

A Muse Mashup: Dabrowski’s TPD and an Eisner-esque Approach to Gifted Education

Vicki Boley¹

¹University of Denver

October 06, 2021

Abstract

Traditional notions of intelligence are crippling the field of Gifted Education and often, whether explicitly or implicitly, perpetuate inequity and disproportionality throughout the field in both theory and practice (Cross, 2021; Owens et al., 2018). A particular reason for this issue takes root in narrow, monocultural conceptualizations of intelligence, “casting it in singular rather than interactive disciplines and ways of representation” (Eisner as interviewed by Buescher, 1986, p. 7). As we seek to reform Gifted Education, “we will need to release ourselves from the grips of traditional stereotypes about what schools should be, how teaching is to proceed, what appropriate curriculum content entails, and how evaluation should occur” (Eisner, p. 89). Drawing from Dabrowski’s *Theory of Positive Disintegration* (TPD), particularly notions pertaining to the five Overexcitabilities and Development Potential, as well as Eisner’s ideas concerning knowledge acquisition through diverse forms of representation and ways of knowing, I present various ideas and implications for the field of Gifted Education. These ideas and implications inform many K-12 teaching and learning practices as well.

@font-face {font-family:“Cambria Math”; panose-1:2 4 5 3 5 4 6 3 2 4; mso-font-charset:0; mso-generic-font-family:roman; mso-font-pitch:variable; mso-font-signature:3 0 0 0 1 0;}@font-face {font-family:Calibri; panose-1:2 15 5 2 2 2 4 3 2 4; mso-font-charset:0; mso-generic-font-family:swiss; mso-font-pitch:variable; mso-font-signature:-536859905 -1073732485 9 0 511 0;}p.MsoNormal, li.MsoNormal, div.MsoNormal {mso-style-unhide:no; mso-style-qformat:yes; mso-style-parent:“”; margin:0in; mso-pagination:widow-orphan; font-size:12.0pt; font-family:“Calibri”,sans-serif; mso-ascii-font-family:Calibri; mso-ascii-theme-font:minor-latin; mso-fareast-font-family:Calibri; mso-fareast-theme-font:minor-latin; mso-hansi-font-family:Calibri; mso-hansi-theme-font:minor-latin; mso-bidi-font-family:“Times New Roman”; mso-bidi-theme-font:minor-bidi;}p.MsoChpDefault {mso-style-type:export-only; mso-default-props:yes; font-family:“Calibri”,sans-serif; mso-ascii-font-family:Calibri; mso-ascii-theme-font:minor-latin; mso-fareast-font-family:Calibri; mso-fareast-theme-font:minor-latin; mso-hansi-font-family:Calibri; mso-hansi-theme-font:minor-latin; mso-bidi-font-family:“Times New Roman”; mso-bidi-theme-font:minor-bidi;}div.WordSection1 {page:WordSection1;}

A Muse Mashup: Dabrowski’s TPD and an Eisner-esque Approach to Gifted Education

Vicki Boley

The University of Denver

Morgridge College of Education

Abstract

Traditional notions of intelligence are crippling the field of Gifted Education and often, whether explicitly or implicitly, perpetuate inequity and disproportionality throughout the field in both theory and practice (Cross, 2021; Owens et al., 2018). A particular reason for this issue takes root in narrow, monocultural conceptualizations of intelligence, “casting it in singular rather than interactive disciplines and ways of representation” (Eisner as interviewed by Buescher, 1986, p. 7). As we seek to reform Gifted Education, “we will need to release ourselves from the grips of traditional stereotypes about what schools should be, how teaching is to proceed, what appropriate curriculum content entails, and how evaluation should occur” (Eisner, p. 89). Drawing from Dabrowski’s *Theory of Positive Disintegration* (TPD), particularly notions

pertaining to the five Overexcitabilities and Development Potential, as well as Eisner’s ideas concerning knowledge acquisition through diverse forms of representation and ways of knowing, I present various ideas and implications for the field of Gifted Education. These ideas and implications inform many K-12 teaching and learning practices as well.

A Muse Mashup: Dabrowski’s TPD and an Eisner-esque Approach to Gifted Education

What *is* giftedness? At the beginning of the 20th century, giftedness was conceptualized as limited to the realm of intellectual functioning, with exceptionally high IQ scores acting as the main criterion for considerations of giftedness (Coleman & Cross, 2005 as cited in Miller, 2011, p. 94). Such conceptualizations began to develop surrounding, in specific, American eugenicist Lewis Terman’s revision of the intelligence test published by French scholars Alfred Binet and Theodore Simon (Brookwood, 2016). However, Terman explicitly noted that intelligence tests would be used to further the agenda of “race hygiene” and “eliminate degeneracy” (Brookwood, 2016). As such, the field of gifted education has established many of its foundational practices upon, primarily, Euro-white tradition, often highlighting ethnocentric definitions of cultural heritage, history, values, language, and beliefs (Owens et al., 2018). Such monocultural notions of intelligence cripple the field of gifted education and often, whether explicitly or implicitly, perpetuate inequity and disproportionality throughout the field in both theory and practice (Cross, 2021; Owens et al., 2018).

However, many researchers have moved away from conceptualizing giftedness solely in terms of IQ tests and have broadened its usage to include many characteristics of giftedness, such as creativity, leadership, and motivation (Sousa, 2009). Moreover, more modern, humanizing conceptualizations of giftedness also consider an individual’s contributions to culture and society, recognizing that people from cultural and ethnic backgrounds outside of Western ways of being may demonstrate certain gifts and talents that are both highly recognized and valued by their own culture (Peterson, 1999; Sousa, 2009). Researchers tend to agree, though, that the characteristics of gifted children from across ethnic groups have some common indicators, including exceptional problem-solving abilities, intense interests, and oftentimes manifestations of asynchronous development (Silverman, 1997; Sousa, 2009). A simple yet powerful definition of giftedness is that “a gifted person demonstrates (or has the potential for demonstrating) an exceptionally high level of performance in one or more areas of human endeavor” (Sousa, 2009, p. 2).

Yet, despite research that supports more dynamic, broad conceptualizations of giftedness, many gifted identification practices used today throughout K-12 education remain reductive, standardized, and dehumanizing in nature and tend to set up gatekeepers that create a ripple-effect in overall provided (or not) gifted education programming and services (Owens et al., 2018). So, what happens when new ways of conceptualizing giftedness meet old ways of understanding, informing, and ordering the field of gifted education? As we seek to reform gifted education, “we will need to release ourselves from the grips of traditional stereotypes about what schools should be, how teaching is to proceed, what appropriate curriculum content entails, and how evaluation should occur” (Eisner, 1994, p. 89). Drawing from Kazmierz Dabrowski’s *Theory of Positive Disintegration* (TPD), particularly notions pertaining to the five Overexcitabilities (OEs) and Developmental Potential (DP), as well as Elliot Eisner’s ideas concerning knowledge acquisition through diverse forms of representation and ways of knowing, the objective of this paper is to bring into discussion the following questions:

- What traditional ways of knowing and/or intelligence and/or knowledge are centered in Eurocentric, monocultural approaches to gifted education?
- What traditional ways of knowing and/or intelligence and/or knowledge perpetuate reductive, mechanistic, and dehumanizing approaches to gifted identification and programming?
- How are the five OEs (psychomotor, intellectual, sensual, imaginal, and emotional) expressed through diverse forms of representation?
- How might DP be dependent on opportunities for engagement in diverse forms of representation?
- In what way is the ability to experience, to imagine, and to represent diverse forms of representation a fundamental process of human intelligence?

- How might gifted education practices be liberalized, so that both students and teachers have permission to engage in diverse forms of representation that nourish DP, particularly in regard to measurements of intelligence (i.e. assessment)?
- How might engagement in diverse forms of representation promote a strengths-based, as opposed to a deficit-model, approach to gifted education practices?

Dabrowski's TPD and Gifted Education

Many experts in the field of gifted education actively support and acknowledge Dabrowski's TPD as a salient framework for definitions, conceptions, and understandings of the psychological aspects of giftedness (Mendaglio, 2002; Silverman, 1997; Tillier, 2002). Dabrowski believed that some individuals are predisposed to experience life more intensely, with such predispositions rooted in genetic characteristics termed *Development Potential* (Tillier, 2002). Developmental Potential (DP) refers to the assemblage of psychological features he believed were associated with advanced personality development, which include three main features: special abilities and talents, the five forms of OE, and a strong autonomous drive to achieve individuality (Mendaglio & Tillier, 2006).

Specifically, within the field of gifted education, TBD has been used to explore and examine emotional sensitivity and intensity; to make a compelling case for frequent misdiagnosis of gifted individuals' traits as disorders; to describe the social and emotional needs of adolescents and young adults; to recognize creative traits and personality characteristics; to evaluate social and emotional needs of the gifted; to suggest a relationship between developmental potential and spiritual development; to counsel gifted individuals; and even to conceptualize suicide (Fiedler, 1998; Gust-Bray & Cross, 1999; Gust, 1996; Hazell, 1999; Mendaglio, 1998; Morrissey, 1996; Schiever, 1985; Tieso, 1999). Overall, TPD significantly informs the understanding of asynchronous development, in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences that are qualitatively different from the norm, thus presenting numerous implications for parents, educators, and researchers of gifted children (Finlay, 2002; Silverman, 1994; Tillier, 2002).

Understanding The Five Levels of TPD

In specific, Dabrowski's TPD describes five different levels of personality development, which reflect differences in the psychological characteristics of individuals that inform the potential for advanced development of personality (Mendaglio & Tillier, 2006). Dabrowski believed that many people become socialized in their early family and school experiences, largely accept the values of society with little question, and have no conflict abiding by the basic tenets of society; he termed this state of being integration level one of disintegration (Tillier, 2002). In some cases, though, a person may notice or imagine higher possibilities in life, creating a conflict between habitual perceptions and reactions based one's socialization and higher, volitional possibilities (Tillier, 1995). Levels two, three, and four of Dabrowski's TPD describe various levels and types of disintegration (Tillier, 2002). When in level two of disintegration, Dabrowski explained that a person may either fall back a level, move ahead a level, or end negatively in suicide or psychosis (Tillier, 2002). As such, the transition from level two to level three involves a fundamental shift that demands an incredible amount of energy, which acts as the crossroad of development where an individual must either progress or regress (Tillier, 2002). Level three of disintegration describes the vertical conflicts that are caused by a compulsory perception of higher versus lower choices in life, which Dabrowski called spontaneous multilevel disintegration (Tillier, 2002).

In the shift to multilevelness, the horizontal, unilevel stimulus response model is replaced by a vertical, hierarchical analysis, which becomes anchored by an individual's emerging value structure, which shapes how said individual wants to live their life (Tillier, 2002). If an individual reaches level four, they take full control of development and come to reflect a deep responsibility rooted in intellectual and emotional factors, in which their feelings extend to almost everything (Tillier, 2002). Given their genuine prosocial outlook, the people that achieve higher development also raise the level of their society, but often conflict with the status-quo (maladjustment); however, to be maladjusted in a low-level society is a positive feature (Tillier, 2002). Level five is "characterized by harmonious autonomy and is manifested in empathy and internal

values” (Dabrowski, 1964 as cited in Sisk, 2008, p. 26). Behavior in level five is based on an individualized and chosen hierarchy of personal values, in which individuals begin to develop their own vision and express talents energetically through action, art, and social change (Dabrowski, 1964 as cited in Sisk, 2008).

TPD and Eisner’s Forms of Representation: An Intersection

Overexcitabilities (OEs)

A major component of TPD is the concept of DP as it relates to the Overexcitabilities (OEs); the OEs are anchored to the sensitivity of the of the nervous system and are viewed as above-average responsiveness to stimuli (Mendaglio, 2002). Mendaglio (2002) explains that the OEs include five manifestations: psychomotor (movement, restlessness, drive, capacity for staying energetic), sensual (enhanced differentiation and aliveness of sensual experience), imaginal (vividness of imagery, fantasies, and inventions), intellectual (avidity for knowledge, questioning, and search for truth) as well as emotional (great depth and intensity of feeling, compassion, and sense of responsibility). Overall, the OEs can be thought of as “an abundance of physical, sensual, creative, intellectual, and emotional energy, which cause inner turmoil but can result in creative endeavors and in advanced emotional and ethical development” (Dabrowski, 1964 as cited in Sisk, 2008, p. 27). Such energy is often seen in eminent individuals, who often appear maladjusted in low-level societies, but create great works of art, invention, and social change (Goertzel & Hanson, 2004).

Knowing, Knowledge, and Forms of Representation

It tends to be the unfortunate reality that “through the use of multiple-choice tests and limiting forms of teaching, our schools have succeeded in promoting a narrow, fact-oriented conception of what it means to know” (Eisner, 1994, p. 71). However, Eisner (as interview by Buescher, 1986) asserts that “we need to expand our notion of intelligence,” noting that “being smart includes much more than being clever with words and numbers despite what GRE scores and national testing programs like the SAT or ACT assess. Those means are certainly not the beginning, middle, or end of human insight or genius” (p. 13). While knowing tends to be cognitive, it pertains primarily to an awareness, and “awareness depends upon our sensitivity to the content of one’s world; in other words, we need both a content to be sensitive to and the skills to experience it” (p. 8). More specifically, “aesthetic knowing – the ability to experience, to imagine, to represent – is a fundamental process of human intelligence” (pp. 11-12).

But how is such an awareness achieved? Eisner (1994) suggests that “...the kinds of meanings we are able to secure depend in large measure on the varieties of sensory information we can experience. Forms of representation are a major source of such experience” (p. 46). Forms of representation are the devices that humans use “to make public conceptions that are privately held,” and are thus “the vehicles through which concepts that are visual, auditory, kinesthetic, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile are given public status” and may take the form of “words, pictures, music, mathematics, dance, and the like” (Eisner, 1994, p. 39). Similar to Eisner’s (1994) notion of forms of representation, creativity experts Root-Bernstein and Root-Bernstein (2001) assert that culturally imbedded translations of creative thinking (i.e. forms of representation, including paintings, poems, theories, formulas, etc.) are both part and parcel toward the goal of exploring, expanding, and synthesizing domains of knowledge.

The Synergistic Relationship between OEs and Forms of Representation

Pablo Picasso expressed a devotion to a single form of representation and, even while in primary and secondary school, “stubbornly refused to do anything but paint,” Albert Einstein disliked any “artificial show of knowledge or learning of facts that cluttered the mind,” and Gertrude Stein often refused to take final exams (Goertzel and Hansen, 2004, pp. 259-263). It stands to reason, then, that the engagement in diverse forms of representation 1) considers aesthetic knowing over narrow knowing; 2) organically taps into an individual’s DP; 3) is both anchored to and fueled by an individual’s prominent OEs; and 4) acknowledges culturally imbedded translations of creative thinking toward the goal of exploring, expanding, and synthesizing domains of knowledge and diverse conceptualizations of intelligence.

Yet, many gifted education programs tend to continue to align with narrow conceptualizations of intelligence and ways of knowing, often promoting curriculum that attends to the status-quo. However,

When the skills necessary for using a form of representation are not available or the encouragement to use them is not provided, the kinds of meaning that an individual might secure from such forms are likely to be forgone. For example, children who are given no opportunity to compose music are unlikely to secure the meanings that the creation of music makes possible. Nor are they likely to regard the world in a way relevant to the creation of a musical equivalent. (Eisner, 1994, p. 47)

The serious problems of the twenty-first century (e.g., dealing with climate change, protecting the environment, managing population growth, and leading social justice movements) will require the concerted efforts of our best minds; thus, more attention needs to be given to clarifying what constitutes a comprehensive and effective gifted education program and what steps schools can take to ensure a broad and rich variety of educational experiences (Sousa, 2009). The engagement in diverse forms of representation not only enables students to produce important ideas and artifacts grounded in their unique OEs, but to actively develop their DP toward higher levels of disintegration, and thus action.

Some Muse Mashup Implications

Considering the intersection between Dabrowski’s *Theory of Positive Disintegration* (TPD) as well as Eisner’s ideas concerning knowledge acquisition through diverse forms of representation may permit experts in the field of gifted education to think critically about how giftedness is conceptualized, supported, and even measured, generating the following implications:

- Engaging students in diverse forms of representation steers curriculum and instruction, and subsequently DP, in a more culturally responsive direction, making transformative teaching and learning more conceivable in practice (Eisner, 1994; Four Arrows, 2013; Banks, 2002).
- Organizing teaching and learning around a curriculum centered in diverse forms of representation, which naturally stimulate and sustain an individual’s OEs, allows educators “to work with both the psychological and intellectual facets of giftedness,” all of which may manifest differently across diverse groups of students (Hines, 2016; Tucker & Hafenstein, 1997, p. 74).
- Encouraging engagement in diverse forms of representation lends toward stimulating deep thought, idea generation, idea implementation, and eventually the ability to enrich the world with unique innovations; this has overall implications for how giftedness is both conceptualized and assessed (Peterson, 1999; Sisk, 2008).
- Equipping students with larger ideas and concepts through unique, diverse forms of representation allows “new facts and new ideas” to become “the ground for further experiences in which new problems are presented,” thus honoring student interests, experiences, and emotions as well as opportunities to co-construct knowledge (Dewey, 1938, p.79; Four Arrows, 2013; Salazar, 2013).

References

- Brookwood, M. (2016). Eugenics, Lewis Terman, and tests of intelligence: One hundred years and counting. Unpublished manuscript. doi:10.13140/RG.2.1.2037.5929
- Buescher, T. M. (1986). Appreciating children’s aesthetic ways of knowing: An interview with Elliot Eisner. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 10 (1), 7-15.
- Cross, T. (2021, February 5) Discussants [Keynote discussion]. 2021 Gifted Education Policy Symposium and Conference, Denver, CO, United States.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education* (Revised.). Free Press.
- Eisner, E. W. (1994). *Cognition and curriculum reconsidered* (2nd ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Esquierdo, J. (2021, February 5). *Identification panel*[Conference session]. 2021 Gifted

Education Policy Symposium and Conference, Denver, CO, United States.

Fiedler, E. D. (1998). Denial of anger/denial of self: Dealing with the dilemmas. *Roeper Review*, 20 , 158-161.

Finlay, L. (2002). Kazimierz Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration and its implication for gifted students. *Journal of the Gifted and Talented Council of the Alberta Teachers Association*, 15(2), 23-32.

Four Arrows. (2013). *Teaching truly: A curriculum to indigenize mainstream education* . Peter Press.

Goertzel, T. G., & Hansen, A. M. W. (2004). *Cradles of eminence: Childhoods of more than 700 famous men and women* (2nd ed.). Gifted Psychology Press.

Gust-Bray, K., & Cross, T. (1999). An examination of the literature base on the suicidal behaviors of gifted students. *Roeper Review*, 22 , 28-35.

Gust, K. L. (1996). Assessing the social and emotional needs of the gifted: Using the Children's Self-Report and Projective Inventory as a potential tool. *Gifted Child Today*, 19 , 38-40.

Hazell, C. G. (1999). The experience of emptiness and the use of Dabrowski's theory in counseling gifted clients: Clinical case examples. *Advanced Development: A Journal on Adult Giftedness*, 8 , 31-46.

Hines, M. E., Anderson, B. N., & Grantham, T. (2016). Promoting opportunity, rigor, and achievement for underrepresented students. In R. D. Eckert & J. H. Robins (Eds.), *Designing services and programs for high-ability* (pp. 151-168). Corwin.

Mendaglio, S. (1998). Counseling gifted students: Issues and recommendations for teachers and counselors. *AGATE*, 12 , 18-25.

Mendaglio, S. (2002) Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration: Some implications for teachers of gifted students. *Journal of the Gifted and Talented Council of the Alberta Teachers Association*, 15(2), 14-22.

Miller, A. L. (2012). Conceptualization of creativity: Comparing theories and models of giftedness. *Roeper Review*, 34 (2), 94-103.

Morrissey, A. M. (1996). Intellect as prelude: The potential for higher level development in the gifted. *Advanced Development: A Journal of Adult Giftedness*, 7, 101-116.

Mun, R. U., Ezzani, M. D., Lee, L. E. & Ottwein, J. K. (2020). Building systemic capacity to improve identification and services in gifted education: A case study of one district. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 1-21.

Owens, D., Middleton, T. J., Rosemond, M. M., & Meniru, M. O. (2018). Underrepresentation of Black children in gifted education programs: Examining ethnocentric monoculturalism. In J. Cannaday (Ed), *Curriculum development for gifted education programs* (pp. 135-149).

Peterson, J. S. (1999). Gifted – through whose cultural lens? An application of the

- postpositivistic mode of inquiry. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 22 (4), 354-383.
- Root-Bernstein, R., & Root-Bernstein, M. (2001). *Sparks of genius: Thirteen thinking tools of creative people* . Mariner Books.
- Salazar, M. (2013). A humanizing pedagogy: Reinventing the principles and practice of education as journey toward liberation. *Review of Research in Education*, 37 (1), 121-148.
- Schiever, S. W. (1985). Creative personality characteristics and dimensions of mental functioning in gifted adolescents. *Roeper Review*, 7 , 223-226.
- Silverman, L. K. (1997). The construct of asynchronous development. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 72 (3&4), 36 – 58.
- Sisk, D. (2008). Engaging the spiritual intelligence of gifted students to build global awareness in the classroom. *Roper Review*, 30 , 24-30.
- Sousa, D. (2009). *How the gifted brain learns* . Corwin.
- Tieso, C. L. (1999). Meeting the socio-emotional needs of talented teens. *Gifted Child Today*, 22, 38-43.
- Tieso, C. L. (2007). Overexcitabilities: A new way to think about talent?. *Roeper Review*, 29 (4), 232-239.
- Tiller, W. (1995, October 25). *The Theory of Positive Disintegration by Kazimierz Dabrowski: Page presented by Bill Tillier* . <http://www.positivedisintegration.com/>
- Tillier, W. (2002). A brief overview of the relevance of Dabrowski's theory for the gifted. *Journal of the Gifted and Talented Council of the Alberta Teachers Association*, 15(2), 4-13.
- Tucker, B. & Hafenstein, N. J. (1997). Psychological intensities in young gifted children. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 41 (3), 66-75.