Translating theory into practice: One school's approach to identifying Māori gifted and talented learners

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Abstract

This is the second in a series of articles which discuss how we can recognise, develop and utilise the potential of Māori gifted and talented students through providing education which acknowledges and caters for Māori conceptions of giftedness and talent. Through a culturally responsive gifted and talented education programme, Māori learners who demonstrate (or have the potential to demonstrate) high levels of ability in areas recognised as valuable in Māori conceptions of giftedness and talent will be identified, challenged and extended, along with those demonstrating high ability in a Eurocentric conception of giftedness, leading to a truly bicultural gifted and talented education model. This article describes how theory and research have informed and changed the Bream Bay College concept of gifted and talented students and the methods used to identify them. Culturally appropriate concepts and identification procedures that recognise and cater for a wide range of gifts and talents are imperative if we are to improve educational experiences for our gifted and talented Māori students.

Introduction

Māori students are currently identified as priority learners by the Ministry of Education and hence, the improvement of their experience of education in Aotearoa New Zealand is under the spotlight. The Ministry of Education (2010, p. 10) in their *Statement of Intent* for 2010-2015 noted that the "evidence and indicators used to monitor the education system's performance for Māori show that the gap in achievement levels between Māori and the New Zealand average across most levels and most school subjects remains too wide." Therefore they make the following statement:

> To support every Māori learner to achieve to their full potential as Māori we need an education system that captures and reflects that identity, language and culture are essential ingredients for all learners and critical to the success of Māori learners in education.
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> Over the past few years, there has been a consistent improvement in education outcomes achieved by Māori students as measured by achievement of school leaver qualifications. Despite this improvement there remains a persistent gap in achievement between a significant number of Māori students and their non-Māori peers. This under-utilised potential has a detrimental impact on those individuals, on their communities and on our nation as a whole.

Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 24

In order to try and address the persistent gap in achievement, a change in direction of policy for Māori education has seen the recognition of the Māori potential approach, which acknowledges that "every Māori student has the potential to make a valuable social, cultural and economic contribution to the well-being of their whānau, their community and New Zealand as a whole." (Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 3). For all Māori students this move away from deficit theory approaches indicates a positive change. If we are able to adapt the current system to recognise and develop a wider range of gifts and talents then Māori students' rates of achievement in the school system can be improved. Instead of trying to fit everyone into a neat box, we need to get rid of the box altogether and value the unique gifts, talents and achievement of the diverse range of students present in our schools.

This is the second in a series of articles which aim to discuss how we can recognise, develop and utilise the potential referred to by the Ministry of Education (2010) through providing gifted and talented education which acknowledges and caters for Māori conceptions of giftedness and talent. Through a culturally responsive gifted and talented education programme, Māori learners who demonstrate (or have the potential to demonstrate) high levels of ability in areas recognised as valuable in Māori conceptions of giftedness and talent will be identified, challenged and extended, along with those demonstrating high ability in a Eurocentric conception of giftedness, leading to a truly bicultural gifted and talented education model. This article will describe how theory and research have informed and changed the Bream Bay College concept of gifted and talented students and the methods we use to identify them. It will also detail why culturally appropriate concepts and identification procedures that recognise and cater for a wide range of gifts and talents are imperative if we are to improve educational experiences for our gifted and talented Māori students. The third article in the series will detail how theory and research have informed the way we provide for Māori students who are gifted and talented as well as describing the development and implementation of a robust self-review process to ensure the procedures and provisions are meeting the needs of our students and community. We were supported in this development by involvement in the Te Toi Tupu Gifted and Talented Education Professional Learning Development contract.

This article intends to demonstrate how research can be used to inform practice, because unfortunately as Cook and Cothren Cook (2011) explain, the significant and persistent gap between research reports documenting effective practices and what actually occurs in typical schools is significant and persistent. The Ministry of Education (2012) makes clear the importance of using research to support effective practice and the next challenge, having explored the theoretical concepts, was to translate theory learning into practice. In 2013, I returned to Bream Bay College to develop a Gifted and Talented Programme for students in Years 7-10. Bream Bay College is a Year 7-13 secondary school with a roll of 436 students comprised of thirty-eight per cent Māori students. In re-developing gifted and talented

education to better recognise and support Māori educational achievement at our school we acknowledged that there were four main areas that needed assessing. These were our definition of giftedness and talent (including the characteristics recognised), our identification methods, our provision for gifted and talented students and our self-review processes. The theoretical support for this came from Ministry of Education (2012) *Gifted and Talented Students: Meeting their needs in New Zealand schools* and we used the diagram below to model our re-development process on.

Figure 1. *The interrelationships between concept, characteristics, identification, programmes and self-review*[1]

This model demonstrates how the components of an effective gifted and talented education programme are interlinked and each relies on the robustness of the next component. Without a robust concept and understanding of characteristics, identification procedures cannot be effective and so on.

This article will be structured around the first three areas – concept, characteristics and identification and threaded throughout the article will be the theory translated into practice to explain how each of these areas have come together to inform and change gifted and talented education at Bream Bay College.

Concept in Theory

As part of my initial research, carried out in 2012 and described in more detail in the previous issue of *Apex* (Scobie-Jennings, 2013a), I investigated mainstream schools' concepts of giftedness and talent and whether these were culturally appropriate for Māori. One of the aspects of this research involved analysing the literature around Māori giftedness and talent, what it is and why it is different from the concepts

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[1] From Ministry of Education (2012, p. 9). Copyright © Crown 2012. Reprinted with permission.

and definitions commonly employed to describe giftedness and talent in majority cultures. This distinction is important, as Sternberg (2007) notes, the abilities that are valued or what it means to be gifted and talented differ from culture to culture and students from minority or indigenous cultures are often overlooked when teachers are looking to define and identify gifts and talents. In order to be included in gifted and talented programmes, they first have to be identified and in order to be identified, the concept or definition used by the school needs to recognise their culturally and contextually specific gifts and talents. Descriptions of disproportionately low representation of indigenous cultures in gifted and talented programmes abound in the international and national research and literature about the topic (Bevan-Brown, 1993, 2009, 2011; Bracken, 2008; Briggs, Reis, & Sullivan, 2008; Chaffey, 2009; Education Review Office, 2008; Ford, 2010; Jenkins, 2002; McKenzie, 2004; Riley et al., 2004; Strong Scott, Stoyko Deuel, Jean-Francois, & Urbano, 2004). Riley and Bicknell's (2013) more recent, New Zealand-based research demonstrates that this is still the case. Riley and Bicknell note that although they found a growing recognition of the need for gifted and talented education and some acknowledgement of Māori cultural concepts, only 14% of the 1273 schools who responded to their survey had a definition which included cultural abilities and qualities.

The Ministry of Education (2012) sets out criteria which provide a framework for developing definitions that reflect schools' individual communities.

A school-based definition of giftedness and talent needs to:
- reflect a multi-categorical approach that includes an array of special abilities
- reflect a bicultural approach that incorporates Māori concepts
- recognise multicultural values, beliefs, attitudes, and customs
- recognise both performance and potential
- acknowledge that gifted and talented students demonstrate exceptionality in relation to their peers of the same age, culture, or circumstances
- provide for differentiated educational opportunities for gifted and talented students, including social and emotional support
- reflect the context and values of the school community
- acknowledge that giftedness is evidenced in all societal groups, regardless of culture, ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, or disability (learning, physical, or behavioural)
- recognise that a student may be gifted in one or more areas
- recognise that a student's gifts and talents will emerge at times and in circumstances that are unique to that student
- be grounded in sound research and theories.

Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 22

This was used as a basis to inform the re-development of our school concept. Bevan-Brown (2009) describes further what the Māori concepts included in the criteria above might be. She points out that teachers must have a clear understanding of the influence of culture when they formulate their school concept or definition in order for gifted Māori students to be accurately identified and provided for. Bevan-Brown's (1993) research discovered that giftedness and talent for Māori is a broad, wide-ranging concept which is grounded in kaupapa Māori and in which many qualities and abilities are valued. Articles written by Bevan-Brown (2000, 2005a, 2005b, 2009, 2010, 2011) expand and build on these findings. Work by Jenkins (2002) and Mahaki and Mahaki (2007) also add to the literature describing the qualities and abilities valued by Māori and contributed to informing our re-development. Both Bevan-Brown and Mahaki and Mahaki explain that the Māori concept of giftedness and talent is not bound by social class, economic status, lineage or gender and is holistic in nature. They also describe how in order for giftedness and talent to be recognised in Māoridom, the exceptional skills, abilities or qualities must be used to help others in some way (Bevan-Brown, 2005a; Mahaki & Mahaki, 2007). A fourth component that differentiates the Māori concept of giftedness and talent from the Pākeha concept is that the exceptional skills, abilities or qualities may be exhibited in both individual and/or group settings and that an individual's gifts and talents can be 'owned' by the group (Bevan-Brown, 2005a). Since the re-development of our definition a third piece of work has been published in this area, Macfarlane, Webber, Cookson-Cox and McRae (2014) investigated the characteristics of successful Māori students in their tribal area of Te Arawa and their findings are also useful in developing Māori conceptions of giftedness and talent and lists of characteristics of gifted and talented Māori students.

Through my review of the literature prior to our re-development process, I found that there are eight areas that are commonly valued in a Māori conception of giftedness and talent. These are āwhinatanga or manaakitanga, whānaungatanga, wairuatanga, kaitiakitanga, rangatiratanga, tikanga, te mahi rēhia and mātauranga (Bevan-Brown, 1993; Jenkins, 2002; Mahaki & Mahaki, 2007) (translated in figure 2). Concepts similar to the areas of āwhinatanga or manaakitanga, rangatiratanga, te mahi rēhia and mātauranga can also be contained in a Eurocentric conception of giftedness and talent as interpersonal skills, leadership abilities, physical, visual and performing arts abilities and academic abilities respectively. However, what is different about the Māori conceptions of these areas, as indicated above, is the way that Māori students who are gifted and talented are expected to use their exceptional abilities or qualities (e.g., in service to others).

Concept in practice

Prior to 2013 our school definition of giftedness and talent was very generic and was loosely based upon the Ministry of Education's (2000) *Gifted and Talented Students: Meeting their Needs in New Zealand Schools.* There was no specific mention of Māori giftedness and the only reference to anything close was the inclusion of 'cultural giftedness' in the list of areas in which a student may demonstrate giftedness and talent. Through my research I found this was common among the schools surveyed and although the mention was there, generally teachers did not know what this would look like for Māori past being good at kapa haka or being able to speak te reo Māori.

Therefore my first task was to update our concept. The Ministry of Education (2012) recommends a process for developing definitions that reflect your individual school community. Although many theories and concepts of giftedness and talent have been developed, there is no universally accepted concept or definition and each school needs to "develop a draft definition that can be reviewed and refined in response to evidence from formal research and the school's own collaborative inquiry" (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 22). Through my investigation the previous year I had compiled literature and reviewed research on conceptions of Māori giftedness and talent as discussed in the section above and on my return to school I presented this to school staff and the community. This was an important step in the process as many authors on the topic (Bevan-Brown, 2009; Jenkins, Moltzen & Macfarlane, 2004; Ministry of Educaion, 2012; Riley & Bicknell, 2013) indicate the importance of ensuring that the school community is a part of discussions around definitions of giftedness and talent. The sharing of information to develop our definition was done in several ways. A formal presentation was delivered to the whole staff of the findings of my research as well as the direction I intended to take in developing our gifted and talented programme. Following that, staff were offered small group and one-on-one professional development sessions as requested to further expand their understandings of giftedness and talent in general and more specifically increase their skills in recognising and providing for their gifted and talented Māori students. The research and literature discussed above as it related to the context of our school and community provided the basis for the professional development.

After increasing the awareness of the varied concepts of giftedness and talent and the importance of recognising cultural giftedness and particularly Māori giftedness and talent, we began to discuss with staff and our school community what our updated concept might look like. A draft concept, which was drawn from the research discussed above and was relevant to our cultural context, was shared with staff in a staff meeting and our school community via a newsletter, email and the school website. Feedback was asked for and all indications were positive and that the proposed concept was far more appropriate than our current one. From

this consultation we developed the following concept as appropriate and culturally relevant to our context. The first part of the concept is adapted for our context from the examples of secondary school definitions provided on the Te Kete Ipurangi Gifted and Talented Online website (White, 2004) which outlined a multi-categorical definition of giftedness and talent. The aspects of Māori concepts of giftedness and talent incorporated into our definition were based on Mahaki and Mahaki's (2007) work but also brought together with components discussed in Bevan-Brown's (1993) research and Jenkin's (2002) case study of Māori giftedness. The Ministry of Education (2012) outlines criteria for a school-based concept of giftedness and talent, discussed above in the theory section and this was used to ensure that our concept was robust and appropriate. Our re-developed concept is as follows:

Gifted and talented students at Bream Bay College are defined as those learners who demonstrate or show the potential for outstanding performance and achievement in one or more of the following areas, when compared with others of similar age, background, culture, experience and environment:

- *Critical, creative and caring thinking*
- *Physical and sporting ability*
- *Cultural traditions, values and ethics*
- *Visual and/or performing arts*
- *Technological aptitude*
- *Academic and intellectual abilities*
- *Spirituality.*

We also recognise that giftedness and talent are a cultural construct and what it means to be gifted and talented differs between cultures. Therefore our definition recognises Aotearoa New Zealand's bi-cultural heritage and the demographics of our kura and identifies that in addition to those areas above, Māori students may demonstrate or show potential for outstanding performance and achievement in one or more of the following qualities and areas specifically valued from within te ao Māori:

- *Whānaungatanga (family values and relationships)*
- *Manaakitanga (hospitality and care for others)*
- *Wairuatanga (spirituality)*
- *Kaitiakitanga (guardianship of knowledge, environment and resources)*
- *Matauranga (knowledge, thinking skills)*
- *Tikanga (knowledge of protocols, customs and rituals)*
- *Rangatiratanga (leadership)*
- *Te Mahi Rehia (expression through visual and performing arts or physical pursuits).*

Now that we had a concept to work with, the next step was to work out how to identify these students. Once again, we started with the theory to inform how we could improve our practice.

Characteristics and identification in theory

Bevan-Brown (2009) describes that identification procedures which are appropriate and effective for one culture may be inappropriate and ineffective for another. Therefore when developing identification procedures, teachers need to consider whether the strategies they employ will accurately identify students from all cultural groups present in their class. As Jenkins, Moltzen and Macfarlane (2004) note, despite the broader, more inclusive concept of giftedness that is promoted by the government (Ministry of Education, 2000; 2002; 2012), practices within mainstream gifted education in Aotearoa New Zealand remain fundamentally Eurocentric. Cathcart (2005) and Webber (2011) note that culture is reflected in what happens in schools in a whole range of ways; therefore it is not surprising that few Māori students are identified as gifted and talented. Jenkins, Moltzen and Macfarlane (2004) believe that in order to increase the visibility of Māori giftedness within mainstream environments the very essence of the system itself needs to be changed in ways that are reflective of the principles of partnership, determination and power-sharing that are expressed in the Treaty of Waitangi.

In order for gifted and talented students to be identified, teachers need to have knowledge of the characteristics of giftedness and talent from both Pākehā and Māori perspectives and how these may be demonstrated. As Bevan-Brown (2005b) outlines, there are two aspects to Māori cultural giftedness and talent. The first is the 'cultural giftedness' which I found in my research is how teachers generally conceptualise, recognise and readily identify gifted Māori learners. This aspect of giftedness relates to being exceptional at kapa haka, being able to speak te reo Māori, having a high level of understanding of tikanga (traditional protocol) and whakapapa (genealogy). The second aspect, which I found in my research, was not so widely acknowledged or catered for, is what Bevan-Brown (2005b, p. 151) terms "exceptionality in culturally valued qualities." These qualities are described in more detail in Appendix B in my thesis (Scobie-Jennings, 2012) which combines the accumulated research and literature about the areas that are considered important components for Māori giftedness and talent and provides more information about the characteristics that may be observed when identifying Māori students who are (or have the potential to be) gifted and talented in these areas. It is important to note, however, that a child will not necessarily display all of the characteristics in the list; rather, the characteristics listed are indicators that a child may be gifted and talented in that area. As the Ministry of Education (2012, p. 33) describes, "the gifted and talented are not a homogeneous group, and every student possesses a unique blend of traits. However, when we look at gifted and talented students as a group, we can see clusters of common characteristics."

Along with the need for teachers to be aware of these areas of giftedness and the characteristics that may indicate students are gifted and talented in these areas, the research and literature around Māori gifted and talented education describes two common suggestions for what needs to happen in order to more appropriately identify these students. Bevan-Brown (2009) explains that the identification of gifted and talented students falls under two main categories – the Culturally Responsive Environment Approach and the Data-Gathering Approach. In terms of identifying Māori students who are (or have the potential to be) gifted and talented, the Culturally Responsive Environment Approach is supported in articles and research by Bevan-Brown (1993, 2005b, 2009), Jenkins (2002), Jenkins, Macfarlane and Moltzen (2004), Macfarlane (2004), Mahuika (2007) and Webber (2011). When using this approach, students' gifts and talents are encouraged to 'surface' in an environment that is stimulating, challenging and where each student's culture is valued, affirmed and developed (Bevan-Brown, 2009). Identification takes place through observation of the child displaying their gifts and talents, however Bevan-Brown (1993) discusses in her research that this method of identification needs to be carried out by teachers who have a sound understanding and knowledge of Māori perspectives of giftedness and Māori culture and customs. According to many authors, having a culturally responsive environment, along with a robust, culturally inclusive definition of giftedness and talent, plays the greatest part in allowing Māori students who are gifted and talented to have these gifts and talents recognised (Bevan-Brown, 1993, 2005a, 2005b, 2009; Cathcart, 2005; Jenkins, Moltzen & Macfarlane, 2004; Mahaki & Mahaki, 2007; Riley et al., 2004; Webber, 2011). It is not enough for teachers to just know about the areas of giftedness and talent outlined in their school definition, there must be opportunities for students to demonstrate these gifts and talent in order for them to be identified. Bevan-Brown (2009) indicates that for gifted and talented Māori students the importance of culturally responsive environments is in the acknowledgement and valuing of the diverse gifts and talents that the students have and that the students feel safe and encouraged to demonstrate, extend and share these gifts and talents at school.

The second approach of gathering data is a more formal method of identifying students who may be gifted and talented and involves using a wide range of strategies and instruments such as observations, checklists, rating scales, standardised tests, portfolios, parent nomination, peer nomination and self-nomination to gather information about students' gifts and talents (Ministry of Education, 2012). For Māori students, this means of identification is fraught with difficulty, as Bevan-Brown (2009) describes many of the strategies and instruments commonly utilised do not include a Māori conception of giftedness and talent. Cathcart (2005), Jenkins (2002), Keen (2005) and McKenzie (2001) support this finding, and note that many methods employed with the intention of identifying Māori students who are gifted and talented are culturally insensitive, focus on a narrow conception of giftedness and rely too heavily on information devised from Eurocentric tests. The Ministry of Education (2012) notes, in their

updated version of *Gifted and Talented Students: Meeting their Needs in New Zealand Schools,* that one of the principles of effective identification is to ensure that information to aid identification is gained from a multi-method approach which includes observation in a range of authentic contexts as well as discussions with students, rather than just from formal assessment tasks. They recommend that schools develop sets of characteristics of giftedness and talent that are aligned to their definitions (Ministry of Education, 2012).

It is just as important (if not more important) to identify students who are potentially gifted and talented, and this is recognised in our new definition. Bevan-Brown (2009) urges teachers to look beyond the classroom and school and beyond any misbehaviour, an observation supported by the Ministry of Education (2012), who note that it is important to recognise gifts and talent that may not be apparent in the classroom but may be more visible on the sports field, at church, on the marae, or at home.

Characteristics and identification in practice

Although we had a relatively broad definition, prior to 2013, formal identification of gifted and talented students was limited to academic giftedness and talent. Students were identified as having a high level of academic ability, through standardised assessment, and were placed in 'extension classes' in Years 7, 8 and 9. The decision had already been made at the end of 2012 to disestablish the extension classes as we could see that these classes were not catering well enough for the broad areas of giftedness and talent that we could see existed in our school. Therefore, as we had refined and developed our concept to be more appropriate for our context, we now needed to work on our identification processes. As recommended by the Ministry of Education (2012) our first step towards this was to develop a set of characteristics that was aligned to our concept. We used the works of White (2004) and Bevan-Brown (1993, 2009), Jenkins (2002) and Mahaki and Mahaki (2007) to develop sets of characteristics for each of the areas of giftedness and talent included in our definition While it is beyond the scope of this article to include these lists, interested readers are welcome to request these from me by emailing the journal editors.

Once again the development of the sets of characteristics was done in draft form initially and the school community (staff, whānau and wider community) were consulted as to whether they felt the characteristics reflected what was valued within our school community. Again the response was positive and with a few minor changes to wording, we now had a working list of characteristics to use to identify students who were, or had the potential to be, gifted and talented. The importance of ensuring that the staff and school community had an understanding of how to use these lists and that not all gifted and talented students would

display all of the characteristics was important, as indicated in the theory above and this message was conveyed in a similar way to the sharing of the definition – through small group and one-on-one workshops with staff and through both face-to-face and online discussions with the community.

The identification process was detailed in a handbook for our school as well as a Google Site which is shared publically (Scobie-Jennings, 2013b) and these were shared with all staff members and gone through in a staff meeting and in small group situations as required. The aim of the handbook and website was to provide all the necessary information about our gifted and talented education programme in one place so that it was transparent, sustainable and available to all staff and not something that was seen as any particular person's 'job'. The discussions throughout this whole re-development kept reiterating to teachers that they were all responsible for ensuring their students were being catered for appropriately as these students spend most of their time at school in regular, mainstream classroom contexts.

Following the development of our set of characteristics and teachers being up-skilled in being able to identify these characteristics we carried out our first cycle of identification for 2013. Parents, whānau, current and former teachers of all students were invited to take part in this process and all were given our concept and sets of characteristics to work through. Our identification forms are available on the website (Scobie-Jennings, 2013b). Names were then given to me and I collated all the information into a Google Sheet which is shared with all our staff. This is a living document and several times throughout the year this was updated and reviewed. Recorded on this document is the students' name, class, sex, ethnicity, identification methods, area/s of giftedness, and provisions throughout their time at our school. For the new Year 7 students I was also able to include whether they had been involved in gifted and talented education provisions at their primary school.

The change in concept and identification processes led to an interesting and challenging situation. Using our previous concept and procedures for identification, only 17% of our identified gifted and talented students were Māori and the only area of formal identification was academic giftedness and talent. Using our new identification procedures, 35% of the students identified as gifted and talented were Māori and 59% of the Year 7-10 students identified were gifted in the areas beyond academic giftedness that are acknowledged in our definition. So now we had a comprehensive list of students who had been identified as gifted and talented across a wide variety of areas, what next?

Next steps

Over the last two years our concept, identification procedures and programmes for gifted and talent students have changed significantly. As discussed above we have gone from procedures which only catered for academic giftedness and talent to a considerably broader and more

culturally appropriate concept, identification procedures and programmes and this has meant a huge change to the way gifted and talented education is delivered at Bream Bay College. Unfortunately there is not enough room in this article to discuss how we have changed our gifted and talented education programmes and provision so this will be covered in the next *APEX* issue. As well as discussing the theory to practice process we undertook to re-develop our programmes and provision, the next article will discuss the self-review process we have employed and how this has ensured that our processes and provision are robust and meeting the needs of our students and community.

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