

Comment on Jane Piirto's "21 Years With the Dabrowski's Theory"

Michael M. Piechowski

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By describing her discovery of Dabrowski's theory, the workshops and conferences she subsequently organized, and the research that they stimulated, my friend Jane Piirto has given us not only a beautiful example of autoethnographic narrative but introduced us to the growing literature on autoethnography as a method.

She describes how people's attraction to a theory and involvement with its interpretation and research can grow into something resembling a cult. However, the theory itself stands or falls on the merit of what it can do. If it generates research to answer questions not tackled before, if it opens new areas of inquiry, if it introduces new research tools, then the theory proves itself to be useful and the cult element drops away.

In her story Jane Piirto relates how she became disenchanted with Dabrowski's theory. The turning point was her study comparing identified intellectually gifted high school students with vocational students. The comparison was made on the assumption that vocational students are not intellectually gifted. The difference between the two groups in scores of intellectual OE confirmed this assumption. On the other OEs there was no difference between the two groups and yet such a difference was expected on the basis of other studies. Among the 104 students in the study there were 5 who scored very high on one or more OEs. Four were in the gifted group and one in the vocational group. Jane Piirto's statistician said that the high scorers were "outliers"—too far above the mean, and should be removed from the computation, the tall poppies that spoil the statistical flower bed.

In the discussions we had about it, and later as a reviewer for the paper when it was submitted for publication, I raised objections. First, what can be the justification for removing nearly 5 percent of any data, or if 4 out of 52 (in the gifted group), nearly 8 percent? Second, what can be the justification for removing good data (just think what would you say to the participants in the study that their results are rejected because they score *too high*)? Third, what can be the justification for removing data that are the *strongest expression*

of what the theory is about? Not the average but high OE scorers represent the gifted group par excellence.

The results could have been interpreted differently: (a) since there was a high OE scorer in the vocational group, it showed that there are unidentified gifted among the vocational students, and, more significantly, that the only difference between the two groups is in the frequency of high OE scorers rather than their absence in the vocational group; (b) the vocational students showed passion for their projects, evidence of many talents other than intellectual, therefore, they most likely represent an unrecognized population of youngsters who are gifted though not intellectually. For those who wish to keep “gifted” to mean “intellectually gifted”, one could say that the vocational students are those with unrecognized talents, and that they are fortunate to have a special program to serve their educational needs.

Fourth, why give all the power to the statistician who did not even understand the study and the theory behind it? I remember well in our discussion that we had no access to raw data, only the results of statistical manipulations. As a former research biologist, I strongly believe in looking at raw data and graphing them to see what picture emerges. And I cannot find any justification for the distortion of results by the arbitrary removal of data that epitomize the theory on which the study was designed. A statistician should not usurp the power of a theory.

Fortunately, though the study was not accepted for publication, Jane Piirto did something better by inspiring Lori A. Beach to do an in depth qualitative study of the five high OE scorers.

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