

# Positive changes afoot for gifted learners

A new set of global principles aims to create positive change on behalf of gifted students locally, regionally, and globally, and indicates the professional learning needed to ensure ākongā can fulfil their highest potential.

**M**ore ākongā fulfilling their potential – that’s the hope of Dr Rosemary Cathcart, one of the contributors to the Global Principles for Professional Learning in Gifted Education.

Rosemary, director of REACH Education Consultancy, was on the initial panel and then on the writing committee for the principles, working with the World Council for Gifted and Talented Children.

The hope is that these principles, along with the

curriculum refresh in New Zealand, willing educators, and value given to Māori concepts of giftedness, will lead to a sea change in the way schools cater for gifted learners.

Rosemary has worked with teachers in New Zealand and abroad and been involved with gifted learners for nearly 40 years.

But throughout this time, she says, it has been a struggle to have the uniqueness of these children acknowledged, or to have plans in place for teachers and schools.



Giftedness could be across a range of areas, including the Arts.

## The Global Principles

Rosemary says there hasn't been a statement of principles to work to across the world. Now there is, and there is an acceptance of a more child-centred approach.

She says these principles align closely to the work done at REACH.

"When I went onto the World Council panel, I was surprised and delighted to find that we were already doing the kinds of things that people all round the world were saying needed to be done."

The Global Principles are summarised as a 10-point list. One of these principles is 'holistic', which means that professional learning in gifted education should address the whole child, including academic, social, and emotional needs.

Another is 'broad', which considers different forms of giftedness and options for modifying curriculum and instruction accordingly.

These are consistent with the vision of REACH Education, an organisation created in 2005 to support schools in working effectively with gifted learners by providing quality professional development. One of their key concepts is recognising the different learning and developmental needs of each gifted child.

As Rosemary emphasises – gifted children think differently, and their needs are unique.

## What it means to be gifted

During her research, Rosemary asked senior high school students how they'd like to be remembered. The gifted students all answered that they'd like to be remembered as having contributed to humanity – or being a kind, thoughtful and caring person.

The questionnaire also revealed that gifted students were three or four times more likely to be involved in service activities.

And Rosemary says those who are gifted also tend to have a strong sense of justice.

However, a lot of young, gifted learners can become frustrated, bored or unhappy because they can struggle to relate to others and form friendships.

"They tend to be highly sensitive and acutely observant in their area of interest. Outside of that some can be completely blind, of course, if they get intensely interested in something.

A house could burn down while they are inventing the next space rocket.

"The real word in there is intensity. Whatever they do, they do with intensity."

## A different way of thinking

But the very definition of 'giftedness' is being rethought.

And Rosemary says it is a much wider category than many believe it to be. It could be leadership qualities, for example, rather than just academic achievement.

"The leader is not necessarily the person charging down the mountain, it could be the person at the back who is respected, and everybody ultimately listens to."

Qualities of this wider view can be seen in action.

Rosemary cites environmental activist Greta Thunberg, and 2012 Young New Zealander of the Year, Sam Johnson, founder of the Canterbury Student Volunteer Army.

These people demonstrate typical qualities of giftedness in looking to give back to their communities rather than being concerned with self.

The Global Principles encompass a wider view of giftedness in line with indigenous views around the world, and closer to home, te ao Māori concepts which Rosemary says we are fortunate to have here in New Zealand.

It involves linking abilities to community, and if you are gifted it is your duty to give something back. There is also a spiritual element. But most interestingly, Rosemary says, the priority is the qualities that person has. It is the qualities you have that shape the way you use your abilities.

## Putting PLD into practice

Former teacher Jos Evans undertook the year-long REACH course for Teaching Gifted and Talented. He believes there needs to be understanding from teachers and management of the Global Principles for Professional Learning in Gifted Education. The principles resonate with his own teaching experience.

The principles are relevant across the world and have sound academic support, Jos says. He believes becoming familiar with them will help to better recognise the needs of learners.

He adds that professional development in this area should be part of every teacher's training.

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*"With gifted students, it's really about understanding that they want to find out more. They have a lot of curiosity – and if we don't, we have a risk of those students getting bored at school, and then they under-achieve."*

Cheryl Jaffar



Abbey, Shaelyn and Riley at St Mary's College in Wellington are previous recipients of the Ministry of Education's Awards for Gifted Learners.

This recognition of individual needs also means recognition and value of Māori and Pacific cultures and all cultures and their value systems, says Jos.

"Equitable inclusiveness and holistic education to meet the specific needs of our learners – giving acknowledgement and facilitation to their individual learning needs, validating cultural perspectives and recognising gender issues are learnings that needed to be embodied and facilitated in our education system, not just for our gifted and talented learners of all backgrounds, but for all students and educators."

Jos says the REACH course took these concepts and translated them to practical classroom scenarios.

And the Global Principles do this too. They are mostly commonsense initiatives that are good practice anyway, such as inclusiveness, he says.

"What works for the gifted also works for the rest of the students."

They are flexible though, rather than being a set of rules. The key is to have awareness and a way of thinking in place first, then teaching practices can derive from that.

One key thought is acknowledging that people learn in different ways – so many methods of pedagogy are possible and desirable to keep learners engaged.

### Understanding the students

Cheryl Jaffar is director of student support services and HoD for learning support at Howick College. She was

able to complete the REACH course after the school received PLD funding through the Ministry of Education's awards for teachers of gifted learners.

Two learning support coordinators (LSC), including Cheryl (as well as two other school staff) used the funding for the REACH course, and one LSC received a Gifted Study Award to pursue Massey University's Postgraduate Diploma in Specialist Teaching (Gifted).

Cheryl says LSCs at the school had identified gifted learning as an area in which they needed more training.

"We tend to focus on the students that are struggling, rather than the other end of the scale. So doing the REACH course was definitely a mind shift for us," she says.

"We weren't looking for a quick fix. We didn't want someone to come in and do a one-day or two-day workshop because that's not sustainable."

So, the LSCs took on the one-year REACH course, in addition to their regular work. It was intense, and challenging with Covid-19, but it has helped them immensely in their work with gifted learners at the school.

"When you read the global principles, the entire content of the REACH course is tied in. Everything that we did is covered," says Cheryl.

"It wasn't just about strategies, it was about understanding the students."

It is also necessary to challenge the students, says Cheryl.

For example, in a maths class, it is not uncommon for a Year 9 student to be assigned to Year 10 maths, but Cheryl

says that is not enough. It's about what the teacher is doing in the class to extend the thinking. It's giving them a deeper question to investigate.

"With gifted students, it's really about understanding that they want to find out more. They have a lot of curiosity – and if we don't, we have a risk of those students getting bored at school, and then they under-achieve."

Cheryl says all the LSCs at Howick College are supporting gifted students and are working to 'extend' them.

A key is to find a student's area of passion. If they can find an opportunity in that field, and excel, then there is a flow-on effect so that all schoolwork benefits.

One example is the REGENERATE Game Jam which may offer an avenue to a few of the students who are passionate about gaming and coding.

Another student at the school was a gifted drama student – and was also a recipient of a Ministry Award for Gifted Learners.

### Finding a way forward

Rosemary says the goal is that the different learning needs of gifted youngsters are clearly and unequivocally seen as an official priority.

"What we are talking about is not so much the mastery of this, that or the other, but the ability to go beyond the known – and I think that is what our gifted students can bring to us."

## Read more



The Global Principles



REACH Education Consultancy



Support for gifted education in Aotearoa New Zealand



Awards for gifted learners or groups of learners, and learners with exceptional abilities



Awards for teachers to access learning opportunities to support gifted learners

## Global principles for professional learning in gifted education

### The 10 principles

1. **Tiered content:** Various PLD programmes for all educators
2. **Evidence-based:** Based on best practice and research
3. **Holistic:** Addresses the whole child
4. **Broad:** Recognises different forms, programmes and options
5. **Equitable:** Addresses diversity
6. **Comprehensive:** Provisions for school personnel
7. **Integral:** In context of entire school programme
8. **Ongoing:** Opportunities for continuing PLD
9. **Sustainable:** Built into policy, monitored, systems set up
10. **Empowering:** Prepare educators to be effective supporters

### Applying the Global Principles!

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