

2018

## A case for Cavalletti in the classroom: The SALT Approach

Anne-Marie Irwin

*The University of Notre Dame Australia*, [anne-marie.irwin@nd.edu.au](mailto:anne-marie.irwin@nd.edu.au)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theo\\_conference](https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theo_conference)



This conference paper was originally published as:

Irwin, A. (2018). A case for Cavalletti in the classroom: The SALT Approach. *BBi TAITE 2018 Religious Education Academic Conference*.

<https://www.bbi.catholic.edu.au/About-Us>

Original conference paper available here:

<https://www.bbi.catholic.edu.au/About-Us>

This conference paper is posted on ResearchOnline@ND at [https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theo\\_conference/14](https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theo_conference/14). For more information, please contact [researchonline@nd.edu.au](mailto:researchonline@nd.edu.au).



Irwin, A. (2018, September) *A Case for Cavalletti in the Classroom: The SALT Approach*. Paper presented at the BBI TAITE 2018 Religious Education Academic Conference, Brisbane, Qld.

Permission granted by BBI, The Australian Institute of Theological Education for use on ResearchOnline@ND.

## **A Case for Cavalletti in the Classroom: The SALT Approach**

A paper presented at the TAITE 2018 Religious Education Academic Conference

Anne-Marie Irwin, University of Notre Dame, Australia. Email: [anne-marie.irwin@nd.edu.au](mailto:anne-marie.irwin@nd.edu.au)

### Abstract

The Scripture and Liturgy Teaching Approach (SALT Approach) is the product of a PhD study completed in 2017. Taking Montessorian principles and Sofia Cavalletti's work, the SALT Approach is built upon the Christian anthropological understanding of the human person. Its core pedagogies address the need facilitate pondering, respect for each person, and authentic choice-making. The SALT study investigated and addressed elements impacting on these pedagogies. It demonstrated that SALT's holistic approach has the potential to work successfully within diversely populated schools, and that it can meet the accountability demands. Furthermore, it offers a paradigm for religious education very much in harmony with cutting edge educational research.

This conference paper focusses on the holistic aspect of the SALT Approach explored through a consideration of a) the roots of the SALT Approach; b) revisiting the Christian anthropological understanding of the person and the anthropological perspective of Montessori and Cavalletti; c) SALT's holistic approach, fostering pondering, respect and free choice; d) the place of the SALT approach within outcomes-based education (OBE); e) SALT's link with Hargreaves and Shirley's Fourth Way, which bears a holistic slant; and f) a brief outline of the way forward.

The roots of the SALT Approach are found in Montessorian principles and Sofia Cavalletti's work. The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd emerged from the latter as a parish-based approach to Religious Education (Cavalletti & Gobbi, 1964). Godly Play is Jerome Berryman's adaptation of it (Berryman, 1994). Elements of both Catechesis of the Good Shepherd and Godly Play are used in Catholic Schools. Godly Play seems to be more extensively used due, at least in part, to the provision of more readily available guidelines and materials. The SALT Approach aims to adapt Cavalletti's work, offering a methodology applicable to the full K-6 Religious Education curriculum within mainstream Catholic primary schools. It does so following Cavalletti's Trinitarian-Christocentricity, with a focus on Scripture, the Sacraments and spiral approach which follows the Liturgical Year.

## **The Anthropological Perspective**

The Christian anthropological perspective of the person is foundational to the SALT Approach. This is the understanding that each human person is composed of body and spiritual soul; possesses intellect, free will and emotions; has an inner life capable of relating to God, humanity and all of creation; and has transcendent value and an eternal destiny (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, §55, §76). Such was the perspective of both Maria Montessori and Sofia Cavalletti. From this perspective, Montessori recognised each child's ability and desire to search for truth (Standing, 1998) and Cavalletti focussed on the child's mysterious inner life and on placing the child in an environment where it could be fostered (Cavalletti, 1983). Indeed, this study evidenced, as many others have, that students of all backgrounds are attracted to the spiritual dimension, regardless of faith differences. Participating students brought many spiritually related reflections to discussions and explored them further in the 'choice times' (which are core to SALT sessions). Moreover, children spiritually nurtured each other in their spontaneous sharing of ideas, discoveries and understandings. Spontaneous prayer often came naturally, and the film footage frequently captured children quietly focused in prayer.

## **Pedagogical Considerations**

The study's data collection was thick and rich, with the concepts of pondering, of respect and of free choice emerging time and time again, together with factors that impacted on consistently supporting them. The SALT study identified challenges emanating from several perspectives. These included a) the children themselves, who were not used to the autonomous learning expectations embedded in the approach; b) the need for readily available materials; c) teachers' pedagogical expertise; and e) accountability expectations. The focus of the study was to address the challenges and specify ways of meeting them.

The timing and structure of sessions that worked best in terms of fostering the core pedagogies followed a deceptively simple pattern. The weekly time allocation of 2.5 hours was divided into two sessions of 60 minutes and one of 30 minutes. The 60-minute sessions involved:

1. A brief 'Warm-Up', linking with previous learning and establishing the relevance of what will be the focus (approximately 5 minutes).

2. A Presentation, virtually always incorporating 2D and 3D material (approximately 10 minutes)
3. Discussion and 'I Wonder' time (approximately 10 minutes)
4. Choice Time (approximately 30 minutes).
5. Closure (approximately 10 minutes).

A particularly effective strategy for the first three parts of the 60-minute session was the avoidance of multi-media/ internet-based input: anything coming from outside the room. This effectively freed the children to engage in a personally imaginative way with the concepts introduced, following their own thoughts and reflections.

The 30-minute session was used in a variety of ways, such as formal assessment or addressing special events relating to special feast days celebrated within the school. At times it offered a continuation of choice-time.

Through pondering, students were empowered to contribute and question in deep and diverse ways: something that neither the students nor accompanying teachers were used to. Accompanying teachers were navigating uncharted waters, encountering questions and contributions that could challenge their own knowledge base. Also, teachers were accustomed to asking questions that students would only be able to 'guess answer'. This could eat into valuable time for pondering. The identified pedagogical practise was described as "*recognising the difference between 'stabs in the dark' and purposeful pondering*". Pondering led to deep learning throughout the sessions and as the students latched on to the idea, a candid sharing of thoughts became the norm. In addition, children took to pondering, be it alone, with other students, or with the adults during 'choice-times'.

Teachers (particularly relief staff) and children were accustomed to controlled student contributions, with anything else seen as unsolicited interruption. Spontaneous expression of thoughts could be 'cut off at the pass', and perceived as unsolicited or rude. The appropriate pedagogy was described as *judiciously encouraging contributions and questioning*. The children soon became more confident, and thoughts were voiced with growing frequency.

*Freely accessible hands-on material* was vital. It was observed that a great deal happened within the child (or, indeed, the adult) while personally interacting with

core materials, and responding in a myriad of ways. Maximising the student's interactions and responses happened when materials were sufficient and accessible. It was not enough for the teacher to use the materials in the presentation: it was when the students personally engaged with the materials that learning became deeper. Many materials were prepared prior to the study, and continued throughout it. This carried implications for the SALT Approach's wider application and highlighted the need to develop ready-made, easily available materials.

*Pondering 'big questions'* over time engaged the children's interest. These were questions that the teacher should avoid directly answering or explaining. Students became aware that some questions had deep, and multi-faceted answers that they could eventually work out for themselves. Big questions such as 'Why did John call Jesus the Lamb of God?' 'Why was Jesus born in a stable?' 'Is there anything God can't do?' kept the students thinking all year and into the next. The challenge for the teacher was to encourage thought and discussion, refraining from giving the answer.

Yet another pedagogical nuance was that of *equipping children with a rich vocabulary, unlocking the power to ponder*. This was achieved by opting to use richly loaded words, which could be explained as needed. Using the actual scriptural passages rather than adaptations was one aspect of this. As the students strove to express their deeper thoughts, the richness language increased and they expressed themselves with growing ease, and even elegance.

Practising a *pedagogy of respect* is not new, but the study offered opportunities to observe that well-intentioned adults are often under pressure and are time-poor. Demonstrating respect in such a climate can be overlooked. Whole sessions could be stymied if respect, for whatever reason, was absent or when children entered the space in an agitated state that, having experienced what essentially amounted to a lack of respect. In addition, discipline issues were at times de-escalated in the SALT sessions: something that was reflected in the school's statistical data, monitoring discipline problems.

Respect was often embedded in small details of attentiveness to the inner person, shown in such details as truly listening, shaping the tone of voice to reflect sensitive

awareness and valuing what the child valued. Addressing disruptions in personalised, respectful ways could be challenging. Using standardised approaches, even very good ones, such as PBS4L, didn't work all the time or for all children. The Christian anthropological perspective brought flexibility and a more tailored approach. In fact, great consonance was found with contemporary recommendations, particularly when handling complex trauma issues (Brunzell, Waters, & Stokes, 2015; McInnes, Diamond & Whittington, 2014; Mendelson et al., 2015; Vacca, 2008; West et al., 2014).

Additionally, respect grew through an understanding of human virtues. Late in the second iteration (Term 3) it became clear that students had little or no understanding of their own human nature. They were not aware of the concept of personal human virtues and the empowering possibilities they held. In fact, 'virtue' was a totally new word for them. They simply had never heard it. This emerged because, in an attempt to find fresh ways of addressing behaviour issues clearly, the explicit language of virtues was introduced. It was, for these children, a 'light-bulb' moment. They were galvanised! New materials were prepared and introduced, opening the world of virtues to the children. Ways were developed to explicitly discuss such concepts as virtues being exclusive to human beings, the existence of the conscience, and virtues being good habits, which are strengthened by practise. The four virtues identified as particularly relevant for these Year Two children were those of obedience, honesty, responsibility and thoughtfulness. The overall impact was that of empowering children in self-control.

Finally, respect for the child was also shown by responding straightforwardly to students' honest enquiries. What is sin? Why do people die? Who is Satan? Why does God let bad things happen? These types of question are deep, but, in contrast to those discussed above, they came from the children themselves and it was clear that the students asked them with the expectation of a response from a Catholic perspective. In this case, the implication for teachers was that a significant understanding of the Church's perspective was needed, as well as the skill of responding in age-appropriate ways. A useful starting point was often 'What do you think?', which established the pitch and content of the required response.

The SALT Approach required offering truly autonomous choices, rather than controlled pseudo-choices. Contemporary educational research emphasises the need for this. Authentic choices foster intrinsic motivation (Lüftenegger et al., 2012; Schunk & Zimmerman 2012; Zumbunn et al., 2011). This requires the provision of substantial time, and upon allowing for real freedom in choice-making. Having the freedom to choose deeply motivates the individual person.

When it came to pedagogical strategies enabling freedom of choice and assisting children to self-regulate their learning, there was much to do. It began by establishing firm boundaries within which worthwhile and interesting choices were made available. As time progressed, students were exposed to new ways of exploring ideas, interacting with new resources as the boundaries were widened. This required regularly demonstrating and practising new skills despite time, space and organisational challenges. Doing this constituted a distinct pedagogical choice. It paid dividends, as the children responded with enthusiasm, engaging in the tasks with verve. However, it required a real 'letting go', with the teacher not being able to monitor everything that was happening at any one time.

Subsequently, the SALT study identified ways and opportunities for 'letting go'. One strategy involved allowing students to frequently re-visit concepts and activities. This was an initial concern for accompanying and observing teachers, who were accustomed to keeping the children's focus on the immediate content. However, revisiting related significantly to pondering and going deeper, as children came back to materials introduced in earlier times, exploring, for example, the Moments of the Mass, Parables and the Paschal Mysteries. The pedagogical strategy of 'letting go' went hand in hand with appreciating the teacher's role as facilitator and observer in choice time. As the year progressed, this was a recurring challenge for the accompanying teachers, especially in the light of the current unit driven approach and the pressure to meet accountability requirements matching those units.

Balancing freedom with accountability is something merits further research. It was challenging when some children, having tasted freedom, tended to 'buck the system' rushing through activities that were to be completed (albeit at a time of their choice), so as to move on to what they *really* wanted to do. Pedagogically acceptable ways of



keeping students on track were identified. Choice Options Charts assisted, but some children felt over-controlled and frustrated. It was important to trust in the power of engagement once the children's interest was piqued, and to combine it with following more closely children who required assistance in this area.

### **SALT and Outcomes Based Education**

Accountability issues lead into the relationship between the SALT Approach and outcomes-based education. OBE and its assessment structure dominate the day-to-day lives of teachers and children. Contemporary research supports that the excessive focus on outcomes can fragment learning, boxing knowledge, understanding and skills into measurable chunks. This binds teachers into a world of micro-accountability and drains energies (Berlach, & O'Neill, 2008; Riley, 2014). While beyond the scope of this paper, the degree to which this is appropriate and helpful for religious education can be questioned. The SALT Approach is holistic and organic, focussing on rich, deep thinking and learning. OBE can be a stone in the road. As has been noted by many others, precisely defined measures of accountability and achievement don't sit well with encouraging the spiritual nature of children, leaving adults and children with little time to think and ponder in deep ways, (Hyde & Rymarz, 2009; De Souza, 2003). An OBE approach says to child and adult alike that what is measured is important, what is not measured is not important. In religious education, should not the message be that what is important cannot really be measured and what is measured has limited value in the spiritual domain?

Assigning grades in the early years was the practice at the school where the study took place and participating students received reports assigning places on a bell curve (a fact of which the children were not explicitly aware). The study evidenced that children, who had been fully and delightedly engrossed, saw grades as an evaluation of their inner attitude, even though such was not intended. SALT's holistic approach promoted trust, and there seemed to be a breach of that trust when children sensed a kind of judgement of the inner self, put out to the world for viewing. Accountability, assessment and reporting have a valued place, but many of the students in this study lacked the maturity to understand that their religious literacy and perhaps skills were quite distinct from their personal inner journey. The

study identified that the perceived judging of the inner child needs to be more effectively avoided. Using ungraded comments is, perhaps, one simple way around it.

That said, the study demonstrated that the SALT Approach could function within an OBE environment. A range of compatible tools were used, including: a) filming and audio recording, accessing students' strong verbalisation skills; b) the students' own collection of work samples; c) allocating dedicated time for formal tasks; and d) individual interviews and focus group discussions. Such data was harnessed to shape sensitively written comments for the reports.

### **SALT's link with Hargreaves and Shirley's Fourth Way**

There is an interesting link between the SALT Approach and the 'Fourth Way' proposed by Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) and further discussed by other researchers (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014; Sahlberg, 2016). These researchers suggest revised ways of approaching education, so as to facilitate deep learning. Briefly summarising, the First, Second and Third Ways refer to the educational impact of political approaches particularly since the 1960s. The First Way, dominant in the 1960s and 1970s, allowed for teacher independence and innovative approaches, with little accountability requirements. Teachers were left to get on with the job. The Second Way of the 1980s was a backlash and its goal was that of reaching consistent standards. School rankings, competition, standards-based reforms, and market-driven accountability were tied to funding. The downside for the Second Way was that the quality, creativity and depth of learning took a downward spiral. From the late 1990s until now, the Third Way dominates. Its data driven decision-making and top-down dominance results in the continued loss of freedom, independence and creativity for teachers and students alike. Micro-management and data collection are not leading to better results. Hargreaves & Shirley criticise this, predicting that it would lead to 'alienating students, corrupting classrooms, manipulating educators, and deceiving the public' (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009, p. 22).

Hargreaves and Shirley's Fourth Way recommends taking the good and leaving the bad of the three earlier ways. It takes a 'bottom up' approach, emphasising both

democracy and professionalism, restoring autonomy to education. It involves moving away from data-driven work and micromanagement, towards more trusting partnerships and mindful teaching and learning. This has implications for the effective use of outcomes, with deep-learning being a prominent factor (Fullan & Langworthy, 2013). Interestingly, the term 'holistic' often comes up in 'the Fourth Way' literature and is mentioned 8 times in Fullan & Langworthy's *A Rich Seam* (2014). The SALT Approach can offer a pathway towards that change, not only in religious education, but across academic domains. This can occur if schools are afforded sufficient autonomy while functioning within a diocesan system of education.

### **The Way Forward**

While the SALT study covered other significant aspects relating to the adaptation of Cavalletti's work for schools, this paper focussed on its holistic nature and the three core pedagogical understandings, which are very much supported by cutting-edge educational research. SALT's spiral approach is organically aligned with the liturgical year. It is about a continuum of learning rather than a set of distinctive, lock-stepped units. Such a personalised approach, takes students from where they are, offering space and time for a personal pursuit of truth, goodness and beauty, and towards a personal encounter with God. It allows for individual levels of maturity, as well as differences in student perspectives. These aspects are particularly valuable in the light of current moves away from a unit driven curriculum and towards a continuum of learning approach.

The availability of a substantial amount of teaching and learning materials is essential for the SALT Approach. A number of compatible resources are already available, but frequent and realistic student accessibility needs to be facilitated. In addition, work is in progress for the provision of SALT-specific materials.

Implementing the SALT Approach in schools offers opportunities to align research and practice at the grassroots level. It offers a methodology compatible within a variety of diocesan requirements, curriculum outlines and programmes. There are valuable opportunities for teachers wishing to undertake post-graduate research

studies intimately connected with actual teaching. Such studies would incorporate a 'Companion Leadership' model, involving a trusting interaction between the companion-leader-guide (possibly the post-graduate supervisor) and the teacher. Developing and implementing the SALT Approach within current social and educational climates opens the way for close collaboration and research possibilities across the academic and educational spectrum.

#### Reference List

- Berlach, R. G., & O'Neill, M. (2008). Western Australia's 'English' Course of study: To OBE or not to OBE, perhaps That is the Question. *Australian Journal of Education*, 52(1), 49-62.
- Berryman, J. (1994). *Godly play: An imaginative approach to religious education*. Augsburg Books.
- Brunzell, T., Waters, L., & Stokes, H. (2015). Teaching with strengths in trauma-affected students: A new approach to healing and growth in the classroom. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 85(1), 3.
- Cavalletti, S. (1983). The religious potential of the child: The description of an experience with children from ages three to six. *Trans. Patrica M. Coulter and Julie M. Coulter*. New York: Paulist.
- Cavalletti, S., & Gobbi, G. (1964). *Teaching doctrine and liturgy: The Montessori Approach*. Alba House.
- Congregation for Catholic Education (1988). *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School*, retrieved from [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccatheduc\\_doc\\_19880407\\_catholic-school\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_19880407_catholic-school_en.html)
- De Souza, M. (2003). Contemporary influences on the spirituality of young people: Implications for education. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 8(3), 269-279.
- Fullan, M., & Langworthy, M. (2013). *Towards a new end: New pedagogies for deep learning*. Seattle: Creative Commons,
- Fullan, M., & Langworthy, M. (2014). *A rich seam: How new pedagogies find deep learning*. MaRS Discovery District.
- Hargreaves, A., & Shirley, D. L. (2009). *The fourth way: The inspiring future for educational change*. Corwin Press.
- Hyde, B., & Rymarz, R., (2009). *Religious education in Catholic primary schools: Contemporary issues and perspectives for RE teachers*. David Barlow Publishing.
- Lüftenegger, M., Schober, B., Van de Schoot, R., Wagner, P., Finsterwald, M., & Spiel, C. (2012). Lifelong learning as a goal—Do autonomy and self-regulation in school result in well prepared pupils? *Learning and Instruction*, 22(1), 27-36.

- McInnes, E., Diamond, A., & Whittington, V. (2014). *Developing Trauma-Informed Pedagogy in a Year 2-3 Classroom* (Doctoral dissertation, Inter-Disciplinary Press).
- Mendelson, T., Tandon, S. D., O'Brennan, L., Leaf, P. J., & Ialongo, N. S. (2015). Brief report: Moving prevention into schools: The impact of a trauma-informed school-based intervention. *Journal of Adolescence*, *43*, 142-147.
- Riley, D. M. (2012). Aiding and abetting: The bankruptcy of outcomes-based education as a change strategy. *American Society for Engineering Education*, American Society for Engineering Education.
- Sahlberg, P. (2016). The global educational reform movement and its impact on schooling. *The handbook of global education policy*, 128-144.
- Schunk, D. H., & Zimmerman, B.J (Eds.). (2012). *Motivation and self-regulated learning: Theory, research, and application*. Routledge.
- Standing, E. M. (1998). *Maria Montessori, her life and work*. NAL.
- Vacca, J. S. (2008). Breaking the cycle of academic failure for foster children—What can the schools do to help? *Children and Youth Services Review*, *30*(9), 1081-1087.
- West, S. D., Day, A. G., Somers, C. L., & Baroni, B. A. (2014). Student perspectives on how trauma experiences manifest in the classroom: Engaging court-involved youth in the development of a trauma-informed teaching curriculum. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *38*, 58-65.
- Zumbrunn, S., Tadlock, J., & Roberts, E. D. (2011). Encouraging self-regulated learning in the classroom: A review of the literature. *Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium (MERC)*, 1-28.

