

## **Feeling it All: Overexcitabilities and the Gifted**

**By Michelle Ronksley-Pavia**

### **Introduction**

Over the past twenty five years much has been written on the application of Dabrowski's *Theory of Positive Disintegration (TPD)* in gifted education - especially where he talks about the existence of five overexcitabilities amongst the gifted. The term 'overexcitabilities' refers to the way gifted people often respond to the world around them; consisting of psychomotor; sensual; imaginal; intellectual and emotional overexcitabilities. In future editions *Feeling it All* will look at each one of these excitabilities in more detail. However, in the meantime I would like to explain a little about the background to the overexcitabilities and how these may be applied to the gifted.

### **Overexcitabilities and the Gifted**

The intense characteristic of many gifted and creative people and their often sensitive and passionate nature might be explained by understanding 'overexcitabilities'(OEs). Dabrowski (1972) coined the term *overexcitability* which he defined as *higher than average responsiveness to stimuli, manifested by either psychomotor, sensual, emotional (affective), imaginal, or intellectual excitability, or the combination thereof* (p303).

Dabrowski's entire theory (which includes the overexcitabilities) is based on basic human development, rather than specifically aimed at giftedness and is said to be guiding educators away from the *education* part of gifted education in order to explore the psychology behind

giftedness. The theory has been most welcomed in gifted education as a way of mapping the inner lives of gifted people, including the search for self awareness, meaning and compassion. The theory is also useful in explaining why many gifted children may show deep emotions, feelings and empathy.

### **Dabrowski's *Theory of Positive Disintegration* (TPD)**

As already stated the *Theory of Positive Disintegration* (TPD) relates to the way an individual's personality develops with OEs being an integral part of the TPD. However, we need to bear in mind that the theory which includes the OEs, levels of development and personality growth is very rich and very complex and when looking at them we need to bear in mind that we are looking at a very small piece of Dabrowski's theory.

The OEs have a breadth and depth often only loosely touched on in many journal articles and it is important to realise that having more than one form of OE could impact on the way the other OE's show themselves. When working with gifted children, the unique ways they experience the world need to be kept in mind, as they not only carry intense feeling of happiness but also intense feelings in other areas including, sadness and frustration.

Dabrowski concentrated on the importance of these powerful emotions in the development of the person; as depending on how these are dealt could impact positively or negatively on a child's growth.

It is important to remember that Dabrowski's theory sees development as not being part of physical maturity. The different levels of the theory are unrelated to chronological age just as giftedness is unrelated to a child's age.

### **Why the Theory**

Dabrowski developed his theory through experiences with being both a psychiatrist and psychologist studying the lives of his patients, many of whom were creative people, as well as gifted children and teenagers. Dabrowski tried to make sense of how people had treated each other during World War II, particularly the Genocide, and how people could (on the one hand) be sensitive and capable of sacrifice and heroism and others be fundamental evil and inhumane. Dabrowski felt an innate need to understand and explain how people could in some instances be cruel, but others, in similar instances, be kind and patient to others (Ackerman).

### **Dabrowski's Overexcitabilities**

The overexcitabilities part of the theory are more commonly the focus in the gifted field where it is said that the overexcitabilities (OEs) appear in five different but often overlapping forms.

Dabrowski finding that:

- There were five ways that OEs can be shown in children - psychomotor, sensual, imaginal, intellectual and emotional.
- Famous and creative people including gifted students displayed high levels of OEs – more than other people who were neither gifted nor creative.

Dabrowski believed that these five OEs were found in some people, (regardless of their age), with those people frequently responding to their inner lives, and to things going on around them, with greater intensity than others. He theorised that the intense responses and feelings by individuals with OE's, were inborn characteristics and showed great promise for their development.

Dabrowski suggested that a person could have all of the OEs, a few or none at all, and these OEs have *the effect of making concrete stimuli more complex, enhancing emotional content and amplifying experience* (Ackerman 2009; p89). Another researcher, Piechowski, drew the picture of the five OEs being like coloured filters through which people saw and experienced the world, suggesting that OEs could be viewed almost as the other *fifth sense*. The more sensitive or open the filters are the greater the value and extent of sensitivity or inward flow of information. This has major implications when teaching the gifted. Quite obviously what one child experiences can be dramatically different to another child's experience depending on the extent of their OEs and their sensitivity, or how open their 'filters' are. These 'filters' then influence *which* stimuli a person responds to (and *how* they respond), depending on the OEs they have. Dabrowski further stated that people who exhibited OEs usually had one that was particularly dominant, sometimes added to by changing intensities of their other OE's. OEs are important parts of personality, which also assist in shaping a person's view of and position in the world a person *who manifests several forms of overexcitability, sees reality in a different, stronger and more multisided manner* (Dabrowski, 1972; p7). Dabrowski does strongly iterate that they are in fact a component of the complete TPD which should not be used by itself when referring to the gifted population - but be related to the whole *Theory of Personality Development* to enable greater understanding.

### **OEs in Childhood, Adolescence and Adulthood**

Viewed as a whole, the research on OE's since the 1980's, show more support for the existence of OEs in the gifted population, than in the identified non-gifted groups.

Four studies involving children and adolescents showed that they tended to demonstrate all five OEs to some extent with psychomotor OE being the strongest indicator of giftedness, meaning 'non-gifted' students did not show high levels of the OEs. Ackerman established

that psychomotor OE was a major factor in distinguishing between the gifted and non-identified groups, the gifted group scored highly on psychomotor OE in both studies.

Research undertaken with gifted adults shows strong evidence for the claim that gifted individuals show greater imaginal, intellectual and emotional OEs. The majority of the support for this outcome flows from studies of creative people, and is particularly strong when research participants were identified as artists. However, adults demonstrated low psychomotor and sensual OEs - perhaps because by the time they reach adulthood they have learned to reign in these OEs in order to be more acceptable to society.

It would appear from the research evidence that there is a great deal of support for Dabrowski's OEs in gifted people showing very different profiles in children and adults studied. Funnily enough (it seems) gifted youngsters with high OEs become gifted adolescents with high OEs and, you guessed it, eventually gifted adults with high OEs.

Therefore over the next few issues in the *Feeling it All* column we will be looking at Dabrowski's five overexcitabilities, how they are shown and their possible bearing on individuals.

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