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Intergenerational reflections on doctoral supervision in nursing

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ABSTRACT

Increasing numbers of nurses seek to undertake doctoral education as nursing continues to develop as a discrete area of clinical and theoretical scholarship. Effective supervision is a crucial aspect of doctoral education and has been identified as essential to successful completion of doctoral training. Relatively little, however, is written about the relationship aspects of doctoral supervision in nursing. This paper presents some reflections on doctoral education in nursing from the perspective of four people who have established intergenerational supervisory relationships.

KEYWORDS: doctoral education; nursing; supervision; mentoring; professional relationship

COMING TO DOCTORAL STUDIES

Doctoral education in nursing originated to meet the needs of nurse educators and leaders (Diekelmann & Magnussen Ironside, 1998; Waldspurger Robb, 2005), but in recent decades the growth of university-based schools of nursing has resulted in increasing numbers of nurses from all sectors pursuing educational pathways to doctoral level. This has generated an explosion of nursing-specific knowledge and scholarship arising from research conceptualized and conducted by nurses themselves. However, doctoral education brings many more benefits additional to the generation of discipline-specific knowledge that

can inform the practice and scholarship of nursing. Jolley (2007, p. 226) asserts that doctoral education is 'nursing's greatest achievement yet' because in successfully pursuing doctoral studies, 'nurses may reach new levels of personal and professional self-confidence perhaps not yet seen within the profession'.

While in many academic and applied disciplines an honours degree is the traditional (and fairly direct) path to doctoral studies, nurses and midwives frequently take a less direct route, with students commonly already holding fairly senior clinical or academic roles on commencement of their candidature (Jackson, 2008; Malfroy, 2005).

Jolley (2007) makes the point that nurses come to doctoral studies because now they have greater opportunities to do so, yet in some ways it could be said that as a group nurses have been somewhat reluctant scholars. Despite the growth of doctoral education in nursing, in the minds of many, nursing remains anything but an academic discipline. The effects of previous generations of apprenticeship-style education and professional socialization of nurses as silent and compliant actors under medical direction are still in evidence. Indeed the possibility that a nursing career can, or will, lead to doctoral studies may not even have been remotely considered. For many nurses, contemplation of such a move as beginning doctoral studies involves stepping so far out of the life script with which one has been imbued, that it involves a massive shift in thinking. Furthermore, this shift represents such a divergence from traditional conceptualizations of a nurse and nursing that it is often undervalued in the broader clinical community of nursing.

Though there is an increasing tradition of doctoral studies in nursing, relatively little is written about doctoral supervision relationships in nursing. It is conventional for completing students to make some brief comment on supervisory input in the *Acknowledgements* section of their completed theses and propriety dictates that these comments are generally highly complimentary and positive. This also perhaps reflects the fact they are written on completion of the work when students may be overcome with relief and gratitude that the thesis is finally finished. These comments rarely (if ever) refer to the messy, thorny or chaotic aspects of the candidature. Nor can they wholly capture the extent of a possible love-hate relationship that has traversed a number of years and so, in the absence of other texts about supervision, these often contribute to the sanitized mythology that surrounds the supervisory relationship.

This paper presents some of our own reflections about doctoral education in nursing and particularly the supervision of doctoral students, based on our own experiences as both students and supervisors. In this paper we argue, as others have, (see

Evans, 2007; Park, 2005) that the supervisory/student relationship is a crucial professional relationship and one of many key variables that can profoundly influence the course of the candidature. Furthermore, we suggest that these relationships, if effective, can continue to provide nurturing guidance and mentoring support extending well beyond the years of doctoral education.

WHO ARE WE?

We come to this paper having all ‘walked the walk’ of completing an earned doctoral degree in nursing. Kath Peters came to doctoral studies via an honours pathway, while the remainder of us held professional qualifications and course work masters degrees as our highest qualification on entry to doctoral studies. We have longstanding doctoral supervisory relationships among ourselves – Philip Darbyshire supervised Debra Jackson (completing in 1999), Debra Jackson co-supervised or supervised Kath Peters (completing in 2006) and Laretta Luck (completing in 2007). Currently, both Kath Peters and Laretta Luck are co-supervising doctoral students with Debra Jackson. Thus, as doctoral students and supervisors, we have an ‘intergenerational’ relationship of sorts, and in this paper, we use the term ‘intergenerational’ to denote the relationships between the authors. Our knowledge of supervision is greatly influenced by these intergenerational relationships.

THE NATURE OF THE SUPERVISORY RELATIONSHIP

The supervisor/student relationship is a particular type of relationship. It is essentially a hierarchical (whether we wish to acknowledge this or not), purposeful and respectful relationship (Jackson, 2008) that needs to be able to endure over an extended period and be resilient enough to survive the various challenges, impediments and hold ups that will almost certainly be encountered along the way. Within the context of this relationship, students will be accompanied on a ‘journey’ of intellectual growth and development. Despite the growth in thinking and scholarship

that should accompany doctoral studies and the capacity for positive development that can occur in and through the supervisory relationship, these relationships are not without complexity and potential difficulty (Deuchar, 2008).

Difficulties can arise where there is dissonance in expectations of the relationship (Park, 2005). While some (rare) students come to their doctoral studies well prepared and self-directed, many do not and look to supervisors to provide considerable direction. Indeed, in an ethnographic study of a doctoral program for nurses and midwives, students expressed disappointment in what they experienced as 'lack of direction from supervisors' (Malfroy, 2005, p. 170). Supervisors in the same study felt some students lacked direction and independence and adopted an air of helplessness whilst expecting supervisors to drive their work (Malfroy, 2005). Other challenges can arise as a result of interpersonal difficulties. Like any close relationship, shared understandings about expectations, type and timing of communications, respect and honesty need to be explicated. As Thompson and Kirkman (2005) note, the discussions required to set the ground rules and parameters for how this relationship will actually 'work' over the next few years need to be discussed and explicated from day one of the candidature. It is almost a recipe for disaster to enter the relationship hoping that somehow this will all take care of itself. This is a relationship where the investment for both the student and supervisor is high (Fridlund, 2005). For the student, this will almost certainly be their one chance at attempting to gain a PhD – very few have the financial or personal resources required to have two bites at this particular cherry. For the supervisor, they are commencing a period of several years of meetings, listening, reading, revising, supporting, guiding, encouraging and counselling. The other demands on their time and the performance expectations under which they work are already too extensive for these years to fail to deliver a 'successful' outcome.

This is also a relationship where there is a differential in power influence (Deuchar, 2008;

Mitchell & Carroll, 2008). It is a more honest and realistic approach to acknowledge this openly rather than simply attempting to dissolve this power imbalance by announcing that we are 'student-centered' or 'co-learners'. It is however, beholden upon the supervisor, as teacher, to model exemplary interpersonal skills in how this power differential will be negotiated and managed throughout the duration of the candidature. It is here that one of the most essential components of an effective supervisor can be acknowledged. An effective supervisor has nurtured a relationship that facilitates their capacity to confidently differentiate between the times when the student genuinely needs interpersonal or scholarly support versus the procrastination periods. It is not only accurate identification of the student's needs that is so important, it is the supervisor's capacity to act on these insights and relay their understandings to the student in a professional and supportive manner.

Difficulties can also arise as a result of naivety and inexperience on the part of both supervisor and student (Mitchell & Carroll, 2008). Though many universities have processes in place to try to ensure potential supervisors have a base set of skills (Park, 2005), it is still possible that doctorally qualified nurses may be pressured to take supervisory responsibilities without adequate support. Many of those who come to doctoral studies in nursing already hold senior positions in clinical nursing, health management and education. However, despite seniority in the workplace, they may be 'new and sometimes naïve doctoral researchers' (Mitchell & Carroll, 2008, p. 219).

It has been noted in the literature that the 'vulnerability senior workers experience when they present their work for critical review in an academic forum places them in a very different position to the authority and leadership they occupy in their workplace' (Malfroy, 2005, p. 169; similarly Holligan, 2005). Entering this relationship, where critique will form a central plank, requires maturity to understand and appreciate critique and not take it personally or lapse into a default position of 'yes but' defensiveness. The supervisor

has a concomitant obligation to critique in ways that are clear, helpful, and never personally disparaging or derogatory.

POINTS TO CONSIDER WHEN CONTEMPLATING A POTENTIAL DOCTORAL SUPERVISOR

Effective supervision is central to successful completion of a research higher degree (Park, 2005), making the match between supervisor and student a crucial decision. However, the choice of supervisor is often limited by the resources of the selected educational institution. There are many reasons for this including availability of suitable doctorally prepared and experienced staff, funding, limited areas of expertise or geographical location. Despite this, there is much wisdom in undertaking a mutually beneficial, honest appraisal of the fit between the supervisor and the individual student (Park, 2005).

To enable the student's development, the supervisor must bring a particular expertise to the relationship (Fridlund, 2005). This could be related to issues such as design, content, analysis, method or technological know-how. Whatever the specialist skill, supervisors contribute to the scholarly development of their students in particular ways. When selecting a supervisor, consider the study long term, the question, design and the expert input that will be needed throughout the candidature. The contribution of each supervisor needs to be sustainable. It is not uncommon for components of the doctoral study to evolve, respond and change over the duration of the candidature. An effective supervisor is able to positively shepherd a student through these changes, whilst continuing to contribute expertise and ensure adherence to all relevant policies and requirements (Mitchell & Carroll, 2008).

There may be limited choices regarding selection of supervisors and/or educational institutions as a function of geography or expertise. Consequently it is not uncommon to discover students and supervisors who are staff members in the same institution, and this can create situations where the supervisor simultaneously has a management role associated

with the student's employment. Anderson (2000, p. 197) advises against enrolling in one's place of employment. It creates a potential for a blurring of boundaries that may not be particularly healthy or productive for either party, and students can feel pressured into accepting people with whom they are in a line management, supervisory, or other close professional relationship as doctoral supervisors. The supervisory relationship is an important and unique relationship that should be privileged and protected from the strains and stressors of competing interests and everyday workplace relationships between colleagues at the same institution.

However, where a decision is made to enroll in one's place of employment, care should be taken to select supervisors with whom there are no existing line management relationships. Deuchar (2008) has commented on the complexities inherent in the doctoral supervision relationship, and additional complexities can arise when other relationships impinge. However, if considering entering such a multi-layered relationship, careful consideration of the possible ramifications of conflicting needs and expectations that are inherent in student and managerial relationships is needed. Furthermore it is crucial to reflect on whether it is possible, or likely, that these can be separated out enough to create and sustain an effective supervisory relationship. It is also important to reflect upon issues of power and potential for oppression, particularly when the student is in multiple levels of subordination with a work colleague.

POINTS TO CONSIDER WHEN CONTEMPLATING A POTENTIAL DOCTORAL STUDENT

Whilst considering the fit of supervisors for students, it is also appropriate to consider the fit of students for supervisors. Notwithstanding various supervisory styles that may be favored and practiced by individual supervisors (Deuchar, 2008), options of educational institution and supervisor may be limited. Institutional forces can team supervisors with an interested doctoral student without the opportunity for discussion or choice.

Again, an honest, mutually disclosing discussion of expectations is warranted. The situation should never arise whereby a supervisor suddenly finds out that they have been allocated a new student without consultation, nor should a student be allocated a supervisor in a similarly thoughtless manner.

In our experience, students frequently enroll in doctoral studies bringing only vague notions of the global nature of the demands of the study. There is a deliberate use of the term 'global'; a doctoral study does not begin or end with simply writing a thesis. Undertaking doctoral studies has an impact on all facets of life and often cuts into time usually allocated to other commitments. Family, friends, holidays, new employment opportunities, dinner and a movie, hockey and washing the dog are all affected by the choice to enroll in doctoral studies. The student who completes doctoral work has developed the discipline to make hard choices in the face of social expectations, opportunities and pressures and demonstrates a commitment to the work required. Simply stated, the choice is to spend sustained and intense time engaging with the doctoral work, or not complete it.

Learning to meet the personal demands and expectations that doctoral study entails is essential to satisfactory completion. There is also an imperative that the student acknowledges their responsibilities within the doctoral supervisory relationship. Feedback is essential for growth and change and our assertion that the supervisor ought to provide honest, constructive feedback seems almost self-evident. Equally the student ought to respond appropriately to honest, constructive feedback. A doctoral thesis is the apprenticeship to becoming a researcher and scholar and this requires the honing of new skills, attitudes, knowledge and understandings. Facilitation of a student's capacity to learn these new proficiencies is largely provided by supervisors and their feedback. The successful student accepts, acknowledges, reflects on, (or challenges with data, evidence and argument) such critique and then integrates it into their ongoing revision of the work. This may include such responses as genuinely acknowledging their 'procrastination

periods', agreeing that their reading and thinking may not have been as extensive or focused as it could have been, and understanding how their thought processes and arguments, as articulated in supervision sessions, have not been accurately converted to clear, concise, elegant scholarly writing. Accepting feedback, in conjunction with an ability to candidly audit their own strengths and weaknesses, enables the student to contribute effectively to the supervisor–student relationship.

FEEDBACK, CRITIQUE AND DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS ALONG THE WAY

'Critique' and 'critical' are terms beloved of all academics. They are part of our articles of faith and we imagine that both supervisors and students will buy into the mutual obligations integral to the terms. However, the terms are rarely unpacked or explored for their everyday meaning. We suspect that, if both students and supervisors were open and honest, then notions of critique would be far more complex and emotionally laden than we imagine. The fundamental premise is that we will both appreciate and respond to 'constructive criticism'. This is the received view, and rarely do students or supervisors counter this by saying, 'No, there are times when I do not like to have my work criticised'. This is difficult for the student to openly acknowledge given the power and status differential between themselves and the supervisor, but supervisors will often have picked up such undercurrents during supervision sessions. We will all have worked with students whose explicit or more ostensibly polite response to criticism has been: 'Well, what do you want me to write then?', 'If that's not correct can you please tell me what is?', 'That's the third time that I've revised this', 'That's what Smith and Jones said in their article/book' and many more.

At other times when perhaps the student has been under more pressure or experiencing more frustration than usual, tears will flow during the supervision session. This is always a difficult situation for both parties. How is the supervisor supposed to react to such a moment, given that their refusal to uncritically accept a particular piece of work, line of

thought or argument, or latest revision is seemingly the cause of their student's distress? What kind of person indeed would 'do such a thing' to a student? For the sake of both parties, we can only hope that it is not the kind of person who will crumple in the face of overt distress, apologise to the student for the criticism that they have found so distressing, and tell them that the work will be fine after all and then pass the tissues. This is not a harsh and unfeeling response but an absolutely essential one if the thesis is ever to reach the academic standard necessary to pass and become part of our published research literature. The conversation here has to be one that checks whether this distress is specifically thesis-related or if something else has happened in the student's life that needs to be acknowledged and considered. If it is thesis-related then by all means pass the tissues, take a moment and make a coffee, but then the conversation refocuses on the work, on what the supervisor's concerns are and how the student can continue to understand and respond to these in subsequent revisions.

This highlights one of the other difficult conversations that may (or may not) occur between supervisor and student. These are the 'How many times do we have to have this discussion/How many times do I need to pick up this point/error?' thoughts which may arise when supervisors feel that they have covered the same point or issue numerous times, in both discussions and in written feedback on writing drafts, but that somehow the student is either genuinely not 'getting' or purposely choosing not to 'get'.

Students are by no means the only ones who can be precious or defensive when it comes to critique. It takes a supervisor with a strong sense of self and confidence in their own work to create the supervisory climate where a student can feel safe enough to respond to comments and critiques with their own arguments in defense of their ideas. Less experienced or secure supervisors will often convey, either explicitly or unintentionally, the message to the student that says, 'Who do you think you are, criticizing me or questioning my ideas?'

One of us (Philip Darbyshire) had a PhD principal supervisor who came from a research background in nursing theory and behavioural psychology. For a student doing interpretive phenomenology, this could have been a fraught relationship, but the openness and scholarly integrity of this supervisor was such that their supervision was absolutely challenging and supportive. Their approach was: 'I am not a phenomenologist or expert in this area, so your job as a student is to research, think and write so clearly and cogently that I and other readers will understand what you are doing and why, and that this writing will meet the required standards of a PhD thesis and subsequent publications'. You cannot ask for more of a supervisor than this. Supervisors do not have to agree with all developing ideas, philosophies or theoretical leanings. They are not cheerleaders or 'best friends' who will always tell students what they want to hear. Their job is to ensure that work is explicated and argued in ways that show clarity, coherence and high-level scholarship within a carefully constructed and presented thesis that fulfills the requirements of the institution. A supervisor should be a student's toughest critic and a constant source of challenge and provocation, urging towards improving the thesis. If they fail in this role, they can be sure that external examiners will not.

Feedback is a two way street. Supervisors should also actively seek feedback. There is no 'one size fits all' in higher degree supervision – as Holligan (2005, p. 270) points out: 'It cannot be assumed that one's own research habits can be fruitfully deployed to guide others; indeed they may disorientate and confuse'. The ability to provide meaningful feedback to a student, in a manner cognizant with the individual, cannot be stressed too highly. The supervisor–student relationship involves individuals with varying capacities to give and receive constructive feedback. An effective supervisor is able to engage in honest conversation with the student about all aspects of their candidature including progression, writing, communication, professionalism and responsibilities associated with the conduct of the research.

EXTERNAL FORCES THAT CAN INFLUENCE THE SUPERVISORY RELATIONSHIP

Political and economic constraints mean that today's doctoral students are subject to increased levels of institutional surveillance and performativity management (Deuchar, 2008; Jackson, 2008). There is no longer the rather laid-back climate which allowed students to ponder and take what might be called interesting side roads on this metaphorical journey. The PhD journey is one with a definite starting point at 'A' and a strong expectation that the student will work towards and reach outcome and finishing point 'B' as quickly as possible. Students will be called upon to regularly demonstrate some form of evidence of successful progression (Holligan, 2005), where success will be deemed to be the achievement of various thesis milestones, such as ethics approval granted, data collection completed and various chapters written. This scrutiny also has its effects on doctoral supervisors who are under pressure to ensure satisfactory progression and timely completion (Deuchar, 2008).

Holligan (2005) suggests that the imperative to complete students within given and prescribed timeframes can create difficulties for supervisors, who may feel bound (or even coerced) into providing excessive direction to students to secure timely completion. There seems little doubt that within today's effectiveness and efficiency climate, the good supervisor will be the one who can 'throughput' their students in a manner that does not incur any negative financial impact to the university through late or non-completion (Deuchar, 2008). In addition, this culture of performativity can result in students having an expectation of excessive supervisory input (Deuchar, 2008; Malfroy, 2005), potentially diminishing development of their own intellectual autonomy and contributing to what has been termed a 'discourse of derision' (Holligan, 2005, p. 268) in relation to assumed supervisory inadequacy. We would suggest that if a PhD student feels that they need weekly meetings with a supervisor, then perhaps they are not yet ready for doctoral level study.

There is a further difficult conversation highlighted within the current climate but rarely

openly discussed. In an era when 'equity' and 'access' are almost unwritten commandments within higher education that must never be questioned (Deuchar, 2008), it may be assumed that a PhD is more of an entitlement or a 'human right' than an achievement. In nursing, we have succeeded in creating much more coherent and simplified pathways of academic and professional progression from initial graduation through to post-graduate study and beyond. Are we however prepared to say that every student who achieves an Honours or Masters degree is capable of continuing to achieve a PhD? We suggest that this may not be the case, but also that this does not mean that these nurses are somehow 'failures' or 'underachievers'. For a PhD degree to mean anything it must surely mean that it is at the highest level of academic achievement, not achieved by everyone, or even by most people.

Perhaps one of the most difficult conversations to have (or even to acknowledge) is with the student who is not managing and who, despite the supervisors' best efforts, is really not making the required progress to doctoral level thinking and writing. Timing seems to be an important, if problematic, concern here. It would seem unreasonably harsh to even consider 'terminating' a student's candidature in year 1 due to lack of progress. We suspect that most of us spend the first year of a PhD basically finding our feet in doctoral level study and most would surely recognize that the difference between our thinking and scholarship in year 1 and year 3 or 4 was considerable. If gnawing concerns about a student's ability to research, think and write at doctoral level continue into year 2 then this is more of a concern, but again, in the vast majority of cases, supervisors will wish to give the student the benefit of the doubt and perhaps intensify their supervisory efforts in an attempt to improve the situation. If these concerns continue into year 3, supervisors face a real problem. Can we ever suggest at this late stage in the process that a student should not be allowed to continue? Is it not too late in the process to halt now? Would the student who failed to see that their work was not up to PhD standard simply

argue (and possibly appeal) that, 'You have let me continue this far without asking me to give up, so why should I give up now?' And of course, how would the supervisor be viewed by their institution if they had a student fail to complete in this way?

We can only speculate that the supervisor's ability may be questioned and that their reputation may suffer, rather than their being congratulated for taking a tough decision that ultimately protects the academic standard of the PhD degree itself. We wonder how many supervisors have found themselves in such a situation but rather than have such a difficult conversation, they simply increase the level and possibly the detail of support, feedback and advice that they give the student in order to get them over the line. The question then that will never be raised is 'Whose work is this thesis?' Indeed, questions have been raised in the literature about how much help is legitimate to provide to students (Mitchell & Carroll, 2008). Of course all students and supervisors appreciate that a successful PhD thesis is never a wholly individual achievement. However, rarely does supervision literature discuss when the degree of supervisory support and advice becomes a question of whether the thesis is the student's own work within the terms of the PhD regulations. If this is simply the pragmatic cost of enabling some struggling students to complete, it is perhaps too high a price to pay.

CONTINUING BEYOND THE DOCTORAL YEARS

After successful completion of a PhD, there is a presumption that the journey is over. However, for many PhD graduates, particularly those who intend to embark on academic careers, it has only just begun. Anderson (2000, p. 199) has commented that 'a benchmark of quality is the extent to which a program prepares its graduates to succeed in an academic/research career'. However in the current climate, without adequate mentoring, and without a framework of available post-doctoral research opportunities, the early career post-doctoral nurse researcher can be left floundering and directionless.

In order to develop a research track record, early career researchers can benefit immensely from continued nurturing, guidance and mentoring as afforded to them throughout their PhD. Negotiating new projects, grant applications, political environments, teaching and general workloads can be daunting to any academic. To foster the growth and development of early career researchers, opportunities to work in a safe and supported environment as part of a research team can be very useful (Jackson, 2008). The trust and rapport that exists within a functional student-supervisory relationship provides the ultimate foundation for future and successful working partnerships. By the end of the candidature, supervisors have gained personal knowledge into the capabilities, strengths and weaknesses of their students so are well positioned to guide the future development of their doctoral graduates.

However, the power differential in the student-supervisory relationship has the potential to foster dependence and allow exploitation. In order to avoid this, it is important to work together to establish independence. Therefore, integral to a successful post-doctoral relationship, in terms of on-going mentorship, is primarily commitment by the graduate to the growth and development of their own research careers. Furthermore when continuing the relationship beyond completion of the doctoral degree, supervisors need to act with integrity to ensure transparency in their motivation to foster an ongoing collegial relationship and ensure that graduates are availed of opportunities to take on leadership roles.

CONCLUSION

As increasing numbers of nurses seek to engage in doctoral training, there will be a concomitant increase in the need for effective supervision. Effective student-supervisory relationships have the potential to generate enhanced research outcomes. Furthermore, supervisors are role models for their students and effective supervisory methods are often duplicated by students. Relationships that nurture and support students, through and

beyond the PhD journey, are invaluable for both individual students and for future generations of higher degree research students in nursing.

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