

Quiveringly alive

Gifted children are often misunderstood. They can be viewed as over-excited, hyperactive, inattentive, disruptive and subject to flights of fancy, when in fact they are being themselves. **Pam Lyons, Co-ordinator of the La Trobe University (Victoria) Able Learners' Enrichment Programme**, examines emotional sensitivities and intensities in gifted learners.

'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)

I use this quote from Michael Piechowski in my lecture to first-year primary teaching students. Invariably I get at least one student who identifies with it, but who has never before realised that there is an emotional sensitivity and intensity in being gifted. They now have something that explains their difference from their peers, rather than just being weird! But how did these students get to university without knowing who they are?

Background

I'm writing this article as a reflection on the gifted children, families and adults that I have worked with over the last 12 years. I have discovered that it is most important for 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. While it may not be overcome, it may be ameliorated by an understanding adult. As teachers, I believe we need to make a difference to the gifted children in our care, not only in our primary and secondary classrooms, but also in our universities.

I have been running the Able Learners' Enrichment Program at La Trobe University in Bendigo, Victoria since 2001 and have watched the students arrive excited to meet friends from previous programmes. They come for the challenge and fun of the two 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. They also find that they are able to meet people who understand and accept them with ease; 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 okay to be themselves they will often attempt to hide their abilities in an attempt to fit in.

Developmental potential and over-excitabilities

The intensity of experiencing by gifted individuals, Piechowski's 'quiveringly alive', was observed by the late Kazimierz Dabrowski in his work with creative and gifted people. Dabrowski was born in 1902 in Poland and lived through both world wars. He studied with Jean Piaget in Geneva, ran a clinical practice as a psychotherapist and 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.

In Poland, Dabrowski witnessed the suffering and death of both soldiers and civilians, and considered both the inhumanity and the compassion displayed by people in wartime. Dabrowski identified in himself characteristics that he later called emotional, intellectual and imaginal over-excitabilities, and it was through these that he attempted to make sense of the human emotions and actions he had encountered.

‘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)

From these observations, plus studies of current theories of personality development and observations of patients with mental disorders who, with their ‘great creative and developmental richness’, were searching for a higher level of reality, Dabrowski proposed his multi-level theory of positive disintegration. This included the idea that intensity and extremes of feeling led to growth and were not negatives, despite appearing from outside observation as psychoneurosis.

‘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)

Dabrowski’s theory was structured with five levels of emotional development, describing people with characteristics of ‘superficiality, vulgarity, absence of inner conflict, quick forgetting of grave experiences’ (Level I), through to those who were ‘authentically ideal, saturated with immutable value’ (Level V).

The following table gives a brief description of the characteristics of individuals at each level.

Levels of Emotional Development
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 – Eleanor Roosevelt</i>
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.

Dog-eat-dog mentality

In his studies of life histories of eminent people, Dabrowski 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, 1996)

These enhanced reactions Dabrowski called ‘over-excitabilities’: ‘The prefix *over* to ‘excitability’ serves to indicate that the reactions of excitation are over and above average in intensity, duration and frequency.’

The extent of expression of these over-excitabilities can determine the development of an individual’s personality and inner growth. Dabrowski found that the emotional, imaginal and intellectual forms were associated with accelerated and universal personal development, but that all five forms were traits allowing the assessment of developmental potential. These extremes of reacting have been observed in gifted children and the over-excitabilities 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 over-excitabilities can be manifested 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.

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, as the conversation progresses, for the parents themselves.

Illustrations of over-excitabilities

Hélène Grimaud is a gifted international concert pianist. She started piano lessons when she was seven years old, was accepted into the Paris Conservatoire 13, and made her first recording at 15. She moved to Florida 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’s autobiography depicts a gifted child growing into an adult exhibiting and understanding her over-excitabilities. 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 and unpredictable. These descriptions illustrate the over-excitabilities of a gifted child and her inability to be ‘normal’. Even though these over-excitabilities are described individually for clarity, gifted children usually have combinations which manifest themselves at different levels.

- **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).

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.

‘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 in a music class?”’ (Grimaud, 2006)

- **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)

‘There was one place where I did not have this feeling of strangeness. It was in the Camargue, and it was magical . . . Even though everywhere else I felt like a wrong note, here I was a part of vast harmony . . . 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)

- **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).

These children are those that ask almost constant questions. They need explanations rather than ‘because I say so’. Their 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).

- **Imaginational**

‘The power of thought creation – expressed through vividness of imagery, and a facility for dreams, fantasies, and inventions.’ (Piechowski, 1991)

Gifted children often have imaginary friends. 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. He has needed this since he first started school and uses the time to 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 . . . In my room, interminable and delicious spaces of boredom unfolded, those empty hours that 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.’ (Grimaud, 2006)

- **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)

‘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 who recognised the characteristics of gifted children and saw them as just one more group of special needs students.

“Nanou, you musn’t ask in a loud voice why the concierge walks like a duck. He limps because he’s crippled, and he heard you . . .” 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.’ (Grimaud, 2006)

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’. For people who live with gifted children (and for 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'. Giftedness is more than intellect, it has an emotional depth.

What can we do for these children so that 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/pre-school 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 book work because he explained to his teacher that his table was too noisy and he couldn't concentrate. By contrast, 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.

What is required 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 – over-excitabilities don't go away. If a child is seen as having problems that need fixing so as to fit in and be normal, then that child will not truly understand that it is okay just to be as he is. 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. Over years of talking to parents of gifted children, and also gifted adults, I have found that if the gifted are given information and explanations about over-excitabilities and positive disintegration there is visible relief and acceptance of themselves.

As an adult, H el ene Grimaud reflected:

'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, even mutilating, to renounce one of these pieces . . . to look like a norm imposed by a model . . . We are all mysteries incarnate.' (Grimaud, 2006)

This article is based on Pam Lyons' presentation to the Reaching Forward conference in Rotorua.