

The Master's Dissertation Journey: Experiences of a Group of Part Time Students at One University Campus in South Africa

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ABSTRACT The postgraduate journey is often a lonely, difficult, frustrating and stressful experience for many part time students, more so for those who lack a strong foundation in research and academic writing skills. Consequently, many students tend to fall by the wayside or fail to complete the dissertation on time. A narrative inquiry was used to explore the experiences of a cohort of six 'pipeline' students enrolled for a Master's degree in Educational Management. The study sought to uncover factors which may have contributed to their 'pipeline status' and their subsequent slow progress once they had embarked on the dissertation. Qualitative data were collected over a period of three years through the students' personal written narratives, verbal reports and text messages, as well as a journal kept by the researcher. Factors which contributed to slow progress in the dissertation journey were mainly academic, personal, administrative, job-related, and financial. However, the journeys culminated in feelings of appreciation and a sense of academic and intellectual achievement. Institutions should provide supportive academic, financial and administrative structures to minimize the incidence of 'pipeline students'.

INTRODUCTION

The postgraduate journey is often a lonely, difficult, frustrating and stressful experience for many part time students. Consequently, many students tend to either 'fall by the wayside' or fail to complete the dissertation on time. The researcher considers the master's dissertation an important first step in a student's 'initiation' into 'research adulthood' or better still, into a 'community of practice' (Wenger 1998) or a 'Discourse community' (Gee 1996). It is at the Master's level of academic study and scholarly research that many students develop their identity as researchers. For many, this is the stage that determines the fate of their academic career – that is, whether it will 'take off' or 'fade' into obscurity. For this reason, it is crucial for master's students to be well-mentored and carefully guided through the difficult terrain of the dissertation.

Students often encounter numerous challenges which delay or sometimes derail their efforts completely. From what the researcher has gathered from students she has guided through

the master's dissertation in the last few years, the dissertation journey seems to be a frightening prospect and conducting a research study appears to be a mammoth task. For some students research is a 'foreign' process shrouded in mystery. The journey is complicated by inadequately developed academic language proficiency, particularly academic writing. Generally, students register and complete their taught modules, but the real struggle begins when they commence their dissertation journey. Chapman (2012: 80) asks a pertinent question in this regard, "What do we make of the fact that even our brightest students and those who have passed the Master's coursework modules with excellent marks find the dissertation a difficult, sometimes even a daunting, experience?" Another question can be asked: What exactly is the master's dissertation?

For the purpose of this study, a master's dissertation is a research study of limited scope on a relevant subject in a particular field/ discipline – in this case, Educational Management. The mini-dissertation can be anything between 80-100 pages and the full dissertation between 120-150 pages. At the time this study was carried out, the curriculum for an Education Master's degree at the university campus (which is the site of this study), consisted of either the writing of a dissertation or the writing of a mini-dissertation combined with taught modules.

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Taught modules must be completed within the first year of study. It is the writing of the dissertation which is a hurdle for many postgraduate master's students. In many instances, students experience difficulties with English in general and academic writing, in particular — a problem noted by many researchers (Chapman 2013; Grant 2013; Layton, 2013; Erwee et al. 2011; Butler 2009; Taylor and Beasley 2005). This is one of the hurdles that is most likely to delay students who have low English proficiency.

Until recently, the Faculty of Education (now renamed Faculty of Education and Training) did not strictly enforce the rule of completing the dissertation within the stipulated period of time, chiefly because the institution did not have a system which automatically barred students from registering once they had exceeded the allowable minimum of two years or maximum of three years. This had the effect of 'clogging' the system with students who had registered but were not active, hence the term 'pipeline' students. When the university realized the seriousness of the negative effects of this pipeline phenomenon, steps were taken to 'clear' the pipeline. As a result, scores of students in the Faculty of Education who had completed their taught modules but not their dissertation, were served with letters of termination. After appealing to the Dean of the Faculty, some of the students managed to re-register and continue. All of these students were professionals who had registered on a part time basis in the School of Postgraduate studies (now the School of Educational Leadership Development). This paper reports on the experiences of a group of these 'pipeline' students who were enrolled for a master's dissertation in Educational Management.

Problem Statement

Research on the master's dissertation experience is very scant, perhaps because researchers are more interested in the PhD or doctoral degree, and may thus view the master's dissertation only as "a stage in [the student's] academic socialization" (Anderson et al. 2008: 36). Master's dissertation students, like doctoral students experience similar challenges in their research journey. Some manage to complete the journey within an acceptable period of time, while others complete the journey after several years or not at all. The problem in this study concerns

those who exceed the acceptable time for the completion of their journey.

Consequently, the study seeks to achieve the following aim.

Aim of the Study

The aim of the study was to examine the experiences of a group of master's dissertation students as well as that of their supervisor. The objective was to uncover factors which might have contributed to the 'pipeline' status of this group of students, and their subsequent slow progress once they had embarked on their dissertation journey. To achieve its aim of reporting on the study, the remainder of this paper is structured as follows: firstly, the context for the study is presented, followed by a conceptual-theoretical framework, then the exposition of the research method that was applied and finally, the recommendations (for students, supervisors and university administration).

Context for the Study

The narrative environment of this study was the Faculty of Education and Training's school of Educational Leadership Development (formerly school of Postgraduate Studies) at one University campus in South Africa. The narrative spans a period of three years, 2009-2011. However, the stories for some of the participants began well before 2009, the year in which the researcher joined the Faculty of Education as a full-time lecturer. She had been assisting the faculty on a part-time basis on and off for several years including 2008.

When she was allocated supervision of the students involved in this study in 2009, two of them had already experienced a long delay in commencing their dissertation journey due to lack of suitable supervisors, after a drastic restructuring process in the faculty had resulted in all the available supervisors leaving the university. Moreover, three of the participants had begun their journey in an era where only quantitative research was taught. Yet, when they finally found a supervisor, the trend in the department of Educational management had moved towards qualitative research. Hence, these students not only had to grapple with research in general, but with an unfamiliar tradition as well. To them, research meant quantitative research,

as this is what they had been accustomed to over the years in the Faculty as a whole.

The researcher, supervisor and narrator of this story (henceforth the researcher) started out with these students at different times and they were all at different levels of academic ability, particularly, research capacity. All, but one of the participants had registered for a mini-dissertation. Two of the female students had completed their research methodology module several years previously and the one who was registered for a full dissertation had no prior experience in research at Honours level. The female students all began their journeys in different months of the same year but all six completed and graduated in April and October of 2012 together with the male students who had begun their journey a year later. In this paper, the participants' names have been changed in order to maintain anonymity. The following pseudonyms are used to identify the participants: Bontle, Bonolo, Matlakala, Tshepo, Tsholofelo and John.

Four of the participants received letters of termination of their studies about a year into the journey because their registration history showed that they had been in the system longer than was acceptable. However, they were allowed to continue when they produced evidence that they were active.

Conceptual – Theoretical Framework

The study was carried out within the constructivist paradigm using the narrative inquiry approach. In the constructivist viewpoint (Corbin and Strauss 2008: 10), “concepts and theories are constructed by researchers out of stories that are constructed by research participants who are trying to make sense out of their experiences and/or lives, both to the researcher and themselves.” Constructionism views reality as the product of social and personal construction (Fouche and Schurink in De Vos et al. 2011: 310), and that there is a narrative truth instead of a real world of truth “out there”. The narrative inquiry is helpful in understanding the actual lived experiences of participants, as the stories reveal truth about human experience (Riessman 2008: 10). Thus, this study is a co-construction of the lived experiences of a novice academic research supervisor and a group of ‘pipeline’ master’s dissertation students. The literature which formed the conceptual framework for this

study is guided by the notions of postgraduate study, supervision and students’ completion rates.

Factors Leading to Non-Completion or Slow Completion of the Master’s and/or Doctoral Degree

Unlike most studies which centre around doctoral research supervision and doctoral success, this study was similar to Anderson et al.’s (2008) study, in that the focus was on students’ perspectives on the master’s dissertation process. It centres on the factors that influence the completion time of masters dissertation students. Studies on the PhD usually focus on: how to achieve doctoral success, the student-supervisor relationship, perspectives/experiences of students and supervisors on the supervision process, experiences of students with the PhD thesis, supervision practice and so forth (Bitzer 2011; Lahenius et al. 2011, Galvin et al. 2009; Kearns et al. 2008; McCormack 2006; Taylor and Beasley 2005; Wisker 2005; Morton and Thornley 2001). However, in general, experiences of postgraduate study are often similar regardless of level, which is why studies reviewed in this paper include those of Master’s and Doctoral students.

Amongst factors leading to non-completion or slow completion of the master’s and/or doctoral degree often cited in various studies are: academic isolation (Bitzer 2011; Mouton 2001); isolation from peers, department, university and supervisor; personal and family-related issues such as illness, divorce and death; workplace issues such as a demanding job; financial problems such as lack of access to or lack of adequate funding for the dissertation (Galvin et al. 2009; McCormack 2006; Taylor and Beasley 2005; Ahern and Manathunga 2004; Mouton 2001); balancing time for the dissertation with family life and work (Anderson et al. 2008); lack of resources such as difficulties in obtaining access to data and conducting the research and lack of access to facilities and events on campus which are restricted to the normal working week and working hours (Galvin et al. 2009; Taylor and Beasley 2005). Taylor and Beasley (2005: 141-165) list other factors that may cause a delay in completion such as: the candidate’s lack of confidence, the absence of role models and multiple competing priorities; different thinking and learn-

ing styles of candidates; different expectations of academic roles; lack of experience of research; verbal and written communication or what Butler (2011: 17) refers to as students' writing ability. Kruger and Bevan-Dye (2013: 879) make an apt assertion that "writing is the means by which the substance of the research is communicated." Indeed, when the writing is obscure, the substance also tends to be obscure.

Manathunga's (2002) study as cited in Ahern and Manathunga (2004: 238), identified four types of behaviour that serve as warning signs that a student's progress is in jeopardy. These are: constantly changing the topic or planned work, avoiding all forms of communication with the supervisor, isolating themselves from the department and from other students and avoiding submitting work for review. These behaviours are common among students who are stuck in the "pipeline" and are unable to progress. Some students are often guilty of procrastination. This behaviour was identified by Ahern and Manathunga (2004: 243) as another factor influencing slow progress with the dissertation. Ahern and Manathunga devised an interesting way to categorise the sources of 'academic procrastination'. They suggested that academic procrastination occurs in the cognitive, emotional/affective and social domains. In the cognitive domain, procrastination occurs as a result of students' inability to admit their lack of skills or knowledge essential for completing the research for fear of not appearing professional (Ahern and Manathunga 2004: 243). Manathunga (in Ahern and Manathunga 2004: 243) indicates that "many students did not want to admit to their supervisors that they did not understand how to do a literature review, start writing or perform other research tasks." (p.243). In the emotional/affective domain students may exhibit a poor sense of self-esteem (or lack of confidence), which can occur because of a personality clash between the supervisor and the student. Ahern and Manathunga (2004: 247) advise supervisors to build confidence in the student and by ensuring that each supervision meeting results in a sense of accomplishment for the student.

In the social domain, Ahern and Manathunga (2004: 249) perceive procrastination as a result of personal relationships and social circumstances as well as inadequate integration of the student into the school's research culture. Procrastination can also be caused by the type of

motivation a student has for pursuing further studies. According to some researchers (in: Ahern and Manathunga 2004: 240), intrinsically motivated students are less likely to procrastinate than those who are extrinsically motivated., ultimately, even with the best of support from the institution and supervisor, it is the "motivation and commitment to degree completion of the student" (Lahenius and Martinsuo 2011: 621) that makes all the difference between completion, non-completion or long time to completion. Poor motivation, procrastination, personal, financial, institutional, work-related, cognitive and other factors are certainly hallmarks of "pipeline students."

With regard to supervision, research studies point to the quality of supervision as one important factor in the success of a doctoral (or master's) study. Bitzer (2011: 435) maintains that although good supervision may be "central to successful doctoral research training, ... it is a process poorly understood." Some of the qualities of good supervision suggested by Wisker (2005) and Taylor and Beasley (2005), include providing adequate and timely support with the research process as well as personal, professional, academic and career support. Although the authors intended this advice for doctoral student research supervisors and their students, it also applies to part time professional master's candidates and their supervisors. Often part time master's dissertation students experience a strong need for personal support particularly when they encounter a difficult personal problem which impacts on their progress.

In response to the questions regarding the level of involvement of a supervisor in a student's personal life and how to deal with a student's personal problem without the supervisor being perceived as interfering, Taylor and Beasley (2005: 122-123) advise that supervisors should "at least reassure candidates that they can speak in confidence to them, to be prepared to listen to any problems with a sympathetic ear, and to be non-judgemental, even if the problem is clearly the candidate's own fault."

With regards to the professional development of the candidate, supervisors can assist by introducing the candidate into the academic community of practice through "networking, giving presentations, publications, teaching and learning, academic careers and the acquisition of generic skills" (Taylor and Beasley 2005: 125; Wisker 2005: 46).

Among the expectations students have of their supervisors is that they should be "friendly, open and supportive with academic issues and establish a consultative, supportive relationship...and be available when needed" (Wisker 2005: 45). In their study on "Dealing with doctoral students", Erwee et al. (2011: 894) found that students sometimes had unrealistic expectations about supervisory support such as 'feedback turnaround within a week' without due consideration for the supervisor's workload and commitments to other students. Supervisors also had to deal with students with low English language proficiency (which is quite common with second language speakers of English even at Master's level). As Erwee et al. (2011: 895) point out, "many students are better at conversational English, but not really good at academic language", so they need guidance and extra help in that regard. Albertyn et al. (in Lessing 2011: 933) make a valid statement that "students at master's level need help in developing arguments logically, in scientific writing, extending vocabulary through feedback, developing reading skills and editing". These are some of the issues that supervisors have to grapple with as they strive to assist students with their dissertations. Some of the methods supervisors in Erwee et al.'s (2011) study reportedly used to assist students with low English proficiency were to model good writing practices. One supervisor "did a thorough edit of a first chapter" in an effort to demonstrate correct use of English so that the student could then learn from this example and get on with the work on her own.

In a study investigating the "Role of the supervisor in the supervisory process", Lessing (2011: 934) concluded that supervisors were unwilling to take responsibility for students' research projects. Yet, in order to improve throughput for master's and doctoral students, supervisors need to take a greater responsibility and accept a mentoring role. In the case of master's students (especially those with a low proficiency in English and weak academic skills) the supervisor has little choice but to take greater responsibility for the student's research project. This may entail adopting a 'directorial' style of supervision for the most part, which is "characterized by supervisors seeing themselves as playing a significant role in organizing and managing the research project, but leaving the candidate to arrange personal support and, where

appropriate, resources" (Taylor and Beasley 2005: 63).

It is against this background that this paper presents findings from a study of 'pipeline' master's degree students who had been served with letters of termination of their studies because of their slow progress with their master's dissertation. It reports on the experiences of this cohort of six part time master's dissertation students.

METHODS

This qualitative study used the personal experience story (Creswell 2007: 5, 2009: 13, 2013: 71) to uncover factors which might have contributed to the 'pipeline status' of the participants and their subsequent slow progress once they had embarked on the dissertation journey. In the portrayal, the participants' experiences are interwoven with those of their supervisor to provide a complete story and a balanced perspective of the phenomenon being investigated. Their stories are 're-storied' into a framework that makes sense (Creswell 2013: 74).

Participants

The six students who participated in this study were a mixed ability group of adult part-time master's dissertation students in Educational Management. There were three females and three males who were solicited to write a story of their master's dissertation journey from beginning to end.

All the participants were educators: three were school teachers, one of whom was a school principal and three were employed at provincial education offices. All were based in the North-West Province of South Africa. Their ages ranged from 35-50 and four of them were married with children. One of the participants was divorced and the other was a widow. The participants had language, writing and research-related abilities of varying levels. With the exception of one participant who had a good academic record, the other participants experienced difficulties of various sorts.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected over a period of three years, which is the period within which the majority of the participants undertook their 'dis-

sertation journey' under the researcher's supervision. The chief data collection method was through personal written narratives, verbal reports and text messages. Throughout the 'journey' the researcher kept a journal in which she recorded discussions after each consultation and noted the academic strengths and weaknesses which surfaced in the students' drafts and during discussions. Spontaneous and voluntary conversations around personal issues were also noted mentally and by means of field notes. The researcher also kept notes of her own feelings and emotions during the journey.

Riessman's (2008: 75) thematic analysis was followed. The main themes were determined by the research question which requested participants to share their experiences of doing their master's degree, particularly the joys, frustrations, challenges and hurdles along the journey; the personal and academic, administrative and supervision experiences. Participants also had to share their feelings now that they had completed their studies. Common and divergent experiences in relation to these themes were illuminated and commented upon. Where relevant, the researcher interwove her own experiences and views with those of the participants on some of the themes. Analysis of the researcher's field notes and journal reflections on observations of the participants' verbal and non-verbal responses, reactions and behaviour in relation to their work was done, all the time searching for key experiences related to the dissertation journey. Verbatim comments on key experiences of each participant's journey are given below. The key themes that emerged were: academic (that is, academic skills and supervision experience), and non-academic (personal, administrative, work-related, and financial issues).

The following section presents an interpretation of the stories of the participants, which have been 're-storied' by the narrator into a 'framework that makes sense' (Creswell 2013: 74).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The aim of the study was to analyse and understand the experiences of a group of master's dissertation students as well as those of their supervisor. The objective was to uncover factors which might have contributed to the 'pipeline' status of this group of students, and their subsequent slow progress once they had embarked on their dissertation journey. The pre-

sentation and discussion of findings from the narratives is thus structured as follows.

The factors that participants commonly experienced as challenges, frustrations and hurdles during their dissertation journey are presented, followed by the supervision experience (which is presented from the perspectives of participants and supervisor), and finally, feelings at completion of the dissertation journey also presented from the participants' and supervisor's perspectives.

The narratives reveal several factors that contributed to the slow progress of the six participants involved in this study. Although each participant's journey is unique, there are several common experiences. For instance, all the participants had a similar experience regarding administrative issues, particularly allocation of supervisor. For three of the participants the problem emanated from internal issues within the faculty, which resulted in substantial loss of time-to-completion for the students. For the rest of the participants, the tumultuous period no longer existed when they registered. For them the problem was merely a delay in allocation of supervisor and the students' personal and academic problems which caused their slow progress.

Challenges, Frustrations and Hurdles

The dissertation journeys of the six participants were mainly characterized by academic, personal, administrative, job-related and financial challenges.

Academic Challenges

The main academic issues were related to inadequately developed academic language, writing and research skills as well as low language proficiency. This is consistent with Erwee et al.'s (2011) findings where supervisors had to deal with students of low English proficiency. In most instances in South Africa, these are students for whom English is a third or fourth language.

Similarly, Butler's (2007) study at the University of Pretoria revealed that postgraduate students who are "additional language users" had writing difficulties (in Butler 2009: 291). Their supervisors admitted that "postgraduate students' academic literacy levels range[d] from average to poor" (Butler 2009: 296). The majori-

ty of supervisors in another study by Butler (2011: 17) felt that academic writing was key to "successful completion of postgraduate studies." Yet, as Grant (2013: 1253) observes, the majority of "education professionals enter the academy with 'everyday discourses' as well as 'professional discourses' [which are not the type required for postgraduate study]."

Very often, students enroll for postgraduate study without realizing the demands of this level of study in terms of academic rigour. For instance, at master's level students are expected to "write and argue scientifically" (Chapman 2013; Grant 2013; Layton 2013; Mouton 2001); to use academic discourse and register instead of conversational English (Layton 2013; Kruger and Bevan-Dye 2013; Erwee et al. 2011); to employ higher order language skills (Chapman 2012) and to think [and read] critically (Huang 2007). A student (Grant 2013: 1253), needs to have the skills of "analysis, synthesis, creativity, critique, argument as well as citation and referencing" as these are essential for academic writing success in postgraduate studies.

Lack of awareness and inadequate exposure to postgraduate writing demands caused one participant in the current study (Bonolo) to fail to understand why the work she submitted was always returned with lots of suggestions for language corrections. For a long time, she could not understand why her language (which she was confident was good) was suddenly not suitable.

Another academic challenge was in relation to lack of prior experience in conducting a research study. Two of the participants (Bontle and Tshepo) possessed only theoretical knowledge of research and no practical experience at all (see Anderson et al. 2008: 37; Taylor and Beasley 2005). What is interesting is that none of the participants mentioned academic difficulties such as writing or low language proficiency. However, the male participants (John, Tshepo and Tsholofelo) reported having had trouble with particular aspects of the dissertation process, such as the literature review, conducting interviews and transcribing data. But even this admission was only made in the stories they wrote, not during the course of the dissertation journey. None of the students openly admitted to the researcher that they did not understand specific aspects of the research task, consistent with Ahern and Manathunga's (2004) findings

which revealed that many students did not want to admit to their supervisors that they did not understand certain aspects of the research process, 'for fear of not appearing professional' (p. 243).

Personal Challenges

Consistent with findings from studies, the majority (five) of the participants experienced serious personal challenges such as illness, divorce, (Galvin et al. 2009; McCormack 2006; Taylor and Beasley 2005; Ahern and Manathunga 2004; Mouton 2001); theft of laptop and memory stick, computer crash and loss of documents. This challenge however, is not reported in the literature. It appears to be associated with students who might not be technologically savvy. Two of the participants, Bonolo and Tsholofelo, lost time due to procrastination and engagement in 'displacement' activities, or parallel activities to take the mind off the dissertation. Ahern and Manathunga's (2004) study identified what they termed "academic procrastination" as one of the factors influencing slow progress with the dissertation. Mouton (2007: 6) cited 'poor planning and management' as a factor associated with non-completion of postgraduate studies. It is evident, from the amount of time lost by two participants in the study, that they had poor time management skills.

Psychological issues can also be a factor in slowing down a student's progression in postgraduate study. None of the participants, however, explicitly referred to psychological issues as a challenge. As in Galvin et al.'s (2009: 21) findings, participants focused on external barriers and not personal psychology factors. Naturally, people do not readily admit to having a psychological problem. Only those around them would conclude from the person's behaviour that such a problem existed. However, one participant in this study (Matlakala) seemed to suffer from problems of a psychological nature, judging from her behaviour and her reference to wanting to kill herself. This may have been due to the stress associated with deep-level study such as required by the dissertation and thesis.

Administrative Challenges

The main administrative challenge reported by all the participants related to the allocation of

supervisors. For three of the participants—John, Bonolo and Matlakala — internal problems in the faculty of Education resulted in non-allocation of a supervisor and a delay in their progress. The other three participants – Bontle, Tshepo and Tsholofelo — experienced a delay in the allocation of a supervisor, the one during the first year of registration for the master’s dissertation, and the other two upon completion of their first year of taught modules. The participants not only experienced administrative challenges, they had work-related issues to deal with as well.

Job-related Challenges

Bontle, John and Bonolo reported job-related challenges that impacted their dissertation progress. These included temporary joblessness, a demanding job coupled with extensive travelling and an unsympathetic boss who often refused to grant permission to the participant to travel to the university for important consultations. Not surprisingly, job-related factors were also found to affect progression of candidates in a number of other studies such as those of Ahern and Manathunga (2004), McCormack (2006), Galvin et al. (2009) and Taylor and Beasley (2005). Virtually all the students who enroll for the Master of Education in Educational management at the university under study are employed professionals who study part-time. This, together with other roles they perform at work and at home, adds to the challenges which delay their progress. It is therefore not uncommon for such students to take longer than two or three years to complete their studies.

Financial Challenges

Financial challenges are arguably the most hard-hitting for a student pursuing postgraduate study. This is cited in just about every study dealing with completion and non-completion of the doctoral or dissertation journey (Ahern and Manathunga 2004; McCormack 2006; Galvin et al. 2009; Taylor and Beasley 2005). The situation was no different for Bontle, Bonolo and John who reported having had financial problems during their dissertation journey, one due to loss of income during a lay-off of temporary teachers, the other due to an unfulfilled promise of a study bursary and the third due to travelling expenses and expensive study materials.

Supervision Experience

The supervision experience for each of the participants started out with a delay in the allocation of a supervisor, but once that hurdle had been overcome, the dissertation experience began. The experience was initially challenging as most of the participants were trying to adjust to the demands of the task as well as the expectations of the supervisor. At first, they found it difficult to understand the research process and resented the amount of drafting and redrafting they had to do – quite the opposite of Anderson et al.’s (2008: 44, 47) finding that the participants “did not resist...grappling with the conventions of academic writing or to meeting the standards required”. Instead they appreciated the efforts taken by the supervisor to assist them with appropriate writing conventions and even viewed this as “a central part of the supervisor’s role” (Anderson et al. 2008: 44).

Gradually, as the participants became accustomed to the supervisor’s style and her writing requirements, they began to appreciate the efforts the supervisor was making to ‘socialise them academically’ or to induct them into the academic ‘discourse community’ (Grant 2013).

Bonolo’s words summarise this sentiment:

Initially I could not at all understand what she (the supervisor) was looking for...I sit down at home BECAUSE I was more confused of what she was looking for, I kept on submitting but she could not be satisfied, to me the professor was too much of a perfectionist, I didn’t understand, but now with what I have now, I could see why was she like that. I’ve grown up and can get into any world of research with the experience I got from her.

Five of the participants explicitly described the supervisor’s style as supportive. Two described the supervisor as having provided motherly advice and guidance. Two portrayed her as patient and kind, and one pointed out that the supervisor was dedicated and hardworking. This texted comment summarises the feelings:

“I just want to thank u for making me proud of what I have achieved. This is only thru yr patience, kind heart. The support u gave me really revealed tht ur a MOTHER who is pruning n leaves a wandafl legacy behind 4 yr student’s beter future. Keep it up nd my the Gud Lord bless u 4 tht. Hav a wandafl day Prof (Bontle)”.

The researcher's experience as a novice supervisor was very challenging. She certainly had to work around the clock because all but one of these students had serious problems with the dissertation. The work was so strenuous that her health was affected. Sometimes she felt like giving up on them, but she pushed herself hard because she wanted to see them through. As indicated by Taylor and Beasley (2005: 63), in certain cases the supervisor has to take a 'directional' style of supervision just to ensure that students are successful. This experience was a real 'learning curve' for the researcher, not only in terms of understanding herself as a person and as an academic, but also as a supervisor. As many supervisors who deal with students from an educational background where explicit teaching of reading and writing and critical thinking skills is not emphasized will attest, supervising such students is a real challenge. However, it is gratifying when the end result is positive. One is left with a feeling of accomplishment and of having made a difference.

It helped the researcher to have a supportive colleague with whom she could discuss issues and 'download' her problems. She also relied heavily on prayer to keep her going whenever she felt her patience running out. Interestingly, the female participants soon realized that the researcher's faith was a central part of her life, and often referred to how faith played a part in their lives too. One of the participants – who was a pastor's wife – understood the role of prayer very well and recounted many incidents related to her dissertation in which she had 'seen the hand of the Lord'. In essence, support for the student and for the supervisor, is crucial in the dissertation and supervisory journey. Magano (2011: 211) makes a valid point when she says that "Support and mentoring are necessary factors at postgraduate level [and that] universities should put in place support structures and make students aware of such structures during orientation sessions"

Feelings at Completion of the Dissertation Journey

Needless to say, there were feelings of relief and joy from all participants including the supervisor. The strongest sentiment expressed by the participants was that of appreciation and confidence in their ability to conduct a research

study. There was a strong sense of having gained intellectually and professionally from the experience. So confident were two of the participants that one felt she could even be a supervisor and the other felt she could handle any dissertation that came her way. This is consistent with the sentiments expressed by Anderson et al.'s (2008) participants. They expressed a strong sense of achievement and personal satisfaction as well as intellectual gains such as learning to read in an analytical way (Anderson 2008: 45).

As for the supervisor in this study, she was relieved and overjoyed when all the participants had successfully completed their dissertations and graduated.

For the participants, a sense of achievement, joy and relief at having completed the dissertation is evident in their words:

"I now regard myself as an academic. Had it not been through your excellent supervision on me, indeed I wouldn't have completed my Master's degree."(Bontle)

"Prof I would love to pass my sincere gratitude to you for what you have done in my journey to my Master's Degree, I am so grateful and very appreciative for all the efforts you took to help me to complete my Master's degree, I felt hopeless and very discouraged in this journey I seriously felt very special when you trusted that I will finish, if it was not you, I would definitely become a drop out. I LEARNED a lot from Prof ..., I can do any dissertation coming along my way, and thank you Prof."(Bonolo)

"I feel fulfilled to have completed this degree taking into consideration a huge number of students who dropped out since we started in 2009. I am very grateful for all the support that I got from Prof..." (Tshepo)

"I have gained valuable insight into research methodology and was blessed with a dedicated hardworking supervisor that greatly assisted me on my research journey."

"I have learned a lot from working with my supervisor. Time management, planning schedules and hard work pays. If it was not for the constant reminder from my supervisor...I could not have completed my studies..." (Tsholofelo)

CONCLUSION

It is apparent from the findings derived from the narratives, that the master's dissertation journey and supervision process have their challenges. The dissertation journey is character-

ized by varying levels and types of personal, academic, financial and administrative challenges. Moreover, student and supervisor expectations are often at odds at the beginning of the journey and the nature of the supervisory process may pose a challenge for the supervisor and supervisee. Sometimes it may be characterized by initial tension and misunderstanding – which can be resolved as the relationship matures and changes. Depending on how it is handled, the dissertation journey and concomitant supervisory experience can be mutually beneficial or mutually destructive for supervisor and supervisee. Compromise, communication and understanding are key to a successful supervisory relationship. It is crucial for students enrolling for postgraduate study to be adequately equipped with basic research and academic writing and language skills. These skills are critical for success at postgraduate level. Lack of proper planning and lack of good time management skills are inimical to success in postgraduate study and often lead to slow progress and late completion. Some students are technologically challenged and consequently tend to lose their work as they do not back it up adequately. Although administrative problems may impact negatively on time-to-completion for students, ultimately, whether a student completes the dissertation on time, progresses slowly or falls by the wayside depends on many factors, the most critical of which is the academic and intellectual preparedness of the student.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the findings, institutions should attempt to provide suitable academic, financial and administrative support structures in order to assist students to negotiate their dissertation journey successfully. Allocation of supervisors should take place immediately upon registration of students and students should be informed about this allocation timeously. Communication between student and supervisor should occur as soon as possible in order to prevent loss of time at the beginning of the dissertation journey. Workshops and seminars should be organized to induct students into the discourse community and community of practice as well as to train them in time management and other critical research and academic writing skills. Supervisor training is recommended especially for inexperienced

supervisors. Special concessions should be made in terms of access to academic support and finance for students who are working, especially those who live far from the university. For instance, the academic development centre could create special time slots over weekends for postgraduate students who need assistance. Part time students often encounter job-related problems where some bosses are reluctant to release employees to meet with their supervisors during the week. Some are engaged in jobs that require extensive travelling, and in both these cases, supervisors could arrange for weekend consultations and/or e-mail and telephone consultations.

Students should be computer literate and endeavour to back up their documents to prevent loss of documents especially at crucial stages of the dissertation journey.

To avoid becoming a ‘pipeline’ student or a ‘dissertation casualty’, students would do well not to underestimate the demands of the dissertation. They should avoid procrastinating once they have registered. They should not hesitate or feel embarrassed to seek help when they encounter academic difficulties or even personal or financial challenges. Although the dissertation is a personal undertaking, students should not feel they are alone. Support from significant others and the supervisor are essential to keep a student going. In this study, support from friends and the supervisor featured strongly in the students’ narratives, therefore students would do well to seek the support of friends, spouses, and colleagues during their dissertation journey. Communication must be two-way for both supervisor and supervisee to maintain a good supervisory relationship. Most importantly, students ought not to feel embarrassed to discuss cognitive problems or problems associated with their lack of knowledge or skills necessary for successful completion of the dissertation.

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