Counseling the Gifted Individual

Linda Kreger Silverman

EMOTIONAL ASPECTS OF GIFTEDNESS

To the uninformed, giftedness may seem a sort of special privilege, but to the gifted individual, often it feels like a distinct disadvantage. It is painful to be different in a society that devalues differences. Pain may also come from internal sources—from a finely tuned psychological structure that experiences all of life more intensely. Giftedness has an emotional as well as a cognitive substructure: cognitive complexity gives rise to emotional depth. Thus, gifted children not only think differently from their peers, they also feel differently.

One of the basic characteristics of the gifted is their intensity and an expanded field of their subjective experience. The intensity, in particular, must be understood as a qualitatively distinct characteristic. It is not a matter of degree but of a different quality of experiencing: vivid, absorbing, penetrating, encompassing, complex, commanding—a way of being quivering alive. (Piechowski, 1991b, p. 2, emphasis added)

Dr. Annemarie Roeper (1982) has defined the term giftedness in a way that encompasses its emotional side: “Giftedness is a greater awareness, a greater sensitivity, and a greater ability to understand and transform perceptions into intellectual and emotional experiences” (p. 21). Another new definition that highlights the internal experience of the gifted may be particularly helpful to counselors:

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, p. 1)

Asynchrony in the gifted means “a lack of synchronicity in the rates of their cognitive, emotional and physical development” (Morelock, 1992b, p. 11). Lack of synchronicity creates greater inner tension, as when a five-year-old child perceives a horse through eight-year-old eyes but cannot replicate the horse in clay with her five-year-old fingers and so screams in frustration. Internal asynchrony is mirrored in external adjustment difficulties because the child feels “different,” “out of place”—out of sync—with others. Uneven development of gifted children has been noted by numerous clinicians and researchers (Altman, 1983; Delisle, 1990; Gowan, 1974; Hollingworth, 1942; Kerr, 1991; Kline & Meckstroth, 1985; Munger, 1990;)

Linda Silverman is a licensed psychologist and the director of the Gifted Child Development Center in Denver, Colorado. This article is an adaptation of a chapter in a new book, Counseling the Gifted and Talented, edited by Dr. Silverman and published by Love Publishing Company, Denver.

Roedell, 1989; Schectky, 1981; Sebring, 1983; Terrassier, 1985; Webb, Meckstroth, & Tolan, 1982). Manaster and Powell (1983) suggested that gifted adolescents are in psychosocial jeopardy if they are out of stage ("dealing with concepts and goals far beyond the reach of those around them"), out of phase ("alienated and distant from or without a peer group with which to interact"), or out of sync ("feel that they are different... and feel they do not, should not or cannot fit in"). (p. 71). Their framework is based on the assumption that everyone needs a sense of belonging in order to experience psychological well-being. Unfortunately, the authors erroneously concluded that "in all other ways the gifted are typical, common, ordinary, regular and normal and able to healthily fit in with others... [They] must have... the courage to be average in order to be psychosocially adjusted" (p. 73).

A more comprehensive precursor to the Columbus Group definition is Terrassier's (1985) "dysynchrony," which has both internal and external aspects. Internal dysynchrony implies the disparate rates of development of various capacities of the child. Manifestations of external dysynchrony include a lack of goodness-of-fit between the school curriculum and the child's needs, a lack of conformity to cultural expectations based upon the chronological age of the child, problems relating to age peers, and preference for older companions.

Child development books usually contain charts showing the interaction between stages of psychosexual, psychosocial, and cognitive development according to chronological age (which presumably correlates with physical development). The basic premise is that these stages all occur in concert with each other. Uniform progression in all areas is rare, but discrepancies are more exaggerated in the gifted (Schectky, 1981), particularly the highly gifted [above 145 IQ], whose development is the most uneven. Despite various concerns about intelligence testing, the intelligence quotient does provide valuable information about the rate at which cognitive development outstrips physical development and therefore is an index of the degree of asynchrony. Tolan (1989) offers a clear example of asynchronous development and the difficulties it presents:

In terms of development chronological age may be the least relevant piece of information to consider. Kate, with an IQ score of 170, may be six, but she has a "mental age" of ten and a half... Unfortunately, Kate, like every highly gifted child, is an amalgam of many developmental ages. She may be six while riding a bike, thirteen while playing the piano or chess, nine while debating rules, eight while choosing hobbies and books, five (or three) when asked to sit still. How can such a child be expected to fit into a classroom designed around norms for six year olds? (p. 7)

There are more questions than answers about the developmental paths of gifted children and a discouraging lack of research to answer these questions. We do know that their development takes an altered course. "With the gifted individual we are often looking not only at precocious development but unique developmental characteristics so that the normal developmental path is less effective as a prospective guide" (Horowitz, 1987, p. 165). Altman (1983) maintains that "the gifted child may achieve stages of emotional and physical development in alternative patterns [from age peers] and/or at varying times chronologically," and may progress through the stages more rapidly, with shorter intervals of "relative stability within stages and between periods of change" (p. 66). According to Altman, unusually rapid development may be a source of emotional trauma, with little emotional support from peers whose developmental changes are more consistent with each other. Even the various developmental stage theories, then, need to be adapted in order to understand the atypical development of the gifted. Asynchronous development results in unusual "awareness, perceptions, emotional responses and life experiences" throughout the life span (Morelock, 1992b, p. 14).
This new definition goes beyond Terrassier’s dyssynchrony and other definitions focusing on uneven development in that it incorporates the emotional dimension, emphasizing the interrelationship of cognitive complexity and emotional intensity. Although the emotional sensitivity of the gifted has been reported frequently (Clark, 1992; Genshaft & Broyles, 1991; Jacobs, 1971; Manaster & Powell, 1983; Roedell, 1984; Webb, Meckstroth, & Tolan, 1982; Whitmore, 1980), many seem to be unaware that intense emotions attend giftedness. The term emotion is conspicuously absent in the indexes of most books on the gifted and talented, indicating how little attention is paid to this component of giftedness. Historically, the expression of intense feelings has been perceived as a sign of emotional instability (Lombroso, 1905) rather than as evidence of a rich inner life. Neglect of the emotional aspects of giftedness can be traced to the traditional Western view of emotion and cognition as separate, contradictory phenomena. Only recently have we become aware of the inextricable link between emotion and cognition and their combined impact on individuals of high intelligence.

The picture of the more emotional person, as it is emerging from this research, stands in significant contrast to the traditional dominant view. This picture reveals that a high level of emotional responsiveness may be associated with advanced cognitive organization. All of the cognitive skills that were found to be related to the ability to respond with more emotions are marks of a highly organized awareness—an awareness that might be governed by a well-structured system of values, oughts, and beliefs, but not by momentary excitements. (Sommers, 1981, p. 560)

Sommers (1981) found that college students who evidenced advanced cognitive organization had a wider “emotional range” (p. 555), a term she used to denote variety of emotional response. Sommers’s concept of emotional range may shed light on one of the age-old mysteries in teaching and raising gifted children: How can an eight-year-old talk like a forty-year-old one minute and act like a four-year-old the next? Apparently the child’s cognitive complexity enables a much wider range of emotional response than is found in the average child. As a firstborn in a household of adults, for example, the child learns adult emotional responses, and when a new baby enters the family, regressive behavior often appears. “Act your age!” is not a simple directive to a child whose mental age, physical age, and emotional age are not well integrated. This explains the apparent discrepancy in the literature between those who find gifted children emotionally advanced (Robinson & Noble, 1991) and those who see them as emotionally immature. Actually, they are both, depending on the moment at which one catches them.

The Columbus Group definition further indicates that cognitive complexity and emotional intensity leave the gifted emotionally vulnerable and therefore in need of modifications in parenting, teaching, and counseling. This definition may be the first to acknowledge the emotional vulnerability of the gifted child and the importance of the counselor’s role in the child’s emotional development. Roedell (1984) suggests that even moderately gifted children (130–145 IQ) are “vulnerable to a variety of adjustment difficulties” (p. 127) and that social adjustment, emotional maturity, and healthy self-concepts depend to a great extent on environmental support. She found the degree of vulnerability directly related to the degree of developmental difference.

As the degree of intellectual advancement increases, so does the child’s risk of social maladjustment and unhappiness. . . . there is general agreement that highly gifted children are more susceptible to some types of developmental difficulties than are moderately gifted or average children. Areas of vulnerability include uneven development, perfectionism, adult expectations, intense sensitivity, self-definition, alienation, inappropriate environments, and role conflicts. (Roedell, 1984, p. 127)

Hollingworth (1931) suggested that gifted children are particularly vulnerable between the ages of four and nine:

To have the intelligence of an adult and the emotions of a child combined in a childish body is to encounter certain difficulties. It follows that (after babyhood) the younger the child, the greater the difficulties, and the adjustment becomes easier with every additional year of age. The years between four and nine are probably the most likely to be beset with the problems mentioned. (p. 15)

Vulnerability is to be expected when advanced cognition brings information into awareness for which there is insufficient emotional maturity. Gowen (1974) likened precocious cognitive awareness to premature rupturing of the protective placental shell during the prenatal period. Too early exposure to environmental realities can be as precarious in postnatal life as in prenatal development. This phenomenon is apparent in an excellent case study presented by Morelock (1992a) of a highly gifted four-year-old girl who experienced intense emotional turmoil during a period of rapid cognitive development.

As Jennie grappled with the sudden onslaught of increased abstract capacity, she was forced to deal with the emotional repercussions of her own thought. Thus, in Jennie’s mind at the age of four, God could not possibly be a loving God if He would refuse Heaven to anyone. And the terrible realiza-
tion of her own mortality could not be softened by her mother’s reassurances, because “Nobody knows for sure; children die sometimes.” In spite of her impressive capacity for abstract thought, Jennie was only four. Her emotional needs, like those of other four-year-olds, included a trust in the strength and reliability of her parents and the predictability of a secure world. However, her advanced cognitive capacities . . . left her emotionally defenseless in the face of her own reason. (pp. 25-26)

Thus, counseling for the gifted and creative is a necessary response to a unique set of emotional needs; it is important both to support healthy emotional development and to prevent social and emotional problems.

THE GIFTED AS A SPECIAL NEEDS GROUP

There is a great deal of misunderstanding about giftedness. Anyone in a counseling capacity is likely to encounter numerous individuals who do not understand that the gifted have special needs. Therefore, to be an effective advocate, the counselor of the gifted must have an appropriate rationale for supporting identification, curricular modifications, and counseling interventions for this group of children.

The necessity of special provisions for the gifted can be understood most clearly when this population is perceived as a legitimate part of special education. Without the shield of special education, it is difficult to justify why gifted children should have differentiated programs. Exceptional children of all types are significantly different from the norm; therefore, they fail to thrive without modifications. The purpose of special provisions for exceptional children, whether educational or counseling, is to respond to their unique needs. Although it is relatively clear that children in every other branch of special education have unique needs, this assumption has not been widely endorsed for the gifted and has to be made explicit.

Under the rubric of special education, one can see that the distance from the norm of those who are developmentally advanced parallels the distance of those who are developmentally delayed, and that the unique needs attendant to that difference increase in direct proportion to the degree of exceptionality. The gifted are traditionally defined as students whose IQ scores are 2 standard deviations above the mean [approximately 130 IQ], comprising the top 2 percent of the population. Although this stringent definition has been replaced by newer ones that include a broader spectrum of capabilities and different types of talents, the most extraordinarily gifted still are neglected. The following analogy helps to bring this point home.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the top 2 percent correspond to the group whose IQ scores fall 2 standard deviations below the norm [below 70 IQ], a population whose needs are so clearly differentiated that they are protected by both federal and state mandates. Individual intelligence tests, comprehensive psychological assessment, staffings, individualized educational plans, certified teachers, modified curriculum, and due process are all required by law for students more than 2 standard deviations below the mean. At 3 standard deviations below the mean [approximately 55 IQ] even greater intervention is

![Figure 1: The Theoretical Curve of Distribution of Intelligence](image)
needed, such as partial or full-day self-contained placements. At 4 standard deviations below the mean [approximately 40 IQ], children need continuous supervision. (In some experimental settings, certain developmentally disabled children may be “mainstreamed,” with a full-time aide to assist each of them, but they would be unable to handle the regular curriculum.) Yet, students who score 2, 3, 4, or more standard deviations above the mean are often placed in regular classrooms with no modifications of any kind, and frequently their parents are derided for attempting to secure “special treatment” for their children (e.g., see George, 1988). A continuum of services should be made available to the gifted, similar to that which is available for the disabled. (See Figure 2.)

The situation is further complicated by unconscious hostility in society toward children who are thought of as “intellectually advantaged.” Resentment toward gifted children on the part of administrators, psychologists, counselors, and teachers has been well documented (J. Gallagher, 1991; Marland, 1972; Singal, 1991). Whereas other exceptional children receive sympathy, often the gifted are targets of antagonism, which increases their emotional vulnerability (Kline & Meckstroth, 1985). (e.g., “If you’re so gifted, why are you running down the hall?”)

Advocates of the gifted must be prepared to deal with the perennial charge of “elitism.” It is ironic that football heroes and Olympic medal winners are exempt from this charge. Athletically advanced youth are the pride of the nation; no one would dream of holding them to the level of their less talented peers as part of a misguided program of egalitarianism. The accusation of “elitism” has been misdirected at the gifted—elitism is actually a function of socioeconomic class rather than of intellectual differences. There is no evidence that grouping gifted children fosters snobbery (Newland, 1976). On the contrary, a false sense of one’s importance is more likely to result from being “top banana” in one’s class all the way through school with no equally able peers and no need to study because the work is too easy. Grouping gifted children together usually cures any illusions of superiority. Hollingworth (1930) observed:

Many of our pupils had their first experience of being equaled or surpassed at school work when they entered the special class. Several interesting episodes arose to suggest that conceit was corrected, rather than fostered, by the experience of daily contact with a large number of equals. (p. 445)

As advocates, we need to clarify the distinction between giftedness and socioeconomic advantage. Giftedness cuts through all social strata, and all racial, ethnic, and economic groups. Gifted education is most needed for children from less economically advantaged families who depend on public

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The continuum of services available for meeting the needs of disabled children. Most are served in the regular classroom with increasing amounts of support depending upon the severity of the problem.

**FIGURE 2**
Continuum of Services
education for the development of their children’s talents. Children from families with greater resources have other alternatives such as private schools, tutoring, and homeschooling. It is the talented poor who suffer the most when programs for the gifted are cut.

In attempts to cope with the charged political climate around the concept of giftedness, gifted education has become more and more broadly defined, so that more children can be considered “gifted,” “talented,” “creative,” and “potentially gifted.” Now it is common for gifted programs to involve 5, 7, 10, 15, 25, and as much as 33 percent of the population. The irony is that the broader the net, the less differentiated the needs of the students, and the less justifiable the gifted program. The small amount of available funds is spread so thin that a differentiated program is hardly feasible. An enrichment program that serves the top 10 percent 45 minutes a week is likely to be attacked as an unnecessary frill because “all students” could benefit from such enrichment.

The result is that the educational needs of the gifted and highly gifted are usually neglected, which in turn affects their morale, motivation, social relationships, aspirations, sense of self-worth, and emotional development. Counseling for the gifted is needed to help these students cope with society’s attitudes toward them, as well as to help them find their way through an educational system that is not designed to optimize their progress. Counselors can provide emotional support to individual students and their parents, institute preventive counseling groups, work with individual teachers to obtain curricular modifications for gifted students, or work at the building level to establish appropriate programs.

In addition to helping gifted students deal with the impact of the external conditions listed above, the counselor must be sensitive to the unique internal conditions of this group. These internal variables—for example, intensity, sensitivity, and perfectionism—are illuminated through the lens of Dabrowski’s “Theory of Emotional Development” (Dabrowski, 1972; Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977; Piechowski, 1991a), the only psychological theory specific to the development of giftedness and creativity (Piechowski, 1979). Dabrowski studied the mental health of intellectually and creatively gifted children and adults. His insights provide a foundation for understanding the complex inner life of the gifted throughout the life span, as well as their differentiated counseling needs.

DABROWSKI’S THEORY

Kazimierz Dabrowski (1902–1980), a Polish psychiatrist and psychologist, survived both world wars. During World War II, at the risk of his life, he gave asylum to Jews escaping from the Nazis. He was imprisoned by both the Nazis and the Communists, tortured, and forbidden to continue his professional practice (Nelson, 1989, 1991). His theory grew out of his own confrontation with death, suffering, and injustice and his desire to understand the meaning of human existence. During the wars, he witnessed acts of complete self-sacrifice in the midst of incomprehensible inhumanity and puzzled that both could exist in the same world.

As a youth, Dabrowski was repelled by the cruelty, duplicity, superficiality, and absence of reflection he saw in those around him. He searched for individuals who were “authentically ideal, saturated with immutable values, those who represented ‘what ought to be’ against ‘what is’” (Dabrowski, in Piechowski, 1975, p. 234). In the biographies of eminent individuals and saints, he found the immutable values he sought and agonies that matched his own. After digesting an untold number of biographies of gifted, creative, and eminent people, Dabrowski continued his search in the laboratory and the clinic. He studied artists, actors, dancers, and intellectually gifted children and youth.

Dabrowski’s private practice attracted creative adolescents and adults. In their struggle to attain something nobler in themselves, his clients displayed an emotional richness similar to that which he had seen in his biographical studies of the eminent. They could not reconcile themselves to concrete reality; instead, they clung to their creative visions of what ought to be. They searched for “a reality of higher level. And often they were able to find it unaided” (Dabrowski, in Piechowski, 1975, p. 236). These clients experienced intense inner conflict, self-criticism, anxiety, and feelings of inferiority toward their own ideals. The medical community labeled these conflicts as “psychoneurotic” and attempted to “cure” the clients by eliminating their symptoms. Dabrowski saw these same symptoms as an inseparable part of the quest for higher-level development. He fervently desired to convince the profession that inner conflict is a developmental rather than a degenerative sign.

From these observations, Dabrowski developed his “Theory of Positive Disintegration,” in which he proposed that advanced development requires a breakdown of existing psychological structures in order to form higher, more evolved structures. The emotional makeup and intellectual capacity of the individual determine the extent of development possible. Inner conflict generates the tension that impels the individual toward higher levels of functioning. Positive disintegration is a disillusion of current ways of thinking and being in the world in the service of greater compassion, integrity, and al-
trium; it is marked by heightened creativity (Dabrowski, 1964). Negative disintegration, in contrast, is a breakdown that has no moral or ethical component; it is self-centered, containing none of the seeds that would enable the person to reintegrate on a higher level. The counselor's job is to distinguish between these two different experiences.

Dabrowski's theory emphasizes the role of emotions in human development, so since his death it has come to be known as "Dabrowski's Theory of Emotional Development." Independent support for some of Dabrowski's tenets comes from the research of Shula Sommers (1981). As described earlier, Sommers found strong correlations between cognitive complexity, emotional responsiveness, and structured value systems in college students. Cognitive complexity enables the person to take other viewpoints and to recognize injustice, creating a strong value system from which to evaluate life events. These evaluations activate rich emotional responses: individuals with well-developed value systems tend to be more emotionally reactive when they see behavior that violates their values. Sommers's findings echo Dabrowski's (1972) observations of the interplay of intellectual and emotional overexcitabilities in the gifted person's pursuit of higher values.

The relationship between cognition and emotion, the development of value structures, and the heightened intensity of the gifted and creative are all addressed in Dabrowski's theory. Intensity, so characteristic of the gifted, is explained in terms of overexcitabilities—greater capacities to respond to various stimuli. Others also have theorized that the gifted are equipped with supersensitive nervous systems which enable them to assimilate extraordinary amounts of sensory stimuli (Blackburn & Erickson, 1986; Cruickshank, 1963; Whitmore, 1980). "By its very intensity, a high kind of creativity may cause nervous strain and tension, and a supersensitivity of the nervous system may be conducive to both inner conflict and creative expression" (Cruickshank, 1963, p. 494). Whitmore (1980) adds that supersensitivity makes the gifted acutely perceptive and sensitive, more discriminating of the details of stimuli, and more analytical and critical of themselves and others.

The expanded awareness of the individual, deriving primarily from inborn emotional, intellectual, and imaginative overexcitabilities, eventually leads to the development of value structures which guide development in adolescence and adulthood. Both the overexcitabilities and the developing value system create a unique inner life which marks the gifted as different from their peers. These differences, often misunderstood, underscore the need for counseling. Counseling via a Dabrowskian perspective goes beyond the sphere of social adjustment and career planning; it focuses instead on the powerful force of inner conflict in the development of value structures.

Dabrowski's theory is composed of two parts: the overexcitabilities and levels of development. The strength of these overexcitabilities, along with special talents and abilities, constitutes the individual's "developmental potential"—that is, potential for self-actualization and higher level development (Piecowski, 1979, 1991b). The overexcitabilities are discussed first because they appear in childhood.

The Overexcitabilities

The overexcitabilities described by Dabrowski (1938) are observable in infancy and thought to be innate. They represent expanded awareness and a heightened capacity to respond to stimuli of various types. Dabrowski postulated five overexcitabilities (OEs): psychomotor, sensual, imagina-
tional, intellectual, and emotional. The term overexcitability, translated from Polish, means "superstimulatability," and carries with it positive connotations: an unusual capacity to care, an insatiable love of learning, vivid imagination, endless energy, and so forth. The OEs are an abundance of physical, sensual, creative, intellectual, and emotional energy. The strength of these overexcitabilities—particularly imagina-
tional, intellectual, and emotional OEs—is positively related to advanced emotional development in adulthood. In studying a group of gifted children and youth in Warsaw in 1962, Dabrowski (1972) found that every one of them showed consider-
able manifestations of the overexcitabilities.

Individuals with the gift of extra physical energy are "doers"—highly active and constantly on the go. Surplus energy is shown in rapid speech and gestures, marked enthusiasm, love of fast games and sports, nervous habits, and impulsiveness (Piecowski, 1991a). Schetky (1981) notes that gifted children have "high energy drive both physical and psychological" and that they can be "physically and mentally exhausting to live with" (p. 2). One of the earliest signs of Psychomotor OE is less need for sleep in infancy (Munger,
1990; Schetky, 1981). A parent of a highly gifted child remarked, “When other babies were getting 12 hours of sleep, I was lucky if he slept 6 hours. I figured he was smarter than other children his age because he had been awake twice as long” (Silverman & Kearney, 1989, p. 52). Children with high Psychomotor OE occasionally are misdiagnosed as hyperactive (Schetky, 1981; Whitmore, 1980). Hyperactive children tend to lack voluntary control of attention and behavior, such as interrupting and then losing the thread of the conversation. Gifted children who are high in psychomotor energy are simply very active, with few other symptoms of hyperactivity. They are capable of focused attention and intense concentration when they are interested; aimless activity seems to occur most often when there is insufficient mental stimulation.

By itself, Psychomotor OE does not differentiate gifted from average development in children, adolescent, or adult populations. It must be integrated with other OEs before it becomes developmentally significant (Manzanero, 1983; Piechowski & Cunningham, 1985). But many actualized individuals (e.g., Albert Schweitzer and Mother Teresa) have been known for their unusual physical energy and capacity for working excessively long hours.

Sensual OE may be the most elusive of the overexcitabilities to measure and understand. It is marked by heightened experience of the senses, sensualism, sexuality, aesthetic appreciation, and desire for physical admiration. Individuals who love to touch different textures, who delight in particular smells such as paint and tar, or who cherish the memory of certain foods are showing signs of Sensual OE. In infants, this OE may be expressed in throwing off blankets and in extreme reactions to certain clothing (Meckstroth, 1991). Other signs include intense reaction to noise and immediate crying when diapers get wet. Colic and food allergies, both common among the gifted, may be manifestations of this OE; the child has enhanced sensitivities to foods and pollutants. Mothers report having to cut labels from children’s clothes and having to be particularly careful about the placement of sock seams on toes because their children react so strongly (Meckstroth, 1991). Some children hate the textures of certain foods and are remarkably sensitive to small differences in their chemical content—for example, they can taste the difference in Coca Cola processed in different factories (D. Lovecky, personal communication, April 8, 1992). Freed (1990) observes:

In addition to their perfectionism, I have noted that children with IQs above 140 seem to have heightened sensory awareness. They taste more acutely, smell everything, observe more in their environment. They get so much information that they have trouble filtering it out. They are constantly bombarded by stimuli. (p. 11)

Reactions such as these may continue into adult life. One respondent wrote, “My mornings were difficult, for my clothes had to exert the same pressure on both sides of my body. One stocking had to be exactly as tight as the other or I couldn’t function” (Piechowski, 1979, p. 33).

An adult gifted population was found to be higher than an unselected group in Sensual OE (Silverman & Elsworth, 1980); however, in studies conducted to date no differences in Sensual OE have been revealed between gifted and average children (Rogers, 1986), or between gifted and average adolescents (S. Gallagher, 1985; Schiever, 1985). Since observation seems to refute these results, it may be that Sensual OE is less conscious or less amenable to study by means of the essay format used to assess the overexcitabilities. Piechowski and Colangelo (1984) found levels of Sensual OE to be depressed in gifted adolescents, compared with two adult samples, which may indicate that Sensual OE increases with age. It is also plausible that adolescents are reluctant to reveal in a questionnaire information that is of an intensely personal nature (e.g., concerning their sexual feelings).

The other three overexcitabilities bear a more direct relationship to giftedness. Imaginational OE—unusual visualization abilities, vivid visual recall, dreaming in color, inventiveness, love of poetry and drama, active fantasy life—is closely allied with creativity. Artists and creative children are particularly high in Imaginational OE (Piechowski, Silverman, & Falk, 1985; Schiever, 1985), and gifted adolescents have been found to be consistently higher than their average peers in this domain (S. Gallagher, 1985; Piechowski & Colangelo, 1984; Schiever, 1985).

Early signs of Imaginational OE include imaginary companions and mixing of truth and fiction. Gifted children who have imaginary companions have more of them than do average children (Rogers, 1986), sometimes creating entire families or communities. One child traveled with a family of imaginary mice! Older children are attracted to science fiction and science fantasy. They frequently express themselves in metaphor, or in such great detail that adults beg them to get to the point. Sometimes it is difficult for them to express their thoughts in words because they think in images. Children high in Imaginational OE may be given to nightmares. They also have a great sense of humor which sometimes borders on the bizarre.

Intellectual OE is particularly correlated with intellectual giftedness: curiosity, concentration, theoretical thinking, in-
sciousness, capacity for sustained intellectual effort, love of learning and problem solving, and moral concern. One of the earliest and most enduring signs of Intellectual OE is intellectual curiosity. Gifted children are given to probing questions from the time they first learn to talk. The following examples are from a study conducted by Rogers (1986) of gifted and average children:

Almost all of the gifted children were perceived by their parents as asking “probing” rather than simple questions. At the age of 18 months, one child wondered, “What is air? How high does it go? Why doesn’t it all float away?” A three-year-old boy wanted to know how airplanes work and how people breathe. Another three year old asked, “Will I still be me when I grow up?” Global and abstract issues occupied the minds of several of these youngsters. One child asked detailed, probing questions about politics, nuclear war, world peace, starvation, pollution, energy and so forth. (Rogers & Silverman, 1988, p. 16)

All gifted samples studied scored high in Intellectual OE, and artistically gifted adults were found to be as high as the intellectually gifted in this domain (Piechowski & Cunningham, 1985). But Piechowski (1979) warns that Intellectual OE is not the same as intelligence. Not all intelligent individuals are intellectuals or have high levels of Intellectual OE. For example, there are those with high IQs who excel in practical intelligence but have little interest in cultural events, literary pursuits, or learning new theories.

The last, and perhaps most important of the overexcitabilities, is Emotional OE—the capacity for emotional depth, attachment to people and animals, intensity, sensitivity, empathy, self-criticism, inhibition, fears, guilt, anxiety. Gifted children, adolescents, and adults exhibit high levels of Emotional OE (S. Gallagher, 1985; Piechowski & Colangelo, 1984; Schiever, 1985; Silverman, 1983; Silverman & Ellsworth, 1980). Again and again we see signs of Emotional OE in gifted children beginning early in life. The following are examples from case files at the Gifted Child Development Center:

B is a very sensitive child. Although not overly physically affectionate to many, his feelings for others are very deep—he feels hurt and pain when he feels he has displeased someone and also feels great pride, especially toward the achievements of his younger sibling. (Age 4)

R had early awareness and empathy with others’ feelings. . . . She has amazing tolerance and emotionally is beyond her age. She wears her heart on her sleeve and is honest in her feelings with adults as well as with other children. (Age 4)

M is a very loving and compassionate child. Cannot stand to hear a baby crying. Puts his hands over his ears if he hears anything too loud or too violent. His feelings are hurt in an instant. Concerned about the welfare of others. (Age 3 ½)

I first observed R’s great sensitivity at the age of 5 ½ months.

K is very hard on herself. She doesn’t forgive herself easily if she has hurt someone’s feelings or makes a mistake. . . . She has a special sensitivity rarely seen in other children her age. (Age 4) (Silverman, 1986, p. 16)

These extraordinary levels of sensitivity do not disappear with age. Gifted adults retain their emotionality; often they are perceived as being “too sensitive.” Emotional OE can be seen clearly in the following passage written by a gifted adolescent:

We are not “normal” and we know it; it can be fun sometimes but not funny always. We tend to be much more sensitive than other people. Multiple meanings, innuendos, and self-consciousness plague us. Intensive self-analysis, self-criticism, and the inability to recognize that we have limits make us despondent. In fact, most times our self-searching leaves us more discombobled than we were at the outset. (American Association for Gifted Children, 1978, p. 9)

One of the greatest gifts a counselor can give gifted young people is an appreciation of their sensitivities, intensities, and passions. Feeling everything more deeply than others do is both painful and frightening. The quote above illustrates how often adolescents with a high degree of emotional OE feel abnormal. In addition, there is often the secret fear, “There must be something wrong with me. . . . Maybe I’m crazy—nobody else seems to be bothered by this but me.” It doesn’t help when people say “You’re too sensitive” or “Lighten up!” What does help is a supportive adult who takes time to listen to these children’s feelings and who explains that such feelings are normal for gifted persons—that they come with the territory. A reassuring adult can dispel children’s fears and help them find ways of coping with their strong emotions. But the first step is honoring those emotions, in boys as well as girls.

The Levels of Development

The second part of Dabrowski’s theory involves five levels of adult development: self-interest, group values, transformative growth, self-actualization, and attainment of the personality ideal. The first and last levels can be thought of as relatively stable states, with well-integrated structures, whereas the three transition states are fragile enough to allow for growth and development. The levels are summarized in Table 1.

At the lowest level, individuals have little concern for others, no introspection, and an absence of inner conflict. In-
stead, they externalize all conflict and blame others. They have a “What’s in it for me?” orientation. Goals are limited to financial success, power, glory, and conquest. They embrace the ideal of competitiveness; they are fierce competitors and usually win. With no guilt or shame to give them second thoughts, it is easy for them to attain positions of leadership in a competitive society. Our society respects and rewards this type of self-serving consciousness.

At Level II, individuals are motivated by desire for approval, fear of punishment, and ambivalences and ambiten-
dencies. Ambivalences are conflicting desires such as approach/avoidance conflicts; ambitenencies are changeable and conflicting courses of action and self-defeating behaviors (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977). As there is no inner core of values from which to make solid judgments, these individuals are easily swayed. “What will people think of me if I . . . ?” dominates their thought processes and becomes the basis for their decisions. Their indecisiveness makes them good candidates for manipulation by self-assured leaders, who are actually less evolved on Dabrowski’s scale than

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**TABLE 1**
Dabrowski’s Theory of Positive Disintegration

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**DABROWSKI’S THEORY OF POSITIVE DISINTEGRATION**

**Level I: Primary Integration**
At Level I, Primary Integration, egocentrism prevails. A person at this level lacks the capacity for empathy and self-examination. When things go wrong, someone else is always to blame; self-responsibility is not a Level I characteristic. With nothing within to inhibit personal ambition, individuals at Level I often attain power in society by ruthless means.

**Level II: Unilevel Disintegration**
At Level II, individuals are influenced primarily by their social group and by mainstream values, or they are moral relativists for whom “anything goes,” morally speaking. They often exhibit ambivalent feelings and indecisive behavior because they have no clear cut set of self-determined internal values. At Level II, inner conflict is horizontal, a competition between equal, competing values.

**Level III: Spontaneous Multilevel Disintegration**
At Level III, multilevelness arises. The person develops a hierarchical sense of values. Inner conflict is vertical, a struggle to bring one’s behavior up to higher standards. There is a dissatisfaction with what one is, because of a competing sense of what one could and ought to be (personality ideal). This internal struggle between higher and lower can be accompanied by existential despair, anxiety, depression, and feelings of dissatisfaction with the self (inferiority, disquietude, astonishment).

**Level IV: Organized Multilevel Disintegration**
In comparison to those at Level III (the level of emotional tumult), individuals at Level IV are well on the road to self-actualization. They have found a way to reach their own ideals, and they are effective leaders in society. They show high levels of responsibility, authenticity, reflective judgment, empathy for others, autonomy of thought and action, self-awareness, and other attributes associated with self-actualization.

**Level V: Secondary Integration:**
At Level V the struggle for self-mastery has been won. Inner conflicts regarding the self have been resolved through actualization of the personality ideal. Disintegration has been transcended by the integration of one’s values and ideals into one’s living and being. The life is lived in service to humanity. It is lived according to the highest, most universal principles of loving, compassionate regard for the worth of the human individual.

themselves. At Level II, the psychological structure of self-centeredness has begun to break down. There is much more awareness of and concern for others. But their insecurity makes relationships frail because these individuals need others to validate their self-worth.

Dabrowski was most interested in the third, fourth, and fifth levels of development, which he called “multilevel development.” Level III marks the transition into advanced development; it is the point at which the personality truly acquires depth, three-dimensionality. Individuals begin to develop a hierarchical set of values and to experience their own inadequacies intensely. An impassioned search for self-perfection originates at this level. “Positive maladjustment” (Dabrowski, 1972), a key manifestation of Level III, means being out of sync with one’s peer group whose norms are incompatible with one’s own, higher-level values. Their sense of honesty, for example, often gets the gifted into trouble. It takes them a very long time to learn that people often say things they don’t mean and that this is socially expected.

Inner conflict, central to Level III, has been noted in gifted adolescents (Silverman & Ellsworth, 1980). The exceptional awareness of highly gifted adolescents predisposes them to moral conflicts between “what is” and “what ought to be,” both in themselves and in society. It is enlightening for the adolescent who may have begun this process of self-examination to learn that feelings of guilt, shame, dissatisfaction with self, and idealism accompany the Level III experience. It is also helpful to know that there is light at the end of the tunnel, that this intense level of questioning oneself actually leads somewhere positive (Nelson, 1989). It appears to be a necessary step in the process of self-actualization (Maslow, 1971).

Many who make the transition to multilevel development do not do so consciously. The path is tortuous, and there is no guarantee that the destination will be reached. Instead, these individuals are “thrown into their destinies” by circumstances that seem beyond their control. The disintegrative process happens to them spontaneously, either through external events such as the loss of a loved one, a brush with death, a mystical experience, or unconscious awareness that they are ready to take the next step in their development. Whether the choice is conscious or unconscious, individuals at Level III are most in need of counsel. The transformation is disorienting and frightening, and it helps to have a light to guide the way. At higher levels, the choice to evolve is made consciously and the pain of disintegration is not feared because the individual understands its purpose and necessity.

At Level IV, the gap between the ideal and the real narrows as individuals learn how to live in accordance with their ideals. “What ought to be will be” becomes the metaphor for the self-actualizing life. Individuals who attain this level of development are committed to responsibility and service to others. They have an unshakable set of values and a strong sense of integrity. They are no longer at the mercy of lower drives; they have overcome aggressiveness in themselves. Self-deprecation and disapproval of others gives way to self-acceptance, acceptance of others, and the ability to look at oneself and others objectively and compassionately. This is the level from which moral exemplars emerge, people whom gifted students can study as role models. Level IV is similar to Maslow’s level of self-actualization (Maslow, 1971), and the methods devised to study individuals according to Dabrowski’s theory are equally applicable to the study of Maslow’s self-actualizers (Brennan & Piechowski, 1991).

Level V is the attainment of the personality ideal; it is marked by universal values, resolution of inner conflict, authenticity, harmony, altruism, and empathy for all living creatures. Mother Teresa and Dag Hammarskjöld are considered to have reached this highest level of development (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977). A recent study (Piechowski, 1991b) has uncovered yet another remarkable moral exemplar. Peace Pilgrim gave up all of her possessions except those she could carry in her pockets and walked penniless throughout the United States for twenty-eight years, covering well over 25,000 miles on foot, helping individuals to find inner peace and become activists for peace. Her philosophy, her total dedication to service, her living “to give instead of living to get” (Peace Pilgrim, 1982, p. 7) indicate that she attained the highest level in Dabrowski’s schema (Piechowski, 1991b). In Peace Pilgrim we see the complete integration of all the overexcitabilities.

Although Dabrowski’s levels of development do not apply to children, adolescents find exposure to this part of his theory reassuring and inspiring. It gives meaning to their own struggle to define themselves in a world that is often bereft of values.

The Relationship Between the Overexcitabilities and the Levels

The overexcitabilities of gifted children are the seeds of their self-development, the sands in the oysters that create the pearl through irritation. Because gifted children are bombarded with so much internal stimulation they must continuously exert conscious control over their internal worlds. Different patterns of OEs connote different types of giftedness
(Piechowski & Colangelo, 1984), but all of these patterns bring excessive information into the system and involve powerful drives which need to be channeled. The rich, turbulent, intense inner worlds of the gifted cause a heightened awareness of the pain and suffering of others, higher levels of moral concern, higher expectations of themselves, and greater commitment to serve. Advanced development in adulthood is the result of the interaction in childhood between these internal forces and external events.

Children who experience intense physiological reactions to a variety of stimuli must continuously make choices in order to function. A gifted child high in all the OEs may simultaneously have a strong desire to continue a book she has begun (Intellectual OE); experience a physical need to play baseball with her friends (Psychomotor OE; also Emotional OE); feel intensely hurt by one of her friends and want to avoid her (Emotional OE); have an almost uncontrollable urge to go out for a sundae (Sensory OE); and imagine in great detail what would happen if she chose to do anything but her homework (Imaginational OE; Emotional OE). Which of these urges will she respond to? In selecting one, she must suppress the others and exercise control over impulses that are exceedingly potent. This provides daily practice in setting priorities and gaining inner directedness, the same skills needed later in life to construct a set of values for oneself. In one of the few glimpses of her childhood that Peace Pilgrim provided, she illustrates how important the ability to set priorities was to her later development:

[As a child] I was preparing for the pilgrimage when I chose my rule of “first things first” and began to set priorities in my life. It led to a very orderly life and it taught me self discipline—a very valuable lesson, without which I could never have walked a pilgrimage. I carried it right into my adult life. (Peace Pilgrim, 1982, p. 1)

Dabrowski (1972) maintained that when Emotional, Imaginational, and Intellectual OEs surpass Sensual and Psychomotor OEs in strength, there is greater developmental potential to attain high levels of personality development. This is exactly the pattern found in a study of gifted adults (Silverman & Ellsworth, 1980): Emotional and Intellectual OEs were the most powerful overexcitabilities represented, with Imaginational OE significantly higher than in nonsellected groups, but of less strength than the other two. The same pattern emerged in studies of gifted adolescents (S. Gallagher, 1985; Piechowski & Colangelo, 1984; Schiever, 1985). Dabrowski’s observations of the developmental significance of these OEs have been at least partially confirmed by Lysy and Piechowski (1983), who determined that the combination of Intellectual and Emotional OE accounted for 48 percent of the variance in levels of development.

Although most studies of gifted populations have focused on overexcitabilities rather than levels, case studies indicate that individuals who have attained advanced development were clearly gifted (Bremner, 1987; Bremner & Piechowski, 1991; Grant, 1990; Piechowski, 1978, 1990, 1991b). Intelligence, however, is an insufficient predictor of multilevel development; emotional overexcitability of significant strength must also be present.

As suggested earlier, the strength of the OEs, combined with talents and special abilities, theoretically predicts “developmental potential” to attain higher levels of development in Dabrowski’s framework. Developmental potential adds an important dimension to our understanding of the traits of giftedness and provides a new direction for understanding the development of gifted individuals throughout the life span. Piechowski (1986) writes:

The concept of developmental potential ... broadens the conception of giftedness by addressing the personality correlates of high ability. This model also suggests a method of identifying individuals with high potential beyond the traditional IQ tests, and brings the goals of their education to self-actualization and advanced moral development, rather than merely to productivity in adult life. (p. 190)

ADVANCED DEVELOPMENT IN ADULTHOOD

The natural trajectory of giftedness in childhood is not a six-figure salary, perfect happiness, and a guaranteed place in Who’s Who. It is the deepening of the personality, the strengthening of one’s value system, the creation of greater and greater challenges for oneself, and the development of broader avenues for expressing compassion. Advanced development in adulthood is the commitment to becoming a better person and helping to make this a better world. Sometimes that results in fame which was not particularly sought as a goal. And sometimes one’s contribution is of a quieter nature. Piechowski (1989) describes one of the less obvious pathways to enhancing society:

The great achievers and the eminent as a rule have a parent or mentor especially devoted to them. ... No doubt it takes considerable dedication and integrity to live for the child but not through the child, to cherish and guide rather than to
EMOTIONAL EDUCATION

Healthy emotional development is clearly as important as academic achievement, but it has not been valued enough to date to create the kinds of environments in which that emotional development can be nurtured. The work of Leta Stetter Hollingworth stands out as one notable exception: "Leta Hollingworth . . . was the first to contribute evidence indicating that gifted children do have social/emotional needs meriting attention" (Colangelo, 1991, p. 273). Kerr (1990) describes Hollingworth as "the first and greatest counselor to the gifted and talented" (p. 178). Hollingworth not only studied gifted children in clinical settings, she created educational environments for the primary purpose of nurturing their emotional development. She was well aware of the adjustment difficulties of the gifted and endeavored throughout her lifetime to help others see the need for special educational and counseling provisions for them.

The psychologist who is professionally acquainted with children who test above 130 IQ will be able to formulate clearly certain special problems of adjustment, observed in the case study of these children, which arise primarily from the very fact that they are gifted. . . . The more intelligent the child, the more likely he is to become involved in these puzzling situations. (Hollingworth, 1931, p. 3)

Lewis Terman also observed the precariousness of the gifted young person in society, and concurred with Hollingworth that the difficulties increase with higher intelligence.

Precocity unavoidably complicates the problem of social adjustment. The child of eight years with a mentality of twelve or fourteen is faced with a situation almost inconceivably difficult. In order to adjust normally such a child has to have an exceptionally well-balanced personality and be well nigh a social genius. The higher the IQ, the more acute the problem. (Terman, 1931, p. 579)

Leta Hollingworth designed special classes for the gifted which offered what she termed "emotional education" (1939, p. 585). Components of her program included placement with like-minded peers to prevent social isolation; fast-paced instruction, cutting in half the amount of instructional time devoted to the basics (now known as "telescoping" or "compacting"); appropriate academic curriculum, sufficiently challenging so that the children enjoyed learning and were motivated to work hard; thematic education, "The Evolution of Common Things," in which the children designed the curriculum according to their own interests and curiosity; independent study and small-group projects; extensive classroom discussion; teaching the children how to handle the apparent foolishness of others with patience and love; helping them learn to balance candor with tact; biographical study to expose the children to role models of others like themselves who had sustained effort against odds and contributed to society; and training in the fine art of argumentation, including "argument with oneself," "argument with others in private, involving etiquette and the art of polite disagreement," and "argument in public" (p. 585). Infused throughout this program was a beautiful set of human values: basic respect for humanity, awareness of our global interdependence, and commitment to service.

Thus, Hollingworth provided the first model for the integration of affective and cognitive development within the regular curriculum. Follow-up studies indicate that Hollingworth's program had a profound, lifelong impact on the students (Harris, 1992; White 1990). Harris (1992, p. 102) asked these individuals, some almost seventy years later, "From your point of view, what constitutes success in life? . . . The replies in the Hollingworth group quite evidently mirrored the curriculum. Their answers were strongly focused on societal connection,
awareness and sensitivity to others as elements inseparable from self-actualization, and definitions of success.”

CONCLUSION

In traditional educational perspectives, we inadvertently foster a type of self-centered competitiveness in life in which the gifted are perceived as having an edge. This framework does little to attract empathy for the unique needs of the gifted. The school reform movement is moving education away from competitive structures toward more cooperative plans. However, there is even less empathy for the gifted within this movement. In the name of cooperation, often the gifted are held back to the rate of less advanced students. A truly humanitarian framework honors the unique learning styles and learning rates of all students. Natural collaborations are formed of students with similar interests and abilities. The school becomes a community of learners, each pursuing his or her own passions as well as absorbing a specific body of knowledge. Emotional development is given equal importance with cognitive development; therefore, groups are formed for the purpose of dealing with affective and social issues. Community service is an integral part of the program. The works of Hollingworth (1926, 1939, 1940) and Roeper (1990) stand as guides for the design of such programs. Until emotional education of gifted students becomes widespread, counselors will have a great responsibility for preserving these children’s emotional health.

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**Professional update**

**February 18–21, 1993**

California Association for Counseling
Town and Country Hotel
San Diego, California

Contact: Dr. Richard Hoover
2555 E. Chapman Ave., Suite 201
Fullerton, California 92631

**March 14–17, 1993**

American Counseling Association
Inforum Convention Center
Atlanta, Georgia

Contact: ACA
5999 Stevenson Avenue
Alexandria, Virginia 22304

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