

## Exploring perceptions of giftedness in the Cook Islands Maori community

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*From my study in the field of gifted education it became apparent that published works related to perceptions of what constitutes giftedness began with a narrow view focused on achievement in intelligence tests and in the latter part of the twentieth century developed to a much broader view. In the New Zealand context the work of Bevan-Brown (1996, 1999) with New Zealand Maori provided a new and different perspective on special abilities or giftedness. This pioneering work was the inspiration for my study. As principal of David Henry School in Tokoroa, New Zealand for nine and a half years I worked in a community with both high New Zealand Maori and Cook Islands Maori populations. I began to wonder whether Cook Islands Maori had similar perceptions of giftedness to New Zealand Maori and whether their perceptions were different in New Zealand by comparison with the Cook Islands. I also wondered how the Cook Islands Maori children who were plainly gifted in the context of their own culture could be better nurtured by the school in order to foster and develop their gifts. Thus my study was born.*

Perceptions, giftedness, Cook Islands Maori community

### INTRODUCTION

I sat in the audience at the Tokoroa Schools Polynesian Festival and watched with pride as the Cook Islands Maori cultural group from my school, David Henry School took the stage. One hundred and ten smiling children from several ethnic groups stood arrayed in their gorgeous Cook Islands Maori costumes awaiting the cue for them to begin their performance. Cook Islands Maori children took lead roles in singing and dancing, producing a stunning performance, which won wide acclamation. These children were plainly gifted in the context of their own culture. I began to think about why I had never previously thought about most of them as gifted individuals and how the school might change to nurture the gifts they had and to develop other gifts which may be latent.

### METHODOLOGY

In the initial stages of the project I met with a prominent Cook Islands Maori man who had been immersed in his own culture as well as achieving in the European world. I discussed whether it was appropriate for a *papa'a* (European) to undertake a thesis involving study of Cook Islands Maori. He indicated that it was appropriate and he considered my proposed study to be an exciting development for his people.

I then discussed whether it was appropriate to gather data by means of a questionnaire. He indicated that he could not foresee any problems with using this instrument. He then developed a list of what he believed were characteristics or behaviours that Cook Islands Maori may see as

indicators of giftedness. The questionnaire was developed from this list. The questionnaire was then discussed with a prominent and gifted Cook Islands Maori woman who gave it her approval.

There are three components to the qualitative research data gathering process I used:

1. use of a questionnaire,
2. interviews both in a group and individual setting,
3. “micro” studies.

All participants in the questionnaires, discussions and interviews were of Cook Islands Maori origin.

Twenty-eight adults completed the questionnaire in Aitutaki, in the Cook Islands and 39 adults completed the questionnaire in Tokoroa, in New Zealand. Five individuals participated in a group discussion in Aitutaki and five participated in a group discussion in Tokoroa. They had all completed the questionnaire prior to participating in the discussion. Two *kaumatua* (elders) were interviewed in Aitutaki and two *kaumatua* were interviewed in Tokoroa. A gifted individual was interviewed in Rarotonga, in the Cook Islands and two were interviewed in Tokoroa to become subjects for case studies. A fourth gifted individual was interviewed in Tokoroa on her perception of what constitutes giftedness to provide a better gender balance for the in depth interviews

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

Results from the questionnaire responses in Aitutaki and Tokoroa are presented in Table 1. The percentage of responses for each characteristic in each column are indicated.

**Table 1. Results from the questionnaire responses in Aitutaki and Tokoroa**

Characteristics	Very Sig.		Significant		Insignificant	
	A	T	A	T	A	T
1. Good memory	67	69	30	31	4	0
2. Excellent vocabulary	62	59	27	38	12	3
3. Good communication skills	65	56	31	34	4	9
4. Early development of skill in the performing arts	48	56	37	25	15	19
5. Skill as a dancer	44	66	37	19	19	16
6. Able to lead in singing or chanting	39	59	36	26	25	15
7. Ability to harmonise when singing	37	63	37	31	26	6
8. Achieving success at school	36	40	46	47	18	13
9. Being articulate in more than one language	36	36	50	57	14	7
10. Ability to know and explain Cook Islands culture to others.	50	60	35	37	15	3
11. Ability to move freely in two worlds, fitting in with mainstream society but being in touch with cultural roots.	27	45	62	45	12	9
12. Ability to interpret each of the two worlds we live in to the other.	21	45	67	48	13	6
13. Ability to speak Cook Islands' dialects other than one's own.	44	38	40	50	16	13
14. Good knowledge of the Bible	48	52	28	39	24	9
15. Skill as an orator (public speaker)	44	52	36	39	20	10
16. Ability to bring the community together with a sense of unified purpose	32	59	40	38	28	3
17. Involvement in the community for the benefit of others	35	58	54	39	12	3
18. Has carefully reasoned understanding of right and wrong.	35	54	62	38	4	8
19. Strong sense of social justice.	32	40	60	52	8	8
20. Ability to think quickly on one's feet	46	48	35	33	19	19
21. Able to speak spontaneously in a coherent and convincing way.	40	38	44	47	16	16
22. Tertiary qualifications	32	19	52	65	16	15
23. Expertise in traditional fields	52	48	36	44	12	8
24. Expertise in fields in the modern world for example, ICT	40	29	44	50	16	21
25. Innovative – has original and interesting ideas	38	33	50	57	12	10
26. Creative – makes original responses or products	54	33	42	54	4	13
27. Powerful intellect – able to reason convincingly	56	40	40	45	4	15

A: Aitutaki T: Tokoroa (All numbers represent percentage of that sample's response)

The original questionnaire also provided another column for respondents to identify the three most significant indicators of giftedness in order. This was deleted from the above table of results but did provide some interesting data. Only eight of the sample of 28 individuals who completed the questionnaire in Aitutaki completed the ranking column in the way that was intended. This sample is too small to draw any real conclusions. However, the characteristics which were identified twice as being in the top three indicators of giftedness were:

1. good memory,
2. good communication skills,
3. good knowledge of the Bible, and
4. has carefully reasoned understanding of right and wrong.

Five teachers at Araura College who had previously completed questionnaires participated in a group discussion about what constitutes giftedness. Two kaumatua were also interviewed. From the discussion and interviews a comprehensive view of giftedness emerged. *Ability in sports*, which did not feature in the questionnaire emerged as an important indicator of giftedness. *Skill as an orator, expertise in traditional fields* for example, fishing, planting, medicine, and *skills related to the performing arts* assumed a greater significance than had been evident from questionnaire responses. *Good memory* was also seen as very significant. One individual indicated that the gifted individual stands out for the *quality of his/her thinking*. One participant in the discussion indicated that for an individual to be considered as gifted he/she would need to stand out in multiple domains and not just in one.

Twenty-three of those who completed the ranking column in Tokoroa did this in the intended way. From their responses the indicators of giftedness most frequently identified as the three most significant were:

1. ability to know and explain Cook Islands culture to others – eight times,
2. good knowledge of the Bible – eight times,
3. ability to harmonise when singing – six times,
4. good memory – five times,
5. early development of skills in the performing arts – four times,
6. able to lead in singing or chanting – four times, and
7. skill as a dancer – three times.

Five individuals in Tokoroa who had previously completed questionnaires participated in a group discussion where they detailed their perceptions of giftedness. Two kaumatua were also interviewed.

*Leadership* emerged as a significant characteristic of giftedness although it had not been listed in the questionnaire. *Expertise in traditional fields* for example, carving, planting, fishing; *skill as an orator, good communication skills* and *ability to bring the community together with a sense of unified purpose* emerged as the most significant characteristics of giftedness. One spoke of giftedness as an inherited gift and this being evidenced as a *leadership* quality. Part of this gift was viewed as knowing the family's genealogy and knowing things about the family. One of the kaumatua spoke of an individual's *creative* ability as a composer and of *skill in sports* as indicative of giftedness.

The three individuals who were the subjects of "micro" studies because of the recognition their peers give them as gifted individuals were interviewed about their perceptions of what constitutes giftedness. These individuals were Teupoko (Poko) Morgan, Tepoave Raitia and Taria Kingstone. Taria's mother, Fanaura was also interviewed with him.

All four spoke of *skills in the performing arts* as evidence of giftedness. Fanaura and Taria spoke of *confidence* as being the first essential ingredient of giftedness. Fanaura further commented on

the individual who is able to *pull people together to work for a common purpose* as having multiple gifts and possessing some of the most important gifts. Poko identified *listening skills* as perhaps the most important indicator of giftedness. She stated that linked to the ability to listen was the ability to observe and to reflect. Poko indicated that *listening, observation and reflection* all contribute to the development of the skills which demonstrate giftedness. She said that the gifted individual will also be *passionate* about the areas in which his/her gifts are evident. Poko emphasised that the gifts an individual possesses need to be nurtured and there is the expectation that the gifts will be shared for the benefit of the family and others.

## DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The data gathered in Aitutaki and Tokoroa have certain strong similarities but also some significant differences. There are numerous trends from the data that I consider may be significant, but only four of these can be explored briefly within the scope of this paper.

### ***1. The strong oral tradition of Cook Islands Maori has a major influence on perceptions of giftedness both in the Cook Islands and New Zealand.***

In the data developed from the questionnaires completed in Aitutaki and Tokoroa *good memory, good communication skills and excellent vocabulary* are identified amongst the most significant indicators of giftedness. Surprisingly, *skill as an orator* does not rate as highly in the questionnaire responses. However, in interviewing kaumatua both in Aitutaki and Tokoroa and interviewing identified gifted individuals, *skill as an orator* featured as an important indicator of giftedness. Coupled with this, kaumatua and gifted individuals also identified *good memory and good communication skills* as characteristics of giftedness. In group discussions both in Aitutaki and Tokoroa *skill as an orator* featured prominently as an indicator of giftedness as did *good communication skills*.

Until the nineteenth century Cook Islands Maori had no written language. Therefore all communication was in oral form. Kaumatua therefore placed great importance on handing down the family's genealogy and the stories of the tribe in oral form. *Good memory* and skills in oral *communication* have therefore been highly valued throughout human history in the Cook Islands. Because the development of written language occurred in the comparatively recent past, *good memory, good communication skills and oratory* are still highly valued and viewed as significant indicators of giftedness. Individuals who were cited as gifted were said to be able to recite a genealogy of one hundred names without difficulty and one was said to be able to recall the genealogy of other families as well as that of her own. The strong oral tradition has clearly influenced perceptions of what constitutes giftedness through to the present day.

### ***2. Amongst Cook Islands Maori there is a strong emphasis on the importance of skill in the traditional performing arts and skills in these areas are therefore rated highly as indicators of giftedness.***

Both in Aitutaki and Tokoroa, aspects of the *performing arts* were identified by most people as very significant or significant indicators of giftedness. Which aspects were given priority varied in the two settings. However, it was significant that the Tokoroa sample generally gave greater importance to skills in the *performing arts* than those who completed the questionnaire in Aitutaki. For example, when considering characteristics which were very significant indicators of giftedness, in the Tokoroa sample 63 per cent considered *ability to harmonise when singing*, 66 per cent *skill as a dancer*, 59 per cent *ability to lead in singing or chanting*, and 56 per cent *early development of skills in the performing arts* belonged in this category. In Aitutaki, all these characteristics had less than 50 per cent of respondents rating them very significant.

The question arises as to why the questionnaires suggest that skills in the *performing arts* may be viewed as more significant indicators of giftedness in Tokoroa than in Aitutaki. This can only be a matter of conjecture. One possible reason could be that with Cook Islands Maori being a minority culture in New Zealand the performance aspects of their culture may have become more highly valued. In Aitutaki, where Cook Islands Maori is the dominant culture, traditional aspects of performance, while still highly valued, may nevertheless not assume quite the same significance as in New Zealand.

In spite of the questionnaire data however two of the participants in the group discussion in Aitutaki identified skill in aspects of the *performing arts* as indicative of giftedness. Also, one of the kaumatua interviewed in Aitutaki placed great emphasis on performance.

All three of the individuals who were interviewed for 'micro' studies because of their giftedness identified skill in the performing arts as indicative of giftedness.

Tepoave Raitia commented:

*What they produce is extraordinary, magic, pleasing to the eye. Some orators have style and heart in what they produce. This is evident in dancers. They shine in their field above all others.*

The way that performance is valued from an early age is illustrated in the following statement from Poko Morgan:

*But you know with giftedness it comes from observation as a young baby, as a young toddler, as a two year old, as a three year old. You have an awful lot of teachers. All the aunties, all the uncles, and then there is your Sunday School teacher. You make a perfect presentation and he picks you up and holds you up for everybody to see. I guess it is really a sharing.*

Both Tepoave's and Poko's comments about performance presentation fit with the high value given to the performing arts by Cook Islands Maori in general.

### ***3. The Christian faith has had a strong influence on Cook Islands Maori culture and affects perceptions of giftedness.***

The only characteristic listed in the questionnaire specific to the Christian faith is *good knowledge of the Bible*. The percentages who rated this characteristic as very significant in Aitutaki (48%) and Tokoroa (52%) are mid range by comparison with the percentages for other characteristics. However, the fact that both in Aitutaki and Tokoroa this was one of the characteristics most frequently identified as being amongst the top three indicators of giftedness means that for a significant number of people *good knowledge of the Bible* is considered to be a very important indicator of giftedness.

Taria Kingstone remarked:

*Christianity has been the most important influence in the modern history of the Cook Islands. I think it is interesting that in a sense, Christianity is an enclave within our culture that is not from our culture. The influence of the missionaries has been so great that I, as a Cook Islander in New Zealand, gain my identity through the church. I guess it's a bit different in the Cook Islands where the main source of a person's identity is through their island.*

Although *good knowledge of the Bible* is the only characteristic specific to the Christian faith, within the New Zealand context the church is often the primary vehicle for the expression of the *performing arts* of singing, chanting, drama and dancing as well as for *oratory*. Songs, dances, dramas and speeches therefore often have a Christian theme.

**4. Cook Islands Maori living in Tokoroa attach greater significance to ability to move freely in two worlds, fitting in with mainstream society but being in touch with cultural roots and ability to interpret the two worlds we live in to each other than those living in Aitutaki.**

The questionnaire responses indicate that 12 per cent of people in Aitutaki and 9 per cent in Tokoroa do not consider the *ability to move freely in two worlds, fitting in with mainstream society but being in touch with cultural roots* to be significant or very significant indicators of giftedness. In Aitutaki 13 per cent, and in Tokoroa 6 per cent do not consider *ability to interpret each of the two worlds we live in to the other* to be significant or very significant indicators of giftedness. However, the data are interesting when considering the percentage of these characteristics marked as very significant. In Aitutaki only 27 per cent for the former and 21 per cent for the latter rated these characteristics as very significant. By contrast, in Tokoroa they were both considered very significant indicators of giftedness by 45 per cent of the sample. This suggests that participants in Tokoroa are more aware of the two worlds of traditional Cook Islands Maori culture with its strong community values and the *papa'a* world with its greater emphasis on individualism. It also suggests that they attach comparatively greater significance to the two characteristics. When considering why this may be the case, the two worlds are clearly more evident in Tokoroa. While there are clearly influences from *papa'a* culture with, for example, the motor scooters and utility vehicles seen on the roads of Aitutaki, the influence is nowhere near as pervasive as in Tokoroa.

### **Comparison with Research Findings on New Zealand Maori**

Some of Bevan-Brown's (1996, 1999) findings regarding New Zealand Maori perceptions of special abilities are replicated in the findings of the research with Cook Islands Maori. Possibly the most significant similarities were as follows.

1. Both have a broad and wide ranging concept of what constitutes special abilities or giftedness.
2. The concept of special abilities or giftedness includes both skills and personal qualities.
3. Traditional knowledge and skills such as oratory and the performing arts are important indicators of giftedness.
4. The concept of giftedness generally originates from Maori *kaupapa* (principles, ideas).

Two differences which may be important were as follows.

1. New Zealand Maori placed greater emphasis on outstanding personal qualities, high moral values and service to others.
2. Cook Islands Maori appeared to be more influenced by the Christian faith with specific reference to *good knowledge of the Bible* as an indicator of giftedness in contrast to the New Zealand Maori broader notion of spirituality.

### **Considerations for Identifying and Providing for Gifted Cook Islands Maori Students**

When developing procedures for identifying and providing for gifted Cook Islands Maori students, educators need to be mindful of the following, particularly in the New Zealand context.

1. Identification processes and program provision must be developed in consultation with Cook Islands Maori.

2. Cook Islands Maori have a broad, wide ranging view of giftedness. Observations must therefore explore the wide range of qualities and abilities that are perceived to constitute giftedness.
3. Testing procedures and instruments need to be screened for monocultural bias and racism.
4. Testing and observation needs to include measures of the skills and knowledge traditionally valued by the indigenous people of the Cook Islands.
5. School programs need to provide the opportunity for Cook Islands Maori to connect with their cultural roots and to engage in learning experiences appropriate to their culture.
6. If using traditional IQ and achievement-type tests, use dynamic rather than static testing procedures.
7. Explore the use of open ended tests of creativity.
8. Avoid stereotyping of Cook Islands Maori students through over emphasis on teaching using a “learning styles” approach.
9. Provide training for teachers in catering for the needs of children from minority ethnic groups in general and particularly for those exhibiting gifted and talented behaviours in any domain, whether within or outside the school context.
10. Encourage all students, including those of Cook Islands Maori origin, to develop their own cultural identity.
11. Raise expectations for Cook Islands Maori students as well as those from other minority groups.

#### REFERENCES

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