



Improving Refugee and Small Rural Community Education

My European Refival initiative has two angles of view, refugee integration and rural revitalization. It proposes to explore the synergies between them. Exactly two years ago, I published an [article](#) about educating Refugee Children and the problems they face due to interrupted enrollment. Unfortunately, their situation [has not improved](#) so far and my message is still as relevant as back then.

More recently, I have [written](#) about regaining sustainability in small rural communities, where it turns out that offering local schooling is one of the most important factors to prevent migration. If young people are forced to leave their village in order to be educated in a city, they mostly [do not return](#) afterward, even if there is employment waiting back home.

For the occasion of World Refugee Day 2021, today, I decided to write a longer and much more in-depth article about my conceptual framework for education that addresses such problems. Since there are important parallels to be found between refugee integration and rural revitalization, it can be used from both perspectives.

To start with, I have to make a disclaimer: my background is neither in pedagogy nor in education. To design my IKNAL (Inclusive KNowledge, Affinity and Leadership) schooling framework, I have instead used my [experience](#) in international [business development](#), [cultural communication](#) and the development of electronic [collaboration tools](#). The outcome is from a traditional educational point of view to some extent out of the box thinking, although I use existing schooling examples as “proofs of concept” to substantiate my thinking.

Common Denominator

A major problem is that in the situation of refugees, as well as in the one of small rural communities, there are frequently insufficient comparable pupils to economically create homogeneous grade or age-based classes. If one still tries to do so by combining unequal level students in a traditional manner, this can easily result in a common denominator that will be on a much lower averaged level than at schools where there are sufficient pupils. **The optimal solution in this case is to avoid averaging and to address all students personally and individually, regardless of their background.** Their origin can include being a refugee or member of a minority group, or coming from a small rural community where mixing ages is obligatory to reach minimum class sizes. Refugees, if possible, further need to be addressed in their native language and are strongly handicapped if they first have to acquire the for them usually new language of their host country before they can study or obtain knowledge about anything else.

Six Elements of Education and Three Levels of Personal Development

The question is how to offer such a more individual approach and whether one can make a split in activities where age or level differences matter and others where they are less important. Here is where Refival envisions discrimination in six elements to be taught or learned: -1- Knowledge, -2- (Obtaining) Skills, -3- Affinity, -4- Socialization, -5- Leadership and -6- Contribution. These six elements are derived from my personal vision of three levels of holistic personal and intercultural development being Agency, Artistry and Achievement. However, the balance between these six elements is strongly culturally determined and in practice always emphasizes some elements over others.

Level 1: Agency

The agency level is entirely focused on the individual. It is a rational level necessary for survival and practical basic personal development to be able to optimally function and become empowered and self-reliant. There are two levels, one of acquiring - how to - knowledge about topics, the other level of vocational training and learning by doing, leading to the development of skills in a more interactive "trial and error" manner. Looking at age sensitivity and resulting behavior of people, particular knowledge is critical and expected to have been obtained at a certain age and schooling level. This presumed knowledge is then used as a foundation to further build upon. Acquiring skills is (although there are similarities) a more gradual, more repetitive, and longer-term process. Many skills (but not all, for example excluding the basic motoric skills) are less age sensitive and proficiency can be attained or people can be trained at almost any age. Skills are also mostly less used to build upon each other. Further, there is a difference in the involvement of educational institutions. Whereas they are a major source of knowledge transfer, their role in skills development is much more limited and many skills are dominantly acquired independently by practicing outside of school.

Level 2: Artistry

The artistry level is handling the social relationships with everyone one knows. It is based on emotional association, intending participation (us versus them or solidarity) and identification through likes or dislikes. This level has two elements being affinity and socialization; both are representing a level of emotional connection. Looking at the role of schooling, it is strong in developing affinity, exposing individual pupils to various topics and awaking interest. It also teaches regulating personal relationships and is stimulating empathy and friendships or allowing rivalry between members of a school class. This type of belonging is not voluntary, pupils have no other choice or option and cannot refuse being part of such a process. Although there is a certain sensitivity, affinity and socialization are mostly less age dependent than knowledge transfer. There can be an age span of 3-4 years in a class, as can be seen in successful examples like [Montessori](#), [Jena plan](#) and [Agora](#) education. Finally, socialization is for a [great part](#) done out of school; being part of a family or group is very often dominantly impacting socialization and the school has limited influence on this.

Level 3: Achievement

Third, there is the achievement level; it regulates the connection with or control of the unknown or universe (including people one does not know) and represents an attitude beyond social relationships. Achievement has two elements being leadership and contribution to society. Leadership and its related “superiority” or “excellence” are individual elements that play an important role in formal education; they are a major source for one’s drive or ambition. Contribution to society on the other hand is more based on applying “universal” values. Although school education has a role in the development of one’s values and building respect for norms, there are many other factors that determine one’s contribution to and what is actually appreciated by society. Regardless of the fact that a society’s expectations do change with age, it has members of all age levels. Respecting its norms is therefore mostly not extremely dependent on formal education, this with exception of schooling in state controlled regimes.

IKNAL: Three Resulting Educational Pillars

Although obtaining skills, socialization and contribution to society are relevant to and part of education, they are part of a much wider personal development scheme where the entire environment, such as the family background and the community one lives in and belongs to, play a dominant role. Formal schooling is, in my opinion, more eminent in relation to knowledge transfer, developing affinity and leadership. These are the more individual processes where one’s general environment is often limited in, or lacking educational resources. My IKNAL vision does therefore primarily address schooling of these three pillars, nevertheless taking the other three elements into account without declaring them to be a major formal focus. In the remainder of this article I therefore will limit myself to the role of these three more individual elements and omit the other three.

IKNAL: Inclusion versus Exclusion

The I in IKNAL (Inclusive KNowledge, Affinity and Leadership) stands for inclusive, it means to educate people in a way that includes everyone and excludes no one. All three pillars are actually polarities, which have the potential to do both. Knowledge can be used as an excluding possession to reinforce one's self-esteem and individuality. Alternatively, it can be used as an inclusive resource, being expertise and based on integrity; this can be used for sharing one's knowledge with others. Also affinity can be used as a excluding possession, creating an "us versus them" segregation or dissociations or dislikes. On the other hand, affinity can be used to discover inclusive likes, sympathies or to develop empathy. Finally, leadership can be based on exclusive power and span of control, whereas it alternatively can be based on wisdom or excellence and on developing an inclusive type of mentorship. However, in order to teach inclusivity, one must also teach or experience its exclusivity opposite. The goal is to learn to handle it. Without doing so, one cannot create real inclusivity towards everyone and one would become part of an exclusive bubble of insiders. What teaching knowledge, affinity and leadership mean for actual education will be elaborated a bit further on.

IKNAL: Knowledge Transfer, Expertise and Integrity versus Individuality

The most age and level sensitive component of education is knowledge transfer. It is at the moment a clear bottleneck for mixing students in groups because the common denominator resulting is depending on the lowest knowledge level in such a group. Broader mixing of levels and ages will hinder most others in their development. Especially in an environment of a small community or of a refugee group with different backgrounds and language barriers, it is impossible to equalize knowledge levels using a conventional class approach. But also in a more traditional urban school environment, the requirements are becoming more complicated. Our modern society increasingly demands to deliver more knowledgeable and more diversified workers. Here is where our current education system reaches its limits and fails. Primarily this is because teachers (within minimum class size and cost parameters, and also limited by their own often outdated knowledge) cannot sufficiently focus on the individual needs of their pupils. There is thus a strong need to personalize knowledge transfer.

Here a new artificial intelligence supported approach called [adaptive learning](#) comes in. In China, for example, [Squirrel AI](#) has this way been used to enroll 3 million pupils (targeting elementary and high school levels). The [approach](#) also brings city level quality education to smaller villages there. Its core is to, computer assisted, teach individual students new subject levels whilst measuring and remembering the ones they have already mastered. It changes the human “teacher’s” role into mentorship, acting mostly only when insufficient progress is autonomously made. Next to this methodology, there is for those already having obtained a certain level of self-reliance and being able to study independently (this has to be learned and continuously monitored and mentored, to prevent people from [leaving courses prematurely](#)) a very wide offering of Mass Open Online Classes ([MOOC](#)) available. The courses range from [Kahn Academy’s](#) elementary-school and high school subjects, up to those offered by the world’s most well known universities such as [Harvard and MIT](#).

Another aspect is what to do with the obtained knowledge? Basically, there are two choices, one can keep knowledge for oneself or share it. In the first approach, knowledge is used as a personal property enhancing one’s individual self-esteem and not shared with others, excluding them. The alternative, second, approach is to actively share one’s knowledge with others, equalizing differences and closing gaps. IKNAL’s approach is to use student’s expertise this way and setup a peer to peer learning system. This approach is primarily based on integrity not on self-interest. Because in small communities or diverse groups there are insufficient learners at the same level in the same place, an Internet based approach is used that automatically connects students to other equal level students elsewhere if they get stuck. This connection is not based on any friendship or previous awareness, but represents a rational learning aid. The idea behind the approach is that in every learner there also is a hidden teacher and that learning to share or teach others is an educational goal. What is important is that **this first, peer to peer, layer of knowledge sharing can likely reduce the involvement of professional mentors and reduce the cost of education, opening it up to more people.**

As one can see, IKNAL’s knowledge pillar is purely based on individualized Internet and online education and could in principle be attended from anywhere. It nevertheless makes sense to embed online learning in a hybrid type traditional school environment in order to prevent distraction and to stimulate rhythm and discipline. At a formal school, personal professional mentors can also be made more easily available. Being part of a students’ community finally means exposure to the experiences of others, which can in turn stimulate the development of affinity. There is some similarity here with the [weight watchers](#) clubs, where members of a group encourage each other to reach goals.

IKNAL: Affinity, Empathy versus Segregation and Rivalry

The second education pillar is about exposure. People are naturally curious but without being aware of the opportunities or challenges in the outside world, or being in touch with people coming from a different background, it is impossible to develop likes or dislikes, sympathies or antipathies. Without active participation, only prejudice will result. It is therefore an important role for education to guide the development of one's affinity and explore personal qualities, discovering strengths and weaknesses. This should be done in a structured way and with strong interpersonal contact. For the development of many affinities, key is to personally experience them, this cannot be offered (yet) in a virtual way.

How to direct affinity? Often one tends to associate with things one likes and dissociate from dislikes. However, there are two ways of processing experiences. The first way is that of excluding things or people one does not like, this leads to a me/us versus them attitude. It easily causes segregation or rivalry. Preconceptions, such as refusing new unknown food without first tasting it, are also often a result of it. The alternative is inclusivity; it means to put oneself in the position of the other by trying to look through the other's eyes, developing empathy this way. Further, there is often more potential in learning things which one is at the start not good at, compared to exclusively focusing on one's strengths. IKNAL therefore promotes the use of this latter inclusive methodology and stimulates participation instead of segregation.

Other than knowledge transfer, the affinity pillar tends to be less age sensitive. [Montessori](#) and [Jena Plan](#) schools, in which affinity development is an important element, show that an age range of 3 years is feasible. Also [AGORA](#) is offering an interesting and successful approach; it has neither classes nor a curriculum, but offers education driven by awaking the pupils' interests and is fully based on [exploiting human curiosity](#).

IKNAL: Leadership, Mentorship versus Power-Based Span of Control

A final educational pillar is leadership development. Without leadership, regardless of its form, many aspects of life cannot be designed or operated. Governance is essential or required to manage most processes.

However, there are two types of leadership. The first type of leadership is exclusive. It is power or span of control based and assumes the superiority and authority of a ruling leader and maximizes this. The second type is Primus Inter Pares (First Among Equals) type leadership, where the leader is considered to possess excellence or wisdom and where the leader does not give orders but instead inclusively stimulates people to be aligned with set goals. IKNAL follows this second, inclusive, approach and also expects teachers to be mentors rather than broadcasting docents for their pupils.

Looking at age sensitivity (at younger ages) the older, mostly physically and intellectually more developed children are usually the winners of the competition to become “the boss” in a group. In a class of equally aged children, therefore mostly a resulting hierarchy can be found. Groups with an age difference of 3-4 years show a different pattern though. If addressed and stimulated, another structure can often be found. Since everyone enters as the “younger” in the group, power based leadership does not develop by competition and can often be avoided. There is a handle here to generate a more [mentorship](#) type of leadership relation between students. IKNAL uses this path.

Commercialization of Education

IKNAL does not want any [exclusivity](#) or to target a happy few. Since it addresses broad vulnerable groups like minorities such as refugees and their integration, and since it wants to revitalize small (often poor) rural communities, it cannot be funded in a private commercial manner.

What is worrying is that currently **the available public money is at risk to be largely spent on maintaining a faulty existing education system**, with too little financial room left for fundamental innovation.

Innovation is mostly taking place in the [private sector](#). Remedies for a failing education system create a huge commercial market. Some parents have to spend a fortune on buying better education for their children or students need to obtain huge loans from which it is [questionable](#) if they can earn it back. In my opinion, fully exploring one’s potential through schooling should be a basic fundamental human right as this can be seen in many developed countries where proper education is [affordable](#).

Of course, there are limitations and we are far away from equality in chances. However, with AI based tools and online instruments available, there is no technical reason not to share these and let more students take advantage of them. This can lead to [convergence](#), whereas currently often only divergence is achieved and digitalization [increases](#) gaps between students with a poor background from those with a more affluent one.

What is needed is a paradigm change. Technologies like adaptive learning through [AI](#) assistance have to become mainstream as part of regular education and become accessible to all. This requires a shift in thinking and public investment in developing the core models, which afterward can be unlimitedly duplicated and shared.

IKNAL: A Rural School from Kindergarten to University Level for 100 Students

Implementing the above three pillars enables to establish an inclusive rural or specialized IKNAL school. This school has five classes: pre-school (3–5 y.o.), lower primary (6–8 y.o.), higher primary (9–11 y.o.), lower secondary (12–14 y.o.), higher secondary (15–17 y.o.) plus an additional sixth life-long learning class for tertiary/higher/adult education (18 y.o. and above). Such a school can locally cover education levels from kindergarten up to university education and can likely be made economically feasible from about 100 students upwards.

This small scale and individual hybrid approach allows fundamentally addressing the lacking educational personalization problems which refugees and rural communities face and is worth to be piloted. A bottle neck is that developing the AI based adaptive learning modules and developing peer to peer learning and mentoring systems require substantial upfront public investment. However, once successfully realized, the IKNAL approach can be easily scaled. This scaling will not happen overnight though, because the method involves teachers as mentors and requires their adaptation.

More than five years after I started Refival, the originally intended one-year self-funded sabbatical activity has evolved into 15,000 hours of R&D and advocacy. To continue succeeding in my mission, external support is urgently needed. Therefore, I am seeking for an organization I could pass the torch to, and which would be willing to continue Refival's and IKNAL's activities. I am personally open for a European rural development or migration related position, allowing [me](#) to continue building positive perspectives on refugees and rural life.

Your advice on the above matter is much appreciated!

Kind Regards,

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