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# ALBERT HÖFER'S INTEGRATIVE GESTALT PEDAGOGY AS AN ANSWER TO THE CHALLENGES OF CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

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## Abstract

Integrative Gestalt pedagogy is an educational process which focuses primarily on the personal development of students and can be compared to 'constant peeling and reapplication of onion layers'. It is aimed at awakening learning impulses in students and responding to them. When applied to religious education, it uses Gestalt structure and principles, such as real-life situations, explicitness and concreteness, as well as methods which mobilize all their senses. In this way, it encourages students to realize their potentials 'here and now' while making them aware of God's salvific action in everyday life.

*Keywords:* religious, education, contemporary, Gestalt, teachers

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## 1. Introduction

Dr. Albert Höfer (born in 1932) is an Austrian Catholic priest, a regular professor and psychotherapist. As a young teacher in the 1970's he realized that traditional religious education failed to provide adequate answers to the needs and challenges of students [1]. The mere factual transmission of religious content and strict Church rules overlooked their integral psycho-physical development and prevented them from connecting religious knowledge with personal faith. To such religious education students reacted with increasing resistance, passiveness and disinterest ... [2]. Literally forced by their reactions, Höfer, the then director of the Graz Institute for Religious Pedagogy, abandoned traditional scholastic education and devoted himself to an intensive study of holistic methods of learning and teaching.

Encouraged by his positive experience with Gestalt therapy and pedagogy, Höfer gradually developed a Gestalt concept, which he complemented with biblical revelation and Church tradition. In the 1980's he devised a model of Gestalt learning and teaching, which became a basis for a successful reform of religious education and a holistic formation of pedagogues and catechists in Austria. His methodological approach, which transcended the existing models in

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religious and secular education, began to spread across Europe and was eventually registered as EU-Marke in 2005 (0037 517 57) [3].

## **2. Origins of integrative Gestalt pedagogy**

Origins of integrative Gestalt pedagogy date back to the 1960s when the pastoral application of kerygmatic theology influenced a renewal of religious education. Until then catechisms (as summaries of scholastic theology) focused more on the clarity of abstract concepts than on the living announcement of the Gospel message.

### **2.1. Influence of kerygmatic theology**

Höfer became acquainted with kerygmatic theology - and related youth, biblical and liturgical movement - in mid 1960s, as a student of Theology and Philosophy in Munich. There he attended a one-year oratory of Saint Philip Neri, led by Schreibmayr, Kahlfeld, Tilmann and Dessauer.

What struck Höfer most about kerygmatic theology was its 'return to the origins', emphasis on the Scriptures and the rediscovery of the apostolic kerygma, which was based on Jesus Christ and the proclamation of the good news of our salvation. This was perceived not as a collection of doctrines, commandments or rules, but as a living, organic and dynamic proclamation of truths, which were compared to the rays of a spiral or spikes of a wheel, emerging from and returning to its centre - Christ [4]. The explicit and integrative, yet highly differentiated concept of Pastoral theology taught by the oratorio leaders strongly influenced further catechetical and scientific work of Höfer who increasingly perceived Theology in connection with Gestalt, both in images, hymns, psalms or liturgy [5].

Kerygmatic theology opened Hofer's mind to the importance of the proclamation of the good news of salvation. With it, Christ offers us his love and invites us to respond to it through faith, conversion and sacraments, both in our personal life and in the mission of the Church. This salvation includes an anthropological dimension, addressing persons at their existential level and actively involving them in God's salvific plan. Hence, Höfer's Gestalt pedagogy from the outset focused on a personal 'contact' with Christ who is experienced as a 'living Gestalt'. Nevertheless, Höfer's pedagogical model is not only Christocentric, but also pedocentric. It combines both religious and human dimensions, since God united the divine and human nature in the person of Jesus. "If I put Christ in the centre of salvation, I cannot separate him from those whom he saves. If I speak of Him as a teacher, I know that he is a teacher only when surrounded by his disciples - both then and today. If I put into the centre Jesus as a prophet sent by God, I must also include those for whom this religious experience is intended. And if I acknowledge Him as the Son of God, this presupposes the admission that he came down from heaven for us humans and our salvation." [6] Höfer wanted to open students to Jesus' embrace by mobilising all

their powers and awakening their “transcendental mental capacities” by means of trust, creativity, personal engagement and sincere relationship [1, p. 19].

In kerygmatic theology Höfer found the first elements of the experiential dimension of salvation, which involves the whole human being with all their senses. Having discovered, through Guardini, that natural experience opens humans for religious experience, Höfer began an intense search for a manner of religious cognition which would include “the uniqueness of sensual perception, spiritual insight and religious excitement” [5, p. 20].

## **2.2. Influence of existentialism**

In the 1970s Höfer attended lectures by Rahner, Buber and Marcell, and personally met Guardini and Goldbrunner. Influenced by their philosophes he put a personal relationship at the forefront of his pedagogical model. According to Guardini, a personal relationship is not a mere quantitative sum of “me” and “you”, but a “reciprocity” which makes this dialogue unique and invaluable [7].

This dialogic relationship - which according to Höfer also presupposes our relationship with the Transcendent [8] - strongly influenced his understanding of relationships in religious life. He began to emphasize the exercise of human responsibility and freedom, understood as a conscious choice between given possibilities and the creation of new ones. Humans are obliged to actively assume responsibility for their conscious and unconscious behaviour and perception, in relation to themselves, their fellow humans, the world and God. As a result, every learning process is both existential and personal, carrying within itself social dimensions [9].

## **2.3. Influence of Gestalt theory**

Höfer was particularly interested in Gestalt analysis and the symbols theory by the renowned psychologist Weinhandle, which were based on Goethe's Gestalt theory and Kant's distinction between ‘aesthetic and rational’ ideas. Höfer was impressed by how the Gestalt analytical methods made metaphysical content more accessible to humans through the use of symbols. He began to perceive religious symbols as mediators of the transcendent. “He realized that religious and metaphysical symbols are essentially the same, the only difference being in what they symbolize. Here we have the roots of Höfer's method of symbolizing as an adoption of catechetical Gestalts.” [5, p. 20]

From the Gestalt theory Höfer transferred to his pedagogical model basic principles, which he summarized in three points:

1. Every creature has its own Gestalt, i.e. ordered uniformity which represents the whole of a certain reality. Thus plants, animals and humans are all Gestalts of their species.
2. The Gestalt theory perceives Gestalts integrally and not partially in terms of points or stimuli.

3. Each Gestalt has its own content, which in time reveals its increasing richness and fullness, while remaining perceptible within a distributed whole as a wealth or a simplicity in wealth [1, p. 14].

In designing curriculum and catechism books for individual grades, Höfer faithfully followed the Gestalt structure and principles of explicitness, real-life situations and concreteness. These concepts form organic units and are evident both in the whole and in its individual parts. Each unit – educational goal, lesson, chapter or church holiday - follows a basic and unaltered structure and is a part of the larger whole. Every part is open to the whole and should reflect the whole as Christ's mystery or the "divine-human" principle; the encounter of divine and human should determine the link between life and activity; it should be named as a theme which emerges from and is linked to both sides - of God or man [1, p. 70].

#### ***2.4. Influence of Gestalt therapy and Gestalt pedagogy***

Höfer's catechetical work was strongly influenced by his research in the fields of Gestalt therapy, pastoral therapy and Gestalt pedagogy at the Fritz Perls Institute and the Institute for Pastoral Theology at the University of Graz [10]. Because of his own Gestalt therapeutic experience, he began to view religious education as an integral process which determines how students perceive themselves, their environment and their experience. Following the example of Gestalt pedagogy, he put in the forefront of religious education the development of students' personality and personal competences [11]. His students were not offered abstract religious content but concrete content in the form of Gestalts, symbols and roles, which addressed them integrally and allowed them to reflect on their biographical experience. With this approach Höfer moved from deductive to inductive religious education, which encourages "good Gestalts" in students "here and now", while sensitising them for experiencing salvation in their life [12].

### **3. Responses to integrative Gestalt pedagogy**

In the German-speaking parts of Europe, Höfer's Gestalt pedagogical approach received a great deal of attention ranging from admiration to sharp criticism. Between the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, a series of both favourable and contrary articles were published in the *Katechetische Blätter*, a religious journal for religious education. Some (traditional) currents in the Church criticised Höfer's pedagogical approach for the lack of scientific theoretical foundation, inadequate terminology, inappropriate didactic methods, excessive pedocentricity, psychologizing of religion, etherealism, etc. [9, 13, 14]. In spite of this, Höfer continued developing his pedagogical model and implementing it in accordance with the guidelines of the Vatican II.

In the 1970s, the entire education system, including the religious, was faced with new challenges of modern society. Existentialist and experiential approaches emerged advocating a genuine, holistic and active personal engagement of learners in the learning process [15]. Religious education saw an increasing prominence of a pedocentric model of teaching, which focused not on dogmas and Scripture, but on comprehensive, problem-oriented lessons seeking to convey religious content through learners' real life situations and by strengthening their personal faith [16-18].

These trends of holistic education correspond precisely to Integrative Gestalt pedagogy, which Höfer, despite his extensive literary output, never systematically defined. Because of this, it became the subject of extensive scientific research in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Since then numerous articles, diploma theses and doctoral dissertations have been published, which deal systematically with the Gestalt pedagogical approach, its separation from other experiential and existentialist approaches and its placement within religious pedagogy [2; 19-22].

#### **4. Integrative Gestalt pedagogy and contemporary Christian education**

In transmitting religious and humanistic contents to learners, IGP focuses on their current issues and challenges. Its diverse Gestalt pedagogical approaches allow learners to independently search for answers to their questions, thereby opening new avenues of learning and teaching in the field of holistic religious education.

##### ***4.1. Learning and teaching process as 'the peeling and reapplying of onion layers'***

Höfer's IGP compares the process of learning and teaching to "a continuous peeling and reapplying of an onion" which has six layers [23]. With this image he wanted to illustrate the "interconnection and intertwining of individual layers (with their juices and life processes) between student and teacher. The more each layer is permeable to organic processes, the more the whole body is alive" [24] and docile for learning and teaching.

##### ***4.1.1. The first layer - learning content***

Learning content represents the first layer or a core in the centre of the onion. "When I enter the class as a teacher, I bring with me something (learning content) with which I wish to improve my students' knowledge or behaviour... enrich their lives and make them fertile." [24, p. 26] According to critics, such an approach 'neglects' objective transmission of teaching content and overemphasizes learners' self-realization, which may lead to selfish pursuit of their goals [25]. According to Albert Höfer, IGP strikes the right balance in the process of learning and teaching. This so-called "personality-based learning" [26],

which emerges from learners, only becomes meaningful in the contact with them. However, since it is modelled on biblical anthropology, which presupposes interpersonal relationships, there is no danger of engaging in one-sided individualism that overlooks the processes of socialization and enculturation.

#### *4.1.2. The second layer - spirituality and attentiveness*

The second layer represents spirituality and attentiveness, i.e. pure spiritual openness to learning content. Höfer was aware that, in the learning process, this layer was often overshadowed by students' fatigue, ignorance, disinterest and various forms of deviant behaviour. Whatever was happening at this level of awareness derived to a large extent from the unconscious - from where patterns and learning disorders as well as great creative impulses emerged [24].

All teachers who bring new learning content to their students expect a degree of attention from them. However, only a few ask themselves, how much knowledge are students, often overloaded by heavy school schedule, capable of assimilating, and whether they find that content relevant. The openness of students' minds very much depends on these two factors. Hence, it is important for teachers to be responsive to the current state of their learners so that they come up 'here and now' with educational content which will stimulate their motivation, personal commitment and responsibility in the learning process. With this approach, a teacher assumes the role of a companion, counsellor, confidant, mentor and motivator. Through an intersubjective relationship, the teacher accepts the learner in their entirety: not only academically but also in their other social roles (e.g. son, sister, classmate...). These roles are felt in the classroom through emotions, thinking and acting, and therefore need to be taken into account [27].

#### *4.1.3. The third layer - body and emotions*

At the third layer, which contains feelings, emotions, physical needs and anxieties, teachers interact with students' emotions, moods as well as physical vitality, which can be expressed all its strength or vulnerability [24, p. 29]. For Höfer, emotions express the perception of one's own body and, last but not the least, oneself. He also realised that it is the emotional component in students that determines which learning content will be kept and which rejected or cast into oblivion. For this reason, in religious education Höfer advocates holistic approaches which involve emotional, cognitive and operational levels. Within a learning process he gives students plenty of room for experience to make them aware of their emotions (What do I feel? How do I experience it? What do I want? ...). He gradually prepares them for learning content by simultaneously opening all their senses.

Höfer notes that teachers who are overburdened often ignore students' emotions, as well as their own, convinced that this is an objective and professional approach. By doing so they are forgetting that integral learning and teaching require the acceptance of one's emotions and their integration into the

learning process [24, p. 29]. Only teachers who consider their own emotions will be able to accept students as unique beings with their specific history and destiny. They will accept students' emotions, which are sensors of their personal world and experience. In this way teachers will primarily focus on the students and only secondarily on the learning subject. Emotions are not something interior but can be perceived and influenced through the body. In this way each lesson becomes a kind of 'physical exercise'. If not, the bodies of students become a disturbance. "Holistic pedagogy is an emotionally charged pedagogy of the body." [24, p. 30] For this reason, Höfer includes various physical exercises in religious education, such as relaxation, meditative dance and praying with the whole body ...

#### *4.1.4. The fourth layer - social environment*

The fourth layer of onion represents social environment, which Höfer defines with Gestalt psychology terms "figure", "background" and "field". In the process of perception, individuals within a "field" (the centre of attention) perceive "figures" (objects, persons, needs etc.) originating from a "background" and defining them [28]. In the pedagogical process, student is a "figure" standing out from the 'background' and showing their Gestalt, which possesses the natural need for self-realization and the tendency to meaningfully complement everything that is perceived as incomplete or incomplete, i.e. an incomplete Gestalt [23, p. 20].

In understanding the character and behavioural traits of students, the integrative Gestalt pedagogy always considers their background which is chronologically conditioned. A student is never treated in isolation. He/she is always set in an environment, which is conditioned by particular group dynamics, social norms and values, as well as the competition of individuals or groups for a particular place or position. "Social environment plays a decisive role in everything I feel and experience. As figures on a background, students are not only marked, or will be, by their classroom, but also by their family, circle of friends, faith, world-view or religious group." [24, p. 30]

Today's social environment puts children in front of many challenges that had been faced also by past generations (such as physical and mental changes, seeking independence and identity, testing personal morals and traditional religious values). Our children grow up in a world of globalization and rapid change. "Unlike the first period of modernism, which was characterized by strength, stability and clear systems, the present period is 'liquid', i.e. consumerist, fleeting, light, unsteady and without gravity." [29] In addition, there is a modern digital technology that encroaches on all pores of human life. It gives us access to knowledge, information and constant connection with friends, regardless of space and time constraints.

Despite digital connectivity many children and teenagers face increasing loneliness, emotional frost and social homelessness [30]. Children and adolescents, who in the past grew up socialising with their peers, today spend most of their time with various gadgets, especially smartphones. Many resort to

inner isolation, spending hours and hours in front of screens and viewing harmful programmes that propagate violence, unbridled sexuality, materialism, individualism. According to UNESCO's statistics, an average twelve-year-old child has seen and experienced as many as 14,000 murders. There are more and more cases of adolescents announcing their suicide on online social networks. "These are no longer isolated SOS calls, but desperate cries for help of entire generations yearning for personal closeness more than virtual communication." [31]

Many such children, who originate from broken families, have been emotionally neglected by their parents and exposed to various forms of abuse. Not having experienced enough security and love, they have built around themselves an 'emotional shield' to defend them from disappointments, rejection and pain. Many feel betrayed (even from the closest relatives) and therefore resort to a seemingly undemanding virtual world and relationships, so as to suppress their sense of isolation, boredom, stress and loneliness.

Integrative Gestalt pedagogy is aware that children and adolescents cannot leave their anxieties and problems in front of the school door but bring them into the classroom. They respond to peers, teachers and learning content with behavioural patterns which have been shaped by their living experience and environment. If at home they had not received positive and appropriate incentives - both emotional and verbal - they are more likely to resist the school environment which presupposes the fulfilment of certain requirements (behavioural patterns) [32]. In view of this, integrative Gestalt pedagogy assists learners to find answers to their anxieties and problems, while drawing their attention to their day to day experiences through various holistic Gestalt pedagogical and therapeutic methods, such as identification, guided imaginative travel, dramatization, role-playing, visual expression, team interaction and project work. This continuous process of learning and teaching enables learners to establish an in-depth relationship with learning content and address it at existential level. Through this approach, integrative Gestalt pedagogy develops their cognitive and emotional dimensions which reflect at interpersonal and intrapersonal levels.

Teacher's personal life story is also part of the student's social environment. The teacher's and student's backgrounds are like onion layers which interact simultaneously. One of the rules of holistic learning says: whatever I do to myself, I also do to you, which means: "Those layers in me, that are alive and communicate and empower each other, I can also perceive in my students. I can address, develop and positively influence them. But whatever I exclude or reject in myself, I will also not recognize or take seriously in my students." [24] Höfer compares this law with the resonance law. For example, a sound wave produced by a violin's body (teacher) resonates in harmony with another resonant body (student). This sound wave, emanating from the teacher and penetrating various layers of the student, presupposes the teacher's continuous self-work and keeps him/her in the state of resonance [23]. If the teacher 'stiffens', he inhibits the whole learning process, but if he is capable of introspection and permanent

preservation of all layers, he accelerates the learning process and becomes a link in this social chain [24].

#### 4.1.5. The fifth layer - the unconscious

In defining the unconscious, Höfer relies on the findings of in-depth psychology and neurology. He locates the unconscious to the brain stem area which regulates basic human needs and instincts, such as survival, nutrition, safety, belonging, sexuality, self-preservation, escape and combat. "These instincts are the first to be deprived to our will and knowledge, as they are revealed in archetypal behaviour as well as in dreams, likes and dislikes, and psychological reactions." [24, p. 31]

For Höfer, the learning process does not only occur at the upper mental level, but also indirectly and directly penetrates its deeper levels. Therefore, dealing with learning content, which takes place at the beta level of brain activity, is complemented by the solving methods which work on alpha, theta and delta levels. These brainwave levels are open and responsive to messages at an intuitive level as well. For example, a student at the alpha level is mentally more sensitive and versatile (e.g. guided imaginative trips), whereas the theta level with its different mental and intellectual action opens the world of myths, symbols, archetypes... With their help, the student, before falling into deep sleep, starts or concludes thought processes which are connected to learning content and life challenges [33]. In seeking solutions, integrative Gestalt pedagogy is also open to the delta level, which is expressed in the mental activity of a deep sleep. At this stage, the student's consciousness is manifested in the form of a dream, which can only be perceived at the theta level, and often grasped and reflected on the alpha level. According to Höfer, the student can communicate with Transcendence also through dreams. In the Bible, dreams are the voices of angels through whom God spoke to many Old and New Testament figures. In their dreams, they often discovered the meaning of God's message for their lives (solutions to their problems) and were prepared to follow it [34].

#### 4.1.6. The sixth layer - existence and faith

The sixth and the last onion layer is related to existence and faith, which for Höfer constitute *conditio humana* [24, p. 31]. It is a "spiritual awareness" that is an integral part of living conditions and is reflected in two opposing poles: "finiteness and yearning for the infinite, mortality and the untouchable value of human dignity, time constraints and a tendency to freedom, the dependence on destiny and self-responsibility, self-fulfilment and the quest for the other..." [24, p. 31]. Höfer is aware that answers to these questions depend on whether students are religious or non-religious, and are closely related to their positive and negative life experiences [24]. Students' ability to believe "derives from these natural experiences, which may sound unusual to theologians. Clearly, also here grace presupposes nature. All efforts to teach religion, which do not emerge from these

foundations, are doomed in advance.” [34, p. 20] For this reason, in the centre of religious education is a student and their experiential history which does not only define their emotional and intellectual development, but also sets the foundation for their religious dimension. According to Höfer, God speaks to the student first on their existential (subjective) level and, in Jesus, accompanies him/her on the path of personal growth. In this way students not only absorb but themselves become “learning content” [6, p. 13].

Therefore, integrative gestalt pedagogy primarily focuses on the student’s personal experiences, needs and challenges, which, according to the Gestalt theory, strive for ‘good Gestalt’ and its realization. “The more intense this perception and the experience of oneself is, the better prepared is the space for experiencing Transcendence. The leap that, through the discovery of oneself, leads to transcendental and religious experience, is a transfer, transmission.” [34, p. 61] If a student “begins to interpret his everyday experience in the awareness of God’s presence (or at least the possibility that God exists ...) this can lead to a religious experience” [35].

In raising the awareness of students’ experience, Höfer relied on Christian values, culture and, in particular, the biblical tradition. He realised that the Bible offers a wide range of stories that are typically human, as they include happiness and misfortune, joy and sadness, courage and fear, the sense of hopelessness and salvation ... Through deep psychological exegesis and various creative approaches (such as biblical drama, writing of personal psalms, story-telling...), students can identify with biblical figures, who not only act as their role models but also transmit to them their perception and experience of God [36]. Through biblical stories and personal reflection, students can become more receptive for the traces of God’s action in their own lives and the acceptance of their own history in the light of the “final Meaning” [37, p. 40-45]. It is important to emphasize that Höfer is open to religious diversity, which enriches students, strengthens their tolerance and promotes ecumenical attitude [2, p. 195].

## **5. Höfer’s Gestalt-oriented concepts of adult education**

In integrative Gestalt pedagogy, the teacher’s primary role is not only to ‘teach’ but to sensibly accompany students and provide conditions for the realization of their potentials. Teachers can only fulfil this challenging task if they are able to observe their own external and internal perceptions (awareness) and use them as a feedback of the atmosphere within the learning situation. So as to acquire these competences, Höfer began to develop Gestalt pedagogical courses. In 2003, together with his colleagues, this was organised into four training modules: A (Gestalt pedagogue), B (Gestalt advisor and pastoral counsellor), C (Gestalt trainer) and D (Gestalt supervisor) [38].

Being aware of a close link between the teacher’s personal structure and their performance in the classroom [1, p. 79], Höfer based Module A on the deepening of the teacher’s personal competences. Through the Gestalt therapeutic approaches this would allow them to mobilize their own resources and

undiscovered potentials in solving their problems. Within the module, the teacher's personal and professional growth is closely intertwined with the biblical image of man and the biblical spirituality. By correlating biblical themes with psychological and therapeutic work, teachers also strengthen their religious competences which, through personal religious experience and their self-reflection, lead to mature beliefs. In this they acquire practical knowledge by using the Gestalt methods which they must first test on themselves. They share their student's experience by "sneaking into their role. In this way they become acquainted with their learning possibilities and difficulties and can teach them from within." [39]

Based on many years of experience, Höfer realized that teachers working in schools which are 'deficient' (due to students' behavioural issues and insufficient hours for teaching) encounter students coming mostly from 'deficient' families (separated or single parents...). Such students need teachers who will give them not only quality education, but also accept and understand them, provide them with meaningful and reliable orientation frameworks and competently follow them in conflict situations. "While (religious) education cannot be therapeutic, (religious) pedagogy certainly can." [40] Therefore, Höfer proposes teachers B Module which qualifies them for counselling work with individuals or groups in schools or parishes. In doing so, participants acquire methods and expertise which help them to tackle and solve students' problems. This work focuses on the students' academic and social performance as well as giving them the possibility to enter a personal relationship with God [41].

Höfer's successful implementation of the A Module saw an increasing international demand for his educational methods. In view of this he entrusted his educational training to Gestalt trainers who were committed to the biblical view of man and able to connect pedagogy, counselling and self-knowledge with Christian spirituality [39]. Participants who train for Gestalt trainers (C Module) learn and deepen their professional competences for the management and preparation of Gestalt pedagogical training courses and other activities. By being trained, under supervision, for a therapeutic and reflective work with different groups in the social and pedagogical fields, they provide emergency assistance in critical situations, and strengthen their personal and professional competences.

The final D Module (Gestalt Supervisor) contributes to the professionalism of Höfer's integrative Gestalt pedagogy and guarantees for a quality pedagogical work with children and adults. Participants are expected to have successfully completed Modules A, B and C, acquired basic knowledge and skills, and carried out supervision at one of the societies/institutes within the European umbrella organization *Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Vereine für Integrative Gestaltpädagogik und Seelsorge (ARGE-IGS)*. Within the D Module, participants widen their professional, personal, counseling and social competences based on learning and designing of the Gestalt pedagogical techniques for the practical implementation of supervision and supervisory approach. The module also allows them to actively include a religious dimension in their work, thus further deepening their supervisory competence [IGB-Bayern, *Integrative Gestaltpädagogik und heilende*

*Seelsorge. Curriculum in Bausteinen für die berufsbegleitende Weiterbildung*, 2009, 7, [www.igb-bayern.de/index.php/gestaltpaedagogik-/curriculum.html](http://www.igb-bayern.de/index.php/gestaltpaedagogik-/curriculum.html)].

## 6. Conclusions

Integrative Gestalt pedagogy addresses learners at their personal level and allows them to establish an in-depth relationship with learning content. For this purpose, it uses pedocentric didactics which views learning as a holistic process, both cognitive and personal, focusing on learners' interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence. Hence it offers learners a 'personality-based' learning that encourages their self-activity, self-reflection, self-realization and personal growth. It adapts to their current situation and empowers them for dealing with real life challenges. In today's age of loneliness, emotional coldness and social homelessness it offers students effective Gestalt pedagogical and therapeutic approaches, which primarily foster their emotional and rational communication. At the same time, it enables them to reflect on their life in the light of faith. Although being based on Judeo-Greek and Christian traditions, it is open to ecumenical dialogue and religious issues that are relevant to contemporary teenagers who, in today's globalized world, are exposed to different religious beliefs, neutral morality, lack of meaning, nihilism and indifference [29]. It provides them with a critical reflection in the light of faith which is essential in adolescence. This critical attitude helps them in developing a deeper and more personal (experiential) faith. This, according to Höfer, is not perceived as a matter of duty or even bad conscience, but as a "treasure that will support them in life, even in situations where they had least expected it" [2, p. vii]. Similarly, Roubalova, Kralik and Zalec, develop personal faith in their paper [42].

An integrative Gestalt pedagogical approach calls for a change in the school system and a revision of the clichéd role-sharing between teacher and student. It fosters a relationship between learner and teacher (emphasising congruence, acceptance and empathy), which takes into account their concerns, visions, anxieties, (religious) experiences, etc. Teachers' task is to strike the right balance between a sympathetic attention and guidance. In this way, they will not overlook, predetermine or misjudge their learners, but will accompany them on their journey of personal growth, seeking for answers together with them.

Integrative Gestalt pedagogy therefore requires a high level of sensitivity and perception from teachers, which, according to some critics, may cause their burnout [M. Schärer, *Gestaltpädagogik*, 2019, <https://www.uibk.ac.at/theol/leseraum/texte/280.html#ch11>]. In view of this, the needs of teachers are addressed through various training modules. These provide them with new methods ('pedagogical fast-food') for the diversification of their teaching approach, as well as an integrated and experiential process of self-formation. By using various Gestalt pedagogical and therapeutic approaches, teachers can deal with their own vulnerability and helplessness, personal and professional challenges (such as burnout and stress), discovering their own resources for problem solving. By improving their personal, professional, social and religious

competences, they become more susceptible to educational and other needs of their learners.

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