

## With Dabrowski in Mind: Reinstating the Outliers in Support of Full-Spectrum Development

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This article acknowledges Kazimierz Dabrowski as a foundational influence and inspiration for our work in supporting the development of highly gifted individuals. Our intention is to help disambiguate the ways this farsighted theory of global human development can be employed in uncommon and atypical profiles in the gifted population. Our focus is a case study of a 7-year-old boy who, although not initially identified as being gifted by his school, clearly exhibits characteristics of higher developmental potential. He provides a context to consider the unique and multifaceted pathways of those individuals that appear to be equipped for accelerated development, as defined by Dabrowski. The dynamic, interactive nature of development that is full-spectrum is emphasized, and a broader view of the meaning and purposes for an individual's behaviors is considered. Dabrowski's theory affords new ways of looking at classroom practices, teacher–student relationships, and the roles of the counselor, psychologist, psychiatrist, and parent in responding to the needs of gifted children.

Keywords: Dabrowski's theory, developmental potential, gifted counseling, inner psychic milieu, integral development, integral psychotherapy, multilevelness, personality

Some concepts from Dabrowski's theory have been selected for emphasis in this article. By emphasizing these points, it is not to be assumed that they are the most important aspects of the theory. Rather, they are ideas the authors believe to be crucial to understanding more fully his integrated theory when discussed with reference to giftedness.

We owe a great deal to pioneers in gifted education (Colangelo & Zaffrann, 1979; Ogburn-Colangelo, 1979; Piechowski, 1979; Silverman, 1993) for introducing foundational concepts from Dabrowski's oeuvre to the educational world and for developing the first contemporary links between his work and the discipline of giftedness studies. Our goal is to strengthen this link and carry the dialogue forward. We wish to emphasize his ideas that have to do with the unique phenomenological experience of a dynamic process for an individual with high developmental potential. Being mindful of healthy development, we believe that it is essential not to view the external behaviors separately from the internal processing and experience of an individual. By focusing on the integrated process and the discrimination inherent in Dabrowski's unique

ideas, we hope to make a case for the importance of carefully understanding those concepts when, as an educator or a helping professional in relationship with a gifted individual, one is interpreting student or client difficulties.

Whereas most gifted educational programs seem to focus on the manifestation of visible talent and on encouraging the production of tangible works, Dabrowski envisioned a shift in the focus of education itself. He advocated that *authentic education* be fundamentally concerned with the development of the individual (Dabrowski, n.d.; Moyle, 2000; Rankel, 2007) and that schools should support students developmentally in becoming the best *persons* they could possibly be—not simply to be focused on making them better producers, consumers, or acquirers of knowledge.

The unique key terms imagined by Dabrowski, which have been selected to highlight in this article, are his concepts of *multilevelness*, *inner psychic milieu*, *disintegration*, *higher-level dynamisms*, and *autonomous factor*.

### DABROWSKI'S THEORY—WHAT IT IS AND WHAT IT ISN'T

The Theory of Positive Disintegration (TPD) is a grand theory. It is a theory with a wide range of applicability to the

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human condition. In TPD there is room to explain human functioning that spans the highest expressions of human creativity and moral functioning to the lowest behavior of the psychopath and the sociopath.

In addition to a consideration of the broad range of human experience, this theory has marvelous working “muscles”—capable of nuanced interpretation of both the subtle and not-so-subtle mental processes and behaviors of those we have chosen to call the *outliers*—those individuals possessing a constellation of features that include (but are not limited to) profound intelligence and who will be referred to as the *highly gifted*.

Dabrowski’s theory is unique in the literature in that it provides descriptions for the inner states of being from the perspective of an individual experiencing disequilibrium during developmental changes, as well as a framework to explain the internal developmental processes and the emergence of those dynamic experiences. It is often this aspect of his work alone that is most moving to highly gifted individuals who encounter his work, because it describes so well their inner feelings. It also provides a positive paradigm from which to view confusions and disturbances to one’s conceptualizations of self.

However, his is not a theory of emotional development alone. It is integral and includes the emotions in a context with other aspects of human experience and growth. It is not a theory for just the gifted, although Dabrowski’s work lends great insight into the potential development of exceptional individuals. Also, in applying his concepts, we want to emphasize that the subgroup of gifted individuals (as measured by high intellectual intelligence) is not to be confused with the subgroup of those supposed to have high developmental potential—although they do overlap. Dabrowski believed that intellectual facility was a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for advanced development (Nixon, 2005). Hence, individuals capable of development—those possessing overexcitabilities (OEs) and other factors, as theorized by Dabrowski—should be looked at as a subgroup within the gifted population (perhaps the “outliers of the outliers” on a theoretical standard normal curve of human development). It should also be acknowledged that *gifted* individuals would always include individuals who were not identified in any formal way in the educational system—by measures of intelligence, factor analysis, or other methodologies.

Dabrowski was deeply concerned with the etiology of an ethical human being and with what mechanism might be at work that creates moral intelligence—making a person behave in ways that further notions of goodness, even in the face of great danger or at grave personal risk to him- or herself (Moyle, 2005). Rather than narrowing his theory to one of only moral, ego, cognitive, or emotional development, he encompassed all aspects of mental functioning and personal being, behaving, and becoming in his theory and called it a theory of *personality* development. In many ways, Dabrowski’s ideas were visionary, and his concepts are

congruent with modern thinkers who write of character, intelligence, and development with a nod toward the spiritual—James Hillman (1996, 1999), Ken Wilber (2000), deQuincey (2002), and A. H. Almaas (2006), to name a few.

Because he wanted to examine the process that extraordinary individuals might undergo, he painstakingly observed and collected empirical evidence from clients of all ages, including the study of children from a gifted school in Poland.

Dabrowski examined biographies and hagiographic texts of individuals universally acknowledged to possess wisdom and ethical greatness—attempting to identify the common characteristics and experiences of persons recognized for their profound and inspiring contributions to the world. He theorized that extraordinary energy, receptivity, awareness, and processing capacities in five domains were evident in, and precursors to, what he termed *advanced development*. By identifying developmental potential in such eminent adults (of which the overexcitabilities are a major component), part of his theory involved defining the OEs as the genetic endowment necessary for development beyond what is typical for most persons. Pyryt (2007) reminds us that the unique combination of OEs (among other characteristics and environmental factors) will determine the particular manifestation of an individual’s giftedness. Dabrowski, of course, did not state that individuals who exhibit these tendencies were necessarily destined to develop to an advanced moral or ethical level.

#### SEEING WITH NEW EYES: MULTILEVEL PERCEPTION AND FUNCTIONING

Dabrowski added depth to his conceptualization of the wide span of human behavior by insisting that we critically reevaluate our notion of “reality.” He introduced the idea of *multilevelness*, an essential feature of his theory (Dabrowski, 1964, 1967, 1972, 1996; Dabrowski, Kawczak, & Piechowski, 1970; Dabrowski, Kawczak, & Sochanska, 1973). This idea refers to a different way of apprehending and processing reality, one with extended awareness beyond what is normally considered common and consensual. In defining this unique term he incorporated the idea of “subject/object”—the idea of being able to understand another’s experience as one’s own (as subject) and also experiencing one’s own point of view from another’s perspective (as an object). He believed that a contemplative shift in one’s awareness that helped to withhold an individual from reactivity was crucial to multilevel perception and, thus, development. The transition from a more unilevel and consensual way of perceiving to a complex, nuanced, and multilevel way of experiencing is a transforming process or event that sets an individual apart from others in fundamental ways.

Dabrowski introduced the idea of inner multilevel *conflict* as a driver in development. When an individual experiences unsettling discord by the conscious acknowledgement

of disparity between his or her actual, manifest behavior (perhaps automatic, selfish, or egocentric) and idealized, “better” behavior (perhaps more conscious, compassionate, or selfless), this awareness can create an impetus to improve oneself. Inner conflicts can also result from realizing a gulf between the environment as it exists and a more congruent or perfect world as it could be, creating a need to act or participate as an agent of change. Though this might seem to imply that each advanced individual would be entitled to define his or her own perfect world based on merely a personal point of view, that was not his intent. Multilevelness should not be confused with relativism in moral valuation—that was a notion that Dabrowski vehemently rejected. He insisted that, at the highest levels of development, moral valuation is in agreement across human cultures and spiritual traditions. With multilevelness, Dabrowski presented a qualitatively different type of human development that went beyond mere scientific quantitative measurement. His inspiration for such a notion actually had its roots in Plato’s writings (Tillier, 2007).

From a Dabrowskian perspective, the inner world of the child, the abstract deliberations of the writer, the sensual imagination of the artist, the “out of touch” visions of the so-called dreamer, and the visual-spatial mental mappings of the scientist (to name a few) are each, for their own creator, as vital a reality as the concrete reality derived from the five senses. Considering the various experiences of all creative persons as viable perspectives and motivations for action, this creates a complex view of reality that extends beyond a usual one-point perspective as defined by an individual alone, or even a single culture.

In Dabrowski’s words:

We may say that the “theoretical reality” which includes the constructs of imagination, fantasy, and thought constitutes one level of reality—one domain that may be “touched” or “seen” in cognition, imagination, fantasy or emotion. Some individuals frequently feel that this reality is higher than the so-called concrete reality, grasped and perceived by the senses.

For a great number of artists and those who strive for self-perfection, the realities of intuitions, dreams and fantasy are much higher, much more understandable than the reality of the senses. It is easier for them to deal successfully with the problems of this reality than the reality of everyday life. This reality is the center of their concerns and inner experiences. In practical matters, they may perform poorly and be outclassed by the practically minded people. (Dabrowski et al., 1973, pp. 2–3)

This *theoretical* reality is a driving component for the fertile ground from which our greatest minds have, throughout history, derived their data and inspiration. Thus, understood more fully, TPD provides a useful framework to describe and illuminate the behavior and inner world of certain gifted persons in ways that may have no parallel. It

invites us to reconsider the functions of emotions, of creativity, and of crises by taking into account unique individual capacities and processes with a view toward integral growth and evolution in the full development of all aspects of what it means to be human.

In her examination of Dabrowski’s view of mental health and his inclusive conceptualization of atypical states, Mika (2007) wrote: “We cannot label such experiences as mentally unhealthy without depriving ourselves of what . . . (are) perhaps the most valuable aspects of our existence” (p 153).

### FERTILE GROUND: THE INNER PSYCHIC MILIEU

Dabrowski coined the term *inner psychic milieu*, perhaps borrowed from Pierre Janet’s (1859–1947) pioneering work in dynamic psychiatry, to refer to the internal mental environment, where all human processes are born. He included in his idea of mental processes not only conscious mental cognition but also instinctual impulses, unconscious processes, emotional feelings, intentions, and motivational drives, to name a few. It is a most useful term, because it takes into account the totality of human functioning, without getting bogged down with neuro-scientific terms, mechanistic explanations, or metaphysical questions. He considered unique individual drives as a sort of evolutionary movement or progressive developmental “instinct”—stronger than the forces of primitive instinct—that work against automatic, reactionary, and unmediated expressions. This “higher level instinct” puts the individual in conflict with that which the individual sees as tiring, stereotypic, repetitious, and restricting the possibility of full growth and development and what is right (Dabrowski, 1964).

### MAKING WAY FOR A NEW WAY OF BEING: DISINTEGRATION

From a Dabrowskian perspective, mental health and human development are continuing, dynamic processes. In these processes, disequilibrium is to be expected and recognized as potentially growth enhancing. He used the term *disintegration* to describe both disharmony within an individual as well as disequilibrium in his adaptation to the external environment. His theory is based on the necessity of disintegrative experiences for an individual either on the path toward self-transformation or absorbed in the creative quest. This occurs when new awareness arises and an individual undergoes change in his or her inner psychic milieu. It is largely dependent upon the imaginal OE (in synergy with other overexcitabilities) and is often associated with many kinds of creativity. In the domain of personality development, disintegration can result when an individual realizes

that the person she or he has been (or is being) is insufficient, unsatisfactory, or lacking in some way. Dabrowski (1964) wrote that most people, although they often have conflicts with their external environment, are not capable of having internal conflicts. The typical individual exhibits behavior and a sense of self that is automatic, well organized, and unself-conscious. Under stress, average persons might show slight forms of disintegration, but most do so only temporarily—returning to a former posture of adaptation. He wrote that most could not postpone immediate gratification, did not understand the meaning of time, could not follow long-range plans, were incapable of discrimination by evaluating and selecting or rejecting environmental influences, and—in referring to Jung’s personality typology—he claimed they were incapable of evolving beyond their natural typological preference (Dabrowski).

Disintegration affects the psychic unity of the individual, because the cohesive mental attitudes and cognitions necessary for feeling a stable sense of identity and of defined meaning and purpose in life are disturbed or lost (one of the measures by which traditional psychology determines mental health). Disintegration involves a loss of confidence, if one considers the Eriksonian notion of ego identity as an accrued confidence that one’s ability to maintain inner sameness and continuity was matched by the sameness and continuity of one’s meaning for others (Erikson, 1968). Dabrowski theorized that these crises and disorienting periods (disintegration) were crucial in order to achieve new integrations of being.

In this reframing, Dabrowski insisted on the positive role of such disorienting periods—even going so far as to defend the function of certain psychoses—traditionally seen as failures of defense and surrenders at attempt to adaptation—by citing potentially positive roles for such breaks with reality when seen in the context of positive development. It should be noted that Dabrowski was not the only one to imagine such a function for psychosis. Thomas French and Jacob Kasonin wrote over 60 years ago that a schizophrenic episode may be temporary state—a transitional episode in the process of emancipation from an old method of adjustment and “learning” a new one (French & Kasoinin, 1941) and Gregory Bateson (1962) wrote that schizophrenia was a global and painful initiation rite conducted by the self, and that it has a definite course to run leading to the birth of a new identity.

These states of disequilibrium can look like presentations of symptoms too easily interpreted as psychological disorders. But disintegration need not be feared, nor looked upon as pathological. One of Dabrowski’s great contributions was to demand that, before a pronouncement of mental disorder is made, an assessment of what he termed *developmental potential* should be conducted. He was vehemently opposed to what he felt were uninformed mental diagnoses by professionals who consistently looked at external manifestations without consideration of internal states and realities. Dabrowski was critical of the dominance of the

behavioral school of psychology with its emphasis on concrete observation, examination, and measurement. Even today, current emphasis in education and in the mental health professions is on classification based on functional behavioral analysis and diagnosis based on concrete observations.

The Theory of Positive Disintegration shifts the perspective on what development is about, the relationship of creativity to the process of development, the meaning of observed behaviors, and the sources of impelling drive and energy to transcend more limited ways of being. Dabrowski reconceptualized and enlarged the entire notion of mental health to include atypical states and developmental aspects common to exceptional individuals (Mika, 2007).

#### KEY TO ADVANCED “ACCELERATED” DEVELOPMENT: THE HIGHER LEVEL DYNAMISMS

The process of global personality development is driven by what Dabrowski termed the *higher level dynamisms*. He saw these mechanisms present in certain persons as energizing, dynamic actions or forces that involved instincts, motivations, emotions, and cognitions.

In addition to having a high level of *theoretical* intelligence—what Dabrowski et al. (1973) called intuitive or creative intelligence—in our experience (Jackson, in press; Jackson & Moyle, 2008), people who develop these dynamisms appear to have the following global characteristics: (a) a high level of insight; (b) a high level of creativity; (c) a high level/capacity/drive for emotional closeness; (d) a high level/capacity/drive to know; (e) a predilection for intuitive, imaginative knowing; (f) a high need/desire for integrating experiences and knowledge across all aspects of functioning; and (g) a high level/ability for prospection/retrospection/contemplation in context of time.

Though an entire book could be written about the higher dynamisms alone, some of the drives that he identified as playing key roles in the appearance of advanced development were the capacity for a subject–object perspective (explained previously), self-awareness and self-control, the capacity to self-educate and a drivenness to investigate one’s own necessary psychological work (autopsychotherapy), a feeling of responsibility for oneself and for others, and an identification of one’s unique personality ideal, toward which one directed his or her efforts and intentions. These are not common characteristics—even in individuals identified as being intellectually gifted.

#### ESSENCE, COURAGE, AND DETERMINATION IN ACTION: THE AUTONOMOUS FACTOR

In Dabrowski’s theory, genetic endowment and environmental influences alone do not completely control one’s

developmental path. The high-level dynamism, which he called the *autonomous*, or the “third” factor (Dabrowski, 1964, 1967, 1972, 1996; Dabrowski et al., 1970, 1973), is the primary determinant of the direction, degree, and distance of an individual’s development in the formation of higher levels of individuality. This evolved and dynamic factor of development is an emergent phenomenon, arising from genetic influences but eventually surpassing and directing them. Dabrowski described the third factor as a:

dynamism of conscious choice by which one sets apart both in oneself and in one’s environment those elements which are positive . . . from those which are negative. . . . By this process a person denies and rejects inferior demands of the internal as well as of the external milieu, and accepts, affirms and selects positive elements in either milieu. (1996, pp. 38–39)

In referring to the emergence of the third factor, he wrote:

Manifestations of a child’s independence of his surroundings and a growing excitability of . . . imaginative, psychomotor, emotional, and sensorial components . . . [show] the germination of the third agent . . . [C]hildish nervousness which are forms of disintegration, . . . [a]ll that influences . . . an accepting and rejecting attitude toward stimuli . . . [and] . . . the placing of . . . value . . . may be considered embryonic forms of the third agent. (1964, p. 55)

## MEANINGS OF BEHAVIOR IN CHILDREN

As for all children, a gifted child’s behavior is purposive. Response to the environment always contains attempts to equilibrate. A child must adapt to an inner reality as well as an external one, and responsiveness should not be seen first as preferred or maladaptive to a desired, predetermined state of being. Though the communal space and culture are preserved by automatically giving the environment precedence over individual expression, the potential for creativity (and thus, evolutionary impulse) is compromised and often lost. And the needs and behaviors of a gifted child cannot be totally separated—no more than can any child’s—from the influence of the environment in which he or she is embedded. So too, the child’s relationships with others must be carefully considered in supporting his or her development. They are no less critical a medium than water is to a fish and play key roles in maturation and unfolding, even in the presence of strong developmental potential. Balance between supporting the unique essence of individuals while still maintaining stability and harmony in the environment requires awareness and, sometimes, great care and effort.

In positive disintegration the process of development involves an essentially evolutionary movement from one state of being, knowing, and experiencing (understood implicitly) through a state of dissolution and chaos. It is

fundamentally creative, in that it involves novel processes of making anew and becoming. However, by imagining a transcending of the needs and realities of his environment (or for that matter, being even unconsciously aware of such a state), a feeling of danger arises for the child, because it involves voyage into the unknown in a most potentially unpredictable and powerfully autonomous way.

## JACK: A CASE STUDY

The following passages detail the notes from a case study involving a highly gifted child and will be used to illustrate some of these concepts from Dabrowski’s theory.

Jack is 7 years old. The school district’s behavioral specialist has referred him to the gifted coordinator. It is the second day of first grade. He had distinguished himself by two consecutive referrals to the principal’s office in the same number of days. According to his teacher he “melted down”: became inconsolable and, in her words, “could not be managed in a group.” His cognitive testing revealed a nonverbal capacity in the highly gifted range (over 145 IQ) and a verbal capacity closer to average. According to these testing results, Jack would be looked at as a highly gifted learner with the possibility of a relative weakness in language. Because written expression is a major focus of school activities, such a child with exceptionally strong nonverbal capacity but relatively weaker language processing skills would be unsettled and discouraged by his difficulty to produce what he knows. An additional frustration would be that his higher level thinking capacities (his strength) would likely go unrecognized as a result of his lack of production. Exceptional frustration and feelings of shame would be expected outcomes of a child with this profile.

A file review indicated that in his kindergarten year he had many difficulties adjusting to classroom routine. He was described as inattentive, willful, and seemed to have difficulties making friends and communicating easily with other children his age. He was formally identified as a child with behavioral difficulties and referred to a pediatrician for an assessment. At that time (based on functional behavioral analysis scales and anecdotal evidence of overt behavior) school officials speculated that he had attention deficit disorder and, due to the difficulty relating to age peers and following the kindergarten social agenda, Asperger’s syndrome. Results of the pediatrician’s assessment were negative for Asperger’s syndrome (Jack demonstrated intense responsiveness and appropriate compliance during this one-on-one interview) and inconclusive for ADD. In this kindergarten year Jack received support and special education funding for his overt (judged to be problematic) behaviors. At that time no attempt was made to investigate the root cause of these behaviors—nor was any testing done or interviews conducted to get a full picture of his cognitive

capacity, his interests, or his obviously multifaceted emotional world. No trusting relationship had been fostered between Jack and school personnel to gain insight into Jack's interior processing, unique mode of experiencing, or ways of operating in the world. Emphasis had been on compliance and management of the overt behaviors.

With this information at hand the gifted coordinator arrived at the school for an interview with Jack. Jack entered the room with a lively step, clear eyed, and unswerving in his gaze. He wrote his name on bright paper with a flourish and asked if he could play some word games. Soon he was engaged in an elaborate game of filling in the missing letter in two- and three-syllable words that he wrote with ease. The average scores in the verbal testing scales were beginning to look erroneous.

He had no difficulty writing and demonstrated a wide and fluid vocabulary. He was able to make adjustments in his thinking and writing immediately, without effort. Interestingly, he began to draw corresponding graphic organizers, running parallel to his written expression, wherein complex emotional and imaginal stories played out. At one point he drew what he called a herd of letter *Ls* who were feeling badly because they had been left out of the word *horse*. He told the coordinator not to worry because the *Ls* were regrouping and planning on entering another word in the next sequence of the word game. He became more and more relaxed as the interview continued and as he was given the opportunity to express himself in multiple ways. The addition of the graphic organizers with their complex emotional and imaginal dynamic was a delight to him. The underlying tension that had been obvious at the beginning of the interview had abated and Jack was animated, energized, deeply engaged, and completely "on task."

The coordinator was especially mindful of the need to establish a trusting and encouraging environment in which Jack could express himself and engage in meaningful exchange. Jack's initial behaviors had indicated that he was very aware of the presence and needs of others. He was most gracious with the coordinator and eager to share his insights and his multidimensional inner reality. At the same time he made it clear that he was interested in the ideas of the coordinator. He wished to know if she was at ease or whether there was something more the school could provide. This heightened self-awareness and responsiveness to another appeared to be the germ state of the subject-object dynamism inherent in multilevel functioning.

Ten minutes into the interview, an interruption occurred. While the coordinator became occupied, Jack took the opportunity to leave the table at which he had been writing and began a complex drawing on the white board. He was asked to return to his seat and had a little difficulty shifting his focus from his deliberations on the board. He was asked, "Jack, what is it like for you to be in Grade 1: to do Grade 1 work and follow the routines and the requirements of all the

adults?" For a moment he looked crestfallen, burdened with thought: "Well it seems kind of hard—not the work though . . ."

At that point Jack's father, younger brother, and learning assistance teacher joined the interview. Earlier Jack had described his father as "nice and happy." Jack's father had the same unwavering gaze as his son and presented as exceptionally bright and verbally very well spoken. He demonstrated a consistent, loving, and attentive style with both his sons. Jack was asked to complete certain tasks quietly at the table while the adults conversed. He maintained his quiet concentration with very little prompting and occasional encouragement for his demonstrated work. Jack's father described himself as "not that school friendly," not a big reader; his self-description was that of a very "hands-on" visual-spatial learner. In school he had excelled in the practical arts and physical education, and he had not found academic learning particularly meaningful. He described his wife, Jack's mother, as "book smart": an avid reader and a quick learner. Both parents were very concerned with Jack's behavioral outbursts at school, happy to cooperate with expert advice, and perplexed that the oppositional behavior was school specific. At home Jack was an avid learner in both hands-on activities such as Lego and robotics and in language-based pursuits such as reading, writing, and creating stories. He described Jack as a prodigious artist with a love and a flare for concept mapping. He noted that Jack had a tendency to become deeply interested in understanding or creating a particular concept, working with focused industry for days or even weeks before exhausting the idea and then moving onto something new. By choice, Jack's father was a stay-at-home Dad. He reported spending a great deal of time with his sons in both quiet and active pursuits. In describing their interactions he pointed out that although Jack was a very kinesthetic child, he was cautious in the physical world. Despite evident physical coordination, he explained, Jack had great difficulty learning to ride a bike. Jack had spent a great deal of time observing the act of bike riding, studying it in detail and asking thoughtful questions until, in time, he felt comfortable enough to strap on a helmet to try the activity itself.

At the end of the interview the coordinator had the beginning of a provisional diagnosis and a working plan. Based on the initial interview there were many indicators of exceptionally high developmental potential. Jack's overt behavior indicated high psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, emotional, and imaginal overexcitabilities. He showed many precursors to the higher-level dynamisms that would point toward an innate capacity for higher-level personality development.

Throughout the interview Jack demonstrated exceptional and uncommon insight—into himself, other children, and the adults in his life. Jack's higher-level creativity—an amalgam of his intellectual, imaginal, emotional, and sensual overexcitabilities—was evident in every action he

took during the meeting. When asked to write a number of sentences, for instance, Jack began with careful attention to the forming of the letters. After a time, however, he began to add distinctive flair to each letter and, when the interviewer showed interest and encouragement, began to imbue each letter with a personality and an emotional life. He explained that the *es* were especially fearful of the *zs*, in particular, the uppercase *Zs*. In Jack's multifaceted inner world the *Zs*' senior position in the alphabet gave them more power and, according to Jack, they were fond of ingesting *es* at will. He asked the interviewer what she thought would happen next and whether the pattern of *Z* dominance would continue in the coming sentences. In the end, the simple sentences were infused with multiple layers of meaning, with each letter possessing a fully animated entity, elevated as a distinctive creative element in and of itself. Jack's seemingly erratic "printing" behavior—to the outside world nonnormative and "counterproductive"—was infused with complex meaning and ardent intellectual and creative inquiry.

The cognitive capacity data needed for informed educational planning meant that further psychoeducational testing was recommended to reconsider the validity of the previous "average" verbal subscales results. The immediate clinical evidence and anecdotal information provided by his father and teachers pointed to exceptionally high verbal capacity in all arenas: reading, writing, and spoken language.

The learning assistance teacher was asked to provide a safe space that Jack could access under certain conditions. Jack's heightened and immediate visceral reactions to "charged" emotional and sensual conditions, exacerbated by extremely high psychomotor expression, would require mindful monitoring. Guidance would also require a sensitive consideration of his elevated developmental potential. An occasional opportunity to remove himself—in order to regroup and relax—would go a long way toward helping Jack maintain maximum learning output and optimal engagement in school life. Jack would need to be tutored in relaxation techniques, in awareness of tensions that manifested in his body, and in the use of breathing techniques and exercise to allay stress and channel the energy of his exceptionally strong overexcitability profile. Manifold opportunities to express himself creatively, warm acceptance of his drivenness, and appreciation of his uncommonly developed "theoretical reality" would have to be developed over time as staff came to know and appreciate Jack.

Until further assessment was completed and the staff became conversant in the particular needs of the highly gifted learner, recommendations for flexibility, relationship building, and fair, consistent expectations were given. Jack would be given higher-level materials to complete where they were available; if the rigor of the classroom became too much or if he became overstimulated, Jack would be allowed to have some downtime in the learning assistance

center to pursue some hands-on activities or to be given the opportunity to quietly read or draw.

Materials pertaining to highly gifted children with high developmental potential were provided for the classroom teacher, for the administration, and for the support team. These included enrichment activities for children with exceptional visual-spatial capacities, program planning for highly gifted learners, and detailed information on how children with high developmental potential grow and develop. The parents were given similar resources to reflect upon and an endorsement for their intention to investigate what appeared to be extreme food sensitivities. Jack had never eaten meat; even as a baby he had recognized meat products and refused to eat them or pulled them out of composite food dishes. Jack was also very sensitive to texture, shape, and temperature of foods and seemed to have aversive physical reactions to particular foodstuff subgroups. He reacted with agitated behaviors and skin rashes to processed foods, and he needed adjustment time to attempt any new foodstuff.

Three weeks later the interviewer returned to visit Jack and to meet with his classroom teacher, both of his parents, and his grandmother. The school faculty had complied with all recommendations and the classroom teacher reported excellent progress. His initial frenetic and seemingly noncompliant behaviors had been reduced significantly. His writing output was high and he was now engaged in all aspects of learning in the classroom. She stated that, as advised by the coordinator, she was "getting to know him" and beginning to tease out the indicators of high developmental potential—seemingly unquenchable curiosity; profound emotional sensitivity; a fervent, teeming imagination; and an indomitable will—from other more common factors that affected his behavior. She was delighted to report that his productivity had increased threefold and that he was engaging a couple of other (gifted) children in social situations. Though much improved, however, the 3 weeks had not been without incident. Jack was happy to illuminate the coordinator on the source of the errant behaviors:

You see I have two hands (extending them for the examiner to see). They do not always work together. This one (extending the right hand) is hmmm . . . a little bit curious. Sometimes things happen, it can't keep away, and the other hand (extending his left hand) watches and says to the other hand "you should not be doing that." This hand is really surprised but it didn't stop the other one. Sometimes the hands bump into each other. That is not good. What the teacher doesn't know is that yelling does not help. You see my hands need calming down. That is what they need. My hands need to calm down. (Jack, 7 years old)

Jack's explanation of his "curious" behaviors and his attempts to monitor and adjust those behaviors provide another example of the nuclei of multilevelness in his internal psychic milieu. Jack is very aware of the higher in

himself—how things should be—and he is unreservedly aware of his shortcomings. The interviewer was careful to listen to his explanation without judgment. Clearly the dynamism of shame (Dabrowski, 1964, 1966, 1972; Dabrowski et al., 1970, 1973) was at work in his emotional configuration. She responded by encouraging him to gently attempt to calm down his own hands when he found himself in the throes of a curious experience. She also explained that a good curiosity was a good thing and nothing to be ashamed of. In discussion with the parents afterward, the need for boundaries and limit setting was juxtaposed against his delight in creative acts and his developmental need for unfettered exploration and self-expression in the world. The parents, as well, reported increasing insight, capacity, and confidence in their ability to provide appropriate responses and experiences for their son.

#### SUPPORTING FULL-SPECTRUM DEVELOPMENT: DABROWSKI LEADS THE WAY

Dabrowski encountered clients that he realized he could not help using the current psychological paradigms (theoretical conceptualizations) in common practice. These individuals were not oriented toward adhering to societal norms but seemed to have urgings, visions, and energy that compelled them toward something better, more complete, more integrated, and more congruent. He identified uncommon characteristics among these compelling drives that he first identified as nervousness and extreme sensitivity—later he coined a term to describe them that has been translated into English as *overexcitabilities*. (Another translation for his original Polish coinage is “superstimulability.”)

Considering the role that parents, teachers, and therapists play in children’s lives, he encouraged adults to maintain awareness and deep respect in their interactions with a growing child for his or her innate exceptional capacities and integrative faculties (personal strengths and will). To emphasize this point, it is imperative that a trust in the child’s capacities be cultivated from the position of holistic support. Dr. Dabrowski had profound regard for the teleology of the child and he encouraged all caregivers to keep a view encompassing a child’s essence central in educational planning, treatment protocols, parenting guidance, and more subtle interactions.

Dabrowski often illustrated the importance of support for children in developmental crises and the importance of *not* focusing on symptoms. In his case history of 7-year-old client Ella (Dabrowski, 1964) he notes:

Focusing on pathology might accentuate anxiety, inhibition, and flight into sickness. Viewing and treating . . . symptoms as psychopathological would itself create conditions that would appear to confirm the correctness of that approach. (p. 27)

According to Dabrowski’s findings, awareness of the positive functions of symptoms decreases problematic behaviors and contributes toward further development. Labeling of symptoms (fantasies, for instance) as psychopathological has a negative effect. Demands or covert suggestions to desist behaviors (even unconscious disapproval of symptoms can be perceived) create self-conscious awareness in the child and cause emotional tension to be increased. Many times symptoms are exacerbated because the critical attitude of others aims to deprive the child of what, for him or her, performs positive functions. Unless the behaviors are disrespectful, dangerous, or otherwise truly antisocial, labeling them as dysfunctional and attempting to eradicate them actually injures the emotional, introverted, creative, and self-conscious child.

On the other hand, it must be remembered that the gifted child, however developmentally precocious, is a *child*. Those charged with the stewardship of such potential must provide the same developmentally appropriate experiences essential to the growth and development of all children. These include physical safety, regulation, limit setting, appropriate structure, ongoing nurturing, appropriate developmental experiences, and attention to individual differences. This is no small order, especially when applied to the growth and development of the child with extraordinary developmental potential. Because of the gifted child’s asynchronous development (Silverman, 1993), adults must be acutely cognizant of appropriate responses and parenting-guiding stances. Effectiveness and appropriateness depends on the maturity level of the domain in which the child is engaged, integrated awareness of the disparity between domains, and the degree of frustration that causes for the child.

Besides intraindividual differences across cognitive, moral, social-emotional, kinesthetic, imaginal, and communicative capacities, each gifted child brings into the world a particular Self or core. Hillman (1996, 1999) called it *character*—an integrative essence that seeks, often against all odds, expression through creative acts, action, insight, and relationship. This can be looked at as a sort of fledgling *personality ideal* and the dawning of the *autonomous factor* in development. This core yearns for integration, for expression of the highest—to know and to fully embody that which is quintessential in that individual. The greater the developmental potential, the more likely this integral nucleus will manifest as a near irrefutable force in the inner life and the behaviors and motives of the individual. Children with high emotional, intellectual, and imaginal overexcitabilities—interwoven with specific talents, higher abilities, and a rich inner life—appear to express unwavering fidelity to this compelling and undeniable force.

This idea is not unlike the concept of *entelechy*, introduced to the gifted community by Lovecky (1993, 1998). A philosophical concept from Aristotle, the term carries with



it the notion of a force compelling one to self-fulfillment. This often profiles as a strong will and an idiosyncratic evidence of purpose. Single-mindedness (sometimes obscure and often, although not always, unconventional) may be covertly or explicitly expressed. Such children most often have distinctive preferences and unique inclinations. They may have unfathomable interests and, at times, strong aversions. A complex, multilevel, multilayered sense of what is right and wrong will be operative internally if not expressed in the external world. These are the children who, despite the protestations of those around them, follow the beat of their own drummer and attend with deep focus to things that interest them intensely despite the often differing educational or social agenda.

Dabrowski theorized that although one's initial essence forms the foundation for character, it is subsequently formed and shaped by day-to-day existential choices. The mature autonomous factor is the expression of the volitional and highly conscious decisions used to shape one's personality essence toward the concept of one's personality idea. He was unique in combining essence and existence in his theory, coining the term *existentio-essentialist compound* to emphasize the interplay between these driving forces.

In Dabrowski's view, higher development will show evidence of a higher-level morality and a high-level value system; we believe it includes a sophisticated awareness of the transpersonal as well. It is critical to note, however, that not all gifted children with a complex inner psychic milieu and the nuclei of the autonomous factor will openly demonstrate these predilections to the external world.

#### TOWARD THE FUTURE: WITH DABROWSKI IN MIND

Whether or not particular methods, curriculums, or programs can be codified to create more favorable environments for human potential to become realized in school environments is debatable. Can the precursors and potential for advanced development (in a Dabrowskian conceptualization) be recognized and nurtured intentionally by all adults charged with the education and rearing of a child? Perhaps not, but the right to live without the label of pathology seems inalienable—especially if an alternative perspective appears valid.

Many believe that a sense of the mysterious should remain between human potential and its unfolding. Many demand scientific evidence, using quantitative data in the field of education for gifted students, in order to replicate the best conditions for demonstrating talent and producing eminent works. However, the bases for scientifically valid methods of inquiry are reliant on the law of large numbers (LLN) and large random samples; and it might be argued that such methods are inadequate and not illuminating—perhaps even invalid—when examining rare outliers.

As a psychiatrist, Dabrowski was acutely aware of the devastation that mental illness can cause. Some of his earliest writings were on schizophrenia and self-mutilating behavior (1937). But he was also concerned about the negative effects of pathologizing what he believed was natural maturation—an evolutionary process, if you will—in individuals predisposed to profound development. If he were alive today, he would almost certainly be speaking out against the profusion of uninformed diagnoses and automatic, rampant use of medication, especially in children of high intelligence and emotional sensitivity.

In science, the “observer effect” states that the act of observation alone will alter behavior—that, in essence, a thing observed is a thing changed. An extension of this might be: a person labeled is a person affected, if not compromised. This may be applied even to labels intended to support, including the label of *gifted* itself. By bringing attention to isolated characteristics of a whole human being, or by applying a generalized label describing aggregate characteristics, we must proceed carefully. Many educators can affirm that expectations for students can easily become realities—both in the positive and the negative. By the nature of their profession, counselors work with the concept of mental health, rather than mental illness, in mind. But it is our opinion that many professionals in the psychological fields rely on their ability and privilege to diagnose illness and prescribe medication, without consideration of (and sometimes to the outright exclusion of) larger contexts and other meanings for problematic behaviors. The question needs to be raised of whether medication for depression or hyperactivity, though mitigating immediate difficulties, might actually negatively impact a child's future *development*—perhaps actually impairing or preventing the expression of positive disintegration (see Tillier, 1996). Many educators proceed in programming without comprehensive knowledge in the field of giftedness or without a full view of a child, and they often lack time to comprehensively plan and implement curriculum. Can a child with multilevel perception be helped by a unilevel teacher and, if so, how? How do professional decisions, which include both conscious perceptions and unconscious projections, affect a child's development?

Currently, there is an alarming increase in diagnoses of particular disorders that share characteristics with gifted persons, and there appears to be a concomitant trend of medicating these conditions, to the exclusion of understanding them. Some students with strong psychological introversion and a highly developed inner psychic milieu, coupled with innate shyness, are being erroneously diagnosed as positive for autism spectrum disorder. Other students with exceptionally high developmental potential fueled by high psychomotor and sensual overexcitability are misdiagnosed as having bipolar disorder.

As professionals in the educational, counseling, and therapeutic disciplines, we invite the reader to consider some of

these ideas in the context of Dabrowski's seminal work. A case study has been provided of a child whose overexcitabilities and dynamic profile clearly indicate the existence of capacities that lend themselves to a more multilevel case conceptualization. By setting aside a more traditional diagnosis, and working with the idea of development in mind, rather than dysfunction, we hope to encourage the idea that profound results can be realized using Dabrowski's theoretical ideas.

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