

My Love Affair With Dabrowski's Theory: A Personal Odyssey

Linda Kreger Silverman

Dabrowski's theory spoke to me at a very deep level of my being. It has been my guide to self-examination, allowing me to appreciate my intensity and to see the challenges in my life as opportunities for personal growth. For the last three decades, I have shared my passion for the theory with anyone who would listen. This article is about my journey with the theory, how it began and where it led. Dabrowski's theory provides a roadmap to guide exploration of the mystifying inner life of the gifted. This lens takes the study of giftedness out of the classroom into the subterranean caverns of the Self—the relentless search for meaning, for self-awareness, for compassion, for all that one can become as a human being.

Keywords: *Advanced Development*, asynchronous development, counseling, idealism, inner, OEQ-II, overexcitabilities, psychology of giftedness

This is a personal account, adapted from a keynote address I was invited to give in November 2002 at the Fifth International Conference on the Theory of Positive Disintegration, honoring the centennial of the birth of Dr. Kazimierz Dabrowski. I was asked to discuss how Dabrowski's theory had influenced me personally and professionally. Because there are different interpretations of this important theory, I want to share how I arrived at mine. I have always been aware that the Theory of Positive Disintegration (TPD) is a basic theory of human development rather than a theory of giftedness; however, it elucidates stunningly the inner experience of the gifted individuals who have poured out their hearts to me throughout my life. It guides us away from the "education" in gifted education, moving the field toward the exploration of the psychology of giftedness.

This article begins by discussing the connection between giftedness and TPD; meanders into my discovery of the theory and fascination with it; summarizes the research on overexcitabilities (OEs); describes efforts to publicize the theory through *Advanced Development Journal*, *Counseling the Gifted and Talented*, training workshops and international presentations; and describes how the definition of giftedness as asynchronous development grew out of Dabrowski's theory. Thank you for joining me on my journey

to understand, celebrate, and share with others the implications of Dabrowski's theory for gifted individuals.

DABROWSKI'S THEORY AND GIFTEDNESS

The Third International Conference on the Theory of Positive Disintegration (TPD) was held in Miami in November 1980, less than 2 weeks before Dr. Dabrowski passed away in Poland. I had submitted a proposal that began with the following sentiment: "The Theory of Positive Disintegration could potentially revolutionize the study of giftedness" (Silverman, 1980b, p. 1). This is not far afield from what has happened in the ensuing years. "Dabrowski" and "overexcitabilities" have become staples in the field. TPD has touched philosophy, psychology, psychiatry, theology, and many other provinces—even medicine. (I heard Bernie Siegel, MD, 1992, reframe cancer as "positive disintegration"!)

But it has left its most far-reaching imprint on gifted education, as can be seen by the issuance of three recent books in the field (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009b; Mendaglio, 2008; and Piechowski, 2006), as well as this special issue of *Roeper Review*. This discipline in search of a theory welcomed Dabrowski with open arms.

This is not to say that every gifted educator and researcher embraces the theory. "Some researchers fail to acknowledge the existence of OEs or the prevalence of these among gifted students" (Tieso, 2007, p. 20). Gifted education is replete with a cacophony of competing conceptions. And with the ever-changing landscape of teachers in

Received 18 December 2007; accepted 29 February 2008.

Address correspondence to Linda Kreger Silverman, PhD, Gifted Development Center, 1452 Marion Street, Denver, CO 80218. E-mail: gifted@gifteddevelopment.com

the field, there is no way to familiarize them all with Dabrowski's work. Nor has the adoption of Dabrowski's theory by gifted education been met with unmitigated delight. The TPD community was discomfited to think that the gifted field had absconded with their theory and made it their own. TPD was designed for a broader population and serves a deeper purpose: understanding the growth and transformation of the psyche. But the gifted community recognized its importance, conducted research to support the theory, and shared Dabrowski's constructs with countless individuals through presentations and publications. And so, the theory found a home in the world of the gifted.

As a multifaceted theory grows and develops, distortions are unavoidable. For some, positive disintegration is the rationale for all of their angst; for others, overexcitabilities have become their salvation from a diagnosis of AD/HD; and there are those who enhance their self-esteem by perceiving themselves at the highest levels of development, with everyone else beneath them. It is also inevitable that various proponents have different interpretations and focus on distinct aspects of the theory as they apply to the groups with whom they work. And so my view of Dabrowski's theory varies in some respects from those who employ TPD within a religious context, a prison, a mental hospital, a shelter for abused women, or a counseling center. My perspective is informed by 50 years of working with gifted and creative children, adolescents, and adults.

TPD is not only for the gifted, but it has profoundly altered our conceptions of giftedness (Silverman, 1993b; 1997), our understanding of traits exhibited by this population (Daniels & Meckstroth, 2009; Daniels & Piechowski, 2009a; Piechowski, 1979, 1986, 2006), our ability to identify emotional giftedness (Piechowski, 1991), and our approach to counseling the gifted of all ages (Gatto-Walden, 2009; Hazell, 1999; Jackson & Moyle, 2009; Maxwell, 1992; Ogburn-Colangelo, 1979). In addition, the giftedness of those who have attained the highest levels of development has been illumined by Dabrowski's theory. Though most gifted individuals do not reach these levels of development in their lifetimes, those who achieved Level IV and Level V were undoubtedly gifted (Brennan, 1987; Brennan & Piechowski, 1991; Grant, 1990; Piechowski, 1978, 1990, 1992a; 1992b; Spaltro, 1991).

MY INTRODUCTION TO THE THEORY OF POSITIVE DISINTEGRATION

In November of 1979, one year before the third TPD Conference in Miami, I was on a plane from Columbus, Ohio, to Baltimore, Maryland, bound for my first National Association for Gifted Children conference. I had just come from a visit to Charles Merrill Publishers in Columbus, hoping to convince them to allow me to write the first textbook on counseling the gifted. They weren't interested. The man sitting next to me on the plane was rifling through a mound of papers on psychology. Obviously busy, he had, "Don't

talk to me" written all over him. Paying no attention to his signals, I leaned over, bubbling, "Hi! Are you a psychologist? I just became a licensed psychologist this year!" His response was icy. Ignoring his lack of enthusiasm, I barged right ahead, telling him that I specialized in gifted children. To my surprise, that got his attention! He happened to be Sam Osipow, editor of *Contemporary Psychology*, a journal that reviews books in psychology, and he had just received a book on counseling the gifted with no idea who to send it to for review. Destiny! Though I was chagrined that someone had beaten me to it, I needed a textbook for the course I was teaching, so I agreed to review *New Voices in Counseling the Gifted* by Nick Colangelo and Ron Zaffran (1979).

I vividly recall the excitement I felt as I read chapter 2, Michael Piechowski's (1979) "Developmental Potential." The concepts were so powerful that I would stop every few pages to call a dear friend long distance and read the passages aloud. I was smitten. Chapter 11, Kay Ogburn-Colangelo's (1979) delicious application of TPD to counseling—complete with tapescripts—was frosting on the cake. My review (Silverman, 1980a) centered primarily on the wonderful ideas introduced in these two chapters. As part of the review, I needed to contact the editors, neither of whom I knew, and incorporate some information about them. So I called Nick Colangelo, briefly interviewed him, and then popped my real question, "Who is Dabrowski?" Then I called Ron Zaffran with the same inquiry. They both told me to call Michael Piechowski; Nick gave me his phone number. It took a while to get up my courage, but eventually I dialed that number.

Michael graciously sent me several papers on TPD, whereupon I plunged headlong into the study of the theory. The following semester, I used *New Voices* as my text for the graduate course, *Counseling the Gifted*, and my students became as enthralled with the theory as I was. What was it about TPD that made it so appealing to those of us who work with the gifted?

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GIFTED

What drew me to Dabrowski's Theory was the fit between its constructs and the traits of the gifted. TPD provided a framework for understanding and explaining years of personal observations of gifted individuals. I think I learned the most about the inner world of the gifted from a support group for highly gifted preteens and teens that I sponsored in Los Angeles from 1965 to 1970. The group was fluid, and I worked with nearly 100 youth during that period. Several qualities surfaced consistently in these young people: perfectionism, intensity, sensitivity, empathy, idealism, moral and ethical concerns, and deep feelings of inferiority. Later, when I tried to describe these traits to educators, they were puzzled. How could a student who was so obviously superior to his or her peers feel inferior? Few understood the feelings of inadequacy that plagued these young people, unless they, themselves, had faced these same demons.

These youth held extremely high ideals and were ashamed when they failed to meet them. They didn't compare themselves with their classmates. They compared their knowledge with all there was to know. When they devoured a book on a topic of interest, they saw that the book had many references, and each of those books had a set of references, and on and on. It soon became clear that there was no way to know all there was to know about a subject. This left these brilliant seekers of knowledge feeling like imposters. In 1970, in a presentation to high-school honors students, I labeled this experience, "The Great Con Game." It goes something like this: "So far I've managed to fool everybody into thinking I'm smart, but just wait until the next test: I'll be exposed as the fraud I really am." This is the voice of a relentlessly critical Self, one that sets standards far beyond the expectations of parents and teachers.

The most salient trait of the gifted that I witnessed was their *idealism*. I recently received an e-mail from Rosemary Cathcart, founder of the George Parkyn National Centre for Gifted Education in New Zealand, who also notes the idealism of gifted youth:

It is fascinating that in adolescence so many of our most gifted young people are so strongly drawn to entirely different, less ego-centered values. And what do we do? We smile kindly and talk of "youthful idealism" and how they'll grow out of it one day and see things differently when they're older and understand that the real world isn't as easy as that, etc. To my mind, and I have believed this all my life and tried to live my own life this way, idealism is the one quality above all others that we need to *preserve*, not undermine, and the task of growing up is in part the task of finding out how to translate our ideals into effective practical effects—to ensure that what we do daily and across a lifetime is the realisation of our ideals. (R. Cathcart, personal communication, April 11, 2007)

In our meetings in California, the members shared their visions of how society should be. They took seriously their responsibility for making this a better world than they found it. They strived to be better human beings. Most of these teens were empathic and endeavored to be kind and thoughtful. But no matter how hard they tried, some were keenly aware of the times they had been insensitive or preoccupied with themselves. They were upset by every unkind thought. Others would agonize over world events, becoming too upset to watch the news. They seemed to identify with all of humanity. Perhaps they were a select group of particularly sensitive gifted youth, but their concerns were similar to those of the gifted teens in Wisconsin studied by Michael Piechowski from 1973 to 1975 (Piechowski, 2006).

The ethical questions they raised during our meetings were remarkable. I remember when Stuart brought this particular moral dilemma to the group. He wanted to treat the Black students in his school in a nondiscriminatory manner. But he was a loner at his school, and he did not relate to many of the students. If he were to say "Hi" to a Black student, he would be singling him out because he was Black, not

because he was treating him equally. To Stuart, that was simply another form of discrimination. If he truly wanted to treat the person equally, he would have to ignore him like he did all the other students. This would be equal, but not necessarily fair, because it could hurt the other student to be ignored. At the age of 11, Stuart was grappling with this ethical issue in his attempt to create a hierarchy of moral values.

Most of the dynamisms of Level III were apparent in this group: feelings of guilt, shame, disquietude and dissatisfaction with oneself, inferiority toward oneself, and the presence of a hierarchy of values (Dabrowski with Piechowski, 1977). These were not undigested values absorbed from their parents and teachers. I got to observe how deeply these young people questioned societal messages. I listened as they carved out their own value systems through dialogue with each other. Many were misfits in their schools, positively maladjusted to the attitudes and values of their age peers, which they found superficial. They sought higher ground.

A high level of abstract reasoning is a requisite for questioning prevailing values. But high intelligence alone is insufficient to predict multilevel development (Levels III, IV, and V). The potential for higher-level development also depends on the presence of overexcitabilities. The OEs of the members of the support group were even more palpable than the dynamisms. Each session the air sizzled with their impassioned discourse. When the oldest members left for college, I asked them to send me essays about their experiences as gifted teens. Intellectual and emotional OE, as well as some imaginal OE, leapt out of these essays.

The constructs of Dabrowski's Theory fit my own experiences with gifted youth and others' experience as well (see Piechowski, 2006, and Daniels & Piechowski, 2009b). Each time I talked about the theory in a presentation to parents or teachers of the gifted, the audience particularly resonated with the overexcitabilities. Several would approach me after each presentation, often with tears in their eyes, and thank me. Some explained why; others spoke only with their eyes. One even wrote me a poem. Whatever it was about TPD that struck me so intensely struck a deep chord within them as well. They were able to find meaning in their suffering, to see their overexcitabilities in a positive light, and realize that their inner conflict was not a personality flaw but a beacon of multilevel development. TPD was life changing.

Linda's work in counseling the gifted introduced me to the writings of Kazimierz Dabrowski. By sharing his work, Linda provided possible explanations for a complex inner life that I had endeavored to understand for as long as I can remember. (Kane, 2006, p. x)

DIVING INTO RESEARCH

Having conducted only one unpublished study for my doctoral dissertation, it never occurred to me that I could ever

become a researcher. My life goal had been to become a teacher and I presumed that one had to be a great deal smarter than me to be a researcher—like Michael Piechowski or Frank Falk. I talked about Dabrowski's Theory to anyone in listening range, and Frank Falk, a professor in the Sociology Department at DU, happened to be within earshot. "You've got to read this!" To humor me, Frank read Michael's chapter, and it intrigued him. A number of students in gifted education became interested in learning more about the theory than the two chapters in their textbook. So Frank and I formed a Dabrowski study group at DU with students from education and sociology.

In the summer of 1980, Michael Piechowski sent me the request for proposals for the TPD conference in Miami in November. We talked it over in the study group, and I agreed to write a proposal. It felt like an exercise in futility, because in the highly unlikely event that the proposal was accepted, how could we possibly conduct a study of overexcitabilities of the gifted in such a short time frame with no funding? My passion for the theory overrode my logic, and I submitted the proposal. We were astounded when we learned that the proposal was accepted. Now what?

The way everything came together was pure magic. Our research team consisted of Frank Falk; Nancy Miller, a doctoral candidate in sociology; Karen Nelson, a doctoral candidate in higher education who had a master's in gifted education; Sharon Nehls, a graduate student in gifted education; Bernita "Bernie" Ellsworth, who had just completed a master's degree in gifted education; and me. Karen Nelson was able to convince a number of Mensans to complete the Overexcitability Questionnaire (OEQ), designed by Michael Piechowski and refined with the assistance of Katherine Ziegler Lysy (Lysy, 1979; Lysy & Piechowski, 1983). Over a dozen graduate students in gifted education at DU, who had been identified as gifted in childhood, were also willing to complete the OEQ. Michael came to Denver at his own expense to train us in coding the OEQ narratives. And the research team worked the clock round for a week rating the data. Frank, the consummate statistician, determined that the OEQs of the two gifted samples were statistically insignificant, so he aggregated the data. He compared the OEQs from these 31 gifted adults with 42 OEQs collected with an unselected group of graduate students from the University of Illinois at Urbana (Lysy & Piechowski, 1983) and created graphs of these comparisons. Frank, Bernie, and I all attended the TPD conference. The paper that resulted from this flurry of activity began:

The research we are presenting today was conducted by an "overexcited" group at the University of Denver. This team has eaten, slept, danced, and dueled with Dabrowski's theory for the past 5 months—much to the dismay of their families and friends. This zealous commitment is unrelated to theses, dissertations, grants, or any discernible incentives.

The apparent motive is pure fascination with the theory. (Silverman & Ellsworth, 1981, p. 179)

We found that the gifted individuals in our sample were higher in emotional, intellectual, and imaginal OE than the unselected group, half of whom were graduate students in counseling psychology. Our findings were similar to Dabrowski's observations of gifted children in Warsaw in 1962 (Dabrowski, 1967).

Dabrowski had a strong interest in the emotional development of intellectually and artistically gifted youth. He was struck by their intensity, sensitivity, and tendency toward emotional extremes. He didn't see these traits as abnormal but as part and parcel of their talented, creative selves. In their intensified experiencing, feeling, thinking, and imagining, he perceived potential for further growth. (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009a, p. 6)

Michael Piechowski had administered the OEQ to gifted teens in 1973. He, too, had found their responses rich in all of the overexcitabilities (Piechowski, 2006). These results suggested that the gifted may have the developmental potential for multilevel development. The process of coding the OEQ narratives had been exhilarating, only surpassed by the incredibly warm reception we received at the University of Miami when we presented our results. It was truly a peak experience.

Our Dabrowski study group met weekly for 5 years—even during holidays—to read all of the books in English on TPD, to study the theory in depth, to conduct research on emotional development of adults and adolescents, and to develop ways of assessing overexcitabilities and levels of development (e.g., Miller, 1985). Michael Piechowski spent an entire summer with us interviewing gifted preadolescents, coding narrative data, and providing advanced training on rating OEQs. In July 1983, the nest of our study group, Buchtel Chapel, burned to the ground. Frank responded by obtaining a grant from the Sociology Department to create an Emotional Development Office in another building. The group attracted members of the community, as well as students and faculty, and one summer 40 individuals from the United States and Canada participated.

From 1980 to 1987, the Dabrowski study group produced 60 papers, including 5 doctoral dissertations at the University of Denver (DU) and Northwestern University (we coded data for some of Michael's students' dissertations at Northwestern), 3 master's theses, 9 published articles in refereed journals, 3 published chapters, 7 published articles in newsletters, 19 professional conference presentations (3 published in proceedings, 1 audiotaped and 1 videotaped), 7 coding systems and rating scales, 7 unpublished studies, 4 small grants from the University of Denver, and a grant proposal to a national foundation (Silverman, 1996). Dozens of contributions emerged later as a result of this fertile period.

EFFORTS AT DISSEMINATION

ISAD and Advanced Development Journal

Frank Falk, Nancy Miller, and I all left the University of Denver at the same time Michael Piechowski left Northwestern. I feared that if all this research came to a screeching halt, Dabrowski's theory might fade into oblivion, and I was determined to keep it alive and well. DU allowed our study group to continue meeting on campus for awhile, and then, Betty Maxwell, a member of the group who also had obtained her master's degree in gifted education at DU, hosted us in her home. With no dissertations, theses, instruments, or conference papers to concentrate on, the study group moved in a new direction. Earlier, we had compared Gilligan's (1982) *In a Different Voice* with TPD in relation to gender issues. Now we spent months comparing Dabrowski's theory with other theories of higher-level development and created a huge wall chart that took up three walls. Because most members of the group at that time had been editors, we decided to create *Advanced Development*, a refereed psychological journal, as a showcase for Dabrowski's Theory and as a means of reconceptualizing giftedness. The only journals in the field focused on the education of gifted children. Giftedness in adults was perceived as eminence. *Advanced Development* represented a new vision of giftedness in adults related to multilevel values: empathy, responsibility, integrity, autonomy, authenticity, moral courage, commitment, and harmony (*Advanced Development*, 1989).

Just as Michael Piechowski (1979) had proposed that the overexcitabilities be employed in the identification of gifted children, our study group advocated that the criteria for higher-level development espoused by Dabrowski (1964, 1967, 1972), and confirmed by other theorists of advanced development, be the determinants of giftedness in adults. We redefined giftedness as advanced development. To assist in this ambitious paradigmatic shift, in December 1986 we incorporated the study group into a nonprofit, tax exempt 501(c)3 agency: the Institute for the Study of Advanced Development (ISAD). ISAD has the following threefold mission: to study advanced development in children (e.g., advanced progression through the developmental milestones, overexcitabilities, developmental potential, moral sensitivity, etc.), advanced moral and ethical development of adults, and undeveloped potential in women (Silverman, 1989).

The following summer, I attended the Fourth International Conference on the Theory of Positive Disintegration in Warsaw and invited several members of the international Dabrowski community, including Madame Dabrowska, to be on the advisory board of *Advanced Development*. This conference was another peak experience. Though I spoke no Polish and I'm not sure that the participants understood my English (even with a translator), a deeper form of communication

occurred—heart to heart. After the conference, I had the profound pleasure of being invited to stay with Madame Dabrowska. I will never forget that trip, especially our pilgrimage to Dabrowski's gravesite.

The major endeavors of the Institute were the study and furtherance of Dabrowski's theory and the production of *Advanced Development*. Betty Maxwell and I worked together to create the journal, and we were eventually joined by Ewa Hyzy-Strzelecka, who had been assistant professor of philosophy at the University of Silesia in Poland and had studied TPD in Poland. Ewa served as assistant editor of *Advanced Development* and translated Dabrowski's articles (e.g., "The Heroism of Sensitivity," 1994). Our first issue appeared in January 1989. Since that time, *Advanced Development* has been indexed in *Psychological Abstracts*, became an e-journal coedited by Nancy Miller and Michael Piechowski, and now the journal articles are available online through ProQuest Information and Learning.

Although we have had a limited number of subscribers, the impact of the journal has been gratifying. Those who wrote books about giftedness in adults mentioned to us that they had been inspired by the journal (e.g., Alvarado Stone, 1989; Jacobsen, 1999b; Streznewski, 1999). They were contributors and subscribers to *Advanced Development* and often published articles in the journal before their books were published (Alvarado, 1989; Jacobsen, 1999a). The journal gave birth to a new field: counseling gifted adults. Now there are counselors throughout the United States who specialize in working with this population. They recognize that gifted adults have complex inner worlds and unique counseling issues in a society that rejects differences. They view giftedness in adults not through accomplishments but in terms of their quest for meaning, moral sensitivity, overexcitabilities, hierarchy of values, and self-awareness.

Training Workshops and the OEQ-II

At the behest of Jane Piirto, the Institute began a series of training workshops on coding OEQs at the University of Ashland in Ohio in 1990, 1991, and 1992. Trainings were conducted in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, in 1992 and 1993, at the invitation of Nancy Breard. In 1993, ISAD sponsored a workshop on Dabrowski's Theory in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, and organized a day-and-a-half symposium on Dabrowski's theory for the 10th World Congress on Gifted and Talented Children in Toronto. In 1994, the Institute organized a 3-day American/Canadian symposium on TPD in Keystone, Colorado. Susan Daniels invited us to the University of Wisconsin at Madison to conduct training workshops in 1995 and 1996. These workshops resulted in numerous studies of OEs as an alternate method of identifying gifted students of various national, ethnic, and socioeconomic origins (e.g., Ackerman, 1993, 1997; Bouchet, 1998; Breard, 1994; Buerschen, 1995; Calic, 1994; Domroese, 1993; Ely, 1995).

In addition to the training workshops, seminars on Dabrowski's theory were organized at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver in 1996, the University of Wisconsin at Madison in 1997, the New South Wales Association for Gifted and Talented Children in Sydney, and at Flinders University in Adelaide, Australia, in 1999. And ISAD arranged a symposium on Dabrowski's Theory in 1997 in conjunction with the 12th World Congress on Gifted and Talented Children in Seattle.

After many years of work, under the direction of Frank Falk, the Overexcitability Questionnaire-II (OEQ-II) made its appearance in 1999 (Falk, Lind, Miller, Piechowski, & Silverman, 1999) and has spurred many new studies worldwide (e.g., Chang, 2001; Pardo de Santayana Sanz, 2006; Tieso, 2007; Yakmaci-Guzel & Akarsu, 2006). This Likert-type questionnaire, validated on college students and gifted populations, provides an inexpensive method of assessing overexcitabilities. It has been used with young children by reading the questions to them and has been adapted and translated for use with gifted children in several countries. (For more information, see Falk & Miller, 2009, and Falk, Yakmaci-Guzel, Chang, Pardo de Santayana Sanz, & Chavez-Eakle, 2008.)

Counseling the Gifted and Talented

The Keystone Consortium had produced *Excellence in Educating the Gifted* (Feldhusen, VanTassel-Baska, & Seeley, 1985, 1989; VanTassel-Baska, 1998) and *Comprehensive Curriculum for Gifted Learners* (VanTassel-Baska, 1994; VanTassel-Baska et al., 1988). The next project was a textbook on counseling the gifted and I was elected to be the editor. *Counseling the Gifted and Talented* (Silverman, 1993b) was a golden opportunity to showcase Dabrowski's Theory, to introduce graduate students to overexcitabilities and multilevel development. TPD is introduced in the first chapter, interwoven in several other chapters, and concludes the book with a section on moral leadership.

Sal Mendaglio had visited Colorado during the conceptualization of the book and presented his ideas to a group of gifted educators. He talked about the emotional experience of gifted children and the need for a multidimensional approach to counseling. He said that none of the counseling models in the field were based on the characteristics of gifted children. The developmental model of counseling presented in chapter 3 was catalyzed by the exciting conversations I had with Sal during that trip. Sal contributed a chapter on counseling gifted children with learning disabilities. As *Counseling the Gifted and Talented* became adopted as a basic text for that course, the Theory of Positive Disintegration gained popularity in gifted education. Sal continues to keep TPD in the forefront of the field with his books (Mendaglio, 2008; Mendaglio & Peterson, 2007), articles, research, and presentations.

GIFTEDNESS AS ASYNCHRONOUS DEVELOPMENT

The definition of giftedness as asynchrony became the cornerstone of *Counseling the Gifted and Talented*. Mystery surrounds the origin of this definition. The Columbus Group gathered in Columbus, Ohio, in 1991, immediately after the second Dabrowski training workshop at the University of Ashland in Ohio. In our meeting, we were inspired by the quotation, "There is no limit to the amount of good you can do if you don't care who gets the credit." By offering the concept of giftedness as asynchronous development without names attached, it would have to stand on its own merit. The Columbus Group never imagined how widespread the construct would become in such a short time.

The aim of the Columbus gathering was to fully explore the question, "What is giftedness?" At that time, we were aware that national policy on gifted education was being shaped by those who defined the gifted by their products, performance, and achievement. This movement eventuated in the document, *National Excellence: A Case for Developing America's Talent* (Office of Educational Research and Improvement [OERI], 1993). After immersing ourselves in Dabrowski's theory, the notion of defining a person by his or her products felt to us like trying to understand an elephant by studying its tracks. The substitution of talents in specific domains for the traditional concept of global giftedness meant that a totally different population would be served. Instead of being available to children with significant developmental differences, gifted education would become a prize for hard-working, high-achieving children or for children who had the *potential for outstanding performance in adult life*. This popular viewpoint strikes me as curious. Where is the crystal ball that can accurately predict the future famous?

Because eminent individuals have been found at all levels of development (Dabrowski with Piechowski, 1977), this perspective obscures the relevance of TPD for the gifted. The prevailing emphasis on what the gifted can produce was questioned most eloquently by Barry Grant and Michael Piechowski (1999):

For some theorists and researchers, explaining giftedness means describing the conditions that produce gifted achievements. Trapped by the metaphor of "gifts," they believe that the most important aspect of being gifted is the ability to turn gifts into recognizable and valued accomplishments. . . .

The models and theories set to maximize giftedness regard gifted children much as farmers regard cows and pigs, with an eye to getting them to produce more. They do not describe how giftedness works—how the gifted think, feel, and experience. (p. 8)

The inner world of the gifted—"how the gifted think, feel, and experience"—is clearly missing in many current definitions.

The practitioners, parents, and theorists who gathered in Columbus to construct a new vision of giftedness were interested in the phenomenological experience of giftedness. With overexcitable zeal, the group worked night and day all weekend coming up with individual definitions and then blending them into a definition that could be accepted by all. The new definition took into account the inner experience, awareness, and heightened intensity of gifted individuals. The influence of Dabrowski's Theory is evident in this conception of giftedness:

Giftedness is *asynchronous development* in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching and counseling in order for them to develop optimally. (The Columbus Group, 1991)

The Columbus Group definition made its debut in an article entitled, "Giftedness: The View From Within" (Morelock, 1992) in January 1992, the 500th anniversary of Columbus's legendary voyage to demonstrate to the Western world that the earth is round. From our vantage point, the achievement perspective seemed like "Flatland." The depth of the inner experience of the gifted individual had been lost in the emphasis on talents and potential for success in adult life. Though many recognized achievers certainly are gifted, achievement is just the tip of the iceberg; a vast, uncharted territory lies beneath the surface. That inner terrain contains the peaks and crevices of overexcitabilities, volcanic dynamisms, and the mysterious developmental forces that press the individual toward higher levels of development.

The construct of giftedness as asynchronous development was shared in several subsequent chapters and articles, often connecting it to its Dabrowskian roots (e.g., Silverman, 1993a, 1997, 2002; Tolan, 1994, 1998). In August 1993, several members of the Columbus Group presented at the World Congress on Gifted and Talented Children in Toronto and participated in the Dabrowski Symposium, which was a major part of the conference. The symposium lasted for a day and a half and even attracted Cezary Zechowski, a psychiatrist from Poland. Segments of the Dabrowski Symposium were videotaped by the organizers of the 1995 World Council Congress in Hong Kong. The organizers were so impressed with this new Dabrowskian-flavored conception of giftedness that they incorporated part of the Columbus Group definition as the theme of the following world conference: *The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching and counseling in order for them to develop optimally.*

I was deeply honored to be invited to present the opening keynote address at the 1995 World Council Conference in

Hong Kong. It was the fulfillment of two life dreams: visiting Hong Kong and delivering a keynote address at the World Congress. In keeping with the convention theme, my presentation was on asynchronous development. It was entitled, "The Universal Experience of Being Out-of-Sync" (Silverman, 1995):

The gifted not only *think* differently from their peers, they also *feel* differently. This intensity may be experienced through various channels. Dabrowski and Piechowski (1977) described five channels of heightened experience or "overexcitabilities": psychomotor, sensual, imaginal, intellectual, and emotional. . . . Individuals endowed with greater capacity for vivid imagery, intellectual curiosity, compassion and empathy are more likely to experience anguish when faced with knowledge of the cruelty in the world. . . . (pp. 8–9)

The marriage of cognitive complexity and emotional intensity, and the enhanced awareness and moral sensitivity born of that marriage, render gifted individuals vulnerable. When advanced cognition brings information into awareness for which the child or adult is emotionally unprepared, vulnerability is the natural result. But we must be careful not to equate emotional fragility with immaturity. [In "The Heroism of Sensitivity"] Dabrowski found morally and emotionally advanced adults gentle, delicate, nonaggressive, likely to withdraw rather than retaliate, "heroic" in their sensitivity. Most of world's treasures are delicate and need to be handled with care, like fine china, crystal, paintings, roses, orchids, and children. (p. 9)

The response of the international audience was overwhelming. It was clear that the noncompetitive view of giftedness emphasizing the phenomenological world of the gifted—the qualitative differences of their intensity, experience, and awareness—resonated deeply with delegates from most of the countries represented. *Asynchronous development* has taken a foothold in global thinking about the gifted and has become a foundational construct of gifted education in Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, New Zealand, and many other countries.

CONCLUSION

The Theory of Positive Disintegration has become fundamental to our understanding of the psychological aspects of giftedness. Though it is a broad theory of development, its prominence in the study of giftedness is not accidental. "Kazimierz Dabrowski (1902–1980) devoted his life to the study and treatment of mental health in intellectually and artistically gifted children and adults" (Piechowski, 2006, p. 17). Gifted education is indebted to Dabrowski for his remarkable insights regarding the process of growth and development and for charting the mysterious, riveting internal life of the gifted.

Discovering Dabrowski's Theory was a crystallizing experience in my professional career. It has also held deep

personal significance for me. For my entire life, I have wanted more than anything else to be understood. I know I am not alone in this desire. For the gifted individuals I have counseled, their need to be understood far surpassed their drive to achieve. The inner experience of the gifted person is rich, complex, turbulent. Dabrowski allowed us to enter that world, to understand its dynamics.

Conquering the inner terrain of competing impulses, becoming ensnared by base resentments and then choosing the higher in oneself again and again, is a lifelong campaign. Paradoxically, it appears that those born with intense physiological reactions and attachments—overexcitabilities—may eventually be bestowed with a vision of the possibility of transcending attachments, reactions, and polarities. Those seekers who set out to realize this vision are propelled by their overexcitabilities; yet, the stronger the OEs, the more arduous the task. Striving to become one's best Self, striving to overcome pettiness, striving to forgive, striving for moral integrity are all much more difficult than striving for success in the external world. Dabrowski's legacy is profound. He has shown us a pathway to discovering our true selves.

REFERENCES

- Ackerman, C. M. (1993). *Investigating an alternate method of identifying gifted students*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada.
- Ackerman, C. M. (1997). Identifying gifted adolescents using personality characteristics: Dabrowski's overexcitabilities. *Roepers Review*, 19, 229–236.
- Alvarado, N. (1989). Adjustment of gifted adults. *Advanced Development*, 1, 77–86.
- Alvarado Stone, N. (1989). *"Gifted" is not a dirty word: Thoughts about being bright in an average world*. Irvine, CA: Technicom.
- Bouchet, N. (1998). *Social structure and personality: Explicating the second factor from Dabrowski's theory of emotional development*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Akron, OH.
- Breard, N. S. (1994). *Exploring a different way to identify gifted African American students*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Georgia, Athens.
- Brennan, T. P. (1987). *Case studies of multilevel development*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL.
- Brennan, T. P., & Piechowski, M. M. (1991). The developmental framework for self-actualization: Evidence from case studies. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 31(3), 43–64.
- Buerschen, T. (1995). *Researching an alternative assessment in the identification of gifted and talented students*. Unpublished manuscript, Miami University.
- Calic, S. (1994). *Heightened sensitivities as an indicator of creative potential in visual and performing arts*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Georgia, Athens.
- Chang, H. J. (2001). *A research on the overexcitability traits of gifted and talented students in Taiwan*. Unpublished master's thesis, National Taiwan Normal University, Taipei.
- Colangelo, N., & Zaffrann, R. T. (Eds.). (1979). *New voices in counseling the gifted*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.
- The Columbus Group. (1991, July). Unpublished transcript of the meeting of the Columbus Group, Columbus, OH.
- Dabrowski, K. (1964). *Positive disintegration*. London: Little, Brown.
- Dabrowski, K. (1967). *Personality-shaping through positive disintegration*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Dabrowski, K. (1972). *Psychoneurosis is not an illness*. London: Gryf.
- Dabrowski, K. (with Piechowski, M. M.). (1977). *Theory of levels of emotional development: Vol. 1. Multilevelness and positive disintegration*. Oceanside, NY: Dabor Science.
- Dabrowski, K., & Piechowski, M. M. (1977). *Theory of levels of emotional development: Vol. 2. From primary integration to self-actualization*. Oceanside, NY: Dabor Science.
- Daniels, S., & Meckstroth, E. (2009). Nurturing the sensitivity, intensity, and developmental potential of young gifted children. In S. Daniels & M. M. Piechowski (Eds.), *Living with intensity: Understanding the sensitivity, excitability, and emotional development of gifted children, adolescents, and adults* (pp. 33–56). Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.
- Daniels, S., & Piechowski, M. M. (2009a). Embracing intensity: Overexcitability, sensitivity, and the developmental potential of the gifted. In S. Daniels & M. M. Piechowski (Eds.), *Living with intensity: Understanding the sensitivity, excitability, and emotional development of gifted children, adolescents, and adults* (pp. 3–17). Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.
- Daniels, S., & Piechowski, M. M. (2009b). *Living with intensity: Understanding the sensitivity, excitability, and emotional development of gifted children, adolescents and adults*. Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.
- Domroese, C. (1993). *Investigating an alternate method for identifying gifted students*. Oak Park, IL: Oak Park Elementary School District #97.
- Ely, E. (1995). *The overexcitability questionnaire: An alternative method for identifying creative giftedness in seventh grade junior high school students*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Kent State University, OH.
- Falk, R. F., Lind, S., Miller, N. B., Piechowski, M. M., & Silverman, L. K. (1999). *The overexcitability questionnaire OEQ-II*. Denver, CO: Institute for the Study of Advanced Development.
- Falk, R. F., & Miller, N. B. (2008). Building firm foundations: Research and assessments. In S. Daniels & M. M. Piechowski (Eds.), *Living with intensity: Understanding the sensitivity, excitability, and emotional development of gifted children, adolescents, and adults* (pp. 239–259). Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.
- Falk, R. F., Yakmaci-Guzel, B., Chang, A., Pardo de Santayana Sanz, R., & Chavez-Eakle, R. A. (2009). Measuring overexcitability: Replication across five countries. In S. Mendaglio (Ed.), *Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration* (pp. 182–199). Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.
- Feldhausen, J. (Ed.). (1985). *Toward excellence in gifted education*. Denver, CO: Love.
- Feldhusen, J., VanTassel-Baska, J., & Seeley, K. (Eds.). (1989). *Excellence in educating the gifted* (2nd ed.). Denver, CO: Love.
- Gatto-Walden, P. (2009). Living one's spirit song: Transcendent experiences in counseling gifted adults. In S. Daniels & M. M. Piechowski (Eds.), *Living with intensity: Understanding the sensitivity, excitability, and emotional development of gifted children, adolescents, and adults* (pp. 203–223). Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.
- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Grant, B. (1990). Moral development: Theories and lives. *Advanced Development*, 2, 85–91.
- Grant, B., & Piechowski, M. M. (1999). Theories and the good: Toward a child-centered gifted education. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 43, 4–12.
- Hazell, C. G. (1999). The experience of emptiness and the use of Dabrowski's theory. *Advanced Development*, 8, 31–46.
- The heroism of sensitivity: An interview with Kazimierz Dabrowski. (1994). (Z. Bierzanski, Interviewer; E. Hyzy-Strzelecka). *Advanced Development*, 6, 87–92.
- Jackson, P. S., & Moyle, V. F. (2009). Integrating the intense experience: Counseling and clinical applications. In S. Daniels & M. M. Piechowski (Eds.), *Living with intensity: Understanding the sensitivity, excitability, and emotional development of gifted children, adolescents, and adults* (pp. 105–125). Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.
- Jacobsen, M. E. (1999a). Encountering the gifted self again for the first time. *Advanced Development*, 8, 9–29.
- Jacobsen, M. E. (1999b). *Liberating everyday genius: A revolutionary guide for identifying and mastering your exceptional gifts*. New York: Ballantine.

- Kane, M. M. (2006). *A view from the self: A life history of Annemarie Roeper*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Loyola University, Chicago.
- Lysy, K. Z. (1979). *Personal growth in counselors and noncounselors: A Jungian and Dabrowskian approach*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois, Champaign, IL.
- Lysy, K. Z., & Piechowski, M. M. (1983). Personal growth: An empirical study using Jungian and Dabrowskian measures. *Genetic Psychology Monographs*, 108, 267–320.
- Maxwell, E. (1992). Self as phoenix: A comparison of Assagioli's and Dabrowski's developmental theories. *Advanced Development*, 4, 31–48.
- Mendaglio, S. (Ed.). (2008). *Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration*. Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.
- Mendaglio, S., & Peterson, J. S. (2007). *Models of counseling gifted children, adolescents, and young adults*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.
- Miller, N. B. (1985). *A content analysis coding system for assessing adult emotional development*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Denver, Colorado.
- Morelock, M. J. (1992). Giftedness: The view from within. *Understanding Our Gifted*, 4(3), 1, 11–15.
- Office of Educational Research and Improvement. (1993). *National excellence: A case for developing America's talent*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Ogburn-Colangelo, M. K. (1979). Giftedness as multilevel potential: A clinical example. In N. Colangelo & R. T. Zaffrann (Eds.), *New voices in counseling the gifted* (pp. 165–187). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.
- Pardo de Santayana Sanz, R. (2006). *El alumno superdotado y sus problemas de aprendizaje: Validación del OEQ-II como prueba de diagnóstico* [The gifted student and learning disabilities: Validation of the OEQ-II as a diagnosis test]. Madrid, Spain: Universidad Complutense de Madrid.
- Piechowski, M. M. (1978). Self-actualization as a developmental structure: A profile of Antoine de Saint-Exupery. *Genetic Psychology Monographs*, 97, 181–242.
- Piechowski, M. M. (1979). Developmental potential. In N. Colangelo & R. T. Zaffrann (Eds.), *New voices in counseling the gifted* (pp. 25–57). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.
- Piechowski, M. M. (1986). The concept of developmental potential. *Roeper Review*, 8, 190–197.
- Piechowski, M. M. (1990). Inner growth and transformation in the life of Eleanor Roosevelt. *Advanced Development*, 2, 35–53.
- Piechowski, M. M. (1991). Emotional development and emotional giftedness. In N. Colangelo & G. Davis (Eds.), *A handbook of gifted education* (pp. 285–306). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Piechowski, M. M. (1992a). Ety Hillesum: "The thinking heart of the barracks." *Advanced Development*, 4, 105–118.
- Piechowski, M. M. (1992b). Giftedness for all seasons: Inner peace in a time of war. In N. Colangelo, S. G. Assouline, & D. L. Ambrosio (Eds.), *Talent development: Proceedings of the 1991 Jocelyn Wallace National Research Symposium on Talent Development* (pp. 180–203). Unionville, NY: Trillium Press.
- Piechowski, M. M. (2006). "Mellow out," they say. *If I only could: Intensities and sensitivities of the young and bright*. Madison, WI: Yunasa Books.
- Siegel, B. (1992, May). *How to never grow old and die young at heart* [Audiotape]. Presented at the Omega Institute Conference on Conscious Aging: A Creative and Spiritual Journey, New York.
- Silverman, L. K. (1980a). Gifts for the gifted [Review of the book *New voices in counseling the gifted*]. *Contemporary Psychology*, 25, 656.
- Silverman, L. K. (1980b). *The theory of positive disintegration and its implications for giftedness*. Unpublished abstract, Gifted Development Center, Denver, CO.
- Silverman, L. K. (1989). *Advanced Development*. Statement of purpose; editorial. Denver: Institute for the Study of Advanced Development.
- Silverman, L. K. (1993a). Counseling needs and programs for the gifted. In K. Heller, F. Monks, & A. H. Passow (Eds.), *The international handbook for research on giftedness and talent* (pp. 631–647). Oxford, England: Pergamon Press.
- Silverman, L. K. (Ed.). (1993b). *Counseling the gifted and talented*. Denver, CO: Love.
- Silverman, L. K. (1995). The universal experience of being out-of-sync. In L. K. Silverman (Ed.), *Advanced development: A collection of works on giftedness in adults* (pp. 1–12). Denver, CO: Institute for the Study of Advanced Development.
- Silverman, L. K. (1996). *Bibliography on Dabrowski's theory*. Unpublished manuscript, Gifted Development Center, Denver, CO.
- Silverman, L. K. (1997). The construct of asynchronous development. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 72(3&4), 36–58.
- Silverman, L. K. (2002). Asynchronous development. In M. Neihart, S. Reis, N. Robinson, & S. Moon (Eds.), *The social and emotional development of gifted children: What do we know?* (pp. 31–37). Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.
- Silverman, L. K., & Ellsworth, B. (1981). The theory of positive disintegration and its implications for giftedness. In N. Duda (Ed.), *Theory of positive disintegration: Proceedings of the third international conference* (pp. 179–194). Miami, FL: University of Miami School of Medicine.
- Spaltro, K. (1991). "A symbol perfected in death": Ety Hillesum as moral exemplar. *Advanced Development*, 3, 61–73.
- Streznewski, M. K. (1999). *Gifted grownups: The mixed blessings of extraordinary potential*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Tieso, C. L. (2007). Patterns of overexcitabilities in identified gifted students and their parents: A hierarchical model. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 51, 11–22.
- Tolan, S. S. (1994). Giftedness as asynchronous development. *Tip Network News*, 4(1), 1, 7.
- Tolan, S. S. (1998). Beginning brilliance. In J. Smutny (Ed.), *The young gifted child: Potential and promise* (pp. 165–181). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- VanTassel-Baska, J., Feldhausen, J., Seelye, K., Wheatley, G., Silverman, L., & Foster, W. (1988). *Comprehensive curriculum for gifted learners*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- VanTassel-Baska, J. (Ed.). (1994). *Comprehensive curriculum for gifted learners* (2nd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- VanTassel-Baska, J. (Ed.). (1998). *Excellence in educating gifted & talented learners* (3rd ed.). Denver, CO: Love.
- Yakmaci-Guzel, B., & Akarsu, F. (2006). Comparing overexcitabilities of gifted and non-gifted 10th grade students in Turkey. *High Abilities Studies*, 17, 43–56.

AUTHOR BIO



Linda Kreger Silverman, PhD, is a licensed psychologist who has contributed over 300 publications to the field, including the textbook *Counseling the Gifted & Talented* and *Upside-Down Brilliance: The Visual-Spatial Learner*. She founded and directs the Institute for the Study of Advanced Development (ISAD), which publishes *Advanced Development Journal* on adult giftedness, and ISAD's subsidiary, the Gifted Development Center (www.gifteddevelopment.com), which has assessed over 5,600 children in the last 30 years. For 9 years, she served on the faculty of the University of Denver in counseling psychology and gifted education. Co-chair of the NAGC Task Force on Assessment, she has organized national/international symposia on assessment of gifted children. E-mail: gifted@gifteddevelopment.com

Copyright of Roeper Review is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.