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## Awakening Genius in the Classroom by Thomas Armstrong

### Book Review by Dr. Jacqueline Collier

In a world of inclusion and acceptance, of diversity and uniqueness, and of looking at the individual strengths of each child in an educational setting, it is only fitting that we look to the "genius" of each learner. The use of the term "genius" in this context redefines the usual perspectives and asks us to stretch our understanding to include the potential capabilities of every learner and what it is that they bring with them to make a unique individual worth developing. In his book *Awakening Genius in the Classroom*, Thomas Armstrong coaxes each reader to examine his or her own belief system and to see "genius" as a conceptualization of the best that we each have to offer. The redefining of a commonly understood word in this way is a strategy modeled after Howard Gardner in his explanation of multiple intelligences (1983).

Howard Gardner first took literary license with the term "intelligences" as he worked at making a strong point that individual learners incorporate the use of "intelligences" differently thus displaying and connecting in as many as eight basically different ways. Now Tom Armstrong is employing the same literary license with the familiar word "genius" to explain how schools and teachers can nurture every child's strengths. His position or philosophy seems to be that every individual has the potential for genius, the potential to reach a higher level of learning, and therefore needs to be afforded the opportunity to nurture that potential.

Of course this philosophy fits well with the notion that every learner has worth, that every learner is capable of learning at a particular level without being labeled, stamped, or categorized by schools, parents, peers, or society. It is not an altogether new notion, but Armstrong makes his case so amicably that this book is a refreshing reminder of what should be core values of school and educators. That is a difficult task in this time of state proficiency testing, labeling, a deficit model of learner identification, and moneys allocated from the state primarily for districts focused on deficiencies. Armstrong notes that with an ERIC search of the word "genius" between 1982 and 1996 there were only two studies related to this term and only 13 hits altogether. In contrast there were 7,322 hits for the term "learning disabilities." It seems as if we are most often focusing on the negative (disability) instead of the positive (genius) in front of our eyes. In *Awakening Genius in the Classroom* Armstrong asks each educator and parent to reexamine those defining values and to focus on strengths instead of deficits.

Although never addressed directly, Armstrong seems to often compare the attitudes and approaches of an educator with a behaviorist philosophy to that of an educator with a constructivist philosophy of learning and teaching. In a behaviorist environment the classroom leader/educator is solely in charge of curriculum development and delivery. It is an environment where the parameters of learning are established by the adult in charge. The learners are receptacles to be manipulated and controlled. In this setting, the qualities of a "genius" are driven underground and with a lack of honoring, often become extinct. In contrast, a constructivist classroom leader is in a partnership with the learner. Flexibility and divergence are key operative words that drive decision making on a daily, weekly, and yearly basis. In this setting the qualities of "genius" are expected and have the opportunity to be honored. It is this later environment that Armstrong is supporting.

Part One: Every Student is A Genius

Part One of this book defines the genius aspect of each learner and defines the 12 qualities of "genius." These are the factors that enhance "genius" and allow it to flourish. The qualities also are the things that educators will want to foster in the classroom that develops "genius." Listed below is a brief explanation of each of these qualities.

The first quality is **curiosity**. It is the educator's responsibility to see that in order to nurture the genius there needs to be a place for natural curiosity rather than the planned questioning for the already developed lesson for the day. Natural questions emerge from a child's innate genius.

The second quality is **playfulness**. This quality is displayed in physical playfulness in the classroom and also a sense of wonder about words and ideas. Armstrong warns of the destructive forces of competition and formalization of classroom structures. These parameters allow very little time for exploring the genius of playfulness.

The third quality is **imagination**. Instead of focusing on the negative of daydreaming, educators can begin by respecting that each of us imagines ourselves with visualizations that can bring growth and confidence. Time needs to be allowed for this visualization.

The fourth quality is **creativity**. Rather than being a characteristic confined to the gifted, Armstrong speaks of the language, art, music, and dance that is a natural part of every child. Creativity remains untapped unless it is nurtured throughout a child's learning experience. Unfortunately this quality is often seen as frivolous and unnecessary in the skills driven learning environment.

**Wonder** is the fifth quality of "genius." For learners who are meaning motivated this is the reason for learning. Especially by the time of adolescence, students are tired of playing games for teachers. Without a sense of wonder that is alive and kicking, they mentally drop out of real learning and become expert test takers or classroom failures.

**Wisdom** is the sixth quality. Wisdom takes maturity and experience and involves a depth of understanding that sees beyond clichés and preconceived notions of society. A learner would need to feel a sense of control and comfort to explore these areas.

The seventh quality is **inventiveness**. Built on the quality of creativeness, inventiveness is the application form. As an application form it is open to impact from adults and therefore is very important to the development of the learner. Again, the philosophy of the adult is crucial to the nurturing of the learner.

The eighth quality is **vitality**. It is this quality that is robbed of learners most in a behaviorist classroom. How can I care about and have a vibrancy about a learning environment in which I have no ownership? Unfortunately teachers see a fine line between the vibrancy of the learner and the chaos that can develop if it becomes a classroom of children out of control. Of course large class sizes only add to the need for control and order of the behaviorist. Without this vitality, however, we have organized, mundane environments with no room for exploration of "genius."

The ninth quality of "genius" is **sensitivity**. This openness in children often is disrupted by adult reactions to tears, questions, and natural emotional reactions. Vulnerability is sensitivity in its negative sense and often in today's world children are taught to put up a protective shield against this sensitivity in order to be less vulnerable.

The tenth quality of "genius" is **flexibility**. In this context the emphasis is on the intellectual flexibility of moving from one idea to the next, one genre to the next, in defining analysis of the states of thinking, and in making connections. The nurturance of this quality requires a teacher who can also be flexible in his or her thinking and allow students' understanding guide the instructional stages. In teachers Donald Schon refers to this as reflection-in-action (1987) states that it requires maturity and confidence.

The eleventh quality is **humor**. Again this is often one of the qualities listed under characteristics of gifted children. In a classroom honoring individuality and fresh perspectives, it is honored. In a classroom that is dictated by schedules and predetermined lesson delivery, it is most often seen as a disruption and nuisance. More than any other quality this one is evidence of a unique perspective that sees the world differently. Humor is needed in order for "genius" to survive and flourish in our undetermined future.

The twelfth quality is **joy**. Joy is a culmination of a way of looking at new experiences. The development of life-long learners is based on the joy of learning. The ability to tackle the complexities of the future will no doubt be enhanced with a joy of learning.

Armstrong cites these twelve qualities of "genius" and states that they relate to every child. It is interesting to note, however, that Piechowski also lists many of these same qualities as the excitabilities in identifying gifted children (1997). Perhaps we should look at these characteristics as behaviors that are demonstrated by those who are assertive enough and nurtured enough to exhibit them overtly, but contained in all children. Educators could look at all children as having characteristics of "genius" or gifted. We could begin to explore France's characteristics of gifts (or "genius") and see how the classroom environment nurtures these into talents (1995). In the final part of this section Armstrong explores these 12 qualities from several different perspectives. He qualifies his understandings by grounding them in a perspective of biology and psychology.

#### Part Two: The Genius Shuts Down

The second part of the book discusses the various contributing factors that create barriers for the development and nurturance of the genius of each child. Armstrong begins with the premise that many educators may have a difficult time accepting the idea of every child as a "genius." Once this is addressed, he talks about the various influences of a child's life; home, emotions, poverty, the pace of today's lifestyles, the media and societal influences. Again, this aligns itself with Gagne's intrinsic and environmental influences (1995). Armstrong spends the greatest effort, however, on the influence of the structure of schools and the negative impact on "genius." Through testing, labeling, tracking, textbooks, tedium, mediocre content, and the constrictions of a skills driven curriculum the school environment is counterproductive to the development of "genius."

#### Part Three: How To Awaken Genius In The Classroom

Armstrong, however, does not leave the reader with a pessimistic view of the future for these potentially wondrous individuals. In part three he explores the questions we need to ask, the steps we need to take, and the experiences we need to provide for ourselves as teachers and for students in order to awaken the "genius" within. Of course this is not a recipe and as such is only as practical as the person willing to explore this optional way of looking at teaching. Armstrong suggests that the first step is to begin at home, with ourselves and to provide personal experiences that support those 12 qualities.

He states that finding the "genius" within ourselves must be the precursor in valuing the "genius" within students. As simple as this may sound, it often goes against every unspoken law of our society today. It's difficult to play with ideas when work consumes 10 hours of each day, and responsibilities to family and professional development consume every other waking hour. The list of suggested ways to play are nothing new. Finding the time to make them a priority will prove the real challenge. The projected benefits would be monumental for exploring personal "genius" and that of every learner with whom we come in contact.

The picture painted of a school or learning environment that nurtures "genius" in every learner regardless of IQ or achievement records is the description of a positive constructivist classroom. There is an emphasis on the learner as the developer of ideas, the learner as the driving force in decision-making, and the learner as the meaning maker of ideas. It is this type of environment that will nurture the creative ideas, the joy, the vitality, and the wisdom of the learner. It is this environment that will develop the "genius" of every child.

Armstrong gets our attention with his creative use of the term "genius." He keeps our attention as he explores the dilemmas facing our schools, teachers, and students today. There are no simple answers. Education in all its complexity is not easy to deal with either in the classroom or on the pages of a book. What Armstrong does, however, is bring the purpose of education back into focus so that we can see those complexities and realize that it is of the utmost importance that we maintain a positive attitude for learners, keep their needs in front of us at all times, and remind ourselves of the "genius" in every learner.

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