



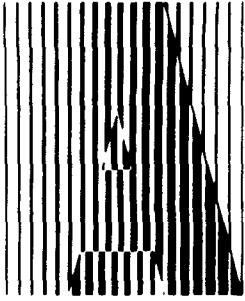
# AGATE

Journal of the Gifted and Talented Education Council  
of The Alberta Teachers' Association



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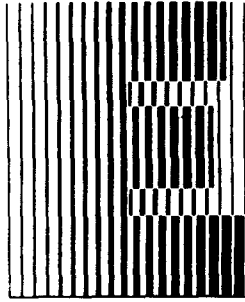
**Special Issue:**  
*Dabrowski's Theory of Positive  
Disintegration and Gifted Educa-  
tion*



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# AGATE

Journal of the Gifted and Talented Education Council  
of The Alberta Teachers' Association

**Volume 15      Number 2      Fall 2002**

*AGATE* (Alberta Gifted and Talented Education) invites theoretical, descriptive and research articles on all aspects of the education of gifted and talented children. Articles may take the form of

- theoretical position papers or discussions of current issues, historical trends or administrative policies;
- descriptions of innovative instructional strategies or programming;
- literature reviews;
- research articles on gifted and talented education; or
- anecdotal and case study reports.

All submissions should be relevant to the education of gifted and talented children in Alberta. Manuscripts should be typed, double-spaced and submitted in triplicate. The author's name and institutional affiliation should appear on the cover page only, to permit anonymous review by referees. A brief (one or two sentence) biographical description of the author(s) should accompany the manuscript.

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# Editorial

*Sal Mendaglio*

**It**  
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is fitting that this special issue on Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration (TPD) is published this year—the 100th anniversary of his birth. TPD has profoundly influenced the field of gifted education,

particularly the social/emotional domain of giftedness. The number of people who attend conference sessions on TPD, such as those organized by the National Association for Gifted Children and Alberta's own SAGE, is one indication of the popularity of Dabrowski's theory. However, TPD elicits strong reactions when people are introduced to it: people love it or hate it. I had a rather negative response to it in my first encounter many years ago. Among other things, its terminology, such as *disintegration*, *overexcitability* and *dynamisms*, put me off. However, after I gave it a second hearing, TPD resolved a dilemma that had dogged me since my days as a doctoral student: how can some people who are highly intelligent and well educated be mean-spirited, intentionally hurtful to others and racist? TPD solved this for me by underscoring a simple truth: superior intellectual ability and academic success are not sufficient for becoming a good person. Other factors are required.

Despite its negative-sounding terminology, TPD is a theory of moral development, not in the sense of moral reasoning, but moral living. Dabrowski provides an explanation of the factors and processes involved in a personal transformation from living a life motivated by self-interest to living one driven by empathy and altruism. In the years since my second encounter with it, Dabrowski's theory has become a regular companion in my counseling of gifted

persons, whether I use it didactically with my clients or as a cognitive map to guide my understanding of their experiences and emotionality.

Regardless of initial reactions to TPD, educators working with gifted students must be aware of Dabrowski's theory. It is an influential force in the literature dealing with social and emotional development of gifted students. Educating all students, including those who are gifted, requires attending to their social and emotional as well as intellectual needs. Understanding TPD will provide some useful insights in this endeavor while facilitating educators' reading of professional literature in this area.

The articles included in this issue serve two functions. First, they provide information regarding the theory. Second, the authors provide suggestions for the application of TPD to teaching gifted students. Those who are familiar with TPD as treated in the literature in gifted education will see signs of a different portrayal of the theory. I call this difference the Canadian perspective on TPD—a suitable characterization because Dabrowski spent many years in Canada.

The articles should be read in order. To provide a context for the other articles, William Tillier's article begins the issue. Although all the authors in this issue are students of TPD, Tillier was among Dabrowski's last cohort of students at the University of Alberta. After Dabrowski's passing in 1980, Tillier took it upon himself to honor Dabrowski by creating a TPD archive in which he maintains a collection of original works by Dabrowski and a record of works by others who publish articles or make conference presentations on TPD.

In addition, he is an active proponent of TPD by managing a very informative website (<http://members.shaw.ca/positivedisintegration/>) and an online discussion group (see website for further information). Because of his unique background, readers may be assured that Tillier's summary of TPD is faithful to its proposal by Dabrowski. In my article, I provide implications for educators of gifted students that take into account some of the complexity of TPD. Three articles written by practising educators of gifted and talented students complete the issue: Linda Finlay focuses on how education of gifted students could be improved by injecting a Dabrowskian perspective into our conceptualization of giftedness; Richard Michelle-Pentelbury discusses elements of TPD in the context of practical classroom situations; and Ann Dodd's article describes a personal account of how overexcitabilities and levels of development can be interpreted for use within classes for gifted students. I believe that the articles in this issue will

provide readers with a unique opportunity to review authors' perceptions on what Dabrowski's theory can offer to educators of gifted students. I hope that this issue will motivate readers to embark on their own investigations of TPD.

I am very interested in readers' reactions to TPD, whether they relate to this special issue and/or their own experiences with the theory. Such submissions, as well as those on other matters relevant to gifted education, would be considered for publication in our journal.

### **Reviewers for This Issue**

Our thanks go to the following reviewers:

- George Labercane, University of Calgary
- Janneke Frank, Calgary Board of Education and doctoral candidate, University of Calgary
- Michael Pyryt, University of Calgary
- William Tillier, forensic psychologist, Alberta Solicitor General

# A Brief Overview of the Relevance of Dabrowski's Theory for the Gifted

*William Tillier*



Kazimierz Dabrowski (1902–1980) advanced a theory of individual personality development based on a progression from an initial lower integration through a sequence of disintegrations, culminating in a higher integration.<sup>1</sup> Dabrowski called his work the theory of positive disintegration to reflect the central and positive role disintegration plays in development. He believed that some people are predisposed to experience life more intensely, and this predisposes them to frequent and severe crises. This heightened sensitivity is based on genetic characteristics Dabrowski called developmental potential. The presence of increased sensitivity combined with crises (disintegration) represents an increased opportunity to develop to advanced levels of personality.

In his research, Dabrowski found that gifted and creative people exhibit higher levels of developmental potential and therefore it is predicted that they will experience increased disintegration and personality growth. This is the basis of recent applications of the theory to the gifted.<sup>2</sup> This article discusses Dabrowski's basic ideas and applies his theory to the gifted.

## Dabrowski's Theory

Dabrowski observed that most people live their lives in a state of primitive integration guided by biological impulses (first factor) and/or by uncritical adherence to social convention (second factor). He called this initial integration level 1. Creative expression at level 1 is influenced and constrained by these two factors. The first factor channels giftedness and talents toward accomplishing self-serving goals. Often these talents are used in antisocial ways. For example, many criminals display this selfish creativity in the service of advancing their goals at the expense of others. The second factor constrains individual creativity by encouraging a group view of life and discouraging unique thought and expression. The second factor shapes creativity into forms that follow and support the existing social milieu.

Dabrowski also described a group of people who display an individualized developmental pathway. These people break away from an automatic, socialized view of life (which Dabrowski called negative adjustment) and move into a series of disintegrations. If development continues, people go

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*William Tillier is a forensic psychologist who has worked for Corrections Canada and more recently with the Alberta Solicitor General. After completing a B.S. degree at the University of Calgary, he earned an M.S. degree at the University of Alberta, where he was introduced to Kazimierz Dabrowski and his theory. Tillier maintains an archive of Dabrowski's works and a website (<http://members.shaw.ca/positivedisintegration/>). He also chairs an online Dabrowski discussion group (registration is available through the website).*

on to develop an individualized, conscious and critically evaluated hierarchical value structure (called positive adjustment). The hierarchy of values acts as a benchmark by which all things are seen, and the higher values in the hierarchy direct behavior. These higher, individual values characterize a second integration reflecting individual autonomy. At this level, each person develops his or her own vision of how life ought to be. This higher level is associated with strong individual approaches to problem solving and creativity. Giftedness and creativity are applied in the service of these higher individual values and visions of how life could be. The person expresses his or her talents energetically through action, art, social change and so on.

Advanced development is often seen in people who exhibit strong developmental potential. Developmental potential represents a constellation of genetic features, expressed and mediated through environmental interaction, that consist of three major aspects: overexcitability (OE), specific abilities and talents, and a strong drive toward autonomous growth, a feature Dabrowski called the third factor.

The most evident and perhaps most fundamental aspect of developmental potential is overexcitability (OE), a heightened physiological experience of sensory stimuli resulting from increased neuronal sensitivities. The greater the OE, the more intense the sensory experience of life. In short, the person is more sensitive to experiences in life.

Dabrowski presented five forms of OE: psychomotor, sensual, imaginal, intellectual and emotional. These overexcitabilities, especially the last three, often cause a person to experience daily life more intensely and to feel the extremes of the joys and sorrows of life profoundly. Dabrowski found that heightened overexcitability in groups of gifted and creative people demonstrated their intense sensual experiences. Combined with imaginal and intellectual OE, sensual OE creates a rich source of

creative material. Additionally, psychomotor and emotional OE often provide strong stamina and motivation and are expressed in bouts of intense work and creativity.

Although based in the nervous system, overexcitabilities are expressed psychologically through the development of structures that reflect the emerging self. The most important of these conceptualizations are dynamisms: biological or mental forces that control behavior and its development. "Instincts, drives and intellectual processes combined with emotions are dynamisms" (Dabrowski 1972, 294). With advanced development, dynamisms increasingly reflect movement toward autonomy.

The second arm of developmental potential, specific abilities and talents, tends to serve the person's developmental level. As outlined, people at lower levels use talents to support egocentric goals or to climb the social and corporate ladders. At higher levels, specific talents and abilities become an important force as they are channeled by the person's value hierarchy into expressing and achieving the person's vision of his ideal personality and his view of how the world ought to be.

The third aspect of developmental potential, the third factor, is a drive toward individual growth and autonomy. The third factor is important in creativity for two reasons: first, it directs talents and creativity toward autonomous expression, and second, it provides motivation to strive for more—to try to imagine and achieve goals currently beyond one's grasp.

Dabrowski's theory presents five levels as shown in Table 1.

The first and fifth levels are characterized by psychological integration, harmony and little inner conflict. As outlined above, the first level is called primitive or primary integration. People at this level show either prominent first factor (heredity/impulse) and/or second factor (social environment). The majority of people at level 1 are integrated at the environmental or social level

(Dabrowski called them average people); however, many also exhibit shades of both impulse and socialization. Dabrowski distinguished the two subgroups of level 1 by degree: “the state of primary integration is a state contrary to mental health. A fairly high degree of primary integration is present in the average person; a very high degree of primary integration is present in the psychopath” (Dabrowski 1964, 121).<sup>3</sup>

Levels 2, 3 and 4 describe various levels and types of disintegration. The character of level 2 is reflected in its name: unilevel disintegration. The prominent feature of this level is an initial, brief and often intense crisis or series of crises. Crises are spontaneous and only occur on one level (and often involve only one dimension).

Unilevel disintegration occurs during developmental crises such as puberty or menopause, in periods of difficulty in handling some stressful external event, or under psychological and psychopathological conditions such as nervousness and psychoneurosis. Unilevel disintegration consists of processes on a single structural and emotional level; there is a prevalence of automatic dynamisms with only slight self-consciousness and self-control. (Dabrowski 1964, 6)

Conflicts on the same level (horizontal) produce ambitemperies and ambivalences: the person is pulled between different but equivalent choices (ambitemperies) and is not able to decide what to do (ambivalence). Ultimately, the person is thrust into an

**Table 1**  
**Dabrowski's Levels**

Level	Name	Factor	Key Features	Life View	Example
5	Secondary Integration	three	Harmonious autonomy, volitional behavior based on personality ideal. empathy, internal values	multilevel	Jesus, Buddha
4	Organized Multilevel Disintegration	three	Person takes control over crises and development	multilevel	A. Saint Exupery
3	Spontaneous Multilevel Disintegration	two /three	More and more aspects of life are called into question: dominos fall	transition	
2	Unilevel Disintegration	two	Distress: previous certainty of some important aspect of life begins to crumble	transition	Picasso, Sartre
1	Primitive (Primary) Integration	two	Harmonious, robotic, reflexive conformity to society's rules: external values, uncritically accepted	unilevel	average person
		one	Instinctual, selfish behavior—conformity feigned out of self-interest	unilevel	criminal



existential crisis: her social rationales no longer account for her experiences and there are no alternative explanations. During this phase, existential despair is the predominant emotion. The resolution of this phase begins as individually chosen values are integrated into a new hierarchy of personal values. These new values often conflict with the person's previous social values. Many of the status quo explanations for the "way things are," learned through education and from the social order, collapse under conscious, individual scrutiny. This causes more conflicts focused on the person's analysis of his or her own reactions to the world at large and of the behavior of others. Common behaviors and the ethics of the prevailing social order come to be seen as inadequate, wrong or hypocritical. Positive maladjustment prevails. For Dabrowski, these crises represent a strong potential for development toward personal growth and mental health. Using a positive definition, mental health reflects more than social conformity: it involves a careful, personal examination of the world and of one's values, leading to the development of an individual personality.

The expression of positive maladjustment can often be seen in both individual creativity and creative movements at this level. For example, Cubism and Dadaism, with their chaotic forms, are examples of creativity expressing positive maladjustment—the rejection and overthrow of the standard views of art and life.

Level 2 is a transitional period. Dabrowski said you either fall back, move ahead or end negatively, in suicide or psychosis. "Prolongation of unilevel disintegration often leads to reintegration on a lower level, to suicidal tendencies, or to psychosis" (Dabrowski 1964, 7).

The transition from level 2 to level 3 involves a fundamental shift that requires a phenomenal amount of energy. This period is the crossroads of development: from here one must either progress or regress. The struggle between Dabrowski's factors

reflects this transitional crisis: "Do I follow my instincts (first factor), my teachings (second factor) or my heart (third factor)?" The developmental answer is to transform one's lower instincts (automatic reactions like anger) into positive motivation, to resist rote and social answers, and to listen to one's inner sense of what one ought to do.

Level 3 describes the vertical conflicts caused by an involuntary perception of higher versus lower choices in life (because it is involuntary, Dabrowski called it spontaneous multilevel disintegration). Dabrowski called this vertical dimension multilevelness. Multilevelness is a gradual realization of the "possibility of the higher" (a phrase Dabrowski used frequently) and of the subsequent contrasts between the higher and the lower in life. These vertical comparisons often illustrate the lower, actual behavior of a person in contrast to higher, imagined ideals and alternative choices. When a person perceives the higher choice, it becomes obvious that this is the path to follow. When the person's actual behavior falls short of the ideal, disharmony and a drive to review and reconstruct one's life often follow. Multilevelness thus represents a new and powerful type of conflict, a conflict that is potentially developmental.

These vertical conflicts are critical in leading to autonomy and advanced personality growth. If the person is to achieve higher levels, the shift to multilevelness must occur. If a person does not have the developmental potential to move into a multilevel view, then he will fall back from the crises of level 2 to reintegrate at level 1.

In the shift to multilevelness, the horizontal unilevel, stimulus-response model of life is replaced by a vertical and hierarchical analysis. This vertical view becomes anchored by one's emerging individual value structure, and all events are seen in relation to personal ideals. These personal value ideals become the personality ideal: how the person wants to live his or her life. As events in life are seen in relation to this multilevel,

vertical view, it becomes impossible to support positions that favor the lower course when higher goals can be identified (or imagined).

In level 4 the person takes full control of his or her development. The involuntary spontaneous development of level 3 is replaced by a deliberate, conscious and self-directed review of life from the multilevel perspective. This level marks the emergence of the third factor, described by Dabrowski as an autonomous factor "of conscious choice (valuation) by which one affirms or rejects certain qualities in oneself and in one's environment" (Dabrowski 1972, 306). The person consciously reviews his or her existing belief system and tries to replace lower, automatic views and reactions with carefully thought-out, examined and chosen ideals. These new values will increasingly be reflected in the person's behavior. Behavior becomes less reactive, less automatic and more deliberate as behavioral choices fall under the influence of the person's higher, chosen ideals.

One's social orientation comes to reflect a deep responsibility based on both intellectual and emotional factors. At the highest levels, "individuals of this kind feel responsible for the realization of justice and for the protection of others against harm and injustice. Their feelings of responsibility extend almost to everything" (Dabrowski 1973, 97). This perspective results from seeing life in relation to one's hierarchy of values (the multilevel view) and the subsequent appreciation of the potential of how life could be, and ought to be, lived. One's disagreements with the (lower-level) world are expressed compassionately in doing what one can to help achieve the "ought."

Given their genuine (authentic) prosocial outlook, people achieving higher development also raise the level of their society. Prosocial here is not just support of the existing social order. If the social order is lower and you are adjusted to it, then you also reflect the lower (negative adjustment in Dabrowski's terms, a level 1 feature). Here,

prosocial is a genuine cultivation of social interactions based on higher values. These positions often conflict with the status quo of a lower society (positive maladjustment). In other words, to be maladjusted to a low-level society is a positive feature.

The fifth level displays an integrated and harmonious character, but one vastly different from that at the first level. At this highest level, one's behavior is guided by conscious, carefully weighed decisions based on an individualized and chosen hierarchy of personal values. Behavior conforms to this inner standard of how life ought to be lived and, thus, little inner conflict arises.

Creative expression and the accomplishments of the gifted find their most individual expression at levels 4 and 5. Especially at level 5, problem solving and art represent the highest and noblest features of human life. Art captures the innermost emotional states and is based on a deep empathy and understanding of the subject. Often, human suffering and sacrifice are the subjects of these works. Truly visionary works, works that are unique and novel, are created by people expressing a vision unrestrained by convention. Advances in society, through politics, philosophy and religion, are therefore commonly associated with strong individual creativity or accomplishments.

### **Applications of the Theory of Positive Disintegration**

The theory of positive disintegration (TPD) has an extremely broad scope and has implications for many areas. One central application applies to psychological and psychiatric diagnosis and treatment. Dabrowski advocated a comprehensive, multilevel diagnosis of the person's situation, including symptoms and developmental potentials. If the disintegration appears to fit into a developmental context, then the person is educated in the theory and encouraged to take a developmental view of his or her situation and experiences. Rather than being eliminated,

symptoms are reframed to yield insight and understanding into life and the person's unique situation. Dabrowski illustrated his theory through autobiographies of and biographies about those who have experienced positive disintegration, and he encouraged autobiography as a step in the process of autopsychotherapy. For Dabrowski, the goal of therapy is to eliminate the therapist by providing a context within which a person can understand and help herself. The gifted child, the suicidal teen or the troubled artist is often experiencing the features of TPD, and if they accept and understand the meaning of their feelings and crises, they can move ahead, not fall apart.

A second primary focus is on education, in particular the experience of creative or gifted students. Dabrowski hypothesized that these students will disproportionately show strong overexcitability and therefore will be prone to the disintegrative process.

### **Dabrowski and the Gifted Individual**

In an appendix to Dabrowski (1967), results of investigations done in 1962 with Polish youth are reported.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, "a group of gifted children and young people, aged 8 to 23" were examined (p. 251). Of the 80 youth studied, 30 were "intellectually gifted" and 50 were from "drama, ballet, and plastic art schools" (p. 251). Dabrowski found that every one of the children displayed overexcitability, "which constituted the foundation for the emergence of neurotic and psychoneurotic sets. Moreover it turned out that these children also showed sets of nervousness, neurosis, and psychoneurosis of various kinds and intensities, from light vegetative symptoms, or anxiety symptoms, to distinctly and highly intensive psychasthenic or hysterical sets" (p. 253). Dabrowski asked why these children should display such "states of nervousness or psychoneurosis" and suggested that it was due to the presence of OE (p. 255). "Probably

the cause is more than average sensitivity which not only permits one to achieve outstanding results in learning and work, but at the same time increases the number of points sensitive to all experiences that may accelerate anomalous reactions revealing themselves in psychoneurotic sets" (p. 255).

The association between OE and giftedness appears to be borne out in the research (Lysy and Piechowski 1983; Piechowski 1986; Piechowski and Miller 1995). It appears that at the least OE is a marker of potential for giftedness/creativity. Dabrowski's basic message is that the gifted will disproportionately display this process of positive disintegration and personality growth.

### **The Environment and the Gifted**

Today, the importance of the interaction of the individual with the environment is well recognized. "From infancy onwards, genetic individuality helps to steer the developing organism through the multitude of possible [environmental] experiences and choices" leading to a "nature via nurture" position (Bouchard et al. 1990). In this view, the dynamic interaction is an important factor, and the effect that the individual has on shaping his or her experience is recognized.

Dabrowski (1967, 12) suggested that "there are very few people among us who are consciously independent of the external environment." Most people generally take what the environment gives them for granted, and the interactive components play out their dynamics on an unconscious stage: Dabrowski's second factor. How we live largely depends on what happens to us, and our behavior is largely reactive and unconscious. Once positive disintegration begins, this changes. A person's "relation to his environment becomes more and more conscious, clear, and determined. He selects from it elements on which he places value. He becomes more independent," gradually moving toward the third factor (Dabrowski 1964, 61-62).

The presence of OE increases the significance of the role played by the person–environment interaction. As a person’s confidence in his developing personality becomes stronger, he comes to choose his environment more consciously, deciding what to respond to and how. Although rejection of unacceptable environmental features may cause further developmental conflict, it is also an important aspect of the emerging autonomous personality. As development proceeds, the environment shapes the person less and the person shapes the environment more.

Opinion on the ideal environment for the gifted is divided into two basic themes. One is a stress-free setting where things are as positive, accepting and easygoing as possible—the “bullish environment” (Sternberg and Lubart 1995). The other approach is called the “bearish environment” (Sternberg and Lubart 1995). Here, obstacles arise that challenge the person. Successfully mastering these obstacles strengthens the person’s character and abilities. Sternberg and Lubart review these positions and conclude that “it helps to have a generally favourable environment sprinkled with some obstacles along the way” (1995, 256). However, in Dabrowski’s theory, this dichotomy does not reflect the real complexity involved in understanding creativity. For Dabrowski, several critical elements are involved, including the physiological reaction of the person to the environment (OE), the dynamic interplay of the person with the environment, and any resultant conflicts and disintegrations that arise.

Dabrowski emphasized that the role of environmental events is most important when genetic dispositions are equivocal. When genetic potentials are strong, environment plays less of a role. Dabrowski said that “the worst environment will not stop the strongest genetics, the best environment cannot overcome the worst genetics” (Dabrowski, personal communication, 1978).

## **Developmental Potential: A Mixed Blessing?**

Dabrowski called OE “a tragic gift” to reflect that the road of the person with strong OE is not a smooth or easy one (M. Rankel, personal communication, April 6, 1996). Potentials to experience great highs are also potentials to experience great lows. Similarly, potentials to express great creativity hold the likelihood of experiencing a great deal of personal conflict and stress. This stress both drives development and is a result of developmental conflicts, both intrapsychic and social. Suicide is a significant risk in the acute phases of this stress. The isolation often experienced by these young people heightens the risk of self-harm.<sup>5</sup> Dabrowski advocated educating the person about OEs and the disintegrative process to give people a context within which to understand their intense feelings and needs. This context is a positive and developmental one. Dabrowski suggested giving people support in their efforts to develop and find their own self-expression. To be out of step is encouraged and seen as a feature of the overall developmental journey. Social maladjustment is also encouraged, particularly when it is positive and based on individually thought-out values. Young people who are seen as squares because they prefer to study instead of party are an example. Many of these children have to find and walk their own path, often at the expense of fitting in with their social peers and even their families.

Piechowski, and subsequently Silverman, have begun the process of measuring OE in the gifted.<sup>6</sup> These are important first steps in applying a Dabrowskian approach to the gifted. Other exciting avenues have begun, for example, efforts to counsel the gifted to help them see their overexcitabilities and disintegrations as positive features (Ogburn-Colangelo 1979).

## A Case Study

M —, a girl 10 years old of asthenic-schizothymic type, had marked mathematical and scientific abilities and was dutiful, with a tendency to be overly so. After good progress in one school she was moved to another, more extroverted system, where the teachers were prone to superficial appreciation of their students, basing their opinions on the pupil's boldness and originality.

M —, a rather shy girl with excessive inhibitions, withdrew from these new conditions and for several weeks showed both shyness and anxiety. She obtained marks that were fairly good, but much lower than in her former school. Her anxieties increased; she became resentful, slept badly, lost weight, and was either irritable or withdrawn.

After several months her marks improved, although she lost confidence in some of her teachers. When her parents discussed with her the possibility of moving to another class or another school, she replied: "It seems to me that in another class or school there will be similar teachers. I don't want to change. Always, only some of the teachers and some of the other students will like me. That's the way people are, and that's the way I am." In this case, disintegration occurred in an ambitious girl with a strong sense of justice, resulting in withdrawal and resentment. The fact that she did not wish to transfer to another class or school seems to be explained by emotional exhaustion and, at the same time, an increasingly realistic attitude toward the environment and patterns of interaction with it. This is a sign of partial, still insufficient, but clear rebuilding. Secondary integration is evident in M —'s new appreciation of herself and others but is still combined with a feeling of disappointment and a certain degree of compromise. (Dabrowski 1964, 105)

## Conclusion

It is beyond this article to explore Dabrowski's theory fully. The central point is that Dabrowski saw the gifted as a special subset of people, a subset prone to experience positive disintegration. This opportunity presents both creative possibilities and risks to the developing self. If the person fails to navigate these risks, a sad outcome of underachievement, addiction or suicide is possible. To avoid this, Dabrowski advocated a supportive and encouraging environment. Additionally, he suggested that the person be provided with the developmental context of positive disintegration. We cannot ease the experience of OEs or the pain of development. Still, we can and must give it context and shepherd our gifted youth through the height of their developmental crises. Individual creativity and expression of talent must be valued as expressions of higher personality development.

## Notes

1. Dabrowski's theory is presented in Dabrowski 1937, 1964, 1966, 1967, 1970, 1972, 1973 and 1996.

2. Recent applications to the gifted are represented by the following research: Brennan and Piechowski 1991; Lewis, Kitano and Lynch 1992; Miller, Silverman and Falk 1994; Piechowski 1974, 1975, 1978, 1979, 1986, 1989 and 1991; Piechowski and Colangelo 1984; Piechowski and Cunningham 1985; Piechowski and Miller 1995; Piechowski, Silverman and Falk 1985; Silverman 1983, 1986, 1989, 1991, 1993a, 1993b and 1994; Silverman and Schuppin 1989.

3. Dabrowski's description of level 1 as psychopathic reflects an earlier definition of the term: one that emphasized individual factors (genetic features as opposed to social factors) that act to impede a person's developmental course. This broad usage encompasses both malignant criminals and upstanding citizens who blindly and uncritically follow every social precept. This has created controversy and confusion in the theory as Dabrowski said that most of society's members live at level 1 (see Dabrowski 1964, 4-10). Other authors have introduced the term *robopath* to describe the unauthentic life based on robot-like reactions (Bertalanffy 1967; Yablonsky 1972). Bertalanffy (1967) was critical of psychology's approach to the human as a lab rat. He extended his

criticism to society and the structure of modern life that demands "reaching optimal psychosocial equilibrium by answering outside demands in reinforced responses" (p. 9). Bertalanffy lamented that people were losing their autonomy in a stimulus-response society, a society where one does not need to reflect or to think but merely to respond, a society geared to meeting external performance standards as measures of success. Yablonsky (1972, 7) uses the term *robopath* "to describe people whose pathology entails robot-like behavior and existence. Robopaths have what Kierkegaard called 'sickness unto death.'" Yablonsky says that robopaths are "socially dead" and function based on "pseudo-image." They are egocentric and lack compassion for others. "Their existential state is inhuman" (p. 7). Yablonsky elaborates how our modern society encourages "the emergence of robopathology." Also relevant is Rieber (1997) and his views on the "normalized psychopathy" of today's culture. These descriptions, especially Bertalanffy's and Rieber's, appear to apply to a person who follows precepts uncritically and who simply follows orders in living life—Dabrowski's idea of the second factor.

4. The appendix is titled "Personality, Outstanding Abilities and Psychoneurosis in Children and Young People."

5. Self-harm is a common feature of those with high developmental potential and the central risk during the height of developmental crises (Dabrowski 1937).

6. Recent research on measuring overexcitability includes Brennan and Piechowski 1991; Miller, Silverman and Falk 1994; Piechowski 1974, 1975, 1978, 1979, 1986, 1989, 1991; Piechowski and Colangelo 1984; Piechowski and Cunningham 1985; Piechowski and Miller 1995; Piechowski, Silverman and Falk 1985; Silverman 1983, 1986, 1989, 1991, 1993a, 1993b, 1994; Silverman and Schuppin 1989.

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# Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration: Some Implications for Teachers of Gifted Students

*Sal Mendaglio*

**D**abrowski's theory of positive disintegration (TPD) (Dabrowski 1964, 1967, 1970, 1972), while largely unknown in education, psychology and psychiatry, has found a home in gifted education. It has been used to address various aspects of gifted students' functioning, including emotional sensitivity and intensity (Fiedler 1998; Piechowski 1997); misdiagnosis of conditions, such as ADHD (Baum, Olenchak and Owen 1998); creative personality (Schiever 1985); spiritual development (Morrissey 1996) and counselling (Hazell 1999; Colangelo and Ogburn 1989; Mendaglio 1998). Arguably, TPD has implications for the education of gifted students, but it provides no strategies or techniques that can be readily applied to the classroom. This cannot be used to criticize TPD because Dabrowski, a psychiatrist and psychologist, was primarily concerned with personality development and psychotherapy. In the absence of a comprehensive theory of giftedness, TPD offers a significant contribution to gifted education by providing provocative concepts that shed light on the affective aspects of gifted persons while simultaneously requiring an examination of our notions of giftedness itself. This article presents elements of TPD that have deepened

my understanding of gifted persons and that may prove useful for educators. A theme in my presentation is that TPD is a theory of personality development (for example, Dabrowski 1964, 1967; Pyryt and Mendaglio 1993). As such, TPD is neither a theory of giftedness nor a theory of emotional development. It is a comprehensive, complex theory with far-reaching implications for understanding human development in general.

## **TPD: What's in a Name?**

It is worth beginning with spelling out TPD again: theory of positive disintegration. In gifted education, theory of positive disintegration is used, but the most prolific writers in the area have reified the label Dabrowski's theory of emotional development (Piechowski 1997; Silverman 1993). Unlike a rose, TPD by any other name is not TPD. Dabrowski proposes a comprehensive theory of personality development. His aims were more ambitious than helping us understand the intense positive and negative feelings witnessed in many gifted students, although his concepts are helpful in this area. In addition, he had little to say about emotional development in the sense that is used in developmental psychology (see Saarni 1999). Viewing TPD as a theory of emotional

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development obscures a cornerstone of Dabrowski's theory: positive disintegration.

In Dabrowski's (1964) theory, positive disintegration is the process by which development occurs. For Dabrowski, growth occurs through a series of psychological disintegrations and reintegrations, resulting in dramatic change to a person's conceptions of self and the world. Positive disintegration forges a personality that motivates one to perform at increasingly high levels, emphasizing altruism and morality. However, not all disintegrations are positive. When negative disintegrations occur, psychoses or suicide may be the outcome. An important theme of TPD is the movement from an initial egocentric approach to life to an altruistic one. The factors needed for positive disintegration and their operation are primary concerns of TPD.

Positive disintegration propels a person to TPD's higher levels of development. There are five levels of development: initial or primary integration; three levels referring to increasing complexity of disintegration called unilevel, spontaneous multilevel and organized multilevel; and secondary integration that refers to the highest level (see Dabrowski 1964). Levels of development may lead one to believe that TPD is a type of stage theory similar to well-known theories of development, such as Erikson's (1963) theory of life span development and Piaget's theory of cognitive development (Piaget and Inhelder 1969). There are some significant differences between Dabrowski's use of level and the notion of stage. For one thing, progression beyond level one, primary integration, is by no means universal in the population. In addition, progression through the levels is not accomplished in a linear, invariant sequence. The concept of level allows for progression and regression, for unique patterns of development.

TPD is not a theory of emotional development, though it provides some useful insights into emotionality. Dabrowski's theory describes how human beings transform themselves from self-serving, conforming

individuals to self-aware, self-directed persons who transcend their primitive natures and strive to "walk the moral talk." Certain prerequisites are needed for the journey from egocentrism to altruism. One is familiar to us, namely, a facilitative social environment; the other, developmental potential, is unique to TPD.

### **Developmental Potential: Beyond the OEs Lie Complexity and Controversy**

Overexcitabilities (OEs) are by far the most frequently encountered components of TPD (for example, Tolan 1994; Gallagher 1985; Piechowski, Silverman and Falk 1985; Piechowski and Colangelo 1984; Piechowski and Cunningham 1985; Lewis, Kitano and Lynch 1992) but they are often presented out of the context in which TPD discusses them. Dabrowski's (1972) notion of overexcitability is anchored to the sensitivity of the nervous system and is seen as above-average responsiveness to stimuli. Overexcitability (OE) is a fundamental but not a sole indicator of the foundational concept of developmental potential. OE has five manifestations: psychomotor, sensual, imaginal, intellectual and emotional.

Piechowski (1986, 191) provides a useful description of OEs:

Psychomotor: movement, restlessness, drivenness, an augmented capacity for being active and energetic.

Sensual: enhanced differentiation and aliveness of sensual experience.

Imaginational: vividness of imagery, richness of association, facility for dreams, fantasies, and inventions, animisms and personifications, liking the unusual.

Intellectual: avidity for knowledge, discovery, questioning, love of ideas and theoretical analysis, search for truth.

Emotional: great depth and intensity of emotional life expressed in a wide range of feelings, compassion, attachments, heightened sense of responsibility, self-examination.

Overexcitability is not unique to gifted persons, as some authors imply (for example, Bouchet and Falk 2001). In TPD, OE indicates the level of developmental potential applicable to the general population. The number and levels of OEs in persons affect their experiencing. When all five are present, emotional intensity results: "These overexcitabilities, especially the latter three (intellectual, imaginal, and emotional), often cause a person to experience day to day life more intensely and to feel the extremes of the joys and sorrows of life profoundly" (Tillier 1998, 50).

### **Complexity**

OEs are only part of a central concept of developmental potential. For Dabrowski (1964), developmental potential includes OEs, special abilities and talents, and the third factor. While the meaning of the second component makes intuitive sense, the third factor is more elusive. Its appearance is "to some extent dependent on inherited abilities and on environmental experiences, but as it develops it achieves an independence from these factors through conscious differentiation and self-definition takes its own position in the course of development of personality" (Dabrowski 1964, 55).

Piechowski (1975) interprets developmental potential as consisting of OEs and autonomous inner forces called dynamisms. Dynamisms are central, but rarely discussed, components of TPD (Pyryt and Mendaglio 2000). Dynamisms are forces that drive disintegration and reintegrations of psychological structures. Despite the importance of these autonomous inner forces as evidenced by Dabrowski's (1964) own writings and in his coauthored volumes with Piechowski (Dabrowski and Piechowski 1977a, 1977b), little reference is made to them in more recent discussions of TPD in gifted education (for example, Piechowski 1997; Silverman 1991).

Dynamisms are forces of development that drive the process of positive disintegration and assist in actualizing persons'

endowment of developmental potential. Dynamisms are forces, biological or mental in nature, that control behavior and its development. Dabrowski (1972) describes them as instincts, drives and intellectual processes combined with emotions. Some dynamisms refer explicitly to a person's experiencing intense negative emotions, such as guilt and shame, for example. Experience of chronic, intense negative emotions contribute to shattering a person's picture of his or her lifestyle and spark changes in perceptions and attitudes toward self and the social environment. In other words, such people become aware of their implicit worldviews that have led to their complacency and conformity, and they become transformed through dynamisms, such as the ones mentioned, and others, including dissatisfaction with self and empathy. Those with the highest levels of developmental potential (extraordinary, in Dabrowski's view) may reach level four, organized multilevel disintegration, where through dynamisms such as autopsychotherapy they take control over their own personality development. At this level, persons transcend their primitive instincts and drives. They achieve a highly developed sense of morality. In the highest level of development, secondary integration, rarely achieved and represented by society's exemplars, the person enacts his or her personality ideal whose hallmark is dedication to serving humanity.

### **Controversy**

While dynamisms receive some mention in recent literature in gifted education (for example, Piechowski 1997; Silverman 1993), an important assumption associated with developmental potential is not apparent. Dabrowski proposes that developmental potential is determined by heredity and fixed at birth. According to TPD, we are all born with a certain level of developmental potential. Whether the level is low, moderate or high, it is out of our control. While our level of developmental potential interacts

with the environment, the environment cannot alter the level we inherited. In this sense, developmental potential is analogous to intelligence. Both are genetically determined but influenced significantly by the environment.

Although developmental potential is not quantified in TPD, positive disintegration requires more than low levels of developmental potential. To attain levels beyond primary integration (level 1), moderate to high levels of developmental potential are needed. Dabrowski argues that the highest level of development, secondary integration (level 5), is rarely achieved. At those lofty heights of human development, we would likely find people such as Mother Teresa. Dabrowski himself said that he had not met a person who achieved secondary integration (Tillier, personal communication, June 25, 2002). Regardless of the quality of the social environment, limits of development are set by hereditary factors.

This means that we are born with a varying number and level of OEs. Dabrowski did not elaborate on this. For example, he did not provide profiles of persons with only two OEs of psychomotor and sensual or a metric with which we can readily assess either the presence or the levels of OEs. It is clear, however, that TPD requires that all five OEs be present, with three occurring in high levels, for advanced human development to take place: "Emotional (affective), imaginal and intellectual overexcitability are the richer forms. If they appear together, they give rich possibilities of development and creativity" (Dabrowski 1972, 7).

In TPD, OEs are only part of the developmental potential concept. If we are interested in applying TPD to gifted students, we need to go beyond the OEs. Dabrowski's OEs are not gifts that can be created by people in a social environment, no matter how loving and supportive it may be. To be sure, the quality of the social environment is implicated in their elicitation, but not in their creation. OEs, as part of developmental potential, are created by heredity, not by

facilitative parents or educators. One implication of adopting a Dabrowskian perspective is that we must divest ourselves of the notion that all persons can be gifted in the sense of TPD's potential for advanced development.

### **Positive Disintegration and Personality Development: No Emotional Pain, No Developmental Gain**

Positive disintegration is an emotionally painful process resulting in psychological reintegration at a higher level of human functioning. Experiencing negative emotions, such as shame, guilt and anxiety, under certain conditions is indicative of positive disintegration. However, we need to see emotions in the context of developmental potential. When developmental potential is low, emotions, including intense negative emotions, are simply experienced with short-term effects on a person. In contrast, intense emotionality in the context of high OEs yields profound, life-changing experiences contributing to positive disintegration. Inner conflict is associated with such intense emotionality: life events and introspection become catalysts to painful experiencing of the discrepancy between the way the world ought to be and the way it is.

Negative emotions triggered by inner conflict propel a person into higher levels of personality structures. In other words, these negative emotions are part of positive disintegration. As such, they do not require fixing. Whereas prevailing wisdom suggests that we intervene at such times to remove the emotional distress, Dabrowski advocates an acceptance of these intense negative emotions. Our interventions should be aimed at helping people understand their emotions in the context of TPD principles. Dabrowski's psychotherapeutic interventions included a didactic use of TPD with patients. I should reiterate the type of emotionality involved here: emotions sparked by inner conflict, not

by self-interest. Educators know firsthand of the range of emotions expressed by students. My guess is that few emotional expressions of students would qualify as being motivated by inner conflict. Experienced educators can instinctively differentiate between self-serving, manipulative emotions and genuine indicators of growth in the Dabrowskian sense of development.

In addition to being a theory of personality development, TPD is a theory of moral development. Unlike Kohlberg's (1976) theory of moral development, which focuses on the development of moral reasoning, Dabrowski focuses on moral behavior—inner conflict serves a motivational purpose. As awareness of how the world ought to be leads to preoccupation with what is good and right, personal values become transformed by an empathic connection with persons as individuals and in the form of humanity as a whole. Self-interest and gratification of drives give way to altruism. While gifted persons may display moral attitudes, a Dabrowskian perspective is not captured by current definitions of gifted used in most school jurisdictions

## TPD and Giftedness

Dabrowski (1967) was aware of the term *gifted* as it is generally used in gifted education. However, it is difficult to support that high developmental potential is equivalent to gifted as currently used in gifted education programs. The influence of the definition proposed by Marland in 1972 (see Davis and Rimm 1998, 18), which altered giftedness into a multidimensional concept in the United States, is still visible today (Stephens and Karnes 2000). Marland's influence is also seen in Canada. The Alberta Learning definition, for example, is a hybrid of Marland's multidimensional view and Gardner's (1983) multiple intelligences: "Giftedness is exceptional potential and/or performance across a wide range of abilities in one or more of the following areas:

general intellectual, specific academic, creative thinking, social, musical, artistic, kinesthetic" (Alberta Learning 2000, 17). This type of definition of giftedness does not capture the Dabrowskian view of high potential for advanced development that is premised on high levels of OEs and the presence of dynamisms, among other factors. Even with the addition of the array of affective characteristics, such as heightened sensitivity, self-criticism, spirituality and emotional intensity, we cannot approximate the advanced human functioning characteristic of those who undergo a series of positive disintegrations. Being gifted for a gifted program requires the meeting of specific criteria, which normally include high intellectual potential or demonstrated high level of ability/performance in some areas associated with schools. This is not sufficient to capture giftedness in a Dabrowskian sense. Other conceptions of giftedness, though distinct from Marland-type definitions (for example, Betts 1985), present conceptions of giftedness that also differ qualitatively from the Dabrowskian perspective. Direct comparisons, admittedly, are difficult because no term is equivalent to gifted in the Dabrowski lexicon. The closest I have come to such a term is the phrase *high developmental potential*. The common notion of potential emphasizes the importance of the environment in which it will be actualized. However, giftedness and high developmental potential are qualitatively different concepts.

Because of my study of both gifted education and TPD, I have concluded that persons characterized by Dabrowski's high developmental potential do not necessarily meet criteria for gifted programs. It is worth reiterating that TPD is not a theory of giftedness; gifted education is an area where it is applied. Those who qualify for a gifted education program may not be gifted in a Dabrowskian sense: not every student in a gifted program possesses high developmental potential. Society's villains can be used to illustrate this point. Some notorious historical figures as well as

current master criminals would likely meet criteria for gifted education programs. People such as Adolf Hitler would certainly not meet the Dabrowskian criteria—Hitler would not be an example of someone who was high on emotional overexcitability and dynamisms such as empathy, which are prerequisites for advanced human development for Dabrowski. The presence of potential for advanced development is not subsumed under the concept of giftedness as it is currently defined in school jurisdictions.

## Summary

Four issues relating to TPD have been discussed in this article. The first issue related to the name of the theory. The name by which Dabrowski's theory is known is not a trivial matter. Positive disintegration is a foundation upon which TPD is built. Calling it emotional development does not adequately reflect the theory. Positive disintegration is the driving force of development for Dabrowski. Second, OEs are only part of a larger concept of developmental potential that includes special abilities and talents, third factor and dynamisms. Third factor is a good example of many concepts Dabrowski introduced that are simultaneous, rich and vague in meaning. Forces such as the third factor and dynamisms, when activated, drive development. Developmental potential is fixed by heredity. The environment can either facilitate or inhibit its expression, but it cannot change the original endowment. Third, intense negative emotions are part of the growth process. These emotions, however, cannot arise out of selfish interests but must emanate from the experience of inner conflict. These emotions are created because of a person's experiencing the conflict between the ideal and the real. Fourth, persons endowed with high developmental potential have the capability of achieving higher levels of development. This is not synonymous with current conceptions of giftedness.

## *Implications for Educators*

Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration is a complex, comprehensive theory of human development with direct implications for psychotherapy. Dabrowski's primary goal was not to propose strategies for improving classroom practices. Reading Dabrowski's original works will enable interested educators to generate their own interpretations of TPD and draw their own conclusions. Meanwhile, here are some of my conclusions based on my interpretation of the theory.

## *Positive Disintegration and Development*

We are concerned with growth and development of gifted students. TPD requires a reconsideration of the teacher's role in contributing to the development of students. Unless we are willing to orchestrate crises in students' lives (which is not recommended), we cannot activate development in the Dabrowskian sense. This places us in a responsive, rather than an initiating, role. Responsiveness does not mean passivity. It requires some usual and unusual approaches on our part. We need to get to know our students, and, to apply TPD, we need to know the signs of growth and have the courage and skills to facilitate it. Being sensitive to students' reactions to such events as puberty, deaths in their families and personal crises is not unique to a Dabrowskian perspective. However, seeing these events as opportunities for personal growth in gifted students is a contribution of TPD. This is an example of how TPD requires its adherents to reframe many commonly held beliefs. Viewing such crises as opportunities for growth will have beneficial effects on how we respond to students.

## *Developmental Potential*

Overexcitabilities are not simple concepts in TPD. They, with other factors, constitute a student's developmental potential. Educators are important people in gifted students' social environments. The manner in which we interact with all students contributes

significantly to creating a positive, constructive environment in classrooms. In this area, TPD reinforces the common belief of the importance of classroom environments in assisting students' maximizing their potentials. Students with high developmental potential will pose challenges to educators. A high level of psychomotor overexcitability may manifest itself in a variety of behaviors that may resemble attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Intellectual overexcitability may result in incessant questioning to satisfy curiosity. Emotional overexcitability may create intense emotionality due to keen awareness of and concern with global events that do not end when classes do.

### *Negative Emotions*

Gifted students' expressions of negative emotions pose challenges to educators. When they express their feelings in a way that we deem acceptable, we have little trouble responding effectively to them. Responding to gifted students' expression of positive feelings is usually not an issue for us. Negative emotions expressed appropriately (for example, "I feel sad because he no longer wants to be my friend") do not pose problems. The challenges are emotions that are masked, inappropriately expressed or manipulative. Students may be sad, but without direct expression, we may misinterpret sadness as anxiety, for example. Avoiding misinterpretation requires that we engage in perception checking with students. On the other hand, inappropriately expressed disappointment, frustration and anger are not to be encouraged, nor are manipulative emotions that are used to avoid doing tasks that gifted students dislike. I have read nothing in TPD indicating that all emotionality is equal in requiring acceptance. What TPD suggests is that persons, including young persons, with high developmental potential will experience much intense emotionality, a great deal of which is negative. However, to indicate growth, emotionality must arise from inner conflict, not from conflict with

others, and it must not be of the type that is egocentric.

One of the many gaps in TPD is the lack of a cognitive developmental context: Dabrowski does not spell out what high developmental potential looks like at age 6 or in early adolescence. My belief is that we will generally see little evidence of students' developmental potentials significantly actualized in their school years, though we will see signs, especially if we know what we are looking for. In an attempt to place some of the TPD in a child developmental context, Mendaglio and Pyryt (2001) suggest that the process of positive disintegration is triggered by a combination of life events and abstract reasoning ability. While gifted students may have achieved abstract reasoning ability early in life, they still are lacking in the experiential component. Having said that, Dabrowski believes that at the upper reaches of developmental potential neither experience nor the quality of the environment is as much a factor as in lower levels. For example, Dabrowski believed that Gandhi was Gandhi at age 10. If we have such an exemplar in our classrooms, we will know. In the majority of cases, only signs of high developmental potential will be visible from time to time.

### *TPD and Giftedness*

I have been using the term *gifted students* loosely. With respect to giftedness, TPD requires another reframing of commonly held conceptions. The concept of giftedness does not encompass developmental potential. Neither definitions of giftedness nor criteria used for selecting students for gifted education programs reflects a Dabrowskian view of potential for advanced development. A Dabrowskian view of giftedness would require a revamping of not only our definitions but also our programming. Dabrowski is clear: TPD is about authenticity, morality, becoming and being a good person; becoming truly human. Success in TPD is not material, nor is it related to academic

achievement. The triumph of people who have struggled and endured the pain of development rests in their lives of service to others: they live their lives for the betterment of humankind.

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# Kazimierz Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration and Its Implication for Gifted Students

*Linda Finlay*

**D**efinitions and conceptions of giftedness currently available to educators do not comprehensively address aspects of personality development and emotionality of gifted students. This situation could be improved if definitions of giftedness were informed by the work of Kazimierz Dabrowski. Dabrowski's (1972) theory of positive disintegration offers a conception of giftedness, which, while far different from others, informs and enlightens the notion of giftedness. This article compares current definitions of giftedness with a Dabrowskian view of giftedness and discusses the implications raised by Dabrowski's theory for understanding gifted persons.

Kazimierz Dabrowski (1902–1980) was a Polish psychiatrist and psychologist who developed the theory of positive disintegration (TPD) as a response to the accepted psychological theories of the time. Dabrowski believed that inner conflict and suffering were necessary for advanced development from what is to the ideal.

Tillier (2001), who studied with Dabrowski, explained the concept as follows:

Dabrowski called his work the Theory of Positive Disintegration to reflect the central and positive role disintegration plays in development. He believed that some individuals are predisposed to experience life more intensely and this predisposes them to frequent and severe crisis. This heightened sensitivity is based on genetic characteristics Dabrowski called developmental potential.

Positive disintegration occurs when a person's personality structure comes apart or disintegrates because of inner conflict or suffering and then comes together or reintegrates at a higher level. Despite the disruptive and conflicted nature of the disintegration, Dabrowski saw the process toward integration as positive because it contributes to personality development.

## **Comparison of Current Definitions of *Gifted* with the Dabrowskian View of Giftedness**

The Dabrowskian point of view does not relate well to virtually any of the current definitions of giftedness because it is not

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concerned with programming for students with intensified emotionality or at different levels of development (what a novel notion!), nor is it concerned with measuring to determine one's current level of development or one's potential for development. The Dabrowskian view is embraced by those involved in educating or counselling the gifted because it offers a window into and an understanding of the emotionality of many gifted persons. Although intelligence is a necessary component from the Dabrowskian point of view, it is only one aspect of the theory of positive disintegration.

While Dabrowski did not concern himself with the definition of giftedness, some in the field of gifted education (for example, Ackerman 1997; Piechowski 1991; Pyryt and Mendaglio 1993; Silverman 1993) have recognized that the theory of positive disintegration speaks to an area of giftedness, emotionality, that is not usually addressed. The idea of personality development has been equated by some with that of the social and emotional attributes of gifted persons (Piechowski 1997; Silverman 1993).

Perhaps the definition that comes the closest to the Dabrowskian point of view is that of Tannebaum (1997, 27) who stated:

Keeping in mind that developed talent exists only in adults, I propose a definition of giftedness in children to denote their potential for becoming critically acclaimed performers or exemplary producers of ideas in spheres of activity that enhance the moral, physical, emotional, social, intellectual, or aesthetic *life of humanity*. [italics added]

By including the "life of humanity" in his definition, Tannebaum has drawn, perhaps unknowingly, since it is never stated, on Dabrowski's vision of the personality ideal.

A second theorist who comes to mind as possibly addressing emotionality because his theory embraces inter- and intrapersonal intelligences is Howard Gardner. Unlike Dabrowski's, Gardner's theory is not

hierarchical or developmental and appears to discuss learning styles rather than the emotional characteristics or development of the gifted.

Neither Sternberg nor Renzulli, two well-known theorists who have defined giftedness, address personality development or, indeed, social or emotional development as interpreted by TPD. Sternberg (1997), in the Triarchic Model of Giftedness, delineated three kinds of abilities, analytical, synthetic and practical, as integral to his definition of giftedness. Renzulli, with the School-Wide Enrichment Model, included the characteristic of task commitment in the notion of giftedness. He went so far as to state that gifted people are only gifted some of the time and that they may move in and out of giftedness. Furthermore, for Renzulli, an exceptionally high intellectual level is not of primary importance. Those who have measured in the top 15 percent in intelligent testing meet his criteria for gifted (Renzulli and Reis 1997).

The most widely accepted definitions of giftedness, at least by governments for the purpose of educational programming, are based on that of Sidney Marland, the commissioner of education for the United States in 1972. His definition of gifted as amended in 1978 is set out as follows:

The term "gifted and talented children" means children and whenever applicable, youth, who are identified at the preschool, elementary, or secondary level as possessing demonstrated or potential abilities that give evidence of high performance capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, specific, academic or leadership ability or in the performing and visual arts and who by reason thereof require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school. (Stephens and Karnes 2000, 220)

One would be hard-pressed to find Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration in that definition.

## Implications for Understanding Gifted Students

Although Dabrowski did not intend the TPD to describe or define gifted persons, the theory does hold implications for the gifted. Considerable research has demonstrated the relationship between the concept of overexcitability and that of giftedness.

Although the majority of these studies have found the gifted to score higher on three of the five OEs (emotional, intellectual, and imaginal) when compared to the nongifted, three studies found emotional, imaginal, and psychomotor to be the dominant OEs for some gifted individuals (Ackerman, 1997; Gallagher, 1985; Schiever, 1985). In addition Silverman and Ellsworth (1981) found sensual OE to be higher for a sample of gifted adults than predicted by the theory. Despite these variations in the results, overall, previous studies show that gifted individuals possess characteristics exemplified by the OEs. (Bouchet and Falk 2001)

Because overexcitabilities are an important component of positive disintegration, we can assume that many gifted people will go through at least some of the levels of TPD. This implies that gifted people are likely to experience periods of intense personal conflict. Dabrowski's TPD provides a context to understand multilevel development, personal growth and inner experience. Behaviors traditionally seen as negative, such as heightened sensitivity and emotionality, self-criticism and the refusal to compromise ideals, can now be viewed in a more positive, accepting way. The theory "helps to make sense of the troubled cauldron of overexcitabilities and presses to resolve conflicts arising from positive maladjustment, self-judgment or the search for a deeper meaning of one's life" (Piechowski 1991). Rather than always being negative, emotional extremes at times signal a potential for further growth. The higher levels of the

TPD describe types of emotional development evident in gifted people.

The implications of the TPD for gifted children and adolescents are of particular importance. Parents and educators must recognize and nurture the emotional potential of the children in their care. A supportive environment is important if a child is to reach his or her full developmental potential.

Disintegration is not always positive. Its downside can include underachievement, addictions and even suicide. It is important that parents, teachers and counselors understand the intensity manifested by these children to help them deal with their developmental conflicts. We need to be sensitive to their emotionality and to facilitate the opportunity for expression in a caring, non-judgmental environment. We need to be careful to respect their high sense of values either by not belittling them or placing them in untenable situations.

Dabrowski believed that anyone undergoing disintegration could be helped in a supportive environment that included explaining the TPD to them. A rational understanding of Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration could temper the emotionality of the crisis. The role of the counselor in this situation is changed from that of a "fixer" of the dysfunctional person to that of a mentor and guide (Pyryt and Mendaglio 1993).

It is important to recognize that emotionality exists within the gifted person even if it is not expressed. Therefore, we must be careful before assuming that we understand the depth of the gifted person's emotion or apparent lack of emotion.

Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration provides us with a framework to understand and appreciate the complex and intensely emotional world of the gifted. Gifted persons often exhibit a number of the overexcitabilities that are necessary components of a person's developmental potential. Along with dynamisms, overexcitabilities provide the necessary impetus to positive

disintegration, which enables the person to move through the hierarchical levels of development.

Dabrowski's view of giftedness as developmental potential is not recognized or addressed in current definitions of giftedness, but research has shown the link between intellectual superiority and overexcitabilities. The theory of positive disintegration suggests implications for understanding gifted people and emphasize the need to recognize and validate the intense emotionality of the gifted in a positive, reaffirming and caring manner.

The theory of positive disintegration is a useful tool for understanding the intense emotionality of the gifted. It provides a framework with which to address the conflicts and turmoil that the gifted often experience, which unfortunately are not often addressed in educational settings.

People responsible for the education of gifted students seem to be only concerned with providing high academic challenge. Seldom, in the author's experience as a teacher and administrator in a secondary gifted program, do people understand the social and emotional needs of these students. Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration emphasizes the need to remedy this state of affairs in gifted education programs.

Teachers and administrators need to recognize the emotional intensity and sensitivities characteristic of many gifted students. They need to be attuned to their students' affective needs and to respond to these needs by providing a safe, accepting and supportive environment. The theory of positive disintegration, particularly that of emotional overexcitability, explains behavior in children that may not be accepted by their peers or adults with whom they interact. Adolescent boys often appear most at risk for receiving negative feedback for what some people might consider immature or unmasculine behavior, such as crying or getting upset. Adolescent girls, too, are often belittled or dismissed when adults tell them to stop being dramatic or to stop giggling.

On the basis of more than 15 years of teaching gifted students, I believe that one of the most important justifications for a congregated setting for gifted students is to address their emotional needs. It is not enough to provide a stimulating academic challenge. Administrators and teachers need to consider the emotional needs of gifted students when they develop programs for them.

A congregated setting for gifted students is an important component in meeting the emotional needs of these students. It provides support for those who may be experiencing positive disintegration and the accompanying turmoil experienced by those with emotional overexcitabilities. A congregated setting permits gifted students to recognize that they are not alone, that others have similar intense emotions and sensitivities. Although I have worked in this setting for many years, I am still in awe of the acceptance and concern these students show for each other. Such altruistic feelings must be an expression of emotional overexcitability. Their empathy and understanding of each other is truly wonderful and is an obvious manifestation of the dynamism of empathy in TPD.

The teacher must recognize the intensity of these feelings, which may not be blatantly obvious but which are nonetheless present, particularly since not all manifestations of heightened emotionality are positive. Students may feel negative emotions as well in the form of intense fears, anxieties or guilt.

Simply putting gifted learners in the same program does not ensure that their needs will be met. It is critical that teachers are familiar with TPD as more than an academic theory. Teachers must be able to discuss their emotions and the emotions of others in light of the theory. They need to live the theory. Professional development in Dabrowski's theory would be a start, but quite possibly teachers would need to be gifted from the Dabrowskian point of view as well. More research is certainly needed to address this issue.

Teachers who experience intellectual, imaginal and emotional overexcitabilities, which Dabrowski has stated are particularly conducive to positive disintegration, may be more able to recognize overexcitabilities in their students and to provide guidance to and acceptance of their students. Teachers may need to experience and to demonstrate to their students a heightened need to seek understanding and truth, to question and to think critically. It may be important that teachers be able to ask the essential questions to spur, nurture and shape their students' intellectual overexcitability.

Teachers with a strong sense of imagination could help students express and refine their imaginal overexcitability to allow students to use elaborate metaphors, develop fantasy and a rich association of real and imagined images and impressions. Students need to see that imaginal thinking is an accepted and respected way of living in the world.

Teachers who are emotionally overexcitable and understand how this way of living shapes one's understanding of the world can offer powerful role models for students who also experience the world in an intensely emotional way. Such teachers can offer empathy and support for students. Rather than belittling the students' intense feelings, teachers could offer ways of channeling these feelings so that students can find a measure of control. For instance, a student who is agonizing over the plight of the homeless could be shown ways of helping, for example, by lobbying government for more shelters or fundraising.

Teachers who are familiar with and have experienced the overexcitabilities and dynamics that shape the process of personality development and can lead to positive disintegration may be able to provide support and understanding as students experience levels of disintegration and reintegration. Such teachers may be able to recognize that TPD provides a framework within which to understand their own and their students' experiences.

Examples of students who could possibly benefit from teachers and administrators who are aware of TPD and its implications for meeting the needs of gifted students abound. For instance, one young man I encountered might be considered a classic underachiever. He never really received passing grades when he left junior high school. At that time, he was undergoing emotional upheaval that led him to attempt suicide. When he returned for Grade 10, he was initially placed in classes commensurate with his level of achievement the previous year. A pattern of absences, underachievement and depression began to surface again. I cannot help but wonder if his circumstances would have been different had he been in a school that looked at him within the framework provided by TPD. Fortunately, he was eventually placed in an advanced science class with a teacher who was sensitive to his needs despite his lacking the prerequisites for the class.

Although this has not completely addressed the boy's problems, it made a significant difference in his outlook and achievement level not only in science but also in his other classes. The difference is that his emotional needs were respected and considered before his academic achievement. What strides might have been made in helping this boy if his teachers had understood his emotional turmoil in terms of TPD?

Unfortunately, teachers and even school-based administrators are hamstrung if system-level or even provincial-level administrators are not prepared to address gifted learners' emotional needs. Often, people at senior levels making educational decisions for gifted students fail to consider their emotional needs. Bureaucracies at the school board and provincial level do not appear to understand the unique and critical emotional needs of these students. For instance, the young man previously described will not be able to obtain credit in his advanced science class, even if he does well, until he either completes the lower level science class or successfully challenges it. The fact that the

knowledge of the higher level class is built on that of the lower level does not matter. The education system has a long way to go in understanding and accommodating the complex problems facing many gifted students.

## Conclusion

I wonder what the educational world would be like for gifted students if everyone concerned, including the bureaucrats, were knowledgeable about Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration, particularly in relation to the emotional needs of gifted learners. What a different place the world of gifted education might be then.

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# TPD and Practicality in the Classroom: A Need for Subjective Identification

*Richard Michelle-Pentelbury*

"It's as pleasant as the smell of a new-mown lawn," I assert. And the students give six rather different responses.

Five: "I can hear the grass screaming when my dad cuts it! I can hardly bear it."

Four: "I don't like the dandelions destroyed; we all should enjoy every single thing!"

Three: "Yes, but I think people should take care of their lawns, for everybody."

Two: "Who cares? We should only cut it if it really bothers others. Right?"

One: "My mom says we should always be aware of what our yard looks like."

One other: "Hey! It's my lawn. I'll do what I want with it!"

Six hypothetical children? Dabrowski's six paradigms of potential? Yes, particularly if the teacher can subjectively identify with the positive disintegration theory. If "walking one's talk" is at the heart of pedagogic pragmatics, then how best to affect the students is almost always of practical relevance.

Yet idiosyncrasies abound. Intelligent people, at whatever degree of realization, are distinctly different, yet they are distributed into identifiable subsets. Dabrowski defines five levels. Kohlberg identified six. Erikson decided on eight.

The factor one, level 1 students, however brilliant, habituate themselves into egocentric choices, surfacing not necessarily only as disruptions to classroom activities, and

perhaps in later years, disruptions to society. Brilliant criminals and awful megalomaniacs provide too many case histories. The events of September 11, 2001, are a case in point. Every caring teacher would want to be able to distinguish between the developmental potential of those sorts of people and that of levels 2 or 3 students. Each person deserves careful word choice, considerable consequences for behavior and knowing redirection of interests.

The factor two, level 1 students habituate themselves into *flatlander* choices (a term lately fashionable, yet common in South Africa where it has the pejorative connotation of having nothing to climb. Yet of all the different mores and codes of ethics, left and right choices, parental values and a sense of moral superiority, we have many wonderful examples of heroes, leaders, ministers and mentors. To challenge level 1 students to challenge themselves or to pursue a more eclectic approach to anthropology and philosophy, for instance, sometimes requires teachers to face the child's disapproving parents. Many an explication, history relates, has "gone with the wind." Yet stability of society, for the majority of us, is formed through this ongoing sense of "appropriateness of choice," even while allowing room for others' freedom of choice in the process.

At best, we all generally exemplify the spiritual, academic and religious icons of

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society. But the iconoclast is the suspect one. The challenger. He is the vacillator of Dabrowski's level 2. As Dabrowski states it, "Nervousness, neuroses, psychoneuroses, and the so-called educational difficulties accelerate the development and increase its many-sidedness" (Dabrowski with Kawcsak and Piechowski 1970, 150). He further asserts, "One who manifests several forms of overexcitability sees reality in a different, stronger and more multisided manner" (1972, 66).

Level 3 defines the autonomous and conscious self, operating out of full respect for the health of the whole. And what of the potential Gandhi or Mother Teresa in our classrooms? Do we expect them already to be sitting (quietly) in a halo of level 4 and 5 recognizability?

Awareness of any developmental theory, as inculcated in students, in others, in oneself, gives rise perhaps at the very least to the potential of reconceptualizing instinct, habit or practice. And practicality, or relevance to oneself, is at the core of one's interests in most given lessons. As Dabrowski (1964, 5) writes, "The term disintegration is used to refer to a broad range of processes, from emotional disharmony to the complete fragmentation of the personality structure."

Precepts and percepts—therein lies the rub for any of us.

A practical application of the positive disintegration theory, as a continuum, however, whether in phys. ed., English, drama or science, relies not so much on an objective understanding of its precepts as on a subjective identification with its percepts. "Personality development is characterized by a shift from the automatic and habitual expression of instinctually and socially determined values and goals toward an expression of autonomous and authentic goals based upon a hierarchy of conscious, individualized values that form each person's unique personality ideal" (Tillier 1999).

Students who can paraphrase Dabrowski's theory will perhaps speak in terms of levels

of developmental potential, factors one and two in the first level and evidence of overexcitabilities or supersensitivity in the upper levels. "The emotional sphere at every level of development is the decisive factor that determines and controls human activity" (Dabrowski with Kawcsak and Piechowski 1970, 150). Students may even refer to Dabrowski's dynamisms, give explication in terms of developmental potential and charge each other with phrases like "That's factor-one thinking!" And there are even those who aspire to level 5, "just as soon as I can quit school!" But of more relevance to the whole, potentially, is the heightened sensitivity to and acceptance of each other's individual differences, accepted as a stream of progress, or stream of consciousness, in its unfolding. As Dabrowski (1964, 54) writes,

The appearance and growth of the third agent [self-directed, autonomous behavior] is to some degree dependent on inherited abilities and on environmental experiences, but as it develops it achieves an independence from these factors and through conscious differentiation and self-definition takes its own position in determining the course of development of personality.

Subjective identification with the theory, which is "conscious choice . . . by which one affirms or rejects certain qualities in oneself and in one's environment" (Dabrowski 1972, 306), and the possibilities of one's potential development endemic to levels 2, 3, 4 and the probably unattainable 5, give rise to the student's evaluation of the self and others in terms of the plethora of daily choices that decide one's life. "Things cease to remain under exclusive control of biological and social determinants. Self-conscious, autonomous choice between alternatives becomes real" (Dabrowski 1970, 12).

But where students (and indeed most of us) may balk is at Dabrowski's concept of a fixed developmental package of potential ascribed to any one of us. Developmental



potential is “the constitutional endowment which determines the character and the extent of mental growth possible for a given individual. The developmental potential can be assessed on the basis of the following components: psychic overexcitability, special abilities and talents, and autonomous factors” (Dabrowski 1972, 293).

And here we hasten to reassure our students that this particular theory, as for most theories, relies not so much on empirical evidence and quantifiable observation as it does on qualitative analysis. That is, it is based on intelligent observation. Measuring developmental potential, per se, is predictably a prickly issue. But empirical measures aside, whether a mental age over an actual age multiplied by a hundred is applicable or not, it is cognizant of the theory of positive disintegration itself, and the potential inherent in re-examining our individual way of progress that is so invigorating, that indeed gives rise perhaps at the very least to the potential of reconceptualizing one’s instinct, habit or practice.

Disintegration is felt according to individual sensitivities. Positive disintegration is understood according to individual paradigms. Paradigm shifts are understood as both minuscule and sometimes simultaneously cosmic as the disintegration of the formerly held perception yields to a new mainstream of thought. Shifts in cognition correspondingly shift gears in behavior, sometimes subtly, sometimes with a perceptible lurch, yet the student affected is, however momentarily, aware of some universal relevance beyond the immediacy of the self.

Yet in terms of practicality in the classroom, however esoteric the realization, the knowledge and application of Dabrowski’s theory allow for each student to advance with a sense of decided attainment beyond the abstract. More communally evident, however, are the many students who become inclusive, more understanding and patient with one another. “Because the sensitivity is related to all essential groups of receptors of

stimuli of the internal and external worlds it widens and enhances the field of consciousness” (Dabrowski 1972, 66).

Caveats, however, prevail. “Psychoneuroses are observed in people possessing special talents, sensitivity, and creative capacities; they are common among outstanding people” (Dabrowski 1972, 2). At risk is the possibility that some students will feel a heightened inferiority to others, or regrettably, a heightened superiority. As Schiever (1985, 233) puts it, “Higher than average responsiveness to stimuli in intensity, frequency and duration . . . have the effect of making concrete stimuli more complex, enhancing emotional content, and amplifying every experience.” Clearly, careful semantics, as practised in the classroom, may reassure and/or readjust the misalignment of a given student’s perceptions.

Evidently then, the practicality of knowing about the Theory of Positive Disintegration lies in the fact that it may collectively be perceived by students to equate with formulating positive outcomes from negative events. It is “the conscious self-direction of the individual towards his or her own development” (Miller and Silverman 1987). Also, the theory may equate with creativity after deconstruction. Reactions to reseating the class, for example, can yield interesting results in the group dynamic. Yet, at the root of the issue is the effect of disintegration on the individual.

Individuals aspire. Idiosyncrasies abound. Common to all is the perpetuation of choice, however subliminally exercised. The disposing and directing centre, for Dabrowski (1972, 293–94) is,

A center which controls behavior over a short or long time period of time. At a low level of development this center is identical with either one or a group of primitive drives (e.g. Self-preservation, sexual, aggressive, etc.). At higher levels this center becomes an independent dynamism working toward harmonious unification of personality.

Teacher and student, we each progress.

The potential is there, and it will out. But in our awareness of the developmental potential inherent in each of us, we can do much to ease the way. The endemic evil lies in the pretense of our intellectual or spiritual homogeneity of development; it is the myth of the metanarrative that we all are phenomenologically equal, and therefore that no one may dare to raise his head above the others.

And so do we all become pruned.

Central to teaching students, and central to the developmental potential inherent in each and every one of them, is the reality of their special individuality as a perception by the teacher. That right to individuality, held dear as a conscious precept by the class as a whole, for the sake of the whole, is the practical basis that may follow an awareness of Dabrowski's theory.

Percepts and precepts; may fewer of us then be victims of being rubbed the wrong way.

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# Applying Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration Within the Classroom

*Ann Dodd*



This article will enlighten educators about the potential of Kazimierz Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration (TPD). I will endeavor to impart its practicality and how it may be of significance in their teaching, particularly with gifted students. Due to the confines of this article, readers unfamiliar with Dabrowski's TPD (Dabrowski 1972; Dabrowski and Piechowski 1977; Piechowski 1975) are referred to articles by Tillier and Mendaglio in this issue for a more comprehensive explanation of the theory's main components. Within this article, however, over-excitabilities (OE), levels of development and dynamisms will be incorporated in the context of teaching. Therefore, educators should be enabled to better understand Dabrowski's TPD, and to relate and appreciate the insights pertinent to teaching that his theory has disclosed for me. My interpretation of Dabrowski's complex theory of personality development will be interspersed with and reflected in anecdotes of former students. Entailed in this article is an overview of developmental potential, its implications with regard to the gifted, its application to teaching and its personal relevance. The article concludes with some thought-provoking questions to pursue.

## Developmental Potential

According to Tillier (2000) and others, Dabrowski's complex theory of personality development involves three phases: early socialization (initial, lower-level integrations based on instinct and socialization); re-organization (series of disintegrations and re-integrations); and transformation (higher secondary integration based on one's own critically developed values and personality ideal). The interplay of three factors—developmental potential, influence of social milieu, and autonomous or self-determining factors—is a prerequisite for the developmental process. The first factor refers to biological impulses, the second to adherence to social convention without critical thought and the third to the strong drive toward autonomous growth derived from conscious critical thought.

Growth, however, depends on both the presence and strength of hereditary or biological traits that Dabrowski (1972) calls developmental potential. Developmental potential is defined as "the constitutional endowment which determines the character and the extent of mental growth possible for a given individual" (p. 293). Dabrowski and Piechowski (1977) proposed that advanced development inevitably involves a dismantling of existing

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psychological structures to construct higher, more sophisticated structures. The person's emotional makeup and intellectual capacity will determine the extent of possible development. It is the inner conflict that activates the powerful force and drive to compel the person toward higher levels of functioning. The inborn emotional, intellectual and imaginal OE eventually lead to the development of value structures that guide development (Silverman 1993).

Each of the five levels of hierarchical and multidimensional development are characterized by distinguishable features. Pyryt and Mendaglio (1993) describe the gradual transformation from the lowest to the highest level of personality development as follows: from external to internal locus of control, from impulsiveness to reflectiveness, from superficial sociability to genuine compassion, from concerns with social norms to those of ideal norms, from moral relativism to adoption of universal principles and from self-seeking love to all-embracing love. In other words, development is evident in one's advancement toward a sense of autonomy by providing the person with a sense of control over one's lower instincts and the social environment. Tillier (2000) refers to the lower levels of functioning (primitive syntony) as levels of automatism, impulsiveness, stereotype, egocentrism and absence or minimal degree of consciousness, whereas higher levels of functioning are characterized by distinct consciousness, inner psychic transformation, autonomy and creativity.

### **Implications for the Gifted**

The gifted population, according to Dabrowski, will disproportionately exhibit strong OE and is therefore prone to the disintegrative process. Hence, teachers, counsellors, parents and significant others have the potential to tailor and apply knowledge of TPD to support the person's process of personality growth. It must first be determined whether the crisis being experienced

by the person is generated from within or is due to external sources. That is, there is a need to examine the rationale behind the person's behavior and emotions because TPD is only applicable to those possessing an empathetic capacity.

If disintegration fits into a developmental context, Dabrowski advocated educating the person in the theory so that he or she can develop insight and understand the context within which to appreciate one's intense emotions, needs, situation, experiences and the plan of development. Despite our inability to ease or minimize the experience of OE and the disintegrative process, we can provide a supportive and encouraging environment, especially through the height of a person's developmental crises. The goal, ultimately, is to equip the person with the faculties to be one's own best therapist.

### **Implications for Teaching**

Prior to my exposure to Dabrowski's TPD, the premise for my teaching conduct and practices were influenced by the following personal beliefs:

- Everyone needs and wants to be heard, understood and accepted.
- Self-awareness and metacognition will benefit and best serve the student.
- Instilling responsibility and initiative helps achieve locus of control and, conversely, fostering locus of control encourages responsibility and initiative.
- Actions speak louder than words; remember, students are astute at assessing a teacher's sincerity and credibility.

Therefore, I have consistently and earnestly endeavored to really understand my students, their idiosyncrasies and their personal backgrounds. By acknowledging and appreciating students' emotional states, I have been enabled to work more effectively with them. My previous observation-formulated hypotheses of student behavior now, reassuringly, have a theoretical foundation or basis with Dabrowski's TPD.

Assuming that personality development is influenced by the OE and autonomous inner forces (PD = OE + autonomous forces/dynamisms), knowing any part of the equation may provide insight into its respective component. That is, familiarity with what is encompassed within each aspect of Dabrowski's theory enables teachers to effectively engage their comprehensive appreciation. For practicality, the application and relevance of Dabrowski's TPD to teaching will, therefore, be explained in terms of positive disintegration levels incorporating the respective dynamisms and the OE.

In relating Dabrowski's TPD to teaching, I will present anecdotal descriptions of former students exemplifying characteristics proposed by his theory. People are complex because of the unique composition of OE of varying degrees and activation of dynamisms. Nevertheless, selected students will be presented under the five distinguished levels of personality development, incorporating the respective dynamisms and OE. An explanation of the components of Dabrowski's TPD in the context of teaching and the school environment, suggestions for the teacher and incorporation within the classroom environment, and anecdotal descriptions of former students who exemplify some of the aforementioned aspects of Dabrowski's theory of personality development will follow accordingly.

It should be noted that the student behaviors were categorized according to the observation at the time. With optimal nurturing and environmental conditions, however, the students referred to in the following may have replaced structures of lower levels with higher levels of development. That is, there may have been a progression in phases, as previously mentioned—from early socialization to reorganization, or from reorganization to transformation. Furthermore, it was not my intention to merely stereotype former students by simply placing them into one of the levels of personality development.

Before proceeding any further, however, the following assertions and/or assumptions must be emphasized and considered:

- All people possess varying degrees and combinations of OE, but OE are more heightened and pronounced in the gifted (Dabrowski and Piechowski 1977).
- People may experience various levels of development in different dimensions or OE simultaneously (Dabrowski and Piechowski 1977).
- With heredity being a fixed factor, providing an optimal nurturing environment and stimulation is essential in maximizing each person's potential (Dabrowski and Piechowski 1977).
- Living in a social and interdependent society, students must be prepared to exercise constructive decision-making skills so that they conduct themselves in a manner that betters society and enhances the individual.
- If the goal of education is to achieve the highest level of development, perhaps more attention to the affective domain is warranted as pointed out by Pyryt and Mendaglio (1993) rather than to prioritizing the cognitive aspect as currently practised.

Just as it is important to match client to counsellor, as asserted by Mendaglio (1994), it is important to appropriately match student to teacher. Given the perceptiveness of gifted students, they will inevitably challenge the teacher's credibility and authority—overtly or inadvertently. Therefore, confidence in the teacher is necessary for the student to be receptive to the teacher's suggestions, instruction and so forth. For example, a teacher functioning as a "level one robopath" (Bertalanffy 1967 and Yablonsky 1972 in Tillier 1998) will not be able to relate to or effectively support students enduring level three emotional turbulence. A teacher who has personally experienced and weathered the inner conflicts and existential struggles, who is hence operating at a higher level of development, will be more

sensitive and competent in identifying and supporting students enduring inner turmoil. The perceptive student will better accept and trust the empathic, introspective and reassuring teacher in the seemingly unbearable disintegrative process. On the other hand, students get frustrated with and lack respect for teachers whom they can easily manipulate and, consequently, they lack confidence in such teachers' judgement.

## **OE with Respect to Teaching**

From five channels through which Dabrowski suggested that people perceive and/or experience the world, the combination of strong emotional, imaginal and intellectual OE renders heightened experiences (as depicted graphically by Pyryt and Mendaglio 1993). Although suggestions for each OE are presented separately, it is the unique composition of the various OE with which the teacher must consider and contend. Each of the five OEs will be exemplified with a personal account in reference to or pertinent to teaching.

### ***Psychomotor***

Because of some students' extreme excess of physical energy, the provision of activities incorporating or accommodating lots of movement and expenditure of physical energy will prove less frustrating for both the student and the teacher. Teachers are cautioned from readily labeling such behaviors as ADHD (attention deficit hyperactive disorder).

My incessant need to move and to keep busy is often met with responses such as "I wish I had half your energy. It wears me out just watching and listening to you!" As hiking or some form of solitary physical activity is a catalyst for helping me generate ideas, organize thoughts or compose essays, I can therefore relate to the students who experience difficulty remaining still while thinking or working.

### ***Sensual***

With students with heightened visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory and taste receptors, structuring learning tasks eliciting the use of the senses will prove pleasurable and satisfying for both the student and the teacher. The student will probably be more receptive and inclined to respond and will be reassured by more frequent affection, such as hugs and pats.

Because of my own hypersensitivity to environmental factors, I am conscious of providing a cheerful and peacefully soothing yet stimulating and sensually appealing environment. From personal experience, I encourage and attempt to instill within my students the exercise of appropriate self-control and necessary self-restraint. Regardless of my concerted effort to restrain myself in a movie theatre, while watching television or while witnessing an accident or an event, I still get caught up in the moment. For example, I am unable to breathe until the victim surfaces from the water. Therefore, how can I refrain from being hypocritical if I reprimand students for evoked spontaneous reactions?

### ***Intellectual***

Activities fostering self-awareness and acquaintance with learning styles, strategies and preferences will prove enlightening to students interested in self-understanding. The teacher should encourage and provide opportunities for these students to best communicate their knowledge, adhering to considerations such as social acceptability and desirability.

My own metacognition, self-awareness and increasing self-understanding have been assets in relating my appreciation for what students may be experiencing. The introspection has also enabled me to share with the appreciative parents the disintegrative process that their child is undergoing and how they may insightfully

encourage and support their child—notwithstanding their inability to actually minimize the emotional experience. Perfectionism, self-criticism and meeting others and one's own expectations are prime examples of issues I frequently address with students and parents.

### ***Imaginational***

Teachers can best benefit the student with an aptitude for visualization and role play by channeling creativity toward something personally enriching for the student and, ultimately, productive and beneficial to society.

I have had the fortunate opportunity to unleash my creativity and vivid imagination in the units I develop and implement with my students. My success is largely due to being able to envision how my students will respond to the meaningfully structured simulations and experiential learning activities and to the inherent enthusiasm that the students can sense within me. One of my most vivid recollections of significant learning as a student was when each of my classmates and I assumed the roles of various significant figures during the time of Canada's confederation and simulated the enactment of the Charlottetown Conference.

### ***Emotional***

Disregarding a student's overwhelming feelings and responding by saying, "You shouldn't feel like that!" are more frustrating than reassuring. Regardless of others' good intentions, a person cannot deny the reality of his or her emotions. Some students are extremely sensitive to their relationship with others and to the universe; therefore, the teacher can best help by encouraging constructive ways in which to consider, approach and handle the intense feelings experienced.

My emotional hypersensitivity, above all else, pervades every aspect of my life.

That is, everything is laden with emotion or connotes an associated feeling. I was repeatedly criticized for being too sensitive or overly sensitive when I was young. However, being emotionally sensitive and attuned has served me particularly well in my teaching capacities. Although my students may not specifically remember what I have taught them, they will certainly remember how I have treated them. In an adult relationship one may continually try harder because the individual does not feel as if the other hears him or her. Likewise, students need to feel that their emotional needs are being addressed. Teachers need to look deeper into and beyond what the students are saying. I attempt to determine whether the inability to articulate what they are thinking and feeling is due to lack of vocabulary, a desire to deliberately avoid or obscure or ignorance. Though I may not be able to solve or to ease the student's particular problem or conflict, just being able to share with and to confide in someone who understands seems to help lighten the burden. As one who becomes so emotionally overwhelmed at times for no particular reason, I can appreciate the need for a good "emotional purge" with someone who is a good listener and who understands.

## **Levels of Development Exemplified with Anecdotal Descriptions of Students**

### ***Level One (Primary Integration)***

Although Dabrowski's research indicates that gifted persons are generally more advanced in their level of personality development, there are those who are not. This is disconcerting and of great concern because high intellectual capacity combined with a lack of morals or conscience can cause ruthless actions and consequences. A prime historical example is the creation of the atomic bomb by such a person (Rankel 1996).

Because of the interdependence of society, we citizens must learn to conduct ourselves according to social norms aimed at and for the betterment of society. Therefore, though psychopaths lack a conscience, they must be told that inappropriate behavior will not be condoned. Whether they lack remorse or not, natural and stipulated consequences must be enforced. Because of the lack of remorse in psychopaths, considered by Dabrowski (1964) and Tillier (1998) to be the lowest level of development, the teacher may find it necessary to ensure other students' safety by distancing them from the potentially harmful student. It is necessary, however, to reinforce that the negative behaviors displayed are inappropriate and will not be tolerated.

The "blissfully blind" or "robopaths" need to be exposed to alternatives and constructive decision-making processes and skills. Robopaths—at the next lowest level of development (Bertalanffy 1967 and Yablonsky 1972, in Tillier 1998)—must be exposed to different perspectives, because they tend to follow blindly or accordingly. Therefore, they must be guided through the process of considering and exploring other alternatives and questioning critically.

As indicated by Tillier (2000), Piechowski and Dabrowski differed in opinion as to the level at which the average person functions. Dabrowski's assertion that 65 percent of the population exists at the upper level of primary integration was considered too pessimistic by Piechowski, who subdivided level two and contended that the majority of the population operated at the lower level of unilevel disintegration.

Of the many students whom I have taught over the past 10 years, Jason perplexed me the most. That is, I had considerably greater difficulty comprehending the motivation for his behavior, though it was merely because I subconsciously did not want to admit or accept his exhibition of sociopathic tendencies or his lack of

remorse or conscience. Perhaps the difficulty was more in attempting to find an acceptable reason for his deviant misconduct and reprehensible attitude. Not surprisingly, his parents are unprepared when complimentary comments regarding Jason are given as they are rather accustomed to being defensive from the history of negative criticism regarding their child's social ineptness and frequent misbehavior. Nevertheless, they were willing to support initiatives aimed at altering his conduct.

I have a vivid recollection of an incident that occurred near the end of recess. Without provocation or prior incident, Jason picked up a handful of debris and tossed it into some children's faces. When the teacher on outdoor supervision went to address this matter with Jason among the students waiting patiently to enter the school, Jason responded to the teacher's request for clarification as to what happened by reaching down for another handful of dirt and tossing it into the teacher's face. When this matter was brought to the attention of the administration and his parents, he was still unable to explain his actions—beyond that he merely felt the urge to do it—and again at the teacher!

That he "just felt like doing it" accompanied by an almost nonchalant sneer was a rather common and standard response to having his misbehavior addressed. Seemingly unrepentant for neglecting his responsibility or ownership for his actions, he was rather more disturbed because he got caught. The extrinsic rewards appeared relatively ineffective and provided little incentive because the externally imposed consequences failed to elicit any internal motivation.

He often secluded himself somewhere within the classroom and shredded up sheets of paper into minute pieces around him as if he were nesting. As if Jason were oblivious to his classmates assembling



quickly at the meeting corner for discussion or instruction, he would grab a carpet remnant and attempt to fly back and forth across the room.

His greatest pleasures are achieving a self-initiated challenge, doing mathematical tasks and eating. Although Jason is emotionally reticent about most things, he does show tenderness toward babies. He also prefers the company of and is more easily befriended by girls.

The Jekyll and Hyde personality observed is confounding because in the middle of being totally absorbed in a math activity, for example, he may suddenly instigate something at a classmate without warning. Other times, he will randomly and generously distribute new pencils or stickers to schoolmates, yet immediately after scribble on another's work or snip a fellow student's hair. It appears as if Jason is most comfortable with and adept at engaging in "emotionally sterile" activities whereas he demonstrates greater discomfort with and is seemingly incapacitated by tasks invoking feelings. Over the past three years, relatively little social maturity has been observed. Although he appears to be able to discern between the more socially acceptable normative behavior and is more cognizant or aware of higher levels of conduct, he does not necessarily feel at that higher level or intensity.

Although Jason appears to be emotionally detached from his peers and teachers, there is, interestingly, a connection with playmates on a shared imaginative level or with other students working on an intellectual level—usually working on an advanced math task or project. Jason continues to assume very little responsibility and demonstrates a lack of internal locus of control for his work, behavior and attitude. Although he does not outright blame others, Jason negates his conscious actions, conveying instead that his conduct is influenced by an external force.

### ***Level Two (Unilevel Disintegration)***

Dealing with students at this level is frustrating because they perceive and acknowledge discrepancies, hence their constant ambivalence and ambidencies, two of the dynamisms most predominant at this stage. Because of their lack of internal locus of control, they are continually complaining and blaming others while being ignorant of their own hypocrisy. Teachers must encourage these students to focus on their own behavior rather than on blaming others, and must point out students' hypocrisy when they criticize others.

How disconcerting to observe the chronic bitter malcontent in an eight-year-old boy! George's persistent questioning was tolerable if one perceived it as genuine curiosity. His constant complaining and sour attitude, however, were particularly exhausting because he failed to assume ownership for his role or responsibility within the situation or incident in question. In accordance with Dabrowski's theory, George was not assuming internal locus of control. On the contrary, his continuous pointing out of discrepancies, yet his inability to perceive the hypocrisy in his frequent criticism or actions, reflects his external locus of control.

People generally do not enjoy being in the company of a constantly negative person. Because of his laudable athletic skills, however, he has established credibility on the soccer field, yet his poor sportsmanship is looked upon with disdain. Nevertheless, he is accustomed to having people constantly appease him, which does not help in getting him to assume greater responsibility for his behavior or attitude. Compliments and apologies are extremely hard to come by with George, as he is usually finding fault, criticizing, pointing out inconsistencies and constantly complaining. George, however, also has a difficult time accepting compliments.

Pointing out how George acted similarly in a past situation, but ensuring it is in a manner that enables him to save face and maintain his dignity, seems to be more effective. It also provides the opportunity for him to own up and to demonstrate consideration for others. I would often associate or refer to his relatively greater patience and ability to overlook his close friend Allan's lack of athletic ability and idiosyncrasies. I would encourage him to react to others more favorably by thinking about how he would respond to Allan in the same situation.

Perhaps his soft spot for Allan is because Allan allows George to be himself without sensing any passed judgment. Nevertheless, Allan will not compromise what he feels strongly about, which George respects. For instance, George respects Allan's refusal to participate in his birthday party activity, Laser Quest, because of its perceived violence and aggression. Even though there is no direct physical contact, it does involve using a laser weapon to shoot the opponents. So instead of subjecting Allan to the awkwardness of this situation, arrangements were made to have Allan celebrate George's birthday with the family instead of with the friends.

Because George expends his energy on the many physical activities in which he is engaged, he is not physically restless. His pensiveness, however, reflects continuous metacognitive processes and unsettled emotionality. At eight years of age, George was extremely conscientious about what he consumed and how it affected or might affect his body. Upon reading the labels of chocolate bars, he limited himself to one that was permissible. Because of his perfectionist tendencies and extreme competitiveness, he will not attempt a task without being guaranteed success. He attempts to compensate by persistent questioning about the task at hand.

The prominent dynamisms of unilevel disintegration (ambivalence and ambivalencies) are evident in George's desire for his parents' approval, yet he is disturbed by this need. Despite his awareness of higher level conduct or options more considerate of others, his decisions and actions are primarily egotistically enacted or calculated. Although George is not malicious, acts of goodwill for which he is applauded for following through are seldom self-initiated. Over the past three years, George has unfortunately become more solemn and less articulate in expressing his thoughts, ideas and feelings.

### ***Level Three (Spontaneous Multilevel Disintegration)***

Although students at this level pose a considerably greater challenge for teachers, this level is more gratifying for teachers because they can observe and acknowledge students' success. Contrary to the predominant belief that a negative self-concept is bad, this extremely difficult and tumultuous time endured by students allows for personal growth. Hence, teachers have the opportunity to assist students in self-understanding and to encourage self-appreciation.

This level is more emotionally draining because of the energy invested in hoping for positive change. The energy is replenished or refueled, however, in acknowledging the students' sincerity and resolve in wanting to be genuinely better despite repeatedly messing up. It is reassuring to observe and acknowledge that higher structures are replacing lower levels of moral conduct.

Perceptive students acknowledge teachers' intuitiveness and understanding of what the students are about. Therefore, they will be less inclined to try to pull the wool over the teachers' eyes. Consequently, energy will be expended more constructively toward academic endeavors, self-growth, altruistic acts and so forth.

Dissatisfaction with oneself and feelings of shame are the predominant dynamisms

experienced at this stage. Others cannot minimize this experience for the students, as mentioned previously. However, teachers can be most supportive by acknowledging the reality of the students' emotions, empathizing with the students' inner turmoil, assisting the students in considering the consequences of the various alternatives, making constructive suggestions and encouraging the potentially best decision. Especially during this most emotionally fragile transitional stage, teachers must remember not to take students' reactions personally but to understand that students need to weather the storm before the calm. Teachers should encourage the students to focus on what they can control and, therefore, can do and to capitalize on the students' inner strength or intestinal fortitude. Referrals or references to mentors, especially people who have endured and overcome similar conflicts and emotional turbulence, would be supportive.

Instill within the students the wisdom of discerning between things that can be changed and those that can't.

I realized Andrew was quite sensitive to and easily distracted by environmental conditions. However, when he would run out of the room with his hands over his ears screaming, exit a room plugging his nose with eyes watering or turn off the lights in the room, I thought he was overreacting! Dabrowski's sensual OE provides greater introspection or insight into how magnified sounds, smells and other senses are for Andrew. In hindsight, I can understand why Andrew appreciated my constant playing of soft and soothing music and either closing the blinds or leaving the lights turned off. If there was a strong or offensive odor in the room or building, Andrew or the entire class would be permitted to leave the affected room until the odor dissipated.

Andrew has a rather sophisticated palate for a seven-year-old, considering he relishes black olives in his sandwiches, artichokes and exotic Dim Sum fare—

tastes, textures and appearances that even some adults do not fancy! If a certain article of clothing is uncomfortable in any way, he refuses to wear it.

Despite being physically uncoordinated, Andrew has an amazing visual-spatial aptitude. While other students would attempt to draw decipherable two-dimensional illustrations, Andrew would incorporate a third dimension or different perspective in his drawings. When explaining the computer hardware, he is able to depict graphically and describe the interior and functioning of the CPU (computer processing unit) or monitor. His first gift to me was a drawing depicting his idea of the depleting ozone layer. Also with respect to the imaginative OE, his strictly-by-the-book mentality renders actual role playing more difficult as it conflicts with his notion of reality. However, his vivid imagination is evident in some of his interesting suggestions, stories or comments and extraordinary ideas for innovative inventions.

In terms of his intellectual OE, Andrew demonstrates tremendous knowledge of many topics and issues of concern. He is, however, quite ignorant of himself and is somewhat frightened by his body's physiological functioning. For example, he became rather hysterical over an incident upon dismissal and started hyperventilating. He began hitting his head and his chest frantically when he felt lightheaded and his heart was pounding. I finally comforted him only by holding him firmly while softly instructing him to slow his breathing down and reassuring him that the physiological sensations he was experiencing were a natural consequence of hyperventilating and getting into a frenzy. I attribute his relatively irrational anxiety partly to his experiences with trial medications that he has had to consume.

Andrew not only has to contend with his own difficulties and conflicting emotions

but also subconsciously bears the weight of his mother's frustrations and disappointment regarding his behavior and performance. Needless to say, he is already shouldering environmental concerns beyond his tender young age. I am rather amazed at some of the ideas he shared with me for getting rid of air and noise pollution, for example, and various other environmental issues. Given Andrew's perceptiveness, his parents were advised by the school counsellor to refrain from responding so emotionally and from attributing an emotional undertone to everything. I was especially careful, therefore, not to unnecessarily contribute greater guilt, shame, self-denial and other frustrations that Andrew already overwhelmingly possessed. As one cannot force change within another, my effort with Andrew was encouraging him in assuming greater locus of control.

Andrew's relative social ineptness accounts for his overpossessive behavior with those whom he has befriended or vice versa. He is as devastated perceiving a friend's betrayal as he is endeared by a peer's kindness. That is, the emotional intensity with which he experiences such interpersonal interactions and situations is evident.

Andrew is perhaps one of the most emotionally exhausting and fragile students whom I have taught. It is disheartening to observe how emotionally withdrawn, saddened or angry Andrew is most of the time. Dabrowski's assertion that a person's endowment with strong OE cannot be suppressed but will manifest itself in some form of expression, explains how emotionally Andrew perceives everything despite his attempts to refrain from feeling.

My interpretation that the emotional heaviness and turmoil Andrew experienced in the past were too painful and overwhelming concur with this aspect expressed in Dabrowski's multilevel disintegration. His theory helps substantiate

my observation: considering how emotionally endowed Andrew is, it appears as if he desires to be emotionally numb. This emotional reticence—expressed by fronting a stone or glazed facial expression (despite the welling tears in his eyes)—is meant to alleviate the overwhelming pain of negative feelings. As a consequence of his normatively inappropriate reactions—given his idiosyncratic OE to various situations and experiences—Andrew is constantly bombarded with feelings of guilt, frustration, shame, self-loathing and distrust in himself and his capabilities.

Despite the repeated incidences of succumbing to lower-level behavior, I could sense the genuine resolve and his heart-felt earnestness to improve his behavior. Moreover, Andrew's sincere remorse discloses a moral conscience. Needless to say, I felt compelled to assist however possible. According to Dabrowski, although no one can minimize a person's emotional experience, significant others can provide emotional support and encouragement. It has been delightful observing Andrew grow into his own over the past four years, smiling more freely and laughing more wholeheartedly.

#### ***Level Four (Organized Multilevel Disintegration)***

This stage is one of self-direction for the students and rejoicing for the teachers because of the personal growth and inner peace achieved and observed. Students are comfortable walking to their own beat and, for the most part, are exceptional and positive role models. As explained by Kohlberg's (1976) stages of moral development, the higher level of conduct to which one is exposed is adopted without question.

Self-awareness and autonomy are the predominant dynamisms experienced at this penultimate stage. Hence teachers can capitalize on the students' internal locus of control by encouraging them to focus on what

they can control, to act responsibly and accordingly, to be exemplary role models and to continue self-reflection and self-challenge in a variety of situations.

Crash! No one ever gets alarmed or really even turns a head anymore because everyone knows that David has merely tipped over from rocking on his chair . . . again! His classmates and I are used to his constant tumbling, thumping his pencil or other fidgeting. He is not intentionally trying to be disruptive. As a matter of fact, he is somewhat annoyed by his own perpetual restlessness and is most apologetic. Despite his concerted effort, however, it was quite a challenge for David to remain still.

David is inherently curious, observant and inquisitive. He likes to examine everything in depth. He is rather adept at distinguishing odors he smells and sounds he hears. His adeptness at handling objects carefully is another story, however, despite his concerted effort in being cautious.

David possesses healthy self-understanding, self-appreciation and self-discipline. Upon our initial acquaintance, he naively but sincerely informed me, "Basically, I'm brilliant!" to which his father responded, "As you can see, he has no problem with self-confidence!"

His resistance to temptation has been observed on several occasions when he has passed up without reservation chocolate or ice cream. Despite his liking for both, they may contain an ingredient that might have set off anaphylactic shock.

David's graphically descriptive stories and ideas and his cleverly constructed and functional inventions reflect his creativity and vivid imagination. He enjoys role playing immensely, and he really gets into playing characters. All enjoy watching him as much as he enjoys entertaining others.

David exudes a strong sense of honesty, integrity and sentimentality. He will unquestionably conduct himself in a manner he deems most moral and thoughtful.

In the event of a situation or incident, David can be relied on to relay every detail as objectively as he perceives, not withholding his role and responsibility either. His modeling of taking responsibility for one's actions by admitting to any wrongdoing and apologizing is exemplary. Everyone acknowledges that David would never intentionally harm another (clearly explaining why his classmates nicknamed him Golden Heart).

Despite how unpopular or unfavorable his actions or articulated stance may be initially, he is respected for his sincerity and dignity by peers and commended by adults. In the name of justice, for example, David would stand up and befriend a person being unfairly treated and enable others to see the person's positive qualities by pointing them out to his peers. I have fond recollections of David face-to-face with his hands firmly on Mark's shoulders and seriously counselling him, "Mark, you have to have hope! You have to believe in yourself!"

David can always be counted on to see the positive in even the most dismal of circumstances, with a constructive attitude of making the best of any situation. An unfortunate cancellation of a field trip, for instance, can be "considered a blessing in disguise considering the weather and terrible road conditions."

David used to get agitated when his choice among alternatives was not the most considerate. It is as if he possesses an altruistic filter within himself—guilt registers if his initial or instantaneous desire is not the one he would consider the most unselfish. For example, he felt guilty when he wanted time to himself or perhaps to play with others whom he usually does not—as opposed to playing with the usual group of friends with whom he normally associates and who expect his company. Over the past four years, he has come to terms and managed to satisfy his own needs while endeavoring to be his altruistic self.

David has progressively struggled less internally when his heartfelt actions conflict with and potentially offend or may be disapproved by significant others, such as his parents, teachers and close friends. His best friend, for example, has a severe peanut allergy, so if anyone accidentally brings a peanut butter sandwich or treats that contain peanuts for lunch, David ensures that he brings the school's policy regarding food restrictions to the offending party's attention. Likewise, he will ensure that everyone gets a fair opportunity on the computer by monitoring his classmates' time at the screen and instructing another to do the same with him, despite how gravitated he is to the computer.

One enjoys David's company because of his healthy disposition. Time or energy never has to be expended on figuring him out or sizing him up since he is what one sees. On first impression, one might view David as boastful or conceited but will soon discover he is unquestionably sincere and entirely truthful. David is definitely one to walk his own beat and his comfort with himself is refreshing. One cannot help but to appreciate his contagious enthusiasm for life. Despite his intense and passionate feelings about many things, my observations of how he has learned to control his overwhelmingly emotional display over the past four years concur with all that is encompassed within Dabrowski's organized multilevel disintegration. It is rewarding to acknowledge David attaining greater inward contentment and harmony because he has discovered how to be altruistic to others and true to himself without compromise.

#### ***Level Five (Secondary Integration)***

Personality ideal is the predominant dynamism at this optimal or ultimate stage. One's exemplary conduct and altruism is an unquestionable testimony and role modeling to be attained.

Lana is one of the most emotionally serene and socially mature gifted students whom I have taught. Despite the depth of her understanding of global issues, environmental concerns and interpersonal differences, the inner peace she exudes is due to her responsible attitude. That is, she is conscientious in doing what she is able to make a difference, and she will continue to look for opportunities to better the world around her. Not only does she possess a healthy understanding and appreciation of herself, she consistently demonstrates wisdom beyond her years. Her intuitive sense and social adeptness enable her to interact effectively with peers and adults alike. Parent volunteers and her peers are often impressed with her introspective ability and the diplomacy she exercises in making others more aware and considerate of others and of various situations. By nature, Lana usually ends up assuming the mediator role between friends or peers in conflict.

Lana possesses a voracious appetite for books and thoroughly enjoys reading. Hence the manner in which she tells and writes stories is indicative of her creativity and vivid imagination. She is also rather adept at assuming the role of various characters and will intuitively improvise or ad lib with appropriate gestures, speech and so forth.

It is endearing to acknowledge the empathetic capacity demonstrated by this eight-year-old girl. As well as being a good listener, she is known for her perceptiveness, good judgment and responsible role modeling. The internal locus of control and fine qualities that she consistently exhibits will serve her well in her aspirations of becoming a tremendous physician.

The rare person, such as Mother Teresa or Gandhi, attains absolute internal peace and harmony. I would like to believe that, given optimal nurturing and environmental factors, people endowed with such fine

qualities as exhibited by Lana possess a greater potential for attaining secondary positive integration.

## Conclusion

My review of Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration and of others' scholarly endeavors to interpret and/or to apply his complex theory of development has been personally enriching and revealing. In addition to providing a theoretical framework on which to base my observations of student conduct, the various components of his theory also offer existential meaning to my own experiences and validation of my overwhelming emotions. I consider his theory particularly pertinent but not exclusive to the gifted.

Dabrowski's theory of personality development provides helpful insight and clarity in understanding the behavior and attitudes of people. It has also enlightened me with explanations accounting for seemingly contradictory behaviors and attitudes that I was previously at a loss to comprehend. Perhaps it is because I, as yet, do not fully grasp the theory, but at this point I do not feel that Dabrowski's theory is all-encompassing to fully explain the complexity of all people's motivations. Only time and deeper understanding through further research will enable me to determine whether Dabrowski's theory can answer perplexing questions such as the following:

- Will the notion that a person's level of development is predetermined result in an attitude of futility and apathy on behalf of the teachers' attempts to improve a student's attitude and behavior? Likewise, will repeated attempts by a student to demonstrate an improved disposition ultimately invoke a defeatist mentality?
- Despite the acknowledgment that the gifted are generally more prone to experience tumultuous inner turmoil, is there any distinction between genders? Caution needs to be exercised in determining

whether females' relatively more overt expression of emotional turbulence camouflages males' experiences of inner conflict. Therefore, does this mean that one gender generally achieves higher levels of development?

- Can it be determined if a person has essentially achieved his or her maximum level of development? If so, what are the implications of telling a person this?
- Given the increase in violence among the student population, is there positive or constructive potential in assessing the level of development of the perpetrators or instigators? For example, are most of them level-one sociopaths, who lack remorse and a conscience? Or are they primarily level-two mindless complaints or blaming hypocrites seeking revenge? Perhaps it is the level-three sufferers retaliating for unsolicited bullying. On the other hand, could it be the unexpected level fours who believe their aggression will achieve greater peace or some desirable resolution? What about students with extreme imaginative OE who have difficulty distinguishing between fiction and reality? That is, could this information and knowledge assist in the forewarning of potentially life-threatening incidents or is it opening more of a Pandora's box?
- Can it be determined whether in schools that have mandated and implemented a more affective curriculum to the students are more equipped to weather the challenging emotional turmoil constructively? In essence, has the affective education better prepared and benefited society and the individual?

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