



Amanda Diehl, preschool head of Selwyn House, Christchurch, explains how their highly regarded programme caters for gifted children.

'One can never creep when one feels the impulse to soar.' Helen Keller.

It was with pleasure that I accepted an invitation to write an article on the way our preschool programme supports gifted children. My immediate response is that our programme nurtures each child's unique talents and strengths, and supports all children to reach their full potential. We want to give every child at our preschool the gift of a lifetime love of learning and discovery.

Our teachers work alongside children listening, observing, interacting and learning. Working so closely with our children is a strength when it comes to identifying those children who are very able, gifted or showing the potential to achieve well beyond their age peers. It may be a comment or a strong sensitivity to noise or clothing that first alerts a teacher to the giftedness.

Selwyn House Pre-School is situated in Christchurch and is attached to Selwyn House School, an independent International Baccalaureate (IB) World School catering for girls from Year 1 to Year 8. Our preschool is co-educational and provides for children from ages three to five.

With the flexibility we have to construct our own unique programme comes the opportunity to draw inspiration from the best educational research and practice. The IB Primary Years Programme (PYP), the philosophies of Reggio Emilia and Te Whāriki (the NZ national curriculum) influence our programme and environment. Our learning programme is inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach, which derives its name from its place of origin – Reggio Emilia, a city located in Emilia Romagna in northern Italy. At the heart of this approach to learning is the powerful image of the child as a fire to be ignited, rather than as a vessel to be filled.

Our programme is focused on inquiry-based learning, with children and teachers working in partnership, often in small groups, and where there are opportunities for children to plan, question, discuss, hypothesise, reflect, problem-solve, evaluate and revisit their learning. Each day, our teachers collaborate to reflect on our children's experiences and consider the possibilities for the next step in the journey. Documentation such as photos, video, anecdotal recordings, learning stories, transcripts of conversations and feedback from parents are used to inform our planning.

Gifted children thrive in this environment where individual children's ideas and interests are valued, and teachers consult with other teachers, professionals and parents to plan a programme that recognises and celebrates each child's unique learning style. One of the most significant aspects of our programme is our belief that children observe, take in information, process it and express it in a range of different ways, or, as we have learnt from Reggio, in one of the 100 languages of children. Gifted children often relish a diverse range of experiences, opportunities and provocations to challenge them. Our children are encouraged to express their ideas through a range of different symbolic languages, including drawing, writing, sculpture, dramatic play and music. Revision of ideas is encouraged and our teachers provide opportunities for children to repeat an activity or explore it through a different language; this allows children to build on their prior knowledge, add detail or modify their ideas.

The following example illustrates this theme:

To celebrate Daffodil Day we planned a range of experiences to explore the symbol of daffodils with our children, such as face painting, collage, clay modelling and painting. Annie, one of our three-year-olds, expressed her ideas and feelings about daffodils through the languages of paint, collage, and clay. These were Annie's words:

'I did paint some daffodils and stuck some daffodils on paper and then I built the clay into a flower and then I painted it. Mika painted a flower on my cheek. I used some paint and stickers and clay. I could use pencils, newspaper, pegs, different paper, a roller too.

Children demonstrate learning in surprising ways and it is our role to listen, observe, document and be open to all the different languages that children use to communicate their ideas and wonderings. Annie, in her story about daffodils, indicated how she would like to progress and what materials and resources she would need: '. . . newspapers, pegs,

different colours, a roller too.'

As teachers, we need to be flexible with children who are gifted so they have time to explore and learn in-depth or move on to other interests, and to express their ideas in a way that makes sense to them. Pre-determined outcomes and strict guidelines for the way something should look become a barrier to working with gifted children. It is important to remember that there is no one right way to learn, only many possibilities. We can draw inspiration from the words of Loris Malaguzzi, who was instrumental in the educational philosophy of Reggio Emilia:

'Creativity seems to emerge from multiple experiences, coupled with a well-supported development of personal resources, including a sense of freedom to venture beyond the known. Our task, regarding creativity, is to help children climb their own mountains, as high as possible. No one can do more.' Loris Malaguzzi.

At Selwyn House Pre-School we are committed to PYP, an internationally devised programme administered by the International Baccalaureate organisation. PYP is designed for children aged three to twelve, providing for the development of the whole child, and supporting children to relate their learning and experiences to the realities of the world around them. Both the Reggio Emilia approach and PYP dovetail to create a curriculum that is relevant, engaging and challenging. PYP teaches our children to be 'thinkers', through the inquiry process. It offers a differentiated programme that recognises the unique needs of gifted children by incorporating a level of abstraction and complexity. In my experience, gifted children thrive when they have the opportunity to explore a special area of interest to them. PYP has taught us to foster this by changing our role from 'experts' to 'facilitators', so that rather than giving children information, we support them in discovery. The following example, from our Unit of Inquiry (UOI) on 'Sustainability', highlights the way provocations can be used as a way to engage children and spark their curiosity:



Our UOI, entitled 'Choose to Change', focused on supporting children to make informed personal choices to sustain our environment. At the beginning of this inquiry we installed a water barrel in the sandpit. The barrel had taps fitted at different levels and was filled once a day. When the water ran out it wasn't refilled until the next day. This encouraged our children to think about the consequences of their actions and consider how they could make 'informed' choices. We recorded the children's comments as they discussed what was happening to the water:

- L.B:** 'Stop we're going to waste the water.'
- C.S:** 'Don't worry there's heaps there.'
- S.H:** 'It's all going to waste.'
- C.S:** 'We could collect the water and put it all back into the big bucket so we don't waste it.'
- S.F:** 'It looks like a big waterfall coming out.'
- T.C:** 'Oh no, oh no it's all coming out.'
- E.R:** 'Oh for goodness sakes, turn the taps off.'
- P.L:** 'I'm going to turn the taps off because we're wasting all the water.'
- E.R:** 'Good girl.'
- W.L:** 'Now the whole sandpit is flooded.'
- L.C:** 'I'm not feeling good, because we are wasting water.'
- S.H:** 'When it's all gone you never get it back again.'
- L.C:** 'Hey guys, in about five minutes the water is going to be all gone.'

By documenting the children's words, it makes visible the learning that has occurred, shows children as active inquirers and highlights individual children's ideas.



Giftedness in young children is often evident through advanced language development, reasoning and general knowledge. Our teachers are often alerted to a particular child through the use of language and will discuss their observations of a child with the trained gifted and talented coordinator in the school.

Recently, we had the opportunity to train with Dr Kathy Short from the University of Arizona, who has worked extensively with teachers to develop curricula that actively involve children as inquirers. Kathy challenged us to consider presenting inquiries to children by first thinking about what concept we want our children to understand, and how the idea may be already present in our children's lives. An example that highlights this is a UOI we planned on 'Pets'. The central idea of the unit was: 'Pets enhance our lives and we have a responsibility towards their well-being.' As part of the planning process we organised a 'make your own lunch day' and a 'dress yourself day'. This encouraged our children to consider what they already knew about taking care of themselves and helped them make connections to the concept of 'responsibility'. For gifted children who may have advanced understandings of responsibility, the concept can easily be taken further by thinking about the responsibility we have for our environment and what we could do.

The following story of an inquiry evolved out of a child's interest and highlights how we support children to make connections in their learning.

David, one of our three-year-olds, commented: 'I think we really need a game about a gorilla who chases people to steal their chocolate.' The other children, who all agreed that we should make a game which our class could play together, immediately took up David's idea. As a starting point, children were asked to bring their favourite game to preschool. One of the children, Susan, who had been identified early in her preschool years as being gifted, brought chess. Susan introduced her game and explained to the other children how to play it.

'This is a game called chess; you move a pawn to one of the squares. This is a pawn. Sometimes Mum says it can move two or one and it can go up. When you get it up some squares to there, you get a queen; they go lots of different ways.'

David asked Susan a question: 'Do the black pieces go on the black squares and the white pieces on the white square?'

Susan responded, 'Good question, David. Well, the black pawn is on the black square and the black queen goes here; we set them up in eights. There are knights. This one has a funny shape my mum remembers.'

Susan went on to explain how to play chess and in the following weeks other children shared their games. Slowly the children formulated their theories and made decisions about what the class game would look like.

L.B: 'We need people and spinner to turn.'

J.W: 'We need a gorilla.'

C.S: 'How about a dice?'

S.F: 'Pink counters to turn over.'

A.R: 'We should call it the Gorilla Game.'

The children split into groups and created different parts of the Gorilla Game. When the game was finished the children invited their friends and family to come to preschool to celebrate their learning and, of course, play the game.

For me, this story highlights that when teachers relinquish the control of their classroom and assume the role of learner alongside their students, they open the doorway for children to become the protagonists of their own learning.

In summary, Selwyn House Pre-School's clear vision and pedagogy for teaching and learning, formulated through the dovetailing of several curricula and philosophies, provides an inclusive framework in which each child is valued. In providing this rich environment, evolving with the interests and needs of each child, we are able to nurture, support and cater for gifted children. This is the magic of our ethos.

Please note that for the purposes of this article all children's names have been changed to protect their identity.