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## **Gestalt Theory in the Field of Educational Psychology: An Example<sup>1</sup>**

### **Introduction**

From the beginning of my work at the University of Education, my motivation to start teaching psychology to prospective teachers was inspired by Gestalt theory as a theoretical background of psychotherapy, that is to say: to understand Gestalt Theory as a convincing and useful theoretical background for application in an interpersonal context. Studying especially the works of Wolfgang Metzger and Kurt Lewin again, I was reassured that Gestalt theory as a differentiating holistic position as well as most of the explicitly drawn or derivable pedagogical consequences could also be a valuable background for teachers' work in classrooms.

But Gestalt theory is not a contemporary issue in today's psychological or pedagogical education for prospective teachers. So I was confronted with the task of finding out on my own how I could give young people an idea of what Gestalt theoretical basics are and which aspects could be relevant for their daily work in future. This year, I decided to try this within a seminar for students in the middle of their studies. The following contribution is a report on this work in progress and is based on empirical data of a course in summer 2012.

### **Gestalt Theoretical Input for Prospective Teachers**

The relevant Gestalt theoretical input for students who are prospective teachers can only be sketched here (more detailed in Soff, 2008b, cf. also Soff, Ruh et. al., 2004).

Of course, we have to start with some Gestalt theoretical and Field theoretical "basics"; that is to say by dealing with wholes and parts and "the whole is not equivalent to the sum of the parts", some of the ideas of Christian von Ehrenfels and especially Max Wertheimer, 100 years ago. Gestalt theory is characterized as a general psychological theory of systems and organization (esp. self-organization) (see Metzger, 1975a, 1f). The role of Gestalt laws and of "Prägnanztendenz" (the tendency of establishing "good order" under the given circumstances, tendency

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<sup>1</sup> Contribution to the 1<sup>st</sup> GTA-Symposium in Helsinki, Finland, also celebrating 100 Years of Gestalt Psychology, September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2012

of excellent conciseness) in apperception as well as in other fields of psychological functioning including the field of interpersonal and social situations are shown in some examples. Also, a definition of “Gestalt” is given, as well as a definition of “field” in the sense of Lewin, including vectors as dynamic forces structuring the psychological situations, and the famous “formula”  $V=f(P,U)$  ( $B=f(P,E)$ )- (“behaviour is always a function of person and environment”, wherein “and” does not mean “plus” but “permanent in interaction with”) (Lewin 1946, 375). The epistemological ideas of “critical realism” are of special importance for workers in pedagogical as well as in psychotherapeutic fields, because a lot of conclusions for the daily work in classrooms, for teaching as well as for all sorts of “classroom management”-actions can be drawn and should be discussed. The difference between the physical world (transphenomenal world) and the phenomenal world is to be stressed, and that the individually perceived world (phenomenal world) has its own dignity and relevance (see Tholey & Utecht 1989, Soff, Ruh & Zabransky 2004).

We also have to talk about the phenomenological orientation of gestalt theoretical scientists and operators. It means starting researches and also reflections on everyday social action with the phenomena of the involved persons, including the necessity to try to perceive the world with the child’s eye resp. the adolescent’s eye. This also in Lewin’s sense, who stated that objectivity in psychology requires description of the individually personal field exactly as it exists for the individual at that point in time (see Lewin, 1946, 377).

Most important for prospective teachers is the acquaintance with Gestalt theoretical anthropology and the conclusions for the field of education: Partly in contrast to other psychologically based anthropologies, here

1. Human beings are seen as “open systems” and “dynamic systems” and therefore as active inter-actors with and within their surroundings from the beginning of life, seeking balance/equilibrium as well as new experiences (see Metzger, 1976<sup>3</sup>, 33ff). The conclusion is the optimistic and encouraging presumption of voluntarily learning in order to improve one’s possibility to interact with the world, if not disturbed or destroyed by too much or too little or desperately wrong social or material experiences.

2. Human beings are seen as social beings from the beginning, affiliated with and in need of others and of social intercourse and therefore also seeking balance and voluntarily learning social rules applied and effective in the group one belongs to or wants to belong to. Concerning school, we have to stress the openness of children and adolescents to the power of group atmospheres and group dynamics and leadership as pointed out by Lewin, Lippitt and White (see Lewin, 1938, Lewin & Lippitt, 1938, Lippitt & White, 1947).

The vision of education in the sense of Metzger and Lewin is the characterization of learning as a mainly active, constructive and (not always, but often enough!)

intrinsically motivated process, using one's own power to think and solve problems instead of just "being trained", "being conditioned", "being manipulated". Without denying that these ways are also in the range of human learning, Gestalt psychologists stressed those active, productive, creative aspects of learning and thinking from the very beginning (Köhler, 1917, Wertheimer, 1945).

Consequently we should also develop ideas about what teachers can do to stimulate and support creative processes and productive thinking in their students (and about what will be useless!). A rich empirical source for this is the motivational factors as investigated by Lewin and his Berlin doctor-fellows. As a basic lecture I propose Lewin's field theoretical characterization of "the psychological situation (of the child) with reward and punishment" (1931). Further topics relevant for school can be the role of aspiration level (Hoppe 1931) and achievement motivation, optionally also the tendency to remember interrupted work (Zeigarnik 1927), the tendency of resumption of interrupted work (Ovsiankina 1928), the role of psychological repletion (Sättigung) and tendency of disintegration ("Gestaltzerfall") (Karsten 1928) as well as trouble understood as a dynamic problem (Dembo 1931). Indispensable for teachers is the knowledge about motivational factors based on social climate factors such as group atmospheres, group leading and group dynamics as investigated by Lewin, Lippitt & White (1938ff) (autocratic vs. democratic vs. laissez-faire style of leadership). With regard to the teacher's task of classroom management, also the further development and integration of individual psychological ideas following Alfred Adler (see Dreikurs, Grunwald & Pepper 2007) on the "democratic classroom" are useful.

Wolfgang Metzger's writings and examinations of Alfred Adler's ideas during the 1950s up to 1970s brought forward a lot of further proposals for educational situations in families and schools, such as the role of courage and encouragement, the avoidance of putting children to shame and the avoidance of breaking a child's social affiliation (see Metzger, 1976<sup>3</sup>, Soff & Ruh, 1999). Consequent Gestalt theoretical as well as individual psychological thinking is the critical questioning of irrelevant/improper ("sachfremd") punishment and also critical questioning of rewards as means of education. This is an accentuated contrast to the suggestions of widely spread educational trainings based on neo-behavioural or cognitive-behavioural ideas.

Last but not least, we have to deal with Metzger's "characteristics of working at the living" (1962) as characteristics of creative processes, especially of working with human beings, here in as much as possible "free" and at the same time "well structured" learning situations, where dynamics of self-organizational forces will lead to success<sup>2</sup>:

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<sup>2</sup> I use Stemberger's (2008) translation and also his convincing sequence (see also Stemberger 2011) in quoting Metzger's characteristics of working at the living, developed in his oeuvre "Schöpferische Freiheit".

1. The mutuality of influence in the relationship between teachers and pupils / teachers and parents
2. Shaping the process by using the forces inherent within the learning individual
3. The non-exchangeability of forms (nothing against the “nature” of the individual will last...)
4. The non-exchangeability of working times
5. The non-exchangeability of work speed and
6. Accepting detours in the process of learning and insight.

To summarize some basic ideas on teaching and learning<sup>3</sup>: If we dare to view the pedagogical relationship as a place of creative freedom, teachers are encouraged to use their chance to create supportive circumstances for the *Prägnanztendenz* (“tendency of excellent conciseness”) in individual developments and educational processes. Education is thus seen as a self-organizational process based on - as much as possible - undisturbed personal relationships between learners and teachers, combined with a group atmosphere in the classroom that allows social affiliation (“*Zugehörigkeit*”) and equivalence (“*Gleichwertigkeit*”). Of course, it would also be necessary to speak about all kinds of perceived (that means: phenomenal!) disturbances in educational processes that can occur and normally occur in the classroom or within the individual learner (or teacher!) – but this is another topic, to be worked out with a lot of ideas developed not only by Metzger and Lewin, but for example by colleagues working in the field of Gestalt theoretical psychotherapy – I will come back to this issue in a later contribution.

### **A Seminar at the University of Education**

Being convinced and reassured about the quality and range of Gestalt theory and Field theory in the context of education, and trying to teach them to prospective teachers – naturally they are not the same. I will now sketch the circumstances and preconditions of a course last summer at the University of Education.

Participants of the seminar with the title “Gestalt Theory and Field Theory in the context of Education and Development”<sup>4</sup> were 35 students, all young women, between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> semester of their courses on becoming teachers for children between 6 and 10, or for children and adolescents between 11 and 16. The pre-information and basic knowledge was sampled during the first meeting; only a few had ever heard about the existence of Gestalt theory as a classical theoretical direction in academic psychology, in general there were no concepts at all. The students’ most usual motivation was to visit and participate in “just

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<sup>3</sup> See Soff 2008b.

<sup>4</sup> Wherein “education” in German has two meanings: “*Erziehung*” and “*Bildung*”.

one more psychology seminar” (they must visit one basic lecture in psychology and 3 or 4 seminars during their courses) and “get some ECTS-points” for “any presentation or homework”<sup>5</sup>.

Another quoted motive was to “visit a seminar of Dr. Soff”, because of the rumour of seminars with topics of practical relevance for teaching and school life, which were always oversubscribed courses; and this was a chance to get a place in a seminar without participant limitation.

Concerning further limitations, it is to be mentioned that not only the number of possible lessons was extremely small<sup>6</sup>, but also the preparation time for this special seminar concept was very short, so that I could fall back only upon my studies during the last years as I have outlined before, concentrating on Metzger’s and Lewin’s writings, only partly including articles of other authors that worked in the same field<sup>7</sup>, or adjacent and sometimes even more basic works<sup>8</sup>.

#### *Schedule and the Topics of the Seminar*

After some theoretical input (only 2 lessons), combined with hopefully instructive introductory literature<sup>9</sup> for home studies, formation of groups for working together on the same topics took place, and organizational and literature hints from the lecturer were given. We had some “consultation time” (working time, asking time, preparation time) for the groups within the seminar (another two lessons), and then the presentations of Gestalt theoretical literature on seven special topics concerning teaching, learning, school life and child development (see table 1), one in each lesson. Finally we had one lesson for feedback and end of the seminar.

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<sup>5</sup> ECTS: European Credit Transfer System. Since the participants started their studies at our University at different times (2, 4 or 6 semesters ago), there is another complication with different standards for the achievement of necessary points through new examination requirements which were established in between. There were students who just needed 2 points for “active participation”, others wanted to achieve a “seminar qualification” (3 points needed, when they started before 2011, 5 points, when they started in 2011). So the demanded performances should be differentiated... this is one of the circumstances in university education at the moment.

<sup>6</sup> Because of some statutory holidays on Thursdays in May and June and some appointments deriving from an extra function for the University.

<sup>7</sup> See for instance Guss (1976) /Seel (1997, 1999) /Herget (2008) / Arfelli Galli (2011) on pedagogics and didactics / Arfelli Galli (2010) on developmental psychology.

<sup>8</sup> See Wertheimer (1945, 1964), Köhler (1917, 1973), Duncker (1935) on thinking and problem solving, Koffka on developmental psychology (1925) and general psychology (2008).

<sup>9</sup> Metzger (1975a+b).

No.	Topic	quoting
1	Creativity and productive thinking at school	Köhler (1917), Wertheimer (1945), Metzger (1959, 1962, 1976 <sup>3</sup> ), Herget (2008), Soff (2001, 2011b)
2	Motivation in the field of education	Lewin (1928), Karsten (1928), Hoppe (1931); Metzger (1976 <sup>3</sup> ) quoting Adler (1973) and Dreikurs (1973)
3	Field theoretical hints for classroom-management	Lewin, Lippitt & White: Lewin (1938), Lewin & Lippitt (1938); Lippitt & White (1947)
4	Diversity and social inclusion in the classroom	Metzger (1976 <sup>2</sup> ), Lewin on minority problems and hints for Jewish parents (Lewin 1940, 1944)
5	Developmental Psychology based on Lewin's writings	Lewin (1927, 1929, 1946)
6	A special developmental topic: "rebelliousness and the rebellious age" (Trotz and Trotzalter)	Metzger (1967), Kemmler (1957)
7	Self care for teachers preventing "burnout syndrome" under Gestalt psychological psychotherapists' perspective	Soff (2003, 2011a), Stemberger (2011), Kästl (2011)

**Table 1:** Presentations – 7 Special Topics Based on Gestalt Theoretical Literature.

*What Happened in the Seminar? – Phenomenological Remarks*

From the beginning, there was a lack of time for the program, and Metzger's "non-exchangeability of work speed" seemed obvious. In spite of this, the students were interested in the Gestalt Theoretical basics. But the first homework for all students, to read Metzger's essays "Was ist Gestalttheorie?" and "Gibt es eine gestalttheoretische Erziehung?" as "introduction literature" obviously was frustrating. Not all of the participants read it, and the active readers found it hard to understand. So I helped with an additional PowerPoint Presentation concentrating on the second of Metzger's essays, in order to stress the anthropological assumptions.

The formation of groups for working on one of the special topics included all participants of the seminar<sup>10</sup>, but obviously not all of the participants were enthusiastic workers on their chosen topic. The process of joint work in the "small" groups (3 to 7 persons) was more or less constructive, partly depending on the participation of 1 or 2 in the group who wanted to achieve a further "seminar qualification" (these participants had the extra task to write an essay on the topic of their group with a special focus on what was their personally worked out part of literature).

<sup>10</sup> Because of the necessity to work for their "active participation"-achievement points.

During the group formation and literature research process, I was astonished and impressed by the easiness of the use of technical media (“like a duck takes to water”) to find the literature in the academic library while sitting in the seminar and talking to others in their working teams (use of mobiles, smartphones). Obviously this is something I can learn from my students, which would be a small example of Metzger’s “mutuality of influence”. On the other hand, if a book or article could not be found easily (or Soff had it to hand...), there was a tendency to omit the text and contents.

But at least all of the working groups/teams managed to present a common lecture including a presentation, based on original Gestalt theoretical texts on their chosen topic for the other participants, often combined with subsequent questions to the audience, often leading to committed and lively discussions in the whole group. None of the groups missed the date for their presentation. According to my knowledge, not all of the presented contents were “correct” or met the tenor of the underlying Gestalt theoretical texts – yet during the discussion, we talked about probable misunderstandings or I made some additional remarks in order to focus on a special aspect of the Gestalt theoretical point of view.

The essays that reached me during the weeks after the seminar’s end had all sorts of different levels... at least one or two of these writings were good enough to be presented at the upcoming 18<sup>th</sup> GTA-conference in 2013.

In spite of the lack of time which forced the participants to skip from one topic to another without the possibility to bring the problems “up to a round figure”, most of the time the atmosphere in the seminar seemed to be serene and unperturbed.

#### *What Happened in the Seminar? - Students’ Feedbacks*

In the last lesson, I begged the students to **evaluate the seminar** in order to get their ideas: what was a new content for them, what was the most important theoretical insight, how they experienced the seminar atmosphere, and (very important) what suggestions they had for improving a seminar in this field. I did not give categories for the answers but begged for their own verbalizations. Altogether I got 25 written evaluations, not all participants were present and not all evaluators answered each question. Multiple answers were possible. In the following, I will summarize some trends:

#### **1<sup>st</sup> Question: What was new content for you?**

- What is Gestalt theory /Field theory? What does it mean for teachers? (5 x)
- Several aspects of developmental psychology (rebelliousness) (4 x)
- That self care for teachers is important to stay healthy (4 x)

- That psychology in general is important for teachers / that there are several possibilities to help teachers in everyday life (2 x)
- Gestalt theory (and Field theory) influence many parts of psychology (2 x)
- Critical realism – important for teachers to see the world with child’s eye! (2 x)
- Several styles of thinking /productive thinking at school (2 x)
- Motivation, facilitation of motivation (2 x)
- Several possibilities of leading a group
- “I learned that it is important to see my future learners as a whole and not to judge on the base of a single impression”

**2<sup>nd</sup> Question: What was your most important theoretical insight?**

- “The whole is not the sum of the parts”(6 x)<sup>11</sup>
- Critical realism<sup>12</sup> (5 x)
- Prägnanztendenz, as a tendency of functioning in each human being and also in groups / as a basic aspect / Gestalt theoretical anthropology (4 x)
- How to deal with stress situations, anger situations in school, “rebelliousness” behaviour of children, prejudices of children (4 x)
- Gestalt theory and field theory in general as a theoretical background (3 x)<sup>13</sup>
- Democratic group leading, influence of educators (2x)<sup>14</sup>

**3<sup>rd</sup> Question: How did you experience the seminar atmosphere?**

- (Very) good, (very) agreeable learning climate: 16 x
- open / frank discussions / everyone could participate / ask questions: 6 x
- target-oriented / concentrated / disciplined: 4 x
- relaxed / stress-relieved atmosphere: 3 x
- well-prepared presentations / highly motivated speakers: 3 x

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<sup>11</sup> The following words were used: The whole is something else as the sum of parts – Wertheimer/ That the human being is always part of a whole /That the child and the class must always be seen as a whole and not as a sum of elements – therefore no judgements on a single behaviour or situation but seen in context.

<sup>12</sup> Students’ words: important for teachers to know that the child has not the same apperceptions / the difference between phenomenal world and transphenomenal world and that every individual has its own apperception of the world).

<sup>13</sup> Students’ words: I became an approximate outline on the topic and understood that it has influence on a variety of school topics / has explanations and solutions on a variety of school topics).

<sup>14</sup> Students’ words: The influence one has as an educator on the child and the confirmation of the idea one has to be cautious with reward and punishment/ democratic leading and encouragement is important.

- it could have been more productive / group puzzle method instead of plenary presentations: 2 x
- relationship between participants and lecturer-participants was positive: 1 x
- “For me, the congruence between Gestalt theoretical ideas of human beings and behaviour of the seminar leader was obvious and therefore at the same time practised in the seminar”

**4<sup>th</sup> Question: What suggestions do you have for improving a seminar in this field?**

- More basic information at the beginning / More input-lectures from the expert lecturer: 7 x
- More Handouts / information material on the presentations – more / better / earlier: 6 x
- More ensurement /confirmation of the results, esp. of the students’ presentations / more time for discussion and reflection after the presentations / more integration of the presentations in the whole of the seminar / more examples from practical experience: 6 x
- Fewer student presentations<sup>15</sup>: 5 x
- A better organizational structure, overview from the beginning: 3 x

**Conclusions: Some Hints for Further Courses**

Gestalt Theory and Field Theory as theoretical frames for teaching and other processes concerning school are obviously interesting for young students. It could be shown that Gestalt Theory and Field theory appear to be connected to a lot of contemporary discourses in the field of educational psychology. Because of this, and since it is useful to train the competence of understanding classical texts, I will go on.

As the answers to the 4<sup>th</sup> question show, there are a lot of ideas for improvement, but this also shows that the students were interested and – perhaps also because of the positive atmosphere – encouraged to tell their wishes and critical remarks. Despite the comprehensible wish of more lecturer input and support, I will maintain the general idea of active learning, self-reading, interactive teaching (see also Arfelli-Galli, 2011), but start with more time for questions and reassurance. Another idea could be to give more detailed information on the historical background and work out the contrasts between other theoretical positions and gestalt theory at the beginning of a seminar in order to give more orientation to beginners, if there is more time in one of the next courses. It has to be tested

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<sup>15</sup> Students’ words: I cannot learn enough from the presentations of others/ I learned much more on my own topic.

whether this way leads to more or better understanding of the main ideas or to better transfer.

### Summary

This paper deals with the question of how Gestalt theoretical and Field theoretical basics currently can be taught to prospective teachers during their studies at the University of Education. After a general sketch of the most important ideas deriving from the works of Metzger and Lewin that are useful for school, the circumstances, schedule and topics of one seminar are described, combined with observations and students' evaluation of the seminar.

**Keywords:** Gestalt theory, field theory, motivation, learning, teaching, classroom-management, social climate, social relations at school.

### Zusammenfassung

In diesem Beitrag geht es um die Frage, wie gestalttheoretische und feldtheoretische Ideen und Grundkenntnisse an künftige Lehrerinnen und Lehrer vermittelt werden können. Nach einer kurzen Zusammenfassung der im Hinblick auf das künftige Arbeitsfeld in der Schule als grundsätzlich notwendig und sinnvoll erachteten thematischen Bereiche wird ein Seminar vorgestellt, das im Sommersemester 2012 unter dem Titel "Gestalttheorie und Feldtheorie im Kontext von Erziehung, Bildung und Entwicklung" an der Pädagogischen Hochschule Karlsruhe angeboten wurde. Die Darstellung der Randbedingungen des Seminars, der speziellen, in Arbeitsgruppen präsentierten, Themen und der Evaluation des Seminars durch die Studierenden geben einen Einblick in ein derzeit noch in Entwicklung befindliches Arbeitsgebiet.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Gestalttheorie, Feldtheorie, Motivation, Lernen, Unterricht, Klassenführung, Beziehungsgestaltung in der Schule.

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