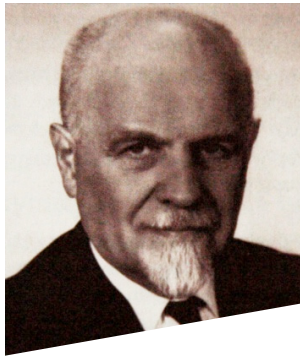


The missing piece of the puzzle in better supporting the gifted pupil



I still read and hear about gifted pupils who feel misunderstood or under-challenged. About those who haven't learned how to tackle difficult, complex problems effectively. About pupils who don't know or understand themselves, who don't realise what they want or are capable of, who are highly critical and express their criticism at both opportune and inopportune moments yet are never really heard, leaving them feeling on the edge of the group.

A focus on the characteristics of the gifted and the Triadic Interdependence Model (see separate section below) can be helpful when offering support to gifted pupils. Nevertheless, there are still too many occurrences of gifted pupils and their teachers misunderstanding one another, which hinders the gifted pupil's development.

So when we think of all the characteristics, do we sufficiently realise what they tell us? What does it mean when the gifted pupil is described as having 'broad interests'? What if those interests truly are very broad, ranging from mathematical puzzles to language/communication-related ones? As teachers, can we understand what it entails when a pupil asks very in-depth questions across the board and is extremely eager to learn? What if a six-year-old child asks us about the meaning of life? Can we invite them to discuss their thoughts with the rest of the class? Are we sufficiently challenging the gifted pupil in that case? They will certainly enjoy the chance to talk to you about how they see themselves, their dreams and ambitions, and what they do and don't like doing. The characteristics of a gifted child call for – actually scream out for – that kind of attention. They want to think about things, are eager to consider all kinds of questions about life, are continuously wondering about meaningfulness and what life means to them.

But as teachers do we realise just how deep their interest is in so many different topics and where that in-depth interest comes from?

GIFTEDNESS AND INTENSITY

The knowledge that the Polish psychologist and psychiatrist Kazimierz Dabrowski (1902-1980) gives us about gifted children offers us greater insight into the intensity of their characteristics. We should grasp that intensity more deeply; it is essential for a better understanding of gifted pupils.

Dabrowski identified three factors that play a role in personality development in gifted pupils:

1. Their above-average ability, task commitment and creativity (the 3 personal factors according to Renzulli-Mönks), supported and driven by an oversensitivity or 'overexcitability'. That oversensitivity is an indicator of giftedness that feeds and supports their talent.
2. The surroundings (the 3 environmental factors according to Renzulli-Mönks) with which they are continuously interacting.
3. Their will to change, comprising internal, autonomous and either conscious or as yet unconscious processes as they choose to accept, reinforce, limit or reject their ability/creativity and the influences of their social environment.

The first two factors are similar to the factors in the two triads of Renzulli and Mönks. The third factor, 'the will to change', means that the child continuously experiences internal conflict. They are continuously reassessing their own moral standards and values and substituting them with better, more appropriate ones.

Additionally, according to Dabrowski, 'ability and creativity' are supported by oversensitivity in a gifted child; that is what results in their characteristic intensity. In conjunction with Piechowski, Dabrowski arrived at the following five oversensitivities (Hoogbegaafdvlaanderen, 2005):

- Psychomotor oversensitivity, the capacity to be active and energetic.
- Sensual oversensitivity, the capacity for sensory pleasure.
- Intellectual oversensitivity, the mind's activity. This is not the same as intelligence! The presence of this oversensitivity results in a constant desire to search for knowledge and truth. In other words, it is an intellectual thirst for truth.
- Imaginational oversensitivity, the capacity for detailed and lively visualisations.
- Emotional oversensitivity, the presence of an emotional intensity that causes the child to experience complex, intense feelings and emotions.

If one or more sensitivities are 'overly' present, i.e. are experienced very intensively, then the child is stimulated more quickly than the average child in the experiential dimension(s) in question. Besides that, the intensity of that experience is different. That oversensitivity feeds and supports the personal development of the gifted child.

That personality development – the will to change – extends from an egocentric personality that conforms to the generally held moral standards and values through detachment from the commonly accepted standards and values to a personality that initially unconsciously and later subconsciously chooses its own moral standards and values. Empathy and altruism feature prominently at the latter level. There are five levels in total.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND HER SPANISH-LEARNING METHOD

Antoinette Gerichhausen is the mother of three adult children. She studied at the HEAO in Arnhem (completed in 1983) and did a degree in Roman Languages at Radboud University in Nijmegen (graduated in 2012). Additionally, her inner drive is to stimulate gifted children to above all live their own wonderful lives. She immersed herself in this topic in response to her own children's questions as they were growing up.

In parallel she developed a three-part method for learning Spanish which is specifically designed for gifted primary-school pupils; they can learn Spanish at their own pace and level.

The first part of the learning method is intended for pupils in Key Stage 1. Called Soy Don Toro, this part helps pupils to explore a number of deeper questions about life which makes it a good fit with this article. Besides challenging pupils at a subject level in Spanish, this part of the learning method above all encourages them to discuss issues that are on their mind. It helps them to learn to better understand themselves and – in conjunction with their teacher – to be better understood. Visit the website (juanyrosa.com) for more information about the learning method and/or to download the first chapter of each part.

If you have any questions or comments after reading this article, feel free to contact the author: antoinettegerichhausen@gmail.com. You can also visit her LinkedIn page.

EXISTING KNOWLEDGE ABOUT YOUNG GIFTED CHILDREN

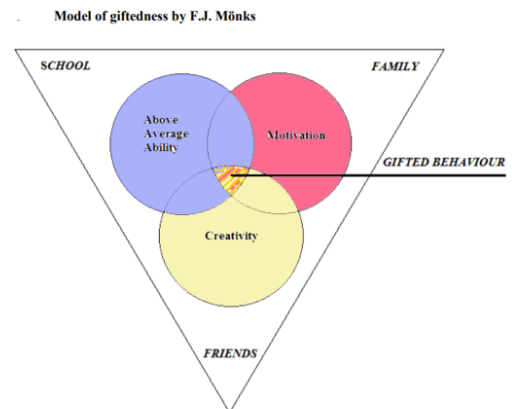
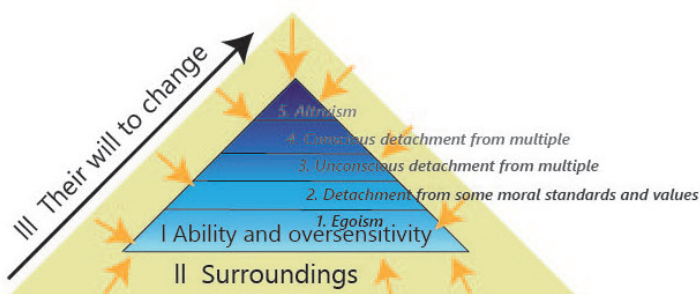
In 1995, Mönks and Ypenburg identified a number of characteristics shared by gifted children. They have advanced psychological development, are inquisitive and eager to learn, have lots of energy, can tackle tasks with focus and concentration but can also work on multiple tasks simultaneously. They have an excellent memory, broad interests and a sophisticated sense of humour, are perfectionists, enjoy working autonomously and in their own way, think about the meaning of life at an unusually young age, often teach themselves to read and write, have their own method of arithmetic, an extensive vocabulary and are quick to spot connections between different events. For the development and evolution of their self-image it is also very important that their special developmental needs are acknowledged and addressed at a young age. Denying, ignoring or even hindering this thirst for knowledge and eagerness to learn can disrupt healthy and harmonious development at an early stage.

In order to support the optimal development of such children, Mönks and Renzulli developed the Triadic Interdependence Model which shows the positive links and mutual dependence between two triads comprising three personal factors and three environmental factors.

FIVE LEVELS OF PERSONALITY DEVELOPMENT

Most people evolve from Level 1, egocentric personality, to Level 2, detachment from some commonly held moral standards and values. Gifted children tend to evolve – and generally at an early age – to Level 3, unconscious detachment from multiple commonly held moral standards and values. Once they have reached Level 3, it is no longer possible to revert to Level 2. Level 4 is the development of a personality that consciously detaches from multiple moral standards and values. Level 5 is the evolution towards becoming one with one's own moral standards and values; it is reserved for the likes of the Dalai Lama and Mahatma Gandhi (Hoogbegaafd Vlaanderen, 2005). This can be visualised as follows:

PERSONALITY DEVELOPMENT ACCORDING TO DABROWSKI



Triadic model of interdependence by F.J. Mönks. The Three-Ring Model of giftedness by J. Renzulli (represented by *Above Average Ability, Motivation and Creativity*) is interconnected with three socializing factors: *Family, Friends and School*.

The model by Renzulli and Mönks shows that the environment has a significant influence on giftedness. They suggest that – in the social interaction with a gifted child – the environmental factors can hinder their motivation and creativity, in which case the child should then be labelled as highly intelligent rather than gifted. According to Dabrowski, there is continual interplay between the environment and the gifted child, with the environment influencing their latent (over)sensitivity and hence their development.

Dabrowski (in Nelson, 1989) studied gifted people of all ages and developed his Theory of Positive Disintegration (TPD). His vision was very much at odds with the vision within classical psychology which regarded the disintegration phase as a neurosis that had to be treated. Rather than being a negative phase, Dabrowski claims that it is a positive one which is necessary for personal growth.

One of his peers, Piechowski, incorporated the TPD into the research into and education of the gifted. In the USA and Canada, Dabrowski's vision has long been used in the teaching of young gifted pupils, with Linda Silverman playing a leading role. The measuring instrument Piechowski developed to assess the so-called emotional oversensitivities is still in an experimental phase and is being further worked on in the USA and Canada (Krachtig Bewustzijn).

HIGHLY INTELLIGENT VERSUS GIFTED

Linda Silverman, who works with Dabrowski's theory in the USA and Canada, makes a distinction between gifted and highly intelligent pupils. She claims that giftedness is colour-blind and occurs across all levels of society, man or woman, rich or poor. Giftedness becomes noticeable at a young age, but it does not necessarily develop evenly. A child can have very in-depth thoughts about meaningfulness but not yet be able to tie their own shoelaces. The child can have complex thought processes and experience deep emotions. The gifted are 'too much' in every sense: too sensitive, too intense, too driven, too honest, too idealistic, too moral, too perfectionist and too 'full-on' for other people. They spend their whole lives trying to fit in with the rest of the group but continue to feel out of place. It is essential to acknowledge that intensity to prevent gifted people regarding themselves as crazy. According to Silverman, giftedness must be removed from the concept of achievement; in contrast to the highly intelligent child, the gifted child is not competitive (Linda Silverman, 2007).

CONCLUSION

Recognition and appreciation of the gifted person's oversensitivity and an understanding of the personality development path are the missing pieces of the jigsaw for providing effective support. The intense sensitivity of the gifted child causes them to experience events in their lives intensely, to think deeply about life and to ask questions. As a result, the gifted person accepts, reinforces, limits or even rejects and substitutes their personal moral standards and values. In my opinion that oversensitivity, which is the engine for their personal development, should be added to the list of characteristics of the gifted. It is important that the recognition and appreciation of that oversensitivity becomes an essential part of teaching young gifted pupils. And that insight will hopefully take us another step forwards in our knowledge of gifted children and they will learn to develop in their own way. In fact, in the ideal scenario, they will flourish.

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Gifted Homeschoolers

(I recommend two brochures as a starting point: "I am ... intense", about the experiences of a gifted child, and a brochure about the Gifted Homeschoolers Forum: <http://giftedhomeschoolers.org/educators-guide-to-gifted-children/> and <http://giftedhomeschoolers.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/GHFbrochure.pdf?71956e&71956e>)