5

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS: BECOMING RESILIENT THROUGH COMPASSION AND IMAGINATION

Bella Vilakazi

INTRODUCTION

You are not ready for a PhD. Come back when you are. Your idea will not even amount to a paper.

These are the words that a prospective supervisor uttered when I proposed that he be my doctoral supervisor. A postgraduate study such as a PhD is an emotional journey for which you can prepare only so much. The challenges that come with it are varied and unique for each student. This chapter aims to provide a perspective into postgraduate student experiences and highlights the importance of compassion and sympathetic imagination between a supervisor and a student. My own initial encounter with a supervisor and the implications of these emotions serve as a backdrop of this perspective. I close the chapter with a discussion on the concept of democratic justice that could serve as a guiding notion in South African postgraduate supervision.

COMPASSION IN THE CONTEXT OF DOCTORAL SUPERVISION

The first encounter with your supervisor is crucial when you embark on your postgraduate journey. It comes with a myriad of emotions, one of which is compassion (Nussbaum 1997). Compassion is a reflection of what it means to be human (Waghid & Davids 2013). Compassion can be evoked by how your supervisor senses the depth your academic need, the depth of your study, your prior experience and the capabilities that you bring to the potential study, as well as the potential for personal development through the research and beyond.

Embarking on a postgraduate journey demands something you are passionate about, as well as a gap in current knowledge that can be addressed in the process of becoming a researcher. Your contribution needs to benefit the field of knowledge,

POSTGRADUATE STUDY IN SOUTH AFRICA

as well as your own learning and becoming (Waghid 2006; Barnett 2007; Waghid & Davids 2013). This passion needs to be met by supervisory compassion, which Waghid and Davids (2013:770) call being encouraged by the student's "eagerness to pursue doctoral studies, coupled with her (sic) critical acumen, astuteness and independence of mind". In the context of postgraduate supervision, compassion refers not only to caring about suffering, but also to recognising commonalities that exist between you and your supervisor and how these can shape you as a student or supervisor, the postgraduate journey itself, the supervision process, as well as the possibilities that might emerge from it (Waghid 2010). In the process you will fulfil your academic need with the help of your supervisor, who in turn will produce a doctoral student who will contribute to the discipline and society at large.

Barnett (2007) describes students' work as gifts they present to their supervisors. In the supervision context the pedagogical relationship between a student and a supervisor takes on the exchange of gifts in the form of numerous drafts and critical engagements. These acts of gift giving are mutual obligations between you and your supervisor. Supervisors introduce you to the values and conventions upheld within your discipline of choice, while you develop independence and critical thinking skills. You also become immersed in the academic texts and learn to see patterns in literature, develop an informed opinion, learn how to be coherent, reflective, argumentative and persuasive and – finally – find your scholarly voice (Barnett 2007; Waghid & Davids 2013). Your gift to your supervisors is to respond to each and every feedback they provide, to engage critically with them and meet the agreed deadlines. This mutual exchange of gifts lies central to compassion in the supervisor-student relationship.

You also need to show compassion to yourself. A postgraduate journey has many pitfalls, such as feeling vulnerable and doubting yourself. The challenging aspects of your journey are not going to disappear if you pretend that they do not exist and do not deal with them. Sometimes it may be necessary to take a step back and create some distance between you and your studies. Give yourself space to breathe, think and gain perspective. Treat yourself during these moments. You will come back with a fresh outlook on your studies.

CULTIVATING IMAGINATION IN THE CONTEXT OF DOCTORAL SUPERVISION

Imagination (Nussbaum 1997) is another key emotive element of a supervisory relationship. Nussbaum (1997; 2010) emphasises the importance of having the ability to imagine other people's circumstances. In order for us to do this, we need to imagine what life must be like for other people (Nussbaum 2010). However,

CHAPTER 5 • CLOSE ENCOUNTERS: BECOMING RESILIENT THROUGH COMPASSION AND IMAGINATION

imagination does not happen automatically, but develops as supervisors and students get to know each other. Students and supervisors come into the relationship with unequal knowledge, experience and disciplinary speciality – and therefore need to imagine each other's positions in order to build a constructive and productive relationship.

Nussbaum (1997; 2010) supports the idea that supervisors get to know their students and learn about their needs, intentions and circumstances¹. This does not suggest that you need to reveal your private life to a supervisor. Although life circumstances tend to creep into this pedagogic student-supervisor relationship, imagination may support compassion which – in turn – can enable emotional intellect and ethical deliberation to emerge (Waghid 2010). Your supervisor undertook the same journey during some point of his or her academic career and knows what it is like to be a student. He or she can understand who you are by imagining what it must be like to be where you are at different stages of this journey, especially when you experience challenges. Supervisors are therefore able to support and guide you while expressing compassionate imagination. Compassionate imagination ensures pedagogic interactions that are morally justified and devoid of narcissism (Nussbaum 1997).

My initial encounter with a prospective supervisor may serve as a case in point where compassionate imagination was not enacted. The theoretical explorations of compassion and imagination described above are what might have emerged had his response been different. I will use this experience to argue in favour of compassion and imagination as the basis for developing resilience to survive and succeed during your postgraduate studies.

AN ENCOUNTER WITH A PROSPECTIVE SUPERVISOR: MY STORY

I will use the pseudonym Kopano² for the academic whom I first approached with a research proposal to supervise my PhD. Kopano was an accomplished academic and supervisor with a substantial research output and publication record to back it up. Meeting someone of his stature was intimidating for me because I knew about the depth the doctoral study required I wanted to pursue under his supervision, but did not have the words to describe it. Waghid and Davids (2013:776) articulates my

1 Also see the second chapter in this book by Zondi Mkhabela and Liezel Frick, where they explore what such a student-supervisor relationship might entail amidst uniquely South African complexities.

2 The name Kopano is a Setswana word meaning “a meeting” or a gathering of two or more people. Setswana is one of South Africa's official languages and is spoken by about 8% of the total population.

POSTGRADUATE STUDY IN SOUTH AFRICA

feelings of intimidation as “the one constructed on the basis of one knowing much and the other not knowing enough”. The interaction left me doubting myself. The difference between what these authors describe and myself was that when she (Davids) encountered her supervisor for the first time, she was “uncompromising” about her idea and knew what it meant to her (Waghid & Davids 2013:776).

I tried very hard not to be too sensitive and read too much into the encounter. However, it was important for me to say what I had come to see him about, be coherent and present myself well. There were awkward and uncomfortable moments, but I gathered up enough courage and requested him to supervise me. I felt vulnerable and no sooner than I knew it, I was out of his office. Dismissed. This was like an “uncompassionate dismissal” that Waghid (2010:19) writes about. While I believe that it was not his intention to treat me that way, I felt violated and disrespected on an academic, professional and personal level. However, Waghid (2006:429) cautions that sometimes we (students) come with “frivolous consumerist logic” and expect supervisors to enable us to obtain a PhD without engaging in a doctoral learning process. He further cautions that we do not take it well when supervisors criticise us. As students, we may become suspicious, feel threatened and make unfounded assumptions about well-meaning supervisors. Doctoral supervision will not always be kind and gentle.

On the same day after this unfortunate encounter I made an inquiry with another professor. I was well received. She gave me space and time to explain what I wanted my study to entail. She confirmed that I was on to something and immediately suggested a doctoral committee for my proposed study. This was a pleasant surprise. However, the doctoral committee included Kopano. I was determined not to be humiliated again and started looking elsewhere for a potential supervisor.

A friend told me about a prospective supervisor at another university. Vulnerable and full of self-doubt, I contacted her. She received me well and I felt respected and appreciated. She also told me that my idea for a postgraduate amounted to a study at a PhD level that could contribute to the needs of my country. Her actions portrayed compassion and imagination. In a short space of time my email inbox was flooded with readings she suggested, and questions that she needed me to answer pertaining to the problem I wanted to investigate. This was followed by a registration for a PhD forum. I never looked back. She has been my supervisor since and I will graduate under her guidance, support, and structured and honest feedback about my work.

DEMOCRATIC JUSTICE IN POSTGRADUATE STUDENT SUPERVISION

Democratic justice, Waghid (2010) suggests, could be a guiding principle in South African postgraduate supervision, especially considering our apartheid past and its legacy in educational settings. I draw on his ideas of mutual attachment, mutual attunement and mutual action as requirements for democratic justice in providing a student perspective.

Following Waghid (2010:51), critical learning is allowing the unexpected or “something new” to emerge. From a supervisory perspective it means that supervisors embody or embrace social justice responsibly in contributing to society by supervising you. As part of democratic justice, your supervisor can use their expertise to contribute to society by taking care of your rights, enabling deliberative engagement and exposing you to critical learning. But the enactment of democratic justice is not a one-way street in the postgraduate supervision context – there needs to be a mutual attachment between supervisor and student.

Mutual attachment is motivated by the work supervisors have done, and their knowledge, experience and level of expertise (Waghid 2010), which inspire students to develop an interest in a particular supervisor. In my encounter with Kopano, I expected him to expose me to possibilities and resources. The relationship became undemocratic and unjust when he dismissed my ideas without any compassionate imagination. I was expecting him to guide me so I could prepare myself for postgraduate study, but his response defeated the potential for mutual attachment that needs to exist in a postgraduate supervision relationship.

You need to recognise the importance of managing and maintaining this fragile yet important pedagogic relationship. You come into the supervision space with having opened up yourself academically and intellectually to your supervisor. You recognise your position as a novice researcher and take into consideration that you must have research questions which need to be well positioned. You become aware of your thoughts and ideas which sometimes can be vague and broad. Supervisors who formatively support you to narrow down all these ideas and make sense out of them enact democratic justice. In the process, you put yourself under their responsibility and, in turn, supervisors become accountable for you. They become the mirror through which you see your strengths, weakness and what you need to learn. They portray democratic justice which is a moral obligation on their part (Waghid 2010).

Your supervisor can also become attached to you because of the attributes or capabilities you might portray. You become your supervisors’ mirror that they can use to reflect on their practice. This presents them with an opportunity to learn from

POSTGRADUATE STUDY IN SOUTH AFRICA

and through you. In this way, you broaden their horizons and open unimaginable experiences. Therefore, do not undermine or underestimate your contribution to your supervisors' growth. It is as important as what your supervisor will do for you. It is important to make the most of each supervisory encounter. Mutual attunement therefore underlies the notion of democratic justice (Waghid 2012) and demands compassionate imagination in order for postgraduate students to become resilient.

CONCLUSION

Postgraduate supervision is one of the encounters which forms the cornerstone of your pedagogic experience in higher education. The initial encounter with your supervisor lays the foundation of your postgraduate journey and what may come thereafter. Such encounters are based on compassionate imagination, which may lead to mutual attunement between students and supervisors. These notions form the basis of democratic justice as a characteristic of the postgraduate student-supervisor relationship.

You can show compassion to your supervisor by not taking his or her supervision for granted. You are also showing compassion to yourself by taking your commitments seriously. Compassion calls for you take care of yourself so that you can build up enough resilience and strength to successfully complete your postgraduate journey.

Supervisors, on the other hand, are exercising the lessons learned from their own postgraduate journeys. It is perhaps expected that they give students supervisory advice based on their own experiences. A supervisor will offer you informed choices and you might want to weigh these and choose the one best suited to your study. All this comes from a position of supervisory compassion, imagination and practicing democratic justice values.

REFERENCES

- Barnett, R. (2007). *A will to learn: Being a student in an age of uncertainty*. New York, USA: Open University Press.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (1997). *Cultivating humanity: A classical defence of reform in liberal education*. London, UK: Harvard University Press.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2010). *Not for profit*. New Jersey, USA: Princeton University Press.
- Waghid, Y. (2006). Reclaiming freedom and friendship through postgraduate student supervision. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 11(4):427-439.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13562510600874185>
- Waghid, Y. (2010). *Education, democracy and citizenship revisited: Pedagogic encounters*. Stellenbosch, South Africa: AFRICAN SUN MeDIA.
- Waghid, Y., & Davids, N. (2013). Reflecting on a doctoral supervision: From scepticism to friendship. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 27(4):769-780.