

Applying the SALT Conceptual Framework

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As an educator, one's philosophy of education is the foundation of all decision making. While we may not get to choose the curriculum, we do have some freedom of choice when it comes to delivery methods and even in the way the classroom is managed. This is where an educator's philosophy comes into play. At Alliance University, the School of Education is centered on a conceptual framework abbreviated SALT (service, academics, leadership, and teaching). This, along with the theories of many of the pioneers of education, has aided in the formation of my own personal philosophy of education.

Service to the students begins with observation. Teachers should get to know their students by watching and listening to them, in order to be better prepared to meet their needs. The work of educational theorist Abraham Maslow has been instrumental in shaping my ideology in regards to meeting the needs of students. "Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a motivational theory in psychology comprising a five-tier model of human needs..." (Saul McLeod, 2018, p. 1). The needs are considered hierarchical beginning with physiological needs, safety needs, belongingness and love needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization (Saul McLeod, 2018, p. 1). Because of this hierarchical nature, teachers cannot even begin to think about educating their students without first ensuring that their most basic needs are met first. Schools should be safe zones, complete with a caring community built on love and acceptance. At school, students should never face hunger or danger. They should be able to build close relationships with their peers and their teachers, with each teacher serving as a positive role model.

Despite not always having the ability to share our faith with students, Christian educators can still be of service to the students as a role model and as their advocate. Teachers should consistently demonstrate moral behavior both in and out of the classroom. However, this demonstration of moral behavior will do very little good if there is no bond between student and

teacher. “When children do not bond with moral adults, the development of conscience and character is retarded” (Lickona, 2004, p. 114). At present, students may not have very many good role models in their lives. Teachers should never take for granted the amount of influence they exert over their students. As both an advocate and a role model for students, teachers should speak up for what is right and should consistently defend and uphold their students’ rights as individuals.

Being of service to students also means being of service to their families, related service providers, and other key members of their lives. Special education team members and family members should work together as partners for the betterment of the child. One way to make them partners is “to give everybody a chance to have input” (Lickona, 2004, p. 69). This is one of the most effective ways to work as a team: provide everyone with the opportunity to voice their opinions, to contribute, and to collectively assign each person a role to play. This type of involvement is essential not only for the special education child, but across the general education population as well. “Parental involvement is the leading indicator of school success” (Lickona, 2004, p. 60). If we want to serve our students, it starts with serving their families.

As a Christian special educator, service and modeling good moral character are just as important as academics. It is vital that teachers remain up to date with the special education criteria and categories. Right now, special education services are governed under IDEA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. This legislation has been amended several times since its beginning in 1975 (Salend, 2016, p. 21). Because of the possibility for reform, it is vitally important that teachers stay informed to ensure they are providing their students with the appropriate education. One aspect of an appropriate education includes the use of accommodations and modifications. Modifications are changes to the curriculum, while

accommodations are changes made to the environment, curriculum format, equipment being used, or even the learning task (washington.edu). To make the course content more accessible for all students, accommodations and modifications are necessary in every special education inclusive classroom.

Another aspect of appropriate education includes planned interventions. If a teacher notices that a student is having difficulty learning, it could be for a number of reasons. Before referring the student for special education services, the teacher must first eliminate any other possible reasons for the student's learning difficulties. This is done with planned interventions also called response to intervention (RTI). RTI is a three tiered intervention process. The first level, tier one, is simply the general instruction the class receives. Tier two includes the incorporation of more intensive instruction in a small group setting. Tier three involves an even greater level of intensive and individualized instruction. The purpose of RTI is to "[assess] the extent to which your students respond to and need more intensive and individualized research-based interventions to succeed in your inclusive classroom" (Salend, 2016, p. 40).

In an inclusive classroom two teachers will often work together, in the process of co-teaching. At this point, the two philosophies of two different teachers must come into collaboration for the benefit of their students. Co-teachers share responsibilities in the classroom and must therefore work hard to have a positive, collaborative, and productive relationship. In my fieldwork placement, I observed a beautiful relationship between two co-teachers who had found a routine that worked for them. They took turns teaching the class, swapping day by day, while the other would simply act as a support for students throughout the lesson. I observed them scaffold for their students, following Lev Vygotsky's theory for cognitive development. This same theory informs my educational philosophy. According to this theory, students' learning is

limited to their zone of proximal development (ZPD) (The University of Manchester). The ZPD is the “zone” for which students are cognitively prepared to learn with the guidance of a more knowledgeable other, making scaffolding so important.

The role of an educator does not stop at service and academics, it also includes the possession of leadership skills. Being a leader means being informed, active, and an advocate for reform. This starts with the most basic necessity of creating and fostering positive relationships with peers, students, and families. As was mentioned, working collaboratively as a team for the same end goal ultimately leads to student success as well as school success. Being an educational leader means being informed in the laws and policies governing education as well as in appropriate research-based identification and assessment practices. As educators it is well-known that we should use evidence based practices that have been supported by thorough research. In this way we can ensure that the educational tactics we are using have been proven to be effective. “Educational research needs to be redirected towards the systematic development of a body of knowledge that is capable of informing the practical judgments of teachers” (Elliot, 2001, p. 556).

In the future, I hope to see special education in an even better state than it is now. I hope to see even more high quality inclusive classrooms scattered within the general education populations. Despite the passage of many laws such as the IDEA advocating for students to have access to an appropriate education in their least restrictive environment (LRE) there still seems to be an aspect of segregation when it comes to students with disabilities. In my fieldwork placement I was in a special education classroom that, although it was in a ‘regular’ public school building, was at the very back of the school down the furthest hallway, away from the other ‘normal’ children.

While the effort for inclusion was there, it was not nearly enough. The students were in the classroom at the back of the school for the majority of the day. They left the room to go to their scheduled services across the hall or to the nearby bathroom. It still felt very much as if they were hidden away from the rest of the general population. According to the data, “as of 2008, over 57% of students with disabilities spent at least 80% of their school day inside regular classrooms while just over 5% were completely excluded from regular school placements” (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014). While this number is relatively high, the data mentions nothing about the quality of the inclusive placement. These numbers could be much of what I saw in my placement. In the future, I hope the quality of inclusive education greatly improves.

My goal as a Christian special educator is to love, guide, and serve my students to the utmost of my ability. I want my classroom to be a safe haven for students of all abilities, all cultures, and ethnicities. My desire is to demonstrate to my students the love of God even if I cannot explicitly tell them about it. I want my students to feel loved enough that they can flourish into the best version of themselves without holding back. If I could do that, if I could see my students' individual progress, I would be satisfied with my job and my performance as a teacher.

Teaching, the final aspect of the Alliance University School of Education conceptual framework, would not be complete without these values. Another crucial aspect of teaching is culturally responsive instruction. “Multicultural education seeks to develop instructional curricula and practices in school communities that meet the needs of diverse student populations” (Lew & Nelson, 2016, p. 7). Culturally responsive teaching means that instead of using the same methods and materials for everyone, teachers cater their instruction to the individual needs of their students. It means that “teachers should be responsive to their students using instructional activities that build on students’ cultural strength and abilities to promote

student learning” (Lew & Nelson, 2016, p. 7). The one-size fits all approach has never been effective in education and never will be.

This type of individualized instruction is not something that can be done haphazardly. Instructional planning is vitally important in ensuring the success of individualized instruction. While it is true that good ideas can strike at any moment during a lesson, it should not be left to chance. In order for this to work the teacher needs to carefully plan out the lessons as well as any accommodations or modifications. Delivery of the lesson is just as important. A well crafted lesson plan does not mean much without effective delivery. Teachers must be flexible and able to adapt their lesson plans to the circumstances at hand. They must also have good time management. In the beginning stages of my lesson planning, I would often write excessively long lessons with too many activities that, in reality, would take two days to complete. I would often teach over the time limit trying to cram in everything that I wanted to accomplish.

In addition to time management, classroom management is a must. Teachers and students cannot perform well if the environment is not conducive to learning. Providing positive behavioral support will help in maintaining a classroom environment in which students can flourish. When used schoolwide, positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) create a “school environment that [is] happy and joyous by systematically working to be preventative rather than reactive to unwanted student behavior” (Molina et al., 2020, p. 3). The less time in the classroom that needs to be spent addressing, correcting, or redirecting unwanted behavior, the more time can be spent educating students according to their various individual needs.

For example, when educating students with a learning disability, high leverage practices are useful to the individualization of instruction. High leverage practices (HLP) are a set of practices used to deliver specially designed instruction (Riccomini et al., 2017, p. 22). Explicit

and intensive instruction are two different types of HLPs (Riccomini et al., 2017, p. 22). In addition to teaching academics, special educators need to teach social and functional living skills. In my placement, I observed the use of a lot of social stories to aid in teaching these skills. The students were also provided with the opportunity to put these learned skills into practice. I hope to do the same in my own classroom, providing students with the opportunity to learn hands on as much as possible. Being able to execute the learning task yourself is vitally important to cementing the new found knowledge from the lesson. This is true not just in the aspect of social and functional living skills, but in all areas of education.

In sum, the Alliance University School of Education conceptual framework has helped to shape my philosophy of education and equip me with the skills and knowledge needed to be an effective teacher. SALT (service, academics, leadership, and teaching) has impacted me in such a way that I hope to pass on to others I meet in the field. Along with the ideas of educational theorists such as Vygotsky and Maslow, I hope to let these teachings guide my steps as a Christian educator in a world where the values of Christianity may not always be upheld. I want to be a great educator, but I also want to be a light for Christ not only to the students in my classes, but to my peers, special education team members, families, and even students I pass in the halls. This goal, above all else, is of the utmost importance.

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