

“GIFTED AND TALENTED: PERCEPTIONS OF MAORI AND POLYNESIAN STUDENTS EDUCATED IN SEGREGATED CLASSES”

Max Galu

Kawerau Intermediate

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Abstract

In New Zealand Maori and Polynesian children are under-represented in programmes for the gifted. It appears traditional identification methods have disadvantaged students who differ from the dominant race. When selected to participate in gifted programmes Maori and Polynesian children are often educated in ways that are considered foreign or contrary to their cultural upbringing.

The aim of this research was to examine the experiences and perceptions of Maori and Polynesian children educated in segregated classes for the gifted, the intention being to see how appropriate these provisions are in meeting their educational needs.

Methodology

- Qualitative methodology used to collect data through interviews and questionnaires of a sample of Maori and Polynesian students, all ex-pupils of the Differentiated Learning Unit (DLU), catering for the gifted and talented, in a large urban city school.
- Views and opinions of DLU teachers, parents and whanau were also collected through interviews and questionnaires.

Purpose of the research

- The research endeavoured to develop an understanding of how one school's experience provided for the needs of gifted Maori and Polynesian children. Answers were sought as to how the students managed to cope in a predominantly European class, the extent of their peer and social relationship in and out of the class and an understanding of how they coped being separated from their cultural peers. The perceptions that these culturally different students bring may provide important insights into the kinds of challenges which they consider, in their experience, have affected them.

- Some of the best known studies of children and adolescent gifted young people are retrospective, written when the children have already attained further levels of education or adulthood (*Gross, 1993*)
- The benefit of having former students who were now at high school is that they add knowledge to their intermediate school experiences.
- The interviews were conducted in 1996. The 13 participants ranged in age from 13-16 years and class levels from years 9-12.

Identification and selection



The student voice...

- **1. Students comments on identification and selection:**
- *I didn't know what it was. My parents didn't either but they were more excited.*
- *I didn't have a clue. We were told it was a special class. They don't tell us so we don't tell other students or they would wonder why they're not in it.*
- *I thought hard out work compared to primary. There was pressure. Hard day at school then homework.*
- *I don't know how I got in!*
- *My parents were very proud of me. It's the culture thing. Not many islanders would get into DLU classes and get a really good education.*

The parent voice...

- Parents comments:
- *.....was surprised when she got into the DLU and the accelerate class at high school. She wanted to get out. Her comments were “they’re all blondes” apart from two Chinese girls and another Maori girl. She wasn’t comfortable in it. She is now (a year later).*
- *Why aren’t there more Maori students so they could get the benefit of it? Maybe if they were included in the programme it would have given them the opening to surge ahead. Given the chance they would have made the progress. Maybe everyone needs a chance like that.*

The teachers voice...

- Teachers comments:
- *Our main concern was to identify students with any special abilities that needed to be addressed*
- *I've never been allowed to select the students so I wouldn't know?*
- *We had to address the equity issue. We found that none of the students (Maori/Polynesian) actually made it in TOSCA or PAT test. We took Maori and Polynesian students at 1 to 2 stanines below European children .*

- If testing continues to disadvantage minorities such as Maori and Polynesian, then the challenge for teachers must be to identify children displaying gifted behaviours not showing up in testing (Bevan-Brown, 1996)
- It has been suggested that the boisterous behaviour and poor basic skills of some Maori and Polynesian students can obscure their special gifts (Cathcart and Pou, 1992)
- The plea is for a more effective identification method which recognizes a broader range of abilities and talents.

Social and Peer relationships



The student voice...

- **Students comments on social and peer relationships:**
- *I had problems fitting in at first. My sister labelled me a courtyard kid (where the nerds play). I was also labelled 'brain box' and other stuff.*
- *No, not really. We still met at interval and lunchtime. I was labelled. They rated me higher than them...you're in the brainy class.*
- *They were great (DLU) except for some people. I was accepted by most people in my class. There was a group I got on really well with and has continued through high school.*
- *Although the DLU was Europeanised it made you feel special. I have a lot of Chinese friends and some were in the DLU. They would stay up very late, sometimes up to three or four in the morning to complete a project.*
- *Some people saw us as an elitist group. They thought we were a special group. It was obvious we were a bright class. My friends in the mainstream called us other names.*

The parent voice...

➤ *Parents comments:*

- *I think he was the only Maori to get an academic award at high school last year. He got three. The other Maoris recognised it. When he went up on stage they all hissed and roared “kia kaha”. They were very proud for him. Obviously during the year they would have given him some flack but when it came to the crunch they were very proud of him. It pushed them up as well.*

The teachers voice...

- *Teachers comments:*
- *.....found it really difficult to fit in as she was one of the top Maori students at her primary school. At first she really battled it. She didn't want to be part of the unit, but as time wore on she really blossomed. She took on a leadership role and had a lot of mana not only with kids in the unit but in the playground as well. She became known as someone with mana. Her confidence grew with me. She realized I wasn't completely foreign.*
- *The biggest step is socialisation and after you see that blossom their attitude and self esteem does too and they have more success. It's not just academic and it's not just teachers. In some cases it is friends.*

Other research

- The idea of taking Maori and Polynesian children from their peers is seen to be inappropriate (Reid, 1990).
- The “tall poppy syndrome”, negative labelling and being culturally ostracised are cited as barriers to any form of separation for Maori and Polynesian children.
- This has recently been countered (Bevan-Brown, 1996).
- Every opportunity and encouragement should be given to gifted Maori and Polynesian children to achieve to the highest level.

- Special classes for the gifted are viewed as elitist, although research suggest higher achievements in a segregated class and better social/emotional outcomes with like peers (Borland, 1989).
- Provisions for the gifted have generally fallen to the regular teacher in the regular classroom. While this may have shielded schools from charges of elitism, many would argue this has been at the expense of appropriate and equitable programmes for these children (Moltzen, 1996).

Segregation / Withdrawal



The students voice...

- **3. Students comments on being segregated from the mainstream and culture:**
- *I would have cruised in the mainstream. Some good Maori students go in the bilingual class.*
- *Most of my friends were smart also. They were saying I got a bad deal. They found it really easy in the bilingual class. They didn't want to try harder. I think it would have been pretty easy for me. It's hard to say really. I wasn't in it.*
- *I think it really cut me off being in the DLU. I'm starting to walk away from them. There's a lot of things happening in the Maori world and it's not really appealing. It doesn't seem like I need it but I do. I've got to find time. I could lose it.*

- *Take this year (Year 12). It's not streamed at all. She (teacher) gives us homework, then the next day asks for those who have problem and it seems like the same people who always have problems. Our teachers finding them hard to cope with as well. She explains the homework and you sit there getting really bored and fall behind. A bit annoying really when you want to get on with it.*
- *The teacher would spend too much time helping out with slower pupils. The faster students would get bored.*
- *I might not be as smart as I am now. The process might have been slowed down. I would get bored and throw darts. That's when kids start mucking around.*

The parents voice...

- *Parents comments:*
- *It would have been a shame if he ended up in the mainstream. He was bored at primary.*
- *With the size of classes, it didn't matter which school, the talented are going to miss out. The fact of the matter is we have got a calibre of student out there who should be given an opportunity. Especially our Maori students because I can recall when I was at school, something that I noticed, pakeha children got more attention than the Maori students. When I think back on those times...and my headmaster was Maori, maybe he didn't know what was going on or maybe he was caught up in the mainstream. That's just my opinion.*

The teachers voice...

- *Teachers comments:*
- *I think the best way for providing for Maori students is through bilingual classes. Parents aren't acknowledging it because it's not working.*

- One of the criticisms of segregated gifted education is that it makes some students feel superior and others feel inferior.
- It would appear that these students have actually become more humble working alongside others of similar ability than when they were obviously more able than a great majority of children in a regular classroom.

Educational Provision



The students voice...

Students comments on the educational provision provided:

- *I just saw it as hard work.*
- *Yes it did. I can handle some things better academically than other people can of my culture. I'm not saying they can't handle it but because I was in the DLU, it prepared me well.*
- *It was really good because they let us learn by ourselves. It made us more motivated. Sometimes the teacher can't help you. You have to work it out by yourself.*
- *It made me work hard. I was not happy with 60 or 70 percent.*
- *It prepared me well for high school. We did lots of abstract stuff. It was hard to grasp. Now at high school we do lots of it. It has given me more confidence in going further.*

The parents voice...

- Parents comments:
- *As a parent the biggest concern for your child is they don't feel swamped by stuff that's too daunting and being stretched and lose confidence. That could easily happen with these children. It's a real balancing act.*
- *The DLU helped him to surge ahead, set him up. When he reached the third form he blossomed. The downside is being mainstreamed. The work is so easy*

The teachers voice...

- Teachers comments:
- *One of the things about the DLU programme is that children get choices. They're all encouraged to be risk takers, to not be shy to come forward. I have a girl in my class. When she came she wouldn't talk. She didn't think she was important enough. Now I can't shut her up. She copes with the kids. She's challenged. She's terrific. I don't know. I have to be honest with you. I think they have coped really well.*
- *It's really hard to think culturally how did they cope? Because I think there were successes for all the kids. And you know when you're doing a varied programme you're going to tap into kids and you know you'll never going to reach all the kids all the time. There are certain things they eat up. They just absolutely love it. They all made huge improvements. None of them failed. It wasn't that sort of classroom. It wasn't set up for them to fail.*

Some reflections...

- Did it cater for their special cultural needs?
- Did it make an impact on their lives?
- Did they cope in the DLU?



- Despite limitations, segregation was shown to be very effective in providing for these Maori and Polynesian students.
- An education system which is diverse and differentiated is sure to be healthier and more effective than one which seeks to impose the best single system for everybody on the basis of age, sex, ethnic background or intelligence.

Research findings

- On being selected:
 - Positive
 - Challenged
 - Inspired to achieve
- On Social and Peer relationship
 - Less serious behaviour problems
 - Similar intellectual and interest level
 - Lifelong friends

- On being segregated from the mainstream and their culture peers
 - Labelled
 - More rigour
 - Maori and Polynesian are a diverse group

- On coping with the educational provision provided
 - Differentiation makes a difference
 - Addresses needs
 - Teachers to be empathetic and knowledgeable and aware of special qualities and abilities of Maori and Polynesian

Recommendations

- A broader and more inclusive concept of giftedness
(Culture often overlooked)
- Awareness of the pros & cons of various educational provisions
- Multiple assessment instruments (too heavy a reliance on tests and teachers)
- Professional development for teachers
- A cultural quota system is an appropriate equity measure
- For teachers to recognize potential as well as demonstrated performance
- With appropriate support, segregated accelerate classes can work for gifted and talented Maori and Polynesian students

➤ “IT’S NOT HOW SMART IS THE CHILD BUT HOW IS THE CHILD SMART”



A point to note...

- This research was conducted ten years ago, prior to any Ministry statement, official policy, guidelines or official provision for gifted and talented students.
- An interesting point to note is that people currently researching in this area are still saying the same thing, despite a Ministry statement, official policy and targeted/contestable funding.
- ***What message is there in this for us all?***