

Research Experiences of Research Students about the Supervisors Selection at Higher Education Level

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Abstract

This article is a case study exploring the experiences of pass out female research students of M. Phil Education at a University in Rawalpindi. The discussion is based on semi-structured interviews by each of the students. This information from the interviews is analyzed thematically, and the three main issues that emerged were the freedom of selecting supervisor, students confidence as a researcher, and student supervisor relationship. Based on the information gathered, this study records the ways in which other research students can benefit while selecting their supervisor to become efficient researcher in the specific area of interest. The study also provides the information about the challenges related to the supervisors faced by research students during their research work.

***Keywords:** Freedom of selecting supervisor, students' confidence as a researcher, student-supervisor relationship*

1. Introduction

Getting admission in a postgraduate research program such as M.Phil. is an imperative commitment that has potential to bring change in students' life. Throughout the whole process of research dissertation the key person in students' life is his/her research supervisor. It is crucial to have an effective professional relationship between the student and the supervisor (Bair & Hawtho, 2004; Shariff, Ramli, & Ahmad, 2014). The working relationship of student-supervisor serves as a sufficient determinant of quality supervision (Ali, Watson, & Dhingra, 2016).

Supervision is an intensive, interpersonally focused one-to-one relationship between the supervisor and the supervisee. Supervisor has to facilitate the student's academic development either in terms of course work or research project. Instead of importance of supervision in the higher education, research

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also found it as a major cause of students' poor research work or even their failure in completion of studies and it usually happens when the supervisors are imposed by departments rather than students own choice according to their research area as well as their comfort with supervisor. Students' needs in their research work are always become a conflict as they did not have any other sources in guiding them to go through their research work. Poor student-supervisor relationship will cause them to extend their studies and have difficulty to finish their project. This situation caused poor quality of students' research work. On the other hand a good interaction between supervisor and supervisee allows a considerable degree of free expression. Supervision is a complex social encounter which involves two or more parties with both converging and diverging interests. Therefore, balancing these interests is very crucial to the successful supervision (Abiddin, Ismail & Ismail, 2011).

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of passed out research students about the challenges related to their supervisor selection faced during their research work. The study also explored the research students' experiences about their supervisor selection in order to provide the information about the challenges related to the supervisors faced by research students during their research work. The study also investigated the aspects of thesis supervision from female research students of M. Phil Education.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

This study is based on following objectives;

1. To explore the students' experiences about their supervisor selection.
2. To provide the information about the challenges related to the supervisors faced by research students during their research work.

1.2 Research Question

The study set out one major research question in its attempt to explore the female research students' experiences about their supervisor selection and supervision at M. Phil level.

How does research students of M. Phil Education experience the challenges related to their supervisor during their research work?

1.3 Significance of the study

The findings of the study can be significant for all the research students specifically for M. Phil students. The study put forward few recommendations and suggestions that can be useful for research students in order to select their supervisor according to their area of interest.

1.4 Delimitations

The study was delimited to the M. Phil level Research students of Education Department from Women University in Rawalpindi.

2. Review of Literature

Writing a research thesis in any program of the study is a very good example of research work by students. Writing research thesis demands from students to display their knowledge, attitude, skills, confidence and power in their research work. Writing dissertation/theses at any stage especially at M.Phil. and Ph.D stage is considered as first systematic empirical step of research introduced to the students. While supervisor and student working on their thesis develops an effective learning relationship between them. It also establishes a clear objective for training and clarifies the role of the students and supervisors (Yousefi, Bazrafkan, & Yamani, 2015). The elements on which the supervision constituted are those meetings which are held during the research process between supervisor and the student. The aim of these meetings is to provide pedagogical support for the thesis students. To provide support and effective research guidance the supervisors are expected to possess professional knowledge for this work (Frank & Arvidsson, 2011).

Many studies have conducted to explore the satisfaction level of students with their post graduate supervision experiences, qualities of good supervisor and the expectations of students about their supervisors (Tahir, Ghani, Atek, & Manaf, 2012). Supervisory styles and supervisory relationships were also investigated (Latona & Browne, 2001). Ali et al, (2016), conducted a study to explore the expectations of students from their supervisor to provide continuous productive feedback, encourage students to work independently. Students also expect that their supervisor must be friendly approachable and competent in the area of research which student is conducting (Ali et al, 2016). During the starting period of the research, students' expect to have regular meetings with their supervisors, supervisor expected to be a guide (Talebloo & Baki, 2013). Specific factors leading to the students' failure to complete their research work include irregular and infrequent meetings with the supervisor, inability of the supervisor and the student to set research goals, and a general lack of direction of the student from the supervisor. We think of supervising/advising of research thesis students as a teaching and learning practice but it is more than this. Alongside teaching/learning, supervision needs to be thought as research student development together with research project knowledge production (Maxwell & Smyth, 2010).

Studies related to the thesis supervision especially concentrated upon the improvement of supervising. Moses (1985) stated that the practice of supervision can be improved if the complaints of many research students considered and try to overcome these problems expressed by the students. There are many issues which were explored by the researchers, some common issues for supervision were mentioned as:

- Poor practice of changing ideas, as a result this poor interchange shrink the amount of good ideas and reduced the scope of learning.
- Insufficient attention to a process whereby a supervisor, or supervisory team, can negotiate each student's needs for structure and direction.
- Poor student-supervisor communication about the project design, targets, timing, responsibilities and expectations, relationship among these elements is also required (Holbrook & Johnston 1999, pp. 66-70).

The process of supervision can be improved if two essential principles are present in advisory relationship;

- A clear and open communication between student and supervisor on all aspects of the project
- A framework for supervision and studies which facilitates rather than hinders students' development and creativity (Moses, 1985).

Research students expect to receive from their supervisors a quality supervision, mentoring, guidance and good advice throughout the research work. This support to the research students provided mainly by the allocated supervisor. All research degree programs involve a professional partnership between the student and their supervisor. A good working relationship is essential for the successful completion of research degrees and can be achieved by both parties understanding their roles and responsibilities within the relationship. Agreed expectations should not necessarily prescribe the way in which a student should work, but they should establish some basic guidelines to ensure the development of a good working relationship. The relationship between student and supervisor is dynamic and therefore, the expectations can be adapted appropriately as the student develops independence in their study.

3. Research Methodology

This study has employed qualitative research method in order to explore the experiences and challenges of pass out female research scholars about their supervisor during their research work in M. Phil. A Case study research design was used to investigate the experiences and challenges faced by the research scholars related to their supervisors during their research work. A case study research design was used as it allows the exploration and understanding of

complex issues. Case study is considered a robust research method when a holistic in depth investigation is required and when the issues especially from education and sociology are addressed in community it is an appropriate method to opt in research (Johson, 2006).

3.1 Population & Sample of the Study

The population of the study was the pass out scholars of M. Phil Education program who have done their research work under the supervision of their supervisors in a women university in Rawalpindi. There is only one university for women in Rawalpindi that is why it is selected by the researcher to carry out a case study to explore the experiences of female research students and challenges that they faced during research work. The university has two pass out batches up till now in which first batch consist of four students and six students were in second batch. Considered the availability option second batch was selected as a population of study. Five students out of six were selected as research participants who showed willingness to give information.

3.2 Sampling Technique

Purposive Sampling Technique was used to select the research participants. The study purposefully selected only those female students who have done their research work in M. Phil Education from Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi. In qualitative studies where the number of research participants are not very large, non- probability sampling is suggested to use. Non- Probability Sampling is used when the researcher is interested in getting in depth detailed information to explore the phenomena and interviews are one of the appropriate data collection method that provide in depth information (Creswell, 2014).

3.3 Instrumentation

Semi-structured Interview Protocol was used to collect information from the research participants. The protocol was designed with the help of literature in which five questions were stated based on students' experiences and challenges that they have been faced during their research work in supervisor selection and supervision. Inter-rater reliability was used to check the authenticity of interview protocol in which three experts from the relevant area approved the protocol. Inter-rater reliability is used when the researcher has to check the reliability of an instrument that is designed for a qualitative study. Inter-rater reliability is an extent to which the information being collected in a consistent manner. This reliability is also used for semi structured interviews (Keyton, King, Mabachi, Manning, Leonard, & Schill, 2004).

3.4 Ethical Consideration

The researcher got permission and clearance from all the relevant authorities including the administration of the universities and also from the participants before collecting the data. Also an individual consent form was provided to each participant for their record. The consent forms were used and signed by all the participants. It was assured that all the information from the respondents will be used for academic purposes and all the respondents were told about their privacy on the providing information and also they were free to use their pseudonyms. The names of participants were decoded to keep confidentiality.

4. Qualitative Data Analysis

The research question of the study was to document the experiences of pass out research students of M. Phil Education about the challenges related to their supervisor during their research work. The data were collected through individual interviews and the participant in the analysis were assigned pseudonyms which were A, B, C, D, and E. The study organized the gathered data on the bases of individual analysis method given by Creswell (2009). The three emergent themes of the study included: freedom of supervisor selection, students confidence as a researcher and student supervisor relationship

4.1 Freedom of Supervisor Selection

Freedom of supervisor selection' is one of the emergent theme from the gathered qualitative data that was characterized into two categories and these were:

4.1.1 By Choice

Two of the research participants stated that they chose their supervisor freely according to their own interest area. They were free to choose the supervisor of their own will by the consent of the supervisor as well. Research participant A stated that "*My supervisors' specialization area and my interest were quite similar and I am happy that I got consent from the supervisor of my own choice.*" Research participant B stated that "*I was quite satisfied with the supervisor that I have chosen for my research work.*" It was shown from the experiences of participant A and B that they both were satisfied by their supervisor selection. While other three participants said that they were not free to choose their supervisors according to their choice and area of interest.

4.1.2 Forcefully allotment of supervisor

Two of the participants A and B said that they were not forcefully imposed their supervisors but they choose them by their free choice. One of the research participants C stated that the authoritative body of the department allotted me a supervisor forcefully that I condemn a lot and after doing a lot of effort I become

successful to get rid of forcefully allotted supervisor. She further stated that *“It was very hard experience that I ever faced in my whole education life that I fought for my right to select the supervisor according to my own area of interest by my own will.”* Two of the research participants shared their experiences that they found it very difficult to choose a supervisor according to their own choice and according to own area of interest. Participant D stated that *“I experienced very negative behavior from the authoritative body of the university that involved power dynamics of the system.”* She further stated that *“It was difficult for me to raise my voice for my right as no one on prominent positions in my university wanted to solve this issue.”* Research participant E stated that *“I was allotted a supervisor and forcefully it was imposed on me to work with that supervisor.”* The gathered data showed that at this level of M. Phil students do not have freedom in their supervisor selection.

4.2 Students Confidence as a Researcher

Students' confidence as a researcher' is the second emergent theme from the gathered qualitative data and it was characterized into two categories and these were:

4.2.1 Optimist

Two of the research participants were very satisfied and admitted that they learnt a lot during their research work from their supervisors as well as from their research work. Research participant A stated that *“I can feel good whenever I have to guide other students in their proposals as well as in their thesis work.”* She further stated that *“It make me feel proud that I have a knowledge to help others.”* Participant B stated that *“I feel myself blessed that my M. Phil supervisor considered my opinion important and engaged me in other research related activities.”* Research participant C stated that *“after struggling a lot now I feel myself capable of doing research better as well as most of the time students asked me to help them and that make me happy and satisfied.”* While participant D and E stated that *“after facing tough experiences on the first stage we found ourselves very unlucky and try to compensate by communicating with other supervisors whose area of interest matches with us.”*

4.2.2 Research Skills

All the research participants agreed with it that after completing their M. Phil study they were capable of doing research and also can help others. Participant A stated that *“I already have done research work but at this stage I learn many different things in which I got familiarized with the concept of paradigm and other important aspects used in research.”* Participant B stated that *“Doing research is difficult task but I found this experience very good in terms of*

learning perspective.” Participant C stated that *“My supervisor helped me a lot in enhancing my research skills and today I can feel the difference in me.”* Participant stated that *“Yes, I learnt many things during my research work but I feel that I can be much better if I continue further work under the supervision of my area of interest supervisor.”* Research participant E stated that *“Doing research is an art and learning an art from an English or Mathematics teacher is not appreciated, same happened in my own case in research but there are some my own efforts who made me capable of doing such tasks without a true guidance according to the requirement.”*

4.3 Student-Supervisor Relationship

Student-supervisor relationship is the third emergent theme from the gathered qualitative data it was characterized into two categories and these were:

4.3.1 Positive Relationship

All the research participants appreciated the positivity in the student-supervisor relationship. Participant A stated that *“Research is an interesting as well as difficult task to complete without quitting and for its completion the most important aspect is student-supervisor relationship.”* Participant B stated that *“student supervisor relationship is the main characteristic that needs to be enhanced for the better output of research circumstances.”* Participant C stated that *“I enjoy my work a lot and its credit goes to my supervisor due to her supportive and positive relationship.”* Participant D stated that *“I do support student-supervisor relationship as it is very important part of research but this element was quite not found in my own case.”* Participant E stated that *“Yes, I agree with it that positive relationship delivers positive achievements, I can make a wish that I would be able to go through the same experience from my supervisor.”*

4.3.2 Motivation

All the research participants were feeling that they were motivated during their research work. Participant A stated that *“No matter how much I was tired and bored from my work but I did my work quickly after every meeting with my supervisor.”* Participant B stated that *“my supervisor was my counselor as well, she helped me a lot whenever I got stuck.”* Participant C stated that *“I work not only for myself but also for my supervisor who always encouraged me and helped me whenever I needed.”* Participant D stated that *“Whenever, I met with my other teachers and discussed about my work I feel encouragement for my work.”* Participant E stated that *“I was confused bit about my supervisor attitude but I feel motivated whenever I discuss my work with my other classmates.”*

5. Discussion

The current research was conducted to explore the challenges of female research students that they experienced in their supervisor selection at M. Phil level in a women university. The qualitative results highlighted the three main emergent themes focused on the students' choice related to "*Freedom of supervisor selection*", "*Students' confidence as a researcher*" and a "*student-supervisor relationship*". The results further showed that research students of Women University were not fully empowered in their decision making about supervisor selection. According to Philips and Pugh (2010) at research phase the selection of a supervisor is a crucial step for a supervisee/student. They relate this selection of supervisor one of the most important transaction in supervision experience. To empower student in decision making of his/her supervisor selection gives them an opportunity as well as freedom in selecting a supervisor and strengthen the level of students' satisfaction. Another research conducted by Donald, Saroyan and Denison (1995) in Canada found the two main factors that are important in conducting a good research. The findings of the research show that these two factors significantly related to the supervisor's research knowledge field and their availability being a graduate research supervisor to their research students. The study found that in case of supervisor allotment from the department there may be a possibility that department ignore the relevant factor that supervisor knowledge area expertise not match the students' research area and it can influence the work performance of the student as well.

In the second theme "*Students' confidence as a researcher*" it was found that students confidence as a researcher enhance and improve when they get an opportunity to work with the supervisor that is not imposed on them by department. They become more optimistic and would be able to polish their research skills as well. On the other side if the supervisor research expertise area is different from the student it influences the students' confidence toward learning and student would not be able to polish his/her research skills. According to Saleem and Mehmood (2017) the lack of suitable knowledge and research expertise of the supervisors relating to the supervisees' research topic may be considered as a barrier towards generating the new knowledge and contribution to the existing piece of information. They further stated that the knowledge provided by such combination of supervisor and supervisees' research effort would not be able to contribute good findings. They suggested further that on the other side if the supervisor research expertise are according to supervisees' research area, this factor influence more significantly on the new knowledge in the field. The third theme that emerged from the gathered data is '*Student-Supervisor Relationship*' that emphasize on the positive relationship

between the student and her supervisor and also it contributed in enhancing the motivation of students towards their research task. According to Philips and Pugh (2010) to empower students in selection of their supervisor of their own choice gives them a freedom to build a strong student-supervisor relationship. It contributes a positive psychological effect on students' learning behavior to work with the supervisor on her own choice and it makes a supervision experience more satisfying for the research students as compared to those who do not get this opportunity.

The findings indicate that there were strong power dynamics in the women university those suppressed the voice of female students and forcefully imposed institutional decisions on the students. The results from the gathered data also show that the research participants were not discouraged by this attitude but they still were involved in research activities. The major findings of the case study shows that the female research students condemn the attitude of the less cooperative behavior of the institution as they experienced least interest in their research work under the supervision of a supervisor with different area of interest. On the other side the findings of the research indicates that those students who were free to choose their supervisors were much satisfied during the whole period of their research work. They were showing their positive attitudes towards their learning and experiencing better student-supervisor relationship. The major findings highlighted the aspects that female M. Phil students are mature and wise students but still they do not have freedom of choice in their supervisor selection but the study uncover this reality that our traditional culture of teaching is difficult to change in which students are free to decide for themselves according to their interest.

6. Conclusion

The study found imposed and forceful behavior of the institution in which students do not have freedom of choice to select their supervisor according to their own area of interest. The findings also indicate the less interest of female students in their research work with a forcefully imposed supervisor. Thus, it is concluded that female research students do not have freedom of choice in their supervisor selection.

7. Recommendations

The study put forward the following recommendations:

1. Students should be empowered in their decision making about the selection of their supervisors as it would be helpful for both the research students and supervisor for collaborative learning.

2. Student-supervisor relationship should be given importance to ensure better output in research field.
3. Workshops should be conducted to understand the importance of students' satisfaction during research stage at higher institutions.

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