

Whiti ki runga! Gifted and talented Māori learners

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ABSTRACT

The importance of identifying and nurturing the gifts and talents of young people is now more widely accepted in New Zealand than it has been in the past. In this country the approach to meeting this challenge must reflect an understanding and acknowledgement of Māori conceptions of giftedness and talent. It is proposed here that the under-representation of Māori students in programmes and provisions for the gifted and talented is partly due to a mismatch between the more traditional western European approaches in this area and Māori conceptions and practices. However, it is also contended that efforts in this area will continue to disadvantage gifted and talented Māori students if the broader issues of power and control are not addressed in schools.

Research paper

KEYWORDS:

Gifted, Māori students, Māori culture, cultural differences, cultural values, culturally appropriate strategies.

The issues facing gifted Māori young people are common to many of the world's indigenous peoples. A primary reason for addressing these issues is the continued under-representation of Māori students in educational programmes for the gifted (Bevan-Brown, 1993, 2000, 2002; Keen, 2001; Ministry of Education, 2000; Moltzen, 1999)

Over the past two decades in particular, considerable effort has been directed at equipping New Zealand teachers to better cater for the increasing student ethnic diversity in their classrooms (Hill & Hawk, 2000; Ministry of Education, 2003; Moore, Anderson, Brown, Glynn, Macfarlane, Thomson & Timperley, 1999). As a consequence many teachers are now more appreciative of and knowledgeable about Māori culture and practices, and are more familiar with the ways these might be reflected in their teaching. However, according to Bishop and Glynn (1999), the views and values of the dominant culture remain disproportionately influential in many schools. Where perceptions of, and approaches to, giftedness are essentially Eurocentric, aspects of ability valued by Māori may be unrecognised and the expression, identification and nurturance of the gifts of many Māori students will be overlooked and undervalued.

Our understanding of issues pertaining to gifted Māori and the ways these might be addressed has been greatly aided by the work of Jill Bevan-Brown (Bevan-Brown, 2004).

Bevan-Brown contends that it is important to recognise that Māori are not a homogenous group and that while the issues may be common to many Māori, they will not apply to all.

A central issue is the difference between the more traditional view of giftedness and how Māori perceive the concept. Where the conceptualisation of giftedness in many western European societies has tended to emphasise characteristics associated with the ability to excel academically, and is seen as the preserve of a small minority, in Māoridom the concept is far broader and wide-ranging, and more widely distributed. Māori value abilities and 'qualities' and extend these to spiritual, cognitive, affective, aesthetic, artistic, psychomotor, social, intuitive, creative, leadership and cultural domains (Bevan-Brown, 1993). In contrast with the western European tradition, the Māori approach to giftedness is more holistic and inextricably intertwined with other Māori concepts. It is the Māori culture that provides the foundation for the emergence and development of special gifts.

Bevan-Brown reports that the gifts may be individual, or can be 'owned' by the group. The Māori participants in her research sometimes cited a group and not an individual as having a special ability. In a similar vein, "There is an inherent expectation that a person's gifts and talents will be used to benefit others" (Bevan-Brown, 2004, p. 179).

The implications for educators of a Māori view of giftedness are extensive. For example, the relationship between Māori culture and the demonstration of exceptional abilities is critical. Bevan-Brown (2004, p. 181) states that, "teachers must give gifted and talented Māori children opportunities and encouragement to develop their talents in a Māori-relevant context." For many teachers this requires an increase in their knowledge of Māoritanga (Māori culture). Bevan-Brown believes gifted Māori children need to be encouraged to develop their knowledge of, and pride in, their own culture. In an environment where their culture is valued and students are strong in their cultural identity, they would be more likely to feel confident about expressing their special abilities.

Many able Māori students do not identify as Māori because of low teacher expectations. Cathcart and Pou (1992) declare that some teachers do not expect to find giftedness amongst their Māori students. It would seem, therefore, that the identification of gifted Māori students calls for a number of comparatively different approaches from those that might

be considered appropriate for non-Māori. Arguably the most important message for teachers in identifying gifted Māori students is the need to provide what Jenkins, Moltzen and Macfarlane (2004) refer to as a culturally-safe and culturally-valuing environment. Further, Mitchell and Mitchell (1988) and Macfarlane (2004) propose that central to this provision is improving school experiences for Māori students, and in this context the pedagogical skills and the integrity of the classroom teacher are pivotal. Such a classroom environment increases the likelihood that these students' special abilities will emerge and flourish.

It is important that gifted programmes are extended to include the abilities and qualities valued by Māori. This does not mean that young people who are Māori do not possess abilities in the more traditional areas of talent – New Zealand has many examples of Māori who have achieved in science, mathematics, literature and in other fields. Nor does this mean incorporating approaches to giftedness that are completely out-of-step with contemporary models. As Bevan-Brown points out, the Māori concept is similar to Gagné's (1999) differentiated Giftedness-Talent Model and Gardner's (1993) multiple intelligences approach. The differences lie in the cultural-specificity of Māori talents, traditions and values, and in the interpretation of particular qualities and abilities.

It is very important that teachers work in partnership with Māori to identify the potential of gifted Māori learners and use culturally appropriate methods of identification (Bevan-Brown, 2004). The whānau, or extended family, can play a significant role in this process. While it is common practice for schools to invite parents to be part of the approach to recognising talent, Bevan-Brown contends that for Māori students it is appropriate to cast the net even wider, and to seek input from kaumatua (elders) and other whānau members.

In a similar manner, it is important that Māori are consulted in the design of programmes for gifted Māori students and are involved in supporting and encouraging this group of students. While an individualistic approach to developing talent may work for many non-Māori students, it may be counterproductive for gifted Māori students. Programmes and provisions that isolate gifted Māori students from their peers may result in these students dropping out. There is little doubt that providing for gifted Māori students in an inclusive setting is generally more appropriate than placing them in a 'special' or separate environment.

Jenkins (2002) contributes to the debate of salient issues, arguing that central to appropriate provision for gifted Māori students are matters of power and control. She contends that increasing the visibility of Māori giftedness is not about adding a Māori dimension to existing constructs and practices, but it is about significantly changing the very essence of the system itself. From this position, the realisation of Māori achievement and actualisation requires fundamental shifts in order to break down the power imbalances and subordination inherent in many New Zealand schools and classrooms. In her view, anything

short of addressing these issues in education is no more than a minor 'tinkering' with an inherently flawed structure, and as such will fall well short of identifying, providing for and valuing the talents of Māori students.

In New Zealand, we have begun the journey toward a better understanding of a Māori concept of giftedness and how we might effectively identify and respond to the talents of Māori students (whiti ki runga). However, it is clear that we still have a long way to go before our approaches can be considered bicultural and equitable. Part of the challenge, as Jenkins points out (2002), is to unpack the legacy of colonisation and to construct new approaches to education in an authentic bicultural discourse – a discourse valid for, and validating of, the culturally lived realities of both Māori and non-Māori.

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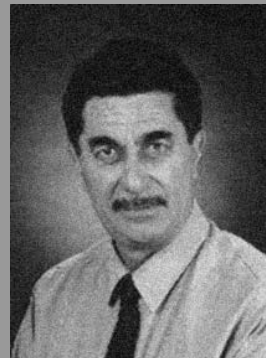
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AUTHOR PROFILES

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