



Building a Rich Knowledge of the Learner

FROM THE ONLINE RESOURCE *INCLUSIVE PRACTICE AND THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM*

*Ka whānau mai te pēpi,
Ka takaia ki te harakeke.
Ka noho te harakeke hei kākahu,
hei rongoā,
Hei mea tākaro,
Hei oranga mōna a mate noa ia.*

*When a child is born,
He is wrapped in the muka cloth made
of flax.
The flax provides clothing, medicine,
Toys for play and leisure,
And the means for living and survival.*

“ *Effective pedagogy begins with knowing the student well.* ”

Narrative Assessment: A Guide for Teachers, 2009, page 22

Working towards an inclusive curriculum begins with building a rich knowledge of learners. Effective teachers ask:

- Where does each of my students come from? What do I know about their identity, language, and culture? What can I learn from their whānau?
- What do they already know? How do they make sense of their world?
- What can they already do? What do they love to do?
- How can I understand and respond to their strengths, passions, and interests?

Knowing all students

All students are active, capable learners with unique potential. However, students demonstrate competence in a range of ways and progress at different rates. A key role of the teacher is to really get to know their students, so that they can help them to recognise their competencies, demonstrate their strengths, and work towards their aspirations.

To build awareness of your current practice, you can ask:

- How do I encourage each student to participate in learning? How do I acknowledge their strengths and support the development of them?
- Do I use a growing knowledge of my students to make connections to their prior learning and enhance the relevance of new learning?
- Have I identified strategies that are most likely to support my students to learn?
- How does my teaching impact on my students?

Addressing such questions will help you to think of each student as a competent and capable learner. It will encourage you to get to know students with an 'inside' rather than an 'outside' view.

“ We often stop at the outside of the child, focusing on how they appear, rather than looking through to the inside. For Pasifika students, looking inside is key to understanding important cultural values and principles, so that these can be used as a part of the foundation for learning. ”

Pasifika education facilitator, project interview, 2013

Knowing our learners requires us as teachers to build relationships with them and to understand what we bring to these relationships – we need to know *ourselves* well in order to be able to really come to know our *learners*. Sometimes, our own beliefs and perspectives about disability and diversity may determine how we see, know, and teach students. Our assumptions can either support inclusive practices or be barriers to students participating and learning.

If students come with 'labels' or diagnosed disabilities, we should not assume they are less capable of learning than their peers. When we act on such assumptions, we may inadvertently deprive them of the chance to engage in the same activities and opportunities as other students. As we build knowledge of their strengths and aspirations, we are more likely to provide opportunities for them to realise their potential as active learners. The challenges they face should not be ignored, but nor should they limit them from learning within the New Zealand Curriculum with their peers.



In [Example 9](#), a year 5-6 teacher builds on what she knows about her students to plan a science unit and creates space for students to bring their interests and talents to the fore – in the process, she learns more about her students and they learn from each other.

Encouraging student voice

“ Often the student has the best ideas of how we might work with them, if we take time to reflect on what they might be trying to communicate. ”

Outreach teacher, project interview, 2013

The best way to understand a student's preferred way of learning is to ask them (Causton-Theoharis, 2009) and to include them in planning and assessment processes. This will mean working alongside them to understand what they want to learn and how to make learning accessible for them.

All students can communicate. Some students use their physicality (gestures, signs, eye movements) to do so, while others use augmentative technologies. Alternative communication modes such as visual representations (e.g., Picture Exchange Communication) or voice activation devices enable students to develop and maintain relationships, to gain and give information, to express feelings, and to control their environment.

Classroom teachers play an important role in facilitating the development of language and communication. Encouraging all students to express their needs and concerns can be supported through strategies that identify effective ways of communicating for students. The teacher needs to consider how to support students so they feel comfortable and able to discuss their learning confidently, with both the teacher and their classmates. Underpinning this is the teacher's knowledge of the students' cultural backgrounds and the approaches to communication that the students are comfortable with. Successful communication outcomes allow students to achieve in their learning and in their relationships with classmates, the school, and the wider community.

Research by Dr Jude MacArthur (2009) showed that students with additional needs are eager to enter into conversations that will help teachers understand their views and their strengths and aspirations.

“ *Students ask to be part of the group of all children and young people at school, and they want their teachers to:*

- *get to know them*
- *give them opportunities to talk about what school is like for them*
- *listen to their views*
- *take their views into consideration when they are planning and teaching so they can learn*
- *support them to make school a better place for them*
- *allow them to be part of the whole peer group and to be fully involved.*

For these things to happen, teachers need time:

- *to talk with their students and their families and whānau*
- *to share ideas and experiences with other teachers*
- *to consult with colleagues who can inform them about the effects of students' impairments on their learning*
- *to develop respectful and equal relationships in their school.*

”

MacArthur (2009), page 42



In [Example 5](#), a teacher collects student voice via text and images on a class blog. On reviewing the blog entry, he notices shifts in students' learning and thinking in mathematics.

For authentic student voice, there needs to be a high level of trust within the classroom. This means establishing an environment and processes that feel safe and comfortable for the student. In the following example, the teacher works with a student so that he feels able to contribute to the direction of his learning.

Adam is a year 10 student. He wants to be involved in decision making about his learning. He is able to think about and discuss his learning with some key people in his life, such as his parents, the specialist teacher, and his sister. However he is overwhelmed and anxious about attending a planning meeting with other people.

Adam works with his teacher to develop a PowerPoint to show examples of his current learning. He includes two new goals he wants to work towards. He decides that he will try to stay for five minutes to present the PowerPoint to his support team but to leave when he feels he needs to. In this way, he is involved in the process of decision making and thinking about next goals, and team members have the benefit of Adam's insights in a way that causes him the least stress. Decisions made after Adam leaves are discussed with him before his IEP is written up.

When students like Adam see that their thoughts and opinions on learning are valued, they are more likely to let you into their world and share their hopes and aspirations. However, hearing and understanding student voice is not enough in itself - it must be acted upon. Only in this way will there be real student agency - where students feel that their voice has led to meaningful action and will see the results of their decisions and choices. Students will hold back if they perceive that what they are saying is not going to make a difference. In the example below, the teacher tries to ensure that her students' thoughts and ideas on learning are regularly incorporated into the classroom programme.

Gina is a year 7 student who loves to read. She is able to use symbols to make sense of most work and can read some sight words, especially the names of people she likes. Each day the teacher stops the class ten minutes before school ends and asks students to think about their day as a learner. She asks the students to think about one thing that can change to help them in their learning for the next day. Students share this information together, using either a goal diary or a visual chart. Gina uses an adapted goal diary that has visual charts. She is able to discuss this with her teacher or with her peers.

As a group, view the video clip [How Teachers Can Help Me Learn](#) and discuss:



- What teaching strategies help to make Katrina's school experiences positive ones?
- What does this clip make you think about? How might you respond to it in your practice?

You may wish to then also:



- undertake the activity [What Students Say](#), to help you understand your students' perspectives
- explore the guide [Down syndrome and learning](#) on the Inclusive Education site.

Learner profiles

Learner profiles give students opportunities for self-advocacy, enabling them to express who they are and their strengths, aspirations, and passions. Learner profiles help students to address assumptions and to share what helps them learn and the challenges they face when learning. Profiles inform teachers about their students, and they help school teams to understand students' perspectives and to build relationships with them, especially at times of transition.

Learner profiles can be developed in a range of formats – for example, as a document with photos, a video clip, a blog, or a PowerPoint. Students can create them by themselves or in collaboration with whānau and teachers. Although profiles can be a strong support for students with special education needs, note that some students may prefer to *talk* about themselves and what works for them in the learning environment.



In pairs or small groups, read the [TKI information sheet](#) for teachers, students, and whānau on learner profiles and reflect on how you might develop learner profiles with students in your class.



For further information and examples of learner profiles, explore the guide [Developing an Inclusive Classroom Culture](#) on the Inclusive Education site.



Contributions from whānau

Parents and whānau are an integral part of the school community and want their children welcomed for all that they bring to this community. They are their children's 'first teachers'. Building relationships with whānau and recognising the wealth of information that they have about their children will help your school to get to know students and give an insight into their strengths and aspirations. Planned conversations (e.g., IEP meetings or hui), informal chats, emails, and phone calls all contribute to this knowledge-building process.



In [Example 1](#), a year 2 student's achievements at home and school are shared between settings to build a rich picture of the learner and inform next steps.

Family knowledge can also help you and a student's support team to understand the student's way of communicating and to verify that your interpretations of their communication are accurate.

Students with diverse needs and their whānau should have access to the same range of conversations with you as other students. Shared information between home and school helps build pride in a student's achievements.

“ The parents' point of view is important. They know their children and their capabilities well. If there are no opportunities for this [knowledge] to be incorporated into the design of programmes, this valuable information, and the inclusion of parent voice, is not valued. Often its only when an IEP is set up that parents are asked to contribute. ”

Pasifika education facilitator, project interview, 2013



In [Example 11](#), suggestions from a year 13 student's parents are shared by the learning support coordinator with subject teachers to help their planning and teaching.



As a group, discuss the questions alongside the two dimensions below from the [Educultural Wheel](#). Add to the questions from your own teaching experience.

Dimension	Teacher questions
Manaakitanga Ethic of caring	In what ways do I express care and hospitality towards my students and their whānau? How do my interactions enable whānau aspirations to be reflected in the curriculum? How do I share good news with whānau?
Pūmanawatanga Morale, tone, pulse	How happy are the students in my classroom? How does the classroom culture promote respect between all and enable whānau to contribute to students' learning? How does the classroom culture uplift the mana of students and their whānau?

Who else can help you know the learner?

As well as your own observations, and contributions from whānau, valuable insights into learners' needs and aspirations will come from regular communication with members of wider teams supporting individuals or groups of students. These teams may draw their members from school, home, specialist services, and the community.

Regular communication with members of such teams plays an important role in building knowledge of the student. To do this effectively and respectfully, you need to agree on ways of communicating with team members that respect the commitments of each person, including whānau members.

Planned meetings, informal conversations, emails, and phone calls are all opportunities to share knowledge of students so their strengths, passions, and interests are made increasingly more visible. These interactions are also opportunities to identify and discuss challenges that students face in their communities and to work together to respond to these.

Building a knowledge of the learner is important when developing learning pathways for students from year 10. Collaborative planning between the Careers Department, the student, whānau, specialist teachers, deans, and subject teachers helps to determine a learning pathway that meets the needs, interests, and aspirations of the student. This may mean a shift in attitude within senior leadership teams to think creatively and flexibly about timetabling, subject choices, and learning pathways outside of the immediate school environment.



In [Example 8](#), subject teachers for a year 9 class collaboratively plan a unit of work and keep in touch to share updates on students' progress.

The following table suggests shifts in practice that will contribute to building a rich knowledge of the learner.

Moving from ...	Towards ...
Attempting to get to know the student from one or two meetings	Developing relationships and growing a rich knowledge of the student over time
Relying on limited information to make decisions about student capability	Drawing on a broad knowledge base - from previous teachers, the student, their whānau, and team members providing support
Adults deciding what can and needs to be done to support learning	Adults listening to and supporting the learner to be an active participant in decisions about their learning Finding out what a learner can do and wants to do, and using this to support learning
Defining a student's needs and learning opportunities by their impairment	Recognising and accessing support so the learner can work within the curriculum
Having all the answers from day one	Identifying one aspect of learning and working on that to build knowledge and achieve progress over time
Teachers working on their own	Teachers working as a part of a collaborative team and sharing information

As a group, use the table above and the following questions to reflect on your practice and how it could change to better support **all** learners.

1. How well do we know and work with our students in respectful and positive ways? Are there some students who miss out?
2. How do our beliefs about disability and diversity support or limit our relationships with our students?
3. How do we gain information about what our students can and want to do? Who do we consult in their network of support? How do we use this information?
4. How do we support our students and their whānau to ensure they feel safe, connected, and valued in the school community?

