

On the move

Jean Hendy-Harris has been running Achieving Potential holiday seminars in Auckland for many years, attracting students from all over New Zealand. Now she and gifted education specialist Elaine le Sueur are rolling out a revolutionary new programme: Uni-on-Wheels.

It began quietly as a germ of an idea, just one of many tossed back and forth over lunchtime meetings in Fredino's Café, in St Heliers. Some of the proposals were more extravagant than others: the boarding school I dreamed up on the Desert Road was clearly destined never to get off the ground, and the winter weekend science meetings in Wellington were deemed not practical, as neither of us could really see ourselves driving back and forth from Auckland on a regular basis.

Elaine and I had been having conversations like these regularly over the years – some of them more serious than others. Both of us genuinely cared about the kind of education New Zealand was giving its gifted students – and we were even more concerned about those who did not easily fit into the 'high flyers' category. Those pupils who clearly excelled academically at least slotted more or less into school extension programmes. But what of the more elusive students who declined to fit within the parameters of any grouping: the imaginative and ingenious, the creative thinkers? Or those with promise and potential who lacked the necessary initiative to turn that budding capability into a productive tool for learning? They, together with the occasional loners who only distinguished themselves by nursing interesting or advanced ideas, were restricted to sitting on the edge of a talent cluster, sometimes observing but unlikely ever to take part. They deserved better.

Needless to say, we both firmly believed we could find the solutions and could provide most of the answers – some of which might lie in the Achieving Potential Seminars I had been offering during school holidays since the early 1990s. They had stemmed from similar feelings of unease regarding the manner in which schools were able to cater for atypical high level thinkers, coupled with a belief that I knew better, if not best. However it was clear that what I provided certainly did not suit all those who enrolled. Some children declared the seminars were boring and declined to come back for a second helping. Students came from all over the country, though, and a surprising number became regulars, frequently massaging my ego by telling me how addicted they were. Some could not relinquish the experience once they outgrew the age limit and insisted on coming back as junior supervisors. One, now in his twenties, works for me on a regular basis and revealed recently that the seminars were the only thing he recalls with pleasure from his schooldays.

Elaine had been running courses at the holiday seminars for several years and her enthusiasm had added a completely new dimension. It was largely due to her energies that we found ourselves exploring new paths and directions in Fredino's Café. Over the years I had received many requests to take the seminars further: to expand them to encompass the entire two-week holiday period; to package up the tutors and take them to Whangarei, Wellington or Christchurch. And time and time again children had said, 'I really wish school could be just like the Achieving Potential seminars.' My inevitable response was that it was not possible – until Elaine asked: 'Why not?'

Elaine is a long-established expert in the education of high-ability children. She has operated both within schools and in the community, building opportunities for educational and emotional advancement for

our most able students. Her work in this field is internationally acknowledged and she now operates her own consultancy, offering structured assistance and programme advice to schools and families. Elaine has much more direct clarity of thought than I do, solving problems with ease, so I should not have been surprised at her 'Why not?'

We embarked upon the initial planning with a great deal of fervor, together with a very clear idea of the range of tutors and topics we wanted. The tutors included those who had proved themselves in the holiday programmes: a selection of inspiring and motivating mentors who could present ideas in a way that enthused and stimulated the imagination and incited a real desire to know more. The topics were those which had proved popular and successful over several years.

Uni-on-Wheels is organised in a fundamentally simple manner under the auspices of the Holiday Seminars Charitable Trust. Because the trust is a registered non-profit-making organisation, we have been able to keep the charge to schools to an absolute minimum and they are able to pass this on to their students. Elaine does all the liaison with principals and boards of trustees, and establishes what their primary needs are and how we might help. Schools have a term-by-term contract with us and are visited weekly on the day of their choice. My own responsibility is to organise tutors and timetables, attend to the printing of publicity flyers and generally ensure that everything works as smoothly as possible.

Once the details have been agreed, the Uni-on-Wheels tutor will work in the designated school with a selected group of students for the entire day, offering one or two topics – for example, Word Wizardry in the morning and Classics in the afternoon. Participating schools can opt to act as a focus school and thereby draw in students from their area, or just offer the opportunity to their own pupils. Flyers specific to each school, detailing the courses available, are produced and the schools determine how they are distributed. Parents can then enroll children in one or more Day Seminars through the term, with direct payment to the school.

The prime advantage for those schools which decide to become involved is that they can effortlessly provide on-site extension opportunities to a range of children with out-of-the-ordinary learning needs, as well as those already demonstrating high level intellectual ability. The benefit for parents is that their children can take part in a programme that does not involve ferrying them over long distances, does not interfere with planned family activities, and does not take place during the school holidays – and again at a very reasonable cost. Additionally, the programme is provided at a very reasonable cost. But the undoubted plus as far as the children are concerned is that school can become . . . just like the Achieving Potential seminars!

The Uni-on-Wheels pilot programmes will be operating during Term 3 in Summerland School, Henderson, on Tuesdays and Puni School, Pukekohe, on Thursdays. The courses include: Maths Magic, Sorcerer's Apprentice, Word Wizardry, Beginning Classics, Forensic Science, Reach for the Stars, Mighty Mathman, Meet the Great Artists, People in History, Secrets & Lies and Psychology for Kids. For more information and a full list of subjects available this year, go to www.universityonwheels.org.