Teaching and learning in the supervision of Māori Doctoral Students: Project outline

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Abstract: This research will investigate major theoretical and cultural questions about the nature of teaching and learning in the supervisory process for Māori doctoral students. The existing research literature suggests that doctoral supervision is a complex and not well-understood process and there is to date no literature that looks at the teaching and learning experience within Māori doctoral supervision. Furthermore, current Māori doctoral students consistently report significant concerns related to supervision. The research team represents a partnership between experienced Māori and Pākehā researchers who are also doctoral supervisors (practitioners) from two universities and one whare wānanga. The team is also in partnership with the Māori doctoral programme coordinated by Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga. Our goal is to enhance understanding of the teaching and learning process of supervision for students and supervisors, particularly around issues of culture that arise in research methodologies and practices. This understanding will inform development activities in support of positive outcomes for Māori doctoral students.

Keywords: Māori education, supervision, teaching and learning

Introduction

Graduate programmes for Māori aim to develop a critical mass of culturally skilled, critically conscious, well-credentialed change makers. Such a group provides a pool of potential leaders who can contribute to the realization of Māori aspirations and to the New Zealand knowledge economy (Durie, 2006; Smith, 2004). A recent paper entitled 'Māori in Doctoral Study' points out that although the number of Māori doctoral students has steadily increased over the last ten years, the completion rates for Māori (17%) were still significantly lower than the 25% realised for non-Māori (Ministry of Education, 2006). Although a systematic study has not been carried out, suggestions are that Māori doctoral students may face significant research issues that are specific to them. These issues include: lack of confidence; maintenance of cultural identity; lack of suitable Māori supervisors; varying situations regarding external advisors; age effects with older students; ownership of data; research methodology; ethical practice; whānau expectations; community engagement and reciprocity. All these issues require negotiation with their supervisors and the disciplinary fields they wish to enter (Smith, 1999; McKinley, 2003).

Supervision is "the most advanced level of teaching in our education system [and] certainly one of the most complex and problematic" (Connell, 1985, p. 38). The research literature to date also suggests that good supervision is central to the success of doctoral candidates (Acker, 2001; Middleton, 2001; Phillips & Pugh, 1994). However, supervision is somewhat under-theorised as a teaching and learning practice (Grant, 2005; Green & Lee, 1995; Green, 2004): that is, we do not understand very well how and why supervision is successful when it is. There are only a small number of studies that actually attempt to uncover the pedagogical dynamics between supervisor and student (see for example, Grant, 2005; Knowles, 1999). Nevertheless there are now some general principles to guide the supervisors of doctoral students (see, for example, Brew & Peseta, 2004; James & Baldwin, 1999; Sinclair, 2004). At the same time, however, there is a notable absence of research literature based on empirical studies on the supervision process of Māori and indigenous doctoral students

(Fitzgerald, 2005; Pope, 2006). Yet Māori educational experience of the past 30 years suggests the importance of the creation of authentic Māori models (Irwin, 2002) for educational transformation.

This partnership-based project will investigate the teaching and learning dimensions of supervision of Māori doctoral students through the use of focus groups and individual interviews. As more Māori students seek doctoral qualifications, this project will provide a growing wealth of descriptive data. This research will produce in-depth information and understandings about the current state of Māori doctoral supervision. Such information will include: the distribution of students across institutions, disciplines and doctoral programmes; the individual learning experiences of the students and the teaching experiences of their supervisors. Some of the salient teaching and learning issues include: how supervisor/s and student work together on the research question and design; negotiating agreement over methodological issues; problem solving; feedback processes; and balancing the many tensions, such as that between the student's respect for the supervisor's/s' authority and experience and her/his need to act independently,; the demands of community engagement in relation to institutional and disciplinary demands,; and knowing when, as a supervisor, to guide the student and when to leave her/him to find their own way. Such tensions play out in the intimacy of supervision in particularly acute ways. Cultural differences between supervisor and student, along with increasing pressures for timely completions, are likely to affect the ordinary misunderstandings attendant upon supervision (Grant, 2003).

Project Aim

To enhance our understanding of the supervision practice of Māori doctoral candidates (from both students' and supervisors' perspectives) so as to improve outcomes for those candidates and their institutions.

Project Objectives

To identify which teaching and learning processes are most appropriate for the supervision of Māori doctoral candidates through to completion

To document and disseminate effective practice regarding the supervision of Māori students to practitioners (students and supervisors) through seminars and presenting preliminary findings

To produce materials that can be used by teaching and learning centres in tertiary institutes that provide professional development courses for Māori students and doctoral supervisors

Research question

How do Māori doctoral students and their supervisors work together as teachers and learners in supervision? How can supervision capability be improved to support better outcomes for Māori doctoral students and their institutions?

Research Design and Methodology

This project will be framed within kaupapa Māori methodology that draws on key assumptions of critical theory but situates them within a Māori worldview (Smith, 2004). It is research that is both rigorous and culturally relevant (Irwin, cited in Smith, 1999), that aims to "make a positive difference for the researched" (Smith, 1999, p. 191). Using these insights, we propose to critically analyse institutional policy documents pertaining to doctoral supervision, and data collected through focus groups and interviews with Māori doctoral students and supervisors of such students.

Review of institutional documents

We will carry out an exploration of the institutional contexts in which Māori doctoral students and their supervisors work. This will begin with an analysis of policy documents on supervision as well as an analysis of policy documents on Treaty of Waitangi and postgraduate research.

Interviews with students

Research participants will be offered the option of a group interview (focus group) or an individual interview. Research team members have experienced supervision workshops in their capacity as facilitators or as workshop participants during the time of their own PhD candidacy. Such group situations trigger the kind of collective thinking Māori students sometimes prefer. Others, for reasons such as privacy, or geographical location, may prefer an individual interview situation.

A series of focus group and individual interviews will be held at MAI te Kupenga sites in the North Island to gather data about how the doctoral students are supported in their learning. The MAI te Kupenga groups are located on a specific university but welcome all Māori doctoral students despite where they are enrolled. In this way we will cover all doctoral granting institutions in the North Island (Auckland, AUT, Unitec, Waikato, Awanuiārangi, Massey and Victoria). Interviews with students may occur both within the doctoral degree granting institutions where they are enrolled and/or at their home or another location suggested by the student. There are approximately 260 Māori doctoral students across New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 2006). The research team will contact students directly for their participation in this project.

Interviews with supervisors

A series of focus group and individual interviews will be carried out at four universities and one whare wānanga to gather data from supervisors of Māori students in order to determine the nature of issues specific to the supervision of those students. We wish to avoid strict sampling methods and instead, will seek to include as many supervisors as is feasible. Our aim is to sample a range of disciplines including at least one of the sciences, social sciences, humanities and professional/applied disciplines. The disciplines chosen will be those with the highest proportion of Māori students.

Analysis of data

Data collected from the students' and supervisors' interviews will be transcribed and indexed in multiple ways. Themes will be identified from the questions and used for the preliminary structure for indexing in the analytical tool. It is anticipated that new themes will emerge from any previous research in higher education. Student data will be collected and analyzed first and preliminary findings will be disseminated through seminars for students and supervisors at the target institutions. Supervisor data will be collected in the second round and prior to seminar presentation.

Research value

There are a number of research values expected from this project. First is building and consolidating our knowledge as practitioners, about the key characteristics of good teaching and learning in the supervision process. It is also expected that the findings should help fill a major gap in the national and international literature on teaching and learning processes involving Māori and indigenous students.

For the supervisors involved as participants, this project should enhance the view that supervision as a teaching and learning process is rather more than simply 'mentoring' or 'guiding' students. An expected value is in contributing to the development of innovative supervision, policy and practice.

Practice value

In identifying key characteristics of effective practice in the supervision of Māori doctoral students, we expect the findings to form the basis of effective guidelines for supervisors of Māori students. As a consequence, we should see further development in capability and capacity among professionals in the educational community in their ability to supervise Māori and indigenous students. A primary implication of establishing culturally appropriate teaching and learning practice is that the impact has the potential to contribute more generally to the supervision of culturally different groups.

The research findings would also appear to have potential for a more strategic and specific deployment of resources provided by learning institutions. For example, by knowing which characteristics of supervision are most effective for Māori students' learning, institutions could direct resources accordingly through professional development and courses with both supervisors and the students. Additional expectations from the research findings include the production of materials and guidelines designed to facilitate the supervisory process, to increase confidence, and ultimately to improve outcomes.

Project Directions

This paper has outlined a project that will, over a two-year period, investigate institutional policies relevant to the supervision of Māori doctoral students and Māori students' and supervisors' accounts of their experience of the supervision process. The research is seen to have strategic value for doctoral education in New Zealand since, by identifying characteristics of effective practice that are specific to Māori doctoral students, we expect to contribute to knowledge regarding the diverse needs of students and supervisors. The focus on Māori doctoral candidates will increase our understanding of the supervision process for a particular group of students that has not received wide-spread, direct and specific attention as learners with special characteristics. Such understanding will also raise implications for students from other culturally different backgrounds.

It is also expected that we will be in a stronger position to prepare both Māori supervisors and non-Māori supervisors in the teaching and support of graduate research students. The growing pressure from the increasing number of Māori doctoral enrolments means that Māori doctoral graduates will be continue to be 'fast tracked' into supervision. They will need support and guidance in this area as part of their professional development. In the long term, if Māori doctoral students have experienced successful supervision then they are more likely to follow effective teaching and learning practices.

In disseminating the project findings widely through workshops, seminars, conferences and journals at local, institutional, national and international levels, we also expect to facilitate a stronger effort to meet the challenge of raising Māori participation in higher education. Further, achieving higher rates of success would strengthen the capacity of Māori graduates to contribute to the knowledge economy across a wide spectrum.

It is noted that one of Durie's five strategic goals for Māori education is to "add value to New Zealand's education portfolio by indigenising policies and practices" (Durie, 2006, p. 10). It is hoped that the findings of present project will inform policy and practices with respect to teaching and learning of Māori doctoral students across Āotearoa/New Zealand.

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