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1

Gifted Kids Have a Unique Perception

Gifted kids have a unique way of perceiving their world and their relationship to it, and this unique perception is probably the first indicator that teachers and parents have of their giftedness. As young children, they can make abstract connections and synthesize a variety of experiences to make both sophisticated and practical conclusions far beyond what is expected of their age (Silverman, 1993). In an enrichment program at a local university, a graduate class of puppeteers were planning to demonstrate a performance of Hansel and Gretel using life-size puppets. The organizing professor and director of the group stressed that only upper grade children should attend; but, I urged him to allow all of the children to be included, even the kindergarten students. He agreed, only if they used appropriate theater etiquette. I asked each teacher to prepare his or her children for “theater manners” before they attended the performance. The kindergarten teacher, an insightful and creative individual, brought her children forward to their conversation rug, and said: “I am so excited about our visit to the theater. I plan to run in and jump on chairs, bounce around, and shout out my enthusiasm for being included—yippee.”

From the back of the circle of children, Mandy quietly said with a serious tone, “And you’ll never be asked back again.” To this response, the teacher replied, “What should I do?” and the children began sharing ideas, including the importance of walking in quietly, sitting in their seats, and listening. Mandy added, “Sort of like church manners, but this will be more fun.”

Mandy’s teacher described her as always seeming to see things differ-

ently from the other children, and as a result they tended to isolate her. Mandy had an advanced level of moral reasoning, and it was very important to her that things be fair. She could be judgmental, and expected the teacher to settle disputes. She would loudly call out to her teacher, “You are needed over here,” which often represented a response to Mandy’s perception of the other children being insensitive, cruel, or even unfair in their interactions with one another. Linda Silverman, a psychologist and director of the Gifted Development Center in Denver, Colorado, observed that, in the field of gifted education, it is often not well known that giftedness has an emotional as well as a cognitive substructure, and that gifted children not only think differently from other children, but they also feel differently. This difference in feeling can be explained as an intensity or expanded field of subjective experience (Silverman, 1993).

In this chapter, we examine the unique perception of gifted students in the context of the Dabrowski Theory of Emotional Development. The theory’s five overexcitabilities—psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginal, and emotional—are discussed, with examples of student responses on the Overexcitability Questionnaire. The second component of Dabrowski’s theory of multilevelness is then introduced, with the five levels, ranging from Level I to Level V.

THE DABROWSKI THEORY OF EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

According to Kazimierz Dabrowski, a Polish psychiatrist and psychologist, who developed his Theory of Emotional Development (also known as the Theory of Positive Disintegration), emotional intensity is a positive characteristic for gifted children and gifted adults (Dabrowski, 1964). He described emotional development as an interaction between developmental potential and the environment. He called this intensity *overexcitability* and identified five types.

1. *Psychomotor*—restlessness, curiosity, and lots of energy
2. *Sensual*—pleasure in sensory and aesthetic experiences
3. *Intellectual*—higher level thinking (analysis and synthesis); asks lots of questions
4. *Imaginational*—spontaneous; fantasizes and uses imagery and metaphor
5. *Emotional*—intense feelings; is sensitive and empathetic

Dabrowski (1902–1980) survived both world wars, and during the second, he risked his life to provide asylum to Jews escaping from the Nazis. The Nazis and the communists imprisoned, tortured, and prevented him from continuing his professional work as a psychiatrist and psychologist. Dabrowski’s Theory of Emotional Development grew out of his own experiences with injustice, death, and suffering, while at the same time he witnessed incredible acts of self-sacrifice in the midst of inhumanity and cruelty.

2

One Size Does Not Fit All

Socialization vs. Social Development

I limit myself to three answers per class, that way there aren't as many groans when I share my ideas, but when the teacher needs an answer, I sometimes will add another point. When class is over, no one talks to me, and I usually eat alone, or with Timmy, who no one likes either, because he is fat and has really bad body odor.

Michael (age 10)

Michael is a fifth grade gifted student who takes most of his classes in mixed ability student classes, except for an accelerated math class. He has been counseled by both his teachers and his parents to “take a back seat” and “don’t answer too many questions” and “stop using big words that other students don’t know.” His response to these suggestions is, “That would make me, not me. I like to share what I know—I need to share what I know, and to be me, not pretend I don’t know.”

Michael is a fine example of what the French psychologist Jean Terrassier (1985) called dyssynchrony. He said that dyssynchrony is made up of two parts. One part is internal and refers to disparate rates of development in intellectual, psychomotor, and affective development. The second part of dys-

synchrony is social, in which the gifted child feels out-of-step with the social context. In Michael's case, he has advanced information and knowledge that he is being asked to keep to himself, because the other students don't understand or they aren't interested in his ideas.

Lewis Terman (1931), a pioneer in gifted education, identified more than 1,500 age-11 gifted students, and he and his colleagues followed them throughout their lifetime. Terman addressed the issue of dyssynchrony:

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 to be well nigh a social genius. The higher the IQ, the more acute the problem. (p. 579)

Another early researcher in gifted education, Leta S. Hollingworth (1930) said the further removed gifted children are from the average in intelligence, the more pressing their adjustment problems become. In a study of social adjustment, Hollingworth found gifted adolescents to be much less neurotic, much more self-sufficient, and much less submissive than nongifted adolescents. Yet, she found that as the intelligence of gifted children increased, so did their difficulty with peer relations.

The truism that one size fits all is not appropriate for clothes, educational environments, familial and peer environments, or the sociocultural context. On the surface, it might appear that Michael is not socially adjusted, but he would demonstrate good social adjustment when and if he could find others like himself. In his accelerated math class in which there is cross-age grouping of fourth to sixth grade high achievers in math, his teachers report that he gets along well with the other students.

SOCIALIZATION OF THE GIFTED

One major fear concerning gifted individuals who have great talent and seek perfection is that they may wind up isolated from others. Predictions of isolation were made early on by Alger (1867):

A passion for perfection will make it a subject solitary as nothing else can. At every step he leaves a group behind. And, when at last, he reaches the goal, alas! Where are the early comrades? (p. 144)

Socialization Is an Educational Concern for the Gifted

Socialization continues to be a concern for gifted students; for example, one major reason gifted students are infrequently accelerated is the fear their social adjustment may be negatively affected. Yet, the research indicates gifted

students have excellent social adjustment (Janos & Robinson, 1985; Robinson & Noble, 1991; Neihart, Reis, Robinson, & Moon, 2002; Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004). However, Silverman (1993b) said her clinical experience revealed that many of these so-called well-adjusted young gifted people suffer great loneliness and inner conflict between a “desire to fit in and their ideals” (p. 291).

One problem with many of the research studies on social adjustment is that gifted students have been compared to nongifted students, and the vulnerability of gifted students may not be reflected in these studies. Elizabeth Maxwell, the associate director of the Gifted Child Center in Denver, Colorado, said when there is a misfit between the gifted student and a given group, the gifted student often receives feedback that he or she does not fit, that he or she needs to change, and “that it is not all right to be oneself” (Genshaft, Bireley, & Hollinger, 1995, p. 27).

Socialization as a Level II Behavior in the Dabrowski Theory

In Level II of the Dabrowski Theory of Emotional Development, the individual is responsive to peers and a desire for approval exists. Individuals at this level are guided by custom and the expectations of others. Level II mirrors the definition of socialization as seeking to acquire the beliefs, behaviors, and values of others. In Level III there is a growing independence from social opinion, and discontent and disapproval of self. Gifted children want to be accepted and to be like others, and it is this desire to be like others that can be problematic for them, in that they are perceptive enough to know they are not like others, and this perception can be very troubling. This struggle is reflected in a journal entry of Shannon (age 16):

I try so hard to be “with it” and to laugh at jokes I don’t think are funny, and to act like I don’t have one worry at all—but that’s not me. I don’t know who I am, and I am losing touch with myself.

This struggle to be like others and to take on the values and beliefs of the group can result in gifted students feeling alienated from themselves, and a loss of the essence of their inner self.

Social Development at Levels IV–V of the Dabrowski Theory

In Level IV of the Dabrowski Theory of Emotional Development, the individual begins to be objective, to step back, and to self-evaluate. Awareness of being unique grows, and one begins to design individual methods and strategies to deal with stress, anxiety, conflict, and depression. In Level V, the individual identifies with the highest levels of development and becomes autonomous, and at this level such individuals assume responsibility for others, as well as for their own development.

GROUP DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION AS TECHNIQUES TO HELP GIFTED STUDENTS EXPLORE ATTITUDES ABOUT PERFECTION

Twelve gifted students were invited to a group discussion to discuss the topic "To Be Nobody but Myself." The students were provided with the following quotation from e.e. cummings: "To be nobody but myself—in a world that is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else—means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight, and never stop fighting." The students were asked to volunteer to spend an half hour with the counselor in their middle school to discuss perfectionism in an effort to see if discussion groups involving attitude exploration could be helpful for the students and the counselors. Their Pre-Advanced Placement Science teacher asked students who felt they were perfectionists to raise their hand, then said that the counselor needed volunteers for a discussion group. Seven girls and five boys volunteered for the group.

CASE STUDY

Miss Elliot, a middle school counselor, was sitting in a circle of twelve chairs arranged in the front of the Pre-AP Science lab. She passed a quotation from e.e. cummings to the group of students, and asked them to read it, and to share any connections they could make to perfectionism. She indicated they would be using a "talking stick," which they could pass around when they wished to make a comment, to encourage full participation.

One student, Paul, reached for the talking stick and said, "Trying to be like everyone else means being, as they say, on the same page, and I don't want to be on the same page. I want to be on my page." The counselor nodded and asked Paul, "What does that mean, my page?"

Paul replied, "Like in the science class, we have to identify a project, and carry it out, but it was so spelled out, that the projects will all be the same, with the same results, the same amount of time, and the same everything. What is different about that?" Another student, Martha asked for the talking stick, and added, "It's not only the science class, but in most of my classes, if you want to do extra, or be different, it is discouraged; plus, my parents won't let me stay up and work on my projects past 11 PM, and I am always late anyway. I need more time if it is going to be my best work."

Elizabeth, leaned over and took the stick from Martha. "I can't get started right away. It takes time for me to decide what I want to do, so I usually go along with others, and then if I don't try, I haven't lost anything." Paul responded to Elizabeth, "Yeah, I know how that is. You make a deal with yourself, like if I just get by, it's OK. But then I feel bad because it's not my best work. My dad is a perfectionist, and I guess my mom is too."

The counselor looked around the circle and then asked the students if most of their parents were perfectionists. Only three of the students agreed, but all of them identified some-

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one in their family who was a perfectionist, a grandmother, a brother, a sister, and an uncle. The counselor then asked, "What's good or bad about being a perfectionist?"

Jon observed, "It looks like all of us have someone who is a perfectionist, who probably acts like a role model. I get so worried about my projects and assignments that I feel sick to my stomach, and that is what's bad about perfectionism." At that point, most of the students began adding negative feelings and behaviors related to their perfectionism, including headaches, depression, eating junk food, and not sleeping. One student described a feeling of "having arms that weigh a ton."

The counselor waited until all of the students had a turn with the talking stick to share negative behaviors of perfectionism, then asked, "What do you do to handle your perfectionism?" and "Can perfectionism be good?" The group of students thought for a moment, and began making suggestions:

- Use humor and laugh at yourself when you get stuck.
- Make a schedule and try to stick to it.
- Make it OK to make mistakes, but learn from them.
- Take the dog for a walk.

The counselor listened to the suggestions, and then stepped to the board to list the suggestions for the group. "These are great suggestions," she said. "Let me add another: make a mental picture of having completed your project and think how great you would feel." One student replied, "I do that Miss Elliot, and it usually works, unless I have bitten off more than I can chew. And when I finish a good project, I feel great." Sue added, "Perfectionism works for me because I'm not satisfied with C work; I want A work. Then I am happy with myself."

"Then that is where you need to be realistic," said the counselor, "and that is difficult." She indicated that their half hour was up and asked if the discussion had been helpful for them. The students all agreed it was and asked if they could talk with her again. She asked them to reflect on: "What's the worst thing that could happen if you don't do something perfectly?" The students began to talk among themselves as they left the room, and the counselor could see they had been successfully involved in "attitude exploration" about perfectionism.

Miss Elliot met with the middle school teachers in their faculty meeting the next day to share what she and the students had experienced in the discussion group. The teachers identified additional strategies they could use with perfectionistic students to help them deal with the social and emotional issues of perfectionism.

One language arts teacher said, "I will talk to my group of students about their small group projects for next week about people who have achieved excellence, and I know many eminent people were perfectionists." The counselor suggested two more techniques, role playing and bibliotherapy, as strategies to deal with the emotional and social issues of perfectionism. At which point, another teacher added that her class was reading Linda Sue Park's book, *A Single Shard*, in which one of the characters is a perfectionist and eventually achieves an outstanding product. The teachers were enthusiastic and responsive in the discussion on perfectionism, and several indicated they were perfectionists.