

**Feeling Bad Can Be Good: Using Dabrowski's
Theory to Reframe Gifted Children's Adjustment Difficulties**

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Traditional approaches to the education of the gifted student have focused on cognitive dimensions and have emphasized providing an enriched academic environment. We believe that a more global approach is called for, encompassing the overall personality characteristics and development of the individual. The impact of being gifted is often ambiguous and many with gifted potential fail to achieve as expected. We believe that this may often be due, in part, to the high anxiety and conflict commonly experienced by the gifted and their failure to learn to cope with the negative aspects of their gifts. The Theory of Positive Disintegration, developed by K. Dabrowski, provides a useful framework to conceptualize, understand and assist the gifted student (Dabrowski, 1937; 1964; 1966; 1967; 1970; 1972; 1977; Dabrowski and Piechowski, 1977). This presentation is an overview based upon our understanding of Dabrowski's Theory and our views of its application to the gifted.

Dabrowski's theory presents a multi-dimensional, developmental approach, emphasizing an understanding of the unique potentials of a given individual. Multiple dimensions are assessed, for example; intellect, imagination, emotion, and indicators of the potential for development. A multi-level approach is used to describe the diversity of behaviour and types of personality

observed in people. This methodology allows for a differentiation between higher and lower levels of function and their interaction. The result is a more articulate and descriptive theory of personality--a theory particularly applicable to the understanding of the gifted.

A central feature of psychological growth is a series of disintegrations--progressive contradictions and conflicts that arise from a person's experience of life. People often tend to be passive and fail to see these contradictions, allowing their views be formed for them, largely by society. Positive disintegration is a developmental process that calls into question our readily accepted adaptations to life. We come to wonder if our automatic endorsement of society's values is proper. We come to question our basic reactions to things, no longer able to simply accept what we are told or to follow the behaviour of others. We begin to differentiate our attraction to or rejection of objects and goals based upon our own accumulating experience, feelings and conscience. Over time, conflicts produce increasing inhibition, cautiousness and reflection that increasingly influence decisions and behaviour. Behaviour governed by primitive factors (how life is and how I should act based upon my impulses and according to society) diverges into an emerging inner sense of how life could and should be. As this bifurcation intensifies, conflicts and disintegrations become a

fundamental, inevitable and positive component of development.

Conflicts and disintegrations are carefully evaluated to expose potential positive, developmental aspects. When appropriate, emphasis is placed upon helping the person to recognize and accept these difficulties, to see their positive aspects and to learn to cope with society and life.

From Dabrowski's perspective, one critical aspect of developmental potential is an over-excitability in response to stimuli. We believe that over-excitability is a critical driving force in the life of many gifted students, but an ambiguous one, contributing both positive and negative features: positive in that one's perspective of life is enlarged, allowing one to fully appreciate the magnificence and joys of life; negative in that overexcitability can also be extremely upsetting as a great deal of human suffering, injustice and sorrow is clearly brought into focus. This can overwhelm a sensitive student's emotions and may lead to depression, breakdown or even suicide. As these intense perspectives become multi-levelled, they encompass visions of both the lowest, grim reality of life and of the highest, real possibilities of life.

Dabrowski elaborated a hierarchy of five types of overexcitability: psychomotor, sensual, intellectual,

imaginational, and emotional. Emotional overexcitability is at the heart of advanced developmental processes. A person with average excitability tends to experience emotions in social contexts, based upon well defined social roles and expectations. In contrast, the intense experience of emotional overexcitability plays a prominent role in giving a person a very unique and private sense of direction and meaning. The person's unique experience of their emotional and cognitive dynamics stimulates critical self-examination. The learned and often robotic behavior and values we accept so readily from society, instilled by parental and institutional education, come to be questioned and critically evaluated. Through the mechanisms of disintegration, the "what is" of instinct and socialization comes to be rejected and replaced by a growing sense of how life "ought to be". The latter reflects the development of a hierarchy of individualized personal values and the "new", evolving personality of the individual. These changes increasingly ensure that behaviour is authentic and is based upon the individual beliefs and choices of the person.

Dabrowski outlined five levels to describe the process of psychological development. Advanced development begins when the previously socially integrated self of Level I undergoes varying degrees of disintegration, starting with simple, isolated, spontaneous and uncontrollable disintegrations common at level

two. Conflicts at the third level take on a broad vertical nature, reflecting the introduction of higher versus lower, multi-level conflicts. Conflicts begin to wane at level four as development increasingly becomes global, self-directed and organized. At the highest level, a second functional integration occurs. This re-integration is comprised of a critically thinking, autonomous self governed by authentic emotions.

We believe that the gifted, as a group, possess strong intrinsic developmental potential and therefore will also exhibit the accompanying overexcitability, conflicts, disintegrations and reintegrations of advanced development. If this is the case, many gifted students may follow a course of development similar to that outlined above.

Dabrowski advocated a long term, well planned program for each student based upon their unique presentation of potentials, personality and interests. A careful, multidimensional assessment of the student is the first step toward establishing a personalized educational and counselling program. Many of the initial developmental experiences are dominated by conflict, anxiety, self-doubt, fear, feelings of worthlessness, maladjustment and depression. Rather than treating these as symptoms to be ameliorated, developmentally focused counselling can assist in coping with these features in a positive and

developmental perspective. The student's personal and academic growth must be facilitated simultaneously, guided by individualized plans overseen by the student, student-mentors, teachers, counsellors and parents.

Dabrowski enlarges upon the traditional, cognitively based approach to the gifted by the inclusion of the developmental and emotional features of the gifted. Similar efforts in this direction are also appearing in the literature; for example, although Dabrowski was not mentioned, Blackburn and Erickson's (1986) views appear very reminiscent of Dabrowski's, including their use of the term "supersensitivity". In addition, Piechowski has developed an approach based upon Dabrowski (Piechowski, 1991).

In conclusion, Dabrowski advocated an individualized educational approach utilizing a developmental counselling perspective. The reframing of the gifted experience and an understanding of both the positive and negative implications of being gifted, minimizes the negative effects of developmental conflicts and encourages psychological adjustment and individualization. This strong foundation, in turn, facilitates cognitive enrichment allowing the gifted to better achieve to their full potential, both academically and as human beings.

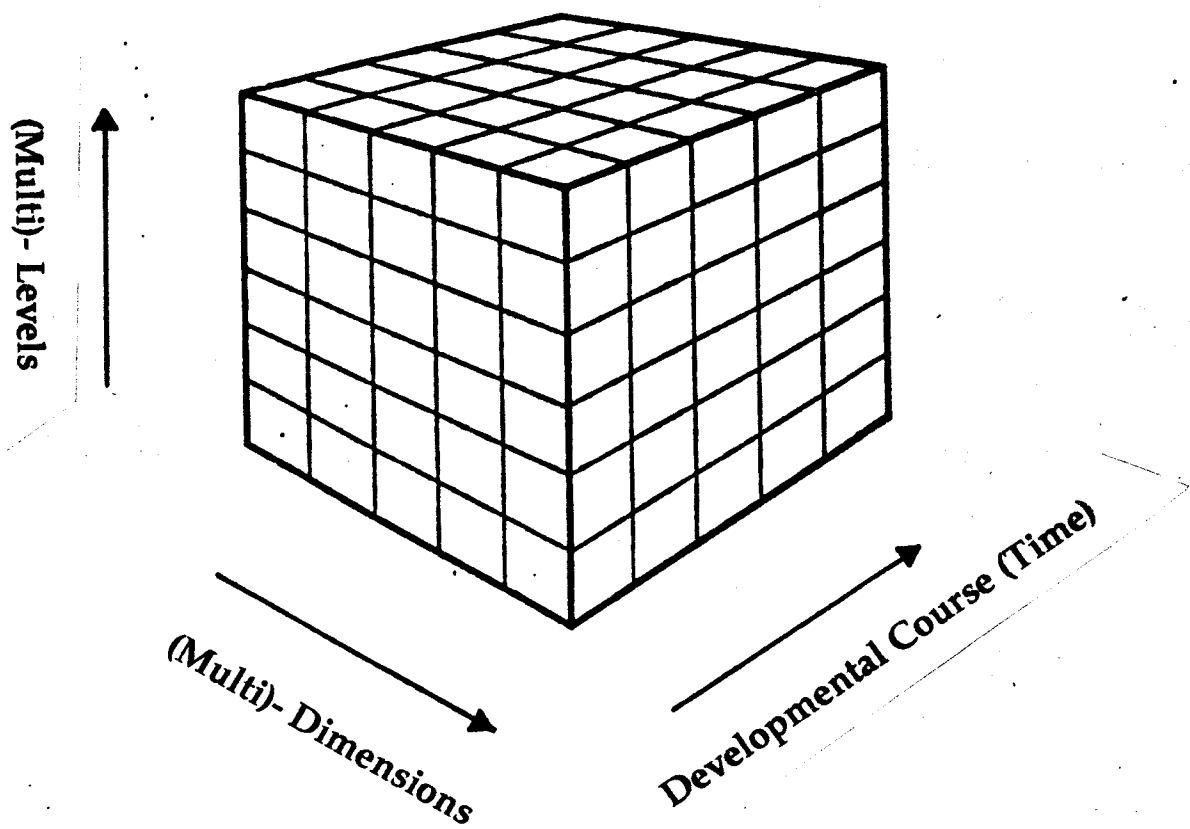
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- Kazimierz Dabrowski, born in Lublin, Poland, 1902.
- Most significant early influence on Dabrowski - first hand experience of the aftermath of battle - World War I.
- M.A. (psychology, philosophy and literature), at Poznan around 1924
- M.D., University of Geneva in 1929
- Studies psychology and education in Geneva, 1928/29 with Edouard Claparede and Jean Piaget.
- 1931 Ph.D. in experimental psychology, University of Poznan
- Certificate of Psychoanalytic Studies in 1931, under W. Stekel
- 1932 attends Harvard University (Rockefeller Foundation)
- Published works reflecting the theory, mostly in Polish
- 1942 held in a "Nazi Prison" , then later imprisoned by the Polish communists (under Stalin) for 18 months
- Allowed a limited clinical practice in Poland
- 1962 met A. Maslow, developed other contacts in U.S.A.
- Two major publications for Little Brown in the U.S.A.- 1964, 1967
- Around 1968, Centre for Advanced Study in Theoretical Psychology, University of Alberta, Edmonton, invites Dabrowski to visit - beginning of a long association
- Some funds for research, "team" assembled, Piechowski translates, result is several works in English; 1970, 1972, 1977.
- Died in Poland, November 27, 1980.

The Multilevel and Multidimensional Paradigm



Basic Features of Dabrowski's Theory

Multi-level and Multi-dimensional Approach

Developmental Potential

Overexcitability

Developmental Factors (3)

Positive Disintegration Necessary For Growth

**Psychoneurosis is Not An Illness (symptoms often a
necessary and positive feature of development)**

Developmental Potential

“The constitutional endowment which determines the character and the extent of mental growth possible for a given individual.”

Psychoneurosis is Not An Illness

Components:

- overexcitability**
- special abilities and talents**
- the third factor**

The Five Overexcitabilities

Psychomotor

Sensual

Intellectual*

Imaginational**

Emotional****

* A "must" for advanced development

Three Factors Controlling Development

First Factor

- biological instincts focused on satisfying basic drives and impulses, usually at the expense of others and society
- intellect and emotion ego-centric, used instrumentally to further primitive goals
- social aspects generally disregarded or manipulated
- conflicts external, involve goals being blocked- often overcome by force

Second Factor

- instincts involving group identification and cohesion
- social goals and values embraced with little question
- intellect used instrumentally to serve social goals
- emotion experienced in the framework of social roles and expectations: "sad at funerals, happy at weddings"
- conflicts external- involve blocks to social goals being reached

Third Factor

- a developmental, genetic instinct that strives for the expression of an authentic, unique self
- largely based upon the overexcitable experience of emotion and a multi-level view of life
- biological and social features rejected in favor of an inner idealized vision of how things ought to be
- conflicts created are internal- focused on growing mismatch between the "what is" and the "what ought to be"
- goals (values) become individualized, reflect desire for more and better human conditions (tend to the non-material)

Dabrowski's Proposed Levels

Level I Primary Integration

Level II Unilevel *Disintegration*

Level III Spontaneous Multilevel *Disintegration*

Level IV Organized Multilevel *Disintegration*

Level V Secondary Integration