

Expressing the Inexpressible:

The Use of Lowenfeld Mosaics In Therapeutic Communication

A talk given at the Association for Child Psychology and Psychiatry Conference

"Children at Play"

On 8 June 2001, Abington Hall, Cambridge

To Celebrate the Lives & Work of Glenys Parkinson and Jane Clark

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Dr Margaret Lowenfeld was one of the 20th century's pioneers of psychology and child psychotherapy. Her distinctive contribution to the field was based not only on her view of the primacy of communication in our understanding of each other, but the fact that our thoughts and feelings about our personal experiences are not adequately captured by words alone. This led directly to her development of the Mosaics and World/sandplay techniques, both non-verbal multidimensional expressive tools which underpin her approach to psychotherapy.

The Mosaics is a psychological projective tool which has the virtue of enabling the Mosaic-maker to express the totality of herself at the moment of doing the Mosaic, as well as enabling the observer to see the personality of the Mosaic-maker in action. What emerges from the process and its product, is a miniature portrait of the person's response to life itself.

The Mosaic set consists of a tray with specific dimensions and a box of 456 coloured tiles, made up of six colours (red, blue, yellow, black, green and white) and five mathematically related-shapes, derived from a basic square. **Illus 1**. The pieces are designed to be used on the tray, the edges of which form the symbolic boundary of the task.

These simple and clear properties of the Mosaics allow the therapist to focus on the way in which the Mosaic-maker creates meaning from material that is minimally culturally biased or directive.

It was primarily through our exploration of the Lowenfeld approach, using these Lowenfeld techniques, that Glenys, Jane and I became acquainted. Thanks to Professor Goodyer's support, I was enabled to embark upon the construction of a training course in Lowenfeld's techniques and theories in his Department, and thanks above all to Geny's personal encouragement and enthusiasm I was able to develop this course into a Masters Programme in Lowenfeld Projective Play Therapy, now being jointly run by the Dr Margaret Lowenfeld Trust and Middlesex University, with the support of the Lifespan Healthcare Cambridge NHS Trust.

Before showing you two examples of how I have used the Lowenfeld Mosaics with adolescents, I would like first to describe the

Use of Lowenfeld Mosaics by a Prelingually Deaf Adolescent with Profound Communication, Learning and Emotional Difficulties.

For a number of years, I had a training group of workers at a unit which offered total care to deaf people who had multiple profound problems, and which aspired to the eventual rehabilitation of these clients into the larger community. The staff came mainly from the hearing community and for some time, they had been looking for a means of communication which did not rely on words or signs, since most of the unit's clients were unable to make use of these means.

After an introductory day with the staff of the unit, I was invited to begin a training group. What had persuaded some of the staff to do this training was what they saw as the potential of the Lowenfeld Mosaics as a medium of self-expression for this group of clients; specifically, the calming effect of using Mosaics on clients whose only means of expression had been violence and tantrums.

I want to show you a series of six Mosaics from a deaf adolescent with profound communication, learning and emotional difficulties. The Mosaics were made at intervals of several months, and not usually in response to any crisis. This series will be shown rather quickly, so that you can catch the main points I wish to demonstrate.

[36] I would like you to take in the general impression of this first Mosaic.

[37] This next Mosaic was done three months later. As you can see, the main features, with very slight changes are all still there. The most notable difference is the addition of two lines.

[38] This Mosaic was made some seven months later. Even a passing glance tells you something has happened. His normal style of approach and manner as well as choice of subject matter is quite different.

So, what was it that caused this third Mosaic to show such a radical difference to the first two Mosaics. For this, we have to go back to what happened about six months before this Mosaic was made.

Soon after the second Mosaic was made, the Mosaic maker's keyworker was murdered, and although he was simply told that his keyworker had died suddenly, his behaviour deteriorated markedly. The staff made allowances for this, but after six months, the staff were beginning to wonder if advantage was being taken of their tolerance. I suggested that they should try to obtain another Mosaic....

[38] ... and this third Mosaic was the result. This was meant to be a giraffe, but all the body parts or facial features were not in their proper positions. Although he had no way of knowing what had actually happened to his keyworker, it was as though he had known about the injuries his keyworker had sustained. On the strength of this evidence, and without any prompting from me, the staff understood that he was still suffering from the effects of the trauma. At the time, it was also observed that he became calmer after doing

the Mosaic.

[39] Three months after that third Mosaic. this was the next Mosaic. He had returned to his original themes. but some changes had also occurred.

[40] One month later, he was faced with the departure of a much-loved teacher. But he had been prepared for this, and it was hoped that he would not be too much affected by it. This was the Mosaic he made for his teacher. As you can see, he was continuing to work on his previous preoccupations as well as showing his feelings for her through his use of the Mosaics: when he replaced a black square with a black equilateral. indicating that this was now "a skirt" and then pointing at his teacher.

[41] Four months later, the work originally expressed in his first Mosaic, continued.

As you can see from these examples, this young man, with all his profound difficulties, was enabled to communicate through the use of the Lowenfeld Mosaics, both to himself and to us. This is not Simply because words are inadequate to express his state of mind. It is also because Multidimensionality characterises that state of mind. Using the multidimensional abstract material of the Lowenfeld Mosaics enabled him, to express the turmoil of his thoughts and feelings despite his lack of the usual communication skills, and in a way which he found ultimately helpful as well as satisfying.

Lowenfeld's other distinctive contribution is her belief in the utter uniqueness of the individual, their personality, and their thoughts and feelings about their experiences, so that the defining meaning of the communication lies with the communicator not with the listener. It is that view, the statement of the communicator. rather than its interpretation from the standpoint of someone else's theory, which needs to be heard. And a workable solution has to be something which the communicator finds possible to adopt, which is what defines it as a solution.

A Short Contact with an Adolescent

Adolescents are often reluctant referrals. This is understandable when they are struggling to get away from adult values and adult authority, to find their own values and their own authority. Thus, we, as therapists, need to go with the adolescent's attempt at solving his own problems. The adolescent needs to be enabled to take charge of his own life and to take it forward personally in his own inimitable way.

This next series of Mosaics is interesting for the light it throws on how the Lowenfeld Mosaics can be utilised by adolescent clients, to address their emotional problems entirely through the medium and language of the Mosaics. These Mosaics were made by a boy in his middle teens.

Illus 8 - 10 When he first arrived, he insisted that all his problems had to do with "other people". staff and other pupils at his school and other family members; he had

nothing to talk about.

I suggested that instead of talking maybe we could start with something different, and then introduced him to the Mosaics. He found himself drawn to playing with the pieces and eventually to making this pattern. I will briefly give you the process, the **moves** of this, his first Mosaic, including his comments as he went along. He worked intently and mostly in silence.

[1] 1) R Sq; 2) G Dmd; 3) Blue Dmd; 4) Y Dmd; 5) White Dmd; 6) R Eq. At this point, he said the white diamond was wrong: it was not symmetrical, but he decided not to change it. 7) G Sc; 8) Y Sq; 9) R Sc; 10) B Sc; 11) G Eq; 12) B Sc (note only repeat of shape + colour); 13) K Dmd. Here he stopped, saying "*its going to get more difficult to fill up the holes*".

I waited. He explained that he had wanted to make something *symmetrical* - so that is what he meant by "filling up the holes", I thought, but did not manage to articulate the thought as he continued the explanation by saying that what he meant by symmetry was that the Mosaic must have *sufficient solidity and strength*. I was thankful I had not been given the time to voice my thought. So now, I took a deep breath and followed my own advice: I asked him what would give his Mosaic solidity and strength? He told me that *Squares represented Solidity, and Triangles represented Strength*.

He went on to say that the *separation of colours* was also important. Furthermore, he *did not consider either White or Black as colours*. These were *shades, not colours* (note: it was the White that was wrong, and he stopped with a Black piece). Was this a subtle acknowledgement that nothing is black or white?

At this point we had to stop. I gave him a choice whether to come again or not. He decided to come for another appointment.

[2] He began with 2 W Eqs, promptly expressed dissatisfaction but continued, as he had done in the first session when he said that the W Dmd was wrong but did not change it. He now *corralled these white equilateral triangles with more equilateral triangles (blue, red and green), ending with the scalenes surrounding the hexagonal shape in the middle*.

He continued to express dissatisfaction with his Mosaic (note no squares, so in his terms, the Mosaic has great strength, but would lack solidity. Furthermore, the separation of colours was not as clear as in his first Mosaic and, Yellow and Black were missing.) He asked to do a second Mosaic.

[3] This time he began with a Yellow in a shape he had never used before, the *isosceles triangle*. At the end, he declared that he was now completely satisfied with the Mosaic: there was now, and I quote, "*a good balance of squares with triangles*" (ie. between strength and solidity) and also "*sufficient separation between the colours*". Indeed, the whole tone of this Mosaic seemed different from his two previous attempts. Note that he had now eliminated the black, retained 2 white shapes as in his second Mosaic, this time in squares instead of triangles. He had

also used all the available shapes. The crucial difference may have been how he began this Mosaic - by using a shape he had not used before (its something I have noted often, that the first piece defines the subsequent process). He saw a potential in the isosceles which had escaped his attention previously, and thereafter everything came together.

He decided that he did not need any further appointments. I agreed and no further appointments were offered. From the referrers' (the school and family) point of view, I later learnt that this young man seemed to have settled down and was no longer a concern to his family or his school.

As you can see, if there had been a case conference, I could not have described in words what his problem was nor the solution he achieved; but what I can do is present the evidence of the process. And all I know is, the sense of satisfaction when he finished this last Mosaic was quite evident in his entire manner, and the sense of completion is suggested by his final decision that he did not need to come again. Perhaps there are times when therapists do not need to know what it was that made the difference, just a recognition that it did.

A Response to a Cry for Help

Illus 11 This Mosaic was made by a teenager, referred by telephone to the local clinic by a frantic mother who said her son had been terribly depressed and was now expressing suicidal thoughts. The boy was offered an emergency appointment without any further preliminaries. I offer this as an example of a meeting with an adolescent of whom only a minimum was known before the appointment.

Surprisingly he came by himself (to me, the therapist, that is: I suppose, because of the frantic call from the mother, I had expected the mother to accompany him). A solemn slight young man. he seemed very self-contained. He had a quiet and methodical manner in his approach to the Mosaics. He began in the comers and worked systematically in a criss cross movement, inwards from the four corners, resulting in a complex mirror image, the mirrored half being rotated through 180°. He fitted in pieces in awkward spaces, but not obsessively so. The space in the middle seemed to have beendeliberately left.

When he had finished he looked up. I held his gaze. "Tell me about what you've just done."

"*It's a pattern.*" - a pause - "*A symmetrical pattern.*"

"Yes. I noticed that you started at the corners of the tray."

"*I was trying to balance the colours and shapes symmetrically; to make it more interesting I did it like this, diagonally.*"

"Yes. You worked in two interweaving movements. Inwards from the edge but also criss-crossing the tray. When you got to the middle you stopped."

"*Yes. The space in the middle is important.*"

"Important?"

He pondered for what seemed a long moment, eyes on the Mosaic. He looked up. His voice was quiet but firm and steady. Indicating his Mosaic, he said, "*This feels like a contracting coffin.*" Pointing to the space in the middle he said, "*I am in the middle squeezed so hard that I've become invisible.*"

A short pause before I asked, "Invisible? To whom?"

He did not answer. I referred back to his Mosaic. "let's look at this more closely."

I now reflected back to him the process of his Mosaic-making, making the movements with my hand, crossing and recrossing the central space, just as he had done, my hand movements contracting towards the centre of the tray. I could feel the tightening, the contracting. He was watching me. The feeling in my hand made a powerful impression upon me.

"Yes," I paused, perhaps overcome, but also because I thought I had seen something else. "You took much longer as you approached the middle. What was happening there?"

"I found it difficult to get the right effect." So, there was a "right effect", I thought. Aloud I said, "Yes?"

"I knew there had to be a space in the middle. It had to be the right shape, that was the problem."

"Let's look at it again. I seem to remember that you took some time to put down the pair of red and yellow diamonds here (third row in). And it got progressively more difficult."

"Yes."

"I think I see something. There seem to be two figures making up the space in the middle."

He looked down at his Mosaic as I spoke and after another while, he spoke, his voice suffused with emotion.

He summed up his feelings about his situation. He was an only child - here represented by the white space in the middle of the Mosaic where he *was "squeezed so hard that he had become invisible"*. If you look very closely, you can make out two identical rudimentary figures, enclosing that space in the middle. These were metaphorically his parents.

To show you how exactly the Mosaic reflected this boy's situation, I will now report on an interview I had with the parents later. I saw that the father was a young 35, looking very much like the boy's elder brother. The mother was a woman in her 40s, looking more like the boy's grandmother. As the interview progressed, the mother showed herself to be emotionally on a par with her son, and the father, emotionally a detached elder brother.

The mother always thought she would never have any children and when this boy was born, did not know what to do with him; in fact, it precipitated her into a deep depression, so that father, who was a university student at the time, became the main carer during his first eighteen months. They now care for him together and they both worked freelance from home. Father had his office at the top of a three-storey house, mother on the ground-floor. The boy had the run of the floor in between, where he did all his schoolwork and slept, but was also where the food was prepared and eaten by the family.

Thus, like the Mosaic, he, just like the space held between the two figures, was in the middle floor of the house, corralled between the parents, one on the upper

and the other on the lower floor. And like the process by which the Mosaic was made, the parents in their daily life, cross his space in the middle floor, but the boy, his thoughts and feelings were invisible to them.

Thus his difficulty with the central portion of the Mosaic, his difficulty in formulating his problem was finally summed up in the process as well as the product of the Mosaic, and in the words: *“It felt like a contracting coffin. I am in the middle squeezed so hard that I’ve become invisible.”*

This view was further strengthened by how the parents had handled his schooling, from information supplied by the parents and the young man himself.

In his junior school, he was bullied because of his small stature and slow learning. but the parents never fully accepted the bullying and put his slow learning down to laziness. He was later sent to a well-known private secondary school, well known for being academically high powered, even though he was by then found to be dyslexic. Dyslexia however, was not a condition this school acknowledged, so his needs were never catered for.

Thus the parents felt that they had been attentive to his educational potential by sending him to this high academically achieving school, whilst ignoring his dyslexia which made it almost inevitable that he would not be able to benefit from the education the school was reputed to be able to provide and thus served also as proof to his parents that he was a lazy boy.

When I saw the parents with him on another occasion, his mother had only traumatic memories of his early life, for example, she didn’t know what to do when he cried and she would hide in the bathroom and stop up her ears. In fact, his father was the one who remembered about his milestones but then only vaguely; from nursery onwards details of his life was largely provided by the young man himself. Thus, while he was their precious, one and only child, they saw him as also the source of all their grief and tribulation.

(Furthermore, he stood out in the secondary school in other ways, but mainly because he did not come from the same social background as most of his classmates. On this account and because he was still rather small for his age, he felt he was denigrated and bullied by some of his teachers as well as his peers.)