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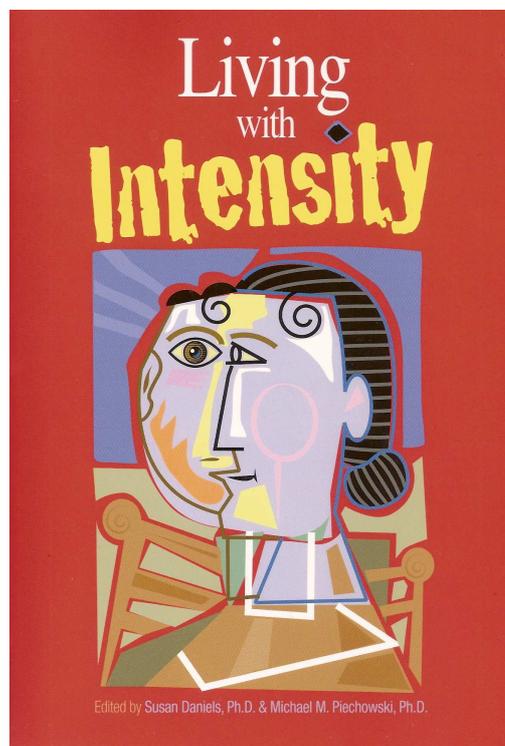
Living with Intensity

Understanding the Sensitivity, Excitability,
and Emotional Development of Gifted
Children, Adolescents, and Adults

Editors

Susan Daniels

Michael Piechowski



Review by Vlad Glăveanu

EJOP Editor

Living as a gifted person, from childhood and youth to late adulthood. Living with gifted persons: children, adolescents, adults. In both cases, living with intensity. The book edited by Susan Daniels and Michael Piechowski takes on the huge challenge of making us all aware of how it is to actually live with intensity, to live with and near giftedness. It is a challenge because of the numerous preconceived and/or misconceived ideas about giftedness, development, and normality maintained by both science and common sense for decades. At the heart of these prejudices stand a group of correlated assumptions: that pain, anxiety and disintegration are always negative, that these could only harm creativity and therefore that any person experiencing these inner states is sure to be pathological rather than creative.

"Living with Intensity", a book edited in 2009 by Great Potential Press, brings together a number of authors that use the conception of Kazimierz Dabrowski in their theoretical and empirical studies of giftedness. Consequently, they all embrace a vision of giftedness that emphasizes the importance of emotions, of personal growth, of overexcitabilities and developmental potential over the entire lifespan. The book offers all readers a comprehensive insight into Dabrowski's theory and its important applications for understanding and cultivating talent and creative potential regardless of age, sex, education, social position; a valuable guide for all interested

in or “touched” by giftedness, from gifted persons themselves, to parents and teachers, counsellors and psychologists, creativity researchers, social workers, everyone working in fields that promote and depend on the creative energy of the gifted: education, business, science and art to name just a few.

The book is divided into four parts. The first gives a general overview of “Kazimierz Dabrowski, Overexcitability, Giftedness, and Developmental Potential”, discussing in two chapters essential notions such as overexcitability and sensitivity (chapter 1) as well as Dabrowski's levels of development (chapter 2). The second part turns to practical aspects in the study of giftedness, “Understanding Intensity: Practical Applications for Parents, Teachers, and Counselors”. Here different authors address developmental topics, from young gifted children (chapter 3) to gifted adolescents (chapter 4) and consider carefully important aspects in the life of the gifted, such as the role of stress (chapter 5) and perfectionism (chapter 9). A considerable number of chapters are dedicated to the delicate problem of distinguishing between giftedness and pathology by calling our attention to instances of missed diagnosis, misdiagnosis and dual diagnosis (chapter 6), counselling work with the gifted (chapter 7) and, in this context, the importance of family dynamics (chapter 8). The third part continues this developmental perspective, “Still Gifted After All These Years – Lifespan Intensity and Gifted Adults”, bringing to the front the advantages and challenges of lifespan intensity (chapter 10), the work of Annemarie Roeper and its relevance (chapter 11), ideas on the process of counselling gifted adults (chapter 12) and outlining in the end what Dabrowski's legacy could bring to gifted adults (chapter 13). Finally, part four is dedicated to “Current Research and Future Directions” with a dual focus, on research and assessment of the theory (chapter 14) and on possible future applications (chapter 15). The book ends with two useful questionnaires for the assessment of overexcitability, the OEQ Short Form and the Revised OEQ (or OEQ-REV).

One essential merit of “Living with intensity” is its clear and well-documented account of Dabrowski's conception, from the notion of overexcitability, an indispensable tool for understanding the mental and behavioural dynamics of gifted individuals, to the bigger framework, the *theory of positive disintegration*. Kazimierz Dabrowski (1902-1980), a Polish psychiatrist and psychologist, has focused, in an age of behaviourism followed by cognitivism, on the significance of emotional development, of self-reflection and conflict for a person's psychological growth. His theory of positive disintegration, of great value for giftedness studies, could seem for many paradoxical: psychological suffering stimulates self-development, positive disintegration opens the way to a higher-level re-integration and therefore needs to be cherished and not eliminated or “treated”. Especially the first two chapters of the

book describe in a comprehensive way Dabrowski's notions of developmental potential, multilevelness, overexcitability (OE), and developmental stages, all central for understanding giftedness. For Dabrowski the developmental potential is not reduced to talent and abilities, but requires also the manifestation of overexcitabilities and the "third factor" of self-directed emotional growth. All five types of OE (psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginal and emotional) and levels of development (primary integration, unilevel disintegration, spontaneous multilevel disintegration, organised multilevel disintegration and secondary integration) are thoroughly described and constantly referred to across the book, along with rich illustrations and detailed applications.

Perhaps the central argument of the book is that gifted children, adolescents and adults and, more generally, giftedness, are often *misunderstood*. Since OE manifest themselves early in life, as authentic temperamental dispositions, they make the gifted child live much more intensively each experience, to feel more, to think more, to move more, to imagine more. For most parents and teachers gifted children may be hard to live with and hard to educate. They are ahead of their age and ahead of their peers, sometimes even ahead of the adults around them. As Daniels and Piechowski note:

"Their excitement is viewed as excessive, their high energy as hyperactivity, their persistence as nagging, their questioning as undermining authority, their imagination as not paying attention, their passion as being disruptive, their strong emotions and sensitivity as immaturity, their creativity and self-directedness as oppositional. They stand out from the norm. But then, what is normal?" (p.4).

Adopting a life sciences approach to normality rather than a statistical one (normal is optimal and not "average"), the authors of "Living with Intensity" urge parents, teachers and clinicians to change the "lenses" with which we see "normality", "pain", "overexcitability". OEs need to be cherished, nurtured and above all *managed* (regulated or adjusted; altered or adapted according to circumstance; varied in their expression) and not limited, eliminated or pathologized (frequently as ADHD in children, and schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and depression at later stages).

A distinctive quality of this book is its balanced presentation of theory, empirical illustrations and useful recommendations, for example the practical advice for parents and teachers on how to modulate OEs without fighting against them. Lists of "strategies" offered for each type of OE describe inventive ways of nurturing the child's intense experience of the world. As an illustration, those children showing

psychomotor overexcitability should be encouraged to use their energy instead of "standing still": they could stand up when they read if they want to or be allowed to play silently when they listen in a group. Solutions are always at hand when adults care to preserve and cultivate their children's "gifts". Second, the book offers a much needed lifespan vision of giftedness, including excellent descriptions of how creativity is experienced in young, middle and late adulthood. A special chapter is of course dedicated to adolescence, a crucial milestone in the development of each individual, and an even more difficult and decisive period in the life of gifted persons. Thirdly, the last part of the book should be of special interest for researchers and practitioners since it includes a review of the main studies that have until now tested Dabrowski's assertions, meta-analyses of researches concerning the levels of development and overexcitabilities. The presentation of items used in research, typical answers and their significance as well as the two questionnaires included in the appendices can help interested readers in making their own assessments.

Summing up, "Living with Intensity" is both a pleasant and instructive reading. It undoubtedly succeeds in its declared aim of making "highly complex material accessible without diluting its essential concepts" (p.265). Using a language that is easy to follow and being filled with illustrations and practical suggestions, this book is essential for all parents, teachers and counsellors "dealing" with giftedness and intensity. The message it advocates, that of listening to gifted children and adults, respecting and understanding them, is an imperative in today's world both scarred by a series of misconceptions about the creative self and in desperate need of creativity. Dabrowski's deeper message is also one of hope in our human potential and our capacity to grow and create, strengthening the belief that "it is never too late to be what you might have been".