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Gestalt in Schools

One of the current failures of the Human Potential Movement is that its activities don't appear to have had a major effect on our education system. The development of human potential could be seen as synonymous with education, and yet our schools limit themselves to an arid approach to intellectual development and hope to cope with other aspects of development with sports and moral homilies delivered at morning assembly.

A beginning has indeed been made (Brown 1971), but this has been mainly in the United States and the attempts in this country have been largely in relatively safe areas such as higher education. Work done in schools tends to be isolated and often disguised, as it would not be seen as an appropriate part of the curriculum. In this short article, I intend to look at the implications of doing Gestalt work in secondary schools, using examples from work done by myself and friends. (I am aware of avoiding the word 'therapy', which would be seen by many teachers as not appropriate to the school situation and yet I find it difficult to differentiate between therapy and education.)

The examples of my own work are taken from a series of 70 minute weekly sessions which took place in a conventional comprehensive school in the centre of an urban council estate. The group consisted of 22 fourth year students, aged 14 to 15, of both sexes. They were told that the aim of the sessions was to look at their own behaviour as it happened and that there would be no formal lesson content or traditional activities such as writing notes. I introduced structures as I thought they were appropriate and the students were told that they need not take part if they did not wish to, but they would not be allowed to interfere with what the others were doing. I worked with Lyn, the class teacher, during the sessions, who already had a good relationship with the students. I am extracting those examples which relate to Gestalt.

The group were not considered to be normally amenable to the school ethos and included students who were described as the more difficult in the school. There were many problems in the week by week sessions, but not the sort of problems that are normally faced in a secondary school.

The first main principle that we observed was to stay in 'the here and now'. We didn't use this phrase, but talked in terms of looking at what was happening as the period went along. The possibility of doing this seemed to be completely alien to the students, and they often said so in no uncertain terms. The idea was described as 'stupid'. In response to the question, 'What is happening to you now?' they would say either 'nothing' or that they were bored. I suppose this is not surprising, when most of their previous educational experience has involved talking about things, or 'aboutism' in Fritz Perls' terms. We did, however, perservere withthis approach and towards the end of term, the demand seemed to be a reasonable one. This was confirmed in a particularly pointed way by the girl who said she thought that what we were doing was

not ridiculous and it was the first time she had been 'allowed' to look at, and talk about her feelings since she had been in junior school.

It was important to listen to the double message behind the complaints of boredom and wasting time. They could choose whether they came to the session or not, as there was a parallel session they could go to. Also many of the activities produced a charged, aroused and interested involvement, which was often later denied. It would, indeed, have been a loss of face for some of them to admit they were interested in what was being done in school. More important, there was no trouble of a vicious or destructive nature. At worst, the students refused to take part in the structures, which was an option they were given. Again students who refused to take part in a structure, often showed in later discussion, that they were vicariously involved in the structure. This was particularly true of the attempts to use fantasy. Firstly, most of the students would deny having experienced any part of the fantasy, but later on in conversation, talked about images that they had obviously experienced during the fantasy. A particularly striking example of this process comes from a friend who used the image of writing your own name over and over again to fill a sheet of paper, as part of a fantasy sequence. Twelve year-old Wendy said it was stupid and refused to take part. Later in the week, her mother came to parents' evening and reported that Wendy had done a strange thing the other night. She had taken a piece of paper, covered it with her name and then thrown it in the fire with the comment, 'I'm glad that's out of the way.' This doesn't necessarily say anything about the value of the activity, but it says a great deal about it's impact. This seems to be a good example of completing unfinished business.

The attempts to use fantasy were particularly difficult as the students had problems in keeping their eyes closed for more than a few second, if at all. Three standard fantasies were tried:- 1. To imagine being a bird in a cage and to try to take on the roles of both the bird and the cage. This was made difficult by the obvious association between birds and girls. 2. Being cast away on a desert island with the rest of the group, and imagining what everyone was doing. 3. Being an animal in the zoo and escaping. In a limited way, some of the students were able to see they were projecting parts of themselves into these fantasies.

This was probably the first time individuals in this group had been asked to look at their fantasy life and possibly this was a threatening experience. Given the freedom of choice, most of the students would not co-operate and then interfered with those who wanted to try. On the other hand, friends who have used these and similar structures, with classes who are willing to co-operate, have found them very productive, in terms of both verbal and written responses.

Another aspect of Gestalt we tried to develop, was the idea that most individuals are made up of conflicting parts and that some of these parts are unconscious or disowned. One way of highlighting these parts is to ask the person to take on the role of the individual parts in turn. The demand, 'Be the . . . ,' was meaningless and the usual direct Gestalt formulations seemed to be inappropriate. Taking on roles had to be approached in a more subtle way. The most striking example developed when attention was drawn to the self-inflicted tattoos on John's forearms. It was pointed out to him in the group that he had previously expressed regret that he had tattooed

himself, and I was able to get him to talk about the part of himself that wanted the tattoos and the part of himself that did not want them. John was normally a silent, morose and unco-operative student in normal lessons. In these sessions, he smiled and laughed and often gave a great deal in terms of his own feelings and his reactions to the others.

A highly successful structure for highlighting projected parts of the self was the use of the students' drawings of trees. A tree seems to be a particularly potent image and the students really enjoyed doing the drawings, particularly as they did not have to think about artistic skill. When the trees were completed, they were put onto the floor in the middle of the group. First they tried to guess who had done the individual drawings, and they were particularly successful at doing this. A considerable amount of personal feed-back emerged from this discussion, with a frankness that did not occur in the earlier sessions and several admitted that the trees could be seen as reflections of themselves.

One memorable incident, involved one of the most inadequate members of the group, whose behaviour pattern was to mess around in a silly way, but be ignored by the other students. His drawing seemed to represent this behaviour very well and at first he seemed amused by the whole business, but later he seemed to catch on to what the discussion was about and tried to push his drawing under another one, and later denied that it was his drawing.

This was not the end of the trees. Next week, one of the brighter, more vocal boys, who had been absent for the drawing session, was invited to see if he could guess who had drawn the trees, which had been kept. The aim of doing the drawings was explained to him. He was about 90% correct, but he also produced a remarkedly insightful running commentary on why he made the choices he did, and this sparked off a lively, but friendly exchange with the other students. Again, friends who have used 'the trees' in different ways, in a variety of school situations, have always found that it generated an exciting and involved session.

One of the most important issues is the application of Gestalt techniques to what are normally called discipline problems. As I mentioned above, the sessions were devoid of the normal type of discipline problem. The outcome of difficult situations as they arose is perhaps best illustrated by an incident with Maurice, a well developed West Indian, who was setting off to thump another student who had quietly insulted him. I asked him, 'What is happening to you right now?' This seemed to stop him in his tracks and he described how this tremendous tension built up in his head and he felt as if he was going to explode. I asked him to try and physically exaggerate the tension and let it go several times and then to imagine he was breathing into his head. He reported that the original feelings had disappeared and that he was feeling quite light-headed. The whole class were highly involved in the whole event.

The importance of the question, 'What is happening to you now?', was raised earlier. This is a common question in Gestalt groups, but very unusual in the classroom situation. In the stress of the classroom situation, it is more common to slip into making demands about motives. 'Why did you do that?'; usually with strong moral and

emotional overtones. Even statements using 'what', such as 'What do you think you are doing?' Often involve an implied moral judgement.

As potential conflicts arose, Lyn and I met them with forms of the question, 'What is happening to you now?' trying to be as cool and non-judging as possible. This sometimes led to some expression of awareness of what was going one, but often left the student in a somewhat confused state. Often it was ignored, but in almost all cases, it seemed to divert potential acting out in a manner which would normally be described as a breach of discipline. Another description of this approach to these types of problem is found in Lederman (1972) who was working with disturbed American ghetto chidlren.

It seems to me that there are two major aspects to any discipline problem. Firstly, the student behaves in a way that the teacher does not like, and secondly, something is happening emotionally and physically to the student that possibly he doesn't understand properly. Any attempt to solve the first part of the problem is bound to end up in a struggle of wills, which can only end up as a loss of face on the part of one or other of the participants. Looking at the other side of the problem, the teacher, using Gestalt questioning, can add a whole new dimensions to the situation. This highlights 'what' is happening to the student, rather than 'why', which allows a much clearer rational understanding of what is going on. This could enable both the student and the teacher to change their behaviour without involving a loss of face.

It could be argued that we were defusing righteous feelings of aggression against an exploitive authoritarian system. My own view is that forms of protest can only be potent if they involve an awareness of the real source of frustration. In the case of the student in school, this is not necessarily the adult or peer group member who happens to be there at the moment and to act out without awareness can only reinforce personal and social problems rather than solve them.

An important criticism raised by this sort of approach in schools, particularly the fantasy work, is that adults are meddling with and possibly doing damage to students' emotional lives. This possibility must be considered seriously, but I would suggest that the reality is that every interraction involves some degree of mutual interference. The Gestalt mode of questioning, however, has a built-in neutrality, which will only allow the other person to experience that which he himself has brought to the situation.

'What are you doing?'
'What do you feel?'
'What do you want?'
What do you avoid?'
'What do you expect?' (Perls 1973)

This form of questioning can be a disturbing experience, but personal defences are so efficient, that the experience is usually cut off or denied. The neutrality turns the situation into a form of self-learning or discovery learning for the students. But if the neutral stance is maintained over a long period of time, then no real contact is made with the questioner and this can be broken by the teacher talking about his own

feelings and experiences, rather than reverting to the more traditional role. In the school context, a good personal relationship is a necessary pre-requisite for effective Gestalt questioning. It is interesting how many teachers become stuck in their teaching role (and group leaders in their mirroring role), and become impossible to contact as persons.

Being involved in this form of learning situation poses many problems for the experienced teacher. It is difficult not to feel there is something wrong with you if a group refuses to take part in what you suggest, even though you have made it optional. Silence is not easy to tolerate, especially when it follows a question you have asked. I think Lyn found this more of a problem than I did, as she was more directly involved in the school. Some teachers find it extremely difficult to share their thoughts and feelings with the students, even when this is being asked of the students. Again, I can understand that this will happen when teachers feel that their egos are being threatened.

A useful guideline for the teacher in this situation is to avoid interpretation to the student. This is suggested by Fritz Perls himself (Perls 1951), who suggests that any interpretation is a trip lain by the interpreter on the interpreted. Many apparently casual statements, particularly those beginning with 'It seems to me . . . ' have a powerful impact because of the high level of dependency involved in relationships such as teacher and pupil and group leader and group member. This elevates the statement to the status of an interpretation. An interpretation takes away responsibility for learning from the interpreted.

Apart from the usual qualifications of working only with volunteers and of not forcing anyone to do anything he does not want to do, I would suggest that a teacher needs to tread very carefully when introducing experiential learning into state schools. Institutions seem to have a strong irrational reaction these experiences, suggesting that they are emotionally harmful and non-academic. I would 'interpret' these objections as a projection.

Most of the examples given above were taken from planned experiential sessions and the caveat about volunteers is important here. On the other hand teachers and students are thrust together by the system in an ongoing way. (It would be too easy to say that the individual teacher must take responsibility for trapping himself within the system.) Given this situation, Gestalt modes of interaction, albeit isolated questions or demands, could well form an integral part of the ongoing relationships and perhaps, after a while, the teacher might find the students doing it to him.

References

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