

Thinking about Pakeha and Maori and gifted children

Maori giftedness ... I am talking to you today on this topic as a Pakeha. I want to acknowledge this from the start. I want to acknowledge that I am not an expert in things Maori, I do not and cannot have the inside understanding that comes from being Maori, but for such understanding as I do have, I am grateful to my Maori friends and colleagues, especially Naida Glavish and Jill Bevan-Brown.

But because I *am* Pakeha – as opposed to being European –, then for me nothing in education can be complete which does not also contain Maori. Together, Maori and Pakeha, we are what makes up the whole of what we all in our different ways experience as Aotearoa-New Zealand.

Thus it is a very great concern to know that Maori children are so significantly under-represented in gifted programmes in our schools. The 2008 ERO report, *Schools' Provision for Gifted and Talented Students*, found that:

- in their definition of giftedness, most schools made no reference to Maori
- in their identification procedures, only 15% made any reference to Maori knowledge and abilities; 85% made no reference to these as factors to be taken into consideration
- consultation with whanau was rare.

The inevitable consequence: very few Maori children recognised as gifted.

But our schools' failure to recognise and value Maori gifted children is much more than simply a procedural failure. It goes much deeper than that. It goes right to the heart of our understanding of giftedness and our comprehension of "culture" and our realisation of the way in which one impacts on the other.

"Culture" is a term which is often used in only a very superficial sense. I recall being at a meeting of teachers at which we were all asked, "How do *you* express *your* culture?", and I remember the flustered Pakeha woman, who said, "Oh but how can I? I'm no good at singing and dancing!" Sadly, her narrow view is all too common. The 2008 ERO report confirmed this, noting that teachers tended to view culture as meaning kapa haka, music and dance, and further, that this was perceived as essentially extraneous stuff, not essential to a child's learning: it was not valued.

What *is* culture? How *does* culture influence us? There's a North American Indian tribe which has only three words for colour. I have seen a documentary in which children from this tribe were asked to make patterns from a pile of beads which, to our eyes, had three very distinctly different colours, white, very bright orange and very bright pink. Their patterns were meaningless to a western observer, unless you accepted that pink and orange were being treated as one colour. Then the patterns were clear. Yet when the observers mixed all the beads up again into one heap and asked the children to sort them into piles according to colour, the children accurately sorted them into three piles. Thus *physically* they could see the difference, but their culture had taught them to disregard that difference and act as if it did not exist.

In short, culture can shape even our perceptions of the physical world at a very fundamental level. Hardly surprising, then, that it also helps shape our perceptions about much less tangible things, such as our ideas about law and order, government, human rights – and education.

So how does culture influence our education system?

I put it to you that that influence is profound.

Cultural tradition shapes our curriculum priorities. How often do you hear a parent asking for remedial lessons in dance or poetry? It shapes the relationship between teacher and student, and it shapes teaching strategies. Alison Jones' research in Auckland pointed out how Pasifika girls who had learnt in their home culture not to question the teacher were disadvantaged in Palangi classrooms where the teacher *expected* questions and challenges. Culture shapes behavioural responses, parental expectations, rewards and punishments, and even what elicits rewards and punishments – what they are given *for*.

And it shapes our perception of giftedness.

So how is giftedness perceived in the European tradition which dominates our Pakeha school system? Neil Reid wrote that, “The prevailing Pakeha conception of giftedness is firmly at the utilitarian/academic end of the scale”. I think we have to say that that is still very largely true. Despite ongoing efforts to persuade schools to look at a range of factors when trying to locate their gifted learners, we still find all too often that the test result is not just the final arbiter, but very frequently the only arbiter. Gifted children, according to this view, are those who get the high grades.

Even as a Pakeha, I would contest this. It is a view which leaves out some of our most highly gifted, imaginative, innovative and far-sighted children, the ones who challenge the system and have the potential to extend human knowledge and insight.

But also it is a view which is totally at odds with the Maori perception of giftedness. From what I have learnt from Maori colleagues, for Maori, giftedness is about, not only the possession of specific abilities or skills, but also and foremost, the possession of valued human *qualities*.

This is very much a holistic view. It takes into account the development of the person as a whole human being. How very much more meaningful and realistic that seems than that narrow concentration purely on one limited aspect of a child’s functioning.

In the Maori view, it appears, those valued human qualities take precedence over abilities. Intellectual ability has been ranked by one authority as 5th out of ten factors to be considered.

If we are to begin to understand this, then we must first recognise the importance of the spiritual dimension which underlies and permeates Maori society and the Maori world view. It is a dimension which in a practical sense is present in all important facets of Maori life, from the accepted presence of the Tipuna [ancestors] in the wharehui [meeting house] through to Maori relationship with land and sea and forest. Moreover, it is a dimension intimately linked to concepts of service to others and caring for others – the concept of *manaakitanga*.

Thus it is logical that Maori sense greatness in those who give outstanding service to others and who demonstrate their command of te Reo [the Maori language] and their exceptional knowledge of Maori history and tradition, all three together preserving and illustrating such concepts. Those who have this kind of giftedness or greatness have *mana tangata*.

The notion of service to others as an attribute of giftedness produces a different concept of leadership. Pakeha normally think of the leader as the person who is up front, out there, the foremost, the first into battle, the one who gives direction and leads decisions. We have also the concept of leading by example, inspiring others, but again with the sense of the person who stands out in that role. Maori share those concepts, but have also the concept of leadership from behind or within, the quiet influencer of the group’s thinking and actions, the one whose words have wisdom and shape the group’s responses.

This leads in turn to the concept of *kotahitanga*, achievement by the group rather than by the individual, the giftedness of the group operating together. This is a concept entirely outside mainstream Pakeha thinking until we open ourselves to the way of thinking which has led Maori to such an insight. Perhaps the nearest we Pakeha come to this is in our understanding of “the team” – we know that an All Black, no matter how inspired, can never win a match by himself. But Maori seem to have taken this a step further, beyond the notion of “team spirit”, to a level where the group has not just a unity of purpose but a unity of mind and soul, where the separateness of the individual is subsumed into the completeness of the group.

Our western culture does not prepare us well to understand the culture of others, even those whose culture is much closer to our own than that of the Maori. Literature is full of stories of Englishmen and Frenchmen and Italians and Germans misunderstanding and lampooning each other – even Englishmen and Scotsmen and Irishmen, speaking (more or less) the same language!

How then can we Pakeha hope to understand the culture of the Maori? There are no immediate answers.

We do know, however, that we need to keep working on teacher understanding, teacher expectations. Never again should a New Zealand teacher say – or think – “You won’t find any of those gifted children here. All our little faces are brown”. I have had that said to me!

We must continue and increase our efforts to create culturally responsive learning environments. We must as a matter of normalcy include Maori knowledge in our curriculum. We need to reach a point where every child is fluent in both te Reo and English.

We need to check out our school organisation. We need to ask ourselves some very basic questions – for example, are ten-minute parent meetings truly appropriate for Maori families? Must gifted Maori children have to choose between a bi-cultural class and an accelerate class?

We must do more to encourage schools to use a multi-method approach when it comes to the identification of gifted learners and to encourage consultation with whanau [extended family] and kaumatua [elders]. Pakeha teachers need to understand that Maori parents can feel whakama, embarrassed or shy, if asked to talk about their children’s abilities; it is the senior members of the family who can speak to this.

We must learn to *use* our kaumatua and kuia [female elders] as mentors, role models, resource people, advisors and evaluators. At Henderson High School in Auckland, when Naida Glavish and my husband worked for a year with the immersion class to produce a creative drama that would demonstrate the children’s knowledge of te Reo, it was the kaumatua and the whole whanau who made the assessment of the children’s achievement, not just the teacher. Truly kotahitanga!

But beyond all of this, there is one thing more, perhaps the most significant of all. As someone working in this field of gifted education, I know from my own experience how profoundly my own understanding of giftedness has been enlarged, enriched, illuminated through the wisdom shared with me by my Maori colleagues. We talk so glibly of crossing the bridge between cultures. *Let us remember that a bridge is always designed to be crossed in two directions.*

If we Pakeha persist in our notion that we have superior knowledge in this matter of giftedness, then ultimately it is *we* who are the losers. We too must discover the wisdom of the Maori who know already that giftedness has its essence, not just in capabilities, but in the human qualities we most value.

It is time that we no longer stand on one side of the bridge waiting for those on the other side to join us, but take our own steps to cross to the other side and what awaits us there.

Rosemary Cathcart, reacheducationb@xtra.co.nz; www.giftedreach.org.nz