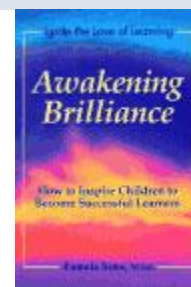


REVIEWS

Is there a difference between 'good' teachers and 'great' ones?

Review of *Awakening Brilliance, How to Inspire Children to Become Successful Learners*, by Pamela Sims, Atlanta & Toronto: Bayhampton Publishing, 1997, 205 pp



by Isa Helfield, adult educator

In this award-winning book, Toronto teacher and consultant Pamela Sims presents a superb philosophy of education that touches on some of the most fundamental of human needs. Indeed, this book is very special: it marries philosophy and practicality. Through a story line in a series of short novel chapters, Sims highlights the intimate connection between a society and its schools and casts light on the extremely critical role that teachers play in the lives of children. It is immensely readable.

Much of her philosophy is encapsulated in the answer to the question she poses at the beginning of her book. Is there a difference between 'good' teachers and 'great' ones? Her distinction is critical. Good teachers, she explains, focus solely on curriculum, teaching students to read, write and do math. Great teachers, however, relate to the whole student. They are nonjudgmental and caring individuals who concern themselves with the total being of their students - their mind, their body and their soul. Sims has derived her philosophy and her stories from years of classroom and consulting experience.

Great teachers have broken away from the habitual negative thinking patterns that have permeated our schools and classrooms. They teach the child, not the subject. They emphasize the importance of respect and caring, rather than discipline. They acknowledge the child's humanity, understanding that he may come to school with his physical and emotional needs unmet; and because great teachers realize that bad behaviour is often motivated by fear, they ask questions and empathize rather than blindly discipline. Schools, they say, must be places that teach children to be successful rather than places that confirm feelings of failure. And so they teach from the heart, knowing full well that each time they interact with a student they are programming him how to feel about himself, a feeling that remains with him for the rest of his life. Their respectful and caring attitudes form the foundation of their classrooms: they fully recognize that children must first feel safe and cared for before they are able to focus their attention on learning.

Every one of these principles is embodied in a story chapter; any one of them can be read alone to illustrate a particular point, but consecutively they trace the voyage of one school principal who learns what a great teacher is through a personal journey of discovery.

Through her main character, elementary school principal Jane Madison, Pamela Sims challenges the concept of a 'normal' learning style and suggests that schools have too narrow a definition causing many children to needlessly be placed in special education

classes. Because children learn in a variety of ways - visual, auditory and kinaesthetic - teachers must use a variety of techniques to satisfy the needs of all their students. When they don't, they sometimes create failures. It is this mismatch between teaching and learning styles, not intelligence, that often determines how well a child will learn in school. The author believes that teachers should have better teacher training and smaller classes so that special education classes with their inherent labelling can be avoided.

Pamela Sims believes that too many of our young people have 'lost themselves' by attempting to play by the rules of others. Schools, therefore, should encourage children to take charge of their own lives and to view destiny as something that they create. She suggests, that they should be involved in setting their own goals and objectives and participating in their own evaluation. We must give children the power over their own successes and failures and imbue them with feelings of self-confidence, selftrust, and self-worth.

Part One of the story introduces chapter by chapter the basic philosophical concepts ; Part Two demonstrates their application by administrators and teachers. Two appendices offer concrete information on pedagogy. The first has five teacher plans for applying the principles in their own classroom. The second has contact information for educational associations for parents and teachers and for specialized associations dealing with dropout prevention, special education, substance abuse, and more. There are listings for the US, Canada, Australia, Britain, and other nations. The Canadian list is broken down by province. Sims concludes with an excellent bibliography and suggested reading list on communication, learning styles, self-esteem, and teaching strategies, as well as a reference section and index for the whole book.

Awakening Brilliance is a 'must' for anyone who is involved with the care and education of children.

Isa Helfield is an adult educator at the English Montreal School Board and a freelance writer.