

An Investigation into the Identification of Māori Gifted and Talented Students in Mainstream Schools

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Abstract

This article describes a study into the identification of Māori students who are gifted and talented. The study used survey methodology and content analysis to establish the definitions and identification procedures used in mainstream schools in one region of Aotearoa New Zealand. The barriers and challenges these schools faced when identifying Māori students who are gifted and talented was also examined. The findings indicated that although some schools had definitions and identification practices which were culturally responsive, their practices were not leading to the formal identification of the numbers of gifted and talented Māori students that are suggested by the literature. The study concludes that culturally responsive environments are the most appropriate way of generating effective identification practices. The findings indicate the main barrier to culturally responsive identification of Māori students who are gifted and talented is the lack of teacher expertise and knowledge. There is therefore a major need for on-going professional development and learning in this area.

Background

In every culture, people who display above average abilities exist, therefore, as Ford (2010) argues, there should be little or no under-representation of diverse cultures in gifted and talented education. However, as the abilities that are valued or what it means to be gifted and talented differ from culture to culture (Sternberg, 2007), students from cultures that differ from the majority are often overlooked when teachers are identifying gifts and talents in their students. Historically, indigenous education has been dominated by deficit model approaches (Ford, 2010); this approach hinders educators' ability and willingness to recognise the strengths of students from diverse cultural groups. Recently there has been a shift in thinking about the purpose of gifted and talented education and the works of Chaffey (2008), Macfarlane (2004) and Webber (2011) have demonstrated that gifted education can act as a means to reverse the deficit model and contribute greatly to the emergence of equitable education outcomes for all students from minority cultures.

In Aotearoa New Zealand this has been recognised in theory for some time and has been prescribed in one of the Ministry of Education's core principles which states that "Māori perspectives and values are embodied in all aspects of the education of gifted and talented learners." (Ministry of Education, 2012). However Riley, Bevan-Brown, Bicknell, Carroll-Lind and Kearney's (2004) research clearly demonstrates that this principle is not being put into practice in many schools and the Education Review Office (2008) report on schools' provision for gifted and talented students reiterated this finding. The Education Review

Office (2008) discovered that only five per cent of schools had a definition of giftedness and talent and an identification process that was highly inclusive and appropriate for the cultural context of the school, with a further 40% being inclusive and appropriate. That leaves 55% of schools whose definition and identification processes are only somewhat or not at all inclusive and culturally appropriate. Bevan-Brown (2009) explains that this is not because teachers are opposed to the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi or those set out by the Ministry of Education, but rather that they lack the knowledge and expertise to know how to identify and appropriately cater for Māori students who are gifted and talented.

The research base specifically aimed at Māori gifted and talented education is very small, consisting of two published empirical studies, relevant to this study and accessible to me as a student researcher. The first was carried out by Jill Bevan-Brown (1993) nearly twenty years ago and the second, by Heather Jenkins (2002), was published a decade ago. Therefore the aim of the study described here was to examine the current practices used when identifying Māori students who are gifted and talented. As the Ministry of Education (2012) describes, identifying gifted and talented students is the link between definition and programmes. This study provided a first step in discovering what is happening for Māori students who are gifted and talented in mainstream schools in one part of Aotearoa New Zealand. Further research needs to be undertaken into assessing the programmes that these students are encountering and the cultural appropriateness of these.

Methodology

Research Questions

This research aimed to answer the following questions about the schools in one region of Aotearoa New Zealand using survey research and content analysis:

1. What are the current practices used when identifying Māori students who are gifted and talented in mainstream schools in one region of Aotearoa New Zealand?
2. What aspects of practice do these schools find enable them to effectively identify Māori students who are gifted and talented?
3. Do these schools experience any barriers and/or challenges when identifying Māori students who are gifted and talented? If so, what are these barriers and/or challenges and how have they been addressed?
4. How many schools have undertaken Professional Learning and Development (PLD) in the area of Māori giftedness and talent in the last three years? Is there a relationship between the amount of PLD undertaken and the cultural responsiveness of the schools' identification practices?

Design

Two data collection methods were employed. A representative from each participant school completed a questionnaire which asked questions about numbers of Māori students

identified as gifted and talented, identification procedures, community consultation and professional learning and development undertaken. Data from the questionnaires was recorded, coded and collated on a spread sheet for analysis. Content analysis procedures were used to code, categorise and summarise data from the gifted and talented education policies and other documents provided by the respondent schools such as checklists and nomination forms.

Respondents

Responses were received from 11 primary schools in the region selected for study. The size of the sample was dictated by the number of schools who were invited to take part that were willing to complete and return the survey and copies of their school documents related to the identification of gifted and talented students. The sampling frame was constructed by using the Ministry of Education (2012b) listing of schools in the chosen district. Unfortunately no secondary schools completed the survey so the actual sample consisted of seven contributing primary (Years 1-6) schools and four full primary (Years 1-8) schools. As this was a qualitative, descriptive study, although a larger sample would have provided more data for description and comparison, the small sample size did not detract from the reliability or validity of the study.

Discussion of Findings

Current Identification Practices

Definitions of Giftedness and Talent

Six of the eleven schools provided documents which included their school's definition of giftedness and talent. All of these definitions were in line with the Ministry of Education's (2012a) recommendation for a definition that goes beyond academic ability. However, the student data provided painted a different picture. Nine Māori students across the eleven schools had been identified as gifted and talented in the last 12 months. Six of the nine Māori students were identified as being gifted and talented in academic ability, one in leadership and two in sport/physical ability. The respondents noted many reasons for this; however the main reason cited was that teachers were not confident in identifying aspects of giftedness and talent beyond academic ability. One of the limitations of this study, unfortunately, is that we do not know if these schools have Māori students that they have identified as gifted and talented prior to the last 12 months and what areas these students are gifted in.

Of the six schools that provided definitions, three specifically mentioned culture-specific abilities and/or qualities as an area of giftedness and talent and one further school included a document which explicitly described what these might be for Māori using Mahaki and Mahaki's (2007) descriptors. Five out of the eleven schools had consulted with their Māori community when developing their definition but none of those schools had identified any

students as demonstrating giftedness and talent in culture-specific abilities and/or qualities in the last 12 months. These results are similar to the Education Review Office's (2008) finding where the majority of schools they studied had not adequately taken into account Māori concepts of giftedness and talent in their definition. They also found that of these schools, most had not consulted with their community to help them understand and incorporate these concepts. A further finding from both Riley et al.'s 2004 study and ERO's 2008 study that still seems to be the case currently was that even if Māori beliefs and perspectives were included in definitions, there was little practical application of these in identification, programmes or strategies for delivery. Bevan-Brown (1993) and Mahaki and Mahaki (2007) advise that consultation with schools' Māori community is vital when defining culture specific giftedness and talent as Māori cannot be treated as a homogenous group. Although the literature presents lists of the areas of ability and characteristics generally recognised as being valued in a Māori conception of giftedness and talent, schools must consult with their particular Māori community in order to ensure that the qualities and areas of ability that they value are reflected in schools' definitions of culture specific giftedness and talent.

On analysis of the checklists provided by five respondents, there were more references to characteristics that are valued in a Māori conception of giftedness and talent than were apparent in the definitions, with characteristics of Mātauranga being by far the most commonly mentioned. Again this raises the issue that although the definition of giftedness and talent recommended by the literature (Bevan-Brown, 2009) is broad and wide-ranging, intellectual or academic giftedness and talent still seem to be the most commonly recognised.

Methods of Identification

The identification methods detailed in the policies, procedures and documents provided by the respondents were broad rather than directive and the three schools that specified particular methods to be employed recommended a similar multi-method approach as recommended in the Ministry of Education (2012a) publication, *Gifted and Talented Students: Meeting Their Needs in New Zealand Schools*.

One school mentioned the importance of a culturally responsive environment in facilitating identification, an approach which is strongly supported by the literature (Bevan-Brown, 1993; Bevan-Brown, 2005a; Bevan-Brown, 2005b; Cathcart, 2005; Jenkins, Moltzen, & Macfarlane, 2004; Mahaki & Mahaki, 2007; Riley et al, 2004; Webber, 2011). The school that included reference to the importance of a culturally responsive environment was one with a high proportion of Māori students (75%), however not one that had recently identified any Māori students as being gifted and talented.

Number of Māori Students Identified

Interestingly, the four schools that had identified gifted Māori students in the last 12 months and the school that had recently taken part in Professional Learning and

Development in this area were not the schools with the highest proportion of Māori students in their total population. The four schools that had identified students had 14%, 19%, 37% and 40% Māori students. The school with 19% Maori students was decile 9, the school with 14% was decile 7 and the schools with 37% and 40% Māori were decile 4.

Further research needs to be carried out to discover the numbers of Māori students identified as gifted and talented enrolled in the school, rather than specifically identified in the last 12 months. The results from this further enquiry need to be compared to the number of non-Māori students that have been identified as gifted and talented to discover whether there is a statistically significant difference between the number of Maori and Pākehā children being identified relative to the number of these two groups on the total school roll. The Ministry of Education (2012a) points out that students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds can be difficult to identify as gifted and talented as well, so this could also be a reason why the low decile schools (who had high proportions of Māori students) had not identified any Māori students as gifted and talented in the last 12 months, although it does not explain why the other high decile schools in the sample had not identified any Māori students who are gifted and talented in the last 12 months. Two of the remaining schools that were not low decile and had not identified any Māori gifted and talented students had very low numbers of Māori students – one had two students and one had three students.

Effective Practice

The findings of this research demonstrate that teachers believe that the same approaches to identification of giftedness and talent work well for Māori children and Pākehā children, but the numbers show that they do not. The numbers of Māori students being identified indicates that the methods being employed may not be working for Māori students, although further enquiry needs to be undertaken to determine if the schools had more Māori students who had been identified as gifted and talented prior to the last 12 months. Bevan-Brown (2009) warns that when employing methods of identification such as teacher observation it is important that teachers are aware of their own cultural perspectives, for example, humour is influenced by cultural beliefs and understandings. So although teachers may believe approaches that work for Pākehā children will work when attempting to identify Māori children as gifted and talented, the cultural perspective they are operating from may be hindering the identification process. The Ministry of Education (2012a) and Bevan-Brown (2009) support the finding that parent and/or whānau nomination may be particularly useful when identifying students whose cultural identity differs from that of the teacher. The Ministry of Education (2012a) warns, however, that it is important that genuinely trusting reciprocal relationships exist between the home and school in order for whānau to feel comfortable in sharing their children's strengths. Bevan-Brown (2009) also notes that it is valuable to include kaumātua and kōhanga reo kaiako in the identification process.

The other identification method found to be effective by participants in the research - peer nomination - is supported in by the literature (Bevan-Brown, 1993; Jenkins, 2002). However, the Ministry of Education (2012a) points out that it is important students are given guidance to consider key areas, behaviours and values that are relevant to different cultural and ethnic groups and focus on specific traits related to giftedness rather than simply nominate their friends. Bevan-Brown (2009) adds that it is unlikely that peer nomination will be effective in an environment that is not culturally responsive. Peer nomination is effective when students have a trusting relationship with their teachers and feel that their culture is valued (Bevan-Brown, 2009).

The literature maintains that a culturally responsive environment provides the best means for gifts and talents to be displayed and identified (Bevan-Brown, 2005b; Bevan-Brown, 2009; Jenkins, 2002; Jenkins, Moltzen, & Macfarlane, 2004; Riley et al., 2004). Without such an environment, recognising and identifying gifts and talents beyond academic ability becomes harder. Teachers do not have to be Māori to be able to provide this environment, but they do need support and professional development if they have limited Māori cultural knowledge. The Ministry of Education's (2008) Māori Education Strategy *Ka Hikitia – Managing for Success*, requires educators to encourage Māori to succeed as Māori and employ the Māori Potential Approach, which advocates shifting the focus from addressing problems and disparities to expanding on successes and investing in strengths, opportunities and potential. This approach sits well with gifted and talented education and encourages teachers to look beyond traditional eurocentric identification methods, to connect with whānau and the wider community and engage learners, parents, whānau, iwi, Māori educators, providers and enterprises in identifying and providing for Māori students who are gifted and talented (Ministry of Education, 2008).

Barriers and Challenges

The main barrier and challenge to identifying Māori students who are gifted and talented reported by the respondents in this research is that of teacher expertise and knowledge. This issue is mentioned widely in the literature (Bevan-Brown, 2009; Cathcart, 2005; Education Review Office, 2008; Farthing, Irvine, & Millar, 2007; Mahaki & Mahaki, 2007; Riley et al., 2004; Rymarczyk Hyde, 2010). Macfarlane, Christensen, Comerford, Martin and York (2010) note that it is important for teachers to realise that they do not have to be of the same culture as the students in order to be effective, but they must be able to 'connect' with their students' cultures and understand what it means to be gifted and talented in that culture.

Other barriers to identifying Māori students who are gifted and talented that were raised through the results of the study were the reluctance of children to take part in gifted and talented programmes and negative peer pressure around doing well in school. These issues were explored in a case study undertaken by Jenkins (2002). She describes how in the school she studied, where there was a very strong culturally responsive environment, the

special abilities of individual students or groups of students was readily acknowledged, nurtured and celebrated by peers. The participants in the study contended that such peer acknowledgement would not be likely in contexts where recognition or demonstration of gifts and talents may result in students being embarrassed and/or separated from the group by way of withdrawal programmes. Again the importance of being culturally responsive arises.

Professional Learning and Development

The significance of specific pre-service training, and continued in-service professional learning and development (PLD), in improving teachers' confidence and ability to identify and provide for their gifted and talented Māori students, as well as better understand these students' cultural background, is identified in the literature (Bevan-Brown, 1993, 2005b; Cathcart, 2005; McKenzie, 2001). In relation to PLD, The Education Review Office (2008, p. 54) in their review of gifted education, made the recommendations that school leaders should "promote on-going participation in school-wide professional development, and specialist training and development for people specifically responsible for gifted and talented education" and that the Ministry of Education should "provide targeted, high quality professional development to rural and low decile schools on providing for gifted and talented students". When I discussed this finding with a principal at one of the respondent schools she said they would love to do some PLD in this area, but all the other requirements of getting to grips with the new New Zealand Curriculum released in 2007 and the expectations for the implementation of National Standards, released in 2009, have meant that PLD for aspects such as gifted and talented education have fallen by the wayside as teachers do not have the time to do everything. The Education Review Office (2008) found that on-going professional development in gifted and talented education was essential to good practice to ensure that teachers' skills were kept updated. However, even with professional development, staff needed to have confidence and guidance to implement new strategies in their classrooms.

Another principal commented that finding PLD specific to gifted and talented education and Māori gifted and talented education in particular, had proved difficult. A solution to this issue, suggested by Riley and Rawlinson (2006), is that there is greater integration of gifted and talented education content, principles and strategies across a range of papers at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels as well as in the professional development offered to practicing teachers, in addition to having specific gifted education courses. For example, professional development focused on improving outcomes for Māori students should provide teachers with knowledge and strategies for how to identify and cater for Māori students who are gifted and talented as well.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Although the schools' definitions of giftedness and talent and identification checklists made reference to culture-specific abilities and qualities, the identification processes and numbers of Māori students being identified as gifted and talented did not match up in most cases. This meant that Māori students that are or have the potential to be gifted and talented may not be experiencing the opportunities to allow their gifts and talents to be recognised and developed. The main reason cited for this was teacher knowledge, expertise and confidence in this area, however only one school had taken part in professional learning and development which involved the identification of Māori students who are gifted and talented. The literature reviewed strongly promoted the importance of a culturally responsive environment to the identification and development of Māori students who are or have the potential to be gifted and talented, but again this relies on teachers having the knowledge, support and confidence to create and maintain such environments.

This research established on a small scale that findings from Riley et al (2004) and the Education Review Office (2008) still seem to be apparent in schools today. Māori conceptions of giftedness need to be more clearly incorporated into schools' gifted and talented education policies and procedures and teachers and school leaders need more support and professional learning and development to enable them to create culturally responsive environments so that Māori culture-specific abilities and qualities can be acknowledged, recognised and developed.

Gifted and talented education is a vitally important aspect of education and meeting the needs of all gifted and talented students remains a major issue in Aotearoa New Zealand education, but is particularly an issue for students from diverse cultures. Culturally responsive gifted and talented education has the capacity to improve learning outcomes for all students from minority cultures as it requires teachers to concentrate on students' strengths rather than focusing on deficits.

On the basis of the findings of this research, the recommendation is made to school leaders that they enable their teachers to undertake professional learning and development about how to create and maintain culturally responsive environments for Māori students. This step would benefit not only the Māori students who may be gifted and talented but all Māori students in their classrooms. There are many providers offering professional learning and development in this area, however teachers need to have time and money to take part in these initiatives. With the current demands on primary teachers to implement National Standards and the focus on raising literacy and numeracy levels, unfortunately gifted and talented education seems to not be a priority. This is a short sighted view, and one that does not take into account the benefit improving gifted and talented education provides for all students, encapsulated by the notion that "a rising tide lifts all ships" (Renzulli, 1998, p. 1). The Ministry of Education needs to reassess the current disproportionate weight given to the improvement of literacy and numeracy levels. Teachers need to be provided with the means to seek ways of improving these levels that will also benefit gifted and talented

students, such as developing culturally responsive environments that cater to all student's needs.

Not only do teachers already in schools need to take part in professional learning and development in this area, but I would suggest that pre-service teacher education also needs to take note of this finding. More in-depth coverage of the importance of developing culturally responsive environments and how this may be done is needed in pre-service teacher education as in Aotearoa New Zealand gifted and talented students spend the majority of their time in the ordinary classroom (Ministry of Education, 2012a).

Secondly, an important recommendation that arises from this study is the importance of schools undertaking robust consultation with their Māori community about the areas of ability that are valued in their conception of giftedness and talent and ensuring that teachers are aware of the characteristics that may manifest in the demonstration of high ability in these areas. As each community may have a slightly different view of the concept of Māori giftedness and talent, it is important schools do not just adopt a generic model but develop a relationship and seek out opinion from their Māori community. Thirdly, schools need to use the knowledge gained from the PLD and consultation to redevelop their policy documents about gifted and talented education to include clear descriptions of their school definitions of culture-specific giftedness and talent. They also need to clearly document culturally appropriate identification procedures and practices for use by their staff in order to provide a clear pathway for teachers to confidently identify Māori students who are gifted and talented.

There are many opportunities for further research presented by this thesis. The main opportunity arises from the finding that no Māori students had been identified in the area of culture specific abilities and/or qualities in the last 12 months. Further research needs to be carried out into the reasons for this finding as well as data gathered from a wider sample to see if this was an anomaly present in the respondent schools or a more wide spread phenomenon. This research also provides a basis for further study into the next stage of the process in gifted and talented education – the provision that is made for the students who are identified. Investigation into the extent, effectiveness and appropriateness of provisions for Māori students who are gifted and talented in culture specific abilities and/or qualities would provide a valuable contribution to the field.

Final Thoughts

Even though this study was of a small sample, the correlation of findings in the literature and previous research with what was discovered to be happening in the 11 schools studied provides a snapshot of the state of identification practices for Māori students. It is hoped that the recommendations made here will be taken heed of and that schools developing or evaluating their gifted and talented education programmes will be aware of the importance

of considering how they intend to identify Māori students who are gifted and talented. The information compiled in the research thesis (Scobie-Jennings, 2012) and the works of Bevan-Brown (1993, 2000, 2005a, 2005b, 2009, 2010, 2011), Education Review Office (2008), Jenkins (2002), Mahaki and Mahaki (2007) and Riley et al. (2004) provide an excellent starting point for schools to base this development on and along with consultation with their Māori community, the identification of Māori students who are gifted and talented need not be a daunting prospect.

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