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Star teaching

Rod Fee, a teacher at Kristin School in Albany, was named as one of the NZAGC's Star Teachers of gifted children in 2010. In this article for *Tall Poppies*, he explains how he approaches his work.

I am a part-time teacher at Kristin School, a co-educational K–13 International Baccalaureate World School. I teach in the Middle School, which covers Years 7–10. I am a barrister [as well as a teacher] and tutor in land law at Auckland University. Additionally, I am currently completing a PhD in literature at AUT, from where I have a master's degree in creative writing.

I teach a range of subjects in the GATE area. The Middle School has a very wide range of such programmes, designed to offer extension or lateral experience in intellectual, musical, artistic, physical and leadership activities. My specialty is in the intellectual sphere. I hold one-day workshops in critical thinking at each of the four year levels. This involves analysis and sustained concentration for 25 or so students, who must analyse a factual scenario for a legal case and then role play as jurors, lawyers, judges, reporters and witnesses. This happens to suit my background, but I use it because of the very deep concentration, engagement and efficient tools the students must pick up for the case work. The subject matter of the case is also of use. For example, we replay the trial of Galileo, which involves the history of science and Europe, as well as legal concepts. The real aim, however, is to foster certain study, concentration, presentation and listening skills.

I run withdrawal creative writing workshops of one period per seven-day cycle for each year group, for students with passion or ability in that area. These are held for six cycles and at the culmination students are able to understand and apply various craft techniques and know how to format for competitions and publication. I encourage them to take steps in those directions and we have recently started producing anthologies which are published through Lulu's on-demand service.

The core programme for me, however, is Advanced Inquiry (Ai). We have the opportunity to offer this to 25 or so students at each year level. It runs for a double period in each calendar week (which is out of phase so that our busy students are not always missing the same subject). Ai is divided into two types of lesson. The first is a wide-ranging discussion. This is a topic that emerges often from the conversations the students are having as they enter the room or from my storehouse of interesting ideas. The aim is that all students engage, all discuss freely, and we are looking at the topic as closely as we can until we reach a level of weirdness and uncertainty. For example, the concept of movement versus stationary objects. What precisely is happening at the point where a stationary object starts to move? A little thought experiment along these lines soon has the students baffling themselves and 'bending our minds' as they say. I use a technique of starting a normal conversation and then continuing to ask stepped questions. I am formatively assessing during this process.

The second part of Ai is to allow the students to take a topic of their choice and research it. I do not give them a topic or a list of options. They simply choose what they want (so long as it is not inappropriate as far as school rules are concerned – no 'how to make a bomb'!). The idea here is that they have every motivation to research what they love and the only barriers are a lack of research skills, which I concentrate on. It is particularly useful for underachievers or for those who have not had to pick up formal study skills because their

abilities have allowed them to work successfully in prior years without that. For some, it is their last chance to acquire skills before senior school.

In Ai there is no product to hand in and there is no summative assessment (though plenty of formative). This eliminates, as far as possible, the effects of either of the classic types of perfectionism and allows the students to concentrate on learning whatever techniques are suitable to advance their inquiry. They do record their journey on a computerised mind map.

All of our Middle School students have personal laptops and we have a very fast wireless broadband connection so most of this research is done online. We also take advantage of the internet to consult international experts, and even to arrange holiday visits or internships with parent assistance during holidays.

Ai allows the students to experience similar-ability peer support and also, for those less organised, to see high-achievers managing their time and resources.

The feedback from Ai and the other classes is extremely positive. It is very encouraging when Year 13 or university students make a point of telling my GATE colleague Raewyn Casey and me how much of a change these programmes have made in their lives.