Teaching Māori Children with Special Education Needs

Getting rid of the too hard basket

Keynote address delivered by **Dr Jill Bevan-Brown** at the *Learning for All: Enhancing Effective Practice in Special Education Symposia,* June 2006.

ABSTRACT

This paper examines research evidence, practitioners' knowledge, skills and experiences and the voice of students, parents and whānau to identify common messages in respect to educating Māori students both with and without special education needs. The keys to effective practice identified include: positive teacher-student relationships; interactive teaching strategies that engage students in their own learning; teaching that builds on students' strengths and interests; high teacher expectations of Māori students; the inclusion of cultural input; and the involvement of parents, whānau and peers. Professionals are urged to take the provision of culturally appropriate, effective education out of the "too hard basket" and to use the previous strategies when working with Māori students.

Keywords

Culturally appropriate strategies, effective practices, evidence based practice, inclusive classrooms, Māori culture, Māori students, parent school relationship, teaching strategies.

INTRODUCTION

When I was first asked to present this talk I declined the invitation. What ensued was a flurry of emails giving excuses and suggesting other people but finally after being wined, dined and flattered, I agreed (it works every time). Chief amongst my reasons for initially declining was a fear that I would disappoint people, be boring and waste everyone's time. Fresh in my mind was another talk I had given. The topic was, "What is the research telling us about provisions for Māori students with special needs?" Briefly my message was that these students were not faring well and that despite the importance of their culture, cultural input into teaching and special education programmes was inadequate.
After the presentation I was in the lift with a woman who had attended my talk and she remarked, "Nothing you told us was new, we've known that for years!" The lift door opened and the woman promptly disappeared which was probably a blessing for us both but what she said got me thinking, "If people are already well aware of the situation, why do many Māori students with special education needs remain inadequately provided for?" I came up with a number of possible reasons.

1. Teachers and special educators don't care.
2. They believe that culture is not relevant to teaching students with special education needs.
3. They believe their efforts won't make a difference.
4. They are unsure of what to do or are so overwhelmed by the enormity of the challenge that they put improving the teaching of Māori students with special education needs into the too hard basket.

I will return to these possibilities at the end of my presentation.

Sir Apirana Ngata once said, 'There are two ways of tackling problems. One is to explore the bad and feature it. The other is to discover good and encourage it' (Percy, 1989, pp. 6-7). My previous presentation, in the main, took the former approach. By giving statistics and examples showing how Māori students with special education needs were missing out I had hoped to appeal to people's sense of injustice. I don't think it worked – well for the lady in the lift it didn't! So in this presentation I am going to take a positive approach.

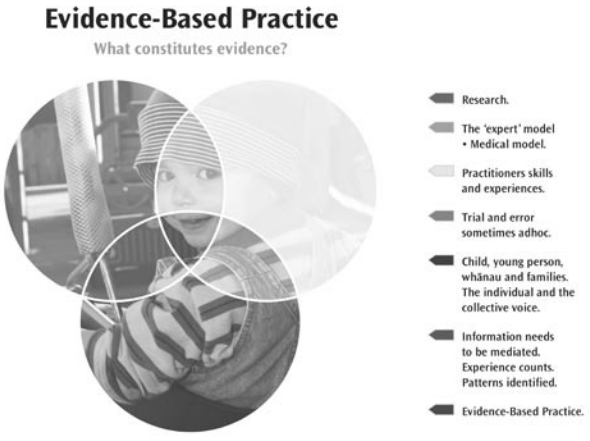

Figure 1. Evidence-based practice diagram. (Bourke, Holden and Curzon, 2005).

To place my talk in a context and outline what I intend to cover, I refer you to this model of evidence-based practice (Figure 1) which very effectively illustrates the sources of evidence we should be drawing on to inform our practice. This model represents three types of evidence: those of research; practitioners' knowledge, skills and experiences; and the individual and collective voices of children, young people, whānau and families.

My talk is going to cover examples from all three evidence sources in respect to teaching Māori students in general, and Māori students with special education needs in particular. I will be highlighting effective practices identified in each area and looking at common messages that emerge. However, I need to mention that this evidence-based practice model was developed as a guide to practice in specific situations. Because I am not dealing with a particular student, the examples I will be giving in each area are drawn from relevant research studies.

PRACTITIONER MESSAGES

Figure 2. Practitioner skills and experiences.

I will start with practitioners' knowledge, skills and experiences and share with you findings from the *Achievement in Multicultural High Schools* (AIMHI) project.

This was a school support initiative to raise the achievement of Māori and Pasifika students in eight low decile secondary schools with large Māori and Pasifika rolls. It consisted of a number of components and was conducted over a four-year period. One aspect of the study focused on identifying teaching and learning strategies used by effective teachers in the AIMHI schools. Over a six-month period, 100 lessons involving 89 nominated teachers were observed. Following each observation the teacher concerned was interviewed to discuss the lesson. In addition, six students from each class also participated in a discussion of the lesson, the strategies used and the qualities of the teacher. Altogether 600 students participated in group discussions and 1645 were present at the lessons observed. We will be hearing from some of these students later when I talk about student voice.

What did this comprehensive study reveal? It showed that successful teachers of Pasifika and Māori students carefully planned and structured their lessons. They knew how to assess and accommodate their students' learning needs and had an armoury of effective and appropriate teaching strategies they could draw on to facilitate their students' learning. These included:

- outlining the purpose of lessons
- including a range of stimulating, meaningful and varied activities
- actively engaging students in their own learning
- differentiating teaching to accommodate different learning abilities
- responding to "teachable moments"
- using focused revision to link previous learning to new material
- "explicit teaching" of new concepts by presenting material in small, manageable steps
- ongoing assessment of students' learning
- using skilful questioning techniques to engage students in paired, small group and whole class discussions
- making learning fun
- incorporating cooperative learning techniques
- providing clear, unhurried, easily understood explanations
- rewarding learning
- giving regular and genuine individual, group and whole class praise and encouragement.

Indeed, research shows that these strategies are effective with all students regardless of ethnicity. They are certainly evident in the literature on teaching students with special education needs.

In respect to culture, successful teachers were identified as having 'a good knowledge and understanding of and empathy with the cultural worlds of their students' (Hill & Hawk, 2000, p. 15). They pronounced Māori and Pasifika names and words correctly and used Māori and Pasifika words and concepts in their teaching. They also seated students who spoke the same language together so they could help each other.

But perhaps the strongest message to emerge from the AIMHI study was in relation to the affective qualities these successful teachers possessed. They were positive, optimistic, hardworking, motivated, reflective practitioners. In dealing with students they were understanding, respectful, fair, caring, giving of themselves, patient, humorous, persevered and kept their word. They also consulted with parents and were involved in out-of-school activities.

The affective qualities these teachers possessed contributed to the development of strong and positive teacher-student relationships. It was these relationships that the researchers identified as crucial to students' learning. In fact they stated that teachers' age, gender, socio-economic status and/or ethnicity did not matter to students; rather it was the teachers' attitudes that the students considered most important (Hill & Hawk, 2000, p.15).

The data show these students have particular needs that students in other schools do not have. The relationship that students in these schools form with their teachers is crucial. While the relationship that forms between a student and teacher in any school is important, the data in this study show that it is not only important to these students but is a prerequisite for learning. If a teacher has not been able to form a positive relationship of reciprocal respect the students in the class will find it very, very, difficult to be motivated to learn (Hill & Hawk, 2000, p. 3).

This finding concurs with other Aotearoa/New Zealand studies of Māori and Pasifika students and with overseas studies of minority group, at-risk and special education students in general.

You may be wondering why positive student-teacher relationships are more crucial to learning for these groups of students than to students in general. There are a number of reasons for this but chief amongst them is the connection between learning and the five "self-hyphens" that is, self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-identity, self-concept and self-assessment. Students from ethnic minorities and those with special education needs have an increased risk of developing negative self-concepts. If their disability results in them having to struggle to achieve tasks others can do with ease, if it excludes them from participating in valued activities, or if the media regularly highlights negative statistics relating to their ethnic group, it is quite understandable that their self-concept and belief in what they can achieve is negatively affected. This in turn affects their ability to learn, not only because their motivation is lowered but also because cognitively they are not "operating on all pistons." Gay (1994, p. 4) provides a good explanation of this in a school context:

If students feel that the school environment is alien and hostile towards them or does not affirm and value who they are (as many students of colour believe), they will not be able to concentrate as thoroughly as they might on academic tasks. The stress and anxiety that accompany this lack of support and affirmation cause their mental attention, energy and efforts to be diffused between protecting their psyches from attack and attending to academic tasks. This stress 'adversely affects students' daily academic performance by reducing their willingness to persist at academic tasks and interfering with the cognitive processes involved in learning' (Gougis, 1986, p.147).

This explains why positive student-teacher relationships are so important for these groups of students, especially ethnic minority students with special education needs who are doubly at risk. If students know their teachers like and care about them, if they are treated with respect and their culture is valued, they can concentrate all their attention, energy and effort on learning.

The AIMHI study identified a second important influence on students' learning. This is the nature of the relationships that exist between the learner and their peers. The findings showed that where positive peer relationships were present, students felt 'safer to contribute, take risks with their learning and learn from each other … group dynamics of the classroom make a difference to student motivation and attitudes towards learning' (Hill & Hawk, 2000, p. 4.) Positive peer relationships were not just left to chance. Teachers planned team-building strategies, taught and modelled relationship skills and provided situations where these could be used. In the special education context, the importance of positive peer relationships can be gauged by the fact that Friendship, Belonging, Social and Bullying constitute four of the seven major themes identified in *Springboards to Practice* (Ministry of Education, 2005).

PARENT, WHĀNAU AND STUDENT MESSAGES

Figure 3. Child, young person,whānau and families. The individual and the collective voice.

What messages are parents, whānau and students giving about effective education for Māori students both with and without special education needs?

Throughout the last 18 years I have interviewed countless numbers of parents and whānau of Māori children with a wide range of special education needs. In preparing this talk I went back to my interview data to find out what the predominant messages were in respect to providing an effective education. The messages clearly indicate that parents and whānau:

- believe cultural input is important in the education of their child with special education needs
- want to be consulted, involved and empowered in their child's education
- want teachers who care about their child and have high expectations of them
- want skilful teachers who can deliver a high quality programme.

Parents and whānau believe cultural input is important in the education of their child with special education needs

A strong message that has come through from the majority of parents I have interviewed is the importance of cultural input in their child's education. This cultural input is important not only for the child's cultural development but also to foster their self-esteem and to facilitate learning in general. The previous quote from Gay (1994) explained how children need to feel psychologically secure in order to learn effectively. Including cultural content contributes to their emotional and psychological well-being because it shows students that their culture is important and valued. It also facilitates learning by providing, firstly, a means by which new information can be related to prior knowledge and experience, and secondly, an educational environment that is culturally compatible with their home environment.

The cultural input mentioned by parents and whānau was wide-ranging. It included the incorporation of Māori content and language into the curriculum; the use of culturally appropriate identification and assessment measures, procedures, teaching strategies and resources; and the recognition and incorporation of Māori values, perspectives and perceptions of special education needs.

Parents provided some excellent suggestions and wonderful examples of cultural input, ranging from the simple inclusion of puha in a science lesson to involvement in kapahaka.

If every Māori kid today could identify puha then that is fantastic. If you can say, "Do you know what puha looks like? Can you go and get me some? Magnificent!" Again it's what they can do. Now who talks about the recognition of puha as a wonderful thing to have and yet you can live on that, you can eat that, it sustains you and then you get the puha and you say, "See that white thing coming out, what's it made of? Gee, it's not just puha, it's some chemical makeup of puha" and can lead on. I remember when I was working in Parehau [this parent was a social worker] we used to ask kids what they had for breakfast and they would lie. They would talk about pavlova, sponges and cream and that was all bullshit. Samoan kids, Māori kids, instead of saying they had the boil up from the night before! They didn't think it was acceptable to say that. It's actually valuing the things they do in their lives and talking about that (Bevan-Brown, 1993, pp. 110-111).

One child with Asperger syndrome who loved music and kapahaka but had difficulty coping with loud noises wore ear plugs at practices and performances. His mother noted that he was usually a few beats behind everyone else but he coped and in time was able to dispense with the ear plugs.

Parents and whānau want to be consulted, involved and empowered in their child's education

I definitely think that for a start for Māori children, Māori people have to be involved in the decision-making about what is going to happen to those children because when they're not, it doesn't matter how good it is, they'll never feel part of it and for it to be successful, Māori people, they have to feel a part of it (Bevan-Brown, 1993, p. 112).

In addition to being involved in decision-making relating to their children, parents were also keen to support their children's learning. However, the point was made that some parents were unsure of how to do this. A Māori parent who was also a teacher aide told of how she visited parents to explain their child's special education programme to them:

When the child goes home you are expecting that child to communicate with the family if they want help. Sometimes it is not that the parents don't want to help, it's that they don't know they can help or how they can help … I didn't learn [what to do] until I was a teacher aide. So you know about getting the whānau involved, I'm really into that … all your planning, all your programmes and everything like that will go right down the poo hole if you haven't got family support (Bevan-Brown, 2002, p. 298).

At the other end of the spectrum I came across parents in my research who were experts on their child's disability. For example, six of the parents I interviewed in the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) study had an in-depth knowledge of ASD. They were well read, went to relevant conferences, regularly searched the Internet for the latest research results on the treatment of children with ASD and contacted acknowledged world experts to discuss their children.

We need to make the most of the knowledge and experience of parents such as these. But even if parents are not experts in their child's disability, they know their children best and we need to make the most of this knowledge. One parent explained how this was happening with her son's teachers:

We were aware of lots of little things that might trigger him off. Even down to hitting kids and then we'd figure out with Tipene … if a rule was you couldn't wear your hat in the classroom and he was aware of it and as soon as he saw a kid who had a hat on, he'd go for them and try to take it off them because that was the rule! But with him it wasn't, "Can you please take your hat off?" it was go up and grab the hat and so that would lead to other things and fracases and fighting because other kids wouldn't realise what he's doing and teachers wouldn't realise why he did it. Lots of little things like that and it's only because we'd see it happen here or other places, we'd be around him when a similar thing would happen so we'd know that's what the problem was … Once we've explained things to teachers and they've seen it and understand it, then they're usually pretty good … Because of things we've said to the kids as well as to the teachers, now everybody is trying to recognise these things and understand why, so they tolerate it because they understand (Bevan-Brown, 2004, pp. 48-49).

However, I need to include a caveat here about parent involvement. While the desire to be involved in their child's education did emerge as a predominant theme in my research studies, similar to the desire for cultural input, this did not apply to everyone. Parents and whānau should be involved to the extent they choose, are comfortable with and are able to manage. Never make assumptions. The best way to find out what parents want is to ask! This consultation should not be a once only event. Because people's circumstances and opinions can change over time, consultation should be ongoing.

Parents and whānau want teachers who cared about their children and had high expectations of them

Parents described teachers and other personnel involved in educating their children as "having aroha," "very helpful," "very open," "supportive," "knowledgeable," "informative," "inclusive," "valuing of family," "great advocates," "easy going," "non-judgemental," "committed to their job," "positive," "caring" and so forth.

I had so many quotes that give testament to caring and dedicated teachers that it was difficult to choose just one to share with you. However, I decided on the following because it shows just how powerful simple little gestures from teachers can be. It is a story that one mother related about her own childhood experience:

I think that if a child feels special with that teacher, then she can draw out lots of things from the child, but if the child feels that he is not special then he'll just keep it in, it won't exhibit itself. Often kids need this drawing out, you know, "this person thinks I'm special!" I remember when I was little, when I was at primary, different teachers developed my self-esteem. I had long hair and always wore it in plaits …

There was one teacher who used to flip my pigtail and smile at the same time. I looked up to him and I thought, "this chap likes me, this teacher thinks I'm neat." So I thought I was neat. This other teacher on my report wrote "cooperative." I looked at that and thought "gosh, that's a big, long word, it must mean that I'm brainy, I'm brainy!" That was in the primers, so that false thing improved my self-esteem so that I had this self-image of being brainy, and people liked me. So that motivated me to do better and better (Bevan-Brown, 1993, p. 109).

Parents and whānau want skilful teachers who can deliver a high quality programme

Invariably, parents and whānau made the point that cultural input was not enough to ensure learning. For special education to be effective it had to be of "a high quality". This included: appropriate, purposeful, timely assessment; ongoing programme evaluation; comprehensive, regular, relevant and sufficient interventions; teaching that was interesting, pitched at the correct level and used effective strategies; and programmes that were well funded and well resourced.

In respect to teaching strategies, the most frequently mentioned approach involved building on children's strengths and interests. This was seen to be especially effective for children with ASD. One father explained how his son's obsession with chess was utilised by teachers who provided chess maths, chess stories, chess PE and so on. He commented that even when the lesson had nothing to do with chess his son was able to find some tenuous link!

Another frequently mentioned strategy was the use of role models. One father told of how his son had chosen Heremia Ngata to study for a school project. He applauded this and explained:

It's just affirming who you are … using images of successful Ngati Porou people like Apirana Ngata and Whaea McClutchie who are the successful images they can whakapapa in to … So in terms of soccer there's Heremia Ngata … Sean Fallen … Winton Rufer … So I say to Tama, "Hey, look, three professional Ngati Porou soccer players, one of them absolutely famous." It's a creation of images, that you have role models that you can say, "hey, that's a cuzzy!" Te Ra is very interested, he wants to find out exactly how Heremia is related to us. I've got to work that out. I know he is but in the meantime "doesn't matter boy," I say, "whether he is a first or second cousin, he's a cousin. We will work it out and I will show you." So that's the modelling thing. You can say, "You are me, your success is my success." It's that sort of thing (Bevan-Brown, 1993, p. 103).

In my ASD study parents were asked about teaching approaches that had been successful with their children. A wide range of approaches were described but the top seven were:

- preparation/transition activities
- visual strategies
- activities involving music and rhythm; firmness and perseverance
- computer use
- one-on-one assistance
- social stories.

STUDENTS' MESSAGES

Unfortunately I have not interviewed large numbers of Māori students either with or without special education needs so I could not use my own research to identify predominant messages. However, hundreds of Māori and Pasifika students have been interviewed in the AIMHI and *Te Kotahitanga* research (Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai & Richardson, 2003) so I looked to these studies for outstanding messages related to learning. This is what I found:

Students emphasised the importance of caring teachers who encourage and have high expectations of them:

They encourage us. They tell us about their lives and about the experiences of past students. They challenge you, they make comparisons that help you to understand. (AIMHI Students)

They respect your views. They don't make you feel stupid and when you ask a question they don't look at you like you're dumb. You feel more confident if you're relaxed with a teacher. (AIMHI Students)

Students want their culture valued and affirmed:

We don't necessarily need PI and Māori teachers but we do need culturally sensitive teachers. (AIMHI Student)

I'm a Māori, they should ask me about Māori things … I've got the goods on this but they never ask me. I'm a dumb Māori I suppose. Yeah they asked the Asian girl about her culture. They never ask us about ours. (*Te Kotahitanga* Student)

Students want: well organised teachers who make learning understandable, interesting and fun; to be actively involved in their own learning; and a classroom environment where it is OK to make mistakes:

It's good when they explain so you can understand. They break down the book information into little bits, part by part. (AIMHI Student)

They have a laugh with you instead of just sitting there, but still keeping us in line. Keep the class in order, but still laughing with you … that helps you like the subject. (*Te Kotahitanga* Student)

If you can join in and do things then it's easier to learn. (AIMHI Student)

Students want the support of their parents, family and friends:

Your friends in your class, sometimes if you don't understand, they will help you out and put it in your words and then you'll understand. So that's how if you get a friend like that and they understand it, they can just tell you and you can get to work. (*Te Kotahitanga* Students)

Having your family and friends to support you … cause they've all been through school and stuff and have good jobs and I want to be like that. (*Te Kotahitanga* Student)

However, it must be added that while students wanted their parents and whānau to support their learning they were not enthusiastic about them coming to school to do so! I suspect the latter actually depends on the age of the student. My four children loved me coming to kindy, kohanga reo and school when they were young but as they grew older they became embarrassed about my looks, my clothes, my bomb car, what I said, what I didn't say – to the extent that one of my daughters wouldn't bring home notes from college asking for parent assistance just in case I volunteered!

Finally, the process of listening to students' voices can be complemented and enhanced by becoming more knowledgeable about youth culture in general. The authors of a book called *What successful teachers do in inclusive classrooms. Sixty research-based teaching strategies that help special learners succeed* (McNary, Glasgow & Hicks, 2005) maintain that understanding where students are and what is important to them is essential to designing instruction. They suggest that teachers:

Check literature, music, clothing trends and so on. Spend time looking over popular magazines, check on students' favourite films and television shows, and most importantly, take time to talk and listen to them … Relating the curriculum to the students in order to make it meaningful, relevant and fun reduces classroom management issues as well as contributes to student success (pp. 11 & 12).

RESEARCH MESSAGES

Figure 4. Research – the last circle.

The diagram *(Figure 5)* illustrates some different types of research that can be drawn on to inform our teaching practice. At the top are the multi-site studies that collect data from large numbers of teachers and/or students. The middle layer includes research which involves many teachers and/or children but they are all from the same site. At the bottom is research that involves in-depth studies of one classroom, centre, unit, teacher or child, and of course there are many gradations in between these three research scenarios.

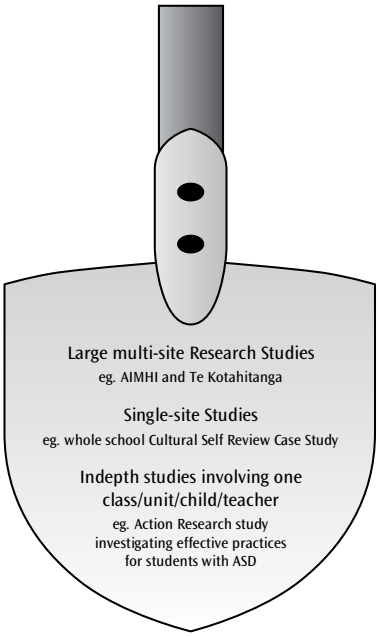

Figure 5. Looking beneath the surface.

Each type of research has its particular strengths and weaknesses. For example, the numbers in the large studies enable the identification of "statistically significant" findings which can be generalised to similar populations or situations. The smaller studies don't have this capacity but they can give "life" to the statistics of larger studies by showing in detail what people do, think and feel. In drawing on research to inform our practice we need to consider studies across this whole spectrum so that we can get the best of all possible worlds. I am going to present an example of research from each level.

AIMHI and *Te Kotahitanga* are both large multi-site research projects. The AIMHI study was described earlier. I will now very briefly explain the *Kotahitanga* project but strongly recommend that you visit the Māori research section on the Ministry of Education website (www.minedu.govt.nz) and read about these and other projects in detail.

In the *Kotahitanga* project researchers talked to Year 9 and 10 Māori students in four mainstream schools about their classroom experiences. They also talked to parents, principals and teachers. The analysis of these interviews showed that the students, parents and principals believed the most important influence on the students' achievement was the quality of the classroom relationships and interactions between the teachers and students. The majority of teachers, however, believed that the major influence on students' achievement was the students themselves and/or their whānau circumstances or structural issues. The researchers concluded that:

This deficit theorising by teachers is the major impediment to Māori students' educational achievement for it results in teachers having low expectations of Māori students. This in turn creates a downward spiralling, self-fulfilling prophecy of Māori student achievement and failure (Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai & Richardson, 2003, p. 12).

The researchers developed an effective teacher profile from the information shared by the students and others and then delivered professional development based on this profile to 11 teachers in four schools. This professional development included marae training and in-class observations and support. Emphasis was placed on both improving teacher attitudes and expectations of Māori students and on introducing interactive teaching strategies. These included giving feedback and feed forward, co-construction, making use of prior learning, cooperative learning, narrative pedagogy, formative assessment approaches and student-generated questioning. The research showed that when teacher-student relationships improved and teaching became more interactive, Māori students' on-task engagement increased, their absenteeism reduced, their work completion increased, the cognitive levels of the classroom lessons increased and students' short-term achievements increased – in many cases quite dramatically (Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai & Richardson, 2003, p. 12).

Since the initial *Te Kotahitanga* scoping study in 2001, phases two and three have been implemented and many more schools and teachers have become involved. The measuring of students' achievement has been carefully documented and analysed. Results continue to be positive including improvements in students' literacy skills as measured by the *Essential Skills Assessment Literacy Test.* The research is showing the many teachers who previously believed they could not make a difference because Māori underachievement was the fault of the students and their home backgrounds, have found in fact they can make a major difference simply by changing their attitudes and introducing interactive teaching techniques.

The second success story I want to share with you relates to the Cultural Self Review (CSR) (Bevan-Brown, 2003), developed as part of my PhD research. In brief, the CSR involves (hopefully) all staff in a school or early childhood education centre examining their own practices to see how well they are providing for Māori students in general and Māori students with special education needs in particular and then developing an action plan to address any areas of weakness.

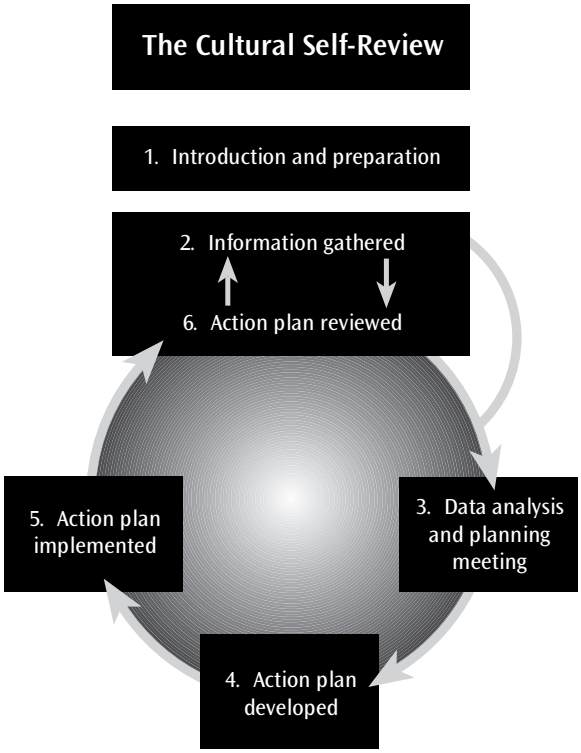

Figure 6. The cultural self-review process (Bevan-Brown, 2003, p. 27).

I have had many anecdotal reports about the CSR from people who have conducted one in their centre or school. These reports have been very positive. Not surprisingly, they show that schools benefit from the self review in proportion to the time, effort and commitment they put in.

The case study I wish to share with you was conducted in a decile 2 primary school with a 42% Māori roll. The school was experiencing major problems and requested assistance from the local Ministry of Education, Special Education (GSE) office. A Māori behaviour specialist came into the school and assisted the staff to conduct a CSR. After explaining the process, she helped teachers to gather answers to the questions posed in a cultural input checklist. (These questions are based on culturally-relevant principles and cover all areas of school/centre life). Staff were interviewed and kept reflective notebooks. In addition, the GSE worker conducted classroom and playground observations. The analysis of all data collected identified strengths and gaps. This information was shared in a staff meeting. People prioritised the areas that needed to be worked on, brainstormed possible strategies and developed a whole school action plan.

This included:

Environment – principal to make home visits to all whānau, school to develop a whānau drop-in centre.

Content and Resources – kapahaka group to be re-established, te reo Māori tutor introduced and all classes to make a marae visit.

Personnel – staff development in Māori, establishment of a school whānau committee and Māori tutors to be employed.

Policy and Processes – te reo Māori in classes, tuakana-teina model, and Māori protocols such as powhiri and koha to be introduced.

Assessment – a cultural profile to be developed for students and a whānau committee to lead the next CSR. Reviews were planned on a termly basis changing to an annual review at a later date.

This staff made a serious commitment to making their school a culturally responsive environment and I am pleased to report their efforts were rewarded. Both staff and children increased their cultural knowledge; parents become more involved in their children's education; whānau and the wider community became more involved in and supportive of the school; relationships between staff and children improved; absenteeism decreased and their Education Review Office (ERO) report improved! Unfortunately, the GSE worker who did this case study did not gather data around learning outcomes so I am not sure if there were significant gains in this area but, given the connection between cultural identity, self-esteem, psychological well-being and learning, it is highly probable these gains were made. (If anyone is interested in learning more about the CSR it is explained in detail in *The Cultural Self-Review. Providing culturally effective, inclusive education for Māori learners* (Bevan-Brown, 2003).

Finally, I would like to share with you the story of a participatory action research project centred around two senior students with autism one of whom is Māori (Bevan-Brown, Carroll-Lind, Kearney, Sperl, & Sutherland, 2005). This research was part of a larger Ministry of Education project to investigate effective practices for students with ASD. Along with two colleagues I was involved as a research mentor. The study was conducted in a large urban, co-educational, secondary school. The two students concerned received part of their education in regular classes and part in the school's special education facility. Staff were concerned that sometimes when these students became anxious or stressed they exhibited "inappropriate behaviours". So the research was focused on identifying stress factors, getting the students to recognise and understand their personal stress levels and to use this knowledge to manage their stress more appropriately. Teachers, teacher aides and parents were the main researchers, and using questionnaires, observations, reflective journals and teaching activities, factors that both caused and reduced stress for these students were identified. Parents and staff were also involved in a number of professional development activities to increase their knowledge of ASD and of how to manage it.

Action research is a cyclical process where various interventions are introduced, evaluated, discarded, modified, continued as is or perhaps built on in the next cycle. One of the interventions trialed was unsuccessful for the two students involved but ended up teaching us one of the most valuable lessons of the research. The intervention was Tony Attwood's *Exploring Feelings* programme (Attwood, 2004 a; 2004, b). There is nothing wrong with the programme itself but the ongoing evaluation showed that the two students did not have the conceptual and emotional understanding needed to benefit from it. This came as a surprise to staff especially in respect to the student who was verbal.

It was "assumed" because of her ability to verbalise, that she was more able at recognising emotions than the non-verbal student. Work with a "mood barometer" revealed that this was not the case. Staff also discovered that this was not an isolated incident – too many assumptions were being made when students' programmes were initially developed. As a result of this finding, instead of starting an organised teaching programme as soon as the students enter the special education centre, staff at this school now spend the first few weeks just getting to know the students – their likes, dislikes, strengths, weaknesses and so forth. This information is then used to develop an appropriate programme. The "getting to know you time" also allows space for the building of positive student-teacher relationships which have been previously highlighted as vital to successful learning.

What interventions did work? Principally a variety of visual strategies and social stories developed specifically to help the students cope with stressful situations. For example, one of the students identified for herself that visiting her mother who had shifted to a new city would be stressful for her, so she asked her stepmother to write a social story about the upcoming visit. Together they prepared a story that focused on stressful areas, for example, what food to avoid, how to behave towards her siblings and what to do when she felt stressed.

Observations throughout the project showed that the two students made slow but steady progress. Given the nature of their disabilities, dramatic changes were not expected. However, there was a significant decrease in incidents of stressed behaviour and an increase in the students' abilities to recognise and deal with stressful situations. For example, initial data showed one student's usual mode of handling stressful situations was to "throw himself on the ground and become vocal and agitated or repeat actions and verbalisations over and over again" (teacher's observation journal). Towards the end of the research such behaviour was very rare. Instead the student would remove himself to a place of "sanctuary" (the equipment room or foyer). Additionally, the parents of both students reported: improvements in stress-related behaviours in the home environment; their children appeared more happy and content; and they felt better equipped to meet their children's needs.

Staff members' knowledge about these two students and about ASD in general was greatly increased. There were also very positive changes in attitudes and behaviour. This is illustrated in the following quote from a teacher aide:

The project has changed the way I relate to A and M and other students with ASD in so many ways!! I feel I can communicate at a much better level than before. Using visuals has helped me no end such as stories, rules, signs and so on. I have more confidence in my own ability and I have a much better understanding of autism. I now speak to A and M not at them. I try and think ahead of ways to make up-coming tasks and events as easy as possible for them to accept through social stories and simple instructions. I also see their behaviours as a way of their communicating to us that things aren't going right instead of naughty behaviour. I'm not scared of A and M any more!! I can "push" harder and end up getting much better results (Teacher Aide Evaluation).

If anyone is wondering whether this action research included any cultural input for the Māori student involved, I should mention that for this pupil the whānau class was her home room. Her father was a staunch advocate for incorporating Māori content into his daughter's programme and believed the school was doing an excellent job in this respect. So cultural input was not something that needed to be addressed for this student.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would like to return to the four possible reasons I put forward for many teachers and special educators not adequately providing for Māori students with special education needs. They were that:

1. Teachers and special educators don't care.
2. They believe that culture is not relevant to teaching students with special education needs.
3. They believe that their efforts won't make a difference.
4. They are unsure of what to do or so overwhelmed by the challenge that they put improving the teaching of Māori students with special education needs into the too hard basket.

1. Have you come across any teachers who couldn't care less about Māori students? I haven't and I have been teaching for over 30 years. I know some teachers get tired and burnt out – teaching is a very challenging and often unappreciated profession but I don't think this means they stop caring, so I will cross number one off my list.
2. Hopefully I have provided enough evidence from all sources to show that culture is indeed very relevant to effectively teaching students with special education needs.
3. Again, all the research studies described and the parents and students we have heard from are living testimony to the fact that teachers' efforts can and are making a real positive difference in schools all around Aotearoa/New Zealand. So reason number three is discarded.
4. This leaves us with number four which I believe is the major reason for Māori students with special education needs not being adequately provided for. There is no denying that teaching and providing for these students is often difficult and challenging. Teaching students in general – whether they have special education needs or otherwise – is not an easy task, however it is not a reason to put these challenges into the "too hard basket".

The predominant messages to come from the three sources of evidence examined show that the keys to successfully providing for Māori students both with and without special education needs are:

- building positive teacher-student relationships
- providing a "high quality" education which includes interactive teaching strategies that engage students in their learning
- teaching that builds on students' strengths and interests
- raising teacher expectations of Māori students
- involving parents, whānau and peers
- incorporating widespread cultural input.

If we had time to delve into best evidence sources, in particular the *Quality teaching for diverse students in schooling: Best Evidence Synthesis* (Alton-Lee, 2003), we would find that these are also keys for successfully teaching all students regardless of ethnicity or ability. Certainly the Education Review Office (ERO) Report *Māori students: Schools making a difference* (2002), noted that Māori do as well as non-Māori in schools that are effective for all students. Additionally, it should be noted that while I have concentrated on evidence specifically related to teaching Māori students with special education needs, the keys to successful provision are equally useful for psychologists, advisors, speech-language therapists, physiotherapists, in fact all professionals who work with these students.

I acknowledge that teaching Māori students is more challenging for teachers who do not have the cultural knowledge required. But many teachers do have this knowledge and so do parents, whānau and the students themselves – all valuable sources to be tapped into – but to learn from not to abdicate responsibility to! There are also many useful programmes and resources available. For example, Poutama Pounamu, an education, research and development centre located within GSE, has developed many excellent programmes that can be utilised. So, it is time to get rid of the "too hard basket".

I will end with a little story from my research. It refers to a class trip to Mt Ruapehu:

I can remember when he was 11 … we did this big trip up the mountain. It wasn't until we were getting them down and we had them all at the bottom and I remember turning to Bernadette saying, "My God, look what we have just done." Four of them, and Ameria, lifting her out of her wheelchair, Hone seizuring all over the show because he was so excited, and each with an adult holding on tight, and Rawiri and Hepa who at the time had two legs in plaster because he had just had another operation for his club feet, and is severely Down syndrome and deaf, they had a good time … Well we know we are inclusive, we know we have made it because we took a kid who is autistic, one who is intellectually handicapped and two children in wheelchairs to the top of the mountain. And it wasn't till we got back down did I think, we have done it! We never ever had a thought about doing it. We just did it (Bevan-Brown, 2004).

So, take a risk – JUST DO IT!

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