

Emotional sensitivities and intensities of gifted children

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Abstract:

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 quiveringly alive.
(Piechowski, 1991, p. 181)

I use this quote from Piechowski in my lecture to first year primary teaching students. Invariably I get at least one student who identifies with it, and who has never realised that there is an emotional sensitivity and intensity in being gifted. They now have something that explains their difference from their peers. How did these students get to university without knowing who they are? These students have known they were different to others but had no conceptual language to describe these aspects of themselves.

How did these students get to university without knowing who they are?

This paper will explore and discuss the sensitivities and intensities of gifted children, relating them to Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration and his concept of overexcitabilities. Understanding these aspects of gifted personalities is important for both teachers and gifted students.

Introduction

I'm writing this as a reflection on the gifted children and families, and adults I have worked with and known over the last twelve years. I have found over the years that it is most important for the gifted children, and their parents, to understand and value who these children are or at least to attempt to do so. There is often an inherent loneliness in feeling and experiencing more intensely than others, which may not be overcome but may be ameliorated by an understanding adult. As teachers, I believe, we are here to make a difference to the gifted children in our care. Not only in our primary and secondary classrooms. I have had gifted children shining out from the eyes of the students in university classes.

I have been running the Able Learners' Enrichment Program at La Trobe University in Bendigo, Victoria, Australia since 2001 and have watched the students arrive excited to meet friends from previous programs. They arrive and excitedly check the class lists for people they know. They come for the challenge and fun of the workshops but also for the joy of meeting like souls - friends who can understand and accept them for who they are. This is important for the parents as well because they

also find that they meet people who understand and accept them with ease. Parents have found that the bonus of having their children attend these workshops is that they meet others with whom they can discuss their children's intensities and sensitivities in safety. We all need acceptance and understanding. As gifted children grow they often look around them and notice they are not "normal". If they do not discover that it is ok to be themselves they will often attempt to hide their abilities in an attempt to fit in (Gross, 1998; Roeper & Higgins, 2007; Silverman, 1993).

Developmental Potential and Overexcitabilities

The intensity of experiencing by gifted individuals, Piechowski's "quiveringly alive" (Piechowski, 1991, p. 181), was observed by Kazimierz Dabrowski in his work with creative and gifted people. Dabrowski was born in 1902 in Poland and lived through both world wars. He had a MD in child psychiatry and a PhD in Psychology, studied with Jean Piaget in Geneva, ran a clinical practice as a psychotherapist and until 1948 was director of the Polish State Mental Hygiene Unit in Warsaw. He later moved to Canada where he held visiting professorships at the University of Alberta and at Université Laval in Quebec City (Tillier, 2008). Living through the world wars he witnessed the suffering and death of both soldiers and civilians and the inhumanity and compassion displayed by the people caught up in these wars. Dabrowski identified in himself those characteristics he later called emotional, intellectual and imaginal overexcitabilities and it was through these that he attempted to make sense of the human emotions and actions he encountered in both wars (Dabrowski, in Piechowski, 1975).

The juxtaposition of inhuman forces and inhuman humans with those who were sensitive, capable of sacrifice, courageous, gave a vivid panorama of a scale of values from the lowest to the highest. (Dabrowski, in Piechowski, 1975, p. 233)

From these observations, studies of current theories of personality development, and later, observations of patients with mental disorders who, with their "great creative and developmental richness" (Dabrowski, in Piechowski, 1975, p. 236) were searching for a higher level of reality, he proposed his multilevel theory of positive disintegration. This included the idea that intensity and extremes of feeling led to growth and that what could appear from outside observation as psychoneurosis were not negatives.

...mental development ... is not a matter of harmonious peaceful and painless transformation. It takes a great deal of tension, inner conflict and struggle, anxiety, and even despair, before the process of climbing up to higher levels can be successfully achieved. (Dabrowski, (with Kawczak, & Piechowski, 1970, p. 3)

His theory was structured with five levels of emotional development describing those people with characteristics of "superficiality, vulgarity, absence of inner conflict, quick forgetting of grave experiences" - Level I, to those who are "authentically ideal, saturated with immutable value"- Level V (Dabrowski, in Piechowski, 1975, p. 236). Level I, in which inner conflict was lacking, he called primary integration and

Level V, that with inner peace and enduring harmony, secondary integration. Table 1 gives a brief description of the characteristics of individuals at each level.

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| V | life inspired by a powerful ideal, e.g. equal rights, world peace, universal love and compassion, sovereignty of all nations <i>A magnetic field in the soul – Dag Hammarskjöld</i> |
| IV | self-actualization; ideals and actions agree: “what ought to be, will be”, strong sense of responsibility. <i>Behind tranquillity lies conquered unhappiness.</i> – Eleanor Roosevelt |
| III | sense of the ideal but not reaching it; moral concerns: higher vs. lower in oneself. |
| II | lack of inner direction; inner fragmentation – many selves; submission to the values of the group; relativism of values and beliefs. <i>A reed in the wind.</i> |
| I | dominant concern with self-protection and survival; self-serving egocentrism; instrumental view of others. <i>Dog-eat-dog mentality</i> |

Table 1. Levels of Emotional Development (Piechowski, 1992, p. 182)

Dabrowski (1996) developed the concept of developmental potential to describe the relationship between the factors controlling development and an individual’s personal development. He identified five factors which he called overexcitabilities, which when present could aid emotional development and therefore personal growth. He had noted that, as he himself experienced, gifted and creative individuals reacted intensely in emotional, imaginal, intellectual, psychomotor and sensual areas. In his studies of life histories of eminent people he found

that from early childhood they manifest an enhanced mode of reacting to the world around them. Furthermore, their enhanced reactivity is coupled with intensified experiencing in cognitive, imaginal, and emotional areas. One observes a similar pattern in gifted and creative children and youth. (Dabrowski, 1972 in Dabrowski, 1996, p. 6)

These enhanced reactions Dabrowski (1996) called overexcitabilities. “The prefix *over* attached to ‘excitability’ serves to indicate that the reactions of excitation are over and above average in intensity, duration and frequency” (p71). The extent of expression of these overexcitabilities can determine the development of an individual’s personality and inner growth. He found that the emotional, imaginal and intellectual forms of these overexcitabilities were associated with accelerated and universal personal development, but that all five forms are traits allowing the assessment of developmental potential. These extremes of reacting have been observed in gifted children and the overexcitabilities displayed can be as different as each individual. They are not just an add-on to their personality they influence how these children (and adults) experience the world. When observed in students in the

classroom these overexcitabilities can manifest in a need to be moving while learning; a sensitivity to classroom noise and the colourful pictures hung around the room to stimulate the students; imaginary friends in the classroom; amazing ideas and a passion for information; and a moral awareness and sensitivity that is evident in concern for fellow students and can extend to concern for the state of the wider world (Daniels & Meckstroth, 2009; Piechowski, 2006; Roeper & Higgins, 2007; Silverman, 1993). I have found that when these traits are explained to parents of gifted children there is an almost instant recognition, first for their children and then often, as the conversation progresses, for the parents themselves.

Illustrations of Overexcitabilities

Hélène Grimaud is a gifted international concert pianist. She started piano lessons when she was 7 years old, was accepted into the conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique in Paris at 13 and made her first recording at 15. She grew up in France and moved to Florida in the USA as an adult. There she met a man who owned a wolf and she found that she had a natural empathy with wolves. After years of lobbying and fundraising she founded the Wolf Conservation Centre north of New York City, where she now lives (Grimaud, 2006). Grimaud's autobiography shows a gifted child growing into an adult exhibiting and understanding her overexcitabilities. She has a power of expression and description which may help others feel her experiences. As a small child her family frequently described her as uncontrollable, unsatisfied, unmanageable, impossible, undisciplined, insatiable, insubordinate, unadaptable (sic), unpredictable (Grimaud, 2006). These descriptions illustrate the overexcitabilities of a gifted child and her inability to be 'normal'. Even though these overexcitabilities are described individually for clarity, usually gifted children have combinations which manifest at different levels in different children.

Psychomotor "heightened excitability of the nerves that control muscles combines with the capacity to sustain the excited state. When a person has to sit still too long, or is locked up in a confined space, the energy is bottled up and the pressure rises" (Piechowski, 2006, p. 38).

These are the children who need to move, and often learn best while moving. John, a gifted 8 year old, completed an IQ test over two hours by climbing on every piece of furniture. As a 12 year old, he worked on his computer while rhythmically kicking his desk, and an essential part of his after school wind-down was bouncing on the trampoline.

"Make her play some sports."

No doubt someone had diagnosed an excessive amount of energy, an overabundance of vitality that could be released through martial arts or tennis. ... I played tennis regularly with my father – lovely shared moments with the one whose Cartesian spirit, rigor, and appreciation for order and schedule were so troubled by my restlessness, my unpredictable moods, and my sudden passions.

... With the best parental intentions in the world, they tried to find an outlet for my insane behavior. But nothing could hold back the energy that I turned on myself (Grimaud, 2006, p. 10).

The Christmas I discovered Bigaro, (a stuffed toy panther) I showed my happiness in the way I knew how: with excess, scenes, and exuberance. As a result of my jumping, I discovered that the tiled floor of the living room was extremely slippery. I lay on my stomach and spun around like mad, just for the pleasure of sliding (Grimaud, 2006, p. 27).

Perhaps it's an excess of mental rather than physical energy? It was my father who first voiced this hypothesis, after all the other developmental attempts had failed. "What if we were to enrol Hélène a music class?" (Grimaud, 2006, p. 44).

"Sensual excitability, a heightened responsiveness to the stimulation at the surface of experience, offers enriched sensory delights and at the same time an outlet for emotional tension" (Piechowski, 2006, p. 45).

... there was one place where I did not have this feeling of strangeness. It was in the Camargue, and it was magical. A dream that emanated from the sea. ... Even though everywhere else I felt like a wrong note, here I was a part of a vast harmony. ... The Camargue was more than a landscape – it was a brief glimpse, a dazzling intuition of a harmony between my soul and what was to come. There for the first time, I had the premonition of great things, of my destiny. ... I was a horse, wind, raging tide, soft hyacinth. I rolled in the waves. Finally at peace with my body, I was neither girl nor boy. I was simply, completely, and marvellously alive (Grimaud, 2006, pp. 12-13).

Intellectual – "gifted intellects are more often driven by the search for understanding and truth than for academic achievement. They search for solutions to know problems, find it difficult to let go of a problem, and identify new questions to be asked" (Piechowski, 2006, p. 53).

These children are those that ask almost constant questions. They need explanations rather than "because I say so", and whose parents report that they (the parents) are always tired.

My teachers failed to keep me in line. Not that I was a bad pupil, it was just that I interrupted all the time, and I daydreamed when I should have been paying attention. I asked inappropriate questions; I was constantly overflowing with words (Grimaud, 2006, p. 6).

Music suited me, because, I think, that in order to be a musician, one has to be compulsive. There is an innate compulsion, as in every other activity that requires a search for perfection. ... I immediately and completely invested myself in music because music gave me pleasure. That hour-long piano lesson was the summit of my week. ... with the piano, I went from pleasure to happiness, from discoveries to revelations, from joys to physical sensations of

freedom. Thus, one day, I was able to read the etudes of Chopin and to play some of them. How can I explain the feeling? Those little marks, those forbidding notes on staves, that mysterious alphabet erected like a wall to circumscribe understanding – all at once they revealed their secret. I held the philosopher's stone that transformed ink and paper into a melodious architecture, a world that was deep, tender, and strong (Grimaud, 2006, pp. 45-47).

Imaginational – the power of thought creation – expressed through vividness of imagery, and a facility for dreams, fantasies, and inventions (Piechowski, 1991: 287).

Gifted children often have imaginary friends (Piechowski, 2006; Roeper & Higgins, 2007). These friends should be valued as an important part of the children's lives and accepted as one of the family for as long as they are around. Frank, the imaginary friend in our family would travel in our car on long trips and sit in the lounge watching television. We knew his personality and had a picture of him that was drawn at primary school. We even sometimes had three way conversations. Frank gradually stopped appearing until now he is not mentioned.

Jack needs time on his own to think after school and gets angry if his peace is disturbed. He understands this and will tell his parents if they forget this. He needed this from when he first started school and during this time he would retreat into his imagination. Until about grade three he lived more in his own world than ours.

My parents supplied me with everything that my imagination needed. With books, first and foremost. ... My passion for books carried me along like a cloud ... The friendship offered by their characters protected me against the inanity of the schoolyard and the boredom of the classroom. Alexandre Dumas watched over those childhood years with unparalleled generosity, consideration, and care for my pleasure. Such elegance! Such a wealth of description so that I would never get lost in a thinly defined setting! Such ingeniously constructed plots! Impatiently, feverishly, I waited to find out how things would turn out. While I read, my thumbs stroked the edges of the pages, whose thickness promised dozens of other secret rendezvous (Grimaud, 2006, pp. 15-16).

I let my book fall. I dreamed. In my room, interminable and delicious spaces of boredom unfolded, those empty hours that my parents did not fill with either after-school activities or television. As I look back, I understand the privilege of those moments when I could practically feel my bones growing. In the slowness of the dream and the thickness of the silence, one could measure the density of the time that flowed past. The hours of boredom of childhood are gardens of time, tilled with frustrations, worked over with slow eternities, haunted by far-off futures ... There I hatched desires and images. I defined myself, learned myself by heart ... (Grimaud, 2006, pp. 17-18).

Emotional – the heart – recognised in the great depth and intensity of emotional life expressed through a wide range of feelings, attachments, compassion, heightened sense of responsibility, and scrupulous self-examination (Piechowski, 1991: 287).

Intense experiencing and feeling in younger students can also be seen as immaturity and a reason to repeat the year so they can catch up with the other students (Daniels & Meckstroth, 2009).

Ken, in grade five, decided that the way his technology teacher was treating one of the students in class was unfair so he had the whole class boycott that teacher and asked the principal to set up a meeting so this could be rectified. The principal agreed and the problem was solved. This was a school and a principal that who recognised the characteristics of gifted children and saw them as just one more group of special needs students.

Nanou, you mustn't ask in a loud voice why the concierge for the building walks like a "duck. He limps because he's crippled, and he heard you. That upset him, and you shouldn't hurt people. It's cruel. ... I was three years old. The next day we ran into our concierge at the same location, and I exclaimed: "You see. Mama? I didn't say that man walks like a duck." ... I don't remember my mother's reaction to these words. I only recall the instantaneous response: the concierge's visible sorrow struck me to the heart. I felt it physically. It was mixed with sadness, because the little girl he had known since birth had succumbed to the cruelty of tactlessness, the power to hurt. ... I remember being horrified by my own words, and I remember as well my remorse and suffering (Grimaud, 2006, p. 4).

... my earthly envelope constricted me, the awareness of my envelope, of this me that limited me, and from which I wished to escape. One day, seated at my school desk, concentrating on writing left-handed, ... all at once I experienced this "me," my me that concentrated all my energy within the limits of my body, even as I longed to burst out of it. I remember feeling the pressure of the entire universe on my skin. It was an incredible, dazzling, overwhelming moment, an experience of my presence in the world that I would remember several seasons later when, for the first time, I encountered the piano – but with the exact opposite sensation (Grimaud, 2006, p. 32).

That first time, at school, I felt closed in, imprisoned. Entirely concentrated on this me, I understood that I was the frontier of the world. ... This was the starting point, the big bang of my consciousness that forever afterward had led me to say – especially with regard to music – that each one of us is an act of magic, that we almost never take the wrong path, and that quite often we just haven't gone far enough. After all what is to come is not so much something to be discovered as invented (Grimaud, 2006, pp. 32-33).

What can we do?

In 2007 Roeper defined giftedness as “a greater awareness, a greater sensitivity, and a greater ability to understand and transform perceptions into intellectual and emotional experiences” (Roeper & Higgins, 2007, p. vi). For people who live with the gifted children (and the grown-up gifted children) the personal characteristics are those that identify these individuals rather than the ability or potential ability to achieve in school. Giftedness, using this description, involves the whole child, not just in isolated or academic settings. Being gifted for these people is not ‘doing’ or producing something to prove their giftedness, it is ‘being’. The personal experience of this physiological difference is not something that can be easily assessed by outside observation of their performance. It is that which contributes to personality development. Giftedness is more than intellect, it has an emotional depth (Roeper & Higgins, 2007).

What can we do for these children so they grow up knowing themselves and valuing their difference? First value the children as individuals, recognise their intensities and sensitivities as part of who they are and not something negative that has to be eliminated to prove that they are mature. One of the most common comments I have from parents of gifted children in kindergarten/preschool is that the teacher says they are not ready to attend school because of their social immaturity - they are too emotional and have trouble playing with the other children – although they are likely to be reading and playing games with rules. I have found that if you talk to the children about their responses to things and explain their sensitivities and intensities at a level they understand they are much more capable of dealing with them. Mitch was taught at the beginning of school that, with his parents’ support, he had to explain what he needed to his teachers so that he had some control over his environment. In first grade he was allowed to sit on the floor for his maths bookwork because he explained to his teacher that his table was too noisy and he couldn’t concentrate. Mat, when he was studying year 11 psychology decided that he was mentally disturbed because he didn’t fit any of the descriptions of ‘normal’ in his textbook. This is not a curriculum modification but an attitude modification. These children don’t fit the norm and require understanding.

Little changes as children get older – overexcitabilities don’t go away. If the child is seen as having problems that need fixing so as to fit in and be normal then that child is likely to have problems sooner or later and very likely still not truly understand that it is okay to be just as they are. This is what I have seen with university students and other adults who have always thought they have to change to fit in. If the child is understood and accepted by others the path is easier. I have found over years of talking to parents of gifted children, and also gifted adults, that if the gifted are given information and explanations about overexcitabilities and positive disintegration there is visible relief and acceptance of themselves.

As an adult H el ene Grimaud reflected:

At one moment in my life, my otherness was so intolerable to me that I no longer wanted to be myself. I got past this stage as well. I prefer taking the risk of disappointing people rather than lying to them. The goal in life is not to protect oneself; risk is part of the

human condition. When all is said and done, I hope that a balance exists: if some are inevitably disappointed, others are happy. These situations always sadden me, but they no longer make me angry.

Little by little, I acquired this internal harmony as I accepted my contradictions and understood that certain beings are not a whole, but a jigsaw puzzle of contradictory hopes, and that it is suicidal, and even mutilating, to renounce one of these pieces under the pretext of wanting to look like a norm imposed by a model. ... Each being carries the mystery of his or her contradictions, of his or her internal struggles.

We are all mysteries incarnate (Grimaud, 2006, p. 243).

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