INTERPRETATIONS OF BEST PRACTICE IN CULTURALLY-SENSITIVE TEACHING: INSIGHTS FROM AWARD-WINNERS

1. INTRODUCTION

How do some of Aotearoa New Zealand’s best educators undertake culturally sensitive higher education teaching? This was the vital question that we aimed to answer through this research. In this poster, we present the results of our study examining interpretations of best practice in culturally sensitive higher education teaching. The study draws upon an analysis of descriptions of best practice by Aotearoa New Zealand tertiary educators who have received the Tertiary Teaching Excellence Awards. These accolades are widely regarded as Aotearoa New Zealand’s peak rewards for recognising and encouraging excellence in tertiary education.

2. BACKGROUND

The study is timely given the growing interest in quality assurance policies that promote best practice in tertiary teaching in the global arena. It adds to debates about the role of tertiary teaching rewards specifically (see, for example, Shephard et. al., 2011; Fitzpatrick & Moore, 2015), and professional teaching recognition more broadly, such as the HEA Fellowship (Thornton, 2014; HEA, 2016). It is timely given the increasing recognition of the value of higher education environment, as well as the growing attention that universities are paying to cultural sensitivity and increased participation by cultural minority groups.

3. METHOD

We used a qualitative interpretative content analysis to uncover the elements of culturally sensitive best practice of award-winning tertiary teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand. The method drew on Ochberg’s (2002) approach to researching personal narratives, which can capture the inherent interconnectedness between individuals’ lived experiences and wider socio-cultural discourses. By ‘paying attention’ to these threads, this form of qualitative research can become a powerful tool for repositioning, resistance and agency. Ochberg’s approach is particularly appropriate for analysing teachers’ narratives due to the centrality of their personal motivations and experiences in teaching and learning. The analysis was performed on 58 case studies (of award-winning teachers from the past five years: that is, from 2013 to 2017). The case studies – described in bio-profiles about each award-winner – were published on the Tertiary Teaching Excellence Awards pages (www.akoaotearoa.ac.nz/awards) of the website of Ako Aotearoa (the national teaching and learning organisation). Examining Aotearoa New Zealand’s award-winning teachers was appropriate, given the fact that the country’s higher education sector has one of the highest proportions of international staff in the world (Sutherland, 2018).

4. FINDINGS

We identified six overarching themes in our analysis. That is, we clustered together specific culturally sensitive approaches into the broad themes. We wish to emphasise that we found that all of the award-winning educators have shown implicit cultural sensitivity in their teaching; however, in this study, we looked for explicit culturally sensitive approaches. The findings below present these explicit approaches.

- **Educators use a broadly culturally inclusive pedagogy that is sensitive towards diverse cultural groups**

- **Educators have incorporated Māori values and practices into their teaching**

- **Educators have incorporated various Pacific cultures’ values and practices into their teaching**

- **Educators have undertaken significant intra-cultural institutional initiatives or projects**

- **Educators have demonstrated specific concern in their teaching for particular ethnic groups**

5. DISCUSSION

A range of insights emerges from the findings. One is the clear ethos of social justice that underpins award-winning educators’ practices across the six themes. Another is the extension of Māori-sensitive teaching, in different forms, by award-winning educators. That said, it is disappointing to see a much lower (explicit) amount of concern for the needs of various Pacific learners. Also, we noticed that much cultural information on the Ako website ‘went without saying’ (James & Biesta, 2007), such as the significance of teachers’ own cultural contexts. Many of the teachers’ profiles included explicit Māori language; however, the relevance of these words to the practical aspects of pedagogical practice (and observations or reflections of it) were often ambiguous.

6. CONCLUSION

Although the study provides a solid first effort at interrogating award-winning teachers’ culturally sensitive practices, its limitations are clear. Our data consisted of only the publicly-available information from 58 award-winning teachers. Other qualitative (and quantitative) types of analysis of this data would be valuable in future analyses. It would be unfair to reach any definitive conclusions based on this restricted analysis. However, this research has uncovered some potentially rich areas for deeper explorations: interpretations of best practice in culturally sensitive higher education teaching are perhaps not as diverse as we would expect. In the increasingly competitive global higher education marketplace, it would appear from this initial study that interpretations of ‘best practice’ in higher education teaching in Aotearoa New Zealand remain within fairly predictable, ‘mainstream’ educational theoretical attitudes, with a heavy emphasis on Māori-focused practices. Perhaps a creative approach to interpretations (and definitions) of ‘best practice’ might encourage more teachers to embark on valuable reflective journeys of their teaching practice.

BIBLIOGRAPHY