

Top name in gifted education to visit NZ

One of the leading names in gifted education worldwide, Polish-American psychologist Michael Piechowski, will be the keynote speaker at the NZAGC's AGM in Christchurch next year. He is being brought to New Zealand by REACH Education and will be conducting workshops around the country.

Piechowski's work centres on understanding the emotional and spiritual world of the gifted young person. **Rosemary Cathcart**, director of REACH, interviewed him for *Tall Poppies*.



- **Your career path – from plant physiology through molecular biology to psychology – must be unique in the history of gifted education. What persuaded you to make such a radical change of direction?**

Originally I chose botany and plant physiology because I didn't have the stomach for dissecting animals. I was fascinated by what happens inside a single cell, the most basic processes that make life what it is. It was at the time when DNA was being shown to be the genetic material, rather than proteins. I was offered a fellowship in Belgium where I started to learn research methods with bacterial viruses.

Next, I applied to the University of Illinois and was accepted as a graduate student in molecular biology, which was then an emerging field. New discoveries at the molecular level were aplenty: for instance, that in bacteria, DNA was one gigantic circular molecule; that genes could be identified as segments of DNA; that viruses had a complex morphogenesis and so on.

By the time I transferred to the University of Wisconsin and got my degree I was also becoming interested in the human psyche. The Book-of-the Month Club offered *A History of Psychiatry*, which I read with fascination. It was no small surprise to me that this book held my interest very strongly. I was riveted by the mysteries of human emotions [and] I began to doubt whether or not to continue in science. I did postdoctoral work and then took a faculty position at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Alberta. You could say it was destiny that brought me there to meet Prof. K. Dabrowski [whose theory on positive disintegration has made over-excitabilities an integral part of the language of gifted education]. We met very soon after I got there.

I knew his name because one of my friends had mentioned him as the man written about in a magazine, who said that psychoneurosis was not an illness (Dabrowski later wrote a book with this title). He gave me some chapters of his in an English translation that was badly done because the translator did not understand what he was talking about. So I became his translator – but more than that, because we held working sessions in which I kept asking him to explain what he meant, to elaborate, to give examples to illustrate his points.

Later on I worked with him on the analysis of his research on levels of emotional development through positive disintegration. I gave up my position at the University of Alberta to become a

graduate student again, this time in counselling psychology, and back at the University of Wisconsin.

In retrospect, do you think you were always a psychologist-in-waiting, unbeknownst to yourself, or do you see a constructive link between these two occupations?

I don't believe I was a hidden or dormant psychologist who went through a science phase. No, I was very much a research scientist. I was never disillusioned with science and I see it as one slice of sanity in a world dominated by ignorance, and wilful manipulation and distortion of information to serve special interests. Scientists are extremely good at international cooperation because what joins them is the higher goal of solving the puzzles of nature.

The constructive link is that my training in science enabled me to work through the complexities of Dabrowski's theory and try to arrive at a clear structure. This subsequently helped the research. I could see that his theory had a sound conceptual structure, but that one needed to define the terms well and show how they were connected.

- **What lessons might gifted students learn from your own career?**

That when you change fields you must be prepared to face different ways of thinking. A change from a hard science to soft science, and even more so to an applied field at the very bottom of academic hierarchy, is an extreme change.

What struck me most forcibly was the difference in how people discussed things. Scientists argue with each other in order to probe theoretical and research questions, to gain a better understanding of the puzzle at hand. In social sciences, and in education and counselling in particular, arguing a point tends to be taken as a personal attack. The expected behaviour is to present a point as a personal view, since it is believed that there are many positions possible on any issue and that one theory is as good as another, and just a matter of personal preference. I could never get used to this. Later, when I was on the faculty at the School of Education at Northwestern University, my papers were criticised for being too clear, and too confident about the points I was making.

Another point is that you must follow your passion and seek where you can make a significant contribution.

- **Can you comment on the choice of title for one of your books: *'Mellow Out', They Say. If Only I Could.***

Initially I thought to call it *Experiencing in a Higher Key*, which [children's author] Stephanie Tolan told me was too awkward for a book title. So I had to look, and I had this essay by a former student in which she expressed her frustration with how she was perceived by others. How they said to her: 'Mellow out, don't be such a baby, sooo sensitive, sooo intense,' and so on. And her reply was, 'If I only could.' She recognized that this was the way she was born: more sensitive, more intense, more concerned about everything, more intent on pushing herself past the limit – for which she paid the price in emotional pain and doubts about her sanity. But all she needed was an acknowledgment of her as the person she was. It's her drawing that's on the cover of the book, depicting how she felt at that time.

- **You've written that: *'Giftedness is not a matter of degree but of a different quality of***

experiencing . . . a way of being quiveringly alive.’ Can we expect teachers who are not themselves gifted, to comprehend or provide for such a different perception of experience?

This brings to mind the line from *My Fair Lady*: ‘Why can’t a woman be more like a man?’ Why isn’t a gifted child like other children? We tend to seek our own kind because we want to stay in our comfort zone, hence diversity presents a challenge: it takes us out of our comfort zone. The bigger the difference, the greater the difficulty of knowing how to respond. This is true of our encounter with any minority, whether handicapped, mentally ill, of different ethnicity, or a gifted child – especially a profoundly gifted child.

The peculiarity of the gifted is that they are often perceived as intimidating because they make [people] feel inadequate, and who wants to be exposed as inadequate? They ask too many questions, they correct teachers’ mistakes, they are bored because the class has nothing new for them, and they demand fair treatment – to have a curriculum appropriately paced for their ability. It is ironic that athletic abilities are universally valued, admired and supported. No one would think of holding back a gifted runner, but this is what we do to gifted children.

Yet it must be acknowledged that teaching is hard work because the teacher has to be aware of the different personalities of the students, has to know the subject well to be able to present it meaningfully and interestingly, and has to know group dynamics. Teaching is performance art without rehearsal, [while] at the same time it requires real expertise in group process as each class is a group with its own pattern of response, challenge and resistance. There is a continuous unspoken negotiation going on between the students and the teacher. On top of that are the pressures from the administration, standards, tests and so on. I don’t know how it is in New Zealand, but studies in the United States revealed how little consideration and respect the teacher’s work and the students’ learning is accorded by the frequent interruptions over the intercom.

How to explain to people who are not gifted how different the quality of experiencing is for gifted children and adults? Perhaps one could illustrate the different ways of perceiving the world. Visual-spatial thinkers provide a good source of examples. Their powers of visualisation and solving complex design problems in their imagination are a source of wonder. We need to spend more time emphasising mysteries of the mind that can produce correct solutions without being able to identify the steps that remain hidden.

Perhaps we can point out that we enjoy artists, musicians, actors, comedians – all of whom are gifted, intense and, in most cases, not easy to live with, but whom we appreciate for what they give us. Perhaps teachers could visit classes for gifted students, to see that there are hardly any discipline problems; there is cooperation and concentrated engagement in learning. Training in the psychology of the gifted is crucial, because it is not easy to understand that the richness of inner experience can easily lead to an overload of stimulation that the child is not equipped to handle.

Something to consider is that gifted students who are home-schooled are much happier, because they can progress at their own pace and are free to explore things in depth and be creative. There seems to be in schools a widespread misapprehension towards imagination and creativity. A friend of mine with decades of teaching experience told me that she has never seen appreciation for gifted children to sprout in non-gifted persons. No doubt, too many false myths about gifted children are still around. I believe that if we released the teachers’ own creativity, or attended to their own personal growth the way [educator and activist] Parker J. Palmer has been doing, the appreciation of gifted children would follow.

- **If it is not realistic to expect teachers who are not gifted themselves to understand gifted children, what implications does that have for the schooling of gifted learners? If it is realistic, what changes would you like to see?**

We know from extensive research that all children learn best with peers of similar level of ability or slightly better. Therefore, grouping by ability is a must because it's only fair. We do it in athletics.

- **You've drawn our attention to 'over-excitabilities' as a significant feature of gifted experience. While this is a crucial recognition for us to have, you've acknowledged that the term has a negative connotation. Should we seek an alternative – and more positive – term, such as that implied in the title of your latest book, *Living With Intensity*?**

Alternatives to over-excitability are heightened excitability or enhanced excitability. However, intensity is a good term to use, especially since some people, instead of talking about over-excitability, reduce it to sensitivity. Both intensity and sensitivity are involved. But intensity conveys the strength of the experience much better than sensitivity. I also look upon it as greater aliveness or being spirited.

- **Addressing the First World Conference on Gifted and Talented Children in 1975, New Zealand scholar George Parkyn said: 'The way ahead, if humanity stays on its present course, is catastrophic . . . we must treasure other gifts than rational-scientific thinking.' He was concerned to see us recognise and value empathy, compassion and ethical awareness as essential to our future survival. In your view, was that a realistic appraisal, or was he exaggerating the possibilities?**

The wisdom of George Parkyn is undeniable. It is echoed by T. Brazelton and S. Greenspan in *The Irreducible Needs of Children*. They said that the complex workings of society require not only cooperation but also compassion. Striving for survival through competition clashes with cooperation and nurturance; consequently it works against development of compassion. Thirty five years later we see the catastrophic trend George Parkyn talked about, continuing. [However] it is not the result of promoting rational-scientific thinking but rather, in part, of devaluing it. I believe we need strong science – because science is about finding out how things work in nature and because scientists know how to work together across national and political boundaries. At the same time we must cultivate empathy, caring and ethical awareness.

- **The Maori people of New Zealand place greater emphasis on the qualities a person has as a measure of giftedness than they do on the skills a person demonstrates. Valued qualities include spirituality, caring for others and service to others. Yet relatively few Maori are identified within our schools as gifted. This seems to be similar to the experience of other cultural minorities. Should we be revising the definitions we use as a basis for identifying our gifted children?**

It seems to me it is not so much a question of revising our definitions for identifying gifted children as to turn away from looking upon gifted children as resources, as potential producers, not unlike how much milk we can get out of cows, [instead of] as whole persons. I am afraid that we buy and sell achievement – who is the best? – because what a person is paid (I refused to say 'earns') becomes a measure of a person's worth.

But if we place primary emphasis on personal growth, the proper context for the development of talent is already there. Consequently, the risk of chasing after achievement to the detriment of wholeness is reduced if not totally eliminated. The Maori see the whole person and value what we know to be humane qualities. They do not divorce the talents, no matter how extraordinary and dazzling they may be, from a person's character. In this they are way ahead of us. It occurs to me that they avoided the money standard and retained character as the measure of a person. Character develops through personal growth.

Personal growth is not part of the school's educational mandate. There are perhaps several difficulties toward providing the time and space for personal growth of schoolchildren. To begin with we lack proper understanding of personal growth and we also lack practical knowledge of how to foster it. Furthermore, we are reluctant to give the power of self-determination to children. And yet we want children to become responsible and capable of making good decisions.

In Chapter 20 of *Mellow Out* I have written about techniques for fostering personal growth. They are simple in practice and don't take much time. They can be easily incorporated into the daily or weekly schedule. In its most basic form, personal growth is about focusing attention, becoming aware of one's self as capable of choices and decisions, engaging the will to act on them, being aware of the consequences of one's choices and decisions, being aware of different aspects of oneself, being aware of the two-way nature of relationships, and so on.

Fostering personal growth intersects with broad notions of emotional intelligence. However, there is one significant difference and that is that in personal growth the emphasis is on cultivating the will and the inner authority of the child. I have conducted these personal growth exercises with both undergraduate students and gifted youngsters for a number of years.

For more information about Michael Piechowski's tour of New Zealand in March next year, go to www.reachgifted.org.nz. He will be conducting workshops in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch.