Teaching Philosophy and Theoretical Framework

As I describe in my application letter, I have a strong practical background in early childhood education (ECE) to complement my theoretical knowledge of the field. I have also had the privilege of working in very diverse settings over my career. These experiences have helped to shape my teaching philosophy by providing the framework by which it comes to life.

Based on the above experiences and my personal values, I believe that education can be transformative and is best viewed through the lens of social justice and caring. I also believe that educators should be knowledgeable, effective, and caring. They should also be ethical agents of change. It is not enough to teach content. How we teach is as important as what we teach. This notion informs my research, my teaching, and my service, and allows for the work I do to have a coherence that feels exciting and meaningful, whether it is teaching, conducting and sharing research, or serving the university and community.

My theoretical framework is Vygotskian in that I also believe strongly that social and historical contexts are important and we learn best in the company of others who can guide and inspire us. We must attend to the social, cultural realities, and emotional needs of learners in order for teaching and learning to take place.

Finally, I believe we learn best when learning is meaningful, grounded in hands-on learning and experiences, and contextually situated. I teach these values, and work hard to live them as an instructor.

The principles listed below further define my philosophy with regard to teaching and my general approach to life as a professor.

Principle ONE: Practice patience, kindness, and a learner-centered approach. Education is not a one-size-fits-all proposition. Caring, tolerance, and understanding the power of relationships within a learner-centered approach to education- are all important components. Teaching with kindness, patience, and hand-on activities are examples of this. The relationship between children and teachers, or students and professors, or professors and each other works best when it is based on mutual respect and shared excitement around learning. Grades are not the measure of growth.

Principle TWO: Know the relationship of development, culture, and pedagogy. A deep understanding of development, temperament, and culture is necessary in order to be an effective teacher or leader. The right pedagogical methods and techniques can make all the difference, as can contextualizing the learning in a context such that learners can deeply relate to the material or learning. This implies a deep understanding of the cultural context of the learner. It also requires deep knowledge of children’s development, including physical, social and emotional, and cognitive development and finally deep knowledge of wide variety of pedagogical strategies.

Principle THREE: Teach such that learning is joyful. This can happen when learners are able to develop their unique potentials through activities based on developmental needs and their own interests and
discerned talents. Hands-on, active learning and “messing around” with ideas are essential. As Montessori put it, when she wrote “He learns without knowing he is learning, treading always in the paths of joy,” learning should be a joyful journey.

Principle FOUR: Provide service. Leadership always involves serving. In some instances service is in the form of a maître de at a fine restaurant-unobtrusively making sure the needs of those I teach or work with are met. In others, it takes the form of passing a metaphorical baton so others can have a “win.” And finally, service is sometimes in the form of the person who cleans things up. In all cases careful observation and assessment is key. In all cases, providing service means I must be able to observe carefully, assess the child, the student, or the situation, change my techniques if necessary, individualize instruction, and get my own ego out of the way.

Principle FIVE: Stay current with knowledge and needs of the field. Our field is constantly changing and evolving. When I started my career as an early childhood educator the notion of developmentally appropriate practice was not yet a concept. It is now on its third iteration. New methods, new research and new ideas should guide our current thinking and teaching strategies. A need to connect children with nature, not an issue 50 years ago, is becoming urgent today.

Principle SIX: Trust the inner voice and reflection. Over and over it has been the case that when I have trusted my inner voice I have been well guided. Thinking outside the box is ok, and when I trust my inner intuition and take the teachable moment, profound learning can take place. This implies reflection on a regular basis and is something I emphasize to my students.

Principle Seven: Focus on relationships and the inter-connectedness of life. “School” does not need to mean desks and locked cabinets. A focus on seeing the relationships among various parts can provide a frame of reference for almost any learning experience. Learning can take place in beautiful spaces with grass and trees. For college students this translates to supporting their understanding of – and ability to teach - the connectedness of all things in the universe and the integration of curriculum around a topic of interest to the children. As a colleague I strive to work collaboratively, looking always for ways to be more inclusive and for ways to weave diverse views into a whole. I support learners in making connections and in learning about themselves and the unique gift they are to creation. I support learners in making a difference for the common good.