

# Alfred Adler's Contribution to Modern Education and its Goals

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Professional societies in the fields of psychiatry, psychology, and education are celebrating the centennial year of the birth of Alfred Adler by scheduling lectures and publishing papers which emphasize the contributions of this Viennese psychiatrist. Adler was a close associate of Freud for several years but eventually separated from him on theoretical grounds and founded his own school of thought, known today as Individual Psychology. There has been an ever growing awareness of Adlerian innovations in the theory and treatment of mental health problems. More recently, the Centennial meetings have served to point out the Adlerian emphasis on social responsibility and interpersonal relatedness.

Alfred Adler is known as the father of social psychiatry, and as an innovator in group psychotherapy and family counseling, but little recognition has been given to his role as a pioneer educator. He was not only concerned with the alleviation of mental health problems, but also with the prevention of problems through a pedagogical approach. His educational perspective encompassed the optimal psychological development of the individual as well as the welfare and the development of his society. An attempt will be made here to briefly describe the historical aims of education<sup>1</sup> and to demonstrate how Adler's educational theories encompass much of the past while remaining relevant to our own time.

## **Historical Aims of Education**

The aims of education in primitive times were to establish security and to maintain group conformity through work and worship. Primitive man attempted to overcome fear through gregariousness and to secure the necessities of life by propitiating the gods.

Oriental education preserved the caste system by inculcating traditional values and encouraging conformity and devotion to civic duty. Social stability was the objective of education, and the individual was expected to submit to the external authority of ancestor or caste.

Jewish educational tradition required obedience to the commandments of God and to the Torah. Hebraic education emphasized the development of righteousness through conformity to the tenets of the Law as revealed by God.

While the Spartans emphasized efficiency, strict discipline, military usefulness and obedience to the state, the Athenians stressed personal advancement, civic

<sup>1</sup>The Summary of the educational goals of the past presented here relies heavily upon E. Wild's, *Foundations of modern education*. New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1936.

virtue, individual success, and active involvement in the affairs of city and state. Personal fulfillment was based on individual reason rather than state authority. Students were to learn how to think properly and to examine life in order to reach independent rational decisions.

Later, the Romans attempted to create dutiful citizens by suppressing individual freedom in favor of state interest. Institutional aims took precedence over personal goals, and students prepared for the life of public affairs and for practical service to the state. They were expected to learn verbal skills and to speak with conviction—the “orator” emerged as the exemplar of success. The Romans divorced themselves from the speculative and theoretical pursuits of the Greeks, preferring the tangible, practical and useful.

Christian education as promulgated by Jesus emphasized universal brotherhood, a respect for human rights, and esteem for the individual’s inviolable personality. Later, Christian education shifted its emphasis to the renouncement of an “evil” world, to the salvation of souls for heaven, and to the regeneration of a “corrupt” mankind. During the medieval period, either obedience to church doctrine through faith and the observance of approved social custom or through rational argument was the educational focus.

The Arabs or Saracens took a course nearly opposite that of the Christians. Educational aims were directed toward obtaining scientific knowledge and toward applying facts already available. The Saracens developed practical arts and crafts without the restriction of religious dogma or prejudice. They wanted to improve life in this world by fostering individual initiative. The Arabs and the Greek scholars from Constantinople were partly responsible for the European Renaissance which gave impetus to the attainment of the rich and abundant life, to freedom of thought, to self-realization, to artistic expression and to intellectual creativity.

This trend toward individualism was heightened by the Protestant Reformation which advocated individual interpretation of the Bible, honesty, faithfulness and duty to home, church, and state. The Catholic counter-reformation, on the other hand, stipulated unquestioned obedience to the authority of the church, preparation for the life hereafter, and spiritual salvation for everyone.

Another force during the Renaissance was concerned with the realities of living in the world of nature and with the use of natural laws and scientific knowledge for the benefit of society. Yet, a lingering dread remained—without conformity to authority, society will crumble. If all social groups—church, state, school—are governed by authoritarian principles, no tension exists, but if some are governed by authoritarian means and others by democratic tenets, conflict is inevitable (Nikelly, 1964).

The restructuring of society in accordance with the natural state of man was Rousseau’s teaching. He wanted to eliminate the artificial inequalities which stifled the individual. By mutual contract each person would bind himself without losing his individual freedom—a notion later embodied rather closely in Adler’s social philosophy.

Nineteenth century educational aims emphasized training for patriotic citizenship and the importance of protecting the state from decay and external threat. Developmentalism emerged which attempted to discover the laws of learning and to systematize the principles of emotional growth through which the child passes. Pestalozzi, the Swiss educator, advocated that the child be provided with favorable conditions under which to use his "dormant powers" in order to develop the strength needed later in life. This tenet is akin to Adler's later pedagogical theories.

John Dewey was concerned that the student gain insight into the existing social order in order to acquire social efficiency and that he also be prepared to cope with progressive social change. He advocated cooperation in lieu of competition, social guidance and self-control instead of discipline, and stressed the importance of respect for the rights of others, problem solving, and reasoning abilities. Adler held many educational goals similar to those of Dewey.

### **Current Aims of Education**

Over the centuries educational aims have changed from submission to an absolute authority, or unquestioning obedience of an elite few, to a critical examination of authority and a belief in universal education. Based upon a desire for social service, common welfare and self-control have become more prominent educational aims than individual advancements.

Similarly, intelligent cooperation and communication with others rather than blind devotion to one's own beliefs and a distrust of others are more prevalent currently. It is in this realm that Adler has contributed most to the work of his predecessors.

Adler's most distinctive concept of normality and mental health is referred to as *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*, loosely translated as social interest or social feeling (Ansbacher, 1968). The term encompasses a collective empathy and a co-feeling for values which are beneficial to society and the individual. Social interest values that which is in the interest of others, and consequently helps one to identify himself with the world. Social feeling, according to Adler, encourages the individual to make a positive contribution to humanity; it involves usefulness and fosters a pro-life process closely related to reality. Social interest is considered by Adler to be an innate potential; it implies a sense of cooperation and social cohesiveness; it generates a tendency for adaptation to reality and, thereby, promotes stability between the individual and his environment. Adler maintained that social feeling is indispensable for mankind's survival, and he advocated that, ideally, it should begin from childhood through the mother's influence. Social feeling, he felt, was an educational goal fostered by the family and developed later in the school. The goal of psychological therapy and of education at all levels was fundamentally, according to Adler, the cultivation of social interest.

## Concept of Authority.

Adler pointed out that the educational process must develop the individual's ability to live harmoniously with others if he is to survive in a society based on the humanistic equalitarian principles of Jesus, Rousseau, and Dewey. According to Adler, the aim of education is the development of social feeling or social interest. Education should not inspire power, egotism, and vanity—factors which do not answer the needs of the immediate community and of society at large. Education should shun authoritarian means of imposing knowledge, means which teach the student the false notion that success is attained through personal superiority. When power is exerted on a student, he will, in turn, use power on others. Confrontations such as we are witnessing today become inevitable, for students are forced to make “demands” in order to attain their rights while school administrators are pressured to “give in” to the students. According to Adler, conflicts are best resolved in an atmosphere of equality and respect. Ultimate authority must rest on *what is to be done*, and must not be based on a power contest where one group wins over the other. In other words, the *reality of a particular situation* becomes the deciding authority (Dreikurs, 1959).

During the student strike this past spring a young female student very persuasively wrote in the student newspaper (*Daily Illini*, 1970) the following comment which reflects discontent among the more sensitive and sophisticated college students:

There is something drastically wrong with any people that bases its values and lives on competition, power, profit, strife and war, and these are the result of the sickness in our society. Our culture and system of education is founded on a competitive dog-eat-dog attitude. From childhood we are taught to succeed at any expense to others, and while this attitude has produced success, it encourages rivalry with others for the purpose of attaining superiority and strength over them. Our country is based on money-grubbing selfishness. Where are high ideals this country was founded upon? Can we not give up our selfishness and work for peace? Can't we be more concerned with more humane problems? In order to bring peace we are going to have to change our values and our outlook on life. Why do we stand only for selfish progress and really care little about other people?

## Superiority and Social Interest

Students today are in universal rebellion against authority, particularly the authority embodied in higher education. Over four decades ago Adler spoke of the consequences of authoritarianism in the family, in the school, and in the society at large; today we are witnessing these dramatic results. His notion of fusing personal ambition with social interest is the apex of the philosophy of pedagogy. Like many educators before, Adler advocated the education of the whole person by fostering his potential to relate with his fellow man on a basis of equality. He felt that the school was most significantly capable of

accomplishing this objective. He maintained that freedom required responsibility and that responsibility had no age limit. Yet, many educators continue to rely on authoritarian means to instill "law and order" without realizing that a democratic philosophy has no place for authoritarianism. Adler (1927) stated, "Any authority whose recognition does not occur in and of itself, but must be forced upon us, is no real authority" (p. 284). Valid authority cannot rest upon force but must be based on social feeling.

Although modern society has become more democratized, it clings to authoritarian techniques and sometimes even militaristic devices for maintaining order. Such a strategy can only provoke continued rebellion. Students have demanded a greater voice in the decisions and policies which affect them, yet, few educators and administrators are able to treat their students on an equal basis and to grant them responsibility in the educational process. Some small colleges have moved in this direction by allowing students to design their own courses in which the teacher is considered an equal contributing member. In such classes, motivation and morale have improved, competition has diminished and communication has improved with the elimination of suspicions associated with differences in status and unequal personal rights.

### **Authority and Equality**

In our age of supposed equal personal rights and freedom for all, authoritarian habits persist: the environment is exploited for the sake of profit; minority groups are denied political and economic rights; military dictatorships in supposedly "Christian" countries suppress citizens; capitalistic imperialism continues to favor property rights over personal rights; the church continues to rely on authority without regard to pressing social needs; "law and order" is enforced by outdated elite cliques in education, politics, and religion; the masses have little direct participation in the making of laws; a self-defeating competitive spirit is encouraged in all phases of life—even in religious domains. The cultivation of social interest or social feeling must become the *main* objective of education, just as it has become the focus of Adlerian psychotherapy. Indeed, Adler's notion of the therapeutic relationship is itself a sophisticated form of re-education. Psychotherapy is an interpersonal dialogue in which an equalitarian atmosphere promotes the client's social feeling. The goals of education are no different—both therapy and education are concerned with developing the ability to get along well with others and to work toward the creation of a world where all may enjoy a rich and rewarding experience. There is a certain inevitable logic in the Adlerian solution to the current educational crisis, and it may be that Adler's philosophy of education is more applicable today than it was 50 years ago and the only alternative for our salvation.

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