



# Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration: Some implications for teachers of gifted students

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Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration (TPD) (Dabrowski 1964, 1967, 1970, 1972), while largely unknown in education, psychology and psychiatry, has found a home in gifted education. It has been used to address various aspects of gifted students' functioning, including emotional sensitivity and intensity (Fiedler 1998; Piechowski 1997); misdiagnosis of conditions, such as ADHD (Baum, Olenchak and Owen 1998); creative personality (Schiever 1985); spiritual development (Morrissett 1996) and counselling (Hazell 1999; Colangelo and Ogburn 1989; Mendaglio 1998). Arguably, TPD has implications for the education of gifted students, but it provides no strategies or techniques that can be readily applied to the classroom. This cannot be used to criticize TPD because Dabrowski, a psychiatrist and psychologist, was primarily concerned with personality development and psychotherapy. In the absence of a comprehensive theory of giftedness, TPD offers a significant contribution to gifted education by providing provocative concepts that shed light on the affective aspects of gifted persons while simultaneously requiring an examination of our notions of giftedness itself. This article presents elements of TPD that have deepened my understanding of gifted persons and that may prove useful for educators. A theme in my presentation is that TPD is a theory of personality development (for example, Dabrowski 1964, 1967; Pyryt and Mendaglio 1993). As such, TPD is neither a theory of giftedness nor a theory of emotional

development. It is a comprehensive, complex theory with far-reaching implications for understanding human development in general.



### **TPD: What's in a Name?**



It is worth beginning with spelling out TPD again: theory of positive disintegration. In gifted education, theory of positive disintegration is used, but the most prolific writers in the area have reified the label Dabrowski's theory of emotional development (Piechowski 1997; Silverman 1993). Unlike a rose, TPD by any other name is not TPD.



Dabrowski proposes a comprehensive theory of personality development. His aims were more ambitious than helping us understand the intense positive and negative feelings witnessed in many gifted students, although his concepts are helpful in this area. In addition, he had little to say about emotional development in the sense that is used in developmental psychology (see Saarni 1999). Viewing TPD as a theory of emotional development obscures a cornerstone of Dabrowski's theory: positive disintegration.

In Dabrowski's (1964) theory, positive disintegration is the process by which development occurs. For Dabrowski, growth occurs through a series of psychological disintegrations and reintegrations, resulting in dramatic change to a person's conceptions of self and the world. Positive disintegration forges a personality that motivates one to perform at increasingly high levels, emphasizing altruism and morality. However, not all disintegrations are positive. When negative disintegrations occur, psychoses or suicide may be the outcome. An important theme of TPD is the movement from an initial egocentric approach to life to an altruistic one. The factors needed for positive disintegration and their operation are primary concerns of TPD.

Positive disintegration propels a person to TPD's higher levels of development. There are five levels of development: initial or primary integration; three levels referring to increasing complexity of disintegration called unilevel, spontaneous multilevel and organized multilevel; and secondary integration that refers to the highest level (see Dabrowski 1964). Levels of development may lead one to believe that TPD is a type of stage theory similar to well-known theories of development, such as Erikson's (1963) theory of life span development and Piaget's theory of cognitive development (Piaget and Inhelder 1969). There are some significant differences between Dabrowski's use of level and the notion of stage. For one thing, progression beyond level one, primary integration, is by no means universal in the population. In addition, progression through the levels is not accomplished in a linear, invariant sequence. The concept of level allows for progression and regression, for unique patterns of development.



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TPD is not a theory of emotional development, though it provides some useful insights into emotionality. Dabrowski's theory describes how human beings transform themselves from self-serving, conforming individuals to self-aware, self-directed persons who transcend their primitive natures and strive to "walk the moral talk." Certain prerequisites are needed for the journey from egocentrism to altruism. One is familiar to us, namely, a facilitative social environment; the other, developmental potential, is unique to TPD.

### **Developmental Potential: Beyond the OEs Lie Complexity and Controversy**

Overexcitabilities (OEs) are by far the most frequently encountered components of TPD (for example, Tolan 1994; Gallagher 1985; Piechowski, Silverman and Falk 1985; Piechowski and Colangelo 1984; Piechowski and Cunningham 1985; Lewis, Kitano and Lynch 1992) but they are often presented out of the context in which TPD discusses them. Dabrowski's (1972) notion of overexcitability is anchored to the sensitivity of the nervous system and is seen as above-average responsiveness to stimuli. Overexcitability (OE) is a fundamental but not a sole indicator of the foundational concept of developmental potential. OE has five manifestations: psychomotor, sensual, imaginational, intellectual and emotional.

Piechowski (1986, 191) provides a useful description of OEs:

Psychomotor: movement, restlessness, drivenness, an augmented capacity for being active and energetic.

Sensual: enhanced differentiation and aliveness of sensual experience.

Imaginational: vividness of imagery, richness of association, facility for dreams, fantasies, and inventions, animisms and personifications, liking the unusual.

Intellectual: avidity for knowledge, discovery, questioning, love of ideas and theoretical analysis, search for truth.

Emotional: great depth and intensity of emotional life expressed in a wide range of feelings, compassion, attachments, heightened sense of responsibility, self-examination.

Overexcitability is not unique to gifted persons, as some authors imply (for example, Bouchet and Falk 2001). In TPD, OE indicates the level of developmental potential applicable to the general population. The number and levels of OEs in persons affect their experiencing. When all five are present, emotional intensity results: "These overexcitabilities, especially the latter three (intellectual, imaginational, and emotional), often cause a person to experience day to day life more intensely and to feel the extremes of the joys and sorrows of life profoundly" (Tillier 1998, 50).

## Complexity

OEs are only part of a central concept of developmental potential. For Dabrowski (1964), developmental potential includes OEs, special abilities and talents, and the third factor. While the meaning of the second component makes intuitive sense, the third factor is more elusive. Its appearance is “to some extent dependent on inherited abilities and on environmental experiences, but as it develops it achieves an independence from these factors through conscious differentiation and self-definition takes its own position in the course of development of personality” (Dabrowski 1964, 55).

Piechowski (1975) interprets developmental potential as consisting of OEs and autonomous inner forces called dynamisms. Dynamisms are central, but rarely discussed, components of TPD (Pyryt and Mendaglio 2000). Dynamisms are forces that drive disintegration and reintegrations of psychological structures. Despite the importance of these autonomous inner forces as evidenced by Dabrowski’s (1964) own writings and in his coauthored volumes with Piechowski (Dabrowski and Piechowski 1977a, 1977b), little reference is made to them in more recent discussions of TPD in gifted education (for example, Piechowski 1997; Silverman 1991).

Dynamisms are forces of development that drive the process of positive disintegration and assist in actualizing persons’ endowment of developmental potential. Dynamisms are forces, biological or mental in nature, that control behavior and its development. Dabrowski (1972) describes them as instincts, drives and intellectual processes combined with emotions. Some dynamisms refer explicitly to a person’s experiencing intense negative emotions, such as guilt and shame, for example. Experience of chronic, intense negative emotions contribute to shattering a person’s picture of his or her lifestyle and spark changes in perceptions and attitudes toward self and the social environment. In other words, such people become aware of their implicit worldviews that have led to their complacency and conformity, and they become transformed through dynamisms, such as the ones mentioned, and others, including dissatisfaction with self and empathy. Those with the highest levels of developmental potential (extraordinary, in Dabrowski’s view) may reach level four, organized multilevel disintegration, where through dynamisms such as autopsychotherapy they take control over their own personality development. At this level, persons transcend their primitive instincts and drives. They achieve a highly developed sense of morality. In the highest level of development, secondary integration, rarely achieved and represented by society’s exemplars, the person enacts his or her personality ideal whose hallmark is dedication to serving humanity.



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## Controversy

While dynamisms receive some mention in recent literature in gifted education (for example, Piechowski 1997; Silverman 1993), an important assumption associated with developmental potential is not apparent. Dabrowski proposes that developmental potential is determined by heredity and fixed at birth. According to TPD, we are all born with a certain level of developmental potential. Whether the level is low, moderate or high, it is out of our control. While our level of developmental potential interacts with the environment, the environment cannot alter the level we inherited. In this sense, developmental potential is analogous to intelligence. Both are genetically determined but influenced significantly by the environment.

Although developmental potential is not quantified in TPD, positive disintegration requires more than low levels of developmental potential. To attain levels beyond primary integration (level 1), moderate to high levels of developmental potential are needed. Dabrowski argues that the highest level of development, secondary integration (level 5), is rarely achieved. At those lofty heights of human development, we would likely find people such as Mother Teresa. Dabrowski himself said that he had not met a person who achieved secondary integration (Tillier, personal communication, June 25, 2002). Regardless of the quality of the social environment, limits of development are set by hereditary factors.

This means that we are born with a varying number and level of OEs. Dabrowski did not elaborate on this. For example, he did not provide profiles of persons with only two OEs of psychomotor and sensual or a metric with which we can readily assess either the presence or the levels of OEs. It is clear, however, that TPD requires that all five OEs be present, with three occurring in high levels, for advanced human development to take place: "Emotional (affective), imaginational and intellectual overexcitability are the richer forms. If they appear together, they give rich possibilities of development and creativity" (Dabrowski 1972, 7).

In TPD, OEs are only part of the developmental potential concept. If we are interested in applying TPD to gifted students, we need to go beyond the OEs. Dabrowski's OEs are not gifts that can be created by people in a social environment, no matter how loving and supportive it may be. To be sure, the quality of the social environment is implicated in their elicitation, but not in their creation. OEs, as part of developmental potential, are created by heredity, not by facilitative parents or educators. One implication of adopting a Dabrowskian perspective is that we must divest ourselves of the notion that all persons can be gifted in the sense of TPD's potential for advanced development.



## Positive Disintegration and Personality Development: No Emotional Pain, No Developmental Gain



Positive disintegration is an emotionally painful process resulting in psychological reintegration at a higher level of human functioning. Experiencing negative emotions, such as shame, guilt and anxiety, under certain conditions is indicative of positive disintegration. However, we need to see emotions in the context of developmental potential. When developmental potential is low, emotions, including intense negative emotions, are simply experienced with short-term effects on a person. In contrast, intense emotionality in the context of high OEs yields profound, life-changing experiences contributing to positive disintegration. Inner conflict is associated with such intense emotionality: life events and introspection become catalysts to painful experiencing of the discrepancy between the way the world ought to be and the way it is.

Negative emotions triggered by inner conflict propel a person into higher levels of personality structures. In other words, these negative emotions are part of positive disintegration. As such, they do not require fixing. Whereas prevailing wisdom suggests that we intervene at such times to remove the emotional distress, Dabrowski advocates an acceptance of these intense negative emotions. Our interventions should be aimed at helping people understand their emotions in the context of TPD principles. Dabrowski's psychotherapeutic interventions included a didactic use of TPD with patients. I should reiterate the type of emotionality involved here: emotions sparked by inner conflict, not by self-interest. Educators know firsthand of the range of emotions expressed by students. My guess is that few emotional expressions of students would qualify as being motivated by inner conflict. Experienced educators can instinctively differentiate between self-serving, manipulative emotions and genuine indicators of growth in the Dabrowskian sense of development.

In addition to being a theory of personality development, TPD is a theory of moral development. Unlike Kohlberg's (1976) theory of moral development, which focuses on the development of moral reasoning, Dabrowski focuses on moral behavior – inner conflict serves a motivational purpose. As awareness of how the world ought to be leads to preoccupation with what is good and right, personal values become transformed by an empathic connection with persons as individuals and in the form of humanity as a whole. Self-interest and gratification of drives give way to altruism. While gifted persons may display moral attitudes, a Dabrowskian perspective is not captured by current definitions of gifted used in most school jurisdictions.

### TPD and Giftedness

Dabrowski (1967) was aware of the term *gifted* as it is generally used in gifted education.



However, it is difficult to support that high developmental potential is equivalent to gifted as currently used in gifted education programs. The influence of the definition proposed by Marland in 1972 (see Davis and Rimm 1998, 18), which altered giftedness into a multidimensional concept in the United States, is still visible today (Stephens and Karnes 2000). Marland's influence is also seen in Canada. The Alberta Learning definition, for example, is a hybrid of Marland's multidimensional view and Gardner's (1983) multiple intelligences: "Giftedness is exceptional potential and/or performance across a wide range of abilities in one or more of the following areas: general intellectual, specific academic, creative thinking, social, musical, artistic, kinesthetic" (Alberta Learning 2000, 17). This type of definition of giftedness does not capture the Dabrowskian view of high potential for advanced development that is premised on high levels of OEs and the presence of dynamisms, among other factors. Even with the addition of the array of affective characteristics, such as heightened sensitivity, self-criticism, spirituality and emotional intensity, we cannot approximate the advanced human functioning characteristic of those who undergo a series of positive disintegrations. Being gifted for a gifted program requires the meeting of specific criteria, which normally include high intellectual potential or demonstrated high level of ability/performance in some areas associated with schools. This is not sufficient to capture giftedness in a Dabrowskian sense. Other conceptions of giftedness, though distinct from Marland-type definitions (for example, Betts 1985), present conceptions of giftedness that also differ qualitatively from the Dabrowskian perspective. Direct comparisons, admittedly, are difficult because no term is equivalent to gifted in the Dabrowski lexicon. The closest I have come to such a term is the phrase *high developmental potential*. The common notion of potential emphasizes the importance of the environment in which it will be actualized. However, giftedness and high developmental potential are qualitatively different concepts.

Because of my study of both gifted education and TPD, I have concluded that persons characterized by Dabrowski's high developmental potential do not necessarily meet criteria for gifted programs. It is worth reiterating that TPD is not a theory of giftedness; gifted education is an area where it is applied. Those who qualify for a gifted education program may not be gifted in a Dabrowskian sense: not every student in a gifted program possesses high developmental potential. Society's villains can be used to illustrate this point. Some notorious historical figures as well as current master criminals would likely meet criteria for gifted education programs. People such as Adolf Hitler would certainly not meet the Dabrowskian criteria – Hitler would not be an example of someone who was high on emotional overexcitability and dynamisms such as empathy, which are prerequisites for advanced human development for Dabrowski. The presence

of potential for advanced development is not subsumed under the concept of giftedness as it is currently defined in school jurisdictions.



### **Summary**

Four issues relating to TPD have been discussed in this article. The first issue related to the name of the theory. The name by which Dabrowski's theory is known is not a trivial matter. Positive disintegration is a foundation upon which TPD is built. Calling it emotional development does not adequately reflect the theory. Positive disintegration is the driving force of development for Dabrowski. Second, OEs are only part of a larger concept of developmental potential that includes special abilities and talents, third factor and dynamisms. Third factor is a good example of many concepts Dabrowski introduced that are simultaneous, rich and vague in meaning. Forces such as the third factor and dynamisms, when activated, drive development. Developmental potential is fixed by heredity. The environment can either facilitate or inhibit its expression, but it cannot change the original endowment. Third, intense negative emotions are part of the growth process. These emotions, however, cannot arise out of selfish interests but must emanate from the experience of inner conflict. These emotions are created because of a person's experiencing the conflict between the ideal and the real. Fourth, persons endowed with high developmental potential have the capability of achieving higher levels of development. This is not synonymous with current conceptions of giftedness.

### ***Implications for Educators***

Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration is a complex, comprehensive theory of human development with direct implications for psychotherapy. Dabrowski's primary goal was not to propose strategies for improving classroom practices. Reading Dabrowski's original works will enable interested educators to generate their own interpretations of TPD and draw their own conclusions. Meanwhile, here are some of my conclusions based on my interpretation of the theory.

### ***Positive Disintegration and Development***

We are concerned with growth and development of gifted students. TPD requires a reconsideration of the teacher's role in contributing to the development of students. Unless we are willing to orchestrate crises in students' lives (which is not recommended), we cannot activate development in the Dabrowskian sense. This places us in a responsive, rather than an initiating, role. Responsiveness does not mean passivity. It requires some usual and unusual approaches on our part. We need to get to know our students, and, to apply TPD, we need to know the signs of growth and have the courage and skills to facilitate it. Being sensitive to students' reactions to such events as puberty, deaths in their families and personal crises is not unique to a Dabrowskian perspective.



However, seeing these events as opportunities for personal growth in gifted students is a contribution of TPD. This is an example of how TPD requires its adherents to reframe many commonly held beliefs. Viewing such crises as opportunities for growth will have beneficial effects on how we respond to students.



### ***Developmental Potential***

Overexcitabilities are not simple concepts in TPD. They, with other factors, constitute a student's developmental potential. Educators are important people in gifted students' social environments. The manner in which we interact with all students contributes significantly to creating a positive, constructive environment in classrooms. In this area, TPD reinforces the common belief of the importance of classroom environments in assisting students' maximizing their potentials. Students with high developmental potential will pose challenges to educators. A high level of psychomotor overexcitability may manifest itself in a variety of behaviors that may resemble attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Intellectual overexcitability may result in incessant questioning to satisfy curiosity. Emotional overexcitability may create intense emotionality due to keen awareness of and concern with global events that do not end when classes do.

### ***Negative Emotions***

Gifted students' expressions of negative emotions pose challenges to educators. When they express their feelings in a way that we deem acceptable, we have little trouble responding effectively to them. Responding to gifted students' expression of positive feelings is usually not an issue for us. Negative emotions expressed appropriately (for example, "I feel sad because he no longer wants to be my friend") do not pose problems. The challenges are emotions that are masked, inappropriately expressed or manipulative. Students may be sad, but without direct expression, we may misinterpret sadness as anxiety, for example. Avoiding misinterpretation requires that we engage in perception checking with students. On the other hand, inappropriately expressed disappointment, frustration and anger are not to be encouraged, nor are manipulative emotions that are used to avoid doing tasks that gifted students dislike. I have read nothing in TPD indicating that all emotionality is equal in requiring acceptance. What TPD suggests is that persons, including young persons, with high developmental potential will experience much intense emotionality, a great deal of which is negative. However, to indicate growth, emotionality must arise from inner conflict, not from conflict with others, and it must not be of the type that is egocentric.

One of the many gaps in TPD is the lack of a cognitive developmental context: Dabrowski does not spell out what high developmental potential looks like at age 6 or in early adolescence. My belief is that we will generally see little evidence of students'



developmental potentials significantly actualized in their school years, though we will see signs, especially if we know what we are looking for. In an attempt to place some of the TPD in a child developmental context, Mendaglio and Pyryt (2001) suggest that the process of positive disintegration is triggered by a combination of life events and abstract reasoning ability. While gifted students may have achieved abstract reasoning ability early in life, they still are lacking in the experiential component. Having said that, Dabrowski believes that at the upper reaches of developmental potential neither experience nor the quality of the environment is as much a factor as in lower levels. For example, Dabrowski believed that Gandhi was Gandhi at age 10. If we have such an exemplar in our classrooms, we will know. In the majority of cases, only signs of high developmental potential will be visible from time to time.

### ***TPD and Giftedness***

I have been using the term *gifted students* loosely. With respect to giftedness, TPD requires another reframing of commonly held conceptions. The concept of giftedness does not encompass developmental potential. Neither definitions of giftedness nor criteria used for selecting students for gifted education programs reflects a Dabrowskian view of potential for advanced development. A Dabrowskian view of giftedness would require a revamping of not only our definitions but also our programming. Dabrowski is clear: TPD is about authenticity, morality, becoming and being a good person; becoming truly human. Success in TPD is not material, nor is it related to academic achievement. The triumph of people who have struggled and endured the pain of development rests in their lives of service to others: they live their lives for the betterment of humankind.

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