

A Personal Philosophy of Teaching - Special Needs to Special Abilities.

Sandra Kurvink

All individuals deserve respect and have the right to be given the opportunity to reach their potential. This belief forms the basis of my philosophy and therefore colours my perspective, attitude and viewpoint in every facet of life. When placed in the context of education, this fundamental conviction is readily identifiable in my commitment, as an educator, to meeting the learning needs of all students across the spectrum – special needs to special abilities.

The trouble is there are too many people who want to *teach* others

(Confucius 551 – 479BC).

It was coming across this pertinent statement that started me thinking, examining exactly what I did want to achieve as a teacher, and in the process identifying the principles that would form the basis of my practice.

1. I do not want to teach, I want to foster learning.

As defined by the Collins Compact English Dictionary (1998), *to teach* is to tell or show someone how to do something, and to give instructions or lessons. Whereas *to foster*; is to promote growth or development. The second provides a more liberal and accurate description of my objectives and the variety of strategies and approaches I intend to utilise in the classroom.

2. I do not want to be the giver of knowledge, I want to empower people to find knowledge for themselves.

I am not the fountain of wisdom, the provider of answers, merely the facilitator that provides the opportunities for learning to occur.

3. I do not want to impart skills, I want to assist people recognise a need for these skills.

For true learning to occur, skills should be taught in context, through solving real life problems and in relevant situations that are meaningful to the students.

4. I do not want to confine, I want to liberate.

Learning experiences should be open-ended broad tasks with a high degree of autonomy that allow the students to soar, to have the freedom to investigate, experiment, and explore, not merely to produce answers.

5. I do not want perfectionists, I want risk takers.

As a teacher I am not always looking for a single “correct” answer, I value in-depth thinking, speculation, innovation, new ideas, and creativity. Therefore I will utilise authentic assessment to identify needs, not standardised testing.

6. I do not want to judge, I want to advocate.

Creating an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect is vital in building a positive learning environment. Consequently my management style will, where possible, emphasise positive reinforcement, self-determination, and personal responsibility.

7. I do not want blank slates, I want experienced experts.

All new learning is based upon student experiences and prior knowledge. New learning builds upon established schema. Accordingly it is important to recognise and value the experience, knowledge, and understanding that is brought to each learning situation by the students.

8. I do not want a quiet audience, I want articulate, opinionated participants.

Constructivism asserts that for learning to take place students need to be actively engaged in experiences. Learning is a social activity requiring responsive, cooperative, dynamic, interactive behaviour.

9. I do not want a homogeneous group, I want a class of individuals.

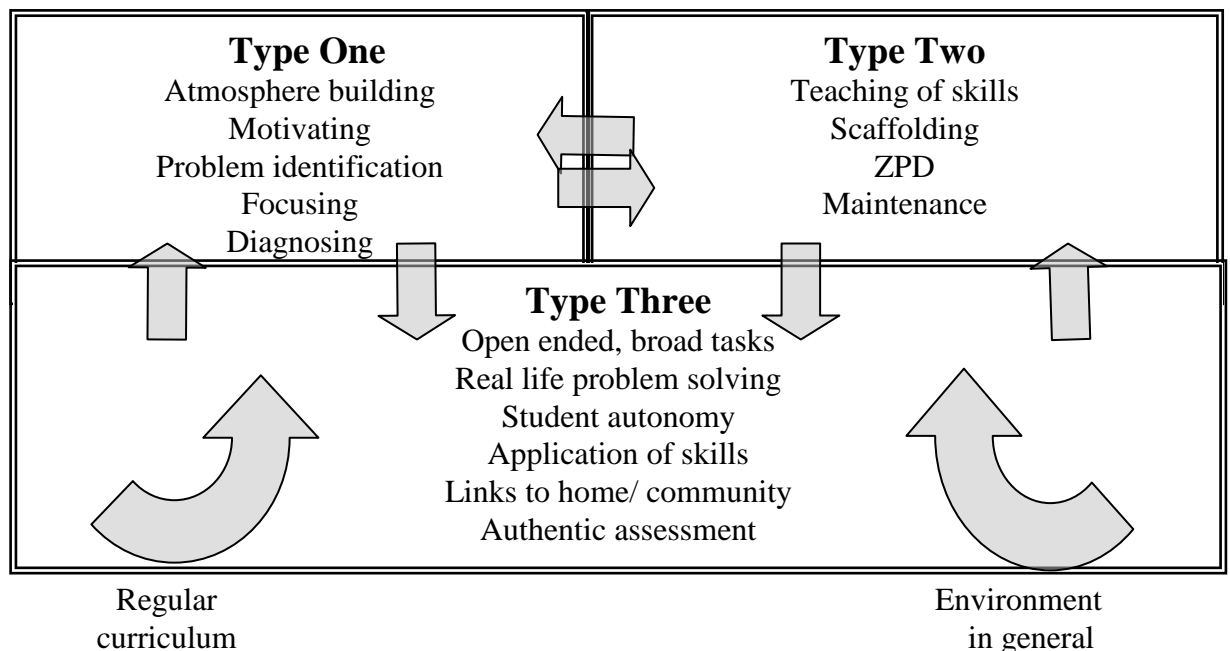
A range of ideas, knowledge, cultures, and abilities leads to a rich learning environment that is beneficial to all students.

10. I do not want to do this alone, I want to build a partnership between home and school.

As research (for example Bronfenbrenner 1979, in Smith 1992), has shown, the importance of communication between home and school, narrowing the gap between the culture of the school and the culture of the home, and parental support for the objectives of the school, are essential to developing an optimum learning environment.

As part of **An Advanced Study in Education: Inclusive Pedagogies – Children with Special Abilities**, we were introduced to a number of curriculum models designed to enrich students learning experiences. These models, although primarily intended to nurture special abilities, I believe to be applicable and beneficial to all students. In particular, I found a close correlation between Renzulli’s Enrichment Triad Model (1977, in Davis and Rimm, 1998:146), and the teaching philosophy I have outlined above.

Renzulli's Enrichment Triad Model (Renzulli: 1997)



Type One activities provide the motivating task enhancement exercises that Gagne (1991), and Renzulli believe are vital to nurturing and fostering talent amongst the students.

Type Two activities contribute the skills required to perform the task, with the teacher scaffolding appropriately for individual needs.

Type Three Activities allow for a high degree of student decision making, self determination, and self evaluation in finding solutions to real life problems, and applying the skills they have learned in a self-directed task. The teacher becomes a facilitator providing assistance and guidance only when necessary.

Within a classroom programme the teacher would be utilising all three types of activities, moving from one to the other as class, and individual needs, demand.

The constructivist principles that underlie how I intend to teach, are comfortably placed within each of Renzulli's three types of activities. Regular curriculum objectives and school requirements can be readily implemented within this model making it practical as well as ideologically sound.

The high degree of synthesis between Renzulli's model and my philosophy will doubtless result in it forming the framework for my own classroom programme. Not simply for students with special abilities, although they may progress faster and achieve better results, but I am convinced that if our ultimate aim is for everyone to be an independent life-long learner then all students must be given the chance to experience self-determination, think creatively, and find solutions to real life problems.

Another theorist encountered in the course also made an impression, adding to my understanding of Gardner's Multiple Intelligences (1983, in McInerney and McInerney, 1998:47), and effecting further reflection on the role of the teacher. Gagne (1991, in McAlpine and Moltzen, 1996), in his differentiated giftedness – talent, model, observes that the majority of people have *gifts* – natural abilities or aptitudes in a variety of domains, but not all are then developed into *talents* –

achievements or performance, because of a lack of a “catalyst”. I accept it is my responsibility as a teacher to recognise not the problems but the potential in each student I have, and help them develop their abilities into achievement. Realistically it will not be possible to be the “catalyst” for every student, however that should be the intention of all committed teachers – to make a difference.

I have come to recognise that good teaching is the teacher’s belief in providing superior learning programmes, having an open mind and a desire to make a difference for every child.

Bionote

Sandra Kurvink is a student in her final semester at the Auckland College of Education, one of the inaugural group completing the three year Bachelor of Education (teaching) degree. She is looking forward to putting all she has learned into practice in the classroom in 2000.

Acknowledgments

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