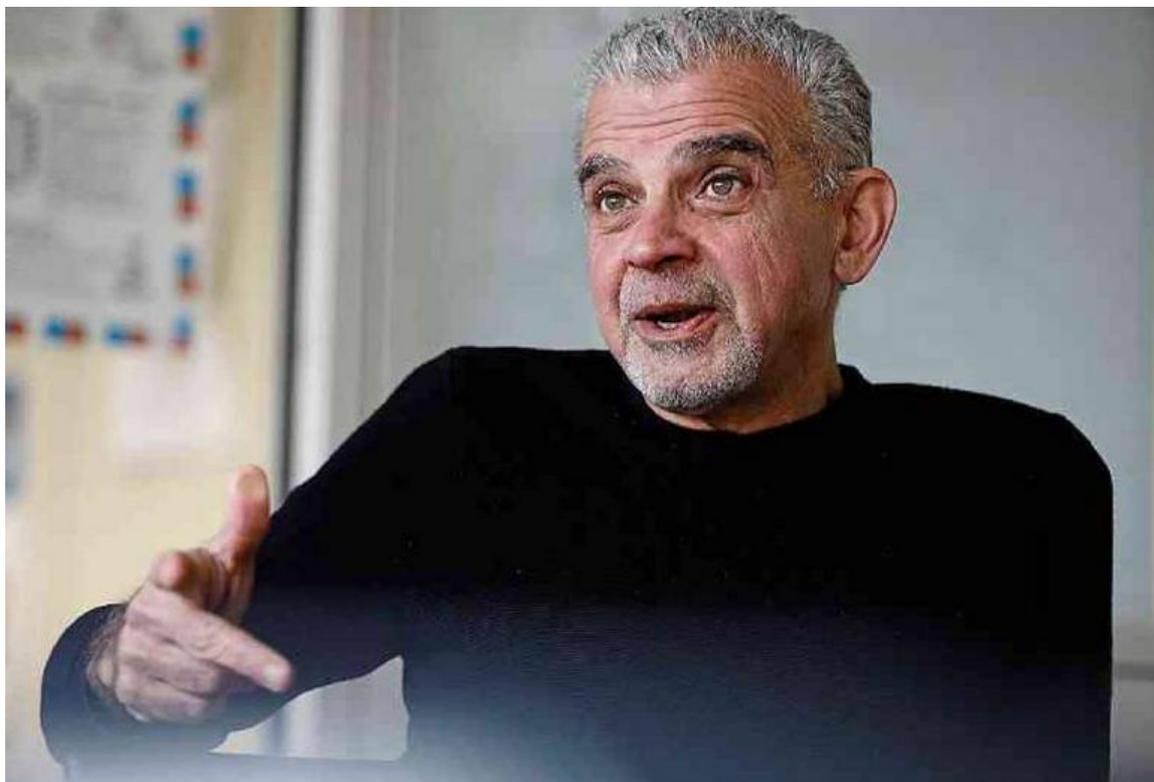


Supporting and stimulating children

Fari Khabirpour on the evolution of society and the challenges of education



Fari Khabirpour jouit de longues d'expérience en tant que psychologue et psychothérapeute.
(Photos: Anouk Antony)

Fari Khabirpour is a psychologist and psychotherapist. He is also the author of the book "Halt mich fest und lass mich los" (Hold me close and let me go), published some 20 years ago, in which he describes what children need. Khabirpour has many years of experience with students, parents and teachers. As a former director of CPOS, he has witnessed the fate of many students and has developed a good sense of what goes wrong in the Luxembourg education system - as well as in society in general.

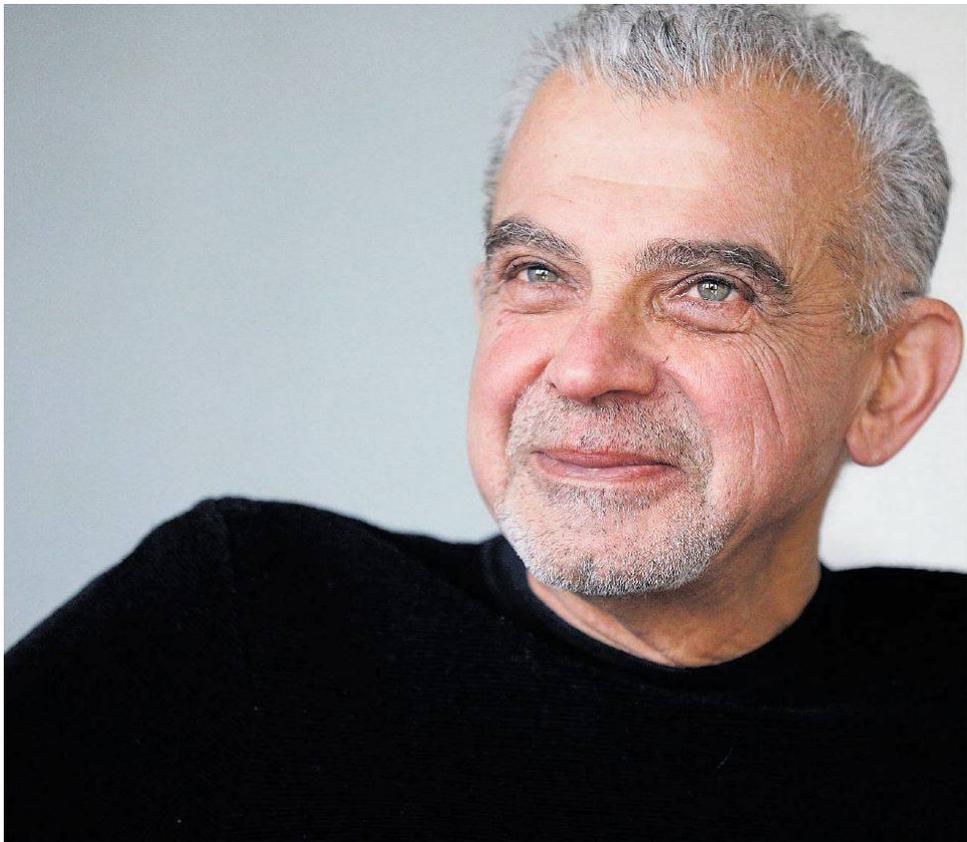
An increasing number of children and adolescents are exhibiting behavioural problems and a lack of social and emotional maturity. Worryingly, depression among children and young people is on the increase, even among very young children, leading as far as suicidal thoughts.

With the help of the 67-year-old psychologist, we will examine societal changes, analyse how they affect children and discuss what needs to be changed in the education system.

Education as a first priority

Fari Khabirpour on the teaching situation in Luxembourg

Over the past years, a continuous decline in performance has been observed within Luxembourgish schools. Companies complain that young people are not ready for apprenticeships in the workplace, and the number of students suffering from emotional and social developmental disorders is increasing. There is a growing need for intensive educational support. What is going wrong in society and how should the education system respond to these new conditions? The "*Luxemburger Wort*" interviewed psychologist Fari Khabirpour.



Fari Khabirpour: the 67-year-old psychologist and psychotherapist has been the director of the Psychological and Educational Guidance Centre (CPOS) and Director of the Findel Retention Centre.

Fari Khabirpour, society has changed enormously in recent years. It seems that adults are under constant pressure. How has this development affected children?

We are witnessing the expansion of a materialistic worldview linked with increasing individualism.. There is a lack of awareness that we form a community and that we all have to contribute to the progress of society. The growing egocentricity does not have a beneficial effect on children. For children, it is extremely important to have a sense of belonging to a community. Many children feel isolated and abandoned because of growing egocentricity and are increasingly sad, even depressed - to an extent that we have never experienced before. We are increasingly emphasising characteristics

such as competition and rivalry - also at school. Comparisons lead to a feeling of loneliness and fear in our society. The fear of failing, of not being good enough, not strong enough.

It's the adults who are creating that pressure...

Yes, adults' attitudes towards children, society and life in general affect children. Parents who have a positive self-image and are satisfied with their lives also behave positively towards their children. However, many parents live in fear that their children will not make their way in the world and put undue pressure on them. Moreover, we are very strongly focused on mistakes. So is our school system. This is the case because we are constantly confronted with negative information. Because of the constant news about disasters, we develop a negative view towards each other. "The other" is experienced as a threat. This makes communication difficult and complicates relationships. I also meet more and more children who no longer want to live. Suicide among children is going to increase. They are no longer in touch with life and have the feeling that "nobody wants me". Many parents come to me and want me to work with their child. But that's not the point. I help parents find peace and acceptance - and that has a positive effect on the children.

So the solution is for adults to find their way back to themselves. But many people don't know that they are not at peace with themselves. Doesn't society as a whole need to be aware of this erroneous development, especially in politics?

I don't want to criticise politicians here, but it is important that politics deals with issues that are fundamentally important. Education policy should be the first priority. I do not feel that is the case. In politics, other issues are always more important: economics, finance, security. Politicians are more concerned about whether their decisions satisfy people in the short term and whether they increase their own popularity. What is missing in politics are visions as to how to prepare children for the world to come, to make them stronger, to develop their potential and to reflect on the priorities of education policy. The most important ministry should be the Ministry of Education. All efforts must be directed towards how the education system can be improved.

So you are saying that our education system is not optimal. What should change?

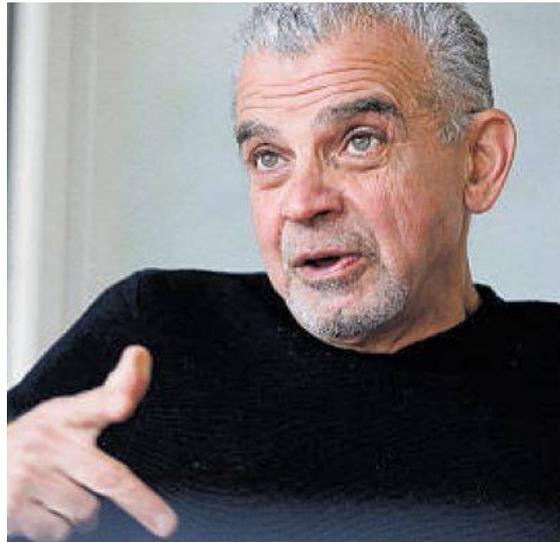
Our education system is focused on the acquisition of basic cognitive skills: reading, writing, arithmetic. If this is successful, we believe that our education system has achieved its goals. This is a very narrow view of the human being. Intelligence is more than cognitive intelligence. A person is intelligent if he or she also has emotional, social, artistic and creative skills. We also talk about spiritual intelligence. It is present when someone puts the common good before personal good. The person who puts his or her abilities at the disposal of the community also benefits from it. Today, the reverse is true, since the spiritual intelligence of people is not developed. Spiritual intelligence is born of a process of maturation. We need to support children in the development of these abilities, for example through service activities where children invest themselves in the good of the school community and take responsibility. Subjects such as human rights and democracy must be taught in schools.

School curricula are already overloaded at present...

That is always the argument: we cannot include these subjects in the curriculum, otherwise there is not enough time for language and mathematics teaching. This is an error of reasoning. When children feel accepted and encouraged in their overall personality, they learn faster. All forms of intelligence are interconnected.

Shouldn't school curricula be urgently cleaned up and reduced to the essentials, which can then be taught and used in an interactive manner?

Absolutely. At school, children receive information that is too one-sided and knowledge that is not applied in a practical manner. That is why the knowledge acquired is lost so quickly. Knowledge has to be applied in a practical or hands-on manner in order for it to become firmly established. A few years ago it was investigated whether students in formal or classical education had a higher IQ than students in technical or modular education. The surprising conclusion was that this was not the case. Students in modular education are as intelligent as students in conventional classical education. The question must therefore be asked why there are not more students in mainstream or classical education.



According to Khabirpour the after-school guidance should be fundamentally rethought

And what is the answer to this question?

The intelligence on which we base ourselves and which we test is not a determining factor for academic success. Success in our school system is based on those who know how to adapt and who are encouraged and supported by their families. Social circumstances play a major role, and the migratory context is also crucial to students' progress.

It has been known for many years that children with a migrant background have difficulties in the Luxembourg school system...

We have an increasing number of children from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, but our system is failing to integrate these children. Language plays an important role in this context. But language is also often an obstacle for Luxembourg children. The problem is that our children are not educated in their mother tongue. This is also one of the reasons why the results of the PISA survey in Luxembourg are comparatively poor. This has nothing to do with the fact that our children are less intelligent, but because they face language barriers. They are taught in a foreign language. Luxembourgish needs to be taught more and from the very beginning in schools. In basic education, the emphasis must be placed on the Luxembourgish language.

It must be used more in the classroom, it must be learned correctly. I would also attach more importance to English, because this language is becoming more and more important on the international stage and because it is the language of science.

But Luxembourgish is not a particularly precise language ...

It is not precise because it has been neglected. But it can become precise. It is the language of the heart. It must be perfected. And a language only develops if it is needed and if it is valued. That hasn't often enough been the case. In fact, I notice that many Luxembourgers feel inferior. That has to do with the language. Language shapes our thinking, our vision of the world, our emotional world. If I don't take my own language seriously, because I consider it to be a dialect, and if I don't have a good command of the foreign languages I have acquired, it creates a feeling of inferiority. This does not affect people who can easily express themselves in other languages.

Students with language deficits are unlikely to be referred to mainstream or classical education. What do you think about the orientation of pupils after elementary education?

Guidance and orientation should be fundamentally rethought and possibly redefined. Even if nowadays parents and psychologists are involved in the decision alongside teachers, this does not change the fact that it is the children's linguistic and mathematical skills that determine whether they are oriented towards classical, technical or modular education. It is not good to steer students in a certain direction at such an early age. We know that much can still change. It would be better to have a common program until the age of 16.

A fundamental change in our school system is needed so that orientation is not based on cognitive skills alone. We need to widen skills. Later on in the workplace, we will not just look at the diploma, but we will demand other skills, including human skills. Students in technical education believe they are less intelligent than students in classical education. Parents are under pressure and want their children to be oriented towards classical education at all costs, since technical education is worth less to them. In our society, technical and manual learnings are considered inferior to intellectual learnings. However, a student with manual skills is no less intelligent or less valuable than a pupil with intellectual skills.

Teachers are increasingly dealing with difficult students. Are they sufficiently prepared for their complex task?

Teachers often do their best, but they are not sufficiently prepared for reality, at least secondary school teachers. Training is too focused on the teacher's ability to discipline and teachers identify very strongly with their subject matter. They do not say: "I am a teacher", but: "I am a math, French or history teacher. »

Certainly, they are learning how to organize their classes. But this is not enough to successfully pass on knowledge to students. At the beginning teachers are highly motivated, but if this doesn't work, they quickly develop prejudices against the students. Instead of questioning their teaching, they label students as stupid or lazy. This creates a false image, but thinking this way reassures the teacher. In addition to professional and pedagogical training, teachers should have knowledge of developmental psychology and psychology in general. This aspect is far too neglected. Teachers need to know how to communicate with students who have problems and how to motivate students who do not believe in themselves. In their training, future teachers need to be given a positive image of students. Often, they already have a negative image of students when they first come in front of the class. Communication in the classroom is important, as well as communication between students so that they can help each other. Students are a resource with skills, not an empty container to be filled.

Aren't we faced with a continuous decline in performance, because even those who have potential don't develop it, because not enough is demanded of them?

Yes. We need to motivate children to make an effort again. Many are not sufficiently stimulated at home either. We do a lot of things for our children, we organize everything for them. For this reason it is not easy for teachers to work with students who come to school without enthusiasm and who avoid any effort. Two things are important: the children must learn that effort is part of life, but for this they must be involved in activities. On the other hand, it is the teacher's job to make sure that the student develops a relationship with the subject, that he or she can see the meaning of it. This goes beyond the practical relationship.

INTERVIEW : MICHÈLE GANTENBEIN

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