

Hanson's Learning and Teaching Philosophy, a Starting Point

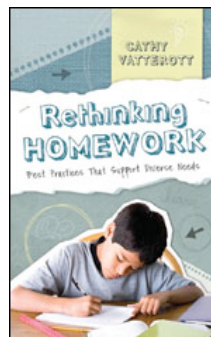
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Section 1. Everyone's Responsibility, Especially Parents and Students

Teachers cannot be held accountable for making up for lost time when students and parents do not do their parts.* First, but foremost, parental concern, commitment, and motivation is critical. If parents do not require students to study or to complete homework, student achievement will decline, and students will not live up to their full potential. Unfinished homework, for example, can result not only in loss of points but diminished understanding as a result of incomplete practice. The following article (from <http://www.edweek.org/>) offers an extended perspective regarding homework as part of student responsibility:

Homework in the Responsive Classroom



INTERVIEW BY THE AUTHOR, EDWEEK.ORG

By Elizabeth Rich

Cathy Vatterott is an associate professor of education at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. A former middle school teacher and principal, Vatterott learned first-hand about homework

struggles as the parent of a child with learning disabilities. Today, her son is a successful college student and she is known as “the homework lady.” She earned the title after years of research and writing about homework. She has presented on the topic to over 6,000 educators and parents in the United States, Canada, and Europe.

Her most recent book, *Rethinking Homework: Best Practices That Support Diverse Needs* (ASCD, 2009), details a differentiated [see Section 2 for a brief definition of “differentiation”] approach to homework—one that can serve teachers, students, and parents. Vatterott believes that homework needn’t stretch into the wee hours of the night. Vatterott sees incomplete homework as a crucial window for teachers into the academic and personal needs of students. She also sees an important role for parents in providing feedback to teachers on the struggles of their children to complete homework.

We spoke to Vatterott about her homework philosophy and why too much homework can bring about academic failure.

Are you opposed to homework?

I’m not at all opposed to the idea of homework. I’m opposed to homework that is excessive. I like the 10-minute rule, which is recommended by the Parent Teachers Association and the National Education Association, that kids should have no more than 10 minutes of homework per grade level, per night. In other words, a 1st grader should only have 10 minutes and a 5th grader should have 50 minutes, and so on. To me, that’s a good guideline. It’s also consistent with the research that shows that for kids who do more than that amount of work, their achievement actually goes down because they burn out. They get tired. Of course, that doesn’t mean that it’s going to be the same for every kid. You’ve got kids who are very focused, who really enjoy doing their homework. They might be able to work longer.

The biggest parent misconception is that a lot of homework is a sign of rigor. A lot of times, parents are like, “If they don’t do all of this work, they’re not going to get into Harvard.” Actually, the research doesn’t support that a lot of homework does any good.

In some ways, there are aspects of poverty’s impact in the classroom—in your book. Specifically, you address how some educators attach their own negative, personal attitudes about social class to students who don’t complete their homework. How does this play out?

I think when students don't complete their homework, it's easy to blame the student or the parent without really examining what valid reasons there might be for the homework not being completed. *Students may not be able to do homework because of home conditions or family responsibilities, not because they are lazy or irresponsible. When teachers fail to understand how poverty or other circumstances can interfere with homework, there can be a tendency to make moral judgments about the student and the parent.

You also suggest involving parents in the homework process, including completing questionnaires about how long it takes their children to complete homework assignments. Why is that important?

The parent is the best source of information about what's really going on with homework. Parents can help teachers diagnose whether the work is too hard or too lengthy and can alert teachers to other factors.

What other factors?

In addition to academic issues, the parents also know if it's an organizational issue—for example, if the kid says, "I did it, but I can't find it." Or, if the kid is really frustrated or they've got a lot of other activities going on that are competing with homework. But then there can also be personal things, like does this kid have an anxiety problem? Are there things going on in the family where this kid is depressed?

The parents know if there's this horrible thing going on in the family. Their child's favorite aunt is sick. It's a young kid and their grandmother's in the hospital dying. Stuff like that that teachers don't necessarily know, that parents can communicate back and say, here's what's going on with my kid right now and why they're having trouble focusing. That is helpful to a teacher.

How do you get a parent to comply with a questionnaire, especially when the family could be coping with some of the issues you mention that might be influencing a student's ability to complete work?

You may not be able to get that from the parent. You may have to make a phone call or email and ask them questions. Yes, sometimes it is hard to get that feedback from the parents. And you may have to just go on the feedback from the kid.

I never understood why we punished kids because their parents didn't sign something. Is that really the kid's fault? Or, is it that the parent just didn't sign it?

You don't believe that homework instills discipline in children; in fact, you stress that homework can negatively affect students' attitudes, their college admissions' test scores, even their admission to college itself. How does this happen?

When students are repeatedly given homework tasks that are too hard for them, frustrations build and students can start to hate learning. When kids are that frustrated, they basically just shut down. We've learned about that from brain research. We've known that frustration shuts down kids' learning [see Vygotsky later in section 2]. And we know psychologically that's what they do to protect themselves.

You've got kids who were fine in school and all of a sudden they start getting a lot of homework in the 3rd or 4th grade and all of a sudden they're starting to say they hate school and that's a little scary. What if what we're doing here—the overloading of kids or the giving kids things they can't do—is causing them to hate to school?

No one wants to do something that repeatedly makes them feel stupid. Students may decide it's less painful not to do the homework. When we give students failing grades for not completing homework, it further de-motivates them *and* may make them feel like they are a failure in school. Failing grades in homework often lead to failing course grades which lead to a lower GPA which can make students less competitive for college admissions. Students who give up and stop doing homework may be shortchanging their own development of knowledge and skills, which in turn can cause them to do poorly on college admissions tests.

How does poverty interfere with homework?

It's not uncommon that kids who live in poverty [economic poverty and intellectual poverty which results in an environment not conducive to study] don't have a quiet place to work. For instance, where I live, it's not uncommon for there to be a family of five living in a two bedroom apartment. There's no quiet place to work. There is no desk. There are no materials. Like when teachers say, "Oh, go home and cut pictures out of a magazine and then put them together for this." They don't have magazines. That's part of it, but the other part is that children of poverty often have lots of responsibilities at home.

An example that I give is of a teacher who said a 9th grade student told her, “My mom won’t let me do homework.” And the teacher said, “What do you mean?” And the student responded, “Well, when I get home I have to babysit my brothers and sisters, then I have to cook dinner, and then I have to give them a bath. And then it’s time for me to go to bed.”

When you get to middle school, high school, those kids are making money. They’re working to help feed the family. And so they’re not doing homework. You also have the population of ELL kids. They get home and their parents don’t speak English. There’s no help available if they need help. I think those are things that people don’t often consider when they look at kids in poverty.

Section 2. What do we know about learning?

Over decades of educational research, the cliché some assert about teaching methodology, or the “pendulum” of instruction that, over time, swings back to some other previous form of teaching, no longer swings back and forth. We know quite definitively how students learn and what teaching works best. The problem is that many teachers continue to gravitate to the way they were taught, mostly a lecture with too much emphasis on memorization/knowledge orientation. True, teachers necessarily must introduce and clarify, but their main role in learning should be monitor and facilitator.

Over the last twenty years, the adaptation of teaching methodology to match **learning styles** (access information and a self-inventory at <http://www.learning-styles-online.com/>) gained acceptance. However, while learning styles do indeed exist, matching teaching to each child’s style has been discredited in favor of a more flexible model called **differentiated learning**, where student outcomes and instructional means should be adjusted to best get at learning. (see Tomlinson for more detail, http://www.cosa.k12.or.us/downloads/profdev/Tomlinson/MappingaRouteToward_DI.pdf). For instance, if the goal of learning is error free paragraphs, students should have multiple ways of getting at learning how to write a paragraph (from outlining to free writing) and while they may be concentrating of a particular genre or form (comparison-contrast, description....), they shouldn’t be restricted to topic. In other words, teachers allow a wide variety of ways in and a wide variety of student demonstration of learning. In another case, depending on the objectives of the lesson, students may be allowed a choice to take a test, create a poster, give a speech... to demonstrate competence. Sometimes this approach is impractical, but this is ideally the goal of differentiation.

Mastering the ability to differentiate instruction takes at least 5-10 years of continuous exploration and experimentation by a teacher. The consensus, nevertheless, is definitive: students should be more engaged, and classrooms should always be moving toward **student-centered instruction** (connected to students' backgrounds in which common objectives or goals should be, ideally, are measured through a variety of different means—from projects to tests to speeches, whatever matches the student's ability to produce) **versus teacher-centered** (i.e., “sage on the stage”; i.e., teacher predominantly lectures while students take notes, and students are bound by knowledge-based regurgitation on tests). A student-centered versus teacher-centered chart that illustrates basic differences in approaches can be found at <http://www.nclrc.org/essentials/goalsmethods/learncentpop.html>. This said, all instructional strategies from “chalk and talk,” where the teacher primarily lectures, to collaborative/cooperative (<http://edtech.kennesaw.edu/intech/cooperativelearning.html>), e.g. jigsaw, <http://www.jigsaw.org/>, all are potentially effective and can produce successful outcomes, **but a variety of teaching approaches** is always warranted. Research has concluded long ago that lecture as the predominant means of instruction is the least effective. Teachers, however, cling to textbooks and lecture because they were conditioned to do so, because standardized tests force surface knowledge acquisition over depth or critical thinking, and because time constraints result in teachers feeling safer by letting the book guide their way instead of creatively allowing students to explore and discover. To their credit, most new books offer teachers a variety of good teaching ideas from which teachers can capitalize.

Moreover, what has changed in educational thinking regarding learner preferences (or styles) is that a fixed “IQ” (usually based on verbal and logical ability) does not fully measure any individual's potential. In fact, more important than learning styles are the notion that **multiple intelligences** exist. First suggested Howard Garner, a summary of these “intelligences” can be found at http://www.thomasarmstrong.com/multiple_intelligences.htm, a notion consistent with differentiated learning, e.g., allowing students a variety of opportunities to practice and demonstrate outcomes, those that best tap into individual gifts and talents, is gaining wider and irrefutable acceptance.

What all of the past and modern learning theory and research have in common is that **critical thinking** (<http://www.criticalthinking.org/assessment/a-model-nal-assessment-hot.cfm>) should be the teacher's main pedagogical driver since knowledge is subsumed and engrained within the dynamic of the application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of information (see Bloom's taxonomy below). The inverse, that deeper processing results in understanding as a product of memorization, is not true. While students knowledge must be in place (a knowledge base or

super-structuring of semantic maps of connected ideas, concepts, information upon which higher level scaffolding is built), the misconception is that memorization is imperative. For this reason, Hanson does not endorse teacher reviews of information immediately preceding test taking the day of the test; this practice merely reinforces cramming, which is a discredited form of study. In fact, the best study technique is short, spaced practice and review over time. Some is, for instance, knowing addition or multiplication tables is a short cut to more complex processing, but most information now exists at our finger tips by a click of a calculator or mouse button, so what students can do with information is much more important than instant recall of trivial facts. As everyone knows, if you don't regularly use information, it quickly decays, just like the test information one studies that is forgotten almost immediately after a test. Surface processing almost always results in forgetting. Deeper processing, or purposeful manipulation of information, always results in greater retention.

Expectations and Consistency: Students live up or down to the expectations teachers create while navigating time and contexts for learning. These expectations are aided by sound instructional delivery. Aside from the teacher prerequisite of management, creating a classroom environment where learning can take place, the following teacher actions drive instructional practice today, a sequence of: a) prethinking to set the stage (<http://tip.psychology.org/ausubel.html>), b) modeling (examples of good, bad, either by teacher examples, in mathematics for example, the teacher shows how a problem should be worked, or products of former students...), c) group practice (depending on the activity, this can be ability matched or heterogeneous grouping—the instructor can best assess what groups work best), d) followed by individual practice, including feedback (the instructor should always be walking and interacting- monitoring, facilitating, clarifying-- as students work either collaboratively or autonomously), e) evaluation (testing and grading), and f) closure—bring various pieces together and rounding out the lesson or lessons—often overlooked by teachers in the rush to finish, but critical to making sense or placing in ultimate perspective the main points or “why” of the lesson. Madeline Hunter’s and Barak Rosenshine’s models reflect this sequence and can be found at http://www.windows2universe.org/teacher_resources/sci_schools/HunterLessonP.pdf and <http://epaa.asu.edu/barak/barak.html>. Other notions that are part of a teacher’s internal repertoire used for assessment of classroom effectiveness and individual or class performance include, but are not limited to Vygotsky’s “zone of proximal development,” scaffolding based on prior knowledge, and learning that includes being challenged but not being frustrated, (http://www.education.uiowa.edu/resources/tep/eportfolio/07p075folder/piaget_vygotsky.htm), Bloom’s Taxonomy of Learning, (<http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd/bloom.html>), and Bruner’s notion of learning (<http://www.newfoundations.com/GALLERY/Bruner.html>), coupled

with the notions of mastery (given enough time and variety of instructional approaches, including technological options, students can learn).

Section 3. Monitoring Instruction (Teacher Ethic)

Students ultimately respect those teachers who continue to keep them on task and insist on learning taking place (maintaining order via management and discipline; the classic text *Building Classroom Discipline* by C. M. Charles best summarizes the dominant techniques that master teachers have synthesized into daily practice—it takes approximately three years to reach competence with respect to teachers understanding disciplinary techniques for any given age group, <http://www.amazon.com/Classroom-Discipline-6th-C-Charles/dp/0801330041>). Students disrespect those teachers who fail in this important task.

From a review of more than 50 research studies, Barak Rosenshine and Norma Furst (“Research on Teacher Performance Criteria” in B. O. Smith, ed., *Research in Teacher Education: A Symposium*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall, 1971) investigated and identified teacher behaviors that appeared to have the strongest relationship to student achievement. The top ten, listed from strongest relationship to the weakest, is captured below. Notice that the key variables are common sense, supported 40 years later by subsequent decades of theory and research. The question is to what degree and how consistently does each teacher incorporate these into daily practice? This list is offered to teachers to assess effectiveness and to aid classroom management.

1. _____ **Clarity** - being clear means giving explanations that students understand, being able to answer questions accurately or in more than one way, and providing clear directions.
2. _____ **Variability** – using a variety of teaching styles and instructional materials. Also, this extends to teacher flexibility in procedures, especially those that pivot on student engagement.
3. _____ **Enthusiasm** – one who shows involvement, excitement, and interest regarding the subject matter and students.
4. _____ **Task-oriented and/or business-like behavior** – encouraging students to work hard, to work independently, and being concerned that students learn something rather than merely enjoying themselves.
5. _____ **Learner opportunity to learn** – setting clear expectations, goals, and providing opportunity to learn relative to how they will be tested.
6. _____ **Use of learner responses** – acknowledging a student’s idea by repeating or modifying it, accepting students’ feelings, or giving praise and encouragement.

7. _____ **Criticism (*negative relationship*)** – the stronger the criticism, the less likely students are to achieve or perform well. There is no evidence to support the claim that teachers should avoid telling a student that he or she is wrong or should avoid providing corrective directions, see #1, clarity.
8. _____ **Structuring comments** - providing signals to indicate the beginning (contextual *advanced organizers*- Ausubel) and end of a lesson (*closure*), providing an overview of what is about to happen, or signaling relative importance of information (“this is important”).
9. _____ **Probing** - teacher responses to a student’s answers which encourage the student or another student to elaborate upon an preliminary response, rather than giving answers, for instance, employing Socratic questioning.
10. _____ **Level of difficulty of instruction** - the student’s *perception* of the level of difficulty (not the actual level of difficulty). This does not translate to grade inflation or reducing goals or objectives. While teachers should not frustrate students, they should *facilitate* the completion of assignments.

Section 4. Self Monitoring (Student Ethic)

Not only must teachers continuously experiment with lessons and assess lesson effectiveness, but students, too, must monitor their own learning (the technical term is metacognition, <http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/students/learning/lr1metn.htm>). Simply, it’s the cognitive process and **awareness** in which a learner negotiates three variables: self, task, and texts/media. Is the learner equipped or does the learner’s background knowledge assure sufficient links for new information? Does the task match the learner’s ability, and does the text (or medium) match the learner’s language levels. And most importantly, if any of these variables break down, does the learner know when and why the breakdown occurs?

Here’s a daily mantra for learners... How would you respond to the following: What are you learning? How are you learning it? How can you use it or apply it? Why is it important? Researchers at Michigan State University’s Center for the Study of Teaching and Technology (<http://ctt.educ.msu.edu/>), interviewed students using these three questions. An awareness on the part of students who are learning, an awareness of what, how, and why. When students do not know or are not aware of what, how, and why they are learning, they do not learn.

Students should self-inventory themselves after each class. On one’s way home, can one remember the topic or goal of the class? Can one recall what the instructor had you do to learn

it? And could you tell someone else how it fits and how one might apply it to another course or task (for instance, how can it be practically applied to everyday living?)? If one can, you're thinking.

If one can answer those questions, both learner and instructor are doing something right! If one cannot, what did the student already know about the topic before attending the class or reading the assignment (KWL is one of multiple approaches that gets at triggering prior knowledge, see <http://www.readingquest.org/strat/kwl.html>)? Nothing? Everyone knows something about everything; the web of relationships (semantic map or scaffolding of ideas) and accessibility of the internet are too accessible to plead ignorance. Is the information or the class important to you? Not really? Then, one is not thinking (which releases the teacher from further obligation).

Section 5. The Successful School

A variety of articles can be found on successful schools, particularly at the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development site (<http://www.ascd.org/>, whose monthly educational journal is regularly circulated to faculty). In the context of diverse populations (mindful that every individual is unique and more differences exist within groups than between groups), John Morefield identifies success characteristics (<http://www.newhorizons.org/trans/morefield.htm#responsible>). Hanson endeavors a reputation that reflects these features:

1. [Strong Leadership](#)- **everyone** shares in this!
2. [Unity of Purpose](#)- real ways of reflecting the mission;
3. [A Total School Environment of Pervasive Caring and Nurturing](#)- works better than criticism;
4. [All Adults Are Responsible for All Children](#)- “we” and “our” are the operative pronouns;
5. [High Expectations for All Children](#)- valuing each student’s background, but setting standards;
6. [A Staff That Believes That Teaching Is a Calling, a Vocation, Not Just a Job](#);
7. [A Multicultural Curriculum Woven Into the Daily Life of the School](#)- every child has the right to feel included;
8. [Outstanding Instructional Practice](#)- professionals stay in touch within their respective fields, experiment;
9. [A Belief in the Important Role of Parents, and the Real Outreach, Involvement, and Empowerment of Parents](#);
10. [An Effective Mental Health Approach](#)- some needs may be beyond our grasps, but a team effort facilitates the process in aiding students;
11. [Safe, Clean, and Aesthetically Pleasing School Environments](#).

Section 6. “College Bound” is Our Primary Academic Goal for All Students

Parents or teachers who profess, “College is not for everyone” are patently wrong. This type of thinking is counter-productive to the expectation that *every* child should perform to one’s greatest potential (and at Hanson the minimum expectation is that the child is college ready). With few exceptions, nearly every child can succeed in the college environment, and not engaging in post-secondary education results in a diminished ability to advance and function in the 21st century. From working in the family business to working off shore to working on Wall Street, college improves performance and opportunities. Success in college is a matter of drive, dedication, commitment, goal setting, and determination, more than any measurable intelligence quotient. Colleges not only provides opportunities to broaden perspectives, but more importantly beyond skills training, develops the interpersonal skills needed to function and succeed throughout society, not merely in a closed loop.

Section 7. Character Development

Occasionally, we’ll see an inspirational poster that sums up the wisdom: “Watch you thoughts; they become words. Watch your words; they become actions. Watch your actions; they become habits. Watch your habits; they become character. Watch your character; it becomes your destiny.” (attributed to Frank Outlaw, but similarly close to Hesychios the Priest, 8th century)

Hanson’s codes of conduct are neither extraordinarily difficult nor apart from the norms of building successful behaviors and instilling character. All of **the rules and regulations are designed for each student’s future success**. Students are often apt to decry the rules, regulations, and dress codes at Hanson. Every cultural subgroup (e.g., Marines, Knights of Columbus, your family, street musicians) has its own codes of conduct, language and interactions. Students at Hanson, therefore, subscribe to a collective, routine code. These codes are part of a group ethic designed to preserve self-respect, without which respect for others diminishes. The informal code of conduct at Hanson is “We pick each other up; we do not knock each other down.” a code that extends beyond the walls of the school.

Hanson serves a pivotal social and religious function in the community. The choices students make radiate far beyond its walls. Thus, students should comport themselves in a manner that is distinguished and admirable.

We ask each student to have a shared interest in leadership and care-taking of the school. During the school year, students literally spend more waking hours at school, so we ask them to demonstrate actions that aid improvement and well-being of the school, from keeping grounds clean to conflict resolution among class members, to demonstrate behavior and interactions equal to those expected at home. Each class should function cohesively, a synergy: the image of a class body creates for itself is “only as strong as the weakest link.”

Soul, Mind, Body, three of the key words in our mission, propelled by students striving to be Christ-like in deed and word, are core to our values. While we are human, and prone to error, our response to mistakes is pivotal to character formation. The old cliché is the definition of insanity: to repeat the same detrimental behavior and expect a different outcome. Stephen R. Covey’s *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* argues, “Change starts from within,” with a spiritual dimension at the center. His habits mirror Casta’s and Kallick’s 16 habits of mind (<http://www.instituteforhabitsofmind.com/what-are-habits-mind>), including **applying past knowledge to new situations** (or learning from mistakes), thinking and communicating with clarity and precision, **managing impulsivity**, **listening with understanding and empathy**, striving for accuracy, and remaining open to continuous learning.

Covey's key ideas, drawn from <http://www.leaderu.com/cl-institute/habits/habtoc.html>:

1. **“Seek first to understand, then to be understood,”** perhaps the most important of the habits. None of the other core values below can be met if understanding is missing. Most people want to be heard, tend to pursue self-centered interests without looks at other equally valid perspectives or remain blind to inconsistencies or contradictions in logic or values. A failure to really stop, listen, and consider prohibits us from understanding truths within another person's point of view or errors in our own; thus honest communication is the most important character trait. Understanding and communication depend on compassion and empathy
2. **“The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.”** We are a family at Hanson. Any action that hurts another is a direct contradiction to our mission and values. Thus, “look for the good in others. You can express ideas, feelings, and experiences in a way that will encourage others to be open also.”
3. Students must be mindful of actions. Character, therefore, depends on “integrity, humility, fidelity, temperance, courage, justice, patience, industry, simplicity, modesty, and the adherence to the Golden Rule.” Poor choices have consequences. **“Self-awareness enables us to stand apart and examine the way we see ourselves.”**
4. Each person is a leader whose actions are a matter of principles: **“Our lives need to be centered on correct principles -- deep, fundamental truths, classic truths, generic common denominators.”**
5. Most people selfishly operate under a win at all costs mentality, but we should really think **“win-win.”** What solution to conflict is mutually satisfying?
6. “The spiritual dimension is your core, your center, your commitment to your value system.” How does Catholic doctrine, acting in a Christ-like manner, translate to simple, everyday behaviors? The administration at Hanson encourages **random acts of kindness** by its members. For ideas, visit <http://www.actsofkindness.org/>.

Section 8. In light of Hanson's mission to educate the whole person, and in the belief that each individual is a child of God, we adhere to the following values:

A. Spiritual Growth

- We value and encourage each student's faith life by teaching Christian values and doctrine. We take every opportunity to acknowledge God as the main support of life.
- Catholicism is made a living experience in our school by fostering an atmosphere in which faith, love and concern of others is evident.

- The dignity of each student is recognized. We encourage an awareness of that dignity to help each student maintain a healthy self-concept.
- All members of our school community are educated in the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church.

B. Intellectual Growth

- In our school community, each student is provided with the knowledge, skills and critical thinking ability needed to meet the challenge of higher education and to become a productive member of society.
- Our school community encourages our students to strive for academic excellence.
- We strive to broaden and enrich the interest, perspectives, and life of our school community by exposing our students to the appreciation of arts and culture.

C. Emotional/Social Growth

- An atmosphere of trust, honesty, mutual respect, and reverence for others and for self is fostered in our school community.
- Students are taught to take responsibility for their choices and accept the resulting consequences.

D. Physical Growth

- Our school community encourages students to understand the physical body as God's gift and temple, and they are encouraged to respect the physical body-their own and others.
- Students are provided with an organized, on-going program of physical education, as well as extracurricular activities, to assist with healthy development of the body.