

Supervision and Māori doctoral students: A discussion piece

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Abstract: This article is written to encourage thought and discussion amongst Māori doctoral students about their experiences of supervision. Along with being the research assistant on a project exploring this topic, the author is also a doctoral student and so has supplemented the small amount of literature on the supervision of Māori students with her own observations.

Keywords: higher education, Māori doctoral students, supervision

Internationally, there is a large literature about the supervision of doctoral students. The bulk of the work focuses on student and supervisor experiences of supervision or institutional perspectives on the supervisory relationship as it affects retention. Within the literature, there is a small body of work addressing the supervision of Māori graduate research students, mostly written by people who have been supervisors (Fitzgerald, 2005; Kidman, 2007; Pope, 2006). The viewpoint given here draws on this published work but also incorporates observations from the author's own experience as a doctoral student to highlight issues that may stimulate further discussion and research. This short article is written on behalf of the research team working on the TLRI-funded project entitled *Teaching and Learning in the Supervision of Māori Doctoral Students* (McKinley, Grant, Middleton, Irwin & Williams, 2007).

The number of Māori students pursuing and completing PhD studies has increased over the last 10 years (Ministry of Education, 2006). Despite this, Māori still comprise only 6.6% of the total number of local doctoral candidates (Kidman, 2007) – although there are others studying overseas or by distance from Australian universities. The attrition rate, however, for Māori doctoral students is still very high, particularly within the first year of enrolment (Ministry of Education, 2006). Lack of support and a sense of isolation are suggested as key reasons for this. In a book chapter entitled *Supervising Māori Doctoral Candidates*, Joanna Kidman (2007) suggests that culture impacts on Māori students' experiences of the supervisory relationship and may also impact on retention:

Given the diversity of the Māori student population and the variety of their educational needs and aspirations, it may be tempting for supervisors to simply treat Māori doctoral candidates as culture-free individuals and be done with it. And yet this does not suffice either; rather, it frequently leads to a simmering resentment among Māori who feel they must leave their culture at the door ... when they arrive for supervision meetings. (Kidman 2007, p.165)

In addition to this cultural element, Kidman points out that other issues such as age may also impact on Māori students' doctoral experience. Māori doctoral students are often older than their non-Māori counterparts, which may lead to different needs and a different approach to doctoral study and the supervisory relationship. For example, issues related to technology, world-view, motivation to study, family support and financial situation are all in some way likely to be related to the age and life-experience of the student. Even within a cultural context, Māori have many roles defined by age and/or experience such as 'Kaumatua' (elder) 'Pakeke' (adult) or

‘Rangatahi’ (young person). Each of these affects a person’s world-view and shapes the way they engage with others and the world around them. Age may become an issue in the supervisory relationship. Imagine, for instance, the difference between a 45 year-old supervising a 25 year-old (Pakeke supervising Rangatahi), compared to the same 45 year-old supervising a 70 year-old person (Pakeke-Kaumatua). The needs of each of the students in this example will differ; the way in which the supervisor communicates or engages with each student should perhaps also differ.

This brings us to one of the key issues raised in the literature related to supervisory relationships: the issue of power in the dynamics that play out between the teacher/supervisor and student (Grant, 2003). Generally speaking the supervisor’s role is underpinned by institutional authority, while the role of the student, as a learner, is quite different and they may experience themselves as having less power in the relationship. There seems to be a range of dynamics that may contribute to the play of power. Pope (2006) describes supervision relationships as being imbued with age, gender, ethnic, cultural and other nuances that shape the interactions, and understandings between supervisor and student. Each of these descriptors adds another dimension to the changing balance of power within the supervisory relationship. These unequal power relationships impact on how each relates and communicates to the other and, ultimately, may affect the research and the writing of the thesis.

Māori have their own method of teaching and learning, and/or mentoring, known as ‘Tuakana-Teina’ or ‘elder-younger’. This name is taken from the concept of an elder sibling and younger sibling working together. Each plays a role in the learning/teaching process. While the Tuakana generally takes the lead, the key issue in this relationship is that both Tuakana and Teina are teacher and learner. The Teina learns new knowledge from the more experienced Tuakana; however, the knowledge of the Tuakana is reinforced and strengthened by assisting the Teina. The extent to which this happens in supervisory relationships is unknown. While some supervisors may look at their role as purely that of teacher and giver of knowledge (what can I teach this student?), other supervisors may view themselves in this paradigm of teacher/learner (what do I need to learn from this student in order to teach this student?). This is the stance that Clive Pope (2006) portrays in his article about attending, as the Pākeha supervisor, a hui with his student’s iwi in order to gain consent for her research.

The ‘Tuakana-Teina’ structure is an example of how culture may shape the interaction between the supervisor and student. However, there are other ways in which culture impacts on the supervisory relationship. One example relates to the research process itself and the exploration of methodology and ethical boundaries. Every discipline has its own theories and approaches on how research should be conducted. Māori also have their research methodologies and ethical systems. For many Māori students, the intersecting and marrying of these two approaches is a key issue for discussion with their supervisor.

Kaupapa Māori methodology is an example of a research approach developed for and by Māori for the purposes of marrying Māori and Western theories of research. It is a relatively new methodology; however, it is being utilised by many Māori academics and doctoral students in a number of different disciplines. This methodology is based on key principles including ‘whānau’ (family), ‘tino rangatiratanga’ (self-determination), ‘taonga tuku iho’ (the gifts passed on), ‘kia piki ake i ngā raruraru o te kainga’ (transformative research) and others (Smith & Reid, 2000). It upholds the legitimacy of Māori knowledge, tikanga, and systems of doing, knowing and learning. Despite its common use by some Māori academics, there are still many (Māori and non-Māori, students and supervisors) who are coming to terms with its use in doctoral research (Pope, 2006). In some fields of study, there is almost a sense of mistrust associated with the use of Kaupapa Māori, as many academics question the ‘legitimacy’ or ‘validity’ of this methodology.

For example, some Māori students who seek to utilise Kaupapa Māori methodology within their research are steered away from doing so, or asked to use multiple methodologies as a 'back-up' to ensure the validity of their research. In a different response to this dilemma, Tanya Fitzgerald (2005), who is a Pākehā supervisor, asserts the importance of engaging with Kaupapa Māori research rather than avoiding it, and she proposes a framework for working with Māori research students in ways that are consistent with the Treaty of Waitangi obligations.

Another issue which may arise for Māori doctoral students is a sense of isolation. Some students feel isolated simply through the individual focus of the PhD programme. Cultural alienation, separation from their department and peers, and students' lack of confidence in themselves or their work may also contribute to this feeling. Some might argue that Māori are naturally more collective and collaborative in their approach to work; if so, this may exacerbate their sense of isolation when required to work mostly alone.

To date, a number of initiatives have been set up to address these issues, both specifically for Māori and also generally across the board in some institutions. Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga in particular, has established several support initiatives such as writing workshops, retreats and a nationally networked curriculum that is part of its Capability Building Programme (see Williams, 2007; and <http://www.mai.ac.nz>). These activities are usually multi-disciplinary and include senior academic staff as well as doctoral students. Some institutions and supervisors have also instigated clustered supervision which involves groups of students within the same area and/or discipline meeting with their supervisors together (Kidman, 2007).

The international literature points out that cultural, gender and power displacements impact on supervisory processes and relationships; however, how these impacts emerge for Māori is not fully understood. While there is work being done to support Māori student needs, there are many issues in this area that need to be further explored to ensure that enhanced support systems such as more effective supervision can be established. This article invites further discussion amongst Māori doctoral students and demonstrates the need for further research in this area.

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Author Notes

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