



Features:

- Underachievement and Quest for Dignity
- Nurturing Affective Growth through Discussion Groups
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Carol Fertig

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Design/Desktop Publishing
Ann Alexander Leggett

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Dana EchoHawk

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Affective Education...We talk about it so much in gifted education. What does it mean? As I thought about it for this issue of **Understanding Our Gifted**, the words of a gifted poet, playwright, essayist, and author came to mind:

To be nobody-but-myself—in a world that is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else—means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight, and never stop fighting.

e.e. cummings

A teacher, counselor, author, and long time advocate of gifted children, received the following description of “a gifted person” from a 12-year-old girl:

A Afraid that at some point in time I'll slip and do something wrong, and everyone will notice.

G Guilty, when pressured into not doing my best.

I Isolated, when others make me feel left out of “the group.”

F Frustrated, when I do something great and everyone laughs.

T Terrified, when I don't know the answer and everyone stares at me.

E Excited, when I create something that everyone appreciates.

D Disgusted, that my special needs are neglected.

P Privileged, when I get extra time during school to do something for myself.

E Embarrassed, when the teacher announces my grades.

R Relieved, when people don't laugh at me for getting less than 100%.

S Satisfied, when I can help someone with something they don't understand.

O On top of the world, when somebody says they enjoyed my work.

N Nervous, when pressured to always be the best.

(Delisle, James R., 1984. *Gifted Children Speak Out*, pp. 113-114. New York: Walker.)

Parents and teachers of the gifted can and should:

- Encourage them to be independent thinkers.
- Help them through childhood with self-esteem intact.
- Empower them to take charge of their own lives, facilitate the smooth passage into adulthood, and then let go.
- **Be there for them when they need you!**

(Knopper, Dorothy, 1997. *Parent Education: Parents As Partners*. Boulder, CO: Open Space Communications LLC.)

We value your feedback and opinions. Please contact Editor Carol Fertig: cfertig@earthlink.net ❖

Underachievement and the Quest for Dignity

Jim Delisle



Do we need to “fix” underachievers?

A Sad Reality....A Promising Possibility

Quick! What words come to mind immediately when you hear the term “underachiever”?

If you answer the way most people do, the words associated with underachiever are a litany of negatives—lazy, unmotivated, a teacher’s (or parent’s) worst nightmare.

So imagine being this kid. You’re likely a boy, age 12-17, with an early history of school success and a roster of interests as long as your lanky adolescent arm. In the primary and elementary grades, school was generally pretty easy—in most cases, *very* easy—and teachers were quick to point out how much potential you had.

Then, a speed bump. While your mind was racing ahead, exploring complex concepts seldom covered in your textbooks, the work you were being asked to produce in school seemed rather, well, pointless. You had already mastered much of the required material, and could prove it to any teacher who might ask you to do so. Few did. So, you began “forgetting” to do your homework or, if you had done it, you neglected to turn it in. Oops....so sorry....That earns you a lower grade. “But I know this stuff!” you protest, only to be told (...and told....and told) that part of being a student means being responsible. Forgetting your homework? Well, that’s not responsible now, is it?

The next step was as predictable as a lunch detention for inappropriate language: You began doing less work in class, and the work you *did* was completed quickly and with little care for accuracy or depth. Lower grades became more common, meetings with the school counselor more frequent, and privileges at home and school were removed until such time as you worked up to that potential you were told so long ago that you had.

If I had \$10 for every time in my career that I heard the above scenario from a parent or gifted adolescent, I’d be as rich as Bill Gates.

Now, imagine this scenario: You’re the same 12 to 17-year-old from the previous story. You’re still smart and able to prove it, but when you run into something in class that the teacher realizes you have learned already, you are given the chance to “test out” of this easy material to pursue something of personal interest. You still have to take the tests and do some of the more challenging assignments in this teacher’s class but, for the most part, your curriculum is determined by your own ideas. Better yet, when you test out of basic algebra, the teacher does not demand that your alternative projects relate only to math; you are allowed to pursue

Underachievement, continued

most any topic that you can justify as educationally valid.

If I had \$10 for every time in my career that *this* scenario occurred, I'd be as poor as that proverbial church mouse.

The Missing Piece of the Underachievement Puzzle

Here's a statement that might seem the epitome of paradox: Underachievement has little to do with curriculum. Sure, curriculum is the stuff of school, the glue that bonds together one grade level to the next, but when it comes to the so-called underachiever's unwillingness to complete schoolwork and assignments, there is something far greater at stake than lessons from stale textbooks. Challenge is missing, to be sure, but so is a far deeper, more vital quality: dignity.

"It may not be the *child* who is underachieving: it may be the *curriculum and its educators*."

Here's how it plays out. If I am a gifted 13-year-old who can hold coherent conversations on many topics with adults, I feel important and valued when my opinions are listened to. I may not *be* an adult yet, but when I am treated as one intellectually, learning becomes meaningful and fun. Respect, whether given or received, feels very good, indeed. So, when I am in a learning situation (i.e. a classroom) with a teacher who revels in my mind's capabilities, I have no reason to misbehave....blow off homework.... underachieve. I progress for the best reason of all: My teacher is giving me a heavy dose of dignity by allowing me to grow at my own pace.

Conversely, if my teacher is one who believes that "if I make an exception for you, it wouldn't be fair to the others," there is little reason for me to want to succeed by the typical standards of getting A's and B's. Why would I want to make a bad teacher look good by succeeding at meaningless tasks?

What's missing from the "no exceptions" teacher is that central feature that every underachiever craves: the dignity to learn at a pace and with a purpose that are uniquely his own.

This hardly seems like rocket science to me, yet with the plethora of misguided practices that have pervaded the field of underachievement for more than 50 years, my perspective is a minority viewpoint. However, taking a cue from Albert

Einstein, who stated that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing again and again and expecting to get different results, don't you think it's time that we took a fresh look at underachievement and realized the obvious? It may not be the *child* who is underachieving; it may be the *curriculum and its educators*.

Them's Fightin' Words!

I can hear the catcalls already. Overworked teachers and administrators (especially administrators) will dismiss my accusations as both ill conceived and unrealistic. I'll be told that in the "real world," you don't get the luxury of doing only those aspects of your job that you enjoy; that there is some grunt work and some drudgery involved in even the most enticing of professions. I'll be told that by telling the gifted underachiever to just "suck it up" and do the easy work, he is learning a life lesson that is valuable to absorb at an early age.

Blah blah blah blah blah...

This type of "logic" is precisely the kind of narrow thinking that has caused the issue of underachievement to stay mired in its pedagogical rut for generation after generation of tired, bored, disrespected kids. If the tables were turned, and the gifted adult was the one being told, day after day, that they must complete chore after chore of meaningless actions in order to stay employed, there would be very few among us who would stay at that job for long. We'd quit, walk out, and seek opportunities elsewhere that were more intellectually sustaining. And that would be the best thing to do.

Kids, though, do not have the option of quitting school like we can quit our jobs. They must sit tight and stay put in even the most straightjacketing of classrooms. So, they choose the option most likely to preserve their intellectual dignity: They simply stop performing at levels they are readily capable of reaching.

I do not criticize these children, I applaud them. Like canaries in the coal mines of days past, gifted children who choose to underachieve are telling us that the air is low and that they are escaping before they begin gasping for breath. These children, so-called underachievers, are our field's best hopes for changing a curriculum that focuses on everyone but them. With their guidance, it is time to do something that we have refused to do for far too long: Listen to their complaints about school and act upon the good ideas that many of them would share if we took the time to acknowledge the legitimacy of their insights.

The Elephant Has Left the Building

I suppose the next thing to do in this article would be to offer

Underachievement, continued

a set of practices that we should adopt to make schools more enticing for gifted students who choose not to perform. Ain't gonna happen. We already *know* what we need to do—it's as simple as this:

Find out what the gifted kids have mastered and eliminate those lessons and assignments, replacing said lessons and assignments with others that involve new learning and individual relevance.

That's it. You have my prescription.

The “Five C’s” of Success

The most important element to overcoming underachievement is to recognize, as adults, the primacy of attitudes—our attitudes—in helping positive change to occur. If I have learned anything from the “underachieving” students with whom I have worked for three decades, it is that they yearn for five pieces of dignity:

1. *Control* over at least some aspects of their learning process
2. *Choice* in the selection of learning methods, materials, and content
3. The *Challenge* to be invited to explore interesting topics in depth
4. *Complexity* in sharing their emerging knowledge in meaningful ways
5. *Caring teachers* who encourage them and understand their drive to learn

By far, the most important aspect to a successful school experience for a child deemed to be underachieving is implied by the fifth component cited above: the personal relationship that the student establishes with a caring teacher. When the boundaries between the teacher/student roles are somewhat blurred, and the teacher is willing to acknowledge and celebrate the ideas and suggestions of the student, a bond is created that is based on mutual respect. From that point of departure, no destination is unattainable.

Further, the successful relationship between a teacher and an underachiever acknowledges the daily frustration felt by the child who is asked again and again to “learn” what has already been mastered. Often, the teacher will need to realize and accept the anger, disappointment, and disillusionment that the student shows in the beginning stages on his path to success. The caring teacher accepts that a child who has felt disenfranchised from his own education for months or years will not transform overnight into the high achiever he is capable of becoming.

Finally, the caring teacher acknowledges the intimate link between underachievement and self-esteem. Despite the outward bravado often displayed by gifted students who are low achievers, they still know that their actions (or inactions) are a disappointment to important people in their lives—parents, siblings, some educators, and a couple of friends or relatives. Understanding this, the caring teacher realizes that there will be bumps on the road to success and opts to look at “the big picture” instead of focusing on the inevitable setbacks.

“...the successful relationship between a teacher and an underachiever acknowledges the daily frustration felt by the child who is asked again and again what has already been mastered.”

What? No References?

It seems odd to have written an entire article on a topic that has been explored in countless writings and to not include even one professional reference. I guess my rationale is that, with few exceptions, the literature on underachievement has not been oriented towards understanding this topic from the child's point of view. Rather, all manner of formulae and contracts have been suggested to “fix” the underachiever and force him to accept the fact that even though school is a bad fit for his mind, the changes must come from him, not us.

But from my perspective, the underachiever does not need to be “fixed,” as that implies something that I simply cannot accept—that he is “broken” to begin with. On the contrary, the gifted child who chooses to underachieve may be our field's best harbinger of what we should do to meet the needs of *all* gifted children: consider what education could truly be if we considered it from the student's side of the desk, not our own.

To the “underachievers” I have known: I thank you for showing us the error of our ways. ❖

Jim Delisle has been a professor of education, teacher of gifted children, and counselor of gifted adolescents. He is currently completing his 15th book, *Growing Good Writers*, as he continues to consult with schools worldwide.



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Susan Winebrenner is a consultant and author who works with school districts to help translate current educational research into classroom practice. She has taught students in mixed ability and gifted classes and is author of several books, including *Cluster Grouping Handbook*, on how to teach and parent gifted students.

For Additional Information contact Open Space Communications LLC
www.openspacecomm.com / (303) 444-7020 / dorothy@openspacecomm.com