

## Providing a culturally responsive environment for gifted Maori learners

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**Jill Bevan-Brown**

Massey University, New Zealand [j.m.bevan-brown@massey.ac.nz](mailto:j.m.bevan-brown@massey.ac.nz)

*Despite the multi-categorical concept of giftedness having widespread acceptance throughout the world, cultural giftedness does not appear to be widely recognised or provided for. This paper examines what cultural giftedness means for Maori (the indigenous people of New Zealand) and describes how a culturally responsive learning environment can contribute to identifying and providing for gifted Maori students. While the paper focuses on gifted Maori learners, the underlying principles are relevant to gifted students from any ethnic minority group. Readers will be challenged to reflect on and share how they recognise and provide for cultural giftedness in their particular area of involvement.*

Maori, culture, identification, diversity, gifted

### INTRODUCTION

This paper is written as a series of reflections and responses. The initial title for this paper, which I subsequently changed, used the term “culturally gifted”. I do not know what it is like in other countries, but from my experience in New Zealand I have learnt that when you talk about cultural giftedness people equate this with exceptional ability in various cultural arts, crafts, music, traditions and ethnic languages. Examples are the Samoan pupil who makes brilliant tapa cloth, the Aboriginal student who is an expert on the didgeridoo or the Maori child who delivers inspirational *whaikorero* (traditional speeches). While these are all important manifestations of cultural giftedness, culture does, in fact, have a much broader influence on the concept of giftedness. It is this wide-ranging influence that is the focus of this paper.

The examples given relate to giftedness from a Maori perspective. However, I must make an important point from the outset. Like any other people, Maori are a diverse group. They differ in lifestyle, beliefs, values, socio-economic circumstances, religious and tribal affiliation, geographic location, degree of acculturation and knowledge and practice of their Maori culture. I am not claiming to present the Maori viewpoint on giftedness but rather a Maori perspective that arose from research studies involving people who identify with and adhere to their Maori culture (Bevan-Brown, 1993, 2002).

### CULTURE AND GIFTEDNESS

For Maori, culture influences giftedness in a variety of ways. First, there is the ‘cultural giftedness’, mentioned above, that is, being exceptional in Maori arts, crafts, music, historic and cultural knowledge and traditions, *whakapapa* (genealogy) and *te reo* (the Maori language). Examples are people like Peter Sharples who is a gifted exponent of Maori *haka* and other performing arts; Cliff Whiting who carves brilliantly in both traditional and contemporary styles, Erenora Hetet whose weaving is exceptional, Tuini Ngawai who composed some of the most famous Maori *waiata*, (songs), Tom Te Maru who has an extensive knowledge of Ngati Porou

*whakapapa*, Patricia Grace who is a wonderful story teller, and Whaea McClutchie whose speeches on the *marae* have people spellbound.

### **Reflection**

In our schools are we providing opportunities for students who are gifted in cultural areas to be recognised and extended? Does developing excellence in these areas receive the same priority, status, funding and time commitment as developing excellence in academic subjects? If cultural expertise is not treated equitably, what message does this give students from minority cultures?

Second, cultural giftedness for Maori not only includes exceptionality in cultural skills, abilities and knowledge but it also includes exceptionality in culturally valued qualities. Some qualities that have been identified include *awhinatanga* and *whakaritenga mahi* (helping and serving others), *māia* (courage, bravery) *manaakitanga* (hospitality), *wairuatanga* (spirituality), *whanaungatanga* (familiness), *aroha-ki-te-tangata* and *tūtōhutanga* (love for, caring and sensitivity to others) *pukumahi* and *pūkeke* (industriousness and determination) (Bevan- Brown, 1993; Jenkins, 2002). These qualities are probably considered important to most, if not all people. Certainly, emotional intelligence, intrapersonal intelligence and spiritual intelligence have received increased recognition internationally with the work of Goleman (1995), Gardner (1993) and Sisk and Torrance (2001). However, it is doubtful whether they are accepted as widely in gifted education as other more academically focused intelligences. For Maori, providing for students who are gifted in culturally valued qualities is just as important as providing for students who have exceptional skills and abilities.

Think of gifted learners from ethnic minority groups that you work with. Do they have any culturally valued qualities that are important components of their concept of giftedness? Are students who are outstanding in these qualities being recognised and provided with opportunities to display and extend these qualities?

Third, culture has an important influence on the way that widely accepted abilities are interpreted, recognised and demonstrated. The abilities referred to here are those listed in many of the popular multi-categorical definitions of giftedness: abilities such as intellectual, academic and physical, leadership, creativity, the visual and performing arts and so forth. These abilities can vary from one culture to the next in the way they are understood, in their characteristics and in how they are manifest. A Maori example will illustrate this point.

Three different styles of leadership have been identified for Maori (Bevan-Brown, 1993) There is 'up-front' leadership and leadership by example – both similar to leadership styles familiar worldwide. However, a third style involves a 'behind-the-scenes' genre where the leader provides emotional support, guidance and inspiration in a quiet, unassuming way. When teachers seek to identify and provide for their Maori students who are gifted leaders, they must take all three types of leadership into consideration, not just the two styles that are similar to Western concepts of leadership.

A further example relates to creativity. There is general agreement about many of the characteristics of creatively gifted children, for example, exceptional ability to produce a variety of ideas and to develop and extend them, to take different approaches, view a situation from many perspectives, identify problems, think critically, separate the relevant from the irrelevant, see relationships and make intuitive leaps. (Davis and Rimm, 1989). However, these characteristics can be exhibited in different ways by learners from different cultures. For example, the ability to 'read between the lines' depends on your particular 'life script' – what constitutes an 'intuitive leap' in one culture may have no meaning at all in another. Similarly, what is considered 'relevant and irrelevant' in creative problem solving will very much depend on your culture, socio-economic status and life circumstances.

**Reflection**

In identifying and providing for areas of giftedness in our schools, are differing cultural understandings and characteristics of various abilities taken into consideration? Do we interpret the behaviours and answers students provide through a lens that is appropriate to their culture? Or do we identify, interpret and provide for giftedness only from a majority cultural viewpoint?

Finally, culture not only influences the areas in which giftedness is recognised and the ways giftedness is demonstrated, but it also influences the fundamental nature of giftedness itself. There are three aspects of the Maori concept of giftedness that illustrate this point. Firstly, my research has shown that for Maori, both individual and group giftedness exist. The latter is exceptional ability that arises from group effort rather than individual talent. This is most easily understood in a musical context. While a band may have many talented members, it is playing together that produces an outstanding performance. Individually the members are not 'gifted', together they are! In Maori there is a word, *kotahitanga* that describes this process of acting in unity. Giftedness arises from this unity and therefore it must be nurtured and developed in this context.

Secondly, Maori can have group 'ownership' of giftedness. There are two types of group ownership, the first being the *whanau* (extended family) ownership of a particular talent or gift that is passed down from one generation to the next. These gifts are cultural skills, abilities or qualities such as *karanga* (the art of calling on and welcoming people to a formal gathering). The second type of group ownership of giftedness is not restricted to cultural skills, abilities or qualities and can be best described in relation to Sir Apirana Ngata. Apirana was an outstanding Maori leader and politician. Not only was he a *tohunga* (expert) in Maori knowledge but when he was in parliament he was also the most highly qualified member by western academic standards. Apirana was especially chosen to be the repository of important Maori knowledge and was supported by his family to go to College and University. While he was the gifted individual, his giftedness was considered to be shared by his family because he was enabled to develop it through their hard work and support. A third aspect of giftedness that is possibly unique to Maori is the 'service' component. In order to be considered 'a gifted Maori', not only must you be exceptional but you must also use your outstanding skill, ability or quality to help others in some way.

**Reflection**

Group giftedness, group ownership of giftedness and the service component are all aspects of a Maori concept of giftedness, which must be taken into consideration in identifying and providing for gifted Maori students. They illustrate the point that cultural influence on giftedness is multifaceted. Again think of gifted learners from ethnic minority groups that you work with. Do you really know what giftedness means to them? Are you aware of any components of giftedness that are unique to their culture and if so, are you taking these into consideration in identification and provision?

**PROVIDING A CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR  
GIFTED MAORI LEARNERS**

At the heart of successful education for all Maori students is the provision of a culturally responsive environment. By this I mean an environment where the learner's culture is valued, affirmed and developed. In such an environment students' self-esteem is enhanced because they are given "positive feelings about their worth as individuals and as productive members in their classroom" (Montgomery, 2001, p.6). Likewise, students' learning is facilitated because their educational and home environments are culturally compatible. They are able to utilise familiar learning strategies and to relate new information to prior knowledge. In a culturally responsive environment students are more motivated to learn, they feel psychologically secure and thus are

able to concentrate fully on required academic tasks (Gay, 1994). Apart from these general advantages of a culturally responsive environment, there are specific benefits for gifted Maori students. Research has indicated that Maori children who have a knowledge of and pride in their Maori culture are more likely to develop their gifted potential and to resist negative peer pressure against achieving (Bevan-Brown, 1993).

For Maori students a culturally responsive environment has a number of essential ingredients.

Four of these are:

1. Teachers who value and support cultural diversity in general and Maori culture in particular. In my experience I have found Maori students especially sensitive to people's attitudes towards Maori. Many appear to have a finely honed perceptive ability to detect people who are biased, insincere or culturally patronising. Once detected these people may be avoided, challenged, discounted, ignored or treated in some other disrespectful manner. On the other hand, I have also found Maori students respond very positively to people they perceive as valuing them and their culture. Having a teacher they relate well to and respect is particularly important for gifted Maori learners. Research shows that this is often a crucial factor in determining whether gifted potential is realised or not (Bevan-Brown, 1994).

Detailed knowledge of Maori culture is not a pre-requisite to valuing it. Students respect teachers who admit their shortcomings and actively strive to increase their cultural understanding. However, providing a culturally responsive environment is obviously a lot easier for a teacher who has a sound knowledge of Maori culture. In addition, in order to provide effectively for gifted Maori students, teachers also need an understanding of how culture impacts on giftedness, of Maori concepts of giftedness and of the consequent implications for identification and provision.

2. Programs that incorporate cultural content including cultural knowledge, skills, practices, experiences, customs and traditions. In a culturally responsive classroom the inclusion of cultural content is part and parcel of the general classroom program. For example, Maori content may include waiata and haka in music; stories about Maori characters and novels by Maori authors in reading and language; Maori history in social studies; the study of native plants in science; carving and weaving in art.

Apart from the previously mentioned cognitive and affective benefits of including such content, it also provides opportunities for Maori students who are gifted in these areas to surface and be identified. However, identification is just the first step. Once identified these gifted students must be provided with opportunities to extend their abilities. An excellent example of this was provided by a teacher of a student gifted in the Maori performing arts: What we did with Mere was we put her in charge of a production. *Heta* (a teacher) kept an eye on her but essentially she created the whole show – wrote the script and waiata, made up the actions, taught them to other kids, organised the practices. The show was performed for the *whanau* and they were blown away (Bevan-Brown, 2000, p.1).

3. Programs that incorporate cultural values, beliefs, attitudes, behaviours and dispositions. Gorman (1999) and Wilson (1997) maintain that adding cultural content to programs is not enough. Cultural values, behaviours and dispositions should also be incorporated. Gorman (1999, p.166) urges educators to develop strategies that build on, rather than change, the cultural dispositions of students and that emphasise being rather than doing; address the past and present rather than only the future; and promote harmony with nature, rather than subjugation of nature.

Although Gorman was referring to Native Canadian students, his quote is equally relevant to Maori students in general and gifted Maori students in particular. The 'being' Gorman speaks of

equates to many of the 'qualities' identified in the Maori concept of giftedness described previously.

For Maori students a culturally responsive environment is a place where spirituality is valued and acknowledged, where perseverance is rewarded, where caring for others is expected and encouraged and where there are opportunities to work cooperatively in groups and to be of service. Just as the inclusion of cultural content allows cultural abilities to surface and be identified, the incorporation of Maori values allows Maori learners to demonstrate culturally valued qualities. As Milne (1993) asks, how can a student who is gifted in *manaakitanga* be recognised if hospitality is not a valued, integral part of the classroom program? Similarly, how can group giftedness be identified if students are not provided with many opportunities to work together?

An example of the 'service' component of Maori giftedness was provided by a teacher who worked with a group of students who had advanced ability in the Maori language. These students were required to analyse published stories for young children to determine the components of a successful children's story. They researched topics of interest to young children by spending a morning in a *kohanga reo* (Maori immersion early childhood centre) and then wrote and illustrated their own children's book. Finally, the completed stories were read to the *kohanga reo* children and a copy of each book was donated to the *kohanga reo's* library.

4. Teaching and assessment that utilises culturally preferred ways of learning. Matching teaching and learning styles eliminates "disjunctures in how different students learn in their cultural communities and how they are expected to learn at school" (Gay, 1994, p.6). The literature reveals many teaching and assessment strategies that are deemed to be culturally appropriate and preferred by Maori students (see for example, Glynn and Bishop, 1995; Hemara, 2000; Metge, 1984; and Walters, Phillips, Oliver and Gilliland, 1993). While being mindful of the danger of stereotyping Maori children and of the fact that gifted students are often claimed to be qualitatively different thinkers (Hallahan and Kauffman, 1991), a number of culturally preferred ways of learning appear to be especially appropriate to gifted Maori students. The use of mentors is one teaching approach that has particular relevance as it was successfully used in traditional times to educate gifted learners (Best, 1974; Buck, 1950; Metge, 1983) and continues to be a popular, effective teaching strategy. A teacher from a *kura kaupapa* Maori (total immersion Maori primary school) explains:

Once a particular talent is identified we look for someone within the *whanau* (extended family) who can take the child under their wing and nurture that talent. Their job is to encourage and teach. The *whanau* member can come into the *kura* (school) and work with the child and maybe others or perhaps the child will go out of the *kura* to work with that person. This can be in school time, after school or at the weekend. It doesn't really matter. It depends on what is most appropriate and what opportunities arise (Bevan-Brown, 2000, p.1).

## CONCLUSION

There are two main aims in this paper. The first is to raise awareness of the significant and multifaceted influence culture has on giftedness. Hopefully my examples of what giftedness means to Maori illustrate this and have broadened your understanding of 'cultural giftedness'. My second aim is to emphasise how important it is to provide a culturally responsive environment. For gifted Maori students it is an effective means of recognising and developing their outstanding skills, abilities and qualities. I feel confident that a culturally responsive environment will also be beneficial to the gifted students from ethnic minority groups that you are involved with. I challenge you to find out if I am correct!

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