

Understanding Emotional Exceptionality in Gifted Youth:

A Book Review

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In understanding the experiences of gifted youth, a number of areas have been explored in depth. The realms of intelligence, creativity, motivation, affective needs, and the corresponding attributes and behaviors of these realms have generally dominated research concerns. In his book, *"Mellow Out," They Say. If I Only Could: Intensities and Sensitivities of the Young and Bright*, Michael Piechowski (2006) presents an elegant description of the gifted child's emotional experience. Exploring heightened sensitivities, or the intense feelings and thoughts of gifted youth, Piechowski delves into one of the more inexact and simultaneously essential components of the gifted research, the social/emotional domain. A number of researchers have acknowledged that gifted youth have unique affective needs (Nugent, 2005), and in his book, Piechowski gives a detailed explanation of a very significant area in this domain. His discussion of heightened sensitivities and intensities begins by probing into one of the most illuminating and renowned theories about affective development: the concept of overexcitabilities from Dabrowski's (1964) Theory of Positive Disintegration.

As Piechowski (2006) explains, overexcitabilities are not synonymous with hyperactivity, but rather, they are a hypersensitivity and awareness of the world. Piechowski describes those who experience such intense emotional depth as those "within whom the current of life is stronger than most" (p. 1). These individuals are more tapped into the subtle nuances of the world, and experience life in extremes. The highs are extended and so too are the lows. In essence, they experience the world through a brighter lens, or a "higher key" (Piechowski, p. 226). Piechowski highlights the five areas of heightened sensitivity introduced by Dabrowski: psychomotor, sensual, imaginal, intellectual, and emotional, and describes the possible manifestations of each. The fundamentals of this conceptualization set the base for Piechowski's detailed and candid account

of the emotional development, growth, and experience of gifted individuals.

Piechowski (2006) presents a strong exploration of emotional development in *"Mellow Out,"* including an examination of sensory and intellectual awareness, emotional life and growth, energy, and the spiritual aspects of heightened sensitivity. He uses a number of modes to explore emotional development, providing an excellent blend of empirical work, theory, and interview excerpts from gifted teenagers who had experienced heightened sensitivity. These interviews came from Piechowski's graduate work. He obtained recommendations from colleagues of particularly promising students involved in a special program for gifted high school students. Students were mailed questionnaires, which elicited responses about emotions and emotional experiences. The student responses to these questions form the essence of *"Mellow Out,"* giving it the authentic and unique quality that allows readers to truly understand the concept of emotional sensitivity. By using the students' own words, Piechowski gives these individuals identity and form. Additionally, the combination of authentic experiences, empirical research, and theory make this a strong book with extraordinary value in gifted research, parenting, counseling, teaching, and life.

Hence, another aspect of *"Mellow Out"* that gives it outstanding utility in the realm of gifted research is its applicability to a number of stakeholders. *"Mellow Out"* reaches parents and teachers seeking to connect with and understand their gifted youngsters, researchers in gifted education seeking to understand emotional development, and gifted youth seeking to understand themselves. The experiences described will undoubtedly resonate with a number of readers to some degree, giving them a sense of connection and understanding. Reaching such a diverse audience gives this book remarkable value.

Gifted youth, particularly adolescents, can benefit greatly from exposure to this book. Although the book mainly speaks about them, it also speaks to them. As Piechowski (2006) insightfully notes, children who experience high emotional awareness often sense that they are different, and this difference is not always perceived in a positive light. They may seek to disguise their emotions or seclude themselves in a private world (Piechowski). A sense of being different can take an intense emotional toll on gifted individuals, potentially resulting in depression, poor self-concept, and antisocial behaviors, among other difficulties (Roepert, 1995, as cited in Nugent, 2005; Piechowski). Thus, for gifted youth, the responses of other gifted youth can serve a cathartic purpose.

The excerpts Piechowski (2006) provides from the gifted students' responses reflected some of the difficulties associated with being different, along with other general experiences of emotional intensity. For example, students were asked questions such as:

- “Do you ever feel really high, ecstatic, or incredibly happy?” (p. 132),
- “Do you ever feel low?” (p. 136),
- “Do you ever observe and analyze yourself?” (p. 197),
- “If you ask yourself, ‘Who am I?’ what is the answer?” (p. 171),
- “Do you ever catch yourself, seeing, hearing, or imagining things that aren't really there?” (p. 83), and
- “What kinds of things get your mind going?” (p. 39).

These questions, among many others excerpted throughout the book, reveal reflections on frustrations, feeling different, self-doubts, and personal clarity. In sum, the responses of the participants thoroughly illustrate the wide spectrum of thoughts and feelings experienced by gifted youth. Many gifted individuals with emotional intensities and sensitivities will find some feeling or thought expressed that resonates with them, which allows them to see that someone else has felt this way. Reading these questions and responses, they can feel a sense of companionship.

Gifted youth may also find “*Mellow Out*” therapeutic in the sense that someone has identified their complex internal mechanisms and validated their experiences. Piechowski's (2006) thorough explanations can help gifted youth to see that their plight is acknowledged in research. In this sense, “*Mellow Out*” promotes self-understanding and acceptance, and may help gifted youngsters embrace their differences.

Teachers and parents also can benefit greatly from the information provided in “*Mellow Out*”. For those who have

limited experience with gifted youth, some of the behaviors that emotionally sensitive individuals display may manifest in less than desirable ways. In fact, as Piechowski (2006) points out, “[b]ecause this manner of experiencing is often viewed as over-reacting, it is often treated as something to be cured” (p. 26). Our culture is not friendly to intense emotional expression (Piechowski), and emotionally intense children may have seemingly odd habits. For example, many children create alternate worlds, complete with elaborate plans (Piechowski). Others may have imaginary friends or pretend to be another personality themselves. Both of these activities might be categorized by an unknowing bystander as eccentric, and even antisocial. To the educator well versed in research on gifted youth and overexcitabilities, these behaviors, among others, are indicators of deep emotional feelings or exceptional creativity. However, those uninformed of the manifestations of heightened sensitivities and intensities may see something different.

Indeed, the behaviors associated with these intensities can easily be confused with a number of problems. In fact, Flint (2001) demonstrated the overlapping behaviors of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and overexcitabilities. Constant motion and impulsivity, daydreaming and inattention, emotional reactivity, distractibility, and exclusive undivided attention to one interest are all telltale behaviors of ADHD (Flint). However, they are also characteristic behaviors of the various overexcitabilities. Reprimanding students for these behaviors, or even assuming they are a disorder to be treated, can lead to their concealment. Yet, these intensities often underlie brilliance and great creation (Piechowski, 2006).

Despite the ease with which the intensities of gifted youth can be construed as negative, Piechowski's (2006) portrayal demonstrates their true value. His descriptions of the experiences and behaviors of emotionally intense youngsters present them as diamonds in the rough rather than oddballs. Through Piechowski's explanations, the child creating an elaborate alternative world is a budding fiction writer rather than an outcast. He reminds the reader that “[w]hat is outside the norm is not necessarily a dysfunction” (p. 29) and that being abnormal is often a requisite of greatness.

Beyond reminding readers of the beauty of exceptionality, Piechowski (2006) provides a number of suggestions for parents and teachers of gifted individuals with heightened emotional sensitivity and intensity. Perhaps most important, and at the crux of all of his suggestions, is acceptance. He emphasizes that these feelings are not overreactions or melodrama, but the way in which these youngsters are experiencing the world. He stresses patience,

sensitivity to needs, comfort, and allowances for some tendencies. He also reminds readers not to forget how they were as children. Finally, he points out that many gifted youth may have to stand alone in their moral convictions, and that a strong supportive family background is a helpful foundation for them to do so.

Finally, the scholar in the field of gifted education also has much to gain from the contents of this book. As professionals committed to understanding and finding ways to serve the many and diverse needs of gifted youth, *"Mellow Out"* gives scholars seemingly unlimited material for reflection, exploration, and potential extension. Going beyond a general explanation and description of the well-known overexcitabilities, Piechowski explores a number of angles, including spiritual giftedness, emotions about death and solitude, energy and vitality, and attachment bonds. *"Mellow Out"* is extensive and thorough, and can inform the investigative pursuits of the researcher of gifted individuals.

In sum, like many of the characteristics associated with giftedness, emotional intensity is multifaceted: a blessing and curse, a gift and a burden. Superficially, it can be difficult for adults to understand how talents so precious can be so onerous. Gifted youth themselves may feel the burden of their intensified feelings and wish to be different, to be able to "mellow out." Piechowski (2006) reminds us all of the true value of intensities and heightened sensitivities—that they are gifts to be nurtured, not peculiarities to be hidden or changed. Beyond illuminating the positive aspects of intensities and sensitivities, Piechowski helps the reader understand the inherent nature of these tendencies. For better or worse, this is the way that some indi-

viduals experience the world, and it cannot and should not be altered (Piechowski). His insightful and stirring glimpse into the experiences of the emotionally precocious helps the reader understand these experiences with glaring clarity. The responses of the gifted teenagers are moving and bitingly real—the reader is brought directly into the experiences of these youngsters. Gifted youth themselves can find comfort in this book, in knowing they are not alone, and that theirs is simply another way of being, not an abnormality or a dysfunction. They can learn to value their intense nature, and understand that when they cannot "mellow out," something can be gained. In essence, Piechowski reminds them and those around them to understand and celebrate emotionality.

References

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