

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

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Definitions 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.