

ALFRED ADLER AND THE TEACHERS

Regine Seidler,
Buffalo, N. Y.

Many years ago, when I was a public school teacher in Vienna, Austria, I was sitting one evening in a "Teacher's Work Shop" ready to discuss progressive methods. While awaiting the start of the program one of my teacher friends chatted half seriously, half jokingly, about the burdens of our vocation. The progressive teacher, she commented, was expected to be an expert in all fields of knowledge and art: highly educated in the subjects she was teaching; a fine musician; a good painter, keeping up with the most recent developments in the field of art; a leader in dramatics; and last not least - a good, understanding, clinical psychologist.

Today after some experience with American teachers I feel that in this country the teacher is a specialist, and he is supposed to be one. It is true, the elementary school teacher teaches all subjects; however specialists like music supervisors, art supervisors, etc., advise and assist him and are often responsible for the selection of his topics. In Vienna, especially during the progressive years after the first world war, the teacher was expected to be equipped to teach everything. There had been no time to train specialists. Every teacher was taking several classes, attended workshops and demonstration classes, in order to keep up as well as possible with the high requirements of progressive teaching.

It was at that time that the Viennese teachers met Alfred Adler. There were no trained clinical psychologists connected with the Viennese school system, no counselors, no guidance workers. The only special service was given to the graduating students who were interviewed, examined, and advised by specialists in vocational guidance. The economic and psychological conditions in a country demoralized by defeat, crushed by hunger and cold, swept by inflation, called urgently for counseling and guidance.

Alfred Adler turned with all the confidence which his personality radiated to the teachers. He considered school as one of the most deciding experiences in the life of the child. School experience compares best with the experience of work and vocation in adult life, one of the three essential problems every individual has to solve - love, living together, vocation. However school experience is still more complex, as the school is a social institution: the child is taught in a group; the school is a community. Thus the problem of living together is involved too, and the adjustment to the other sex is an important factor too, especially in co-educational schools. The school then, at least to a certain degree, depicts life, and Alfred Adler rightly considered the adjustment

to school as a vital test for the child's ability to adjust himself to new situations.

The part the teacher plays in the school experience calls for high educational and psychological qualities. Alfred Adler stressed the manifold psychological responsibilities of the teacher. He had to understand the child; to detect his individual goal, to recognize his pattern of life, to interpret every feature of his personality, every expression of his mind or body, in the light of his individual life style. He had to see the child as an in-dividuum, whose faculties are closely interrelated to form a unity, a whole. This understanding of the individual child was according to Adler the necessary prerequisite for eventual guidance. The teacher had to account with the given pattern of the child, if he wanted to help. Based on this understanding he was supposed to mobilize his forces in order to reorganize the eventually erroneous pattern of the child; to modify his goal; to direct him to the "useful side of life."

It is obvious that teachers need to be carefully trained for such therapeutic tasks. Alfred Adler recognized the importance of this work, and - very characteristic for his personality - went right ahead and started to train the teachers himself. For many years he lectured for teachers in the Pedagogical Institute in Vienna. His child guidance clinic served as much for the education and training of teachers as for the immediate benefit of the children and parents who attended. Each case was presented by the teacher of the child. Adler dedicated much time and effort in training the teachers to prepare a thorough case study, not just an accumulation of data, but a meaningful biography of the child with careful exploitation of all the factors which possibly contributed toward the development of his problems. Adler's discussion of this case study took place before an audience of teachers. It was an excellent supplementary clinical training to his classes in individual psychological theory in the Pedagogical Institute. The actual consultation with the parents and the child demonstrated to the teachers how to do the interviewing and counseling. Each demonstration of this kind was followed by another thorough discussion. The findings of the case were generalized, and many of Adler's most profound lectures were given in connection with practical case work before the teacher audience of the child guidance clinic.

Naturally not every teacher will be deeply interested in clinical psychology. Not every teacher has the time for the necessary training and the amount of work involved in guidance. Therefore employing school psychologists should be the safer method to secure understanding help for all children. Doubtless the schools which have psychological services are fortunate. But the teacher who deals with the children for many hours every day has such an outstanding chance to observe, to study, and eventually to help, that not to use this opportunity is to deprive the children and himself of a sure opportunity for betterment. The amount of time and work spent in clinical psychology will be compensated by the better adjustment of his students, and by his ability to work more efficiently and agreeably with a group of better adjusted students.

Those teachers who came under Adler's influence could not escape the logic of his theory, the fascination of being able to help children to solve their problems. Those few who dedicated themselves with all their enthusiasm to the application of Individual Psychology were rewarded by their successes in their daily work with children, and by the enrichment they derived from trying to make Adler's philosophy their way of life.