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A Look at the Possible Effects of Genial/Eclectic Learning Environments In Denmark and The United States of America

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Abstract

The intent of this qualitative research is to gain knowledge and understanding of the impact a genial/eclectic environment may have upon creativity and skillful problem solving. Upon invitation from Benedicte Riis, a well-known Danish educator, composer, author, musician, and presenter in Denmark, Bulgaria, Norway, and the United States; I embarked on a trip to Ebeltoft, Denmark in May of 2000 to study her pedagogy. My desire was to compare the methodologies, philosophies, and classroom environments of Benedicte's Tante Andante Hus in Denmark with Franklin Elementary School in Council Bluffs, Iowa. My professors at the University of Northern Iowa encouraged me to prepare a series of questions that could be asked about an object that students would most likely be unable to identify. The object of discovery was a peccary skull. The twenty interviews (ten in Denmark and ten in the U.S.A.) were conducted in environments where freedom of thought and exploration were encouraged. The students interviewed were four to six years of age, and there were equal numbers of female and male subjects in each population group. Parental/guardian permission was granted. I employed the same procedures and standards in both countries. Answers were recorded on audio tape and analyzed to ascertain if the genial/eclectic environment these students were accustomed to would aid in the art/science of problem solving and creativity.

A Look at the Possible Effects of Genial/Eclectic Learning Environments

In Denmark and The United States of America

A Graduate Project

Submitted to the

Division of Gifted Education

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

In Partial Fulfillment

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By

Annette Sigrid Wilson

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Titled: Is a Genial/Eclectic Environment Needed for Gifted Students?

Has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the
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Is a Genial/Eclectic Environment Needed for Gifted Children?

Do you wish to open the door to enhanced problem solving and creative thinking in the classroom? How valuable is the classroom environment in obtaining these goals? Educators seek to promote higher-order thinking skills in their classrooms via projects, discussion groups, Bloom's Taxonomy, authentic assessment, learning centers, guest speakers, films, videos, field trips, and by reminding students to "think deeply and be creative!" Seminars and conferences are attended to gain greater knowledge and expertise in the realms of creativity and problem-solving strategies. Books are often purchased and countless pages photocopied dealing with the steps needed to achieve higher order thinking skills and the promotion of enhanced creative thought processes in our students. Exemplary teaching requires these facets; however, my intrigue and interest lies in the component of a genial and eclectic environment for both student and teacher. My goal in this research is to gather information from experts in the field, as well as information from my own observations in Denmark and Iowa, as to the influence of the environment on sophisticated problem-solving abilities and creativeness in the classroom.

Can one imagine the feeling of attending a wedding, funeral, birthday, or any other event in one's life in which the environment does not set the tone or climate for the event about to take place? In like manner, I am inclined to believe that the culture/environment that teachers provide may serve as a vital function in the intellectual and aesthetic stimulation of both student and teacher. Teachers should consciously create an interesting environment so that when students come into the classroom, they will be stimulated to think deeply and retain this excitement and interest for learning throughout

the day. What kind of environment is ideal? Of course, no definitive declaration can or should be found. Then there could be no further creativeness! However, the words “genial” and “eclectic” should typify the instructional settings of all classrooms. Is the environment such a vital component that it could help to prepare the intellect and imagination for further investigation? These are the questions that prompted me to observe two different educational settings in an attempt to determine if a genial, eclectic environment could be a causal factor in the fostering of genius. By “genial,” I am referring to the term as defined in Webster’s New World College Dictionary (1999) as: “promoting life and growth; pleasantly warm, mild, and healthful; cheerful, friendly, and sympathetic; amiable; characterized by genius” (p. 592). The term “eclectic,” as used in this paper is defined as: “selecting; choosing, as doctrines or methods, from various sources, systems, etc.” (Webster’s New World College Dictionary, 1999, p. 450).

What do the Experts Say?

Let us look at the viewpoint of Csikszentmihalyi, a professor and former chairman of the Department of Psychology at the University of Chicago and author of best-selling Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience (1990) who writes in his book Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention (1996) concerning how deeply the environment affects our thinking:

The belief that the physical environment deeply affects our thoughts and feelings is held in many cultures. The Chinese sages chose to write their poetry on dainty island pavilions or craggy dizzy gazebos. The Hindu Brahmins retreated to the

forest to discover the reality hidden behind illusory appearances. Christian monks were so good at selecting the most beautiful natural spots that in many European countries it is a foregone conclusion that a hill or plain particularly worth seeing must have a convent or monastery built upon it.

A similar pattern exists in the United States. The Institute for Advanced Studies in the physical sciences at Princeton and its twin for the behavioral sciences in Palo Alto are situated in especially beautiful settings. Deer tiptoe through the immaculate grounds of the Educational Testing Services headquarters, and the research and development center of any corporation worth its salt will be situated among rolling meadows or within hearing range of thundering surf. The Aspen conferences unfold in the heady, thin air of the Rockies, and the Salk Institute sparkles over the cliffs of La Jolla like a Minoan temple; the idea is that such a setting will stimulate thought and refresh the mind, and thus bring forth novel and creative ideas. (p. 135)

Why would environmental elements be such important components when in actuality those external elements do not fundamentally relate to the topic(s) at hand, and how do they play a role in being able to think deeply? Csikszentmihalyi (1996) goes on to say that although it would be hard to prove that a delightful setting helps in the creative process, the fact remains that a large number of creative works in art, music, philosophy, and science came to be in the midst of a very beautiful site. He believes that the only way to know if the environment has an effect is to conduct a controlled experiment. Because we are dealing with creativity itself, a controlled experiment would be very difficult. This is what I attempted to do in my research in Denmark and the U.S.A.

In his study, Csikszentmihalyi (1996) has found evidence that the thought processes of creative individuals are influenced by their surroundings. He also believes that having creative thoughts about a subject is not always achieved by focusing intentionally on the subject. Linear concentration can lead to predictable conclusions. Perhaps a walk down a path with an inspiring view would shed new light on the problem and offer new connections that may not be immediately apparent through traditional deductive reasoning. To offer an eclectic/genial environment may be just what our students need rather than to magnify one single piece of information.

Lynch and Harris (2001) agree with Csikszentmihalyi, reiterating the belief that creativity is a human characteristic that is extremely difficult to trace. They see no boundaries in the creative process. Piirto (1995) also concurs that the environment plays an important role in creative thinking. As a principal, she made sure that visitors to her school would sense an atmosphere of creativity by merely venturing down the hallways. Pictures, poems, artwork, and bulletin boards displayed the efforts of the students throughout the building. She laments the fact that in too many schools, the hallways and classrooms look more like army barracks than places for inspiration and learning. Simon (1981) observes that it is imperative that the creative person is exposed to a vast variety of materials with which to interact and modify. Insight and surprising conclusions will follow. Armstrong (1998) writes that geniuses such as Einstein, Beethoven, and Goethe went beyond the scope of the external authorities who tried to dictate how they should think or learn. These geniuses were at their best when they had freedom to work and concentrate without the boundaries that are normally established by those who propose the status quo. Students should be given some input into their classroom environment. If

students do not feel that their ideas are of value, they will more than likely tune out and give up. Armstrong suggests that enthusiasm is at the pinnacle of importance, and that the teacher will be remembered more for his/her enthusiasm than for the subject matter taught. A teacher's attitude can inspire or retire students' curiosities!

Along these lines, Armstrong (1998) has a deep belief that it is the teacher's perspective towards creativity that makes the most significant difference in the classroom. If the classroom is non-genial, creative impulses will be undermined by rigidity, strictness, criticism, anxiety, and boredom. A genial classroom is one in which there is the possibility of joy, humor, vitality, and flexibility. How can analogies and connections to the real world be made if the environment stifles and restricts connectedness?

Armstrong (1998) believes that all genial classrooms share five characteristics that guide their instruction regardless of content or grade level. These characteristics are: (a) freedom to choose, (b) open-ended exploration, (c) freedom from judgment, (d) honoring every student's experience, and (e) belief in every student's genius. Is there anyone who wouldn't thrive when these are the principles guiding the classroom?

Why does Armstrong (1998) take this issue of creativity so personally and passionately? He writes that creativity is a birthright that every student possesses, and that the teacher must recognize this fact before it can be brought to its place of prominence in the classroom. Again, as much as a student may wish to contribute to the class, if he/she does not find a genial attitude toward his/her inventiveness, the ideas may shrivel and deeper problems of lack of self worth, underachievement, and disrespect may

arise and replace the sprouts of genius. How very sad! Can we blame the student at this point? Let us remember to work together to achieve our goals of learning.

The following are examples mentioned by Armstrong to enable the teacher to recognize types of resources available to stimulate creativity:

- Recordings of significant music
- Reproductions of great art
- Historical relics
- Simple math puzzles
- Fauna and flora
- Classic movies
- Performances of great theater or dance
- Prize-winning documentaries
- Readings from great literature
- Recordings of the work of eminent poets
- Simple machines
- Art materials
- Building supplies
- A fascinating visitor
- Field trips to museums or concerts (p. 58)

Why so much variety? With variety, students can think critically and creatively in evaluating which pieces within their environment can be used to solve problems. It is critical to include elements that are of interest to the students. If not, it may be likened to

a grand buffet, loaded with foods that are all new to a person. The buffet may be beautiful, but not satisfying. With time, preferences can be widened. Armstrong (1998) suggests that resources should be selected for their ability to evoke humor, joy, creativity, and vitality. Materials should be able to surprise, shock, delight, or wake them up to a new perspective. Armstrong refers to this bringing in of new perspectives as “genius experiences.” He also contends that many of these “genius experiences” may appear to have no impact at the time but may sometime in the distant future have a profound influence. Exactly! How can we know when the mind will see connections?

In Sparks of Genius (1999) Root-Bernstein and Root-Bernstein write, “The more ways students can imagine an idea, the better their chances of insight. The more ways they can express that insight, the better their chances that others will understand and appreciate it” (p. 319). It is our responsibility as teachers to impart knowledge in as many ways as we can to aid the students’ understanding. Our rewards as educators will be realized as we see our students develop a life-long interest in learning.

What about the notion that every task a student submits must be evaluated or judged? Armstrong (1998) tells educators and students alike that they must focus on the sheer joy of learning, reminding them that high grades are not the most important thing in life. Genial classroom teachers should even provide a time for exploration that is grade free. These are times when the student may follow an interest in the classroom that will not have an effect on grade point average. Ideas and creative efforts are honored even if they don’t fit into the experiences of others in the classroom or community. Respect in the classroom for ideas expressed by all students is of paramount importance.

My Observations in Two Countries

With all these brilliant ideas from some of the foremost thinkers in American education in mind, I set off to discover for myself some evidence of a connection between creative individuals and their thought processes and a stimulating genial/eclectic learning environment. Because I have always thought that the environment of my own classroom had an important effect on my students, I was very interested in validating this belief through more research. I also recognized that I could improve my environment by observing other classrooms.

With the serendipitous meeting of Benedicte Riis, an innovative and creative teacher, author of numerous books for children and educators, gifted musician, composer, and presenter in Denmark, Bulgaria, Norway, and the United States at the Danish Immigrant Museum (Elk Horn, Iowa) in October of 1999, I was invited to come to Denmark to teach and observe her pedagogical style. In the summer of 2000, the opportunity presented itself for me to travel to Ebeltoft, Denmark. I planned to compare the environment she created for students in Denmark with another stimulating classroom environment in Council Bluffs, Iowa. Because I am fluent in the Danish language (thanks to my parents who immigrated to the USA in 1949), I was very excited about the opportunity to learn more about the experience of Danish students in their classrooms. I had often wondered what school would have been like for me had my parents not come to America.

Benedicte Riis is a remarkable, inspirational teacher who has created her own place of learning called Tante Andante Hus (English translation: Aunt Andante House).

Students may come here every day and schools often take field trips to her delightful environment to learn and explore. Her philosophical base lies in the discoveries of Howard Gardner and his Multiple Intelligence Theory. Before you enter the Tante Andante Hus, the intrigue begins! The exterior of the building is a face with hands—to remind the students/teachers who visit that all of our senses help us to learn. There are multiple varieties of beautiful flowers and fascinating objects to explore which serve to set the mind in motion.

Upon entering, you discover a genial/eclectic environment. A crystal chandelier hangs from the ceiling of the restaurant (Fantasy Café) where a variety of delicious foods and beverages can be ordered. Singing birds mix with soft background music and friendly people are there to greet you. Other features become apparent: a stage with an oil-painted backdrop, costumes, a singing-listening area where every chair is of a different design, musical instruments, stuffed animals, a painting area, a cooking area, varieties of plants, and places to just think or have free-play. I observed children getting along (cooperatively, but also independently). With so many choices of things to do, no one seemed enamored by being “in control” and because of the complex and interesting layout, everyone could feel they had enough space of their own. The day I arrived, a group of thirty or more students and teachers were visiting. Tante Andante (Benedicte Riis) introduced me and within minutes I was singing and dancing with the Danish children. How gracious and attentive they were! The climate was fantastic! I was delighted to find a place where a child or yes, adult, could not help but feel invigorated to learn and explore. It was most evident that Benedicte Riis had a passion for what she did and it was evident that she believed that “play” is good for the student. Much work is

required to get the areas arranged and conducive to engagement. She had a staff that helped her with scheduling, put things “back in order” after each session, and served ice cream or other treats in the Fantasy Café. Tante Andante also performed with her Tante Andante Band at festivals, schools, and private functions where she interacted with both children and their parents.

What a fabulous place in which to investigate the abilities of the students in an explorative research project and to gather data which could give credence to the idea that elements that comprise the environment could be more than just *stuff* that kids seem to think is...fun!

Back in Council Bluffs, Iowa, I have been working in a Challenge Center designed to meet affective and academic needs of the highly gifted elementary students in the Council Bluffs Community School District. In the primary grades the students are encouraged to participate in centers three times a day. After I interviewed the students, I asked what time during the school day they liked best. I discovered that learning centers was the answer one hundred percent of the time. Not recess? Some educators and parents might be surprised!

During the center time, I saw students in costume, listening to audiotapes, working with a vast array of manipulatives—writing, singing, drawing—given much choice in their exploration. I also did not see a “hovering hen” over her “chicks”—students were encouraged but relatively free to think and be themselves while taking in new ideas or building on attained Aha’s!

The students had the opportunity to dress in costumes and explore at a level that is difficult to attain while merely reading a textbook in their seats. This creative approach

seemed to be reflected in the students' curiosities when they returned to "academic work." Could the students be responding at a higher cognitive level because of the freedom to explore and to ponder situations never contemplated before? If so, educators and parents would of course like to consciously create and foster such a stimulating environment.

In both Denmark and the USA, I interviewed ten students between the ages of four and six who were recommended for their exceptional creativity. The subjects were encouraged to examine an object (a peccary skull) for two minutes and then we began the interview. This object was selected on the merits that it would probably be an unknown object and thus, provide an opportunity for problem solving. A tape recorder was used to collect the responses to a number of questions about the skull.

The question and answer format was selected to give students the opportunity to think deeply about one object with the intent of observing the degree of interest each student exhibited. The questions were designed to relate to their own needs of food, socialization, growth, and reality. How the students responded to questions relating to an animal they did not know would purposely test their knowledge, perceptions, creativity, and adeptness at problem solving. How carefully they responded also conveyed elements of perseverance and attention to detail. The questions were as follows:

What part of the skull did you look at first?

What do you think this animal ate?

Do you believe the animal was young or old when it died?

How old do you think this animal was?

Where do you think this animal lived?

Do you think the animal lived alone or in a group?

If this animal were alive, would you like to keep it as a house pet?

The questions were developed with my professor at the University of Northern Iowa. Upon his advisement, I created questions that would relate to a child's natural realm of existence. Thus, the questions about an unknown object were compared to their known world. The peccary skull was selected as the unknown object. By including the word "skull" in the first question, we are informing the child that it is indeed a "skull," narrowing the realm of possibilities to avoid the question, "What do you think this is?"

By interviewing the children individually, I hoped to encourage spontaneity and originality of thought rather than anticipate that a "consensus" be reached and, thereby, destroy or cripple original or eclectic thinking. Few responses were found to be alike. I believe the one-to-one conferencing was helpful in giving each student ample time and space in which to think and respond. When students understand that spontaneity, originality, and imagination are valued, they are more likely motivated to display their unique thinking. However, if trapped in a classroom with "one way" thinking, creativity will be "road-blocked" and will eventually be extremely difficult, if not impossible to "jump start!" It is then crucial that this genial spirit be set free each day; otherwise, students may think creativity is only valued while working on a project or an authentic assessment assignment.

In reviewing the students' responses in Denmark and the U.S.A., some discrepancies in the responses were evident. I will attempt to give insights into these discrepancies, but my opinions are based solely upon my observations and the student responses to the interview questions. The limitations of this research may also be due to

the first-time meeting with both groups of children. The children may have provided more in-depth responses had they known me for a longer period of time.

In response to the question about what the animal ate, I found the Danish children had more fanciful answers while the American children had answers that were more practical. Three Danish children provided the imaginative answers of “Danish fruit pudding,” “chocolate sandwiches,” and “Danish sausages,” whereas American students demonstrated more practical thinking when they responded with the answers “bugs,” “grass,” and “meat.” Why would the Danish children respond with two to three word responses and American children offer one-word answers? Why would the Danish children suggest foods that they themselves enjoy rather than offer dietary suggestions of “grass,” “bugs,” and “meat?” Perhaps one could conclude that the Danish suggestions were fantastical and the American responses were realistic.

When answering the question of where the animal lived, Danish students suggested the more complex, sophisticated locations of Thailand, Africa, and the Atlantic Ocean compared to their American counterparts’ answers of “in a garage,” “in a hole,” and “woods.” The responses of “Thailand” came from a girl who had lived in Thailand until the age of four. Again, personalizing the foods Danish children themselves enjoy, as well as places where they have lived, seemed to exhibit a rare sensitivity. This depth comes only through personal acceptance and introspection. It seemed to imply that “I can see this unknown animal as a close element of my existence—not just a “thing” that a teacher wants me to think about for a few minutes.” The young man who responded “Africa” had seen a program on television that he felt reminded him of the peccary skull. The student who responded “Atlantic Ocean” went to the ocean often.

When asked if they would like to take the animal home as a pet, Danish students responded with nine saying “yes” and one refusing. American student responses were practically the reverse with two students saying “yes” and eight declining. These responses were quite a surprise to me! I had assumed that American children would be more adventuresome. It was clear, however, that the American children were actually a bit shocked that I would ask such a question. On the other hand, in Denmark the question was met with delight! Their faces lit up as if to say, “You would actually let me take this home?” I even had to tell one student that I could not let him take the skull home because I still had to interview American children. Are Danish children less aware of the dangers of taking home an unknown animal and serving it foods that may not be appropriate? Is it lack of knowledge on their part or do they trust that I, as a friendly stranger, would surely not bring them something that could cause them harm?

Another observation was that the Danish children constantly conveyed feelings of sympathy and care for the animal. I noticed that when I posed the ten questions to the American students, they hardly ever re-examined the object before responding. The Danish children spent more time looking over the object before responding.

I also observed that Danish children spent time taking daily walks, tending gardens, and playing in a natural environment. American children tend to play in a more artificial setting of concrete or asphalt playgrounds. Could the causal factor of daily exposure to birds, flowers, and small creatures be significant compared to an environment where nature seems to be estranged? The daily influence of different flora and fauna may, indeed, be the element that created the interest to examine more carefully any different object in order to categorize and evaluate it based on a richer prior background

of knowledge. Whatever the reason, it is obvious that the reactions were quite different on this question.

It was exceedingly interesting to note that both settings in this study gave evidence that environment is a vital component necessary to stimulate creative thinking and problem solving. Both settings were conducive to incremental discoveries.

I learned that Benedicte Riis has explored the need to allow for the students' personalities in the seating arrangement of the classroom. If the students would like to bring personal objects from home such as pictures of family members, friends, or pets, she encourages them to do so. The classroom becomes an extension of who they are rather than who the teacher is. I have observed many classrooms that overflow with who the teacher is and who/what they enjoy—be it sports, favorite author, belief system, et cetera. This immersion can be fascinating at first, but soon seems as if a strict paradigm or prison is formed around the students. Students realize that if they think like the teacher, they achieve greater respect. Can we as educators truly purport, then, that we seek and celebrate divergent thinking? Obviously not. These personal passions affect the abilities of the students to think freely because they will feel that they must take their cues from the master teacher. Clearly, teachers have a right to their own personal and professional opinions, but to minimize the opinions of our students is critically detrimental to the development of problem solving and creativity.

Benedicte Riis valued originality and diversity over replication. She encouraged students to be interested in the backgrounds and interests of others. This process, when appropriately handled, lends itself to the students and teachers cooperatively forming an environment that welcomes originality and diversity. When this spirit is genuine,

creativity will flow. Why? The conditions are ideal for human development and creative thinking.

Having observed Benedicte Riis and her engaging style and kind-hearted treatment of children at the Danish Immigrant Museum in Elkhorn, Iowa, I believed I would find her in a place of creative and thoughtful work in Denmark. Certainly, it was exactly that, plus more! It was surprisingly similar to Howard Gardner's vision of creativity as an integral part of the curriculum in The Key School as noted by Goleman, Kaufman and Ray (1992):

Each day every child is exposed to materials designed to stimulate the whole range of human abilities—in art, music, computing, language skills like Spanish, mathematics, physical games. Beyond that, attention is paid to personal intelligence, knowing oneself and knowing others. . . .The Key School's aim is to let children discover those domains where they have natural curiosity and talent, and allow them to explore them. Gardner explains: "The idea of this school is not that you should discover the one thing a child is good at and insist he or she focus only on that. By virtue of the fact that the kids are exposed to everything every day, they have lots of opportunities to change their minds and go in new directions. I think that reduces the likelihood that any child will come to that really tragic conclusion: I'm not good in anything." (p. 87)

Her genial style and love for children and their imaginations provided a safe haven where children and adults could be themselves. The Tante Andante Hus reminded me of a house where a very special aunt has time to observe and celebrate with each person who

comes to visit her. What must Tante Andante have in order to keep such good “management”—a loving heart, a listening ear, an encouraging tongue, a quick and interested mind, and a friendly spirit? Yes, all of the above flow together to create a genial environment where students do not want to “go home” because they already feel at home.

Sincerity must prevail throughout the day. Children in Denmark are greeted both upon entering and exiting the Tante Andante Hus—a practice which lent itself to a cheerful “I am needed” attitude—vital if creativity is desired. I know that this practice exists in America as well and have observed that when a sincere, welcoming spirit is prevalent, an interesting and enlivened environment usually exists as well!

In both Denmark and the USA, I found the teachers’ personalities to be supportive which, I believe, encouraged the students to freely express themselves. It was evident that the teachers did not expect their students to mimic each other or to imitate the teachers’ thoughts or viewpoints. I heard exclamations of surprise and praise for novel insights or ways of solving problems. When the teacher can express his or her delight in the pursuit of new ideas, students will more likely interact knowing that their views will receive respect in the classroom. If this interest is genuine, the students will note the positive feeling in the environment, educators’ expertise will expand as teachers learn with and through the students, and the teachers and students will help to create a place where problems can be solved and creativity can be set free.

I was delighted to see that a genial/eclectic environment also prevailed in Council Bluffs, Iowa! I did not expect to find students in costumes in the middle of the school day. After I had interviewed one of the students, I came to the classroom to escort

another student for his interview. How delightful to see one young girl dressed in a long gown with a shawl around her shoulders. She seemed so at ease in her new attire.

Another student was scurrying about in a cuddly bathrobe. Another student was eager to show a teacher what he was learning on the computer. Other children were working independently and cooperatively in reading or math centers. This session was part of their learning center segment for the day. For a moment I felt transported to the Tante Andante Hus in Denmark. I found great choice and freedom in the classroom. I also heard teachers singing with their students and saw an abundance of smiles during that portion of the day.

Another point of reflection is the observation that students in both settings remained fully engaged in the quest to solve the questions I posed. The interview lasted ten to fifteen minutes and not one child seemed disinterested or frustrated. Though no one was able to identify the object, the responses exhibited excellent probing of prior knowledge and experiences. This behavior added credence to my belief that students at this age are fully capable and keenly interested in seeking for truth and certainly not bored with the search for meaning. As educators we must encourage the development of such sophisticated reasoning skills. With daily searches, I believe we can expect students to be much more interested in deeper understandings and connections.

Hewish (2001) says that the obvious factors to fruitful and innovative scientific research are freedom and encouragement. Encouragement “for individuals who wish to follow new leads spurred by their own curiosity, lively interactions within the group to test out new ideas, the courage to abandon fashionable theories and paradigms, and, of course, the provision of adequate resources for the necessary work” (Hewish, p. 147).

Implications for Gifted Education

How significant is the effect of a genial/eclectic environment? If the value of a stimulating environment could be proven, I would hope each parent and educator would carefully consider its importance and implications. In my opinion, and with the limitations of observing two educational climates, I would conclude that the skillful awareness and careful creation of a genial and eclectic environment did contribute to the amazing responses to the questioning about the peccary skull.

Thus, if the given variable of a genial/eclectic environment does affect the problem solving abilities of our students, the parents and teachers would hopefully seek to engineer an environment which provides sanctuary and stimulation to the developing minds of both students and teachers. This brings us to the question, “How would parents and educators build a genial/eclectic environment?”

I propose that teachers and parents **build a genial/eclectic environment** by creating a diverse setting that includes stimulating all of the senses in order to unleash the creativity within each child. This diversity is precisely what I have been privileged to observe throughout my study of the Tante Andante Hus and the Franklin Elementary School. It is essential to remember that in a genial/eclectic environment, all knowledge is relevant to understanding. Root-Bernstein and Root-Bernstein (1999) have written concerning the connectedness of everything in nature. For this reason, I would caution parents/educators against having one particular theme all year unless special emphasis is made to relate the theme to other topics. If a topic is not broadened, students recognize a personal preference and may try to please the teacher rather than thinking globally. If

one strand of knowledge is glamorized and coddled, the classroom no longer takes on the persona of a laboratory where investigation is ongoing.

Another important consideration to bear in mind is **do not overvalue one talent or ability over another**. Students must not be subjected to a climate where blue is the color or a specific sport is valued more than another or regarded more highly than a musical, linguistic, or academic ability. Some may recall having been in classrooms where it was made clear that some talents were celebrated more than others. If students possessed that “particular talent,” they had an “inside track” with the teacher. If our own personal values were marginalized we most likely were not free to develop our creativity. Again, this position is predicated on my own personal experiences and through my observations in Denmark and Council Bluffs, Iowa. I did not sense that any one area of learning was idealized in either setting. Every student and every facet of learning seemed to be a vital part of the organism of learning.

Make sure that your classroom environment is non-biased. It is my sincere belief that a non-prejudiced environment is as important to the full development of critical and creative thinking/problem solving and exploration as our personal openness to equity of race and religion. Our environment, I believe, reflects an inner/outer representation and appreciation of all ideas and cultures. When students sense a sincere sensitivity to their interests in the classroom, they will be more interested and will be more likely to contribute to discussions and solve problems.

Grant student ownership in the classroom. In essence, to encourage a genial/eclectic environment, teachers and parents need to exhibit an attitude of “What do you think?” instead of “This is what you should think!” When this spirit prevails,

students will desire to take part in discussions and a genial environment will likely ensue. At the beginning and throughout the school year, teachers can remind students that “this is our classroom, not mine.” Educators must seek to discover the interests of the students and perhaps encourage them to bring something from “their world” to be a part of the classroom environment. Naturally, then, the classroom environment will be different from year to year. As students learn, their interests are broadened. When respect for diversity is genuinely felt, students will respect their fellow classmates’ opinions, ideas, ideals, and varied talents. No human being “has it all.” We continually must seek for the development of the mind. With a stimulating, honest, supportive climate, students, parents, and teachers can contribute to the continual pursuit of knowledge and happiness. As in the Tante Andante Hus and the Franklin classroom, parents and teachers should engage in creating a wholesome, egalitarian place where discoveries and delights are a daily occurrence.

Education should be more than lessons out of a book. A teacher’s lesson plan should include not merely the page numbers of the text but should also take into account the layout of the classroom; personal space for all; and a positive, respectful feeling tone toward all members of the classroom.

In a genial/eclectic environment **the teachers and parents become facilitators.** Experimentation is an important part of the genial/eclectic environment and should not be ignored. As I was privileged to observe in the Tante Andante Hus and the Franklin Elementary School, learning was enhanced through experimentation and exploration. When a student reaches the point of understanding a concept, we would not want to hold him/her back from connecting his/her learning to life itself. Imagine holding a butterfly

or bird back from enjoying a beautiful day in nature. We would most likely jump up and justifiably shout, “Let it go! Let it go!” Should we do less for the bright and beautiful students that come to us each day? The study of the influence the environment can have on a learner has been acutely heightened for me as I have worked with the capable teachers and students at both the Franklin Elementary School and the Tante Andante Hus. I applaud the teachers that influenced my thinking on this topic and will endeavor to create the most genial/eclectic environment for those who I may influence in the days to come.

Albert Einstein, one of the greatest minds of all time, felt stifled in the authoritarian Prussian school system and was greatly relieved to find a school in Switzerland that afforded him more freedom of thought. Would he have been intrigued and happy in our classrooms or would he long to be removed? It is this question we cannot escape for the students who come to our doors each day. Who wouldn't wish to have been the teacher whom Einstein could have reflected was an inspiration and encouragement rather than an obstacle to learning and a detriment to his self-fulfillment? It is my hope that educators will recognize that the genial/eclectic environment they create is worth the effort if creative thinking and problem solving is our goal.

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