

TPD and Practicality in the Classroom: A Need for Subjective Identification

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"It's as pleasant as the smell of a new-mown lawn," I assert. And the students give six rather different responses.

Five: "I can hear the grass screaming when my dad cuts it! I can hardly bear it."

Four: "I don't like the dandelions destroyed; we all should enjoy every single thing!"

Three: "Yes, but I think people should take care of their lawns, for everybody."

Two: "Who cares? We should only cut it if it really bothers others. Right?"

One: "My mom says we should always be aware of what our yard looks like."

One other: "Hey! It's my lawn. I'll do what I want with it!"

Six hypothetical children? Dabrowski's six paradigms of potential? Yes, particularly if the teacher can subjectively identify with the positive disintegration theory. If "walking one's talk" is at the heart of pedagogic pragmatics, then how best to affect the students is almost always of practical relevance.

Yet idiosyncrasies abound. Intelligent people, at whatever degree of realization, are distinctly different, yet they are distributed into identifiable subsets. Dabrowski defines five levels. Kohlberg identified six. Erikson decided on eight.

The factor one, level 1 students, however brilliant, habituate themselves into egocentric choices, surfacing not necessarily only as disruptions to classroom activities, and

perhaps in later years, disruptions to society. Brilliant criminals and awful megalomaniacs provide too many case histories. The events of September 11, 2001, are a case in point. Every caring teacher would want to be able to distinguish between the developmental potential of those sorts of people and that of levels 2 or 3 students. Each person deserves careful word choice, considerable consequences for behavior and knowing redirection of interests.

The factor two, level 1 students habituate themselves into *flatlander* choices (a term lately fashionable, yet common in South Africa where it has the pejorative connotation of having nothing to climb. Yet of all the different mores and codes of ethics, left and right choices, parental values and a sense of moral superiority, we have many wonderful examples of heroes, leaders, ministers and mentors. To challenge level 1 students to challenge themselves or to pursue a more eclectic approach to anthropology and philosophy, for instance, sometimes requires teachers to face the child's disapproving parents. Many an explication, history relates, has "gone with the wind." Yet stability of society, for the majority of us, is formed through this ongoing sense of "appropriateness of choice," even while allowing room for others' freedom of choice in the process.

At best, we all generally exemplify the spiritual, academic and religious icons of

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society. But the iconoclast is the suspect one. The challenger. He is the vacillator of Dabrowski's level 2. As Dabrowski states it, "Nervousness, neuroses, psychoneuroses, and the so-called educational difficulties accelerate the development and increase its many-sidedness" (Dabrowski with Kawcsak and Piechowski 1970, 150). He further asserts, "One who manifests several forms of overexcitability sees reality in a different, stronger and more multisided manner" (1972, 66).

Level 3 defines the autonomous and conscious self, operating out of full respect for the health of the whole. And what of the potential Gandhi or Mother Teresa in our classrooms? Do we expect them already to be sitting (quietly) in a halo of level 4 and 5 recognizability?

Awareness of any developmental theory, as inculcated in students, in others, in oneself, gives rise perhaps at the very least to the potential of reconceptualizing instinct, habit or practice. And practicality, or relevance to oneself, is at the core of one's interests in most given lessons. As Dabrowski (1964, 5) writes, "The term disintegration is used to refer to a broad range of processes, from emotional disharmony to the complete fragmentation of the personality structure."

Precepts and percepts—therein lies the rub for any of us.

A practical application of the positive disintegration theory, as a continuum, however, whether in phys. ed., English, drama or science, relies not so much on an objective understanding of its precepts as on a subjective identification with its percepts. "Personality development is characterized by a shift from the automatic and habitual expression of instinctually and socially determined values and goals toward an expression of autonomous and authentic goals based upon a hierarchy of conscious, individualized values that form each person's unique personality ideal" (Tillier 1999).

Students who can paraphrase Dabrowski's theory will perhaps speak in terms of levels

of developmental potential, factors one and two in the first level and evidence of overexcitabilities or supersensitivity in the upper levels. "The emotional sphere at every level of development is the decisive factor that determines and controls human activity" (Dabrowski with Kawcsak and Piechowski 1970, 150). Students may even refer to Dabrowski's dynamisms, give explication in terms of developmental potential and charge each other with phrases like "That's factor-one thinking!" And there are even those who aspire to level 5, "just as soon as I can quit school!" But of more relevance to the whole, potentially, is the heightened sensitivity to and acceptance of each other's individual differences, accepted as a stream of progress, or stream of consciousness, in its unfolding. As Dabrowski (1964, 54) writes,

The appearance and growth of the third agent [self-directed, autonomous behavior] is to some degree dependent on inherited abilities and on environmental experiences, but as it develops it achieves an independence from these factors and through conscious differentiation and self-definition takes its own position in determining the course of development of personality.

Subjective identification with the theory, which is "conscious choice . . . by which one affirms or rejects certain qualities in oneself and in one's environment" (Dabrowski 1972, 306), and the possibilities of one's potential development endemic to levels 2, 3, 4 and the probably unattainable 5, give rise to the student's evaluation of the self and others in terms of the plethora of daily choices that decide one's life. "Things cease to remain under exclusive control of biological and social determinants. Self-conscious, autonomous choice between alternatives becomes real" (Dabrowski 1970, 12).

But where students (and indeed most of us) may balk is at Dabrowski's concept of a fixed developmental package of potential ascribed to any one of us. Developmental

potential is “the constitutional endowment which determines the character and the extent of mental growth possible for a given individual. The developmental potential can be assessed on the basis of the following components: psychic overexcitability, special abilities and talents, and autonomous factors” (Dabrowski 1972, 293).

And here we hasten to reassure our students that this particular theory, as for most theories, relies not so much on empirical evidence and quantifiable observation as it does on qualitative analysis. That is, it is based on intelligent observation. Measuring developmental potential, per se, is predictably a prickly issue. But empirical measures aside, whether a mental age over an actual age multiplied by a hundred is applicable or not, it is cognizant of the theory of positive disintegration itself, and the potential inherent in re-examining our individual way of progress that is so invigorating, that indeed gives rise perhaps at the very least to the potential of reconceptualizing one’s instinct, habit or practice.

Disintegration is felt according to individual sensitivities. Positive disintegration is understood according to individual paradigms. Paradigm shifts are understood as both minuscule and sometimes simultaneously cosmic as the disintegration of the formerly held perception yields to a new mainstream of thought. Shifts in cognition correspondingly shift gears in behavior, sometimes subtly, sometimes with a perceptible lurch, yet the student affected is, however momentarily, aware of some universal relevance beyond the immediacy of the self.

Yet in terms of practicality in the classroom, however esoteric the realization, the knowledge and application of Dabrowski’s theory allow for each student to advance with a sense of decided attainment beyond the abstract. More communally evident, however, are the many students who become inclusive, more understanding and patient with one another. “Because the sensitivity is related to all essential groups of receptors of

stimuli of the internal and external worlds it widens and enhances the field of consciousness” (Dabrowski 1972, 66).

Caveats, however, prevail. “Psychoneuroses are observed in people possessing special talents, sensitivity, and creative capacities; they are common among outstanding people” (Dabrowski 1972, 2). At risk is the possibility that some students will feel a heightened inferiority to others, or regrettably, a heightened superiority. As Schiever (1985, 233) puts it, “Higher than average responsiveness to stimuli in intensity, frequency and duration . . . have the effect of making concrete stimuli more complex, enhancing emotional content, and amplifying every experience.” Clearly, careful semantics, as practised in the classroom, may reassure and/or readjust the misalignment of a given student’s perceptions.

Evidently then, the practicality of knowing about the Theory of Positive Disintegration lies in the fact that it may collectively be perceived by students to equate with formulating positive outcomes from negative events. It is “the conscious self-direction of the individual towards his or her own development” (Miller and Silverman 1987). Also, the theory may equate with creativity after deconstruction. Reactions to reseating the class, for example, can yield interesting results in the group dynamic. Yet, at the root of the issue is the effect of disintegration on the individual.

Individuals aspire. Idiosyncrasies abound. Common to all is the perpetuation of choice, however subliminally exercised. The disposing and directing centre, for Dabrowski (1972, 293–94) is,

A center which controls behavior over a short or long time period of time. At a low level of development this center is identical with either one or a group of primitive drives (e.g. Self-preservation, sexual, aggressive, etc.). At higher levels this center becomes an independent dynamism working toward harmonious unification of personality.

Teacher and student, we each progress.

The potential is there, and it will out. But in our awareness of the developmental potential inherent in each of us, we can do much to ease the way. The endemic evil lies in the pretense of our intellectual or spiritual homogeneity of development; it is the myth of the metanarrative that we all are phenomenologically equal, and therefore that no one may dare to raise his head above the others.

And so do we all become pruned.

Central to teaching students, and central to the developmental potential inherent in each and every one of them, is the reality of their special individuality as a perception by the teacher. That right to individuality, held dear as a conscious precept by the class as a whole, for the sake of the whole, is the practical basis that may follow an awareness of Dabrowski's theory.

Percepts and precepts; may fewer of us then be victims of being rubbed the wrong way.

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