

**EXPLORING STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF  
PRODUCING A MASTERS DISSERTATION**

**By**

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## DECLARATION

I, Mildred Nomkhosi Nzimande do hereby declare that this dissertation which is submitted to the University of KwaZulu-Natal for the Master of Education degree has not been previously submitted by me to any other university; and all sources that were used and/or quoted have been duly indicated and referenced accordingly.

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Mildred Nomkhosi Nzimande  
Researcher

As the candidate's Supervisor I agree/do not agree to the submission of this dissertation.

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Prof. Reshma Sookrajh

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## **List of Abbreviations**

- AC - Abstract Conceptualisation
- AE - Active Experimentation
- CE - Concrete Experience
- CHE - Council for Higher Education
- ELT - Experiential Learning Theory
- FET - Further Education and Training
- FEU - Further Education Unit
- HEI - Higher Education Institution
- HEQC - Higher Education Quality Committee
- KMA - Knowledge Management Approach
- KZN DOE - KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education
- LSI - Learning Style Inventory
- MEd - Master of Education
- PPER - Project for Postgraduate Education Research
- PRO - Personal Responsibility Orientation
- RO - Reflective Observation
- RSQ - Reflective Supervisory Questionnaire
- SDL - Self-Direction in Learning
- UKZN - University of KwaZulu-Natal



## Abstract

A substantial number of research articles have been published on postgraduate (doctoral and masters) studies, locally and internationally. Whilst most of these articles address issues of research supervision, some are seen to be concerned with issues of postgraduate retention and throughput as aspects of focus and debate on Higher Education Institutions.

This research study was conducted with the aim of analysing students' experiences of researching for a masters dissertation. Seven masters students from the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa participated in this study. Using a qualitative case study approach within the interpretive paradigm, the researcher sought to answer the two critical questions: *1) what are students' experiences of producing a masters dissertation? 2) How are masters students supported through the process of research?*

The theory of experiential learning was used as a framework for this study. This theoretical framework assumes that people learn new knowledge by consciously reflecting upon their existing and newly constructed knowledge. The literature reviewed as the point of departure for this study was based on two major issues, namely: students' issues as well as supervision issues since these are the areas that have been widely researched concerning postgraduates.

Issues of trustworthiness and credibility were taken care of and are explained in chapter 3, as well as ethical considerations for the participants.

Based on the collected data, eight themes were created and data analysed accordingly. From the analysed data four major insights emerged relating to individuality of research; self-direction in learning; students' previous experience; and challenges of research. The findings suggest that research supervision is the major contributory factor to the students' progress with their research. Therefore, greater efforts on the supervisors part in terms of creating an enabling environment for students to successfully conduct or complete their research studies seems to be a necessity. Hence, one of this study's recommendations is that the institution or the specialization should consider introducing group supervision to minimize the privatized nature of supervision. A proper working

plan needs to be in place to ensure that postgraduates are adequately supervised in the manner that will encourage them into becoming successful researchers.

# CHAPTER 1

## *Introduction, Context and Overview*

### **1.1 Introduction**

This chapter introduces the study by explaining its context/background, purpose and objective. The rationale further explicates the reasons why this study was needed and how the findings will inform or contribute to the research community. The critical questions that drive this study are also explained. Finally, this chapter expands on the overview of the whole study by indicating what will be discussed in the forthcoming chapters.

### **1.2 Background of the Study**

This is a study of masters students' understanding and experiences of researching for a dissertation, which is known to be a form of gatekeeping for students in passing or graduating for their degrees. Retention and throughput studies in Higher Education Institutions (HEI) by various scholars (Yorke & Longden 2004; Koen 2007; [CHE] Council for Higher Education<sup>1</sup> 2010) indicate similar or closely related issues such as writing difficulties experienced by students due to their isolation during the dissertation writing process are evident in institutions either nationally or internationally. These common issues that have been identified and cannot be claimed to be contextual, include among other things admission policies, in/availability of resources as well as funding/financial support. This is affirmed by Yorke (1999) who advocate for these items to highly contribute to the problems of retention. Likewise Rudd in Koen (2007) concurs with Yorke's ideas and also adds inadequate supervision to the "list of usual victim items" (p.17). These issues are regarded as contributing to the problems of student (undergraduate and postgraduate alike) retention and success. Statistical evidence from the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) graduation report (2011)

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<sup>1</sup> CHE – is an independent body formed as per the Higher Education Act, No. 101 of 1997. It is responsible for quality assurance and promotion through the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) as well as advising the Minister of Education on all issues pertaining to higher education.

reveals that the overall number of students who graduated in April 2011 decreased by 7%. Although a slight increase of 0.7% was identified in the masters and doctoral candidates (students) who graduated as compared to 2010, this can be argued to be as a result of those postgraduate students who might have failed to complete their research on time and therefore could not graduate on time. The argument that I am presenting here is that there seems to be a decline in the postgraduate students (particularly masters) who complete their studies on stipulated time. This observation concurs with the statement of the CHE (2009) that one cannot conclude much from graduation rates since they do not “take account of the time lag from enrolment to graduation and the different durations of qualifications” (p.15). Accordingly, the CHE (2010) reports that South African institutions have been seen in the last decade to be having difficulty in trying to maintain the required targets of student success or throughput particularly on the completion of the masters dissertations. This is said to have influenced the shift from the ‘masters by thesis’ only, to a more manageable ‘mini dissertation’ which is part of a structured masters programme, which is commonly known as ‘coursework masters.’

### **1.3 Focus and Purpose of the Study**

This study focuses on the Master of Education (MEd) by coursework and dissertation. The Faculty of Education’s rule is that students who undertake their masters degree following this route, need at least 240 credit points in order to qualify for the degree. According to the Faculty of Education handbook (2011) these points will be acquired through “sixty (60) credit points in research methodology, sixty (60) credit points in the area of specialization and a one hundred and twenty (120) credit dissertation” (p.76). The 60 credit points from both the research methodology and area of specialization arise from the three modules that students undertake in each respective area. The coursework route of MEd only permits students to register for their dissertations “once they have attained at least 80 credit points from the coursework modules” (Faculty of Education, 2011, p.76).

The focus of this study is largely on understanding the whole notion of researching for a masters dissertation. For the purposes of this study the term ‘dissertation’ is preferred

over the term 'thesis' which is commonly used for the PhD (doctoral) studies and because it is widely and generally used by the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) research community to refer to the masters. This differing terminology is also brought to bear by Hart (2005) in highlighting that these terms are either used interchangeably by some researchers and/or universities. He posits that "most universities in North America call a PhD a dissertation and the masters a thesis while most British universities call the PhD the thesis and the masters the dissertation" (Hart 2005, p.6).

A relevant point to this study arises from anecdotal evidence and informal interviews with some discipline co-ordinators from UKZN, in suggesting that masters students seem to pass their modular component of the masters programme but they usually struggle to complete their dissertations. This idea is also affirmed by the CHE (2009) report in highlighting a decline in both enrolment and graduates since 2005 with a high degree of variation from one year to the other. The questions that can be raised include: what seems to be the problem, considering that these masters students would have already been taught the skills or techniques of conducting a research study in their research modules which form a component of the masters programme? A possibility could be that the theoretical aspect or research may have not been adequately taught, or was not learnt sufficiently to inform the practice. Is there a disparity between research theory and practice?

The report by the CHE (2010) claims that the Master of Education (MEd) research dissertations, particularly in Education and Leadership Management (but also congruent with other MEd mini dissertations) narrowly focus on the student's work context or rather are stuck to the demarcation of disciplines or specializations. This has resulted in them being crowned the "thesis of limited scope" (CHE, 2010, p.25). The argument they are highlighting here is that the dissertations they reviewed were "most frequently case studies of the students' work context, an approach which tended to provide an inadequate grounding in research design, methods and academic writing" (CHE, 2010, p.25). This is an indication that too many limitations cause problems at various points of the research process. Is this limited scope a pitfall for students in their attempt to complete their dissertations? My own experience of formulating the research topic was one of constant changes and refining of the topic in order to meet or fit within the specialization requirements. These changes and refinements can be said to ultimately

alter the original ideas that the students might have had about the research to be undertaken. This is likely to decrease the students' morale and enthusiasm when conducting the actual research and this may have a negative impact on their progress and completion of dissertations.

### **1.3.1 The Rationale for the Study**

The rationale for conducting this study was driven by personal imperatives. Being a master's student myself and anticipating what the process of researching for a dissertation entails, I developed a personal interest in wanting to understand the experiences of those masters' students who are already involved in or have recently undergone the process of research. However, my personal interests were not the only motives for undertaking this research study. Some research on postgraduate studies (Murray 2007; Earley 2007) discusses the students and supervisors' perceptions on writing the PhD (doctoral) thesis. Other research articles focus on research supervision with specific interest in the roles of the parties (supervisor and supervisee/student) concerned, e.g. Lessing & Lessing's (2004) study. This reveals a gap in the literature relating to the masters students' lived experiences in producing dissertations. Therefore this study's endeavour is to contribute to the literature by presenting a case study of a particular group of masters students from one specialisation in the UKZN.

Karlsson, Balfour, Moletsane and Pillay (2009), have undertaken the Project on Postgraduate (doctoral and masters) Education Research (PPER) with the purpose of creating a profile (database) for all the education research that was available in South Africa. The reader's attention should be drawn to the idea that such a study was only interested in the research product (dissertation/thesis) and not in the process that led to the product. At the same time, another study<sup>2</sup> on masters students' experiences has been recently conducted in the same institution (UKZN). However it must be noted that my research study is not a replica of the mentioned study. Chikoko (2010) was interested in the first year, part-time masters students and their overall integration into the university life and their experience of the teaching/lecturing. The difference is that in my study, the

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<sup>2</sup> Chikoko, V. (2010). First year master of education (M.Ed) students' experiences of part-time study: A South African case study. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 24(1), 32-47.

focus is on either full-time or part-time masters students who have already engaged with the process of researching for a dissertation. Researching for a masters dissertation is usually done by students who are in their second year of a masters programme. So, this study's gaze is on the ultimate aim of getting insights and explaining masters' students experiences of being involved in the process of producing a dissertation.

Hence the focus of this study is located in my field of interest (Curriculum Studies) with the aim of wanting to fully understand how research is/was perceived and experienced by those masters students who have gone before me. The findings from this study could contribute to the co-ordinators of the masters programme as well as the supervisors in their planning and allocation of students for supervision. The importance of matching the student and his/her research topic with a compatible supervisor is apparent. The coordinators and/or supervisors may use the findings in this study to critically reflect on their own practice. This critical reflection may lead to them implementing or considering new and effective ways of enabling students to successfully conduct research studies and, hopefully, complete their dissertations timeously. They could also be beneficial to prospective masters students who are likely to approach the research process differently and in a more effective way.

### **1.3.2 Critical Questions**

This research study was based on two critical questions which were used to elicit students' own perceptions and experiences on researching for a dissertation as it is known and understood by them:

1. What are students' experiences of producing a masters dissertation?
2. How are masters students supported in their research processes?

## **1.4 Overview of the Study**

### **Chapter 1**

This chapter gives an elaboration on the background of this study by spelling out its focus and purpose, the objective and the rationale, and by stipulating the critical questions which formed the basis of the study. The discussion of the rationale highlights some of the studies that have been conducted in the same institution but at the same time reveals how this study differs from them, hence strengthening the argument for its necessity. The critical questions that this study seeks to answer are presented. The chapter concludes with an overview of the study, a summary of how the chapters are arranged within this dissertation.

### **Chapter 2**

In this chapter, the theoretical framework underpinning the study is discussed. A detailed account of Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory and its relation to this study is given. Different learning styles are discussed and how they feature in or complement the experiential theory. This discussion is related to the idea that the masters students' understandings and experiences that they may have acquired through their research processes may have been influenced (positively or negatively) by their own styles of learning (intrinsic factors) rather than extrinsic factors in the form of supervision issues. The amount of reading that the students undertook for their research projects together with reflections they had to make throughout the research process can be regarded as intrinsic factors. A comprehensive review of local and international literature is presented to address the issues of students' throughput and supervision issues as well. These two issues come to be at the forefront of the review since most research articles mostly dwell on supervision issues. Various supervision issues are discussed, such as models of supervision (Dysthe 2002); student-supervisor relationship (Rau 2008); and the writing process (Ylijoki 2001). The notion that how masters students perceive and experience supervision might have a direct bearing on the throughput issues merits the elaboration of such issues by this study.



### **Chapter 3**

This chapter discusses the methodology employed in this study. The case study methodology is located within the qualitative approach. The choice of methods used to produce data as well as the sample, issues of validity, data analysis, ethical considerations as well as limitations of this study have been argued for in this chapter. Tables 1, 2 and 3 are used to give detailed background on the participants to enhance better understanding of the findings and their interpretation. Thematic analysis of data is used; this is argued to be the most appropriate method for analyzing data in this study. Various ethical considerations are dealt with and are presented (as appendices) to render the study's credibility.

### **Chapter 4**

The study's findings and analysis of data in relation to Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory is illuminated in this chapter. Thematic analysis is used in arranging corresponding data into categories and themes. The analysis employed in this study has allowed for the participants' voices to be audible through the use of verbatim citations. The variety of experiences that were shared by the participants allow for eight themes to be created in an attempt to present and interpret the findings. Themes such as the understanding of research, reading and writing, clarity of focus, challenges/positives of doing research, participants' lack of co-operation, good/bad supervisor, the nature of supervisory sessions and in/accessibility are abstracted from the data and discussed in relation to the participants' verbatim accounts. Table 5 is used for explicit presentation of the themes and the categories from which they were created or emerged. Several questions as suggested by the interpreted data are raised and they can be said to indicate further possibilities of research.

### **Chapter 5**

This chapter encapsulates the study's findings by bringing to bear the meaning of the data presented. Abstraction of the overall data reveals insights such as the individuality of research, self-direction in learning, students' previous experience and challenges of research. Each of these insights is discussed in detail as to how they came about and how they inform the study. Zhao's (2003) model of knowledge management is discussed as informing the students' ideas of self-directed learning. The Further

Education Unit model, which informs the idea of students' previous experience, is also explored. Concluding remarks and recommendations are also presented in this chapter.

## **1.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has provided the basis or the background for this study of issues of throughput in Higher Education Institutions in general, and in particular the problem of masters students not graduating on time due to the delay with the research component of their masters programme. The focus and purpose of this study have also been discussed. Discussion of the rationale for the study highlights the need for this particular research study. The synopsis of all the chapters and what each chapter entails have also been discussed.

The next chapter will bring to light the theoretical framework as well as various research findings that guide the study.

## Chapter 2

### *Theoretical Framework and Literature Review*

#### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter discusses the background of the chosen theoretical framework, that of experiential learning. Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), together with the different learning styles as argued by various scholars in support of Kolb's theory, are presented as the main theory informing this research study. A justification of how Kolb's ELT relates to this study is also given.

A discussion of various local and international research findings is presented. Local studies such as Koen (2007) and Chikoko (2010), as well as international studies such as Yorke and Longden (2004) and Green and Lee (1995), are used to strengthen the arguments made about the issues that promote or inhibit the research process.

The literature<sup>3</sup> concerning the role of supervision in relation to the writing of dissertations is presented. These scholars highlight such issues as the roles of supervisors and/or students (Lessing & Lessing 2004) in research supervision, models of supervision (Zhao 2003) as well as the dissertation writing process (Murray 2007). Other issues covered in literature are retention and throughput issues and their impact on the students' studies.

#### **2.2 Background to Experiential Learning**

Experiential learning is understood to be a process which involves human cognition (learning and understanding). Due to the usually informal nature of this form of

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<sup>3</sup> Lessing & Lessing (2004); Waghid (2006); Drennan & Clark (2009); Dysthe (2002); Acker, Hill & Black (1994); Zhao (2003); Rau (2008); McAlpine & Norton (2006); Ylijoki (2001); Murray (2007).

learning, it is sometimes referred to as: “self-directed learning, lifelong learning, working knowledge, practical intelligence, and situated learning” (Fenwick, 2000, p.3). This notion of experiential learning takes as an assumption that all learning involves some form of experience and a high degree of reflection upon that experience. One may argue that young and old (adults) have different experiences, hence their differences in learning. Self-directed learning may lead the young and the old to approach the same task differently because of their prior experiences.

Various scholars or theorists<sup>4</sup> are widely known to be advocates of experiential learning and have written extensively on the educational practices of this form of learning. Their differing views can be said to indicate the fluidity and subjective nature of experiential learning. Whilst Schön’s (1983) idea of experiential learning is situated on the improvement of professional practice through critical reflection, Mezirow’s (1991) centres around critical reflection to bring about transformation in one’s “assumptions, premises, criteria and schemata” (p.29) when dealing with problems. Emancipatory education as espoused by Freire (1970) deals with active engagement of learners in their education process whereby they make meaningful contribution toward their learning. There are diverse views concerning the “nature of experience and its relation to learning” (Fenwick, 2000, p.8). Saddington (1998) asserts for experiential educational practices to challenge adult learners to acquire knowledge in the manner that will allow them to be progressive, humane or act radically in various situations.

Experiential learning in adult education emphasises the idea that people (‘learners’) are not passive participants in the learning process (knowledge development/production). In fact, Boud and Walker (1991) maintain that authentic learning can be said to occur only if learners are consciously engaged in the process. This means that the proponents of experiential learning envisage a learner who is independent, reflective and with some commitment to learning. Hence, the idea of ‘reflection’ is seen to correspond with ‘constructivism’ which is known to use an educational approach underpinned by a “learner-centred practice” which is highly likely to help “adult learners to reflect on their experience in order to construct new knowledge” (Fenwick, 2000, p.12). This

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<sup>4</sup> Kolb (1984) – developed a model on experiential learning, Mezirow (1991) – wrote about transformative learning, Freire (1970) – well known for ‘emancipatory education’ through ‘praxis’ and Schön (1983) – an advocate of the ‘reflective practitioner.’

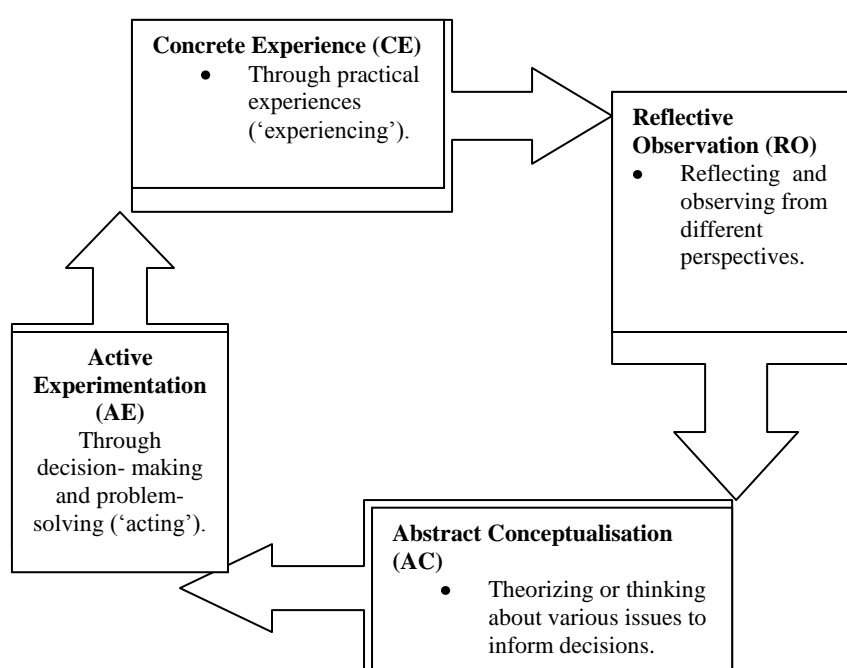
constructivist view of learning assumes that people are continuously constructing meaning knowledge during their interaction with their world. This view emphasizes the importance of socially constructed knowledge which is known to be “recreated in the personal knowledge of the learner” (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p.194). In other words, the learner has to make cognitive adjustments to the newly constructed knowledge until it makes sense.

Based on the constructivist analysis of experiential learning, adult educators (who can be equated to supervisor/s in this study) are known to assume different roles within the teaching and learning discourse. According to Fenwick (2000) the educator can act as a “facilitator” – in this instance the adult educator – to help learners to critically analyse their experiences in order to learn from them. When educators purposefully engage learners ‘experientially,’ they are said to be “instigators” of knowledge construction. Allowing learners to “reflect on their choices in the ‘hot action’ of experience” (Fenwick, 2000, p.17) and hence able to make corrections on the erroneous situations, is said to place the educator in the coaching role. Upon allocation of judgment and/or credit in accordance with the learners’ experiences, the educator is known to be occupying the “assessor’s” role. The claim made by Fenwick (2000) is that these adult educators’ roles form intersections in practice: they are not separate entities.

### **2.3 Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory (ELT)**

Kolb’s theory is derived from the constructive perspective of adult learning. In this theory, Kolb tries to elucidate how people’s concrete (actual) experiences integrate with reflection. According to Kolb (1984), nearly all forms of learning are filled with conflict and tension regarding skills, knowledge and/or attitude that need to be acquired or learned. Therefore, the ELT presumes that there are two ways of knowledge or experience acquisition, namely: ‘Concrete Experience’ (CE) and ‘Abstract Conceptualisation’ (AC). Kolb (1984) posits that learners acquire meaningful experiences if they “involve themselves fully, openly and without bias in new experiences (CE)” (p.30). This can be argued to be a form of ‘direct experience’ or ‘apprehension’ since it is verified by Clark (2004) to be a stage of ‘feeling’ or emotion as opposed to thinking. Atherton (2011) claims that CE involves ‘practical experience’

as opposed to theoretical. At the opposite end from CE is AC, which is known to involve theorizing about issues/experiences. These two ways of knowledge acquisition work hand-in-glove with the two ways of knowledge/experience transformation, namely: Reflective Observation (RO) and Active Experimentation (AE). After having grasped some experiences, learners are expected to be able to reflect on and be able to view them from different angles (RO). In such instances, learners are trying to make sense of the newly acquired experiences. Alternatively, learners are supposed to be able to use various theories in decision-making and problem-solving (AE).



**Figure 1 Illustration of Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory adapted from Kolb (1984, p.21)**

In simple terms this model indicates that the learning process is cyclic. It assumes that after a particular experience (CE), an individual consciously reflects about that experience (RO). The reflections are highly likely to initiate thinking (conceptually) (AC) which is known to influence the individual into actively want to test the ideas in new situations (AE). Testing the ideas in new situations usually results in new experiences being created and cycle starts all over again.

### 2.3.1 Learning Styles

Fenwick (2000) asserts that although adults may be exposed to a variety of life experiences, it cannot be guaranteed that they will all learn from such experiences. This brings to bear the idea of different abilities that are inherent in every learner. These then allow and inform various learning styles in different individuals. According to Kolb, Boyatzis and Mainemelis (1999), an instrument known as the Learning Style Inventory (LSI) was designed to assess the individuals' learning styles. Proponents of this LSI are said to have identified four learning styles which are claimed by Kolb and Kolb (2005) to be linked to "different approaches to learning" (p.196). Various researchers<sup>5</sup> identify the four learning styles to be 'diverging,' 'assimilating,' 'converging' and 'accommodating.' They argue for the individuals who are inclined to these learning styles to be possessing particular abilities which are influential in their learning. For a clear understanding of these learning styles and the individuals' abilities, they are aligned with and are made to fit into Kolb's ELT. However Clark (2004), noticed that the learning styles are actually influenced by one's background and experience. Hence, they can be regarded as 'learning preferences.'

According to Kolb & Kolb (2005), a learner with a 'diverging' style is known to be dominated by Concrete Experience (CE) and Reflective Observation (RO) as his/her learning abilities. Therefore, such a learner is known to function optimally where imagination is required, since s/he is assumed to perform better in "generation of ideas, such as brainstorming session" (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p.196). Moreover, Clark (2004) affirms that a 'diverger' usually shows an interest and understanding in people, hence prefers group to individual work.

The 'assimilator' can be said to have good analytic skills and is characterized by a learner with Abstract Conceptualisation (AC) and Reflective Observation (RO) as dominant abilities. Such a learner is argued by Kolb *et al.* (1999) to be interested in the creation of models and/or theories. Project managers are likely to fall into this category.

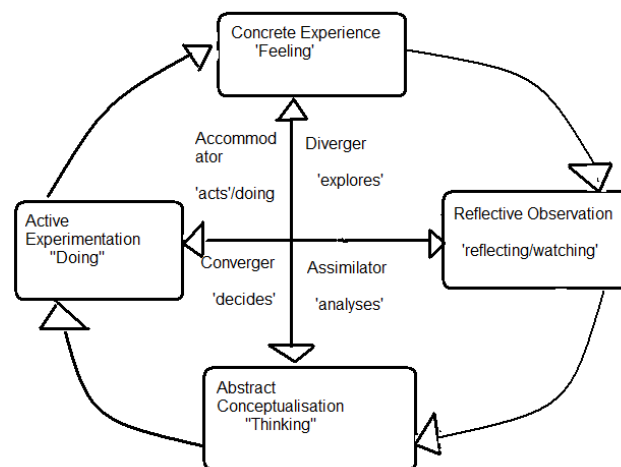
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<sup>5</sup> Svinicki & Dixon (1989); Kolb, Boyatzis and Mainemelis (1999); Clark (2004); Kolb & Kolb (2005) and Atherton (2011).

The learner or person with a ‘converging’ style is said to be constantly involved in deductively making decisions and has a preference for technical tasks. This learner is known to be influenced by Abstract Conceptualization (AC) and Active Experimentation (AE) and is concerned with making ideas workable.

The ‘accommodator’ is argued by Clark (2004) to be well adapted to discovery learning whereby s/he gets things done and is not scared of taking risk. This learner is dominated by Concrete Experience (CE) and Active Experimentation (AE). Kolb and Kolb (2005) state that the ‘accommodator’ relies more heavily “on people for information than on their own technical analysis” (p.197).

The above elucidation of learning styles is best represented diagrammatically in figure two below:



**Figure 2 Kolb's Learning styles adapted from Bergsteiner, Avery & Neumann (2010, p.32).**



## 2.4 How does Kolb's ELT relate to this study?

From the extensive discussion about Kolb's theory of experiential learning, it is evident that various authors<sup>6</sup> seem to agree on the nuances they attach to experiential learning. They view experiential learning as a process of producing knowledge through involvement in different experiences between the person and the world around him/her. This is the premise which informed the choice of this theory to underpin this study. It must be remembered that this study explored the students' experiences of producing a dissertation. This is one implication that the study is concerned with the whole process of research and not just the outcome (dissertation).

Kolb's ELT as discussed earlier deals mainly with adult learning, therefore its fitness for purpose of this study which deals with masters (postgraduates) students who are usually adults (the next chapter sets out the average age of the cohort in this study, which is 41 years. Furthermore, the aim of discussing and integrating the learning styles into this theory was to illuminate the different understandings and construction of various knowledges that might have informed these masters students in their selection of their research topics for their research/dissertation. Having been actively involved in their research projects/studies toward the production of a dissertation and with some form of deliberate reflection or non-deliberate reflection, these masters students can be said to have been involved in experiential learning. These masters students (participants) have already undergone the process of research and thus their involvement in this study may grant them opportunities to reflect consciously on their lived experiences.

The participants in this study can be said to have had various intentions and had used different modes of learning to access information about their different research topics. Moon (2004) maintains that with experiential learning, "there is usually formal intention to learn" and that this form of learning is "empowering" (p.120). It can also be argued that the involvement of the masters students with various people during their data collection processes may have been empowering for them since they were exposed to exclusive knowledge which is only open to a select few.

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<sup>6</sup> Kolb (1984); Moon (2004); Kolb & Kolb (2005)

Understanding concrete experience to be any form of life experience that learners may encounter and not just to be about ‘cognition’ justifies the use of ELT framework for this study. Fenwick (2000) suggests that Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory actually clarifies “how different people learn by integrating their concrete emotional experiences with reflection” (p.13). Therefore, for this study, the students’ concrete experiences are not limited to cognition but to any form of experience that was influential in the students’ research journeys.

## **2.5 The Review of Literature**

This literature review hones in on two different ideas in terms of postgraduate students. These ideas have to do with students’ issues and supervision issues. The student issues to revolve mostly around financial support and the process of coming to know (learn) about research, that is, producing a dissertation. This implies that any individual masters student may be positively or negatively affected by any of these factors during the process of learning to do research and/or dissertation writing.

### **2.5.1 Issues Impacting on Students’ Learning**

The manner in which the masters’ students come to know about the research domain can be said to play a major role in the students’ understanding of how to conduct their own research and is known to have positive or negative contributions to their dissertation writing, thereby contributing to the throughput rate. Koen (2007) identifies factors which he claims ‘victimize’ students’ learning processes, thereby causing further problems with retention and throughput issues. He contends that many full-time employed academics in South Africa tend to either “not know much about research” or are “not sufficiently involved in research and publishing” (Koen, 2007, p.46). These can be seen as the shortcomings which are likely to lead these academics (who may be postgraduate supervisors) to be ineffective at socializing the masters (postgraduate) students into issues of research. Similarly, Chikoko (2010) suggests that “socio-economic background and research and academic quality of the staff at the universities”

(p.36) have been identified as contributory factors to issues of retention and throughput in Higher Education Institutions.

Furthermore, Koen (2007) strongly believes that “resources at institutions impact on student retention” (p.16). Resources in this case can either be human or educational. Human resources are competent lecturers able to teach postgraduates about research and competent supervisors who understand and are willing to professionally guide their research students; educational resources refer to library resources as well as internet resources. How easily accessible are they to postgraduate students who are conducting their search for online publications?

Financial circumstances are regarded by Yorke and Longden (2004) as having the possibility of impeding or facilitating the students’ success with their research studies. Students who receive funding (scholarships) for their studies are known to progress far better than those who are not funded since they do not have to worry about their tuition fees. This is affirmed by Koen (2007) who states that “finances have a crucial role to play in retention and student success” (p.97). Issues of retention in Higher Education Institutions are said to form an international discourse. Longden in Chikoko (2010) posits for financial factors in Britain to be “more salient today than they may be in America” (36).

Green and Lee (1995) argue that learning to research should not be taken as a “matter of ‘coming to know’ .....it is also a matter of ‘coming to be,’ that is, of becoming and being a certain authorized form of research(er) identity” (p.41). This is a strong suggestion that masters’ students do not seem to learn to do research by mere production of knowledge, but they seem to be influenced by the different positions that each individual may occupy in the world at any particular point in time. This can be said to have manifested itself in terms of masters students’ understandings of research before they embarked on their different projects, or at any point during the process of research as well as at the end of their research. It can be argued that this calls for or emphasizes the importance of reflection (consciously or unconsciously) throughout the research process.

### 2.5.2 Supervision Issues

Literature on postgraduate studies gravitate towards supervision issues as experienced mostly by supervisors and very little experiences by postgraduate students, hence the extended review of the models of supervision in this study. The roles of the supervisor and/or the student as well as the inherent powers of supervision are also discussed. The powers are said to be inherent because of the various positions (of authority) occupied by the student and supervisor in the supervisory relationship.

There has been a proliferation of research articles written on postgraduate research supervision,<sup>7</sup> and specifically on the various expectations and/or roles of both the supervisor and the supervisee (student) involved in the research process. Lessing & Lessing (2004) discuss the roles of the supervisor and the student in the postgraduate research process. They believe that students should be allocated supervisors who are knowledgeable about the students' research topics so that they can provide "academic insights to the student about the issues raised in the research" (Lessing & Lessing, 2004, p.76). However, these 'academic insights' should not take away the student's responsibility of "doing the research and the reporting of the study" (Lessing & Lessing, 2004, p.76). This statement is an indication that supervision is a 'two-way street' where both parties are held accountable on different aspects and levels. Waghid (2006) explains how postgraduate supervision can play an important role in authentic learning. He posit for students to learn authentically if and when supervisors create enabling conditions by ensuring that their supervisory sessions are democratic in order to "connect with students' storytelling with the aim to discovering untapped possibilities" (Waghid, 2006, p.434). This can be said to be a move by supervisors to help their masters students in coming to be researchers. Drennan & Clarke (2009) are seen to emphasise the importance of quality supervision as a means of "assisting postgraduate students successfully complete their theses" (p.485). By quality supervision they mean one which is characterized by a supervisor who is flexible, that is, one who is able to give prompt and suitable alternatives should problems arise in terms of the research design.

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<sup>7</sup> (Sayed, Kruss & Badat 1998; Lessing & Lessing 2004; Waghid 2006; Drennan & Clarke 2009)

Some literature on supervision deal with models of supervision which are seen to reveal the range of power relations between the supervisor and the student. Dysthe (2002) discusses three models of supervision which he identifies as: a 'teaching' model, a 'partnership' model and an 'apprenticeship' model. The teaching model is known to be dominated by the imbalance of power between student and supervisor and by the student's dependency on the supervisor during the process of producing the dissertation. This model can be equated to Acker, Hill and Black's (1994) 'technical rationality' model in which the supervisor is directive and managerial in the student-supervisor relationship, whilst the student is a passive recipient. In both these models of supervision, students tend to heavily depend on the 'expert' advice from the supervisor/s.

Dysthe's (2002) 'partnership model' is governed by three characteristics, namely: dialogue, collaboration and independent thinking. Again this model can be compared to Acker, Hill and Black's (1994) 'negotiated order' model, characterized by full participation of both the supervisor and the student in the decision-making about the research process. In these supervision models the supervisor is seen as a facilitator rather than a director of the research process and is also seen as devoted to the student's independency and/or creativity.

The 'apprenticeship model' can be said to highlight the power differences between the supervisor/master and the student/apprentice. In this model, "the supervisor assumes a much clearer authority base that is recognized by both parties" (Dysthe, 2002, p.519). Here, the student is bound to serve and expected to emulate the supervisor's actions, that is, usually when they are involved in the same research project.

What is common in all these models of supervision is that they all seem to indicate that the manner in which students learn to do research and ultimately produce a coherent dissertation is dependent upon the type of relationship that the students have with their supervisor/s.

A 'partnership model' of supervision is also espoused by Greene in Waghid (2006). This model is claimed to enable 'authentic' learning to occur; supervisors and students are continuously involved in discussions which allow students to "reach beyond

themselves, to wonder, to imagine and to pose their own questions” (p.432). Green’s implication is that continuous involvement of students and supervisors in discussions is likely to eradicate students’ fears/uneasiness since they are able to share their ideas with their supervisors who may be able to guide students to new conceptualizations and/or possibilities. These new conceptualizations allow students to further engage in critical thinking, leading to effective writing, enabling students to produce a competent dissertation. This form of supervision can be said to allow the students some kind of freedom in the research process and is also seen as building a friendly relationship between the supervisor and the student.

According to Zhao (2003) research supervision tends to be about knowledge management, that is, how knowledge is produced, shared and used by the people involved. She emphasizes the need for supervisors to create enabling environments where students can learn how to research (acquire and utilize knowledge). She understands the core of research supervision to be about “helping students to critically manage knowledge, identify and exploit existing knowledge and create new knowledge [rather] than the provision of students with academic research skills and a toolbox of research techniques” (Zhao, 2003, p.191). By this she implies that the ultimate purpose of research supervision is the student’s skills in generating knowledge. Hence, she advocates a Knowledge Management Approach (KMA) or model for supervisors who are concerned with fostering quality in their supervisory sessions. This model addresses the inputs and outputs of research, but more so the processes that occur between the two.

Another model of supervision, espoused by Pearson and Kayrooz (2004), is explicitly concerned with the supervisors’ actions (practices). It is known as the Reflective Supervisor Questionnaire (RSQ). This model is said to allow research supervisors to engage in self-reflection and/or critique from others about their supervisory practices. This is affirmed by Nulty, Kiley and Meyers’ (2009) comment that the RSQ model is useful for supervisors in “thinking about, reflecting on and delivering richer and more structured supervisory experiences to students” (p.696). The RSQ model brings to bear the different roles that the supervisor can play in the supervision process, namely: a ‘sponsor,’ ‘coach,’ ‘reflective practitioner,’ ‘mentor’ and a ‘facilitator’. Pearson and

Kayrooz (2004) provide an extensive list of characteristics by which one can recognize the supervisor's role in particular research supervision.

The supervisor is regarded as skillful when s/he appears to be approachable and patient to the students. Such a supervisor is likely to be given high regard by the students just by "being available, and having the ability to supervise a variety of students, and have a range of supervisory approaches" (Pilcher, 2011, p.34) and being able to offer constructive and timely feedback on the students' work/drafts. Ability to dedicate sufficient time and being friendly to students is viewed as essential requirements of a good supervisor. Similarly, Wisker (2005) concurs with Wisker *et al.* (2003)<sup>8</sup> in their view of an 'ideal supervisor' as someone who knows how to introduce the students into the research sphere. Someone who is able to guide students and allow them to develop agency for their respective research studies/projects.

Green and Lee (1995) point to the idealized image of a supervisor with 'panoptic powers' who can be said to be at an elevated level, gazing upon the students' work with his/her 'super-vision.' This image assumes that the supervisor has all the knowledge about research and somehow "the student is supposed to absorb the necessary know-how by a sort of intellectual osmosis between great minds" (Green & Lee, 1995, p.41). The argument they are pushing forth here is that students need to be taught the tacit curriculum of research issues irrespective of the privatized, one-on-one nature of supervision. Since both the student and the supervisor are known to be involved in the constant construction of knowledge during the research supervision, they are seen to be incorporating 'teaching and learning,' which is argued by Clark (1997) to bring to bear the idea of 'co-researchers.' Green and Lee (1995) state that supervision is characterized by "keeping in touch" (p.41). By this they mean that students and supervisors should meet regularly and carefully keep records for such meetings.

Rademeyer in Lessing and Lessing (2004), states that some supervisors view a student as an "independent researcher who takes initiative in proposing and executing research" (p.75). This form of supervision can be said to encourage autonomy in the students who may be differently positioned in various points on a growth – empowerment continuum

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<sup>8</sup> Wisker, Robinson, Trafford, Warnes & Creighton (2003)

at different stages of the research process. Accordingly, Rau (2008) uses the autonomy/dependency dichotomy to explain what she calls the “push, allow and pull” (p.6) strategy or model. In her explanation she maintains that the ‘push’ can result from the supervisor’s approach to supervision whereby the student can either be pushed towards dependency or autonomy. The ‘pull’ is said to be the supervisor’s attempts to curb the student from doing what is outside the student’s research study. These are clearly issues of control. The supervisor is seen to control the extent to which the student can go with the research. These issues bring about “different power relations” (Rau, 2008, p.4) between students and their supervisors. The question that may be posed here is: if students and supervisors occupy different power positions, to what extent is the student’s voice represented in the research? Consequently, McAlpine and Norton (2006) have noticed that the student’s voice is hardly heard in ‘graduate’ studies (here ‘graduate’ refers to what in South Africa is referred to as ‘postgraduate’).

Writing and/or producing a dissertation is considered by Ylijoki (2001) to be a ‘paradox’ whereby students are required to work independently as well as becoming knowledge producers. Three types of study orientations which result from students’ approaches to learning are said to have profound effects on dissertation writing. These orientations as clarified in Ylijoki’s (2001) study are: ‘academic orientation’ (which is seen to be concerned with developing critical thinking), ‘professional orientation’ (which aims to improve qualifications) and ‘instrumental orientation’ (which aims at getting the degree done). One may argue that these orientations are linked to masters students’ attitudes towards the writing aspect of a dissertation. These attitudes are likely to emanate from lack of appropriate guidance in supervision as well as lack of research skills.

Likewise, Murray (2007) views thesis/dissertation writing to be a complex academic process which may be categorized into “rhetorical, psycho-social and behavioral dimensions” (p.1067), depending on what is investigated by a particular research. By this explanation, he seems to imply that the manner in which the students think about or approach the dissertation writing is highly dependent on the manner in which the students orientate themselves. Therefore, he sees the need for supervisors to have a crude understanding about these dimensions in order to be able to guide their students effectively. The ‘rhetorical dimension’ is concerned with the student’s ability to form



strong arguments and be able to present the coherently in their academic writing. Murray (2007) describes the 'psycho-social dimension' as dealing with the writer/student's identity and ability to interact with others and how these influence the student during the writing process. The 'behavioural dimension' envisages a student or writer who seeks to reach self-efficacy or independence. However, Murray (2007) warns about the danger of assuming that these dimensions occur in isolation. He considers that these dimensions are likely to work together at any point of the writing process of the research dissertation, thereby enhancing or inhibiting the students' writing process.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has situated the study within experiential learning theoretical framework which has been discussed intensively using Kolb's theory. It has also presented the various scholars' views on issues of retention and throughput as well as supervision issues and how they impact on students' learning progress.

The following chapter will elaborate on the methodology used in the study giving appropriate justifications when necessary. Justifications such as why the study uses a case study, a qualitative approach, purposive sampling, semi-structured interviews are given. This chapter gives an extensive background on the participants for the readers' benefit. The need for ethical considerations and the various efforts made in ensuring the participants' protection are also presented in chapter 3. This chapter also reveals the study's limitations.

## Chapter 3

### *Research Design and Methodology*

#### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter explains the research design and methodology employed in this study. The research design covers the paradigm and approach chosen for this study. The justifications for situating this study within a qualitative research approach, using an interpretive paradigm as its lens, are highlighted. The methodology used in this study is a qualitative case study, the case being a 2008-2009 masters students cohort in the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The method of data production used within this methodology is also discussed and justified. Thereafter, reasons are given for the use of semi-structured interviews as the main technique/method of data collection employed in this study. The chapter finally discusses issues of sampling, limitations of the study as well as ethical considerations that were considered in this study.

#### **3.2 Research Design**

This section seeks to fully explain the chosen paradigm for this study and make valid justifications for its choice. In addition, the qualitative approach is espoused as the approach that forms the basis for the study.

##### **3.2.1 Interpretive Paradigm**

A paradigm is defined differently by various scholars or researchers. In their definition of the term 'paradigm,' Mac Naughton, Rolfe and Siraj-Blatchford (2001), include "a belief about the nature of knowledge, a methodology and criteria for validity" (p.32). In contrast, Neuman (2006) suggest that a paradigm is merely a justification of why one needs to do research that is value-laden and ethically grounded. In other words, Neuman view the paradigm as a predetermining factor of a researcher's direction of his/her study. The implication from MacNaughton *et al.* and Neuman's studies is that

researchers usually strive to conduct valuable studies which are not harmful and can be trusted by other people. Literature reveals a number of “ways of seeing the world” (Bertram, 2004, p.39) or paradigms, which can be said to be underpinned by the researchers’ beliefs. There seems to be confusion as to how many research paradigms exist because of the manner the researchers use the terms differently. It can be said though that three main paradigms are seen to emerge from the social sciences, namely the positivist, interpretive and critical. Whilst positivism is known to be based on objectivity and measurement, interpretivism is said to be based on people’s consciousness whereby they are able to give meaning of “their previous experiences and the context they are in” (Bertram, 2004, p.41).

This study uses the interpretive paradigm since its intention is to have a deeper understanding of the experiences of this group of participants. This is affirmed by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2009) when they argue for the interpretive paradigm to be intended for “understanding the subjective world of human experience” (p.21). This means that in this study the sole purpose of the researcher was to understand each participant’s own viewpoint of their experiences, as they were given an opportunity to reflect on their research journeys. It can then be said that individualized concern for every participant was displayed in this study by ensuring that an open mind was kept regarding the handling of their responses to the questions. This was done on the premise that the researcher understood that she was dependent upon the quality of the “participants’ views of the situation being studied” (Creswell, 2003, p.8). In this way the participants were able to give their own interpretation of the phenomenon that was being studied, i.e. their experiences of producing a masters dissertation.

The interpretive paradigm is argued by Carcary (2009) to put emphasis on the methods that are usually qualitative and which allow for flexibility. This flexibility is known to allow for spontaneity in the interactions of the research participant and the researcher, in a relationship that can be said to be informal.

### 3.2.2 Qualitative Approach

The qualitative approach in research seeks to produce quality data rather than quantifiable data. Various researchers (Henning 2004; Denzin & Lincoln 2005; Toma 2006; Nieuwenhuis 2007; Cohen *et al.* 2009) agree on the empirical nature of qualitative research since it is conducted in natural settings. These natural settings are known to allow the qualitative researchers to produce data through interaction with the participants. This interaction is highly likely to result in the production of data which is highly descriptive and detailed. Likewise, Lichtman in Jones (2010) describes qualitative approach as being “holistic” without any need to “identify variables for the study” (p.35).

This study can be said to have put more emphasis on the quality and depth of data produced through the interviews, hence its location within a qualitative research approach. According to Kvale (1996), qualitative research methods are known to engage discussion between the informants/participants and researcher. Hence they tend to be responsive to the human circumstances and their contextual issues. The interpretive paradigm brings focus on the subjective nature of the researcher. This is confirmed by Walsham (2006) in stating that “we are biased by our own background, knowledge and prejudices to see things in certain ways and not others” (p.321). Generally, the subjectivity of the researcher can be said to influence the researcher’s continuous involvement in the production and interpretation of data. This means that the researcher ought to be reflective and be able to critically assess the participants’ statements/comments in an open manner which accommodates the researcher’s bias.

In this study the researcher is no exception to issues of subjectivity. It may be argued that since I am a masters student researching other former masters students from the same institution (UKZN) and discipline/specialization (Curriculum Studies), I am too close to the data. However, I would point out that in engaging with the relevant literature I have noted that one can never truly argue for true objectivity, there is always a chance of subjectivity, whether one is close to the data or not. This is affirmed by Heshusius (1994) when questioning about researchers’ motives in their quests of finding answers to their research questions. His question is: “don’t we reach out (whether we

are aware of it or not) to what we want to know *with* all of ourselves, because we can't do anything else?" (Heshusius, 1994, p.16). This is an indication that subjectivity in the process of research is unavoidable. The argument that Heshusius (1994) is bringing forth here is that if there are no procedures to ensure objectivity in the research process, there can neither be any to guide subjectivity.

Similarly, Mehra (2002) understands the researcher to be an important part of the research process in the qualitative approach. He reiterates that

the researcher can't separate himself or herself from the topic/people he or she is studying, it is in the interaction between the researcher and the researched that the knowledge is created. So the researcher bias enters into the picture even if the researcher tries to stay out of it (Mehra, 2002, p.8).

Therefore, it is imperative for the reader of this study to understand any form of subjectivity or bias that may be inherent in this research study. In this study, bias was minimised by explaining the researcher's personal interest on the study as well as supplying detailed information about how data were produced and analysed.

Qualitative research designs are known to favour methods of data production and/or collection such as "field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos of the self" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.3). This study mainly produced verbal data through semi-structured interviews which can be said to have provided detailed and rich information.

### **3.3 Research Methodology**

This section gives details about the case that is being studied and makes justifications as to why the case study was chosen as the most appropriate methodology for this study. It further discusses explicitly the choice of the method used for data production.

### 3.3.1 Case Study

In research, the term ‘methodology’ is seen to be used or explained differently by various researchers. Henning (2004) describes it as the reasons for the value of methods used; Mackenzie and Knipe (2006) as a link between approach and theoretical framework; Somekh and Lewin (2005) as a collection of methods; and Walter (2006) as a frame of reference. In this study, methodology is used to mean the approach used to collect and analyse data as well as its ‘fitness for purpose’ for answering the set research questions. Within a qualitative approach I chose to use a case study. This methodology allowed me to gain deeper understanding about the masters students’ experiences by doing an in-depth study because according to Bertram (2004) when using a case study, the researcher seeks to “capture the reality of the participants’ lived experiences” (p.60). Likewise, Cohen *et al.* (2009) assert that case studies usually focus on participants individually or in groups whilst seeking to fully comprehend their insight of events. This research is a case study of a particular group of masters students’ at UKZN and the focus of the study is their experiences of producing their masters dissertations. Thick description of their experiences, opinions and feelings about their research journeys was revealed. This is affirmed by various researchers (Henning, 2004; Toma, 2006; Maree, 2007; Cohen *et al.* 2009) who advocate for case study to assist in bringing to bear a deeper understanding of people’s real situations and the different meanings they attach to those realities.

Furthermore I argue for this study to be an ‘intrinsic case study’ which is known to allow a researcher to obtain an enhanced understanding of a specific case. Stake (2005) maintains that researchers often use intrinsic case study in their quest to let the “stories of those living the case to be teased out” (p.445). Therefore, through the one-on-one interviews the researcher attempted to carefully let the participants share their stories. Again it must be stated that this case is of particular interest to the researcher (since the researcher is also in pursuit of a masters degree) and therefore it does not seek to represent other cases. The purpose was to understand the specific case under investigation.

The findings of this case study are context-dependent since the case is institutional. This has allowed for “boundaries to be drawn around the case” (Cohen *et al.*, 2009, p.253). It must be remembered that the case being studied here, are the masters students; the boundaries drawn were that they needed to be from a particular institution (UKZN) and that they should be recent graduates (already graduated or still to graduate) as well as from a particular discipline/specialization (Curriculum Studies). This was a strategic move in terms of minimizing the research costs so that the researcher could conduct research on her own without necessarily utilizing a research team. This is also argued by Cohen *et al.* (2009) to be a strong point of a case study.

According to Henning (2004), case studies in education tend to be usually concerned and interested in the “process rather than the outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation” (p.41). This notion can be said to be the basis of this study since it is concerned with understanding the masters students experiences in their process of producing a masters dissertation with the purpose of discovering various truths regarding contextual issues that might have influenced them positively or negatively in their respective research journeys.

Moreover, Johansson (2003) highlights one key feature of this methodology (case study) as being able to use different methods which are usually “combined with the purpose of illuminating a case from different angles” (p.3). It was from this assertion that two different methods of data production were used in this study as they are elaborated in the discussion below.

### **3.3.2 Method of Data Production**

In this study, data were produced mainly through the semi-structured interviews. I argue for the semi-structured interviews to have been the most appropriate method of producing data because they allowed the participants to respond to the core questions and at the same time enabled them to contribute their thoughts, feelings and/or concerns on various questions. This is affirmed by Maree (2007) who advocates semi-structured interview as it directs the participant “to answer a set of predetermined questions” yet can also “allow for the probing and clarification of answers” (p.87). Similarly, Cohen *et*

*al.* (2009) refer to semi-structured interviews as “standardized open-ended interviews” in which the participants/interviewees respond to the “same basic questions in the same order” (p.353). This can be argued to increase the chances of comparing the participants’ responses.

It was imperative that the interview elicit as much information as possible since the researcher had only one chance of interviewing the participants. Therefore, the use of structured as well as open-ended questions in the interview schedule (see Appendix C) was an attempt to allow participants to freely express their views in a less formal manner. Mason (2002) classifies an interview as a ‘social interaction’ process which offers fine distinction, intensity and complexity in the captured data. Likewise, Carcary (2009) considers the interview to occur in an “interpersonal context which is influenced by power, emotion and the interpersonal process” (p.17). Through this interaction, I was able as a researcher to come to a deeper understanding of the case in question.

Each interview was scheduled to last between 45 and 60 minutes depending on the willingness of the participant to talk. It must be noted that some participants easily responded to the questions without the researcher having to probe for more responses whilst others’ responses were very short and at times very vague. With the participants’ permission, each interview was audio recorded and later transcribed. Converting the raw data from verbal/audio into textual was purposefully done by the researcher so that the textual data could be given to the participants for verification.

The purpose of the interviews was to get the participants to respond to the research critical questions through answering pre-set questions which allowed them to give their extended views on different aspects. The interview questions covered questions such as the students’ (participants’) understanding of researching for a dissertation; their experiences in terms of challenges and/or positives of doing research; the form of support that was available for them during their research processes in terms of resources and/or supervision as well as their experiences of the writing process (see Appendix C for detailed interview questions).

Furthermore, content analysis of relevant documents was done as a baseline study to this research study. Data from these documents enriched my understanding of the topic,



particularly issues on postgraduate retention and throughput which was an essential part of the literature review. This method of data production served as a means of triangulation, i.e. using various sources of data to strengthen the arguments being made.

### **3.3.3 Pilot Testing the Interview**

In order to check for the appropriateness and clarity of questions designed for the interviews, a few participants (two to be exact) were used for trial and error. These participants, on whom the interview questions were pilot tested, were not part of the actual research sample. The idea was to identify ambiguous and/or loaded questions, that is, checking whether the actual participants will have any difficulties in understanding the questions as well as to check on the time allocated for the interview process. This pre-testing revealed that the duration of the interview was roughly 40 minutes instead of the one hour that was anticipated and that the participants were informed about. The duration of this pilot testing suggested that the researcher could achieve sufficient depth without requiring a full hour. This was seen as an advantage since it would allow some time for pleasantries to be shared prior to the interview as a way of helping the participants to relax, as well as time for debriefing or off-the-record comments at the end of the interview.

### **3.4 Selection of Participants**

In this study, the sample consisted of masters students from the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Various research studies by (Bertram 2004; Henning 2004; Maree 2007; Cohen *et al.* 2009) refer to this form of sampling as purposive sampling since the participants tend to be chosen because they fit certain criteria that may have been pre-selected by the researcher. For choosing this sample the criteria were that the participants should have undergone the process of producing the dissertation and they should belong in the curriculum studies field (discipline). Therefore the masters students cohort of 2008 were chosen as the appropriate sample. This was done purposefully since they were the recent graduates and/or still to graduate; therefore they were the best candidates to reflect on their recent research journeys.

The purpose of the researcher in using this form of sampling was to “access knowledgeable people” who were highly likely to have and offer “in-depth knowledge about particular issues” (Cohen *et al.*, 2009, p.115). This means that choosing the 2008/2009 masters students cohort as opposed to the 2010/2011 cohort was done on the premise that the chosen cohort would have gone through the complete process of producing a dissertation and therefore were in a better position of commenting on interesting matters of this research study. Again, one may bring forth the issue of bias or subjectivity with the claim that the researcher was too close to the data and/or participants. The participants in this study were people who had already graduated or were waiting for graduation. Therefore, they were no longer physically a part of the University community but were in their various places of work. It should be noted that in qualitative research and particularly in social sciences, a researcher is said to “cope with issues that are close to the researcher’s own experiences and daily life. At least theoretically, often practically and emotionally, the researcher is somehow touched by the issues he or she investigates. Researchers are humans” (Diefenbach, 2009, p.877). This is an indication that usually researchers conduct research in their areas of interest, hence the unlikelihood of complete detachment from what is being researched.

In choosing the sample, the researcher ensured that racial diversity in the sample was represented as far as possible. Names and contact details of the potential participants were obtained from the UKZN School of Education Studies administration offices. Unfortunately the cohort consisted of participants from only two ‘racial’ groups, Indian and African. The researcher encountered difficulties in trying to represent both groups equally in the collection of data due to the unavailability of the potential participants. Hence two Indians and five Africans were the ultimate participants for this study. Due to various constraints, the researcher could not make an equal representation of gender of the participants as well; hence only two male and five female students participated in this study.

The researcher encountered a few challenges in terms of accessing the potential participants. Most of the participants are full-time teachers in schools, and the time that was scheduled for data production happened to coincide with a tight schedule in schools. As a result a lot of appointments were made with the intention of conducting interviews but last minute cancellations surfaced as well on the part of the participants

due to various reasons. Therefore a lot of scheduling and rescheduling had to be done and that delayed the projected time-line for the study.

### **3.4.1 The Participants' Narratives**

As already indicated I worked with masters students who are teachers of different grades and subjects/learning areas. The duration of their teaching experiences varied from 8-25 years. A narrative about each participant is provided below to enable the reader to identify with or to be able to visualise the participants. Each narrative contains detailed information on each participant's background as well as in-depth information about the interviews with the participants. The participants research interests are also mentioned. Through these narratives I hope to provide enough background information about each participant. The intention is to allow readers to better understand this study's findings and maybe even the participants' responses to various questions.

#### **Lydia**

Lydia is a 47 year old Indian female. She is very much absorbed in teaching and learning. She has been teaching for 22 years in a senior primary school, specialising in Natural Sciences. She is very passionate about her work as an educator for Natural Sciences. Lydia was interviewed on Saturday, 5<sup>th</sup> March 2011 at 9H00. During the interview she was very eager to talk although very cautious with some responses. Her interview had a duration of 33 minutes. Her research study explored how different teachers taught a selected unit of study in Natural Sciences in Grade 4. Lydia had no funding for her study.

#### **Tim**

Tim is a 49 year old Indian male. He teaches Physical Science in the Further Education and Training (FET) phase. He boasts of 25 years of teaching experience. He is involved in the judgmental and analytical research in Grade 12 Physical Science at a provincial level in the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education (KZN DOE). Tim was very willing and eager to participate in this research study, hence gave very detailed responses during the interview. He was interviewed on a Saturday, 12<sup>th</sup> March 2011 at

9H30. The interview lasted for 39 minutes. Tim's research study's focus was on the performance of Grade 12 learners in the gateway subjects, i.e. Mathematics and Physical Science. Tim had no funding for his study.

### **Nadia**

Nadia is a 33 year old African female. She has 8 years experience of teaching Life Sciences in the FET phase. She is intrigued by research and/or researching about assessment particularly formative assessment. She was interviewed on Saturday, 12<sup>th</sup> March at 15H30. Nadia answered in short sentences, hence she needed a lot of probing and/or further questioning. The focus of her research study was on finding out whether educators were willing to use formative assessment practices to meet the demands of the New Curriculum Statement (NCS) in Grade 8 Mathematics. She also did not have any funding for her study.

### **Mary**

Mary's age is within the 30-40 range. She is an African female teacher of Maths Literacy in Grade 11 and 12. She has 10 years of teaching experience. She had recently finished her masters dissertation and is intrigued by researching in rural schools. She participated in the interview on Monday, 14<sup>th</sup> March 2011 at 10H00. Mary had not yet received feedback about her submitted dissertation, hence she was very cautious about her responses. The duration of her interview was 35 minutes. Mary's research study was about how learners in the rural area understood the teaching and learning of Mathematics Literacy. The focus was on the learners' understanding. Her idea was to enable the silent voices of learners to be heard. Mary had no funding for her research study.

### **Martha**

Martha is an African female of  $\pm$  30 years of age. She is a secondary and high school teacher in Lesotho with 10 years experience of teaching Business Education. She is intrigued about researching about teachers' experiences of implementing new curricula. She was interviewed on Monday, 21<sup>st</sup> March 2011 at 14H00. Her responses were very skeletal, the researcher (interviewer) had to probe for more answers. She was very careful in responding to certain questions. This was deduced from the long pauses she had before attempting to answer some questions. Her interview lasted for 29 minutes.

Martha's research study explored teachers' experiences of implementing Business Education in three secondary schools in Maseru district, Lesotho. Secondary schools in Lesotho consists of Form A, B and C which is equivalent to Grade 8, 9 and 10 in South Africa. Her study was partially funded by the Lesotho government.

### **Luke**

Luke is a 45 year old African male. He is a senior primary school teacher with 15 years experience of teaching Natural Sciences in Grade 7. His research interest lies in understanding how teachers implement new strategies in schools to help with the transformation in the South African education system. He participated in the interview on Thursday, 24<sup>th</sup> March 2011 at 14H30. He responded enthusiastically to questions and provided examples to clarify his responses. His interview's duration was 36 minutes. Luke's research study explored the implementation of formative assessment in the teaching of Grade 7 Natural Sciences. He did not receive any funding for his study.

### **Rebecca**

Rebecca is a 45 year old African female. She has  $\pm$  20 years of teaching experience as well as a few years experience as a principal in a primary school in Lesotho. She is very much interested in researching about HIV and AIDS. She was interviewed on Friday, 8<sup>th</sup> April 2011 at 11H00. She seemed to be anxious about what the next question will be about, hence not providing very detailed responses and ended abruptly. The interview lasted for 28 minutes. Rebecca was smiling throughout the interview even if she was talking about her frustration about certain issues on the research she conducted. Rebecca's research study was based on HIV and AIDS. Her study was partially funded by the Lesotho Government.

### 3.5 The Process of Data Analysis

Data that were produced through the semi-structured interviews were categorized and thematically analysed. The interview questions (see interview schedule: Appendix C) were designed to respond to the two critical questions, namely: *1. What are students' experiences of producing a masters dissertation? 2. How are masters students supported in their research processes?* In this study, all interviews from the participants were transcribed, interpreted and the data were categorized and thematically analysed. This was done with the purpose of making meaning about the participants' "perceptions, attitudes, understanding, knowledge, values, feelings and experiences" (Nieuwenhuis, 2007, p.99) related to a particular phenomenon, that is, the phenomenon of producing a masters dissertation. Braun and Clarke's (2006) design of data/thematic analysis was used to organize and analyse data. Their design is based on the premise that the researcher will use the quantity of raw data at one's disposal and search or create divisions/categories from which themes are supposed to emerge. Therefore, in this study, the overall data were simultaneously interpreted and categorized into six major divisions, namely: researching for a masters dissertation, skills needed to produce a dissertation, challenges/positives of research, support from supervisor, comfort level during supervision and lastly in/availability of supervisors. The participants' responses led to the creation of various themes, which were then used to unfold and represent the participants' arguments. The whole process of data analysis employed in this study was in line with what Maree (2007) asserts to be the researcher's role when analyzing qualitative data. He suggests that interpretation and identification of trends or themes will surface from the collected data. Four major insights emerged from the analysed data as what was common to the participants' responses in terms of their experiences of research. The insights were: individuality of research; self-direction in learning; students' previous experience; challenges of research.

### 3.6 Ethical Considerations

When undertaking research, researchers are expected to consider various ethical issues. Cohen *et al.* (2009) assert that it is not sufficient to consider 'procedural ethics,' instead a researcher has to "consider how the research purposes, contents, methods, reporting

and outcomes abide by ethical principles and practices” (p.51). This means that they acknowledge that there are certain ethical issues that must be brought to bear on every stage of the research process and which require the researcher to deal with during the planning and throughout the research process.

For this research study, ethical approval was granted by the Faculty’s committee<sup>9</sup> on the 14<sup>th</sup> February 2011. Appendix A<sup>10</sup> serves as physical evidence of the study’s approval under the stated protocol.<sup>11</sup> According to Stake (2005), researching within a case study allows for the participants’ opinions and varying circumstances to be shared between the participants and the researcher. Therefore there needs to be a binding agreement between the “researcher and the researched” in which the “rules for protection of human subjects” (Stake, 2005, p.459) are followed and respected by the researcher. Such an agreement was entered into by the researcher and the research participants through the signing of informed consent<sup>12</sup> (see Appendix D). Similarly, Bertram (2004) states that the participants’ consent is imperative in the research process. This is due to the fact that when the research study was explained orally and/or in a written form, the participants were asked to make voluntary informed choices about participating (or not) in the research, and given time to do so. Important issues such as anonymity, confidentiality and nonmaleficence<sup>13</sup> were explicitly addressed in the informed consent. The participants had the right to know what would happen to the tangible evidence once the research study was complete.

The researcher also sought permission to conduct this study from the Head of School<sup>14</sup> (see Appendix B). Seeking this permission was important because some of the interviews with the participants were conducted using the premises of this school (an office).

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<sup>9</sup> UKZN’s Humanities & Social Sciences Ethics Committee.

<sup>10</sup> Ethical Clearance Certificate, approval number: HSS/0086/2011 M: Faculty of Education

<sup>11</sup> Exploring masters students’ experiences of producing a masters dissertation

<sup>12</sup> Detailed explanation highlighting the importance of the study and how it will benefit other people in the long run as well as expectations on the participants’ part.

<sup>13</sup> Assurance that the research will not do any physical or emotional harm to the participants or other people

<sup>14</sup> School of Education Studies which includes Curriculum Studies

### 3.7 Limitations of the Study

This study was situated in one university<sup>15</sup> and in one faculty<sup>16</sup> using participants from one discipline<sup>17</sup> only. The requirement that the study be situated within one discipline can be said to have resulted in the difficulty of accessing a wide spectrum of participants since the masters students in the chosen specialization consisted of a small group of people. The limitation inherent in this study was that the findings could only be reported only in relation to the unit of the study and they could not be true for the whole population of the masters students at the UKZN. This is affirmed by Patton (1999) in stating that “qualitative findings are highly context and case dependent” (p.1197) which is usually linked to purposeful sampling which is the form of sampling used in this study.

### 3.8 Issues of Validity

Various researchers<sup>18</sup> within the interpretive paradigm argue for validity to be an indication of how appropriate the research method is in terms of its investigative nature. In this study, issues of validity were taken care of through triangulation which is argued by Cohen *et al.* (2009) to be “the use of two or more methods of data collection in the study of some aspect of human behaviour” (p.141). This means that the researcher tries to find more explanation about the phenomenon in question or the researcher studies the same phenomenon from various viewpoints/standpoints with the aim of finding corresponding information. Likewise Tellis (1997) concurs that triangulation increases the dependability of the data and their production process. Therefore the use of document analysis and semi-structured interviews as methods of data production in this study was the means of rendering the study as trustworthy as possible.

However, Lather (1986) opposes the notion of regarding the research study’s credibility based on triangulated methods or data sources. Instead she strongly suggests that researchers should engage in research that is based on ‘catalytic validity’ by which it

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<sup>15</sup> University of KwaZulu-Natal

<sup>16</sup> Faculty of Education

<sup>17</sup> Curriculum Studies

<sup>18</sup> Lewis and Ritchie (2003); Mason (2002)



seeks to empower the participants/researched with the knowledge and skills to change their situations. This view is affirmed by Schoefield (1990), who claims for such a research process to “focus on what might be... (future trends) and what could be (the ideal)” (p.209). Similarly Burgess in Cohen *et al.* (2009) argues for catalytic validity to be aligned to research ethics since it “requires researchers to interrogate their allegiances, responsibilities and self-interestedness” (p.140). Therefore, it can be argued that in this study as a researcher I used catalytic validity since I advocate for the personal imperatives to be one of the driving forces for this study and hence argue for subjectivity to be recognised. Again, the participants were granted the opportunity and space to consciously reflect upon their research journeys with the hope that they will be empowered to make changes in the areas that they would identify as needing improvement on their part. In the instances where the participants felt that they had been let down by either the system (University) or the supervisor, it was hoped that they would either learn to deal with such situations better in the near future should they decide to pursue their PhDs or would have their concerns represented through this piece of work.

Furthermore, each participant was granted the opportunity to view his/her interview transcript for verification, that is, to check whether the responses have not been misinterpreted or manipulated. This is what Maxwell (2002) refers to as ‘interpretive validity’, monitoring or checking the accuracy of the researcher’s interpretation as well as understanding of the participants’ views and/or experiences. At the same time, the participants were checking the accuracy of the report as described by the researcher. In other words the participants were given the opportunity to double check whether the report accurately reflected what transpired during the interviews. Maxwell (2002) refers to this form of validation as ‘descriptive validity.’ Again, this study was cross examined/reviewed by the supervisor (as indicated in the first page of this dissertation). It was also sent to an independent editor for further scrutiny.

Using verbatim accounts of participants in the research findings was in line with ensuring the authenticity of the findings, as suggested by Whittemore, Chase and Mandle (2001). This means that some information as gathered from the participants have been used directly, to depict and highlight their lived experiences. As a researcher

I was aware of the differences in the voices of the participants, therefore care was taken not to influence the participants' responses.

Again the researcher took enormous care to interpret the data as accurately and as truthful as they were presented by the participants. In this way, credibility and/or trustworthiness of the study was ensured. Carboni in Whittemore *et al.* (2001) argues for credibility to refer to the "conscious effort to establish confidence in an accurate interpretation of the meaning of data" (p.530).

### **3.9 Conclusion**

The research methodology and the research methods or techniques used in this study have been discussed in detail and justifications have been presented regarding their choice. This chapter has reported why the qualitative case study was used as a methodology and why semi-structured interviews were chosen to be the main form of data production.

Issues of ethics have also been discussed in detail to show all the considerations that were taken to accommodate or to ensure the protection of participants. How the sample was chosen and its representativity, as well as the challenges encountered in terms of trying to persuade the participants to take part in the study, have also been presented.

In the next chapter (chapter 4) I will focus on the raw data that were produced through the one-on-one interviews and how they were analysed and interpreted using various themes.

## Chapter 4

### *Presentation and Interpretation of Data*

#### *Analysis of data*

#### **4.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to make sense of the data that were collected through the semi-structured interviews. The interview questions were designed to ultimately respond to the two critical questions, namely: *1. What are students' experiences of producing a masters dissertation? 2. How are masters students supported in their research processes?* This process of analyzing data that were qualitatively produced is regarded by various researchers (Niewenhuis 2007; Cohen *et al.* 2009) to be of an interpretative nature. Niewenhuis (2007) describes this approach to the interpretation of data as about the participants' "attitudes, understanding, knowledge, values, feelings and experience" (p.99). This was an ongoing process throughout the research study. In this study, analysis was carried out on textual data (in the form of transcripts) from the interviews, as opposed to on audio data. This form of analysis is claimed by Cohen *et al.* (2009) to be a "reflexive, reactive interaction between the researcher and the decontextualized data that are already interpretations of a social encounter" (p.368). By this they mean that when the researcher analyses data using the transcripts, it allows the researcher time to reflect upon and engage with data in a different context from where the interpersonal interview had occurred.

This study used thematic analysis of data, which is argued by Braun and Clarke (2006) to be a method of "identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p.79). However, they highlight the fact that there is no fast rule as to how this method may be used by the researchers. As the researcher, I took an active role in recognizing and selecting interesting themes/patterns. Whilst data were rigorously analysed, care was taken that the process should be congruent with the theoretical framework (Kolb's theory of experiential learning) underpinning this study. This form of data analysis seemed viable for this study because of its flexibility since it is not "wedded to any pre-

existing theoretical framework” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.81). This can be said to indicate the fluidity of the thematic analysis.

After every session of one-on-one interview with every participant, I had to transcribe the data verbatim. This was purposefully done in order to familiarize myself with the data and at the same time to create various categories into which specific responses fell. When all the transcripts were typed, I printed them and read them against the taped conversation to verify if I did not miss or leave out valuable information. Then I had to decide on the appropriate themes to use which would be most helpful in producing an authentic report. For this whole task I adapted and used Braun and Clarke’s (2006) idea of the phases of thematic analysis. These phases are indicated and explained in table 4 below:

<b>Phase</b>	<b>Description of the process</b>
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data.
2. Creating initial categories	Organizing interesting features of data.
3. Searching for themes	Gathering all data relevant to each theme.
4. Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes are appropriate.
5. Defining and naming the themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, generating clear definitions and names of each theme.
6. Generating the report	Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, analysis of selected extracts relating it back to the research question/s and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

**Table 1** Phases of thematic analysis (adapted from Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.87)

The study’s initial raw data were in the form of spoken words from interviews which were then transcribed into written or textual data in order to easily work with the data in identifying themes. Data were read and re-checked for the purpose of identifying interesting or similar features which were used to create relevant themes. The themes were further checked against the available data and refined or renamed accordingly. Then, selected extracts from participants’ responses were used in analysing the data and producing a scholarly report. All participants were asked similar questions as indicated in the semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix C). It must be noted though

that some participants required follow-up questions depending on their responses, therefore, follow-up questions differed greatly depending on the individual's response.

For the purposes of addressing and adhering to the ethical issues of confidentiality and anonymity, the participants were allocated pseudonyms. The pseudonyms were as follows: Lydia, Tim, Nadia, Mary, Martha, Luke and Rebecca (refer to the participant's profile list in chapter 3 for detailed information).

As stated before, the mission of data analysis was to find out whether the data were responding to the critical research questions of the study and whether there was any link with the theory driving the study. Furthermore, I argue for this study's thematic analysis to not only be theoretical but to be 'latent' rather than 'semantic.' Latent thematic analysis is said by Braun and Clarke (2006) to offer an assurance to the reader that the themes that have been developed were interpreted and the description of data had been theorized.

The finalized definitions and/or names of themes as they were identified from the participants' responses to the interview questions which were an elaboration of the critical questions are shown in the table below:

<b>Major categories</b>	<b>Themes created from data</b>
1. Researching for a masters dissertation	1. Understanding of research
2. Skills required to produce a dissertation	2. Reading and writing 3. Clarity of focus
3. Challenges/positives	4. Challenges/positives of doing research 5. Participants' lack of co-operation
4. Support from supervisors	6. Good/bad supervisor
5. Comfort level during supervision	7. The nature of supervisory sessions
6. In/Availability of supervisor	8. In/accessibility

**Table 2** Categories and themes created from the raw data (interview transcripts)

Table 5 illustrates that six main categories which were congruent with the interview questions were initially identified. From these categories I was able to create eight themes guided by the participants' responses to the interview questions. The identified

themes enabled me to generate a comprehensive report about the case that was being explored. The themes that were identified were: conception of research, reading and writing, critical thinking, challenges/positives of doing research, participants' lack of co-operation, good/bad supervisor, the nature of supervisory sessions and in/accessibility.

In order to avoid misinterpretation and/or misrepresentation of data, the participants' verbatim citations will be presented as they were transcribed, in order to highlight even the tone or texture.

## **4.2 Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Data**

In the next section the eight created themes are discussed by presenting the participants' responses as captured in the interviews.

### **4.2.1 Theme 1: Understanding of Research**

This theme was selected from the participants' responses to the question that asked about their understanding of research/researching for a dissertation. Tim thoughtfully responded, *"to me, ...it meant, finding something new or investigating some phenomenon and researching it in terms of trying to understand or explain some phenomenon"* (Tim). This statement showed a link to what Mary expressed about research, *"to me it means ..., researching about a particular idea that you want to know or about something that you are keen to know and write about so that you won't just make a speculation"* (Mary). Both Tim and Mary can be argued to have an understanding of research as a process of knowledge construction. And in trying to emphasise the ideas held about research, Martha expounded further by saying: *"what I learned is that I had to find a problem, a problem in my area or somebody's area which needed to be solved and the ways that it can be solved and after it has been solved, how can it help those who had the problem"* (Martha). This notion of research or researching as understood by Martha brings to bear the idea that research is better understood by other researchers as a social space as opposed to an individual need.

It can be argued that the way these masters students' (participants in this research) understandings of research is highly likely to have influenced the way they engaged in their processes of researching for their dissertations. Their choice of terms or words can be said to indicate their research orientation and is likely to influence their epistemological as well as ontological inclinations. This is also advocated by Kolb and Kolb (2005) in their description of the different learning styles (using what they call the Learning Style Inventory - LSI), highlighting that these learning styles are known to be influenced among other things by the learners' personalities and/or their job roles. This was highlighted by Tim when he said: *you know as a masters student, the challenge is that most people are already in employment, so as educators greatest challenge that you find is the challenge of time because you've got to meet other expectations at work, you are pressurized*" (Tim). Therefore, it can be said that these participants' conception of research could have been shaped by their involvement in the modular aspects of the masters coursework in preparation for the research dissertation. Their active experimentation (doing their research) can also be said to have contributed in the shaping and re-shaping of their original ideas of research. Kolb's (1984) notion of learning is based on the people's understanding of the "nature and forms of human knowledge and the processes whereby this knowledge is created" (p.36). For Kolb, knowledge is produced through a continuous incorporation of personal and social knowledge. Incorporation of these forms of knowledge was brought to bear by the participants' involvement in their ventures of either 'investigating a phenomenon' or solving problems or wanting to know about a particular idea which can be said to have allowed them to socially construct knowledge about their research topics. A compelling suggestion by Rebecca in her statement: *"To me research is like wanting to know something new or wanting to have deeper insights of what you want to know; exploring some of the things that you want to know or having more knowledge"* (Rebecca).

At the same time, other participants viewed research/researching for a dissertation as the epitome of the research modules that they had already covered in their masters coursework programme. When Lydia claimed that *"in your coursework you are like finding your way but the modules that led to researching for a dissertation were very helpful in understanding like the equipment that you need to use"* (Lydia). Here, it was

indicated that the knowledge used in conducting research for the dissertation was credited to the experience gained in the foregoing modules on research. So, for this participant, researching for a dissertation was putting into practice the theory already gained. This can be said to dovetail with Nadia's commentary, *"I wouldn't say I understood exactly what I was doing because I expected more than what I got there, because I did my Honours degree in another institution and I think it was this background that enabled me to write my dissertation because as it is you didn't know exactly what to do there (masters programme)...[partial laugh, sarcastically], so, it wasn't easy at all, they couldn't guide you, well fine with methodology they were able to guide you but when you are writing your real dissertation..."* (Nadia). In this explanation, Nadia wanted to bring to light the limited guidance that was given in the masters research modules and on the contrary, praises were attributed to another programme (Honours degree), which was done in another institution.

These responses seemed to concur with various suggestions from literature, for example, Sayed, Kruss and Badat (1998) and from anecdotal evidence, that the masters students seemed to sail through their coursework modules and 'get stuck' in their research portion of their masters degree. But the fact that these participants acknowledged the usefulness of the research modules they had engaged in prior to their research, is an indication that they have engaged in meaningful experiences that were likely to contribute and transform their new experiences as argued by Kolb, Boyatzis and Mainemelis (1999). The question that one can pose here and maybe needs further interrogation is: to what extent are the masters research modules preparing the masters students to undertake research rigorously?

It was interesting to note that almost all participants were eager to share the difficulties they experienced with the write-up process of the dissertation, although it occurred at various moments of their write-up. Rebecca explained: *"it wasn't easy at all. You write and you may think that you are okay and with the help of the supervisor you realize that you started with things that you were not supposed to"* (Rebecca). This is an indication that this particular student and maybe some masters students rely heavily on the supervisors' critique with the hope that it will offer guided direction in their research studies' progress. Therefore, they can be regarded as being dependent on supervisors' understandings in crafting their own concrete experiences. In contrast, Luke articulately



stated that *“really, when you are writing is unlike reading, when you write you must release the information that you have read, it must come from you... [long pause]”* (Luke). Again, there seemed to be an understanding that one had to create and produce one’s experience logically in written text, after having been on the ‘research field’ collecting or producing data as well as engaging extensively with various literature. From this participant’s account one could detect the feeling of aloneness during the writing process. In addition to these challenges, another concern about the writing process was that: *“it was difficult because with the dissertation you don’t write the everyday language; you use the dissertation language, so it is not easy really if you had not written one before”* (Nadia). The implication here in terms of Kolb’s theory is that this participant seemed to have encountered difficulties with “thinking about, analyzing, or systematically planning” (Kolb *et al.*, 1999, p.3) or conceptualizing about writing the research report in the form of a dissertation. Hence the participant’s concrete experience of a difficult research language which can be seen to impede on some students’ understandings and maybe progress in their research studies

At this point it may be wise to highlight a few things about the process of research. Research as a process is known to be a “systematic enquiry whose goal is communicable knowledge” (Archer, 1995, p.6). This definition implies that research is a process which involves communication, which can be between the researcher and the researched and/or between the researcher and the supervisor or anyone interested in the findings of the study. Again from Archer’s explanation, research is seen as a planned process of seeking answers to particular questions whereby the researcher has to decide upon the means of obtaining authentic answers. This means that the researcher is expected to possess certain skills that will allow him/her to produce a credible study. Skills such as identifying relevant data sources, observation, recording, managing and handling data, analyzing and interpreting data as well as writing academically. Therefore, the ultimate end (product) of research is the written report whereby the researcher has to present convincing arguments about the research study. If the researcher is able to support the arguments “by facts or evidence from a range of sources” it is likely that the research study may be considered to be “convincing and credible” (Wright & Ferns, 2010, p.1118).

During the writing phase of their research process, the participants in this study can be said to have been occupying two positions as described by Kolb (1984), that is, as active experimenters (experimenting with the process of writing a dissertation which was something new to them) and at the same time being reflective observers whereby they were expected to be detached (from the research process) and involved in an objective or analytical process.

#### **4.2.2 Theme 2: Reading and Writing**

This theme arose from the participants' responses on the question that asked about the skills required in producing a dissertation. Half of the participants strongly argued for intense reading and coherent writing to be the major skills that one needs in order to be able to produce a dissertation. This is illuminated in Martha's stance *"one is reading, you have to read a lot, especially when you are doing chapter two you have to read other people's work, journal articles, books, theses, what they say about the problem that is related to yours because you don't need to write about what has been researched already, you have to write about your own"* (Martha). Similarly this view was emphasized in Luke's response, *"I think you get more skills as you read through the literature because the literature tells you different things but if you read as many articles as you can, you get to understand other people's point of views because different writers express themselves differently. So, reading more is much more profitable when you are dealing with academic reading."* (Luke). These students' difficulty can be said to have the requirements both to undertake extensive reading and at the same time being able to locate in the reading pertinent information that they could use in their studies. This difficulty was communicated by Mary in her comment: *"reading and taking what is important from all the readings that you have read is not easy, sometimes you read a lot and then you find that you cannot write because you have a lot of information an you don't know what to take and not to take"* (Mary).

The idea of research as encompassing the skill of reading and writing academically can be said to have required these masters students to read widely on their respective research topics. This means that they were required to be computer literate for them to

be able to access various databases to search for their relevant literature electronically. This was well articulated by Mary in her account: *“another skill is the computer skill. If you are just computer literate, it’s not very easy to write, because there are other things that I needed to know to be able to write my dissertation, so I had to contact many people even from my colleagues from other schools who teach computers”* (Mary). Reading widely on their topics can be said to have allowed the students to get more insights for their discussions and for reference purposes. Referencing other people’s work is beneficial to the researcher because it “substantiates what you are saying, so that it is not just your opinion” and most importantly it “prevents plagiarism” (Wright & Ferns, 2010, p.1120). It can then be suggested that the participants in this study had been actively involved in the reading and writing as these were among the essential skills required in the process of researching. Tim reiterated his experience as: *“you know like when we first started, I have done a number of times; draft upon draft upon draft, and that in itself will tell you that we needed to at each stage sharpen those skills so that we get them right. At the last stage we were still making some errors with referencing”* (Tim).

Conversely, another participant stated that, *“the skills, ok number 1, I had to adapt the reading skill. Then the other skill is the writing skill, the academic writing, how you write, how you put it together and support what you are claiming”* (Rebecca). This explanation revealed the amount of attention that needed to be invested in the writing of the dissertation with the students having to adhere to and meet certain stipulated university standards.

Another participant highlighted a different aspect of writing, which had to do with the students’ responsibilities. The expounded view was that: *“I think the amount of typing that you do and change over time I think it does become problematic and especially for many of us who use one finger to type. But I think it helps to do it in stages, because it is difficult to do all at once. Sometimes you could sit for weeks just doing the typing”* (Tim). This participant shares Murray’s (2007) inclination towards “snack writing” (p.1072). Murray’s idea is that thesis-writers should engage in writing for shorter periods of time rather than tiring lengthy periods of time. His advice to writers and supervisors is that they should view thesis and/or dissertation writing as incremental, that is, a fluid process shifting from simplicity to complexity.

### 4.2.3 Theme 3: Clarity of Focus

Responding to the same question about the skills required in producing a dissertation, the other half of the participants vouched for the critical thinking to be the essential skill that was needed. *“Skills that you require, you must know exactly what you want to discuss in your topic, your critical questions, how you are going to get your data, mm...[pause] you have to have a clear understanding of how to go about everything”* (Lydia). Here, Lydia is seen to have been concerned with thinking about all the stages or phases involved in the production of a dissertation. Similarly, Mary shared her thoughts, and for this participant the required skill *“is to be able to ask some questions that are relevant to your topic and that will give you answers and to be sure that you are not biased. I think formulating those questions first is very important, ... to be able to think critically because you don’t have to take everything as raw as it is and write everything, you have to know what to write and not to write”* (Mary). Again the same sentiment was expressed by Tim in stating that: *“A lot of times we attempted to ask a lot of information and then when we have all that information at our disposal it is very difficult to analyse, so I think the skill of knowing where you are going right from your critical questions and knowing what information you want”* (Tim). What all these participants highlighted was the importance of the skill of thinking critically to be a necessity in the research process since it seemed to be needed or employable at various points/phases of the research. These masters students can be said to have been actively involved in what is regarded by Kolb (1984) as concrete experiences. In this case, the experiences of ‘formulating’ research questions (CE), thinking about ways of collecting and analyzing data (AC) had required the participants to engage in critical thinking.

### 4.2.4 Theme 4: Challenges/positives of doing Research

When asked to express their challenges and/or positives about doing research for a dissertation, some participants vented their frustrations as: *“the challenge was getting one-to-one with my supervisor, go through the emotions and whatever stuff. I actually never had one-to-one with my supervisor, so I had to be pro-active because when you keep on falling back then it will be problematic at the end”* (Lydia). This participant yearned for a close connection with the supervisor, with the hope that it will allow for

effective progress in the participant's research study. These feelings can be said to have been shared by Nadia who stated that, *"the supervisor did not care whether she sees you for supervision or not, sometimes you would call and your calls got diverted and not answered, so it was difficult to meet or contact the supervisor. The supervisor would give you all her contact details and tell you to contact her anytime, but when you contact her she is not available and when she finally agrees to see you, she will only have 10 minutes to discuss your issues"* (Nadia). This participant's concern was really about the amount of time that supervisor was supposed to spend with the student during the supervision, both during a supervisory session and for the entire research project/study. She raised issues of 'caring,' what did it really mean to say that the 'supervisor did not care'? Was it supposed to be professional or pastoral care? Can one say that there was a mismatch between expectations of the student and the supervisor? Whilst the student expected necessary, structured and adequate guidance (which might be viewed by the student as 'caring'), the supervisor's intention could have been to push the student for autonomy (which might have been viewed as 'uncaring').

Again, this was also explicated by Mary as having been a huge challenge. This is what was claimed: *"another challenge was my supervisor, I couldn't find her most of the time as I was working. I was very frustrated because maybe I could make an appointment to meet with her and I had asked for time from my work and I couldn't find her. Sometimes I could see that I needed her a lot, you know, when you are stuck along the way, when you try to call you don't find her, you SMS and you don't find her, you e-mail and no response. It was so stressful!"* (Mary). Here the issue of depending on the supervisor for structured guidance was brought to light when the participant said 'I needed her a lot' or 'when you are stuck along the way.' Again this illuminates the dependency/autonomy dichotomy. This issue is discussed by Rau (2008) as stemming from issues of control which are associated with power relation/s which "situates supervisors, students and their contexts in unequal positions in relation to one another" and these positions are claimed to be "along a continuum of autonomy and dependency" (p.6). So, in this context (researching for a masters dissertation), how much dependency was expected by the student or allowed by the supervisor and how much autonomy was the supervisor willing to give to the student? The assumption that one can make here is that if these issues were adequately communicated between the students and the supervisors concerned, there would not have been so much heartache, frustration and resentment.

However, Green (2005) argues that supervision is clouded by a continuous process of “subject(ificat)ion” which is usually seen to be “fraught with tension, uncertainty, ambivalence” (p.154). By this statement, Green can be said to view supervision as a productive space in which uncertain subjects are being produced through the circulatory forms of power rested in institutions, disciplines and/or persons which is often resisted. In this study, these uncertain subjects could either be the masters students or their supervisors. According to Butler (1997), “subjection signifies the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject” (p.2). As subordinates in the student-supervisor relationship, most participants in this study can be said to have been subjected to a variety of emotions particularly when the supervisors could not avail themselves for supervision moments. Being conscious of the fact that supervisors held powers to progress or hinder the students’ studies, most participants in this study had to conform to or submit to those powers even if they were seen to be abused. One may argue that the supervisors were also subjected to varied emotions which can be said to have contributed to the decisions made during the supervisory sessions with the different students. It is these emotions that may have influenced the manner in which the supervisors related to their students during supervision. Therefore, the supervisors for the masters students in this study can be said to have had “authoritative voice, the voice of sanction” (Butler 1997, p.6) due to the powers they had and the possibilities they seem to hold for the students’ success. Hence Green’s (2005) notion of research supervision and its subjective nature as an “unfinished business” (p.154).

#### **4.2.5 Theme 5: Participants’ Lack of Co-operation**

Participants in this study also conveyed the difficulty in getting participants to partake in their research studies as having been one of the major challenges for them. One participant declared: *“Another challenge, I think many people experienced it, getting the participants, eh...getting material, especially if you are conducting interviews as opposed to analysis of documents, it is very, very difficult because it is not only your time constraints and balancing your time but it is the other people’s time and you don’t want to inconvenience your participants as well., so that becomes quite challenging. So,*

*meeting deadlines become problematic at times”* (Tim). This participant noted with much concern this issue of the study being ‘delayed’ because of the people who could not make up their minds timeously if they wanted to be part of the study or not. It must be remembered that I have also raised this issue (in the methodology chapter) as one of the pertinent issues that surfaced in this study, that is, participants who had verbally given consent but never honoured their appointments. The research ethics and the informed consent signed by the participants which give them leeway and power to withdraw from the study, is seen to have a huge impact on the continuity/discontinuity of the study. The researcher can be said to be at the mercy of the participants. The same opinion was articulated by Luke in his assertion that, “.... *there are problems, like for instance if you want to interview people or you want respondents, it’s very difficult to get respondents. People will have questions as to why you want them to participate in the study and they may shy away until you may become late about the time that you had budgeted for the research. Others will not like to be recorded and it becomes worse if you are not conducting interviews in their first language. And if you write down notes during the interview, they would want to know what is it that you are writing. They want you to account for every little move you make”* (Luke). In this case, Luke brought to light the issue of assurance and accountability. The research participants wanted to be assured about all their concerns (in the language that they understood) and wanted the researcher (Luke) to be accountable for anything that may go wrong. It may be argued that the issue of power between the researcher and the researched was seen to be at play. The researched viewed the researcher as a powerful person from the ‘university’ who has come to do research on them in the ‘schools,’ whilst the researcher viewed the researched as having the power to either make or break the study.

#### **4.2.6 Theme 6: Good/Bad Supervisor**

In responding to the question about the kind of support the participants received from their supervisors throughout their research process, a theme that I identified was referring to either a good or bad supervisor. Here, a range of emotions was noted. Whilst most participants had broad smiles showing some form of satisfaction, others showed resentment in their discussions about this issue. This is what Tim had to say, “*I had a very supportive supervisor, she went beyond supervision, and she actually pushed*

*me to meet deadlines, so she was very, very supportive in terms of that. In fact the main supervisor encouraged us to seek help from other people (lecturers/supervisors) so that if one thing (study) was out of depth for one supervisor, others were able to help”* (Tim). This comment was made with the highest degree of contentment, which undoubtedly indicated this student’s (participant) good and memorable experiences of supervision. These characteristics of supervisor/supervision are those advocated by Waghid (2006) in his contention for “freedom and friendship” to prevail in the “relationship between a student and a supervisor” (p.432). By this argument, he implies that supervisors ought to allow their students some space to explore beyond their limitation. Therefore, by virtue of allowing the student to ask for help from other supervisor/s, Tim’s supervisor was viewed as a good supervisor.

In the same light Luke’s declaration of supervision experience was: *“you know what? My supervisor was good in a sense that sometimes he would refer me to literature that I did not know of, for example he told me about a book on academic writing of a dissertation. He would go to far as searching for some information in the internet and at times he would just tell me to go through certain websites where I can get valuable information”* (Luke). This participant gave an account of a supervisor who showed interest and caring for the student’s well-being and progress in the study. In the same way, Rebecca’s experiences of supervision were also positive since the claim made here is that: *“apart from checking my work, she also gave books to read and she would also refer me to relevant articles. Sometimes I would go to her with my personal problems and she would counsel me”* (Rebecca). Therefore, in both these instances (Luke’s and Rebecca’s) the supervisors are seen to have played their role of “guiding, advising, and providing emotional support” (Mouton, 2001, p.17). Accordingly, Lessing and Lessing’s (2004) view of the supervisor’s role as an expert in the research field and/or provision of adequate support for the student typified this supervisor’s role.

It is apparent that experiences of the participants varied enormously. The painful experiences for the following participants seemed to have outlasted and outweighed what might have been counted as good experience. One participant lamented thus: *“[bitterly laughs], I can’t say there was much support because most of the things actually I was doing for myself using previous dissertations, looking how they write, ...then I would submit to the supervisor and then she will tell me one or two things. I*



*didn't really get anything*" (Nadia). This outcry was echoed by Lydia's anguish in categorically stating that: *"I never had the experience of working one-on-one with my supervisor. Like I said I had to be pro-active, I went to the library and read other research (dissertations, journal articles) to see how it is done"* (Lydia). Lydia's 'pro-activity' was in 'reaction' to the relentless attempts of trying to meet with the supervisor for some 'expert' guidance. These students' (participants Nadia and Lydia) actions should also not be confused with being an "independent researcher" who is known to take "initiative in proposing and executing research" as perceived by (Rademeyer, 1994, p.94). Their actions were highly driven by disappointment and despair. For these students, their supervision experiences were a nightmare and hence they situated their supervisor/s in the category of a 'bad' supervisor. The supervisor/s cannot be said to have created enabling conditions for authentic learning for their students.

#### **4.2.7 Theme 7: The Nature of Supervisory Sessions**

Almost all participants undoubtedly declared their supervisory session/s to have been informal although others claim that the sessions had been formal in the beginning. Being able to share ideas with the supervisor had lasting impressions on Tim and this is the account that was given about the supervision moments: *"This is something as well that I feel is a strong point because the manner in which the supervisor dealt with supervision was very comfortable, she was not talking down to us, we basically shared discussions. With my supervisor I could phone her at her house (with her permission of course), she would agree to see me if it were at her home or coffee shop to discuss matters related to my research. So it was very, very comfortable kind of supervision"* (Tim). It is apparent that the supervisor devoted ample time to this student even outside the university boundary (office) to a more relaxed environment. Clearly for this student the supervisor was seen to be friendly and approachable. In the same way, Rebecca reiterated the supervisory encounters to have been *"both formal and informal, like I indicated before that I could talk about my personal issues as well. But when we spoke about my research it was formal. At first I was scared to say 'really the delay is troubling me' but as we began to talk and understand each other I was able to make comments about the delay but at first I was scared really"* (Rebecca). It can be argued

that both Tim and Rebecca's accounts of supervisory moments resonate well with Hetrick and Trafford's (1995) view that students usually consider their supervisor-student relationship to be a personal or private matter, where they have a space to share issues not related to their studies. In this case the supervisor acts as a counsellor to whom "the student can turn, not only in the face of problems, but also in order to get other advice" (Ylijoki, 2001, p.29).

On the contrary, Mary also had informal supervisory sessions but what went on in those sessions did not seem to be aligned with the setting. Mary elaborated: "*I was comfortable, I can't lie, it was informal and I was comfortable to talk about anything, it's just that sometimes you come up with your own idea and she would totally change it, then when you go back to your work you would struggle because you are no longer working with your idea then you would get confused along the way and then you would need to go back to her*" (Mary). Crushing or changing the student's ideas and leading the student in a completely new direction can be said to have been an imposed top-down form of supervision, whereby issues of power and control were heavily displayed. To what extent were issues of professional care considered in this case? According to Rau (2008), knowledge should not be "communicated by controlling and limiting what is learned"; instead a teacher or supervisor ought to have "strategies of listening, empathising, and engaging the person's creativity by encouraging him or her to participate in the construction of knowledge" (p.11). In this instance the supervisor cannot be said to have been channelling the student to be autonomous since the student was given new information that did not relate to the understanding that the student had reached.

Nadia's experiences could be described as frustrating. This is her contention: "*Okay, no they were informal, there was no tension. But like I said they were very minimal, four at the most and they were more toward the end when the submission date was close by*" (Nadia). For this student, almost the whole experience of researching for a dissertation had been a constant struggle, as can be seen from her statement about the number of supervisory sessions that materialized between the student and the supervisor. It is highly unlikely for the sessions to have been fruitful and for feedback to have been truly constructive and formative for the student since they occurred toward the final stages of the whole process. Nadia's argument about these supervisory sessions stretched to

include comments such as this one: *“you would email something to the supervisor a week or two weeks before your meeting but on the day of the meeting you would find that the email hadn’t been opened, nothing had been read, and then the supervisor would then sit with you for 10 or 15 minutes. It was very stressful”* (Nadia). The supervisor is likely to have been under enormous pressure since all other students wanted to submit their dissertations, therefore one-on-one supervisory sessions could not have been very detailed.

#### **4.2.8 Theme 8: In/Accessibility**

In response to the question about the supervisor/s’ accessibility, varied changes of moods (emotional) were noticed in the participants. The emotions displayed extremely differed, as will be shown by their comments. One student discussed the predicament: *“there was this time when I really needed to speak with my supervisor and I couldn’t get hold of her in her office, therefore I had to call after office hours. Somehow it did feel like the supervisor was not happy. But since then I didn’t feel comfortable enough to call her any other time. So, that’s when I saw plan A is not working, therefore I had to resort to plan B, i.e. going to the library and working on my own. I really felt that the supervisor should have just told me that “I really don’t know much about this, maybe you can ask somebody who is more in that field”* (Lydia). Not being able to contact the supervisor or to secure a meeting with the supervisor, the student came to the conclusion that maybe the supervisor was not well-versed with the student’s study; hence the avoidance. This view is affirmed by Pilcher (2011) in stating that sometimes there appears to be a mismatch between supervisors and students. The belief is that if such a mismatch occurs, supervisors are usually not confident with their supervision.

A wave of sadness filled Mary’s face when she gave her response about accessibility of the supervisor. In some way she reiterated Lydia’s concern and added her own frustration: *“that was the most challenging part: accessibility of the supervisor because most of the time as I said before she was unavailable, SMSes, e-mail, call and she will not respond for weeks you couldn’t find her. By that time you would be stuck because you couldn’t go on, not knowing what to do because you are confused and you need her to guide you, to give you direction. That was very difficult because it was delaying me.*

*Sometimes you would write for a long time without meeting with the supervisor, so that when you met she would change everything that you had written claiming that it will never be accepted. That meant you had to start afresh with the new information that she would give you. It felt like a waste of time”* (Mary). The frustration is said to have emanated from the issues of ‘delay’, the student’s not being responsible for it and the supervisor not understanding the harm that is being caused. Kolb and Kolb (2005) suggest that “a teacher will never succeed in giving proper guidance to a child if he does not learn to understand the psychological world in which that child lives....” (p.201). This judgement is true also for the supervisor and his/her students. If the supervisor does not understand or does not care about the psychological space that the student might be in, it is highly likely that no meaningful learning will result from their meeting. In this study, from Mary’s data, it was found that she had already been frustrated by not being able to meet with the supervisor and when they finally met, she was made to change the work in which an enormous amount of time had been invested. Is it the supervisor’s lack of interest in the student’s study or is it lack of respect for the student as a person/individual to have the student subjected to such a painful experience? Is research supposed to be painful? Such questions emanate from the data that is presented here and clearly indicate a need for further research in the field.

From the two accounts mentioned above, it can be said that participants Lydia and Mary’s inability to access their supervisor/s denied them access to valuable knowledge. Can one say that issues of power were seen to be at play in these instances, where the supervisors intentionally or unintentionally could use their powers to delay the students’ studies by being inaccessible? Access to knowledge is claimed by Ribot and Peluso (2003) to be essential in determining the form of benefit that individuals can get from the resources. One needs to understand that for some students, supervisors are regarded as sources of knowledge. Therefore, not being able to access the supervisor/s when needed can be said to have been a means of control on the supervisors’ part, who can determine who gets access to this asset and who does not.

A few participants’ notion of accessibility linked to the challenges they experienced in connection with feedback from their supervisors. One participant confirmed that: *“I had to spend a month after sending the supervisor some work on my topic, the supervisor would not open the email. I would stay here (on campus) crying, literally crying*

*because I would not have a response from the supervisor and did not know what else to do*” (Martha). This strongly dovetails with Rebecca’s declaration that: *“You get frustrated when you submit your work and it takes ages for you to get feedback then, by then you don’t know whether to continue because you are not sure whether what you submitted is correct or not”* (Rebecca). The issue of feedback was also seen to be connected with issues of supervision where the participants strongly showed their unhappiness with the supervisor who could not provide feedback on time. This concurs with Pilcher’s (2011) study in suggesting that students seem to value “helpful advice and guidance, and value prompt, and constructive feedback on drafts, and answers to questions” (p.35). For the participants in this study, they maintained that not getting feedback timeously on their work from the supervisors, reduced their self-esteem and had emotional if not psychological effect on them

Differing participants’ views on issues of accessibility were also noted. The following are joyful accounts on the issue. These participants had different experiences to those of Lydia and Mary. Luke recalled that: *“yes, I was able to get hold of him. If he was going to be away for a certain period he used to tell that he will not be available at a particular time”* (Luke). Likewise, Tim’s version on this issue was a positive experience; this was evident when Tim said: *“in terms of accessibility we had no problems. As I indicated earlier on, if let’s say if the supervisor was not available, the understanding had been that we can go to other lecturers for help and the supervisor actually indicated to us that they had no problem in assisting us. I think that was important for us because you don’t want to offend anybody as well”* (Tim). For these students, issues related to supervision had been a wonderful experience since they had continuous communication with their supervisors, who as Bittencourt (2010) assert, are likely to have been well-motivated and interested in the students’ respective studies. In turn, these students are seen by Waghid (2006) to have used their supervisor/s as a “resource person who helps them achieve their goals” (p.281). These are the students who are highly likely to have their dissertation completed on time because of all the relevant support that they obtained from their supervisors, in terms of the feedback they received from their meetings with supervisors.

According to Ribot and Peluso (2003), access is “about all possible means by which a person is able to benefit from things” (p.156) or from people. One can then argue that

the supervisors' un/availability for students' supervision is aligned to their beliefs and ideologies about issues of access. It can be said that the supervisors for participants Luke and Tim provided them with all possibilities to benefit from their supervisory sessions. It must be noted that Tim had the opportunity to consult with other supervisors in the absence of the core supervisor. At the same time Luke had the advantage of being informed way ahead of time when the supervisor was not available.

### 4.3 Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented selected excerpts of raw data from the semi-structured interviews conducted with the masters students who are recent graduates, that is, they had already undergone the process of researching for a masters dissertation. The data had been thematically analysed and presented in eight themes<sup>19</sup> that were created from six major categories<sup>20</sup>. Each theme has been presented by illuminating the responses of the participants to various interview questions that were asked. This has been made to be congruent with the extensive interpretation of the data.

The data have shown varying positions and extreme differences of the manner in which the participants experienced researching for a masters dissertation. Citations of the participants' responses were used to allow the reader to make sense of the interpretation or representation of data made by the researcher.

In the next chapter a discussion of various prominent insights as abstracted from the data is discussed in relation to the relevant models of supervision that are congruent with the presented data. Concluding remarks as well as recommendations are also discussed in chapter 5.

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<sup>19</sup> Eight themes as illustrated in table 5: theme 1: understanding of research, theme 2: reading and writing, theme 3: clarity of focus, theme 4: challenges and positives of doing research, theme 5: participants' lack of co-operation, theme 6: good/bad supervisor, theme 7: the nature of supervisory sessions and theme 8: in/accessibility of supervisor/s.

<sup>20</sup> Major categories as illustrated in table 5: category 1: researching for a dissertation; category 2: skills required to produce a dissertation; category 3: challenges/positives; category 4: support from supervisors; category 5: comfort level during supervision and category 6: in/availability of supervisors.

## Chapter 5

### *Discussion of Insights and Conclusion*

#### **5.1 Introduction**

This study was aimed at exploring a particular group of masters students' experiences (within a particular university) on producing a masters dissertation. The focus on this chapter is on exploring the findings that have been presented in the preceding chapter. From the themes that were identified, deeper insights and understandings about the participants' experiences have been gained from their responses. Apart from answering to the interview questions, these responses were broadly responding to the study's critical questions, which were:

1. what are students' experiences of producing a masters dissertation?
2. how are masters students supported in their research processes?

There will be no further separation of data into themes; rather data will be presented holistically in terms of insights that were established. Overall analysis of data revealed a few insights, namely:

1. Individuality of research supervision
2. Self-direction in learning
3. Students' previous experience
4. Challenges of research

#### **5.2 Insights**

With deeper analysis of the data as presented by the participants, the following aspects came into being as the accepted or common understanding of research by the masters students. The highlighted (consciously or unconsciously) aspects were named as: individuality of research – as something to be performed by the individual student with guidance from privatized meetings with the supervisor; research as a self-directed learning process for each student; students' previous experience (particularly work

experience) as an essential factor in shaping the research studies and lastly challenges as encountered by students in their research journeys.

### **5.2.1 Individuality of Research Supervision**

It was apparent from the analysed data that researching for a masters dissertation is conceived and practised as an individual affair in this institution (UKZN). By this I mean that the procedure for research in this institution is such that a masters student is allocated a supervisor in the student's particular specialization. The assumption is that this specific supervisor will work hand in hand with the student in developing the research proposal and hence assist the student in all matters pertaining to the research process (administrative and academic). Accordingly, "the nomination of a supervisor" is said to be "dependent on workload, and take into account the lecturer's expertise and/or area or interest" (University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2011, p.15). This means that the student is seen to be relying on the supervisor for guidance since the masters student is relatively new in the research sphere. From the onset, the research becomes privatized, as something belonging to the student and the supervisor. This private nature of research can be said to be an international occurrence, since Green and Lee (1995) argue that the postgraduate education in Australia's and United Kingdom's (UK) systems is "largely one-on-one, intense, highly privatized relationship between a student and a supervisor" (p.41). They view this form of relationship as entrenching power issues between the student and the supervisor. The privatized nature of supervision support meetings can be said to be the major or the most official form of contact between the student and the supervisor in this institution. Some supervisors are said to be easily contacted through emailing or telephonically, but what about the plight of those students whose supervisors were said to not respond to such forms of contact? Such supervisors can be said to have disappointed the students who were placed under their care.

If research supervision is supposed to be about helping/guiding the students through their research studies, why are the data in this study indicating so many students being frustrated about it? Kiley and Mullins (2005) suggest that the manner in which supervisors conceive of research and its purpose is known to heavily influence their



supervisory strategies. Are lecturers/academics serious about this part of their job? Is the individualized nature of research supervision beneficial or detrimental to the students? Again, Green and Lee (1995) have argued that academics do not regard research supervision to be ‘teaching’ and they argue for this view to be “complex and problematic” (p.40) in terms of effective supervision. Data from most participants in this study seemed to indicate the problematic nature of supervision in the sense that supervisors were seen to be able to get away from not fulfilling their supervisory obligations, yet they are usually nominated based on their ‘expertise’ which they are expected to share with their students through quality guidance. This can be said to be further compounded by the idea that this problematic nature of supervision is often left unacknowledged.

An alternative approach to supervision is espoused by Dysthe, Samara and Westrheim (2006) as a “three-pronged supervision approach” which consists of “supervision groups, student colloquia and individual supervision” (p.300). They maintain that this approach aims at counteracting the tendency of students to rely on a single person during their research supervision as well as investigating “the potential of group learning in the research and writing processes” (Dysthe *et al.*, 2006, p.300). Had this approach been used by the supervisors of this study’s participants, it could have eliminated the frustrations and dissatisfaction from those participants who claimed to have struggled to schedule one-on-one meetings with the supervisors.

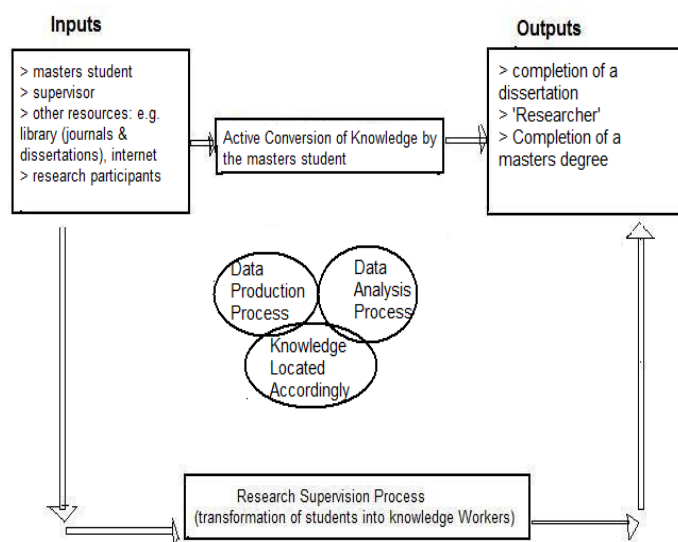
### **5.2.2 Self-Direction in Learning (SDL)**

From the data that were provided by all the participants it became clear that they were all (knowingly or unknowingly) exposed to self-direction in learning. This form of learning does not necessarily mean that the participants were learning in isolation. According to Brockett and Hemstra (1991) this form of learning in adults means that the adult learner “assumes primary responsibility for and control over decisions about planning, implementing, and evaluating the learning experience” (p.11). This is seen in Lydia’s account: “*I had to be pro-active, I went to the library and read other research (dissertations, journal articles) to see how it is done*” (Lydia). Likewise, Nadia’s experience was closely related to Lydia’s since she “*was doing it for myself using*

*previous dissertations, looking how others write*” (Lydia). Therefore, since the participants in this study were responsible for planning and conducting their own research studies (with the help of supervisors), can be said to have been directing their own learning. For those participants who were fortunate to have meetings with their supervisors, they were able to get feedback on the work they had done and some clarity and guidance on the ideas they still had to present. In such cases, the ‘external characteristics’ of the supervision process were taken into consideration by the participants in assisting them to direct their learning. It is unquestionable that the bulk of the research work was their responsibility. This was particularly the case for those students (participants) who struggled to get hold of their supervisors to schedule a meeting for their supervisory sessions. These participants had to create their own resources by being ‘pro-active’ and by using ‘old dissertations’ without the valued expert knowledge from the supervisor. In these instances, these participants can be said to have been guided by their ‘internal characteristics’ or using “learner self-direction” (Brockett & Hemstra, 1991, p.25) in making decision about other sources to use in their research studies apart from the supervisors.

One may argue that the data seems to suggest that the supervisors in this specialization (Curriculum Studies) may have been pushing their students towards autonomy. The supervisors’ unavailability when required by students might be viewed on one hand as having been the supervisor’s way of granting students ample time to work independently. Working independently is regarded by Brockett and Hemstra (1991) to be a personal responsibility of the adult learner and they relate it to their Personal Responsibility Orientation (PRO) model which “shows a strong connection between self-directed learning and learner self-direction in a given learning context” (p.25). This model illuminates the important contribution that supervision could have made in progressing the participants in their various research studies, especially those who found difficulty in accessing supervisors. On the other hand one may view the supervisors’ unavailability as purposeful avoidance, caused perhaps by the mismatch of the supervisor and what the student was researching, or a simple lack of interest and consideration for the student. Despite being forced to work on their own, these students were able to produce, transfer and embed some form of knowledge, because their research studies (learning activities) could not be separated from their social context.

These masters students (participants) and their supervisors can be said to have explicitly or implicitly followed Zhao's KM framework/model of research supervision as shown in figure 3 below. The data indicate that most of the students used various inputs to undertake their respective research processes. Inputs such as the supervisors' knowledge (during the supervisory sessions), technological knowledge (use of internet) and any other form of knowledge from various library resources, e.g. dissertations and journals to mention a few. Researchers who use the KM model are known to be continuously using three processes of knowledge creation/production, knowledge transfer and knowledge embedding. In this study, the participants can be said to have been involved in knowledge creation through their data collection/production processes. They were seen to have been involved in knowledge transfer through the continuous process of data analysis and the formation of new insights about their studies can be likened to the knowledge embedding process.



**Figure 3 A Knowledge Management framework for research supervision adapted from Zhao (2003, p.192)**

Zhao (2003) argues for the KM model to reveal the research supervision process as a necessity for research students since it allows students to “develop new knowledge, theory and methodology (knowledge creation) through integrating, synthesizing and

valuing existing knowledge (knowledge transfer), and in which students advance understand and develop new insight into their area of investigation (knowledge embedding)” (p.192). Having engaged with the participants and from the data collected in this study, it has been indicated that through engaging with various forms of knowledge, these masters students were able to acquire information about their research topics which enabled them to write their dissertations, which were the main research output for them, and ultimately to graduate. Hence Brockett and Hemstra’s (1991) affirmation that the “social milieu in which learning occurs needs to be recognised” (p.32) if learning is to be considered meaningful.

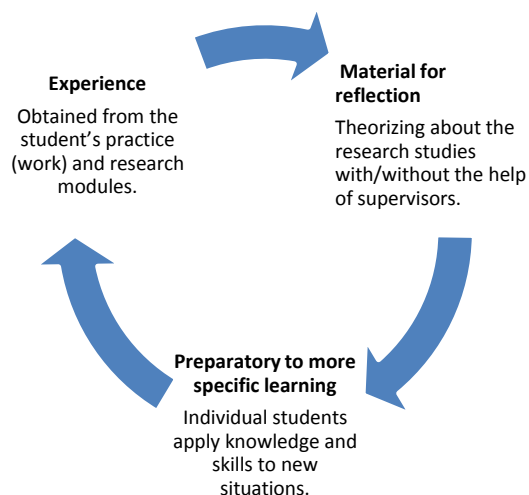
From the model illustrated in figure 3, it is clear that for the research students to emerge as authentic researchers, they need to be exposed to specific research knowledge, which is understood to be gained from research supervision. The data has indicated that some students value their supervisors’ inputs since they regard them as experts in their field of study. Thus the sadness and disappointment in those students who claimed to have battled to meet with their supervisors when they needed to. However, the library can be said to have provided the participant with access to various technologies or sources which allowed them to create, store and transfer knowledge.

### **5.2.3 Students’ Previous Experience**

The research part of the masters programme (if not the whole programme) ought to instill some form of growth which is line with the idea of teachers/educators as lifelong learners. Masters students have been argued in this study to be adult learners who show and bring with them some form of “maturity, which may become evident in greater confidence, self awareness, and problem solving skills” (Newman & Peile, 2002, p.200). Their maturity and the knowledge gained in the coursework part of their masters degree or anywhere else ought to have been recognized and valued by their research supervisors. This is evident in some participants’ accounts: “*the modules that led to researching for a dissertation were very helpful*” (Lydia), as well as “*I did my Honours degree in another institution and I think it was this background that enabled me to write my dissertation*” (Nadia). A competent research supervisor with good supervision skills ought to recognize the individuality of each research student and be able to facilitate the

learning/supervision process accordingly to suit that particular student. This means that the supervisors of these masters students (participants) need to consider their students' life and educational experiences in order to understand their choice or research topics and thereby arranging appropriate help or working strategies for them.

The unique previous experiences of the participants can be said to have enabled some participants who had opportunities to be guided by supervisors to develop relevant conceptual and theoretical frameworks for their research studies. At the same time this was not well taken by other participants like Mary who felt that "*supervisors need to find a way to accept the way we think and just guide us along those lines. They think that their way of thinking is the way because it would be easier for them to guide you along their thinking because if you come up with your own then it means you have to do the talking and the supervisor will have to listen to you. So, for the sake of progress you end up succumbing to the supervisor's suggestions even if you are not happy about them*" (Mary). This comment raises questions like: to what extent are students' previous experiences and their self-directness being recognized in the supervisory sessions or by the supervisors? It must be understood that any specific learning based on previous experience would require some form of reflection about that experience to enable learning. The professional or life experience is considered by Newman and Peile (2002) to be the driving force for adult learning and reflection. This is best depicted in figure 4.



**Fig 4 Further Education Unit (FEU) model showing how experience drives the process of learning, adapted from (Newman & Peile, 2002, p.201)**

This model (fig. 4) can be said to have worked out in this study on the basis that the masters students (participants) are seen to have used their own experiences gained in their respective practices (their places of work) as well as from the research modules to conceptualise the various research topics they were involved in (researching about). Using materials suggested by the supervisors or by the library staff (for those students who struggled to access their supervisors), these masters students have been able to theorise about their research which then allowed each one of them to act individually capitalizing on their strengths to arrive at new situations or knowledge.

The FEU model indicates that the initial experiences that the masters students bring into the learning process (research) seem to have been reflected upon by the students either during or after their associations with their respective supervisors. These associations can be said to have shaped the students' new thinking about their research studies in terms of theorizing about their studies as well as their 'hands-on' involvement in research, despite a few moments of confusion when some students could not reach their supervisors for the 'expert' guidance. The analysis of this study's data indicates that the supervisory sessions allowed the students to acquire specific knowledges and skills that

they applied in researching for the dissertation. This process is seen to be similar to that of the FEU model.

This model seems to concur with Kolb's theory of experiential learning as extensively discussed in chapter 2 of this study. According to the proponents of Kolb's theory, the students' concrete experiences (initial experiences) are moulded by reflections and abstraction about new ideas/concepts (association with supervisors) and students' active involvement in their various research studies (using knowledge and research skills acquired from supervisory sessions).

#### **5.2.4 Challenges of Research**

It was apparent from this study's data that masters students were faced with different challenges of varying degrees. Most participants related the challenges to issues of supervision which ranged from the lack of feedback as in this case: "*I had to spend a month after sending the supervisor some work on my topic, the supervisor would not open the email*" (Martha); to supervisors who just could not avail themselves to students as often as required by students especially "when your supervisor is somebody more committed to other things" (Rebecca); or "*like I said I never had the experience of working one-on-one with my supervisor*" (Lydia). This is what is highlighted by Osborne's (1998) study, which suggests that the relationships that are usually created between the dissertation supervisors and students are not mutual. The norm is that supervisors tend to be important to their students and not vice versa. This may be due to the fact that supervisors are "often working with other students and may give no special significance to a particular individual" (Osborne, 1998, p.81). These challenges and others have been intensively discussed in chapter 4 and supporting literature has been provided. One of the recent studies which elaborates on the challenges encountered by masters students is Pilcher's (2009) study which addresses the context of the United Kingdom. This is an indication that such issues are not limited to one context but are widespread.

The question that most students seem to be asking is how can these challenges be overcome or curbed? What was common in most participants when airing their views about the challenges they encountered during their researching for a dissertation was

that the challenges seemed to have outweighed the ultimate joy of completing the masters dissertation. They had very little to say about what was supposed to be their joyful moments. Some of them had unresolved issues pertaining to supervision and they hoped that this kind of study will allow their voices to be audible. The claim is that the procedures for reporting supervision issues are known to be too long, therefore the norm has been that most masters students suffer in silence without avenues to raise complaints.

### **5.3 Adaptation of Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning**

From the discussion of the theoretical framework in chapter 2 and the analysis of some data in chapter 4, it was apparent how Kolb's model of experiential learning have been regarded by some researchers as the most influential model. Researchers such as Bergsteiner, Avery and Neumann (2010); Clark (2004); Fenwick (2000) have been used in this study as the proponents of Kolb's model of experiential learning in adults. Fenwick (2000) suggested that this model is situated within the constructivist perspectives. This constructivistic nature of the model is regarded by Seaman (2008) as creating the "possibility of alternatives" (p.6). These alternatives can be said to bring about different interpretations about learning phases and styles within any given learning process. This idea had been a concern for some researchers (De Ciantis & Kirton, 1996; Garner, 2000) in suggesting that specific learning styles as espoused by Kolb should not be allocated to particular individuals, rather to the whole process of learning. It is from this premise that this research study is arguing for its participants to have developed personally, socially and even academically without being bounded to the cycle of learning as expounded by Kolb's model.

Kolb's (1984) theory has been seen to assume that adult learning occurs linearly whereby concrete experience (CE) is followed by reflective observation (RO) which leads to abstract conceptualization (AC) and then active experimentation(AE). Contrary to this belief, the data in this study revealed that the participants did not take time to consciously reflect on their research studies whilst they were involved in them. This finding concurs with Engeström, Mietennen and Punamaki's (2003) suggestion that people cannot be thought to be only learning from and after the experience, but that they



rather can be seen to be learning *in* experience. Furthermore, these ‘reflection’ moments as presented in Kolb’s theory are seen to occur cognitively when the learner is removed from the situation. In this way the theory is seen to be failing to consider the ‘holistic’ nature of learning, not taking into consideration all the aspects that influence the learning process. The participants in this study revealed that the social aspect (in/availability of supervisors) played an essential role in their learning. Their diverse backgrounds came into being in their supervisory sessions which can also be said to have been influenced by the differences between the student-supervisor’s ideologies about the different students’ research topics/studies. Hence the moments of frustrations and/or helplessness as expressed and experienced by some participants in this study.

Presenting the theory as a simple linear and cyclic process seems to further undermine the complexities of the learning process and assumes an unproblematic nature of learning. Kolb (1984) and his proponents work on the assumption that a concrete experience must take place before any learning can be said to have occurred. The understanding of the learning process to be encompassing the context, experience as well as the learner is seen to challenge the idea of a concrete experience. Michelson (1999) suggests that experience should not be placed into formulated categories since the learner can acquire experience at any phase of the learning process and not at any pre-designed point. This linearity of the learning process as illustrated by Kolb’s model is problematic. The findings of this study bring into question the simple cyclic form of experiential learning. This presentation of experiential learning as a fixed pattern is also critiqued by Rogoff, Paradise, Meija-Arauz, Correa-Chavez and Angelillo (2003). In sharing their experiences, the participants openly stated the various forms of problems and/or challenges they faced in their processes of researching for their dissertations (as shown in the analysis of data in chapter 4).

Furthermore, analysis of data in this study showed that the meetings or associations of students with supervisors during the supervisory sessions were relationships of power whereby supervisors held more powers. The discussion of Kolb’s theory of experiential learning has revealed that the theory does not associate experiential learning with issues of power. In fact, the Kolb’s cycle presumes that knowledge is processed in the mind after it has been extracted from experience through reflection. Fenwick’s (2000) critique of Kolb’s cycle is based on the premise that the reflection stage of the cycle “ignores the

possibility that all knowledge is constructed within power-laden social processes” through which knowledge and experience can be “mutually determined, and that experience itself is knowledge-driven and cannot be known outside socially available meanings” (p.25). The omission of the issues of power that are inherent in the learning process can be said to be one of the limitations of Kolb’s theory.

#### **5.4 A General Claim About the Analysed Data**

Research is experienced differently by different students and their experiences impact on the time taken to complete their dissertation. The students’ data showed varied and complex experiences of research even though the students were from the same discipline. Some students are likely to have been supervised by the same supervisors but they had diverse experiences. Accounts such as: *“I must say that eh, I had a very supportive supervisor, she went beyond supervision, so if I can use this word, that she actually pushed me to meet deadlines, so she was very, very supportive in terms of that”* (Tim). In contrast to: *“The challenge was getting one-to-one with my supervisor, go through the emotions and whatever stuff. I actually never had one-to-one with my supervisor”* (Lydia). Here, we are exposed to two extremely different views or experiences whereby Tim enjoyed the support of the supervisor and can be said to have been privileged in accessing the expert knowledge of the supervisor. This is contrary to what was experienced by Lydia who did not have the privilege of getting the supervisor’s attention. The students who had consistent supervision can be said to have been able to finish and submit their dissertations on time. This was confirmed by Tim in stating that: *“Thanks to my supervisor I completed on time because she put pressure on me”* (Tim). The same sentiment could not be said to have been true for Mary whose claim was: *“it wasn’t on time. I submitted after the due date”* (Mary).

#### **5.5 Concluding Remarks and Recommendations.**

This study has revealed that masters students had similar experiences regarding some aspects of research and also very different experiences regarding other aspects of research and some of these have been discussed in chapter four. These masters students

originally had positive thoughts about research and of becoming ‘researchers’ until they were faced with chains of challenges (at various phases of their research studies) What was apparent in this study was that there seemed to be a mismatch between students’ and supervisors’ expectations. There seems to have been assumptions made about each party’s expectations without really jointly discussing (negotiating) about them so that all parties were in agreement and with clear understanding of the terms. It appears that there needs to be some kind of ‘contract’ drawn between the student and the supervisor/s which will hold them accountable.

Issues of supervision came to light as needing major attention. This study does not suggest that all the supervisory relationships of these masters students were failures; instead it opens up a debate on what needs to be done for student-supervisor relationships to work productively. Students should not view supervision as an “unfathomable” thing that they are subjected to against their will or “something that happens to them” (Craswell, 1996, p.2), at the mercy of their supervisors. This idea emanated from the privatized nature of supervision. After the realization that the participants in this study experienced research supervision as an individualized affair, it is recommended that the institution should consider group supervision as a viable option to lessen the lecturers’/supervisors’ workloads. The assumption is that with group supervision, the students will get to share and listen to other students’ ideas about their different studies whilst the supervisors address more students in a single supervisory session.

It is surprising though that with so many research articles that have been published locally and internationally (some have been cited in this study) regarding issues of supervision, there seem to be very little change or no change at all. From this study’s data one may be justifiable in stating that there is a major need for most masters students to be properly guided through their research and as often as the need arises. Supervision should be the means to propel the students forward in their research processes and not hinder them.

Although this study’s finding was that the participants showed self-direction in their learning (research), they still needed and advocated for the external (expert) advice from their supervisors to be equally important. Therefore this study acknowledges that

postgraduate supervision should be varied and flexible enough to suit individual students, that is, supervisors cannot expect to use the same strategies in supervising all students since they are all unique and involved in different research studies. I would propose that the institution should look into the issue of co-supervision even in the masters level. This will be to try and minimize student's frustrations of not being able to access a particular supervisor. The assumption here is that at least one supervisor can be accessed if the other cannot be. In this way, maybe supervisors can communicate and motivate each other into availing themselves for supervision.

If supervisors are to do their work effectively, they need to consider how they respect and care for their students and their personhood. This recommendation came into being after the realization of the traumatized state of students who were not able to access their supervisors even after many attempts. The idea is that masters students should emerge out of the research process as 'new beings' who have been socialized into a new sphere of learning. This can be effected if supervision is well managed to benefit the very people it intends to, that is, the students. If supervisors are tasked by the university to monitor the students' progress in research, then who is tasked to monitor the supervisors to find out whether they are doing their jobs as prescribed or expected? Therefore, it is recommended that the institution needs to have a plan of ensuring that postgraduate students are properly supervised and get the necessary support that will enhance their growth as researchers.

The participants' responses (narrations) in this study can be said to be valuable for supervisors to note and to enable a deeper understanding of the numerous and powerful forces that drive supervision. This understanding can bring to bear the needed debates among supervisors about various aspects of supervision. These debates can be seen to create spaces "where supervisors engage with a language and ways of thinking and being that enable them to critically and reflexively investigate their supervision practices" (Manathunga 2009, p.344). This reflexivity is likely to encourage supervisors to adjust their styles of supervision to suit the diverse nature of their supervisees. For example, supervisors need to take into consideration and acknowledge their students' previous experiences in order to be able to properly facilitate their learning processes.

Findings about the challenges of research are seen to have outweighed the joys of becoming researchers. Apart from the joy of having eventually completed their dissertations and graduated, some of the participants would take some time before they embark on another research study.

It must be remembered that this study only focused in one specialization, therefore the findings cannot be taken as conclusive for all disciplines within this institution. Further research is recommended whereby the sample will include participants from more or all disciplines in the Faculty of Education.

Moreover, a research study in which supervisors' perspectives can be represented is also recommended so as to shed some light about the 'politics' of supervision and maybe create a way forward where all parties will be satisfied.

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## APPENDIX A



14 February 2011

Mrs M N Nzimande  
School of Education Studies  
EDGEWOOD COLLEGE CAMPUS

Dear Mrs Nzimande

**PROTOCOL: Exploring masters students' experiences of dissertation writing**  
**ETHICAL APPROVAL NUMBER: HSS/0086/2011 M: Faculty of Education**

In response to your application dated 11 February 2011, Student Number: **200276724** the Humanities & Social Sciences Ethics Committee has considered the abovementioned application and the protocol has been given **FULL APPROVAL**.

**PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the school/department for a period of 5 years.**

I take this opportunity of wishing you everything of the best with your study.

Yours faithfully

**Professor Steve Collings (Chair)**  
**HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES ETHICS COMMITTEE**

SC/sn

cc: Prof. R Sookrajh (Supervisor)  
cc: Mr. N Memela

Postal Address:

Telephone:

Facsimile:

Email:

Website: [www.ukzn.ac.za](http://www.ukzn.ac.za)

Founding Campuses:

■ Edgewood

■ Howard College

■ Medical School

■ Pietermaritzburg

■ Westville



## APPENDIX B

P.O. Box 11015  
Mariannahill  
3610  
14 February 2011

The Head of School  
School of Education Studies  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
Edgewood Campus  
Ashwood  
3605

Dear Sir

**Permission sought to conduct research in the Curriculum Studies specialization  
(discipline).**

As required by the Ethical Clearance Committee, I hereby ask permission to conduct a research project in your school using a sample of masters students and supervisors from the Curriculum Studies specialization. I (Nomkhosi Nzimande) am currently a registered masters student at this University (University of KwaZulu-Natal). As part of fulfilling my degree, I am required to conduct a research project in my field of interest. I have chosen the following topic for my research: *Exploring masters students' experiences of dissertation writing*.

Through the use of masters students and supervisors in the field of Curriculum Studies, this research project aims to answer the following critical questions:

1. What are masters students' understandings and experiences of a masters dissertation?
2. How are masters students supported in the research process?

The findings of this research project/study are highly likely to contribute to the knowledge around challenges and/or successes that masters students experience on their research journeys particularly when writing their dissertations. These findings will bring

light to supervisors as to the various kinds of support that may appear to be really required by the masters students. Findings (particularly from supervisors) may also bring to bear specific guidelines to masters programme developers/co-ordinators regarding any gaps that may need to be addressed to effect changes that will be useful to masters students.

The informed consent of the participants (masters students and supervisors) will be sought to conduct in-depth one-hour interviews. All participants will receive a verbal and written briefing about the nature and purpose of the study. The recording of interviews will be explained and discussed with the participants. Hence, participants will be given assurance concerning confidentiality and anonymity. Moreover, they will be informed about their right to withdraw from the study when and if they wish to do so at any point. Since their participation will be voluntary, they will not be forced to answer certain questions if they choose not to.

Your understanding and co-operation in this regard will be highly appreciated.

Thank you.  
Yours faithfully  
Nomkhosi Nzimande

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Contact details:

Researcher: Nomkhosi Nzimande

Supervisor: Prof. Reshma Sookrajh

University of KwaZulu-Natal

University of KwaZulu-Natal

031-7031401/ 0722473065

031-2607259

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Having read and understood all the terms stipulated for the participants, I do/do not grant the researcher permission to conduct the study in the School of Education Studies.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

### **Semi-structured interview schedule**

**Title: Exploring students' experiences of producing a masters dissertation.**

**Interviews with the participants (masters students).**

Good morning/day/afternoon Mr/Mrs/Ms\_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for agreeing to be part of this study and for signing the consent letter (see Appendix D).

For my records and the study's background, please briefly tell me about yourself, your work and your age or age group if you don't mind.

Thank you.

Let me remind you that this interview/study seeks to explain or understand your experiences of researching for your masters dissertation. Therefore, questions will probably require you to critically reflect on the research process you undertook.

Four questions are asked to address critical question 1.

Critical Question 1: What are masters' students' understandings and experiences of a masters' dissertation?

#### Understanding

1. What does a dissertation mean for you? Why do you feel this way?
2. How did you understand research/researching for a dissertation?

#### Experience

3. What do you think are the important skills that will enable/enabled you to confidently produce a dissertation? How did they help you achieve this task?

4. Discuss some of the challenges/positives in doing a research dissertation.

Critical Question 2: How are masters students supported in the research process?

5. What kind of support did you receive from your supervisor?
6. How did you feel about it? Do you think it was adequate or fair? In what way?
7. Did you feel that you had enough resources (access to relevant information) to help you in completing your dissertation?
8. How did you come to know about these resources?
9. What can you say about the comfort level during supervision?
10. Tell me about your experiences of supervision, in terms of your supervisor's accessibility? How did it contribute to your ability or inability to competently write your dissertation?
11. How was your supervision schedule designed? Was it convenient (beneficial) to you or the supervisor or for both of you? Why do you feel this way?
12. How do/did you experience the writing process (easy or difficult)? Why do you feel this way?
13. How long did it take you to complete your dissertation? Did you complete on time?

## Appendix D



### **Informed consent of research participants**

Dear Sir/Madam

I (Nomkhosi Nzimande) am currently a registered masters student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. As part of fulfilling my degree, I am required to conduct a research project in my field of interest. The following topic has been chosen as the topic for my field of research: *Exploring masters students' experiences of dissertation writing*.

Through the use of masters students and supervisors in the field of Curriculum Studies, this research project aims to answer the following critical questions:

3. What are masters students' understandings and experiences of a masters dissertation?
4. How are masters students supported in the research process?

The findings of this research project/study is highly likely to contribute to the knowledge around challenges and/or successes that masters students experience on their research journeys particularly when writing their dissertations. These findings will bring light to supervisors as to the various kinds of support that may appear to be really required by the masters students. Findings (particularly from supervisors) may also bring to bear specific guidelines to masters programme developers/co-ordinators regarding any gaps that may need to be addressed to effect changes that will be useful to masters students.

### **Research expectations of participants:**

1. Each participant will be expected to participate in an in-depth, one-on-one semi-structured interview which will take place in a venue that is convenient for the participant.

2. A follow-up meeting will be scheduled with each participant to verify a transcript of his/her interview in order to confirm what was said earlier. This meeting will be arranged approximately one week after the interview.

**Research Ethics:**

1. Participants will participate in this study voluntarily, and are allowed to withdraw at any time.
2. Participants will be protected from any harm, i.e. they will not be exposed to any risks.
3. The participants will not under any circumstances be coerced to respond to interview questions in a particular manner, i.e. they have the right to refuse to answer some questions if they choose to do so.
4. In order to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms and different codes will be used for all participants. Each participant will only be aware of his/her own pseudonym and code.
5. Data collected during this research will only be used for the purposes of this study.

Your participation in this research project will be highly appreciated. Copies of the transcripts of data and research findings will be made available for any participant who is interested in them.

Thank you.  
Yours faithfully  
Nomkhosi Nzimande

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**Contact details:**

Researcher: Nomkhosi Nzimande  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
031-7031401/ 0722473065

Supervisor: Prof. Reshma Sookrajh  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
031-2607259

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I have read the above terms and agree with them. I understand that my real name will not be used in the write-up (dissertation) of this study and that the information that I will provide will be used only for this project. I am also aware that I am not forced to answer any questions that make me uncomfortable and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any point. Therefore, I am giving consent to participate in this research project.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX E – INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS**

### **Interview with Lydia - Saturday 5 March 2011**

**Interviewer:** Good morning Lydia

**Lydia:** Good morning Nomkhosi

**Interviewer:** how are you today?

**Lydia:** I am very well, thank you Nomkhosi.

**Interviewer:** let me remind you that for the purpose of this interview, a voice recorder will be used to help with the process of capturing the discussion. Again, you are not forced to respond to a question when you don't wish to do so.

**Lydia:** Ok.

**Interviewer:** If you don't mind this question, please tell me about your age and your work.

**Lydia:** (laughs) I don't mind my age, I'm 47 years old and I work in a Primary School with the senior phase.

**Interviewer:** let's start now with the formal interview. Critical question 1 is divided into two parts/categories: understanding and experience. The first question is: what does/did a dissertation mean for you?

**Lydia:** It meant nothing for me at first until we did the Research Proposal module. We had excellent lecturers who took us step by step into the whole process of developing a proposal. This module helped us to shape our focus, methodology and data collection techniques. It was so amusing to see that our research was all over the place. (laughs) we were these big guns at schools but here we were so embarrassed when our research was thrashed (you know) when they dismantled it apart, we were all worried you know? The whole cohort By the end of this module we kind of knew how we were expected to go about writing the dissertation. It was daunting at first.



**Interviewer:** How did you understand research/researching for a dissertation?

**Lydia:** It was a bit more focus by then because of the proposal module. I had an enjoyable experience although a little bit like daunting at first, like in your coursework you are like finding your way but the modules that led to researching for a dissertation were very helpful in understanding like the equipment that you need to use.

**Interviewer:** what do you think are the important skills that enabled you to confidently produce a dissertation?

**Lydia:** Skills that you require, you must know exactly what you want to discuss in your topic, your critical questions, how you are going to get your data, mm... you have to have a clear understanding of how to go about everything. You know, if there are no like set things, you have got to read about everything that you are using in you methodology. Theoretically it may look like very good but practically it's not easy.

**Interviewer:** But these are the skills that helped you achieve this task (dissertation writing)?

**Lydia:** Yeah, they helped me get there.

**Interviewer:** Can you now discuss some of the challenges or the positives in doing research dissertation?

**Lydia:** The challenge was getting one-to-one with my supervisor, go through the emotions and whatever stuff. I actually never had one-to-one with my supervisor, so I had to be pro-active because when you keep on falling back then it will be problematic at the end. I actually know of my friends who were assisted at every single point of their research being shown how things are done. It was very disappointing for me because I would have liked that. Like I said I had to be pro-active, I went to the library and read other research (dissertations, journal articles) to see how it is done. Ethical Clearance took absolutely forever (late October). I was practically here (on campus) every week to check if I had been cleared. I can't say that I did very well in my dissertation but it was good enough, considering that you were given six weeks to edit and then you had to send it back for final marking.

**Interviewer:** Under critical question 2 I have six questions that I like you to respond to. What kind of support did you receive from your supervisor?

**Lydia:** group supervision/discussion where issues were addressed in a group, then at the end we had to ask specific question. Like I said I never had the experience of working one-on-one with my supervisor.

**Interviewer:** How did you feel about the kind of supervision you had? Was it adequate or fair? In what way?

**Lydia:** I don't know about adequate but you know even when you emailed some work to be checked, you never got a response maybe highlighting errors that need to be changed or just acknowledging that the emailed was received and maybe saying hey I don't understand about what you mean in this line/phrase? I'm not sure if everybody does it but hey that was my experience.

**Interviewer:** Did you feel that you had enough resources (access to relevant information) to help you in completing your dissertation?

**Lydia:** Plenty of journal articles internationally and locally, unfortunately South African research articles, there was just one article that I could relate to. E-Journals were very helpful.

**Interviewer:** How did you come to know about these resources?

**Lydia:** I feel that the orientation process helped us in understanding our way around and knowing what is available for our use whilst in campus. The library staff I found to be very helpful, if you couldn't find a book in this campus they could always get it for you from other libraries (interlibrary loan) provided you tell them on time. Having internet at home is also very vital, otherwise you will be sitting in the campus library even when you need to be at home.

**Interviewer:** What can you say about comfort level during supervision?

**Lydia:** Our supervisor was fine, our meetings were informal. As a group we had good rapport with our supervisor. It was just fine. In our group we knew each other and it was fine and we got to know each better through discussing around ideas. We only saw the bright side of it ....when people had to critique your work.

**Interviewer:** So, would you say then that group supervision is necessary for critiquing other people's work?

**Lydia:** It... Yes! It did help, because had there been a problem with your work, then you didn't have to go back with it. You would see during the discussion that what you had was not going to work, then you would change it. But personality issues may come out and some people may be frustrated that they will have to go and change their work after being critiqued.

**Interviewer:** Now, tell me about your experiences of supervision in terms of your supervisor's accessibility. How did it contribute to your ability or inability to competently write your dissertation?

**Lydia:** There was this time when I really needed to speak with my supervisor and I couldn't get hold of her in her office, therefore I had to call after office hours. Somehow it did feel like the supervisor was not happy, I mean I don't blame the supervisor, maybe it was just my bad timing. But since then I didn't feel comfortable enough to call her any other time.

**Interviewer:** What's the point of having their (supervisors) cell phone numbers if they are not going to avail themselves when you need them?

**Lydia:** Me, I'm the type of personality if somebody doesn't want to spend their time with me then I'm not gonna be happy spending time with them. So, that's when I saw plan A is not working, therefore I had to resort to plan B, i.e. going to the library and working on my own. I really felt that the supervisor should have just told me that "I really don't know much about this, maybe you can ask somebody who is more in that field."

**Interviewer:** How were your supervision schedules designed? Were they convenient (beneficial) to you or the supervisor or for both of you? Why do you feel this way?

**Lydia:** Some people could not make it to the group supervision, I mean, because the message about the meeting would just go to one person and that person would have to relay the message to all of us (we were nine in our group). Can I ask you a question? I like to check: how many times and what length or amount of time must a supervisor spend with the student during the process of dissertation writing?

Interviewer: I don't know, I'm hoping that these are the issues that will be uncovered by this study since I will still have interviews with a few supervisors, hopefully they will be able to shed some light into this.

*(Silence)*

**Interviewer:** If my questions did not cover any aspect or burning issue that you were thinking about, please share or if you have any other questions about this study, please ask.

**Lydia:** (laughs heartily). No, but hopefully it will help others now who come after us.

**Interviewer:** Hopefully, if anyone takes this study seriously.

*Both laugh loudly.*

**Interviewer:** Thank you very much Lydia for participating in this interview, your contribution is highly appreciated.

**Lydia:** My pleasure, I'm glad I could help.

## **Interview with Tim – Saturday 12 March 2011**

**Interviewer:** Good morning Tim.

**Tim:** Good morning.

**Interviewer:** Thank you for participating in this study. Please tell me about your work and if you don't mind about your age as well.

**Tim:** (laughs) I don't mind, I'm not a female. I am 49 years old and I am a high school Physical Science educator.

**Interviewer:** wow, a scientist. Ok, I'll like to remind you that you are not forced to respond to any question if you feel uncomfortable and that you have a right to withdraw at any point of this interview.

**Tim:** Ok, thanks.

**Interviewer:** May I remind you about the topic of this study, which is: Exploring masters students' experiences of producing a dissertation. This study is trying to understand the experiences of masters students particularly in the Curriculum Studies field about research issues. So, critical question one: What does a dissertation mean for you? And why do you feel this way?

**Tim:** When we did the course, understanding of the dissertation was to research in the field of our study and add value to curriculum. Mm...the dissertation itself comprised of various aspects and mainly the literature search, simply not to duplicate the literature already done and maybe to find some gaps that existed in er....research and present in the dissertation material and/or knowledge that will actually be new and adding value to curriculum. That's basically my understanding of a dissertation, eh.....and also, I mean there are specified ways in which a dissertation is written, in terms of how you go about writing a dissertation.

**Interviewer:** Ok, how did you understand research/researching for a dissertation?

**Tim:** I think you know, in research, as I indicated in my first response eh, to me meant eh, finding something new or investigating some phenomena and researching it in terms of trying to understand or explain some phenomena so that was, eh, my research dealt

with understanding the Physical Science results produced in 2008, eh, 2008 having been the first year that matriculants had written the Physical Science examination under the new curriculum. Being new, I felt that we needed to understand how learners had performed in the new system, so that would have added some new dimension and new value to...to eh, the results produced.

**Interviewer:** Wow, it sounds interesting, and I've seen your thesis or your dissertation in the library.

**Tim:** (smiles and laughs) Ok, thanks.

**Interviewer:** Ok, What do you think are the important skills that enabled you to confidently produce a dissertation?

**Tim:** Ja, in terms of the skills, firstly, we had to attend a number of sessions with our supervisors because we felt that research wasn't really the way we do research as educators, basically it isn't research that we do at school level. But I think for a masters dissertation we needed to actually understand how research is actually done in terms of the requirements, in terms of the ethics involved in terms of the procedure. I think another important skill, I think is to understand what is research and how it is conducted and important thing we found that the thinking should be around that, how are we going to analyse the information that we get. A lot of times we attempted to ask a lot of information and then when we have all that information at our disposal it is very difficult to analyse, so I think the skill of knowing where you are going right from your critical questions and knowing what information you want. There are lots of interesting and eh, you know, inviting information out there, sometimes they are superfluous to what you are really studying, you may find that your analysis maybe very difficult and sometimes in your analysis you are looking like you are not really answering your critical questions. Another skill is the skill of writing up, the write-up. Writing up a bibliography will change from time to time and how do you reference. So, those were some of the important skills that we needed in order to get through the dissertation.

**Interviewer:** So, can you say that these skills really helped you to achieve the task (of producing a dissertation)?

**Tim:** Yes, you know like when we first started, I have done a number of times draft upon draft upon draft, and that in itself will tell you that we needed to at each stage

sharpen those skills so that we get them right. At the last stage we were still making some errors with referencing, you know, those skills are quite important but I must say that another very important skill is the ability to work with your supervisor and the ability to work with the team, with similar work, other masters students, maybe in your field, say, curriculum, because that sharing I think it motivates you meet deadlines etc. and also you sharpen your skills as you go along with interaction with others.

**Interviewer:** wow, now, I like you to discuss some of the challenges and/or positives in doing research dissertation.

**Tim:** Ja, I think you know as a masters student, the challenge is that most people are already in employment, so as educators greatest challenge that you find is the challenge of time because you've got to meet other expectations at work, you are pressurized, you've got constraints. As educators we've marking, preparations, meetings to go to etc. So, that's one. Secondly, masters students are generally older they already have kids, so to balance everything your private life, work life and your studies it's like you are walking on a tight rope!! You have to create a fine balance. I think another challenge eh, so if you have left studies for a few years, for ten years then you decide to do your masters you find that getting back it takes a little time, you have to find that inertia and get back into the rhythm, right.

**Interviewer:** Mmmm.....

**Tim:** Another challenge, I think many people experienced it, getting the participants, err...getting material, especially if you conducting interviews as opposed to analysis of documents, it is very, very difficult because it is not only you time constraints and balancing your time but it is the other people's time and you don't want to inconvenience your participants as well., so that becomes quite challenging. So, meeting deadlines become problematic at times.

**Interviewer:** So, were there any positives?

**Tim:** In terms of positives, you know, there were many positives, you see, it may be draining, challenging or difficult but err..., satisfaction that you get, things that you learn, once you get to you workplace you find that you are now using the skills and the information. You'll find that satisfaction outweighs all the challenges. I think if we keep our minds focused that this is a short thing, it's not for life it will end in a year or two

years, I think that sort of motivates you but the positive is that you really feel that you have moved in terms of extending your knowledge base.

**Interviewer:** so, some kind of growth?

**Tim:** Yes! I think that's the correct word.

**Interviewer:** Ok, thank you. I have a couple of questions to address critical question two: how are masters students supported in supervision? So, what kind of support did you receive from your supervisor?

**Tim:** I must say that eh, I had a very supportive supervisor, she went beyond supervision, so if I can use this word, that she actually pushed me to meet deadlines, so she was very, very supportive in terms of that. My very outstanding feature of studying here is that my supervisor and other supervisors worked as a team, we could freely go and speak to another person if our supervisor was not available without her taking any offence. They had that understanding and I felt that was actually very, very helpful because. In fact the main supervisor encouraged us to seek help from other people (supervisors) so that if one thing (study) was out of depth for one supervisor, others were able to help. My study was both quantitative and qualitative, so I had to speak to other supervisors who had a little more experience in quantitative. That kind of supervision goes beyond supervision and that kind of assistance helped us a lot.

**Interviewer:** Ok, I was still going to ask if this kind of support that you have just mentioned, how did you feel about it? Did you think it was adequate or fair?

**Tim:** As I indicated, it was more than adequate, in terms of, because you know our work would have been looked at five times and apart from the comments that were made on your work, a lot of advice had been given as to how do you rectify this if there is a problem. So, it was not about finding errors but also about guiding you about how to go about rectifying some issues.

**Interviewer:** So, did you feel that had enough resources (access to relevant information) to help you in completing your dissertation?

**Tim:** The human resource was okay because we had various people that we could consult to help us with our work but I felt like in my own study I did not have eh...too



much of current research because in the library shelves you find that most research is not qualitative research studies. To get quantitative studies it was rather difficult.

**Interviewer:** Was it because you were doing something new?

**Tim:** Yes, you see, analysis of results it's something done by the Department of Education every year but I am talking about research studies here, there were very little quantitative studies that were done recently. Because even those studies that used mixed methods I found that there was a very small portion of quantitative and a bulk of it was qualitative.

**Interviewer:** Ok thank you for that clarification. How did you come to know about those resources?

**Tim:** Well, you need to spend a lot time in the library, apart from that the supervisor actually assisted quite a bit by directing you to various authors who have research along the lines of your study. But I think going through most of the stuff by yourself in the library. Apart from that the internet comes a bit through but you cannot depend on that information heavily but you can use it as a reference.

**Interviewer:** In terms of the human resources that you talked about, is it inclusive of the Admin staff?

**Tim:** Basically, in terms of the Admin staff, your work is done at the beginning of the year when you register; we clearly do not have too much contact with the Admin staff.

**Interviewer:** So, What can you say about the comfort level during the supervision sessions?

**Tim:** This is something as well that I feel is a strong point because the manner in which the supervisor dealt with supervision was very comfortable, she was not talking down to us, we basically shared discussions. The atmosphere was conducive to discussions rather than being lectured to, you know because when you are doing your masters (apart from those who are fortunate who are still young), you relate on another level, if I may use the word, the supervisor become like your friend although there is that distinction in terms of the role but you know, the kind of relationship is slightly different. With my supervisor I could phone her at her house (with her permission of course), she would

agree to see me if it were at her home or coffee shop to discuss matters related to my research. So it was very, very comfortable kind of supervision.

**Interviewer:** (smiles), now you are overlapping to my next question.

**Tim:** (laughs), ok.

**Interviewer:** Please share your experiences of supervision, in terms of your supervisor's accessibility? How did that contribute to your ability or inability to competently write your dissertation?

**Tim:** I think if I can just stretch your question there a little bit, it's not just about your supervisor's accessibility, I think what also is problematic is your availability as well. Because if you are not a full-time student with all the luxury of all the time, your supervisor has other students to supervise, so it's a two-way stream.

**Interviewer:** that is so powerful.

**Tim:** Ja, I think that as much as there are time constraints that a person might have but supervisors must be prepared to meet us even outside the normal hours, after work, at home etc. The relationship that you build, the kind of trust that you build, actually assisted us and motivate you to continue. So, in terms of accessibility we had no problems.

**Interviewer:** Ok, so, being accessible at all times or most of the times, can you say that it contributed to your ability to competently write your dissertation?

**Tim:** As I indicated later on, if let's say the supervisor was not available, eh, the understanding had been that we can go to other lecturers for help and the supervisor actually indicated to us that they had no problem in assisting us. I think that was important for us because you don't want to offend anybody as well.

**Interviewer:** Mmm.....so, how were your supervision schedules designed? Were they convenient/beneficial to you or the supervisor or for both of you? Why do you feel this way?

**Tim:** I think in a way I have already answered that question, we had a schedule that was mutually agreed upon. The point I must make is there were a few sessions that were structured, like on a Saturday we were coming from 9H00 to 14H00 or whatever but

those were for a group to deal with general aspects and over and above that, because every student topic was different, then we had to design with the supervisor our own schedules. Some people needed to see supervisors quite often for a short period of time because of maybe a technical aspect. It depended on where you were with your work, you might see the supervisor once a month or in two months.

**Interviewer:** How then did you experience the writing process (easy or difficult)? Why do feel this way?

**Tim:** The write-up looks at different things, you know, the order of chapters, those things, because different supervisors preferred different layouts. In terms of the writing, the language etc, eh...we didn't find too much of a problem with that, as well as I've indicated working in little groups helped because your colleague to pick some errors and notify about but I think the amount of typing that you do and change over time I think does become problematic and especially for many of us who use one finger to type. But I think it helps to do it in stages, because it is difficult to do all at once. Sometimes you could sit for weeks just doing the typing.

**Interviewer:** How long did it take you to complete your dissertation? Did you complete it on time or you needed extension?

**Tim:** Oh, yes. Thanks to my supervisor I completed on time because she put a pressure on me. You see at that time of the year, there are examinations in schools but with all the assistance I had to take a few days leave (3 days of leave) to actually work in my research. But the last two months I was working till 01H00 or 02H00 in the morning including weekends because of the refining that had to be done. One really need a holiday after finishing the masters dissertation, a day in the Spa, being massaged to release all the tension.

*Interviewer and Tim both laugh out loudly.*

**Interviewer:** I have covered all my questions. Do you have any questions about this study or do you have anything that you want to share that you feel was not covered by my questions?

**Tim:** I think we covered quite a bit there in terms of dissertation. I just wish you well in completing your work, I do know how difficult it is, but I can guarantee you once you have given that in and you got your qualification you will feel proud of yourself. All

students have been through that, you'll feel like you want to quit at some stage, I will strongly advise you not to do that because next year it will be as difficult as it is now if not more. There are really good supervisors who are always willing to help and other good students who may be willing to help.

**Interviewer:** wow, such powerful words, thank you so much Tim.

## **Interview with Nadia – Saturday 12 March 2011**

**Interviewer:** Good afternoon Nadia.

**Nadia:** Good afternoon.

**Interviewer:** May I remind you about the topic of this study: Exploring masters students' experiences of producing a dissertation, and may I emphasise that if at any point of this interview you don't feel comfortable you may withdraw if you wished to do so. Ok, so I have two critical questions, the first one is: what are masters students' understandings and experience of a masters' dissertation? And the second one is: how are masters students supported in supervision? But then I have sub-questions under each critical question. Can you please start by telling me about your work, just to ease off.

**Nadia:** (laughs) okay, I am a Science and Maths educator for grades 10, 11 and 12.

**Interviewer:** and your age group?

**Nadia:** I'm 33.

**Interviewer:** Thank you for sharing that. Okay, what does a dissertation mean for you? Why do you feel this way?

**Nadia:** mm....to me it means you are giving others information, you are exploring things and you are sharing it with other people what you have experienced through reading other dissertations.

**Interviewer:** So, why do you feel it's about exploring and sharing?

**Nadia:** because we need to research, we need to go to people, we need to observe and when we write it down I think we are sharing with other people.

**Interviewer:** okay, how do you understand research or researching for a dissertation?

**Nadia:** hey...., I wouldn't say I understood it exactly what I was doing because I expected more than what I got there, because I did my Honours degree in another institution and I think it was this background that enabled me to write my dissertation because as it is you didn't know exactly what to do there...*(partial laugh)*, so, it wasn't

easy at all, they couldn't guide you, well fine with methodology they were able to guide you but when you are writing your real dissertation, hey!!!

**Interviewer:** So, do you feel that those modules of research did not help you at all?

**Nadia:** no, they were fine, actually they helped a lot.

**Interviewer:** so, what was the problem?

**Nadia:** It's the research process that was the problem, how to write it, the language that was expected.

**Interviewer:** okay, thank you for explaining. What do you think are the important skills that enabled you to confidently produce a dissertation?

**Nadia:** the skills.....it's hard work, I knew I was a hardworker and sharing with other people who have been in the same situation before.

**Interviewer:** so, were you sharing with people from the same field (Curriculum Studies) or from other disciplines?

**Nadia:** from the same field, ja, from the same field but not most of the time, actually I was alone because one person that I used to share with had to go back to Lesotho.

**Interviewer:** so, you had a lonely experience?

**Nadia:** Actually, we couldn't find each other, people were busy, we couldn't discuss things, to me, even the supervisor was very busy, I think through all this process of researching I only saw my supervisor three or four times, that is on one-on-one. Most of the times you would email something to the supervisor a week or two weeks before your meeting but on the day of the meeting you would find that the email hadn't been opened, nothing had been read, and then the supervisor would then sit with you for 10 or 15 minutes. It was very stressful. Sometimes there would be a disjuncture between what lecturers in the Research Proposal module and your supervisor want you to approach your study especially with the theoretical or conceptual frameworks. You end up having a problem.

**Interviewer:** Now, can you discuss some of the challenges and/ or positives in doing a research dissertation.

**Nadia:** the challenges, some I have indicated, I don't know if I should say that supervisors don't give the necessary support or what, so it wasn't easy to write the dissertation in UKZN. The supervisor did not care whether she sees you for supervision or not, sometimes you would and you calls got diverted and not answered, so it was difficult to meet or contact the supervisor. The supervisor would give you all her contact details and tell to contact her anytime, but when you contact her she is not available and when she finally agrees to see you, when will only have 10 minutes to discuss your issues.

**Interviewer:** Any positives?

**Nadia:** positives? What do you mean?

**Interviewer:** I mean like anything that you regard as good which came out due to your involvement in the research process.

**Nadia:** well, ja, because at the end I got the information that I set out on finding in my study. Teachers don't understand the term formative assessment, so, they don't practise it.

**Interviewer:** what kind of support did you receive from your supervisor?

**Nadia:** (laughs) I can't say there was much support because most of the things actually I was doing for myself using previous dissertations, looking how they write, eh...then I would submit to the supervisor and then she will tell me one or two things. To me, hey, I didn't really get anything.

**Interviewer:** how did you feel about that kind of support? Did you feel it was adequate?

**Nadia:** it wasn't really because I expected more, like I said I was using my knowledge from my Honours degree to remember the things we did. To me, when you are a supervisor you need to spend adequate time with your student during supervision sessions, +/-1 hour and guide as to what needs to be done. I wrote chapters 1, 2 and 3 without any input from my supervisor.

**Interviewer:** Do you think that just maybe your supervisor was not affluent with your topic and maybe did not want to say so?

**Nadia:** No, no, I wouldn't say that, my supervisor was well known so I think she was just using her experience knowing that a dissertation with her name will pass. Yes, it passed but I'm not happy, such that if I am to pursue my PhD I would have a huge problem because I didn't gain anything at all such that my examiner suggested that I changed my topic because my data does not correspond with my topic, yet my supervisor did not pick that up. I was not happy that I had to change my topic but the examiner said that for the dissertation to pass, the topic had to be changed. My supervisor agreed that I had to change the topic.

**Interviewer:** So, did you feel that you had enough resources?

**Nadia:** Oh yes, there were plenty of resources on campus.

**Interviewer:** How did you come to know about those resources?

**Nadia:** mm.....(laughs), mm...hey, I don't know, I just went there looking at other dissertations and others doing the same and just do, there is no one to tell you.

**Interviewer:** what about the library staff?

**Nadia:** it's just that most of the time I was using the internet rather than the books.

**Interviewer:** what about your supervisor? Were there any suggestions about which resources you can use for your study?

**Nadia:** No, actually she didn't because one of the examiner's comment was: why was I using old articles and books when there are newer/recent articles available. That's because I was using my readings from my Honours degree. Hey, I passed because I am a hardworker not because I was getting much help from my supervisor.

**Interviewer:** Okay, let's continue, what can you say about the comfort level during supervision?

**Nadia:** what do you mean by a comfort level?



**Interviewer:** by a comfort level I mean whether the supervisory sessions were informal or formal?

**Nadia:** Okay, no they were informal, there was no tension. But like I said they were very minimal, four at the most and they were more toward the end when the submission date was close by. To make matters worse, copies of my dissertation were not returned on time by the examiners and when I tried to contact my supervisor to get some clarity, I just couldn't get hold of her. At last I asked and was told by the administrator that one of the examiners was sick and couldn't mark, so they (university) were still trying to find another examiner.

**Interviewer:** Okay, I think you have covered some parts of the next question but I still will like you to share your experiences of supervision, in terms of your supervisor's accessibility, and how did it contribute to your ability or inability to complete your dissertation?

**Nadia:** Well, toward the end, when it was correction time, she did gave me some things saying "take this it will help you with your correction," in a way, ja, she helped me not that she did not help me at all. In terms of accessibility, hey, I could hardly get her when I tried to contact her. I don't know this thing she did with her cellphone, when you call the phone just says 'end' and the call will end without the cellphone ever ringing, like she has blocked calls or something.

**Interviewer:** and the office?

**Nadia:** office? She was never there.

**Interviewer:** So, you never tried other means of contacting her, like emailing or sms?

**Nadia:** I did, all the means but no response. Hey, I was really not happy about my supervisor, like in the beginning she used to supervise us as a group, okay we were a small group of 7 or 8 people but what do you say to people who are researching different topics. Why not individual supervision? Even when you eventually had that one-on-one, you would find her busy and it will be a very quick session of ten minutes. She would say we need to email some work to her before we come for supervision but on the day of the meeting you would find that she had not even looked at your work.

**Interviewer:** So you all had one supervisor?

**Nadia:** it looked like it.

**Interviewer:** Now, er..how did you experience the writing process, I mean the actual write-up of the dissertation? Easy/difficult and why?

**Nadia:** It was difficult because with the dissertation you don't write the everyday language, you use the dissertation language, so it is not easy really if you had not written one before. But I think if one had had good supervision it would have been easier to be guided by somebody. On top of that when you submit your work the supervisor would be too busy to look at your work, such that the first person I asked to edit my work (dissertation) said "hey, there is a lot to do with this work and unfortunately I only have two weeks because I am preparing for an overseas conference, so I can't do this job in less than two weeks. The language in this dissertation is everyday language it is not dissertation language." So that person had to bring my dissertation back. My supervisor said I shouldn't worry because editors are like that. Then she gave me another editor whom I paid R3000.00 but I was not happy with his work because he divided and separated my dissertation chapters into various folders. There was just no flow in reading it. So I had to find someone else who would do what I needed to be done.

**Interviewer:** How long did it take you to complete your dissertation?

**Nadia:** Yes, against all odds, I managed to finish on time. We were supposed to submit on the 15<sup>th</sup> December but then I had that problem of one copy of my dissertation that was not marked because of the sick examiner, so the date was postponed to January something, I can't remember the exact date.

**Interviewer:** thank you, I have finished with my questions. Do you have any questions concerning this study or something that you want to share which you feel was not addressed by my questions?

**Nadia:** (*laughs*), except that supervisors also need to be supervised by others to see if they are doing what they are supposed to be doing because I feel that they are not doing enough.

## **Interview with Mary - Monday 14 March 2011**

**Interviewer:** good morning Mary.

**Mary:** good morning.

**Interviewer:** Can you please tell me about your work and your age group if you don't mind. It's for statistical purposes only.

**Mary:** I am a high school teacher for grades 11 and 12 and I teach Maths Literacy. My age group is between 30 and 40.

**Interviewer:** ok, thank you for sharing that information. May I remind you that the study is about exploring masters students' experiences of producing a dissertation which means that it looks at the whole process of researching toward a dissertation. Okay, the first question: what does a dissertation mean for you?

**Mary:** Do you want the real meaning of a dissertation or you want my ideas?

**Interviewer:** Yes, your own views not what the books or others tell what it is.

**Mary:** mm...to me it means eh..., researching about a particular idea that you want to know or about something that you are keen to know and writing so that you won't just make a speculation, so to me it means that researching, finding the real core about that particular topic.

**Interviewer:** and why do you feel this way?

**Mary:** mm...it's because even before I embarked on research, I had some questions and areas of interest especially in my subject, the learning area that I am offering (Maths literacy) and in a rural area, I had so many questions I wanted to know. In fact getting to know the voices of the rural, eh, learners in the rural areas.

**Interviewer:** So, how did you understand research/researching for a dissertation?

**Mary:** before or after?

**Interviewer:** well, you can give both views if you have different views, it's up to you.

**Mary:** going to the people who are really experiencing that particular topic that you are researching about. Like in my case, going to the rural learners, because that's where you are going to get real information rather than talking to people who are not part of what you want to research about. So, to me it's getting to the core of what you want and getting their ideas, the way they think and that's how I understand it.

**Interviewer:** now, what can you say are the important skills that enabled you to confidently produce a dissertation?

**Mary:** mmm...skills, eh, it is to be able to ask some questions that are relevant to your topic and that will give you answers and to be sure that you are not biased. I think formulating those questions first is very important, and another thing, writing skills are very important because at the end of the day you have to write a report, so writing skill is important and what else....(*silence*)....hey, it's been quite a while.

**Interviewer:** no, it's fine, relax and take your time to think it through.

**Mary:** okay another skill is the computer skill. If you are just computer literate, it's not very easy to write, because there are other things that I needed to know to be able to write my dissertation, so I had to contact many people even from my colleagues from other schools who teach computers. I was troublesome to them. Another skill is the thinking skill, to be able to think critically because you don't have to take everything as raw as it is and write everything, you have to know what to write and not to write. Also, listening skill, because sometimes you might miss something important especially if you are interviewing a person, so you have to have that skill.

**Interviewer:** okay, thank you. Now at this point I would like you to discuss some challenges or positives in doing a research dissertation.

**Mary:** there were positive things, especially writing, because it was my first time experience so it was challenging but exciting at the same time because I was learning at the same time, this was a learning curve, before I didn't know, I took it lightly. Now, I could see that I'm not the same person that I was: I can argue, I can write, understand a lot of things. Challenges, there were so many challenges. Firstly I started on full thesis/dissertation and I could see that there were so many gaps because I didn't understand the language, I was just confused. So, in the second semester I changed into

masters coursework and it was better because the gaps started to be filled up and I was meeting people because I used to work on my own. Another challenge was my supervisor, I couldn't find her most of the time as I was working. I was very frustrated because maybe I could make an appointment to meet with her and I had asked for time from my work and I couldn't find her. Sometimes I could see that I needed her a lot, you know, when you are stuck along the way, when you try to call you don't find her, you SMS and you don't find her, you e-mail and no response. Hey, it was so stressful. That alone was giving me a lot of stress but at the same time when I did find her, it helped, you felt like you had some direction, it's just that it was very difficult to find her. Lots of challenges, you don't know what to read, not knowing whether you are on the right track with your writing because there were things that you had to follow, there are ways of writing and researching. So, reading and taking what is important from all the readings that you have read is not easy, sometimes you read a lot and then you find that you cannot write because you have a lot of information and you don't know what to take and not to take. Ja, that was a challenge but it's doable.

**Interviewer:** wow, very enlightening. Okay, now we are addressing critical question 2. What kind of support did you receive from your supervisor?

**Mary:** mmm...the support was that sometimes when I sent SMS she responded although most of the time she didn't but when we had an appointment and discussing, ja, she contributed a lot and made things clearer. You would come out of the meeting knowing what needs to be done. Sometimes she would refer me to books that I must read.

**Interviewer:** So, how did you feel about it? Did you think it was adequate or fair? In what way?

**MARY:** it was adequate because I could find information. My supervisor did make an effort, she sometimes referred me to other masters students who were researching in the same line as my study.

**Interviewer:** Did you feel you had enough resources (access to relevant information) to help you in completing your dissertation?

**Mary:** I'm not sure about that.....am not sure about that because I was trying, sometimes I didn't have books, I couldn't get books from the library, you would check

books and you couldn't find because some of the books I was referred by another professor from the Maths department but I couldn't find those books. I think there are no enough resources in our campus (library). Even if you order from interlibrary loan, you still did not find, sometimes you didn't even know what to look for.

**Interviewer:** and if you asked the library staff?

**Mary:** sometimes they didn't have the books you were asking and they would refer you back to the electronic search which you had already conducted.

**Interviewer:** so, the resources that you had, how did you come to know about them?

**Mary:** googling helped me, I could find articles, of course with the help of the guy from the library (William), he was very helpful.

**Interviewer:** now, what can you say about the comfort level during supervision?

**Mary:** I was comfortable, I can't lie, it was informal and I was comfortable to talk about anything, it's just that sometimes you come up with your own idea and she would totally change it, then when you go back to your work you would struggle because you are no longer working with your idea then you would get confused along the way and then you would need to go back to her. It meant that you had to change your thinking and really if the idea is not yours you run short of ideas, there just is no flow even in your writing.

It's a fact that we don't think the same, I think the supervisors need to find a way to accept the way we think and just guide us along those lines. They think their way of thinking is the way because it would be easier for them to guide you along their thinking because if you come up with your own then it means you have to do the talking and the supervisor will have to listen to you. So, for the sake of progress you end up succumbing to the supervisors suggestions even if you are not happy about them.

**Interviewer:** Now, tell me about your experiences of supervision, in terms of your supervisor's accessibility. How did it contribute to your ability or inability to competently write your dissertation?

**Mary:** that was the most challenging part: accessibility of the supervisor because most of the time as I said before she was unavailable, SMSes, e-mail, call and she will not respond for weeks you couldn't find her. By that time you would be stuck because you

couldn't go on, not knowing what to do because you are confused and you need her to guide you, to give you direction. That was very difficult because it was delaying me in a way because when I was supposed to submit I had not finished so I was running short of time, I was so stressed, I even suffered from the back pain and headaches. I even submitted after the due date. Really submitting for the sake of submitting because you are sticking to the date you stipulated on the intention to submit form but the course of that was not you, you did not contribute to what was happening. Sometimes you would write for a long time without meeting with the supervisor, so that when you met she would change everything that you had written claiming that it will never be accepted. That meant you had to start afresh with the new information that she would give you. It felt like a waste of time.

**Interviewer:** but then what would be her excuse when you finally met with her, didn't you ask as to why she did not respond to your attempts of contacting her.

**Mary:** maybe she would say 'I was on leave' or she would tell you about family things you know, that you don't have anything to do with really. I know family is important to most of us but telling you that at this moment I can't see you, you know? Because I was even prepared to discuss even over the phone but I couldn't find her over the phone. It would have been better if we discussed something over the phone and then later meet, but that couldn't happen also. So, that was the most challenging part.

**Interviewer:** how were your supervision schedules designed? Were they designed in a manner that was convenient (beneficial) to you or the supervisor or for both of you?

Why do you feel that way?

**Mary:** I think it was convenient for her because sometimes as I'm working, I'm a part-time student so I would say maybe let's meet in the afternoon around 14H00, she was unavailable, you just couldn't meet with her in afternoon; she would tell you 'no, I can't, why don't you come to my home late.' For me that was inconvenient because I live far from where she stays and also sometimes you would ask to meet at a particular time in the morning, then you would ask for permission from your workplace, on the very same day she would send a message asking that you meet at another time, usually an earlier time than originally agreed upon. This means you had to bunk work just to meet with her because you are afraid that when you miss that opportunity you don't know when will you be able to see her again.

**Interviewer:** was she aware that you are a teacher and you needed to be at school to teach?

**Mary:** Yeah, she was aware because I would come and tell her that I have asked for permission and I'm going back to work after the meeting.

**Interviewer:** Now, about the writing process itself. How did you experience it, was it easy or difficult? Why do you feel this way?

**Mary:** it was difficult for me as I said I had a problem, technology wise. The study was mathematical, so trying to find and type in relevant signs was quite a challenge. Numbering of pages was a huge challenge, I had to call many people for help, even my editors couldn't do it for me. I was so stressed, because I had to submit yet I couldn't without the pages being numbered until I separated it into different files.

**Interviewer:** how long did it take you to complete your dissertation?

**Mary:** it wasn't on time. I submitted after the due date.

**Interviewer:** this has been enlightening, thank you so much for having participated in this study. I have finished with my questions not unless you have a burning issue that you want to discuss or share which you feel was not covered by my questions.

**Mary:** I can't think of anything.

**Interviewer:** okay, thank you again.



## **Interview with Martha – Monday 21 March 2011**

**Interviewer:** Good day maam.

**Martha:** good day.

**Interviewer:** may I remind you that this study seeks to understand the masters students' experiences of producing a masters dissertation. Okay, maybe before we can start with the formal interview can you tell about your work, if you are working or just about yourself.

**Martha:** Ja, eh, I work in Lesotho, I am a high school teacher but now I have just come to do my dissertation corrections.

**Interviewer:** for statistical reasons, what is your age or age group.

**Martha:** (laughs), 36, I am 36.

**Interviewer:** Okay, thank you for sharing that information. Okay, let's start with the questions. what does a dissertation mean for you, i.e. what do you or did you understand by a dissertation?

**Martha:** okay, I don't know if I will be answering the question, but what I learned is that I had to find a problem, a problem in my area or somebody's area which needed to be solved and the ways that it can be solved and after it has been solved, how can it help those who had the problem.

**Interviewer:** so, why do you feel this way, that it is about helping other people.

**Martha:** at first I didn't understand it, it's only now that I understand and I like doing a dissertation.

**Interviewer:** how did you understand researching for a dissertation?

**Martha:** like I said, at first I didn't understand and remember at my home (Lesotho) teachers don't like being interviewed or given these questionnaires. So it was difficult for me, but other teachers really helped me.

**Interviewer:** hey you are touching on a sensitive issue of participants. Okay, what do you think were the important skills that enabled you to competently write a dissertation?

**Martha:** mm...skills like what? Maybe, reading skills?

**Interviewer:** whatever skills that you think you needed to help to write your dissertation.

**Martha:** one is reading, you have to read a lot, especially when you are doing chapter two you have to read other people's work , journal articles, books, theses, what they say about the problem that is related to yours because you don't need to write about what has been researched already, you have to write about your own. I think when I was told about methodology that one enabled me to understand how to go about research, like how to talk to participants and how to select them.

**Interviewer:** are these the only skills?

**Martha:** ja, reading and understanding what you are reading and able to relate it with what you are researching about.

**Interviewer:** okay, can you now tell me about any challenges or positives (something good) about doing research for a dissertation.

**Martha:** hey, first I will talk about supervisors. To me, being given a supervisor you are given somebody who is going to be there for you all the time you need him or her. But really some supervisors are not there for us, they are just there because they are going to be paid. I had to spend a month after sending the supervisor some work on my topic, the supervisor would not open the email. I would stay here (on campus) crying, literally crying because I would not have a response from the supervisor and did not know what else to do.

**Interviewer:** if you went to your supervisor in person for a face-to-face consultation?

**Martha:** you couldn't do that, he needed for you to make appointments to see him through email but if he doesn't open the mail how will he know that you have made an appointment to see him? You were not allowed to phone, he was the one to phone you if he wanted you to come. The other thing I think with me I spent a lot of time (some months) without having a supervisor because the supervisor that I was allocated at first had a lot of students then I was removed from him and nobody wanted to supervise me.

**Interviewer:** what do you mean when you say that nobody wanted to supervise you, was it because of your topic or what?

**Martha:** mm...because of the topic, and another challenge is, I was given a supervisor who was not in my specialization area, so while I was doing my chapter two he was just reading it like anybody else he didn't understand what I was trying to say, he did not help at all. He would just say that I must go and read but not indicate what must I read. He did not even mark the work that I would have emailed him, so I never really knew whether I was in the right direction or not.

**Interviewer:** so, no input from you supervisor?

**Martha:** no input from my supervisor, the co-supervisor helped me with the grammar because she also wasn't in my specialization. I tried to get help from other people, those people really did not help me. Ja, those were the challenges.

**Interviewer:** anything good or positive about doing the research for the dissertation?

**Martha:** the good thing is I now know how to do research, I can understand if someone is deviating from the topic. You end up enjoying it, that is if you do it yourself you don't let other people do it for you.

**Interviewer:** now, what kind of support did you receive from your supervisor? I know you have stated that you spent quite some time without a supervisor, so when you finally had the one who was allocated to you?

**Martha:** this one was a very busy supervisor because of the position she held but if I sent something to her she will really mark it and after it has been brought to me I would be happy with the comments. Even if she did not open the mail on the same day but when she did she would fully concentrate on the work and maybe call me and discuss the comments she made on the work.

**Interviewer:** how did you feel about that support. Was it fair or adequate?

**Martha:** I think it was fair and adequate as well because I know that I was not the only student that she was supervising.

**Interviewer:** did you feel that you had enough resources (access to relevant information)?

**Martha:** not really, especially finance part of it. I think from my country I was not given enough because there was a lot of money to be used in the research process, printing, binding etc.

**Interviewer:** other than finance, any problems with resources?

**Martha:** no, not really, they were enough?

**Interviewer:** How did you come to know about those resources?

**Martha:** ja, I was told where to get the recorder, the CDs and where to do the binding.

**Interviewer:** the readings?

**Martha:** oh, the readings I found them for myself.

**Interviewer:** Where? Library or?

**Martha:** internet, I was using the google search.

**Interviewer:** so, what can you say about the comfort level during supervision, when you had supervision session/s with your supervisor were they too formal or informal?

**Martha:** well, with the first supervisor, I was scared of him because he was not talking to me like a supervisor, a parent. Every time I had to go to see him I would pray, pacing up and down trying to release stress. But with the other one, she would laugh and I would really feel comfortable like I'm talking to a parent, a supervisor, a helper. So, ja it was informal I could talk about anything, because she would say I must ask question if I'm not clear about something.

**Interviewer:** so, you were lucky to have changed supervisors.

**Martha:** yes I was because I don't think that I would have finished my dissertation with the first supervisor.

**Interviewer:** okay, now tell me about your experiences of supervision in terms of your supervisor's accessibility and how did that contribute to your ability to your writing of your dissertation?

**Martha:** accessibility you mean if it was easy to find her?

**Interviewer:** yes.

**Martha:** yeah, you had to make an appointment with the secretary, then she would fit me where possible. So I think it was not difficult to meet with the supervisor.

**Interviewer:** so, you being able to access the supervisor at any time

**Martha:** ja, contributed in me completing the dissertation on time because really we had a lot of time to talk about research and what to do.

**Interviewer:** so, did have any supervision schedules? How were they designed? Were they suitable for the supervisor or for you or the both of you?

**Martha:** no, we didn't have the schedule. Whenever you have finished whatever you were writing you can go and make an appointment to see the supervisor then you can see the supervisor. There were no pre-designed schedule/s it depended on your pace.

**Interviewer:** so the writing process itself now, how did you experience it, was it easy or difficult? Why do you feel that way?

**Martha:** it was, in the process it was not easy because you would not understand what is a theoretical framework, you would go and ask another person and they won't understand what your theoretical framework is, so you will not be able to convert to what your study is about. I think that one was difficult together with literature review. But during the writing I started to understand some of the things but in the beginning it was not easy at all.

**Interviewer:** how long did it take you to complete your dissertation?

**Martha:** I can say I finished in one year but the supervisor was busy in December 2009 she couldn't attend to me fully, so I had to come back in January 2010, but she was busy again and I had to go back home and she told me that I will submit my work in March. At this point I can say that she was not helpful to me because I was too far away, even if I phoned she would not pick up the phone or respond to emails as immediately as I would have liked. In August I was told to come and submit the dissertation and I came and submitted in September but then I was made aware of other errors that I had to correct. Then finally I submitted in December 2010.

**Interviewer:** thank you maam for participating in this study. We have finished with the interview process not unless you feel that there is something important that you want to share which was not covered by the questions, you are free to share.

**Martha:** I think you covered everything that you wanted to cover.

**Interviewer:** in that way, I like to thank you again.

## **Interview with Luke - Thursday 24 March 2011**

**Interviewer:** good afternoon meneer.

**Luke:** good afternoon.

**Interviewer:** before we can start with the formal interview, can you please tell me about your work and if you don't mind your age or age group.

**Luke:** ok, anyway my age group, I'm 45 this year. I'm working as a teacher in a primary school, teaching natural sciences in grade 7. I'm an HOD at work but you know it's just a minor position.

**Interviewer:** okay, I would like to remind you about my study that it seeks to understand masters students' experiences of producing a dissertation. So, what does a dissertation mean for you and why do you feel that way?

**Luke:** I think for me the way I conceive a dissertation is a measure through which you can estimate your level of thinking, so if you are able to write a dissertation to a satisfactory requirement it means you have done it, you become proud of it because it's not for everybody to produce a document like a dissertation which is being scrutinized by various academics.

**Interviewer:** so, how did you understand researching for a dissertation?

**Luke:** well, because my aim was to write a dissertation so I had to read a lot, trying to explore as much information as you can so that you will be able to put up with the requirements of academic writing. For me, researching for a dissertation in a scholarly way is very high level thinking, you have to look at various nitty gritty things like the style and language of writing must be up to a certain level.

**Interviewer:** what do you think were the important skills that enabled you to confidently produce a dissertation?

**Luke:** I think you get more skills as you read through the literature because the literature tells you different things but if you read as many articles as you can, you get to understand other people's point of views because different writers express themselves

differently. So, reading more is much more profitable when you are dealing with academic reading.

**Interviewer:** so it was just reading that helped you to write?

**Luke:** yeah, amongst other skills because you also need to have a skill of understanding what you have read and being able to put your ideas into writing where you can show that you have understood the concepts.

**Interviewer:** can you now please discuss some challenges or positives that you encountered whilst doing research for a dissertation. By positives I mean anything good about doing that research for a dissertation.

**Luke:** yeah, first of all, looking at the positive things, when you are doing a field study, you go to the field and that's when you start to enjoy your research because there you mix with people who have a different thinking than yours. In a school you find teachers with real experiences about and of the school, that is if you are researching about a school. So, mixing with the people who have the first hand information is much more enjoyable. Knowing that you are doing such a degree gives you confidence, you are not afraid of asking questions or saying anything that you want to say as long as it doesn't hurt anybody. About the negatives, there are problems, like for instance if you want to interview people or you want respondents, it's very difficult to get respondents. People will have questions as to why you want them to participate in the study and they may shy away until you may become late about the time that you had budgeted for the research. Others will not like to be recorded and it becomes worse if you are not conducting interviews in their first language. And if you write down notes during the interview, they would want to know what is it that you are writing. They want you to account for every little move you make.

**Interviewer:** so any challenges on campus other than with the respondents?

**Luke:** ja, in the campus, the problem is with the supervisors at some stages but not always, especially if you have two supervisors: the main and co-supervisor, sometimes they say things that contradict each other but even if you have one supervisor, he/she would tell you one thing which will be different from what you had agreed on in your previous meeting. It becomes a problem, you end up not knowing what is it that you have to do. As you pursue your study you would think you are on the right track, when



you meet your supervisor he/she will tell you to delete it and put it the other way round, that becomes a problem because for every piece of work that you do you have to go through many books and intense reading, you research through many websites, now if that work is easily discarded you get disappointed and you may even want to deregister from the programme. But with my supervisor there were not many problems because we used to meet and discuss issues face-to-face.

**Interviewer:** now, addressing critical question 2. What kind of support did you receive from your supervisor? I know that you said you had face-to-face meetings but I need to know about the actual support that you got from him/her?

**Luke:** you know what my supervisor was good in a sense that sometimes he would refer me to literature that I did not know of, for example he told me about a book on academic writing of a dissertation. I was very grateful because that helped me a lot. He would go to far as searching for some information in the internet because at that time I didn't have the computer so I just relied on the institution's resource, so at times he would just tell me to go through certain websites where I can get valuable information. So, ja, he helped me a lot. Although that was not the norm, but he did help me at one particular moment.

**Interviewer:** so, how did you feel about that support. Do you think it was fair or adequate? In what way?

**Luke:** I think it was adequate because, anyway a student must search for the information for him/herself. So, in that way I think it was adequate. He also helped me in coining the topic, you know it's very difficult to come up with a research question. Just to come up with a question can take you up to a month.

**Interviewer:** so, did you feel that you had enough resources, in terms of accessing relevant information that enabled you to write your dissertation?

**Luke:** yeah, I managed to get more literature on the topic I was researching on even though it was too general but I could relate some aspects to the learning area I was interested in.

**Interviewer:** how did you come to know about these resources?

**Luke:** I looked for literature in the library, also through the websites and I managed to get the information. Reading through the theses in the library I was able to get some information although not much.

**Interviewer:** so, what can you say about the comfort level during supervision. Were your supervision sessions with your supervisor formal or informal?

**Luke:** at the beginning it was a little bit formal but as we talked over the phone, it started to become informal and our sessions became more informal. I was able to ask anything that I wanted to ask though most of the things that I wanted to ask did not relate to my discipline but my supervisor was able to respond and helped me. So, the atmosphere was relaxed.

**Interviewer:** now, tell me about your experiences of supervision in terms of your supervisor's accessibility. Was it easy to get hold of him/her and how did that help you in completing your dissertation?

**Luke:** well, my supervisor, I used to call him before I pay him a visit because a supervisor may not have one student that he is supervising. At that time my supervisor had four students that he was supervising and he was also involved in writing because I think he was about to publish some stuff, so I would call him and arrange for a meeting over the phone so that when I came to campus I would know exactly that I would find him. Yeah, I was able to get hold of him. If he was going to be away for a certain period he used to tell that he will not be available at a particular time.

**Interviewer:** wow, so, how were your supervision schedules designed? Were they convenient for you or the supervisor or for the both of you?

**Luke:** I would say, eh, the supervision schedules were convenient for the both of us because we negotiated the times and we even suggested what we were going to talk about when we meet. I wanted him to know ahead about the problems I was experiencing so that when I come he would just tackle those problems. Sometimes we would just converse over the phone and discuss serious issues pertaining to the study. I would say that supervision skill goes with the personality of the supervisor, other supervisors are short-tempered and do not want to discuss with their students, they would just tell them to go and read and read and read and then show me what you have

written. Some people will give you some time and be passionate about your study, like my supervisor.

**Interviewer:** about the writing process itself. How did you experience it? Was it easy or difficult and why do you feel that way?

**Luke:** when it comes to writing and reporting on your findings, hey, I think that is the most difficult part of research. You know when you are writing, sometimes you even hate to see the computer because you have been doing it from morning till sunset. Really, when you are writing is unlike reading, when you write you must release the information that you have read, it must come from you. In a way you must relate the literature to your critical questions, sometimes you feel that the respondent did not respond in a way that you wanted him to respond or in a way the question was asked. With writing it needs more, some guts you need to know more about the methodology that you are dealing with. With me, I also had a problem of finding an editor, you know end of year is quite a busy time for everybody so I could not find somebody to help me with editing my dissertation. So I checked and re-checked it myself and I submitted it. Fortunately it was accepted.

**Interviewer:** so, how long did it take you to complete your dissertation? Did you complete on time?

**Luke:** no, I wouldn't say it was on time because you know when you are writing a dissertation, sometimes you feel like 'let me forget about this thing' and then later on you feel that you are not doing justice to yourself and you would go back and try to finish your study. So, that's what happened to me. I wrote the first two chapters, then I was taken aback being told that I must strengthen my literature review, which meant I had to go through some extensive reading again and more writing. Therefore I was fed up about everything such that I stayed at home about a month but then I thought carefully about it and was motivated to start again.

**Interviewer:** so, I have finished with my questions. if you have any burning issue that you want to discuss you are free to do so because this is about your experience.

**LUKE:** so far I think your questions were good, it's only that maybe we did not talk about the time spent on the field when you are doing research. Sometimes you know the respondent, at the first meeting will not be as open as he/she could, but as you visit

him/her again and again to show that you are with him/her then he/she may start to come out. The same thing happened to me, I paid them initial visits without talking about the study. I visited them at least three times before I could start talking about the study, because if you just come with the questions the first time around the person might not say much because he/she is afraid. That was important for me, even buying some drinks just to make the conditions favourable for any discussion. You must understand that people don't want to be interviewed, they may think you want to expose them, so they would give you various reasons in order to avoid being interviewed.

**Interviewer:** thank you so much, it has been very enlightening.

**Luke:** it's my pleasure, as long as you benefited from it.

## **Interview with Rebecca: Friday, 8 April 2011**

**Interviewer:** good morning maam.

**Rebecca:** good morning, how are you?

**Interviewer:** I'm fine thank you for asking. Thank you for participating in this study and I'll like to remind you that the study is exploring masters students' experiences of producing a dissertation. Okay, before we can start with the formal interview or questioning, will you please tell me about yourself and your age or age-group if you don't mind.

**Rebecca:** mm...you want me to introduce myself fully? Who am I and what I do?

**Interviewer:** yes, if you don't mind, just to ease up.

**Rebecca:** eh, mm.. I have been a teacher for more than 20 years, back at home (Lesotho) I have been a principal of the school and I came here in UKZN to upgrade myself and I have gone as far as masters. At the moment I work as an administrator in a students' counsel department. My age group is between 40 and upwards...(laughs), I am over 40.

**Interviewer:** ok, thanks for sharing that information. So, what does a dissertation mean for you and why do you feel this way?

**Rebecca:** for me, dissertation is a journey that you start without knowing where you are going. When you start you feel like I want this, but as you talk with your supervisor you become aware of other angles to approach your study then you feel like ok. Along the way, I tell you there are mountains to climb. Well, for my one the proposal went through but then I had to change the supervisor and I expected to get more confused but it didn't go that way. I got the new supervisor and my study took another shape. When I engaged with the literature, I was more interested I began to love what I was doing. Let me tell you, for my data collection another frustration because the school that I was supposed to research in they rejected me, so I had to ask another school in a short space of time, the principal agreed and it went on. When it's time for data analysis, ja, you feel like you are jolling again with your study, it's part of you, you dream about it all the time until it's submission time...(knock on the door)

**Interviewer:** ok, let's continue. Maybe you will find that there is overlap of questions or answers, it's okay.

**Rebecca:** mm..where was I then?

**Interviewer:** you were telling me that you were frustrated about another school...

**Rebecca:** oh yes, in the new school I was able to collect data and the process continued smoothly.

**Interviewer:** how did you understand researching for the dissertation?

**Rebecca:** researching...mm...actually, I do understand what you are saying. To me research is like wanting to know something new or wanting to have deeper insights of what you want to know.

**Interviewer:** so, it's just having deeper insights?

**Rebecca:** mm...exploring some of the things that you want to know or having more knowledge.

**Interviewer:** ok, so, what do you think were the important skills that enabled you to competently write your dissertation?

**Rebecca:** the skills, ok number 1, I had to adapt the reading skill, then 2, when you read you have to analyse the readings. Those are the skills that I used throughout the research. Then the other skill is the writing skill, the academic writing, how you write, how you put it together and support what you are claiming. The analyzing skill when you analyse the data that you have got.

**Interviewer:** ok, at this point I like you to discuss some of the challenges or positives of producing a dissertation. Positives, I mean anything good about doing research for the dissertation.

**Rebecca:** I think I have already mentioned some of the challenges but you may meet challenges when it comes to your participants, you may meet challenges when you change supervisors especially when your supervisor is somebody more committed to other things. You get frustrated when you submit your work and it takes ages for you to get feedback then by then you don't know whether to continue because you are not sure

whether what you submitted is correct or not. The important part of doing a dissertation I mean, having a supervisor is someone who is interested in your study who has time for you, it does help, for me, my supervisor was so helpful, I really liked the way she supported me.

**Interviewer:** so, that was your second supervisor? What was the reason for your change of supervisors?

**Rebecca:** I was told that he had many students to supervise. So, we had to be distributed to other supervisors. My second supervisor we had meetings but at one stage I gave my work, that's what got me angry actually because you submit your work and it takes a long time, not getting feedback on time otherwise in our meetings she was helpful in shaping the questions, literature, she could tell what literature you must look for, ja, that's it.

**Interviewer:** anything positive? Do you feel that you gained something ?

**Rebecca:** ja, now I can publish as well. I am an academic now, I can join the academic world!

*Rebecca and interviewer share a hearty laugh.....*

**Interviewer:** what kind of support did you receive from your supervisor?

**Rebecca:** okay, apart from checking my work, she also gave books to read and she would also refer me to relevant articles. Sometimes I would go to her with my personal problems saying 'I need to go home and I want to leave this masters' and she would counsel me and say 'you better do that and then come back and let's discuss,' you know you happen to develop that kind of a relationship with your supervisor and if you stressed and have problems she is the right person to talk to.

**Interviewer:** wow, that's good if you had a good relationship. So how did you feel about that kind of support? Did you think it was fair or adequate? In what way?

**Rebecca:** the support was okay, but I still think that the issue of delay in feedback did hold me back I would have finished sooner.

**Interviewer:** so, when you did meet with your supervisor did you raise your concerns about those issues of delay in feedback.

**REBECCA:** ja, I did but she would respond by saying ‘you know this is a good study I don’t want to rush anything. *(laughs)*

**Interviewer:** so, how did you feel about that?

**Rebecca:** I felt that it’s a good study because I also joined the postgrad poster competition and I came second place. So, in a way I felt good about it.

**Interviewer:** did you feel you had enough resources (in terms of accessing information) to help you in completing your dissertation?

**Rebecca:** yes, I think maybe it’s because of my topic. It was really easy for me to get articles.

**Interviewer:** Ok, so it’s all about the topic?

**Rebecca:** ja, it’s all about the topic.

**Interviewer:** how did you come to know about those resources that helped you in your writing?

**Rebecca:** other than the guidance of the supervisor, I think perusing the internet, I’ve got the skill I even helped other students to access the articles.

**Interviewer:** so, what can you tell me about the comfort level during your supervision sessions. Was it formal or informal?

**Rebecca:** it was both formal and informal, like I indicated before that I could talk about my personal issues as well. But when we spoke about my research it was formal.

**Interviewer:** so, if the sessions were formal, didn’t that intimidate you in some way? Were you free and able to talk about important issues pertaining to your study?

**Rebecca:** ja, at first I was scared to say ‘really the delay is troubling me’ but as we began to talk and understand each other I was able to make comments about the delay but at first I was scared really.



**Interviewer:** now, please tell me about your experiences of supervision in terms of your supervisor's accessibility. Were you able to get hold of your supervisor whenever you wanted to meet with him/her?

**Rebecca:** sometimes, like I said she was a committed person with a high position, most of the time she was not in the office but when she was around, the secretary would call me and we would meet. But at other times she will not be around for months. If we had met regularly, it would have been nice and it would speed up things.

**Interviewer:** how were your supervision schedules designed? Were they convenient for you as a student or for your supervisor or for the both of you?

**Rebecca:** in answering this, at first we said we were going to meet regularly, i.e. fortnightly, but it never worked as planned as I have explained that she was a very busy person.

**Interviewer:** so, when you saw that it was not working out, did your supervisor suggest an alternative plan?

**Rebecca:** no, we never talked about it. But even if I gave in (submitted) the work, it took a very long time to get feedback. At one point I submitted two chapters without any form of feedback. But when she did look at your work, she would do it thoroughly and she would discuss every point of correction that needs to be done. I liked that about her.

**Interviewer:** now, about the writing process itself, how did you experience it, was it easy or difficult and why do you feel this way?

**Rebecca:** it wasn't easy at all. You write and you may think that you are okay and with the help of the supervisor you realize that you started with things that you were not supposed to, when you come to chapter 4 you don't even know what you are writing about.

**Interviewer:** so, the difficulty was in the manner that it was supposed to be written or because there was not enough information?

**Rebecca:** ja, the style of writing or the genre if I'm correct to say so.

**Interviewer:** yes.

**Rebecca:** to make it clear and simple for the reader but at the same time keeping it coherent and all about academic expectations. The analysis of data, is it convincing, are quotations speaking to what you are trying to say.

**Interviewer:** I have finished with my questioning, if you feel that you have an important issue that you want to contribute that you feel was not covered in these questions you are free to do so.

**Rebecca:** I think you have covered everything but I think what helps a lot is getting your information and your data on time and analyzing it. That's all.

**Interviewer:** thank you so much for having been a participant in this study. The encounter has been very enlightening.

**Rebecca:** ok, it's been my pleasure.