

JUSTIFICATION OF THE INFLUENCE OF GESTALT PSYCHOLOGY THEORY ON TOTAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT IN EDUCATION

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Abstract

Educational psychologists, past and present, have propounded different theories in education that have indeed affected modern educational systems. One such theory is the Gestalt theory, which states that the whole is better than the sum of its parts. In other words, our perceptions are always centered on the whole even before we visualize the parts that form the whole. This means that the whole is stronger than the individual parts. Further, the theory stipulates that the whole speaks for the individual parts. Such an idea is borrowed by many enterprises, corporations, and institutions that focus on teamwork rather than on an individual's contribution. In institutions and corporate bodies, wholistic functionalism is always needed for success and growth. That, in a nutshell, describes why in Total Quality Management (TQM) we cannot ignore the wholistic idea of the gestalts. After all, TQM is the practice that involves the total performance and involvement of all workers and all material entities for the achievement of the goals and objectives of an organization. It involves teamwork with a single aim, which is ultimately excellent performance. TQM involves continuous evaluation of performance resulting from the total contribution of every facet and tenet of an organization. This paper is a descriptive analysis of how Gestalt theory in psychology has shaped the practice of TQM in our educational institutions, and of course, other organizations.

Key Words: Education, Gestalt theory, Proximity, Total Quality Management.

INTRODUCTION

In the early part of the 19th Century, Austrian and German psychologists were interested in knowing more about how the human mind works. They thought about how people perceive objects. First, they discovered that people make sense of the world around them through automatic groupings and associations. This is how the Gestalt theory began with eminent psychologists like Wertheimer, Koffka, Metzger, and Kohler, who observed that the human brain tends to automatically organize and

interpret visual data through grouping (Wagemans et al., 2012).

Gestalt is a German word that means configuration or structure. The Gestalts believe that the whole is understood even before the brain perceives the individual parts. For example, when you see a bird on a tree, you first see a single entity, a bird, before starting to observe the details about it, that is, before you begin to observe the beak, the wings, the feathers, the head, legs, etc. Your first remark is

about the whole bird, whether it is beautiful or not.

LAWS OF THE GESTALT THEORY

The Gestalts propounded six laws to buttress the theory as follows:

The Law of Simplicity (Pragnanz)

It is also known as the Law of Good Figure. When the human brain is faced with a complex situation, it tries to break it down into simple solutions as much as possible. The good figure is what can easily be perceived as a whole. Dresp-Langley (2015) gives an example of the Law of Good Figure using the Olympic logo. Langley comments that we tend to see overlapping circles rather than a series of curved, connected lines.

The Law of Similarity

The Law suggests that the human mind tends to group shapes, objects, or design elements that share the same similarity in terms of color, shape, orientation, texture, or size. Elements that have similar components are put in a context together (Graham 2008). When you enter a supermarket, there are sections with items of the same use. For example, a section with different kinds of perfumes in different bottles with different aromas.

The Law of Proximity

This law states that shapes, objects, or design elements located near each other tend to be perceived as isolated. The closer visual elements are to each other, the more likely they will be perceived as related to each other (Mungan, 2023). When one visits the supermarket, they find arrangements of items in different sections with related items. For example, different vegetables are found in one section to show proximity.

The Law of Common Region

According to McLeod (2024), this law emphasizes location closeness. Elements that are located within the same closed region tend to be perceived as belonging to the same group. Even stronger is when the region or location has a boundary.

The Law of Continuity

Elements that are grouped to form a continuous image are perceived easily. For example, when elements are positioned in lines, in curves, etc. For easy perception, elements must be grouped to form a continuous image.

The Law of Closure

As Wagemans et al. (2012) explain, the human brain has a natural tendency to visually fill in the gaps whenever information is missing. The human brain focuses on what is present and automatically fills the missing parts with appropriate images, lines, colors, patterns, or words.

Apart from these laws, the gestalt theory has two principles that guide the theory.

- i. The symmetry principle, which states that symmetrical components will tend to be grouped.
- ii. The faith principle, which states that elements tend to be perceived as a group if they move together (Wagemans et al., 2012).

The question is, how does this theory of the gestalts influence the practice of Total Quality Management (TQM) in education? Before this question is answered, let us first examine what TQM is all about.

DEFINITION AND PRINCIPLES OF TOTAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT

Gayathri (2018) defined TQM as a methodology that involves measurable improvements at all levels of education, ranging from school

performance to employee performance. It is a system where there is continuous effort from each management and staff members to do everything properly and effectively. It enhances a feeling of confidence and trust, alleviates insecurity and fear among members of an institution.

Total Quality Management has the following characteristics:

1) It is customer-focused

The customer ultimately determines the level of quality, which means understanding the customer's needs and providing products and services that have value.

2) Employee Involvement

All employees, regardless of their level or role, should actively participate in quality improvement efforts. Training, empowerment, and fostering a culture of accountability are essential.

3) Process Approach

Total Quality Management involves understanding, managing, and improving processes to achieve desired results. The focus is on effectiveness and efficiency in the operations of an institution.

4) Integrated System

Systems and processes are fused for common quality. It involves the alignment of goals to ensure coherence and collaboration.

5) Strategic and Systematic Approach

This is also an alignment process to strategic goals consistent with long-term objectives.

6) Continual Improvement

Striving for ongoing improvements in process, products, and services.

7) Fact-based Decision Making

Decisions must be based on accurate data and not on assumptions.

8) Communication

Binding all participants together with seamless implementation.

IMPORTANCE OF TOTAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT

Marimar (2020) describes the importance of TQM in institutions and organizations as follows:

- a) It provides better quality services to all the members of the organization. There is equality and fairness under the umbrella of cultural ownership. TQM eliminates any kind of discrimination from the system. Each worker is considered important. Everybody's contribution matters and is considered a unique element to be incorporated into the system. The hierarchy of administration, with different structures, inculcates mutual respect towards each individual.
- b) It assists an organization in fulfilling its accountability requirements. TQM involves strict evaluations that help an organization to know the contribution of each worker through performance. Specific assignments are given to each worker in the organization, and targets are to be met. All workers are required to reach their targets.
- c) It offers more excitement and challenges to organizational members. When members work together, they motivate and encourage each other, share ideas, and enthusiastically resolve their issues together. By so doing, quality is revealed based on shared responsibility.

- d) It provides a direction and framework for morality in an organization. What is defined as morality in an organization is the total of the organizational culture. For example, the dress code of the employers and employees, and how they should conduct themselves.
- e) TQM embraces concepts of integrity, honesty, commitment, participation, and ownership. These are elements of TQM. These elements define what quality is all about. These elements must be found in a system to experience TQM.
- f) It plays an important role in achieving quality goals through planning, monitoring, assuring, and improving quality. TQM begins from the planning stage through all the other stages, including implementation and evaluation.

TEN RULES OF TOTAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT

Teeradej et al. (2020) assert that there are ten rules, which they describe as the commandments of TQM. This includes the following:

- i. **Open your mind to change:** Changes are inevitable. You can't expect new results if you continue to do things the old way. TQM expects new and improved results. Hence, the need to be objective, searching for new horizons.
- ii. **Think yes, we can:** Members of an organization should be objective, hardworking, and committed to effective TQM. They should think positively about success and believe in what they are doing and saying. They should not allow any obstacle to block their progress.

- iii. **Always attack the process, not people:** TQM involves an evaluation of people and processes; that is, human resources, material resources, and the process whereby the human resources harness the material resources for production. To perform well, the people in an organization should be encouraged, not attacked. It is the process that should be subjected to scrutiny.
- iv. **Seek sample solutions:** Since quality is progressive, organizations endeavor to approach challenges through multiple ways until quality is attained.
- v. **If it is broken, stop and fix it:** TQM depends on evaluation. When an organization notices that some processes are not working well, they should spend time to revisit the process to see where a change should be effected. Once it is noticed, it must be attended to immediately for the process to continue.
- vi. **Use creativity, not capital:** Achieving total quality demands initiation. Without creativity, things remain the same. Creativity is an initiative that seeks change towards development.
- vii. **Problems are opportunities in disguise:** Organizations that embrace quality are those that turn stumbling blocks into stepping stones. There is progress after every obstacle, which is removed by the combined efforts of those involved in the task.
- viii. **Fix the root cause:** Ask why five times instead of who; Managing total quality is a matter of considering causes and effects. When a problem is identified, thorough investigations must be made to analyze it from different angles in minute detail to remove it completely,

never to resurface. This calls for multiple efforts from the management.

- ix. **The wisdom of many is greater than the knowledge of one:** TQM is the combined efforts of all those involved in the organization. Total Quality is achieved when ideas come from different people with varied experiences and technical know-how. It is the total of the ideas and efforts of individuals who are trying to reach a specific goal.
- x. **There is no final destination on the improvement journey:** Quality is progressive. There shouldn't be any time when an organization comes to a stage and thinks that it has reached the epitome of quality. This makes TQM quite relevant.

Comparison Between Classic Quality Assurance and Total Quality Management

S/N	Quality Assurance	Total Quality Management
1	People make mistakes.	Process provokes errors.
2	Individual employees are responsible for mistakes.	All employees are responsible for mistakes.
3	Zero error is not realizable.	The goal is zero error.
4	Purchasing from many suppliers.	A few suppliers as partners.
5	Customers must take what the company offers in terms of quality.	Everything is designed for complete customer satisfaction.

Source: (<https://www.researchgate.net>)

ASPECTS OF GESTALT PSYCHOLOGY THEORY THAT INFLUENCE TQM

An analysis of the Gestalt theory portrays that there are many elements in the theory that have influenced Total Quality Management (TQM) in Education. By this, one can visualize that the Gestalt theory aligns with the basic characteristics of TQM. Let us now examine the aspects of the theory that influence TQM.

- 1) The Gestalts believe in the whole, which they are convinced is better than the sum of its parts. When it comes to TQM, it is working together as a team where no single individual stands alone. If the energies of workers are not put together, it becomes difficult to perform efficiently and effectively. In fact, every description about an institution is wholistic. One sees an institution, not an individual member or a system. It is the total achievement and image of the institution that matters, not an individual achievement. That is TQM. We can see the idea of the gestalts infused in TQM here. People see an institution before they come to know about any worker or any particular operation in the institution.
- 2) In an institution, all processes and systems are integrated as one; a wholistic view of an institution. Each system depends on the other. TQM is a matter of dependency, which makes an institution stronger. The whole is better than the sum of its parts. This is where integration features come in. The parts must integrate to formulate a complete whole. In institutions, this idea of integration is visualized through what is known as an interdisciplinary curriculum, where some important courses cut across.
- 3) In TQM, we talk about the closeness of workers. If workers do not think and act

together, it becomes quite difficult for an institution to achieve its goals and objectives. One of the laws of the Gestalt theory is the law of proximity, which states that elements located near each other tend to be perceived as isolated.

The closer the visual elements are to each other, the more likely they will be perceived as related to each other and isolated from others. In all institutions, workers identify themselves with the institutional culture, which directs all their activities in unique ways. In institutions where proximity, either in the physical or psychological sense, is absent, and where people see themselves as isolated individuals, there is no growth. This also buttresses the theory of Gestalt that the whole is better than the sum of its parts.

- 4) According to the gestalts, the whole hangs on the parts; that is, the whole is at the center. The summation of the parts makes up the whole. Likewise, in TQM in education, a mission statement determines the activities of an institution. There is no cohesiveness in an institution without a mission statement.

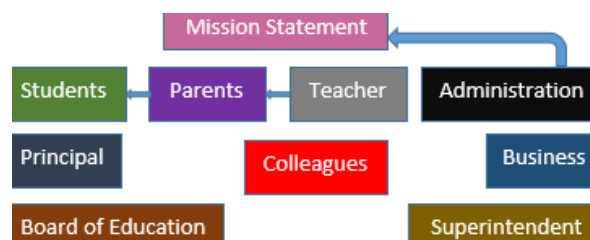


Figure 1: A School without a Mission Statement

Figure 1 depicts what happens when an institution does not have a qualified mission statement. All the players (parts) in the system are in disarray, with no direction. There is confusion. The absence of the arrows connecting all parts with the mission statement

shows that some sectors are disconnected from the mission statement which is the driving force for the institution. The activities are randomly selected and directed. There is no 'whole' determining the sum of the parts. However, when there is a mission statement, the activities are connected, and people are committed as a whole. The people and the activities become the sum of the mission statement.

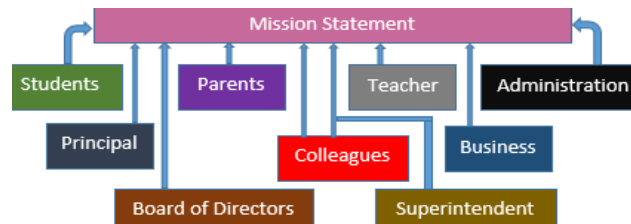


Figure 2: A School with a Mission Statement

As depicted in Figure 2, all the players in a system are influenced by the mission statement. The mission statement hangs all the activities and the people. They focus on the mission statement to such an extent that there are no clashes and frustrations. The whole (mission statement) determines the sum of the parts (activities and people).

- 5) In TQM, there is an element known as the student subsystem. TQM has at its center the learning behavior of students. Hence, all the factors affecting or influencing student learning must be considered. These factors are depicted in Figure 3.

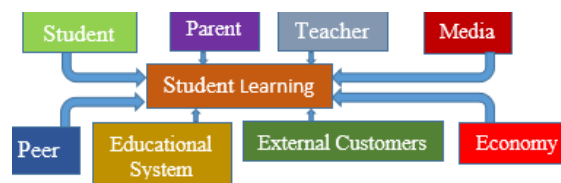


Figure 3: Factors affecting student learning

As demonstrated in Figure 3, the point is clear that TQM involves each factor influencing student learning. Each factor determines what student learning is all about. Hence, to create TQM in an institution, these factors affecting

student learning must not be neglected. Comparing this to the Gestalt theory, one can visualize that student learning is affected by the sum of all these factors. Student learning is a summation of all the factors.

Each factor has its own place. Each factor complements the other to determine a whole that is the locus of the subsystem. The diverse elements produce harmony of action. Each factor or activity has its unique sphere of action, yet all are found to be linked together in the great whole (Belts, 1992).

CONCLUSION

The theory of the gestalts, with its principles and laws, has directly or indirectly influenced the way institutions operate in line with TQM. When institutional operations are analyzed, we get a taste of the contributions made by the gestalts. Even though this theory is not popularized enough as it should be, it is high time we took a critical look at it.

However, this submission brings out some salient features about the gestalts and their passion for knowing how the human mind works by adhering to the laws that they propounded. This article has captured some aspects of TQM that are influenced directly or indirectly by the laws of the Gestalt theory. This is to initiate an academic discussion about the influence of the Gestalt theory in psychology on other spheres of life.

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