

The Importance of People

Column Editor: Fred T. Wilhelms

Gulliver and Other Under-Achievers

I WONDER if you grew up on the same edition of *Gulliver's Travels* as I did: the one with the big woodcut of Gulliver-as-giant in the Land of Lilliput, flat on his back, tied down by hundreds of thread-like ropes fastened to him as he slept, by the six-inch Lilliputians.

That image of the helpless giant was often in my mind's eye in the five days of ASCD's wonderfully stirring fourth annual Research Institute. We were talking much of the under-achievers in our schools, particularly of those with exceptional brains. The examples rolled on and on: so-and-so many boys and girls with I.Q.'s averaging 135 or 150 or 160, achieving less in school than their intellectually mediocre classmates; a case here or there with I.Q. 198 or even 204—and still achieving less than the ordinary youngster in the next chair.

Giants! Simply giants, by the yardstick of intelligence. Mediocrities—or worse—by the measure of what they achieve.

Why don't they rise to their commanding intellectual height and tower among us as the giants our measures say they are? Or better, how can we bring them to stand tall and turn loose the mighty engines of their minds?

These were the questions that haunted us as we debated until all hours in Washington's Burlington Hotel. They are questions pondered far and wide by lay public and profession alike. For, as in Washington, we have everywhere said

to ourselves: Here is a terrible wastage of our finest timber; a waste no society could ever afford, least of all ours in these times of trouble.

Stirred to my depths, I listened closely to every suggestion brought forward, to every account of experiment and evaluation. I projected alongside these what I knew to be going on or proposed around the country. I felt a surge of gratitude for the rising concern. I was glad for every earnest effort. And yet a vague uneasiness hovered in the edges, a hard-to-define intuition that while we were searching so hard we might be looking the wrong way.

Look to the Ropes

I said to myself: these emphases on tougher subject matter, faster paced; these pushings and urgings; maybe they're just the thing for those who are already on their feet; but, for the prostrate, may they not be like handing Gulliver a correspondence course on how to strengthen his muscles?

I said to myself: *If you want Gulliver to rise, look to the ropes which bind him.*

For, in the deeper sense, there are no under-achievers. Every organism achieves what it can, given its developed internal resources and its existential environment of stimuli and impediments. Gulliver will get up if he can. For the one sure fact about all organic life is its endless striving, the ceaseless surge

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of its internal energy beating against all that limits it. Look through a microscope at the tiniest living cell, and you will see the elemental protoplasm endlessly active, perpetually inquiscent. Look with a seeing eye at humankind, and you will see restlessness incarnate, the never-ending surge of wave upon wave of wish and hope and ambition and striving: the struggle to be. It is a fundamental fact of nature: Every organism is striving as best it can.

Is this pessimistic? Does it say that we must settle for present low levels of achievement because they are all these students can reach? No—exactly the reverse, if we can be wise enough. It means that tremendous driving energy is available, if we can get it used.

Those tiny, almost invisible ropes—of what stuff are they woven, and how do they get attached? Can we learn to prevent the weaving, and to find the tiny

knots and untie them? All of us have some of them holding us down; do the gifted suffer a special, additional set—a web of strands set high enough to restrict only those who tower? The Lilliputians put ropes on Gulliver precisely because he was too big to be trusted. Does our society, crying for giants, nevertheless unconsciously put ropes on those it finds, because it fears them? Do we teachers, admiring brains as we do, still get scared when too big a mind thrusts its bold way up through our nice web-bings of routine?

Nobody knows all the answers. But I am sure—with a sureness that amounts to a passion—that *along with* our concern for refined, accelerated, toughened-up subject matter and raised standards of performance, we had better look to the fundamental prime-movers within the personality. In many a case the job is primarily to *release* and only then to *stimulate* the ability that is there.

A Giant Bound

Maybe I was hurting so hard because I kept thinking back, guiltily, across the years, to the wastage I permitted of by far the most brilliant student I have ever known. He had everything—not only a powerful mind, but with it artistic and literary ability, a sunny disposition, a fine body, and decency—but he just sort of fizzled out. The school was a small, intimate one and I had him for years, with all the opportunity one could desire to help him catch fire. I failed, and I've never quit asking why.

Perhaps I'd fail again, if I could start all over; but with the insights we've gathered over the years I'd go at the job pretty differently.

I think I didn't help him enough to build a valid concept of himself. Because he was so obviously outstanding, I

thought he knew it, that he had a sure confidence to face high hurdles. Now I know that he was unsure of himself; maybe he knew that he had better-than-average competence in a little country high school—just as he played good basketball in that little league—but he didn't know he was championship stuff. Good youngsters rarely do know it, because they've had no way of finding out. He knew he could do the usual lesson handily, but I never helped him test himself on something so very tough that he could see he would be a star in a graduate college.

The people around him were ordinary, and it may have gotten a bit uncomfortable for him when he stood out. Anyway, I think he kept his head down a little—as an occasional tall girl will stoop a bit, to hide her height. It's still hard to see how to avoid that, but it needs a try. We needed to build around him a complete acceptance of what he was—and a sure knowledge within him of that acceptance.

Because he was so intelligent, we looked too much at his intellect. We guided him into work that was wholly academic—not simply in choice of courses but in details within a course. He never had as much chance as the ordinary kids to work at what was *significant to him as a person*. We weren't grim about it, exactly, but there was that steady pressure on that one purely intellectual line.

Strangely enough, I know now that just because he could do any lesson so well we held him very close to specifications. We called it high standards, I guess. But the fact was he had to cross all the "t's" and dot the "i's" more orthodoxly than anybody. If we had looked ahead to visualize him in graduate school or in a leadership position, we'd have

known that he, of all our students, most needed *freedom*—to fool around, if you will, and try his wings in a thousand different ways—to be inventive and take the consequences—to get the truly creative man's feeling that just because he wanted to do a thing a different way there must be some validity in his urge. But, because he was nearest to our intellectual ideal, we insisted that he be perfect—and that meant he had to produce the disciplined, finished, orthodox job. He could be creative later.

But, most of all, we simply saw him as a mind. We concentrated on that. We refined it and we polished it. And all the while the little ropes were weaving, weaving. And one more giant went out into the world only half-erect.

Who Are The Giants?

And then, as if all that weren't trouble enough, another question began gnaw-

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ing at me: Who *are* our potential giants, anyway? Are they exclusively the greatly intelligent?

The question couldn't have come out of anti-intellectualism, because I do believe unequivocally that high intelligence is a resource of untold value. And I'm sure it's not just sentimentality in defense of us common folk, of whom God made so many.

But there is a real, hard-headed question to be asked. As a society we seem to be moving toward a royal-jelly diet for a select few, on the ground that their full development is essential to our progress. That may well be essential—without connoting neglect of the rest. But wisdom in the investment demands the unsilenceable question: Who are to be the chosen ones?

In cold fact, who *are* the kinds of people who get the jobs done that have to be done if we are to survive and prosper? We know, at the very least, that we have problems of moral insight

and moral leadership, of organization and administration, of all the arts, of invention, and of business and finance. *In cold fact*, again, how highly do the actual contributions to each of these correlate with the single variable of intelligence? Even to the extent that they depend upon an intelligent person, to what extent is it his intelligence that does the trick?

We don't know. My common sense observation of the world about me leads me to skepticism. If I were some cosmic banker, contemplating a heavy investment in a chosen few of great potential; or if I were some cosmic human-cattle judge, score card in hand, rating the candidates; if I had to do the scoring, I think I would place intellect as only one heavily weighted item on my score card. I think the question is susceptible of research.

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Learning about Learning

(Continued from page 345)

Each of the projects discussed illustrates one or more principles of learning commonly accepted *in theory* but not always employed in educational practice. In the special high school summer program, students exemplified the power of the individual's drive for knowledge when stimulated by new and intriguing material. The team approach to college teaching released, for the graduate assistant, the tremendously vital and highly individualistic learning capacity of the person deeply involved in a responsible situation. The use of instructional secretaries enabled the capable teacher to muster his resources for instruction in such a manner that greater clarity, exact-

ness and thoroughness characterized classroom teaching. It is within the context of such experimentation that theory comes to life for the administrator and classroom teacher.

Carefully developed and controlled cooperative experimentation by theorists and practitioners can provide insurance against abortive and disillusioning experiences. Furthermore, an adequately manned research staff can provide special assistance in the collection and interpretation of results of classroom experimentation. This working relationship can result in an educational experience for the participants in which the effectiveness of theoretically sound educational planning is demonstrated to the classroom teacher and in which the theorist puts his constructs to empirical test.

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