

Why we would do well to remember Perls of wisdom

LES WALTON wonders if today's school leaders are missing out on valuable lessons in philosophy

POPPEYE the Sailor Man first appeared in 1929 and is in my top ten of cartoon characters. His favourite phrase was "I yam what I am. That's all I yam."

Michael Bassey Johnson the Nigerian metaphysical poet supports Poppeye's view that self respect is important. "If you truly want to be respected by people you love you must prove to them that you can survive without them."

When I started teaching in the 1960s our approach to education was very much influenced by the philosophers and psychologists who were prominent at the time.

Amongst the most influential thinkers were the Gestalt theorists, who had been around since the 1920s. Without doubt they struck a chord with the new 60s students. We were heavily involved in discussions about the need for individual liberty and working together to create a better world.

The most popular phrase associated with Gestalt theory is "the whole is greater than the sum of the parts".

For example, the whole (a picture of an aircraft) carries a different and together greater meaning than its individual components (paint, doors, windows, wheels).

However, quite often this phrase is wrongly used to suggest that the group is more important than the individual.

In 1969, in my third year of teaching, Fritz Perls, the noted German-born psychiatrist coined the term Gestalt Therapy and published the Gestalt Prayer. Notice he translates Poppeye's mantra to 'I am I'.

I do my thing and you do your thing.

I am not in this world to live up to our expectations.

And you are not in the world to live up to mine.

You are you, and I am I.

And if by chance we find each other, it's beautiful.

If not, it can't be helped.

Fritz Perls "Gestalt Therapy Verbatim" (1969)

This "prayer" clearly reinforces the importance of individualism within the group. It also formed the basis of learning by discovery. This struck a chord with young teachers like me who were particularly attracted by the concepts of individualism within community.

Of course over the years many new influences and new ways of thinking



➤ Les Walton, chairman of the Northern Education Trust: "Learning is the discovery that something is possible – not impossible"

influenced educators. However when I and my fellow old gaddies are sitting in national conferences listening to debates about national strategies, national testing, national inspection and national curriculum, our minds often wander back to the days of individual freedom of expression (and peace and love!)

The thinking of 'Gestalt theorists' such as Perls still challenges our thinking today.

How do you develop leadership skills in young headteachers without giving them a chance to fail? Perls would comment: "Nobody can stand truth if it is told to him. Truth can be tolerated only if you discover it yourself because then, the pride of discovery makes the truth palatable."

How often is a school's judgement on itself dependent on the views of external inspectors or those who seek to judge from afar? Perls would question this. "Our dependency makes slaves out of us, especially if this dependency is a dependency of our self-esteem. If you need encouragement, praise, pats on the back from everybody, then you make everybody your judge."

Many years later Professor Tim Brighouse, a living legend in the world of education and a fellow oldie, reinforced this view by saying that organisations should judge themselves by their previous best, not by the best of the rest. "Let us not create schools which are copies of a national model. Let us not create teachers who simply teach by for-

mula and children who learn by numbers."

I leave you with the final word from Frederick Salmon Perls:

"A thousand plastic flowers don't make a desert bloom. A thousand empty faces don't fill an empty room". Learning is the discovery that something is possible – not impossible.

Fifty years later in October 2014 I attended a national education conference. The discussions throughout the day focused on structures, systems planning, marketing, financial management, network management and leadership.

Not one speaker described their own personal philosophies, values and beliefs. A very different atmosphere from the conferences in the 1960s!

All the discussion at the October conference was centred on a response to present and possible future government policy. Very rarely do we hear different views on the philosophy and psychological basis for developing education today.

When I first started writing this column I did warn my readers that I am essentially an old gaddie who fondly remembers the old days and does not want to forget the lessons learned in the past.

Of course, I also believe we are lifelong learners and therefore need to be ready to change our ways of thinking.

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