



Building on Strengths and Aspirations

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

E tipu e rea mō ngā rā o tōu ao ...

*Grow, tender young shoot, in the days
destined for you ...*

Āpirana Ngata, 1874–1950

We all have dreams and aspirations, shaped by where we come from, what we already know, who we interact with, and where we see ourselves in the future. And we all have strengths, which we build on and draw on to work towards our aspirations.

When we work in collaboration, we learn together and achieve more through the support we give one another. In such situations, some students may readily build on their strengths and work towards their aspirations. Others will require more support to do so. Along with whānau and peers, teachers and leaders play a key role in providing this support.

It is critical that we recognise and respond to students' aspirations and strengths. A common barrier faced by all students is others underestimating their potential. Teachers also need to look for the *yet-to-be-discovered* abilities and talents of their students (Giangreco, 2010).

“ [We need to] pick up on how we perceive the learner ... because if the teacher doesn't believe the student can do it, guess what? They won't.”

Academic, project interview, 2013

Why is building on strengths and aspirations so important for students with additional learning needs?

A diagnosis tells us something about a student with additional learning needs, providing some understanding for the student, their family, and those who support them. However, it may not tell us much about their strengths and aspirations. In many ways, students with additional needs are at greater risk of people focusing on what they *can't* do and overlooking their capabilities and dreams. Everyone should actively challenge low expectations for any student, regardless of who holds them. (In some contexts, this may include members of their whānau.)

All students have a right to express themselves in a non-judgmental, safe environment in which they feel their aspirations are valued. It is essential that they are supported in planning for what they want to achieve. Building on their strengths, prior knowledge, and interests will then engage and motivate them as they work towards realising these plans.

If we are to recognise every student as an active learner, we need to get to know them in order to understand and reflect back their strengths and aspirations. When teachers, peers, the student, and whānau work together to achieve this, the student will see their learning as purposeful and of use to them in becoming contributing, active members of their communities.

Regular conversations provide opportunities for a student and those in their network of support to share their understandings of the student's strengths, passions, and interests and the changes in these over time. They are an important forum for exploring ways of supporting aspirations and addressing challenges or barriers.



The following table outlines the benefits of collaborative conversations for a student, their whānau and teachers, and others in the student's network of support. Working in pairs, choose 2-3 rows and identify examples of how they are seen in practice in your school.

Collaborative conversations support ...	
... students to:	... whānau, teachers, and others to:
share their aspirations, their preferences for learning, their strengths, and their knowledge	share their specific knowledge of the student
develop relationships with their teacher, peers, and others supporting them	build relationships with both the student and one another
feel welcomed into a new class or school and know that their needs will be met	understand the context for support and the strengths of the school community
talk about what helps them to learn	discuss and agree on appropriate differentiations and adaptations in the classroom
have a say in what happens for them and where they are heading	use the knowledge and skills that others bring to agree with the student on what is best for them and where they are heading
know that the school recognises them as a learner within the school community	know that they are part of an effective network of support for the student and their teacher
identify the key people working with them, who they are, and what they do	identify the key people and their roles in the family, the school, and other agencies providing support
plan for working together in the future.	plan for working together in the future.

Paora, a year 8 student, is a non-verbal student who uses a communication device effectively and independently. Recently at a student-led conference, he shared how he was interested in learning te reo Māori in order to be able to communicate on his marae. His teacher, Ms Scott, discussed how they could programme his communication device in English and Māori so that he could work independently and with his peers and specialist support to learn the language. Paora's whānau commented that they hoped this strategy would also support Paora to gain NCEA Level 2 in te reo in the future. They asked whether the collaborative team (including Paora) could plan a pathway that would help Paora to achieve this.



As a group, view the video clip [My Dreams and Future Plans](#) and discuss how the school is supporting Katrina to work towards fulfilling her dreams. Then consider how, in your school, you:



- support students to share their aspirations with others
- develop interim goals that support these aspirations
- provide experiences for students that relate to their aspirations.



Family and whānau aspirations for their children

Parents and other whānau members have important knowledge about a student's strengths and aspirations. They are likely to have discussed their own goals and aspirations for the student and to have clear ideas about the student's possible future within and beyond the whānau. There should be regular opportunities for them to share their ideas within the student's support team, especially at the start of the year. A shared understanding between the student, their whānau, their teachers, and other team members illuminates a clear pathway forward. Supporting the student to move forward on this path then becomes a collective responsibility.

Sometimes whānau aspirations for a student may differ from those of the student or school. For example, whānau members may wish for the student to follow in the family's footsteps by doing what others in the family have done. Or their aspirations may be influenced by the circumstances of the community in which they live. Sometimes they may need help to understand the opportunities available to their child. What is important is that everyone works together to support the student to identify realistic goals and aspirations and to work towards achieving these.

It is also important that the student develops an awareness that they will hold dreams and aspirations both at school and in their later life – and that everyone has goals that may develop throughout their life. No student should feel that they are letting others down by changing their goals or aspirations as they progress through school. Sometimes this occurs because they have been made aware of new options that they didn't think were possible for them.

“ No one expects us to do well in exams and go on to have a career or even a decent job. Changing this means challenging the mindset that sees the disability, not the person, and that fails to recognise that while it might take a young person with a disability longer to achieve goals, we can still do it. ”

A young adult quoted in Educable Project, 2000, page 56

Learning opportunities that build on strengths and aspirations

“ In deep expressions of practice, students' learning activities and the curriculum/ knowledge content they engage with are shaped in ways that reflect the input and interest of students, as well as what teachers know to be important knowledge. ”

Bolstad, Gilbert, et al., 2012, page 19

Learning involves making connections between what is already known and new information, skills, and understandings. Research also demonstrates the importance of emotion and motivation for learning – for example, a major OECD review of the research on learning calls emotion and motivation the 'gatekeepers to learning' (Dumont, Istance, & Benavides, 2012). Therefore it is vital that the learning opportunities you provide build on each learner's strengths (linking to prior knowledge), aspirations and interests (linking to emotion and motivation), and identity, language, and culture (linking to both).

A second key consideration is supporting students to acquire the knowledge and skills that have been identified by the New Zealand Curriculum as important and appropriate for their age and stage of development. In this regard, broad learning experiences will provide contexts for developing students' overall capacity to learn: that is, to use knowledge effectively, to be curious and questioning, to think independently, and to plan and evaluate.

Over time and on balance, teachers' planning has to take account of these two key considerations. At times this will involve supporting students' short-term goals – for example, they may want to have a friend who will sit beside them and talk to them, or to be able to give a presentation like their classmates. At other times, it will support longer-term goals, such as being able to ride the bus by themselves, to drive, to obtain a qualification, or to live independently. In both cases, the learning opportunities you provide will enable your students to draw on and develop the key competencies, to develop the specific knowledge and skills they need in relation to their goals, and to understand why these are important for achieving these goals.



In [Example 4](#), a student in a year 13 English class is supported to build on her strengths and interest in photography while working towards an IEP goal of talking to others about why and how she takes or selects particular photographs.



In small groups, view the video [Involving Families in Transitions](#). Discuss how as a school you listen to and support the aspirations of whānau for their children throughout their schooling, particularly at transition points. How might [learner profiles](#) help to capture the aspirations of both students and whānau?



Connecting pathways with strengths and aspirations

It is important to build on students' strengths and aspirations when planning learning pathways with them. The people around them need to work together with them to agree on where they are going, how they are going to get there, and the knowledge and skills they will need. Such discussions about pathways should take place throughout schooling, particularly when planning for transitions. In the secondary context, listening to students and having conversations about their future becomes even more important.

It is important to recognise that pathways for students with additional needs may change as they progress through school and the diverse experiences it provides. Pathways are also influenced by what students encounter in their lives outside of school. What is important, however, is that learning is always seen as useful, purposeful, and leading to outcomes that are important for the student.

Ben talks about the pathway he has taken and how it links to his strengths and aspirations: “I didn't know what I wanted to do when I left school but the Gateway programme helped me think about what I could do. Mr Ames and Michelle found out what I liked to do and the things I was good at. I love sport, any sport. So I got to go to the local golf course one day a week for most of the year. I learnt to drive ride-on mowers and how to use a weed eater, change green holes, mow the tees, and look after the equipment. From my time at the golf course, I discovered I liked to work outside and didn't want to be stuck in an inside job. I discovered that I really enjoy mowing grass and can mow lawns in a straight line. I learnt that there is a lot more to mowing grass than I thought. I'd have to do some study to know how to do it correctly. With the help of my parents, I've got lots of small goals for me to achieve so that I can work towards my big goal of mowing sportsfields. I know it won't be easy, but I know I have my family and the garden volunteers where I work to help me get there. Each time I achieve a small goal I feel proud of myself and that I am getting closer to my big goal.”



Related information is available on [support for students to continue their education](#), on [deciding on what to do after school](#), and on [transitioning from school](#).

Information on vocational pathways is available from [Youth Guarantee](#) and [STAR](#).



In pairs, select and discuss 2–3 rows of the table below. As you do so, identify:

- examples of how you support your students to build on their strengths and aspirations
- how the pathways students decide on complement their strengths and aspirations
- what else you could do to better support students to work towards their goals and aspirations.

Moving from ...	Towards ...
Teachers' beliefs limiting students' aspirations	Teachers expecting that all students are able to work towards their goals and aspirations
Little agreement or guidance on pathways	Personalised pathways agreed and planned through collaborative teamwork
Students' strengths being unrecognised and their potential unfulfilled	A strengths-based approach leading to meaningful pathways and learning
Peers seeing the disability before they see and know the student	Peers supporting and valuing the uniqueness of every student
Students' aspirations seldom being recognised or sought	Students feeling confident that their aspirations are listened to, acknowledged, and supported
Differing views of students' strengths and aspirations limiting the support they receive	Shared views supporting students to work towards their aspirations
Others making decisions on behalf of students (with the best of intentions)	Students knowing they have a range of options available to choose from
Classroom cultures that do not value and support diversity	Teachers and students valuing diversity and what each student brings to the classroom