



Scottish Youth Mentoring Children

Therapeutic Education: Growing2gether and Positive and Transpersonal Psychology

Growing2gether is underpinned by transpersonal psychology, which provides a holistic psychological approach focusing on enabling individuals to access more of their potential; on developing self-awareness and personal responsibility and on recognizing the importance of *meaning* as requirements for wellbeing and positive engagement with society. Combined, we find a congruent pedagogy with transpersonal psychology and positive psychology, a branch of mainstream psychology, which was founded 1998 by Seligman (Seligman 1998). Positive psychology has added scientific rigour and has become more established over the past decade. More recently, a systematic review of 36 papers concluded that interventions using Positive Psychology leads to reductions in anxio-depressive symptoms, as well as increases in wellbeing (Sitbon, Shankland, & Krumm, 2018).

Growing2gether focusses on bringing out the unique potential of young people, rather than seeing them as a 'problem', empowering them with life skills, a renewed sense of self belief and a deeper understanding of who they are.

Growing2gether is underpinned by the principles and practice of psychosynthesis, a transpersonal psychology. Youth work professionals are committed to a particular set of assumptions, which are not absolute, but nevertheless are useful as working hypotheses. A few commonly adopted contexts are:

- The young person is most essentially a Self, a Being who has a purpose in life and is on a path of unfoldment which includes challenges and obstacles of a psychological nature.
- Pathological processes, maladaptive behaviours are seen within this larger journey, and are perceived as learning opportunities for personal development to be worked through, rather than symptoms to be cured or behaviour to be controlled. Therefore, a young person's behaviour is seen to contain a creative possibility which can provide opportunities for transformation and growth.
- There is a deeper identity in each individual (the Self), which carries the capacity for self-knowledge and inner wisdom; much like an acorn knows how to become an oak tree.
- The transpersonal realm, which includes experience of the Self, awareness of values, meaning and purpose, higher feelings like altruism, creativity and the evocation of potential is a prerequisite for psychological health.
- The shadow (our darker side which contains unredeemed aspects) is integral to the human condition and needs to be integrated into our experience of mental health and well-being.
- The human relationship and interaction with young people are central to working with young people and requires an 'I/Thou relationship. (Martin Buber) Within this context interruptions to I/Thou relating provide important material to be addressed in the journey to healthy interpersonal and social relationships.

In psychosynthesis, there is no predetermined therapeutic model to be applied to all young people. We do hold a normative definition of a healthy and fully functioning adolescent. A high value is placed on inner freedom and upon the young person learning self-awareness and self-management. The educational task is to help the young person to enlarge their possibilities and choices and to become increasingly responsible for them.

The Facilitator of Young People as an External Unifying Centre

Disengaged young people often have multiple and complex needs, have experienced trauma in their lives and suffer from low aspiration and self-belief. Of course, they would rather die than show their vulnerability, instead creating a 'persona' that they show the world – sometimes of being tough and aggressive, sometimes falling into depression and despair and often into hopelessness. They have not developed or lost any internal reference point, no stable sense of identity and often feel victim to both the forces of their own psyche and those in their external life. Like a leaf tossed by the wind, they feel no capacity for clear awareness and vision, for being the *source and sustenance* of their existence; their locus of control is outside themselves. Without a stable sense of identity, we tend to experience being a *victim* to the circumstances of our life and at the mercy of forces, both internal and external over which we have little control.

It is an experience of the 'I', or sense of identity that gives us the experience of being deeply connected with ourselves, *at home* with who we are, of our individuality.

Attachment theory (Bowlby) tells us that the earliest bonds formed by children with their caregivers has a tremendous impact that continues throughout life, especially in terms of our capacity to form strong and loving relationships. This links closely with the vital role that *mirroring* (Winnicott, Kohut, Miller) plays in the early development. We experience this empathic connection through what Assagioli called an *external unifying centre*. Our early caregivers are meant to provide a *holding environment* (Winnicott, Mahler) which adequately mirrors to us that we are fundamentally good and worthwhile.

The youth work professional will, throughout the Growing2gether programme(s), provide this mirroring function through their relationship with the young person, their valuing of them and their role modelling. This non-judgmental, respectful and nurturing relationship provides an *external unifying centre* for the young person, until they are able to internalize this experience and establish an *internal unifying centre* of self-empathy and positive regard for self.

Transpersonal Psychology

Transpersonal psychology is a response to and a modern initiation of the search for wholeness beyond the bounds of a person's individuality, and leads to an exploration of consciousness, creativity and inspiration, values and meaning. Ferrucci (1990) shows that support for the principles of transpersonal psychology has been coming from researchers and scholars in a wide spectrum of disciplines: positive psychology comparative religion, the psychology of creativity, physics, philosophy, social analysis, systems theory, anthropology, and neuropsychology.

The characteristics of transpersonal psychology that are relevant to Growing2gether's work with young people are:

- It postulates that there is a deeper sense of identity in a young person that can be increasingly accessed through self-awareness and self-management and contains within it an inner knowing of what is of value and meaning to the unique

unfoldment of their development. Basically, the hypothesis is that the young person can find their own answers, indeed have a source of inner wisdom. The methodology used to evoke this is coaching. Young people do not respond well to being *told what* to do or how to behave. With coaching, the facilitator can evoke the answers from within the young person; thereby empowering them.

- It recognizes that human relationships are of central importance and that *relationship* is the primary means for realizing oneself through valuing the fundamental identity of the other and through an experience of our interconnectedness.
- It systematically explores the realm of human potential by carefully observing the young person in action on our programmes and perceiving their potential (positive behaviours, inherent character traits, gifts and talents), even before they are aware of it themselves; and affirming these in a practical and authentic way through observation of young people's behaviour during our programme.
- It accepts that spiritual drives or urges are as real, fundamental and indispensable as the basic psychological ones, and that these higher needs for self-realization must be met for optimum health – with young people, the need to belong, feel that they have something to contribute to the world; that they can make a difference in the lives of others; that they are worthwhile. With Growing2gether we see how serving another persona (the small child they are mentoring), is both healing and transformative for the young person. When a young person serves others, they themselves are healed, as well as their community participation strengthened.
- It suggests that each person benefits from identifying a purpose in life which is meaningful and potentially fulfilling and that this purpose is evolving as the young person evolves. This exploration can lead to an emphasis on and exploration of one's vision and values. On Growing2gether, young people experience having a focused purpose for an extended period of time, which gives them a taste of the value of this and impacts their aspiration.
- It reframes crisis, pain and pathology as opportunities for growth and creative steps forward and holds that these are intimately connected with our developmental path forward. Young people can learn to embrace their mistakes as learning opportunities without self-condemnation.

A Transpersonal Context

A Youth work professional working in a transpersonal context recognizes the pivotal role of consciousness in determining the outcome of the intervention. Consciousness is both the instrument and the object of change, and the facilitator will be less concerned with *problem-solving* than with fostering the conditions in which the problem can be addressed creatively. Rather than resolve a particular situation in the young person's life, the facilitator supports the young person while they learn *how* to deal effectively with problems as they arise.

Working from a transpersonal context also means that through the relationship of empathic holding and mirroring, the facilitator has taken a *stand* for basic human goodness, placed her trust in the young person's fundamental alrightness and is willing to accompany them on their journey to wholeness. This context plants the seeds for a change in conscious, rather than behavioural modification – aiming for self-belief and a renewed sense of aspiration with an accompanying vision of the future. This is not something that the facilitator will say/speak to the young person but rather is the ground on which they stand together which is rich, congruent and transformative.

Diana Whitmore, MAEd, Director Scotland, Growing2gether, 2022