

## Q & A

**Dr Jill Bevan-Brown, 58, is Associate Professor at Massey University's School of Curriculum and Pedagogy. Her specialist subject is Maori children with special needs, including those who are gifted.**

### **How did you first become involved in this area of specialisation?**

I took a course in Special Education in my BA many years ago and since then I have continued to study and research in this area. I am not sure what motivated me to take that first course, although prior to that I had friends and acquaintances over the years who had various physical and sensory disabilities. I know my mother was not surprised I entered this field, as she said I'd always 'had leanings' towards this area.

### **Were you a gifted child yourself?**

No, definitely not, although I did do well at school. I put this down to a love of learning and lots of hard work. I have always maintained that you don't have to be highly intelligent to be a successful student, but you do have to have stamina! Over the years I have put in a few 'all-nighters' when assignments were due, or to swot before exams, and that is what got me through.

### **Tell us about your childhood.**

I was fortunate to have a very happy childhood. I had wonderful parents, three sisters, one brother and a very supportive, close whanau. I attended primary schools in Porirua and Titahi Bay, went to St. Bride's Catholic boarding school in Masterton for three years, and then finished my education at Mana College in Porirua. You couldn't have got two colleges that were more different, but I am glad I went to both of them. St. Bride's gave me a good academic foundation and taught me to study hard; Mana College taught me about life!

My father, Vince Bevan, was an All Black who wasn't allowed to go to South Africa in 1949 because he was Maori. I was brought up amongst the controversy that surrounded this and believe it had a real influence on me. It instilled at a young age a keen sense of social justice and a hatred of prejudice in any form. I clearly remember being invited to a 'day' girl's house for Sunday lunch when I was at boarding school. When her mother started criticising the 'dirty Maoris' that lived nearby I gave her a piece of my mind! Needless to say I was never invited back and got into a bit of trouble with the nuns, but it was well worth it.

### **How has provision for Maori children changed over the years?**

Originally published in *Tall Poppies*, the magazine of the NZ Association for Gifted Children, July 2010

When I first started teaching in 1972 (yes, I was only 19!), Maori children with any sort of special need were treated as if they were Pakeha. There was no recognition that a child's culture could impact on how their special needs [including giftedness] were perceived or provided for. However, it's great to see that there has been a growing awareness of the important role that culture plays in learning and this has extended to teaching Maori children with special needs.

I am a big supporter of the Kotahitanga programme [a government-funded project aimed at improving the educational achievement of Maori students in mainstream secondary schools]. Although it is not aimed specifically at students with special needs, it is teaching educators to focus on potential and to move from the deficit thinking approach that has disadvantaged Maori for many years – i.e. focusing on what is wrong and what children can't do, instead of their strengths. In the 50s and 60s, for example, many teachers believed that Maori children were 'disadvantaged' by their culture, so instead of drawing on the children's rich cultural heritage, teachers required them to read and write about experiences that were completely foreign to them.

Additionally, Kotahitanga emphasises the importance of building positive relationships, having high expectations and involving children in their own learning. I know these messages are relevant for all students, but the positive relationship aspect is particularly powerful for Maori. If Maori students know you like them and value their culture, you are 90 per cent there!

### **How adequately are their needs being met?**

Although things have improved greatly, there is still much to be done. High rates of expulsion of Maori students, relatively lower NCEA results, over-representation in some special needs areas, and under-representation in gifted programmes etc. are testament to inadequate provisions. I have written a book called *The Cultural Self-Review. Providing Culturally Effective, Inclusive Education for Maori Learners*.<sup>\*</sup> It is based on my PhD and outlines a step-by-step process teachers can use to explore how well they are providing for Maori learners, including those with special needs. It also includes strategies teachers can use to improve provisions for Maori students. From the reports I receive, the cultural self-review process is helping many schools to more adequately meet the needs of Maori students.

### **You sent one of your children to kohanga reo. Was it a difficult decision to make?**

My youngest son went to kohanga reo. He now works in a kohanga and has been doing so for six years. Sending him there was not a difficult decision at all – au contraire! Although my oldest three children did not have the opportunity to attend kohanga reo, they were all involved in bilingual schooling. Both my mokopuna go to kohanga reo. I struggled to learn te reo as an adult, so it lightens my heart to hear my two-year-old moko chattering away so naturally. Not only is it an advantage culturally, but cognitively it is really beneficial to speak more than one language; it develops cognitive flexibility.

Originally published in *Tall Poppies*, the magazine of the NZ Association for Gifted Children, July 2010

**You've talked about problems of cross-cultural misunderstandings and miscommunication arising when Pakeha are dealing with giftedness amongst Maori children. Can you give us some examples?**

Well, first of all, that statement needs to be qualified. Just because people are from different cultures does not mean that cross-cultural misunderstandings are inevitable. There are many Pakeha teachers who have a sound understanding of the impact of culture as it relates to giftedness and are doing wonderful work with gifted Maori children. I take my hat off to them. However, when teachers from a majority culture are teaching children from minority cultures there is always potential for cultural misunderstandings and this applies in the area of giftedness as well.

The research I did years ago on Maori perspectives of giftedness contained some good examples. There was the gifted Maori girl who was sent to a science camp with other gifted students in the district. She was miserable there. The other students couldn't pronounce her name so the teacher asked her to use a Pakeha name. She was also expected to get her own breakfast and she felt uncomfortable helping herself to food in a strange place. She ended up leaving the camp and was blamed for not making any attempt to 'fit in.' The teachers running the camp did not understand that she felt culturally unsafe in this environment.

Another example is a Maori boy who missed class because he was involved in making an advertisement. When he explained this to his classmates, his Maori friends laughed and asked was he playing the part of the dog. This was interpreted by the teacher as a 'put-down' to discourage tall poppies. From my experience of my own children and their friends, the remark was simply an expression of Maori humour – no put-down would have been intended or taken.

**You believe that ideally, interviewers doing research should have the same ethnic background and cultural identity as the people being interviewed. Why?**

Firstly, because people from a minority culture are often more comfortable talking with someone from their own culture, and secondly, having the same ethnic background helps to guard against the cross-cultural misunderstandings and miscommunication we have just been talking about.

**It seems, then, that New Zealand is still far from being 'one nation'?**

We are one nation – one multicultural nation. Unfortunately, when some people talk about being 'one nation' they are referring to us all being like Pakeha. What a boring place it would be if we were all the same! I think NZ's multiculturalism should be provided for and valued. We are a vibrant and diverse society and that is something to celebrate.

**You've described yourself as being 'a very pale-looking Maori'. How do you believe that ethnic and cultural identity should be defined?**

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My definition relates to having blood connections to a particular ethnic group as well as having a personal identification with the cultural beliefs, values, traditions and world-view of that group. In the first instance, people are usually categorised by the way they look but this is sometimes an inaccurate identification marker. As you say, I do not look very Maori and this has been problematic on many occasions. Take the example I described earlier of my classmate's mother 'dissing' Maori to me. If I had looked Maori she probably would not have done this – actually, I probably would not have gotten invited to dinner in the first place! Then, on the other hand, I remember being confronted by a Maori woman after a lecture, telling me in no uncertain terms that I had no business talking about Maori perspectives when I was a Pakeha. A lesson about not taking things at 'face' value or making assumptions!

**What recommendations would you make for Maori children that would be different for gifted children overall?**

I think the main thing is to be cognisant of the child's culture and the implications this has for identifying and providing for gifted Maori children. For example, include cultural content into their programme; provide a learning environment that is culturally responsive – that values the Maori culture; consult with parents and whanau; remember to also provide for affective qualities and, where relevant, incorporate a service component in gifted programmes and activities I would also recommend that you read my article 'Identifying and providing for gifted and talented Maori students' in Apex\*, as that contains many more ideas than we have space for here.

**What do you mean when you use the terms 'affective qualities' and 'service component'?**

By this I mean positive personal qualities such as courage, hospitality and aroha. They are intangible attributes that are manifest in a person's behaviour, particularly as it relates to others.

A service component is using the children's gifts in some way to help other people. For example it might be coaching tennis, or singing in a retirement village concert. For Maori children, this fulfils the obligation to use exceptional ability to benefit others, which is part of the concept of giftedness.

**You're also a writer of short stories? How important is this in your life?**

You make me feel guilty as I haven't written any fictional work for ages. Writing these days seems to be limited to evaluation reports, study guides, journal articles and the like. I am waiting till I retire and then I hope to do all sorts of things I don't have time for now, including writing stories. I believe fiction can often get important messages across more effectively than factual texts. One of my stories is about a Maori mother who struggles to get her daughter with Down Syndrome enrolled in her local primary school. It seems to have a greater impact than all

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my study guide material on inclusion.

**If you had to choose one piece of advice to give to parents of gifted children, what would it be?**

Don't get hung up worrying about whether your gifted child is making the most of their abilities. Instead, direct that energy into listening to them, loving and supporting them, enjoying their company and laughing with them.

**And to gifted children themselves?**

Be yourself, enjoy your gifts, and if things get difficult, find someone to share your concerns with. Believe that things will get better – 'cos they will!

\*You can find Jill Bevan-Brown's article on 'Identifying and providing for gifted and talented Maori students', at [www.giftedchildren.org.nz/apex/](http://www.giftedchildren.org.nz/apex/), Vol. 15, No. 1, 2009. Her book, *The Cultural Self-Review. Providing Culturally Effective, Inclusive Education for Maori Learners*, is published by NZCER Press: [www.nzcer.org.nz](http://www.nzcer.org.nz).