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GESTALT PEDAGOGY AS AN INSPIRATION FOR MODERN SCHOOL*

“The educational relationship is a purely dialogue-based relationship (...). Educating people by people means selection of the effective world via the person and within the person”

Martin Buber

Introduction: The theoretical underpinnings of Gestalt pedagogy stem from the tenets of humanistic psychology and rely on a holistic concept of humans. They are embedded in the paradigms of Gestalt therapy, a therapeutic modality that dates back to the 1960s. The challenges of today’s fast-evolving world make it difficult to build healthy interpersonal relationships based on mutual respect. It seems to be a dying skill despite being critical to fostering healthy development of children’s and young people’s identity. Hence, it is necessary to explore the conditions for the educational process (upbringing and teaching) to be effective.

Research Aim: The aim of this paper is to discuss the central tenets of Gestalt pedagogy. It delves into definitions of the education process and highlights selected principles that frame the way Gestalt schools operate. What is more, it considers an original profile of a teacher whose approach and skillset are embedded in Gestalt theory.

Evidence-based Facts: The concept of Gestalt pedagogy is fairly well covered by German literature. However, it continues to be a relatively obscure subject in Polish pedagogical community, with little consideration being given to its theory and practice. This calls for exploration of the concept and its core elements as part of a broader and ongoing effort to expand pedagogical knowledge and build an up-to-date understanding of educational phenomena.

Summary: In order for the educational process to remain effective, it is essential to produce new knowledge in alignment with the challenges of today’s world. Given the state of contemporary educational reality, it is necessary to actively promote changes not only in the way the teaching process is organised, but also in how the concept is approached. It is also a must to abandon the traditional method of providing learners with raw knowledge (at every stage of

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the educational process) and a modicum of skills in favour of education as a process of self-exploration.

Keywords: Gestalt pedagogy, Gestalt school, teacher, teacher-student relationship

INTRODUCTION

One may put forward a thesis that the modern system of education is lagging behind the present-day reality and that traditional models of education are not effective enough to prepare young people to function in the constantly evolving world. Present-day reality is highly challenging for tutors and teachers. It is very difficult to predict what skills and knowledge will be indispensable the moment children and adolescents leave school. Rapid technological advances, artificial intelligence already impacting our world, and rapidly shifting geopolitical landscape (including an increasing number of armed conflicts emerging around the world) make humans the weakest link. Although humans are capable of developing new technologies and turning things once impossible into possible, still when observing their existence in the world it appears that they are less and less able to establish and maintain healthy relationships with other people, and they are getting more and more lost and unable to function in the world. As emphasized by Śliwerski (1998), humans are made of the body, mind and spirit, living in an inseparable connection with the social and natural environment. By interacting with this environment, they gain their identity (p. 433). Therefore, creation of a system of education intended to equip students with skills and knowledge that, undoubtedly, are important nowadays, and at the same time enabling them to develop their potentials, poses a real challenge.

RESEARCH PROBLEM AND AIM

In the face of already mentioned threats and challenges of contemporary world, schools, which to some extent forge a young person's identity, should stimulate to the largest possible extent their biopsychosocial development and support their emotional growth in the context of building robust relationships with the self, others, and the world. Combination of these objectives is possible but at the same time quite difficult to achieve in present-day reality. At the same time, supporting what is linked to current human needs and expectations of the world in the context of social identity, construed here as fulfilment of the social roles, is complex and demanding. It appears to be possible only when tutors themselves undergo transformations and undertake the effort to make a change in accordance with Gestalt's Paradoxical Theory of Change (Beisser, 1970).

This change is not the aim or the way to being of some kind (according to one's own or someone else's expectations) but it is about accepting oneself the way one is; it is a change in self-perception; in raising one's awareness – it is becoming and discovering what one really is and not what one is trying to be or not to be. Change construed in this manner is an ongoing and natural process. It is a path towards discovering one's own authentic needs and making informed choices based on such needs. Only after such discovery takes place, will it be possible to genuinely match principles, methods, and forms of work specifically designed to build a horizontal and not asymmetrical student-teacher-parent relationship. Teaching and upbringing work based indeed on assumptions of Gestalt pedagogy might pose a chance for next generations. As noted by Śliwerski (2015), there has been a growing interest in Gestalt pedagogy, and as the author wrote, this may have happened since owing to this pedagogy every subject engaged in the teaching-learning process is capable of getting to know oneself, achieving self-realization, and taking responsibility for one's own actions. Further, Gestalt contributes to the revival of the art of life, it illuminates the present and the future, releasing the freedom to design life and restore its value (p. 187), It can, therefore, be presumed that pedagogy based on Gestalt modality comes as a sort of an opportunity to heal the to some extent unhealthy people-to-people contacts resulting from extremely rapidly advancing technology.

METHODOLOGY

Our analyses concern current views on the subject of research. The paper shall present the main tenets of Gestalt pedagogy, with emphasis on those being most significant for potential changes in modern education, including presentation of teachers pursuing their role in accordance with the principles of this pedagogical trend. The aim of the study is to present the main assumptions of Gestalt pedagogy. Moreover, the paper demonstrates the way the educational process and selected principles organising work in schools employing Gestalt pedagogy are construed.

EVIDENCE-BASED FACTS

Gestalt pedagogy – assumptions, aims, principles

Theoretical foundations of Gestalt pedagogy make references to humanistic psychology and the holistic concept of humans and the surrounding world, based on the idea of supporting human development. They are linked to the theoretical assumptions of Gestalt therapy developed in the 1960s. In German, “Gestalt” means a figure, form, shape, or a whole. The main assumption of this trend is

the holistic perception of a person, focusing on the present (here and now) and establishing a therapeutic relationship with the client, which is regarded as one of the major healing components. In reference to pedagogy, it should be noted that a teacher is not a therapist for the student but a person supporting their growth. The key terms used in the concept of Gestalt include, among others, self-awareness, responsibility, holistic perspective, the present, natural human inclination to perceive incomplete components as a whole (the law of closure), self-regulation of the body, fundamental role of needs, contact boundary, cycle of experience, reconciliation of polarities (Ginger, 1995; Paruzel-Czachura, 2015; Perls, Hefferline & Goodman, 2022). Gestalt has also been inspired by psychoanalysis, existentialism, Zen psychology, phenomenology, and field theory. The most significant contributors to the development of this therapeutic trend were, among others: Perls, Perls, Goodman and Hefferline. As noticed by Houston (2006), this trend

[...] just like many other theories of change and psychotherapy, was born out of anxiety, energy and consistent, creative thinking. Like all approaches to psychotherapy, it is a collection of hypotheses describing reality, based on a consistent system of assumptions and therapeutic methods. It does not rely on scientific certainty but on the creative effort of people who used data they had at their disposal in the best available manner. (p. 34)

As noticed by Houston (2003), this trend, like other psychotherapeutic trends, arose from a sense of restlessness, energy, and creative thinking. Like other concepts, it creates a set of hypotheses and ideas describing reality, based on an integral system of assumptions and therapeutic methods. It does not rely on scientific certainty, but on the creative effort of people, based on making the best use of available data.

Gestalt pedagogy draws on the ideas of humanistic psychology (Perls, Goodman, Rogers), holistic learning (Rousseau, Pestalozzi), existentialism and phenomenology (Buber). In the Polish literature, papers describing theoretical underpinnings of Gestalt pedagogy have been primarily published by Żłobicki (2001, 2002, 2007, 2008) and Śliwerski (2010, 2015). As noted by Żłobicki (2008), the essence of education according to the Gestalt approach is direct and holistic communication between subjects employing the body, mind and feelings, whereas realization of this holistic thinking about a person involves awareness of one's own living space, creation of one's own action space, realising one's own origin, and admitting constraints to one's own cognition, one's awareness and temporariness of existence (p. 44).

Gestalt presumes existence of five areas of human development: emotional, social, physical, intellectual, and spiritual. In the educational process, it is essential to devote appropriate attention to each of them. It is also important to ensure the development of students' responsibility and awareness. Gestalt pedagogy is founded on three basic components. The first one is confluent education, involving de-

velopment of the curriculum in a way that enables combination of cognitive and emotional aspects. Education construed in this manner is essentially about connecting students' emotions, attitudes, and values, as according to Gestalt followers, teaching that lacks these three components is incomplete. Only in this manner, it is possible to get to the essence of humanity.

The second pillar of Gestalt pedagogy is a theme-centred interaction for group work intended to strike a balance between the theme and the presented content; physical, moral, spiritual, and emotional needs of a child; as well as the ability to communicate with oneself, with the environment, and within the group. Finding balance between listening and speaking, giving and taking, as well as activity and passivity is of key importance. This principle is intended to make learners gain self-reliance, assume responsibility in contacting other people, and improve people-to-people communication. The third foundation is the pace of interaction (applied anthropology) – according to the interaction principle, a human consists of three components: body, mind, and soul living in an inseparable connection with the natural and social environment. Existence within these environments makes one develop one's own identity (Śliwerski, 2015).

The main objectives of Gestalt pedagogy include enabling students to identify their individual potentials, interests, and needs, and develop them further, thus preparing them to live their lives independently, helping them discover themselves and their identity, develop empathy and respect towards other people, and teaching them to take responsibility for their own actions. Moreover, Gestalt pedagogy is intended to improve the capability of perceiving and noticing things and to facilitate focusing on what is here and now.

Hence, the aim of Gestalt pedagogy consists in training students in, among others:

- developing the capability to identify their own needs;
- improving the ability to perceive and experience;
- identifying and developing their interests;
- developing their skills and abilities;
- recognising opportunities to broaden the potential of experiences and actions;
- self-determination and building of autonomy with awareness of the social bonds;
- social engagement, with awareness of the responsibility for oneself (self-responsibility);
- developing capabilities and readiness to identify expectations and related behaviours (openness to situational requirements; see Ginger, 1998; Śliwerski, 2015).

The aims listed above require teachers' effort to realize the way in which they function in present-day reality, the way in which they integrate current experienc-

es, or how creatively they adjust to the current demands of the environment. As stated by Śliwerski (2015), what significantly differentiates Gestalt pedagogy from other educational trends and approaches, is starting from the clarity of meaning and objectives in educators' (teachers and tutors) personal life and the system of values in reforming the educational theory and practice (p. 172).

Fundamental principles to be followed in working as a teacher include: (1) the principle of the primacy of the teacher-student relationship; (2) the principle of designing horizontal teaching and learning situations; (3) the principle of addressing the unity of the body, mind, and soul; (4) the principle of making what currently engages the pupils, the here and now, the starting point for the classes; and (5) the principle of addressing the unity of an individual; (6) the principle of learning through experiencing and acting (Burrow & Schrepp, 1981; Śliwerski, 2015).

The first principle assumes that the teacher-student relationship is superior to all other components of the teaching process (e.g., the addressed theme of the classes). This stems from the assumption that proper relationships within a group (including student-to-student relationships and their attitudes to classes), and proper communication are of key importance for the teaching process to be effective. The main task of a teacher referring to the "here and now" is to create favourable conditions enabling students to address important and meaningful issues in order for them to realise their needs, possibilities and potentials.

The second principle of designing horizontal teaching and learning situations refers to finding that the teaching process should be based on trust and partnership. This means that teaching is based on partnership and it is not a one-way process; that is, both the student and the teacher learn from each other. What is more, under the assumptions of Gestalt pedagogy, it involves two levels: social-emotional and academic learning. The former is extremely significant and provides grounds for the latter, to some extent determining its efficacy (Burrow & Schrepp, 1981; Śliwerski, 2015).

The third principle of addressing the unity of the body, mind and soul requires teachers to consider all aspects of student functioning (i.e., the bodily, emotional, intellectual, social and spiritual dimension). It is crucial to apply, as Żłobicki (2008) posits, a holistic approach to having contact with the surrounding world, with other group members, with the self, and with the issue comprising the topic of the classes. For this allows the participants of the learning process – both the learning and teaching individuals – to integrate thinking, emotions and actions. Special meaning is taken on by the inner areas of contact with the self, which should lead to the unity of the body, intellect and feelings (p. 50).

In accordance with the subsequent principle of making what currently engages the pupils, the here and now, the starting point for the classes, by selecting the content to be addressed during classes, a teacher should consider topics currently valid for the students, and also those that may be important for them in the future.

Issues discussed during lessons should consider age, needs, and interests of the students. Students, on the other hand, should have a say in determining the taught content and decide about it together with the teacher. The aim of the principle of addressing the unity between an individual and the environment is to teach a child to take responsibility for their actions in the environment, irrespective of whether the child likes or dislikes the environment. The key issue here is the significance of bonds within the group and teacher's activity in the structure of this group.

The last principle listed above (of learning through experiencing and acting) refers to the teacher creating situations that enable students to learn the meaning of issues and matters they find important. This gives students a chance to understand them on their own in direct action (Śliwerski, 2015). This refers to seeking opportunities to support students' own activity. Teachers should therefore undertake activities that spark curiosity and provide students with opportunities to independently discover their interests and issues that are important to them. This is achieved by involving students as much as possible in the planning, preparation, and implementation of activities.

Teacher in the Gestalt approach

A teacher role in a school that employs the principles of Gestalt pedagogy is primarily characterised by a democratic approach to students. As already mentioned, the educational process construed as growth (rather than mere knowledge acquisition), which is close to the ideas of Gestalt underpinnings, is not a one-way process. It is both the teacher and the student who learn from each another. They have a horizontal (egalitarian) relationship. Moreover, a teacher is open to what a student contributes to the relationship, respecting all aspects of their functioning, and very strongly employing a holistic approach to the student but also towards themselves as a teacher. The entire educational process is pursued in the air of authenticity, empathy, acceptance, and open-mindedness. What differentiates a school that applies the principles of Gestalt pedagogy, however, is primarily the teacher's approach towards themselves (Ablewicz, 2003).

Most theoretical studies and educational approaches have proposed descriptions of what makes a good teacher. On the other hand, by making references to one of the fundamental tenets of Gestalt (i.e., the paradoxical theory of change), Gestalt pedagogy assumes that in order to become a good teacher one needs to get to know oneself and the way one is. This becomes possible owing to constant learning about the self. Change involves accepting oneself as one is and it is related to the change in self-perception, in raising self-awareness. Only then can a teacher stand a chance of becoming a facilitator supporting student growth. Facilitation, extensively described by Rogers (1998), is of key importance in pursuing the role of a teacher in a school that implements principles of Gestalt pedagogy. Just like a facilitator, a Gestalt teacher focuses on organising conditions for their students

that facilitate the students' growth, among others, by building a student-teacher relationship based on trust and sense of security. Building of such a relationship requires authenticity and empathy, among others. Empathy, construed as the ability to imagine emotional states of another person, a specific sensitivity to a complex situation of the other person, is a component that determines establishing good relationships. As pointed out by Ablewicz (2017), in the holistic concept of a person, which is also represented by the concept of Gestalt, emotions are strictly related with the body and the way it responds to them. At first glance, it is commonplace; however, the practice shows how much awareness of the currently experienced emotions and feelings in the experience by an adult person is limited and how much it might be distorted by earlier life experiences. For this reason, an educator needs to practice recognising this awareness, in order to be able to gradually teach their pupils how to recognise it as well (p. 55).

According to Hinte (1980), the primary task of a teacher is to support the learning process, which determines all other actions addressed to students. Hence, they can assist students in finding access to any available sources of knowledge, offer their personal competences, skilfully give feedback (and not interpret), present readiness to provide an ongoing assistance and support in difficult or emergency situations, and be an advocate of learning in the spirit of support for this process (Hinte, 1980; Żłobicki, 2008).

In accordance with the Gestalt-based concept of school, building of a relationship with a student refers to phenomenological foundations of Gestalt therapy and assumes focusing on description and observation of things as they are present in the experience. Therefore, it calls for a phenomenological epoché (Husserl, 2014), meaning bracketing the beliefs about the real world and the entity discovering the world. In the teacher-student relationship, this allows to grasp the uniqueness of each experience of the "here and now" and eliminates the need to make interpretations. In reference to existentialism, which forms one of the pillars of Gestalt therapy, Gestalt pedagogy assumes that a student is constantly in the process of getting to know (becoming) oneself, concurrently assuming responsibility for the decisions they take. Hence, the educational process is, to some extent, the process of human development, whereas the role of the teacher/tutor is to maintain this special type of existential contact with the student/pupil through intersubjectivity. Intersubjectivity means perceiving and understanding the student as an internally integrated and highly competent human being, and treating them as such (Śliwerski, 2015, p. 174). Well aware teachers induce students' self-reflection, stimulate students to identify conditions and possibilities to take action, at the same time creating opportunities to assume responsibility. They give students a chance to build autonomy owing to possible diversification, and an opportunity to experience the world by engaging all aspects of existence; that is, bodily, emotional, mental, social, and spiritual dimensions. Therefore, a teacher who works in accordance with the tenets of the Gestalt

pedagogy makes references to ten recommendations of Gestalt therapy that according to Godawa (2015) may be referred to teaching, namely:

1. Live Now: deal with the present and not with the past or the future.
2. Live Here: deal with what is present and not with what is absent.
3. Give yourself in to what you are now: be what you are, accept yourself.
4. Stop imagining: experience real things.
5. Take full responsibility for your actions, feelings and thoughts – be honest with yourself.
6. Express: do not manipulate, do not explain, do not justify, do not judge.
7. Deeply experience the entire range of emotions, both the unpleasant and painful ones, as well as pleasant ones.
8. Do not accept any external demands and instructions, such as “you should” that are contrary to what you know about yourself.
9. Stop unnecessary thinking; instead, watch and taste, be ready to experiment to encounter new situations.
10. Be open to change and development (p. 52).

A teacher in a school that employs the principles of Gestalt pedagogy is, therefore, focused on supporting their students in the building of their autonomy and increasing their responsibility for their own lives. To this end, they try to create a space to enable them to experience the world holistically. In their efforts, the teachers are guided by acceptance, authenticity, and openness to their students' autonomies and their beliefs about their potential for development.

SUMMARY

As an alternative theory of learning, Gestalt pedagogy offers a new look on the organisation of the teaching and upbringing process pursued by schools. By focusing on the emotional and cognitive aspects of these processes and their interaction, it complements and enriches the currently functioning system of education. It should be remembered, however, that the Gestalt-inspired concept of the learning process is highly demanding of a teacher, for it asks of them to be constantly authentic, self-accepting, and open to getting to know themselves, which is not an easy task.

To meet these expectations, teachers should take a deliberate effort of guiding their own growth. Self-improvement is not only an investment in oneself but primarily in teachers' professional responsibility, for it is them who constitute the key instrument employed in the teaching activities. Teachers who are not aware of themselves, their feelings and needs, their autonomy and self-responsibility will not be able to respect the freedom and autonomy of their students or to allow them to act as experts in their feelings and needs. Hence, it is highly important for persons working with children and adolescents to have the courage to have

a closer look at themselves and undertake the effort of raising their awareness and improving themselves in all areas for development.

Self-improvement is not only about participation in vocational courses and trainings. It is also about working with one's own emotions, self-reflection, and reflection on one's previous beliefs, as well as being open to change and pursuit of psychological maturity. For only a mature teacher who first learns to be a grown-up themselves can fully live up to the role of an educator and a guide who understands the idea of accompanying students in becoming themselves more and more evidently.

The effort of discovering what is truly close to and accordant with the teachers and raising their awareness is therefore essential for them to be able to build holistic and horizontal relationships with the students. By providing the sense of security and trust, assumptions and principles of the Gestalt pedagogy stimulate and encourage students and teachers to experience the world in an informed way, to choose what is striking and sparks interest, to act in a conscious manner. It is then that all participants of the teaching and upbringing process stand an equal chance of learning from one another.

CONCLUSIONS

While certainly having numerous advantages, Gestalt pedagogy appears to be very difficult to apply in the Polish system of education, which is focused on standardization and evaluation. The Gestalt approach, focused on the teacher-student relationship, may raise resistance of school principals and parents who expect measurable educational outcomes in the students, as well as of teachers themselves who bear responsibility for the efficacy of the teaching process. Teachers, obliged to observe the curriculum, find it easier to apply traditional teaching methods and to focus on monitoring the learning outcomes than discovering each student's distinctiveness and potential. Considerable amount of time required to work in accordance with the Gestalt approach appears to be virtually impossible in the light of large-size classes. Moreover, absence of established procedures and the need to embed the educational process in the authentic relationship in the "here and now" requires teachers to display considerable mindfulness, flexibility, and teaching courage, allowing them to pursue their professional role effectively in situations characterised by uncertainty and unpredictability.

Additionally, establishing deep relationships with students requires high self-awareness and emotional maturity, considerable mental resources, and ability to be assertive, allowing teachers to accompany their students while they go through various emotions, and at the same time respect their personal boundaries. Teachers willing to work in accordance with the principles of Gestalt pedagogy

would not only have to face challenges posed by the Polish system of education, but also – due to no vocational Gestalt trainings offered to teachers, to focus on their own personal growth, which is not always possible in the absence of proper psychological and psychotherapeutic support.

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PODEJŚCIE GESTALT W PEDAGOGICE INSPIRACJĄ DLA NOWOCZESNEJ SZKOŁY

Wprowadzenie: Teoretyczne podstawy pedagogiki Gestalt wiążą się z założeniami psychologii humanistycznej i holistycznej koncepcji człowieka. Nawiązują one do paradygmatów terapii w nurcie Gestalt, stworzonej w latach sześćdziesiątych XX wieku. Wyzwania współczesnego, dość szybko zmieniającego się świata, w dużym stopniu utrudniają budowanie zdrowych, opartych na szacunku relacji międzyludzkich. Umiejętność ta wydaje się zanikać choć jej kształtowanie u dzieci i młodzieży jest jednym z najistotniejszych czynników warunkujących prawidłowy rozwój ich tożsamości. Konieczne jest zatem przyglądanie się warunkom skuteczności procesu edukacyjnego (wychowawczego i dydaktycznego).

Cel badań: Przedmiotem rozważań jest przedstawienie głównych założeń koncepcji pedagogiki Gestalt. Analizy dotyczą rozumienia procesu edukacji i prezentacji wybranych zasad organizujących pracę w szkole bazującej na pedagogice Gestalt. Deliberacja dotyczy również oryginalnej sylwetki nauczyciela opierającego swój warsztat pracy na idei teorii Gestalt.

Stan wiedzy: Koncepcja pedagogiki Gestalt jest dość dobrze opisana głównie w niemieckiej literaturze przedmiotu. Na gruncie polskiej pedagogiki jest obszarem wciąż słabo rozpoznawalnym – zarówno w sensie teoretycznym, jak i praktycznym. Wskazane jest zatem zgłębienie jej idei i postulatów zgodnie z koniecznością ciągłego eksplorowania ogólnej wiedzy pedagogicznej i aktualizowania zjawisk edukacyjnych.

Podsumowanie: Warunki skuteczności procesu edukacyjnego wymagają nieustannej aktualizacji wiedzy korespondującej z wyzwaniami świata. Kondycja współczesnej rzeczywistości edukacyjnej wymusza podjęcie działań wpierających zmiany w obszarze nie tylko organizacji procesu dydaktycznego, ale również w podejściu do rozumienia tego pojęcia, a także odejścia od tradycyjnego wyposażania uczniów w wiedzę (na każdym etapie edukacji) i czasami stosunkowo niewielkie umiejętności w stronę edukacji rozumianej jako proces poznawania siebie.

Słowa kluczowe: pedagogika Gestalt, szkoła Gestalt, nauczyciel, relacja nauczyciela z uczniem