

450 UNDERACHIEVING CHILDREN REACH WORLD FAME

In R. S. Illingworth's book, *Lessons from Childhood*, he writes about 450 underachievers who became famous men and women. When they were children, they all received extremely derogatory comments about their lack of ability from teachers and parents.

Illingworth is a Professor of Child Health at the University of Sheffield, England. He wrote about his student of "unrecognized abilities" in the publication distributed at the First World Council for Gifted Children in London, 1975. On this eve of the Second World Council, the following excerpts are from this article, reprinted with permission:

Louis Pasteur was only a mediocre pupil in his Baccalaureate; he was 15th out of 22 in Chemistry. Charles Darwin, who began a medical career at Edinburgh and gave it up, was told by his father, "You care for nothing but shooting, dogs, and rat-catching; you will be a disgrace to yourself and your family." Darwin later wrote in his autobiography, "I was considered by all my masters and by my father as a very ordinary boy, rather below the common standard in intellect." Carl Jung's teachers considered him to be stupid; he had trouble with Mathematics. Jung himself said that he was less intelligent, less hard-working, attentive, decent, and clean than many of the other boys. Gregor Mendel twice failed the examination in Vienna to qualify him as a teacher. Albert Einstein's teacher described him as "mentally slow, unsociable, and adrift forever in his foolish dreams." He was expelled from his school and failed to gain entrance to the Zurich Polytechnic.

Amongst other future scientists who did badly at school and showed little promise were Edison, Humboldt, Fesnel, Berzelius, and James Watt (who was described as "dull and inept"). Among artists who did badly were Joshua Reynolds, Gauguin, Turner, Edouard Manet, and Rodin. Rodin's father said "I have an idiot for a son."; his uncle said that the boy was uneducable. The boy was described as the worst pupil in the school, failing three times to secure admittance to the school of art.

Emile Zola secured a nought [*a zero*] in literature at the Lycee. Jean de la Fontaine, Jonathan Swift, Wordsworth, Honore de Balzac, Hans Christian Andersen, John Keats, George Barrow, Charles Thackeray, W. B. Yeats, Anton Chekhov, G.K. Chesterton, Oliver Goldsmith, Percy Sheridan, and Leo Tolstoy all did badly. Leo Tolstoy was described as "both unable and unwilling to learn" whilst Goldsmith was a "stupid, heavy blockhead, little better than a fool, who everybody made fun of."

Of the politicians and statesmen, Napoleon Bonaparte left school undistinguished, 42nd in place. The Duke of Wellington was thought by his mother to be the dunce of the family. He had to leave school (to go to a military academy) because of his failure in classes. Nasser did badly in school and failed to secure entry at a law school and so he entered the army.

Illingworth defines underachievement as the below-level performance of a child, as compared with his tested level of intelligence. "No one can say precisely how many children are underachievers," he said. "The incidence must inevitably be higher in the lower social classes than in the upper." Illingworth quotes estimates from 20% of underachievers among English school children to 50% in the United States.

When a child does badly at school, he said, teachers usually blame the child: "He could do better if he tried." The following five factors should be considered, Illingworth suggests.

1. The Child.....Underachievement may be due to a dislike of school, dislike of the children there, unpopularity, boredom and lack of interest in work which in turn may be the result of undesirable features of the home.
2. The Home.....Several studies have attempted to delineate the factors in the home which are largely responsible for the poor performance of many children of the lowest social classes as compared with that of children of the same level of intelligence from middle and upper classes; the IQ score of underprivileged children falls as they get older.
3. The School and the Teaching.....Much is said about the need for motivation, but it is much more difficult to find how children should be inspired to enjoy their work and to enjoy learning.
4. The Examination and Method of Assessment.....Examinations assess progress in the subject included in the curriculum (and even then results are fallacious) but they give no idea of the child's ability in subjects outside the curriculum which are of particular interest to him.
5. The Assessor and Examiner.....It is interesting to speculate just why so many children destined for fame were underestimated by their parents and teachers, and why they did badly at school.

Children need to be given all possible opportunities to learn and the necessary materials with which to discover and to practice their skills. They need suitable play material to help them to learn and to enjoy learning; they need opportunities outside the home to gain new experiences. Children need to have books read to them; one begins when the baby is nine or ten months old. He (or she) is given pre-reading material, is taught to argue, to question, and avoid unnecessary absences from school. They need to instill a sensible attitude to

illness by avoiding the exaggeration of symptoms, confinement to bed for trivial childhood infections, and unnecessary medicine. Parents need ambition for children but not over ambition which could mean that they demand more from their children than their intellectual endowment permit. They should set the example to their children of wanting to learn. They should try to teach persistence, thoroughness, curiosity, leadership, and self-confidence. Above all, perhaps, they should try to help their child to be a nice child, for a nice person may ultimately achieve far more than a much cleverer person who is not so nice.