Teaching and Learning Statement

"The secret in education lies in respecting the student."

Ralph Waldo Emerson

**Theoretical Framework**

The above quote is my philosophy of teaching and learning in a nutshell. I truly believe that the secret to teaching is respecting who the students are and their needs. This respect for the learner is seen in my philosophical framework.

As a special education teacher working primarily with students with Autism Spectrum Disorders, behaviorism is used in many ways to facilitate learning. Many students on the spectrum learn best by utilizing techniques found in behaviorism. This is seen in the use of repetitive work, social stories and software to teach the basics of language arts and mathematics.

I also employ the behaviorism in my classroom management. I have seen how effective rewards can be for appropriate behavior. I think praising positive behavior is more effective in changing student behavior than punishing misbehavior. What is often seen as misbehavior in students on the spectrum is often their way of communicating with us using very awkward social communication skills. ASD students, like all students need to be reminded and praised for making good decisions and this is a skill that they will utilize the rest of their lives.

Assessment of student learning in this model is cut and dry. Is the work being done correctly? Yes or no. I generally use this type of assessment with folder work and fact-based learning.

Cognitivism makes sense to me on a very elemental level. This is how I like to learn and teach. I believe that students learn much more when the work and learning is meaningful and interesting. In an ASD classroom, I use this approach when doing group learning. Generally, I teach science and social studies in this manner. As the students get older, this method is used with working in the community. Teaching self-help skills, while individually taught, also fall into this style of teaching and learning. One of the issues that students with ASD tend to have is generalizing their learning. Using cognitizism is a natural way to help student learn to generalize. Inherently, the learning goes from simple to more complex, thus allowing for scaffolding the learning process as needed.

From a classroom management perspective, there are far less behavioral problems when students are interested and engaged in learning. Cognitivism, by its definition is to make work and learning meaningful and thus students are too busy in the process of learning to be disruptive and behavior problems in the classroom.

I love the constructivism concept that learning is the search for meaning. I truly believe that the interdisciplinary approach to learning is inherent. Students learn better when they utilize different aspects and types of learning. As a teacher of those with autism, my students, as all students do, have different mental models. It is my responsibility as a teacher to find a way to help my students learn and process information. For many of my students, the hands-on experiences are invaluable because it taps into different areas of the brain. I like that this process encourages learners to analyze and think about problems and solutions. I’m intrigued by the process of having students judge their own learning. I have found that I love to ask students “why” for a couple of different reasons. The first reason is that I want students to become more metacognitive and the external questioning helps start the process. The second reason is that I’m fascinated with their thinking and reasoning processes. I do wonder if this type of assessment may be difficult for students with ASD.

My classroom, as a long-term sub in an elementary ASD categorical room, was a reflection of my philosophy. There were different areas that allow for different types and styles of learning. Each student had an individual work space that contains either a desk or a table and storage areas. There was a group learning area that includes both tables and chairs and access to the smart board. The quiet reading area was for the necessary down times. The room had two computers and two iPads that were used for learning. There were play and sensory areas as well as teacher spaces. The walls had the PBS charts, learning aids/posters and student art work.

Assessing learning is a daily practice. Assessments are made informally on an ongoing basis. Because so many ASD students utilize folder-based learning, folders need to be check for learning progress before they are reutilized. I really like discussing with my students. This way I can get immediate feedback on how they are learning and progressing. Portfolios are another wonderful way to see long term growth and progression.

**A Reflective Urban Educator**

I am an instinctive and natural teacher. This is what I was born to do with my life. While I am getting my MAT as a second career, I have spent most of my adult life teaching in some capacity or another. As a teacher, I need to assess myself. I do this in several different ways. Are my students progressing towards their goals? If not, what do I need to do differently to teach them? If yes, stay the course. What do those around me say about what I am doing in the classroom? This group includes other teachers, parents, assistants, administrators and most importantly my students. Their comments and observations are invaluable to me as they give me a different perspective on teaching and learning. Are the processes that I have put into place effective and working well? Not everything we try will work, so teaching must be a process of trying and modifying and trying again until you find what works for each student and class.

As a second-career teacher, I bring many individual strengths to the classroom. I am a parent of a special needs student. This allows me to have a unique perspective that many Special Education teachers do not have. I have been on both sides of the IEP table and this makes me more approachable to parents. I work very hard at establishing good working relationships with parents, staff and most importantly the students. I rely on the Golden Rule and try and treat people the way I would want to be treated.

I love to learn and am always looking for ways to improve myself, my classroom and those around me. I am famous for sending emails with tips and ideas to parents and other staff. I am loving, innovative and creative. I am hard working and full of grace.

Like any teacher, I have my areas of weaknesses that I need to work on to be an even better teacher and human being. There are days that others see my grace as not being strict enough. I try hard to balance the two and provide the right amount of discipline in the classroom. Physically, I need to get into better shape. I am losing the weight and exercising more. I am wearing a Fitbit to and using this to monitor not only my exercise, but also my food consumption.

There are days that I feel that I am scattered and I need to spend more time planning and following through on the plans I have made. To combat this, I have set up a weekly calendar with all of the assignments and assessments that are schedule for the week. I have a page for each grade with a spot of each teacher. At the beginning of the week, I check the teachers’ websites and email the teachers to find out their plans. This allows me to not only make sure that my students are prepared for what is expected of them in the gen ed setting, but it also gives me time to plan for the modification and adaption of assignments that may be necessary. Like many of my students, I find that I do better when I have a schedule and I follow it on a consistent basis.

My professional development has been limited to a few district wide training opportunities during my long-term subbing experiences. One to the district wide trainings I attended was in November, 2013. The district set up a day of peer-led training with a key-note speaker. I participated in two different seminars: incorporating ULS (Unique Learning Systems) into a categorical classroom. This session provided practical tips for the implantation of this newer Common Core-aligned, special ed. curriculum. The other session was on current legal issues found in Special Education and was presented by the district’s lawyer. The question and answer format allowed us to ask a variety of questions we had regarding FERPA and IDEA. The day was very informative and I gained some very practical knowledge.

In my current student teaching placement, I am a resource room setting and we collaborate with two different math teachers. I learn so much from watching and listening to these two veteran teachers. As an observational learner, I gain many insights and ideas this way. I find that my development continues in all sorts of school settings as I sit back and listen to those around me, both students and other teachers. We also have Professional Learning Community time each Monday morning which allows me to experience new and different perspectives of my chosen profession.

**An Innovative Urban Educator**

As a Special Education teacher in a categorical or resource room settings, one the biggest components of my job is to modify and adapt learning instruction to the individual student. One example is accessing the amount of work a student is to complete for an assignment or assessment. For some of my students this may mean having them work on a portion of the questions assigned. It can also mean rewriting the questions and providing more visual and physical space to solve the problem. Adding word banks for fill in the blank questions and reducing the number of options on a multiple choice test are two common modifications that are made in a resource room setting. Color coding so that the students have visual cues is another way we modify assignments for students. Some students need the assignment broken into smaller pieces so that they are not overwhelmed, so chunking a task is often done as well. Developing and implementing graphic organizers also provides needed support. In a categorical class room modifications and adaptions might include using an alternative curriculum like ULS that is age and developmentally appropriate for the students. This is one area where my hardworking, innovative and creative nature has a chance to shine. I am always on the lookout to find a better way to teach a topic.

At the beginning of the year, I like to have the parents and students fill out a questionnaire for me. This gives me a chance to see the student as the parents see them and as they see themselves. The questionnaire asks for information about the student’s interests, their learning styles and their perceived strengths and weaknesses as a student. These surveys then help me to develop that hands-on teaching that makes learning come alive.

I also love technology and like to integrate it into the classroom. ASD students tend to love technology as well and this gives them a learning method that makes learning easy and enjoyable for them. There are many apps and websites available help provide appropriate learning experience. My ASD students tend to be visual learners, so I utilize the smart board for group learning situations. I implemented a group reading program during my long-term subbing that was a huge success. We would watch/read a book each week. The books all had a “read to me” button and were on the iPad and projected onto the smart board. The class watched the book, read the text and then we discussed it in a Grand Conversation. I was always amazed at the comments and the number of students who would read the book again and again when they had DEAR time later in the day.

**An Urban Educator Committed to Diversity**

I am a firm believer that we are far more alike than we are different. I had the opportunity to live in Germany for three years and to teach in an international preschool. It was a wonderful and eye opening experience. I had students from around the world and it made me really appreciate not only our common humanity but our wonderful cultural differences. As an educator, it is my responsibility to teach my students to see those similarities while celebrating what makes us different and unique. This can be done in many ways. One of the most obvious is the daily use of materials that celebrate similarities and diversity. Students need to see not only people like themselves, but to also see a range of humanity in the books they read, the problems they solve, the projects they do and the assessments they take. Celebrating diversity and appreciating it is not something that should be done in a particular month, but should be fully integrated in to the daily experience. One of my favorite projects was integrating the app **Walter’s Flying Bus** into my ASD categorical room. **Walter’s Flying Bus** tells the story of a group of African orphans. Each of the children has a unique story as well as abilities and disabilities and is based a real child. My students immediately connected with the characters and their stories. We used the tale as a starting off point to learn about different parts of literature and writing as well as what life in an orphanage and in Africa is like. I think it is important that all students develop a point of view that encompasses a world that is much larger than their little neck of the woods.

It is important to teach that diversity is more than just racial and cultural. It is male/female and sexual orientation. Diversity is special needs verses neuro-typical and all kinds of different learning styles. It is differences of living in a rural setting rather than a suburban and urban setting. It is religion of any flavor or having no religion at all. In the end it all circles back to the Ralph Waldo Emerson’s quote:

"The secret in education lies in respecting the student."