole system. If he's poor in spelling, it may have no effect on his mathematical skills or vice versa. But if he cannot read well, it influences all other academic subjects. "The child's difficulties in school, particularly in regard to reading, is often an expression of his antagonism against school and learning, of his reluctance to cooperate with adults and accept their demands (Dreikurs, 1974, p. 43)." This deficiency will also bring him the most concern of others; much more so than if he were merely a poor grammarian. Schools often provide special classes for poor readers but do not do likewise for other subjects. Thus failure to read properly may reflect the child's resistance to society's demands. Teachers, parents, and society require that a child read, but he says, "No!" While any of the four goals described by Dreikurs (Dreikurs, Grunwald and Pepper, 1972) may be involved, Goal 4 is the most frequent.

Another factor related to poor reading skills may be the sterile quality of most elementary school reading material which in no way resembles how youngsters actually talk. This problem becomes more accentuated as children are exposed to exciting television programs and then come to school the next day to read "See Spot Run". (There is the story of the first grade teacher who, upon surveying the dent in her fender following an auto collision exclaimed, "Oh! Oh! Oh! Damn! Damn! Damn!"). Boys are also encouraged in masculine concepts and tend to be disinterested in "sissy activities" such as reading (Lecky, 1945) "This mistaken masculine ideal, and not slower cerebral or muscular development, may be the reason why boys appear to have a later reading readiness and form the larger percentage of poor readers (Dreikurs, 1974, p. 43)."

## **Other Preferences**

Often, when children are asked for their favorite subject at school they choose recess. In this way they communicate the message that they have no use for school at all. Other youngsters who choose gymnastics class, may find this the only time during the school day that they have fun. Too often teachers feel

that education must be a chore, that education and fun cannot coexist. This they, no doubt, transmit to their pupils who then find little enjoyment of or excitement with the educational process.

It is thus evident that deficiencies in various school subjects, once medical and other factors are eliminated, can be seen to be related to certain personality characteristics. It is important for teachers to be cognizant of these attitudes if they are to be successful in their attempts to re-educate the child.

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