

Pillars of Strength in the Lives of Female PhD Students in Education and Engineering at One University in Malaysia

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Abstract

Participation in doctoral studies has becoming a national agenda as it contributes towards the accomplishment of world class universities in Malaysia. However, the path towards obtaining a PhD degree can be challenging and full of uncertainties. Thus, success is not definite. This scenario may discourage eligible students to pursue for doctorate degree and thus the national agenda in terms of higher education may not be achieved. Therefore, this research was conducted to explore the significant people in the lives of female PhD students in Education and Engineering at one university in Malaysia as to shed some lights on their journey. Reasons for choosing those people were also being investigated. Thirty eight students were interviewed in this qualitative study and data were also derived from two focus group sessions. Thematic analysis of the data led to the discovery of certain significant individuals which provided three kinds of support namely; Professional, Personal and Financial.

Keywords: Doctoral studies; significant people; support

Abstrak

Penyertaan dalam pengajian diperingkatan kedoktoran telah menjadi agenda negara kerana ia menyumbang ke arah pencapaian universiti-universiti tempatan yang bertaraf dunia di Malaysia. Walau bagaimanapun, laluan ke arah mendapat ijazah PhD adalah mencabar dan penuh dengan ketidakpastian. Oleh itu, kejayaan adalah sesuatu yang tidak pasti. Senario ini mungkin tidak menggalakkan pelajar yang layak untuk meneruskan pengajian ke peringkat doktor falsafah dan dengan itu agenda negara dari segi pendidikan tinggi tidak boleh dicapai. Oleh itu, kajian ini dilaksanakan bagi mengenalpasti individu yang signifikan dalam kehidupan pelajar PhD wanita dalam bidang Pendidikan dan Kejuruteraan di sebuah universiti di Malaysia bagi memberi gambaran yang jelas tentang perjalanan akademik mereka. Rasional pemilihan individu-individu tersebut juga telah dikaji. Tiga puluh lapan pelajar telah ditemubual dalam kajian kualitatif ini dan data juga diperoleh daripada dua sesi kumpulan fokus. Analisis tema bagi data membawa kepada penemuan individu-individu penting yang menyediakan tiga jenis sokongan iaitu Profesional, Peribadi dan Kewangan.

Kata kunci: Pengajian doktor falsafah; individu penting; sokongan

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Postgraduate studies are essential for the development of research activities and advancement of knowledge at higher learning institutions. Therefore, every university aims to establish its postgraduate programs in order to attract enrolment of students both at Masters and PhD levels. In addition, Malaysian government has launched several initiatives to assist public universities such as MyBrain 15 Program and declaring tax relief incentive of RM5000 for tuition fees at postgraduate level (Zaini, 2009:241).

The idea of a PhD as a tough journey (Cross, 1981: 9) can be irresistible to certain people since in addition to personal, academic and vocational factors. Delamont (2004:188) cites “the challenge of PhD was appealing” as one of the motivating factors. Leonard (2001:50) also highlights factors relating to career, academic and personal; she adds “contributions towards community or society” as an additional reason. Striving for a PhD is a complicated journey (Leonard: 1998:167) since it does not involve dealing with academic matters only.

There are two kinds of PhD thesis (in the humanities/social sciences/education field). One view is that a PhD must be a piece of scholarly enquiry, deliberately limited in scope, but perfectly executed. The other view of a PhD is that it is a worthwhile learning experience. (Lawton, 1998:3). Lawton’s second view on the PhD is also supported by Ibrahim (2005:2), “The process of getting a PhD is a life story. It creates various physical and emotional changes”.

Based on the above views, this article seeks to present the people who have made the journey possible and bearable for a group of female PhD students at one university in Malaysia.

■2.0 RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

This paper is based on a research which investigated the experiences of female doctoral students in Education and Engineering at one university in Malaysia. The research objective presented in this paper is one of the five objectives covered in the above research. As students' experiences can vary from one another as mentioned by Wisker (2005:2009), "Research is exciting, demanding and rewarding but can also be a lonely and lengthy business compared, by one of our PhD students, to long-distance running", it is vital to explore the significant individuals in their lives in order to have a complete picture of their journey. Therefore, the research objective is to identify the significant individuals in the lives of female PhD students in education and engineering at one university in Malaysia and to determine whether there are any similarities or differences among them.

■3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted qualitatively using three methods of data collection namely individual interview sessions, focus group discussion and informal session. The respondents were female PhD students from Faculty of Education and the engineering faculties in the university. They were contacted by email asking their voluntary involvement in the research. Thirty eight students participated in the interview sessions and I managed to conduct two focus group discussions. In addition, I also had the opportunity to hold conversations with four participants from Faculty of Education and five engineering students during two separate informal sessions. The data were transcribed and analyzed thematically.

■4.0 FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Thus, flipping through the transcription pages for this research question, through thematic analysis, different characters emerged between the lines of the stories narrated by my research participants. My analysis involved identifying the people that were highlighted in the stories. Subsequently, the analysis reveals that there are recurrent references to certain characters and, therefore, as my participants and I are in the 'same boat', I would also like to metaphorically symbolize the characters as 'pillars of strength'.

My quest to explore this issue would be inadequate if I did not probe the reasons for the chosen individuals to be significant. Therefore, I included a question in my interview guide which specifically probed on that matter. My analysis indicates that a recurrent theme of 'support' has emerged from the data. Another critical glance at the findings led to the discovery of three kinds of support provided by those significant individuals namely; Professional, Personal and Financial. In addition, certain significant individuals are blessed to have the ability to offer more than one kind of support. This revelation will be elaborated upon further in the subsequent paragraphs.

4.1 "I am indebted to my father for living, but to my teacher for living well" (Alexander The Great)

I would like to use the above quotation to introduce the individual who was most frequently mentioned by my research participants. The data reveal that most of my participants thought that their supervisors were significant in their PhD endeavour. This is not surprising as PhD supervisees are expected to maintain close relationships with their supervisors. The analogy of their connection is described as, "The relationship between student and supervisor is about as close as many marriages, and lasts as long as many marriages"(Rugg and Petre, 2005:33).

In addition, the findings show that my participants' supervisors were capable of providing three kinds of support, namely: Professional, Personal and Financial. This indicates that supervisors have a lot to contribute towards ensuring students' persistence and determination to succeed. I believe this notion has been successfully conveyed by Alexander the Great in the above heading. However, to be suitable in this context of discussion, the reference for teachers has to be substituted with supervisors.

The choice of supervisors as one of the significant individuals in their lives was clearly emphasized by three of my participants from Engineering.

"..40% of the support comes from my supervisor..he is the best.." Hanim (Engineering)

"..of course my supervisor..without him I cannot .." Fira (Engineering)

"My supervisor is excellent..my project is a joint venture between two supervisors..one professor in Chemical Engineering and another professor in Civil Engineering..both of them are helpful.."Hyda (Engineering)

In providing support concerning professional matters, my participants highlighted that their supervisors were significant in navigating the route that they needed to take along the journey.

"..sure it's my supervisor..I have two..I'm doing a research so someone has to guide me on the right track.." Amni (Engineering)

"..supervisor is important to guide me ..now he is properly guiding me.." Dija (Engineering)

Towards approaching the end of my PhD journey, I can proudly state that, 'neither life nor a PhD journey is a bed of roses'. There were different forms of obstacles and they happened at various stages of this journey. Although all students wish that their PhD will be a smooth process, my participants voiced that some academic matters proved to be beyond their grasp. However, fortunately, their supervisors came to the rescue.

"..I think it's the supervisor..because when I am doing it I have to discuss with him..sometimes when I did not see...when I met my supervisor..he would see from a certain angle which I didn't notice so I think supervisor is important.."Zura (Education)

"...if he asked me to see him, I would go....he provides moral support in terms of helping in my writing, assists me in understanding the problems that I didn't notice....he helped a lot at the time when I felt that I could not think any more..before I presented my proposal..I went to see him every week..I had to see him..for emotional comfort..for emotional and moral support..he's my driving factor.." Ain (Education)

In addition, the imaginary role of supervisors as 'pillars of strength' can be further illustrated by looking at different forms of professional assistance being offered to the students. A student from Engineering had this to say on the above notion.

"my supervisor..a friendly and down to earth person..he's very knowledgeable..he made me feel comfortable..he welcomed good ideas..with him I feel confident that I can finish earlier..he understands the difficulty faced by students who are married..everyday he comes to the lab..sometimes twice in one day, he would ask questions about my research.."Devi (Engineering)

In the above discussions I have presented supervisors as 'Pillars of strength' in terms of providing professional support to my participants. Despite being closely associated with professional roles, it is remarkable to discover that some supervisors were also able to provide personal support. This finding supports the thought by Easterby-Smith *et al.* in Sambrook *et al.* (2008:72) who mention that, "The purpose of supervision is to steer, guide and support students through the process of conducting a doctorate. The supervisor's main task is to provide both technical and emotional support". However, more participants considered that their supervisors were significant due to professional matters rather than personal.

Two students from Education acknowledged that their supervisors were significant in inspiring them to persevere in their studies. Despite facing several personal setbacks in life, one student still had the determination to strive through due to the support given by her supervisor.

"I would say number one would be my supervisor..I think she has been the driving force behind everything I do and behind the ups and downs..after I was accepted into this university my father passed away and a few tears down the road..just last year..my mother passed away..these were the ups and downs..everybody is probably going through the same thing..my supervisor has been there to encourage me .." Lina (Education)

Similarly, having to endure the hardship of taking a few prerequisite Educational courses in the first year of her study and also juggling with assignments and examinations, another student was grateful for her supervisor's continuous encouragement.

"..then the one who gives a lot of motivation is my supervisor..keeps pushing me .." Faz ((Education)

Dependency on supervisors to provide personal support was also expressed by two of my Engineering participants. As someone who is also experiencing similar support from my supervisor, I think that we should thank our lucky stars for having supervisors who could boost our morale.

"actually I depend so much on supervisor..for moral support.." Fasha (Engineering)

"It's my supervisor..there were times when I felt like giving up..he would lead the way..it's a long journey that's why the supervisor is important.." Mary (Engineering)

A few of my Engineering participants were fortunate enough to be able to pursue their PhD under their supervisors' research grant. Although this dependency was not mentioned by others, one student brought the matter forward during her interview. Obviously, she felt indebted towards her supervisor for allowing her to achieve her dream.

"..supervisor of course..due to his research student grant and financial support.."Rina (Engineering)

4.2 "Bagai Aur dengan Tebing"

I have chosen the above Malay idiom to be the heading for this section since I believe it is suitable to represent the ideal relationship between PhD supervisees and supervisors. In English the idiom will be phrased as 'Like bamboo and the river bank'. It indicates a dependency on each other's support in order to exist. The meaning can be associated with a PhD by taking into account that supervisees and supervisors rely on each other in the quest to ensure successful PhD endeavours.

Consequently, PhD students and supervisors are two entities bonded together throughout the study duration and there should be symbiotic interactions between them in order to attain the desired outcomes. This notion was highlighted by Rugg and Petre (2005:32) when they mention that, "A good relationship between student and supervisor needs work by both parties". Hence, in exploring the experiences of female PhD students it would be futile if I did not take the opportunity to enquire about their relationship with their supervisors. Therefore, I specifically included one question on this matter in my interview topic guide. I hope the findings will shed some light on whether the relationship with supervisors has any influence in my participants' experiences as PhD students.

Although the choice of supervisors was not in their hands, this practice does not become an obstacle for my Education participants to foster good relationships with their supervisors. Consequently, these relationships are able to stimulate positive interactions between them, which contribute towards the progress in their studies.

"..I think I have quite a good relationship with her , she understood my problems and my concerns and I also understood her..I'm seeing her almost every week and we spend about half an hour maybe two hours..I will come in with my drafts ..we share lots of ideas and she would give lots of feedback..on books and materials that I can use as references..so I would say the relationship is quite good.." Lina (Education)

"..my supervisor is so kind and so helpful. He would give feedback..he's a critical person..to me he's an excellent supervisor.." Zai (Education)

"my supervisor and I..Thank God since my supervisor has lots of ideas..Thank God that each time I presented to her, she always gave ideas..she would give alternatives..she opens my mind ..although she is busy as Deputy Dean..she can still spend time with me.."Anis (Education)

However, for Mas, the road was a bit bumpy at the initial stage of her PhD journey.

"..I had a problem with my supervisor during the initial stage..at that time he was busy..he was the Deputy Dean..during first year..he didn't like me..I didn't like him.." Mas (Education)

However, being a determined person, Mas did not use that hurdle as an excuse for her to give up. She worked independently for her proposal since she wanted to prove that she was capable of doing it. Then, she was relieved to discover that her supervisor's 'cold' attitude towards her changed after she managed to give a successful proposal presentation. This issue is also found in a study by Manathunga (2005). The above scenario indicates the need for students to make the effort to ensure their supervision is fruitful as exemplified by the second assumption in Knowles' concept of adult learning which concerns the ability of adults to be responsible for their own learning (Knowles, 1990).

The advantage to select supervisors has proven to be a successful strategy for my Engineering participants. This finding supports the criteria mentioned by Rugg and Petre (2005:33) who state that "compatibility" between students and supervisors is a significant issue. Prudent criteria of selection such as areas of expertise, quantity of journal publications and acquisition of research grants have resulted in achieving these students' PhD expectations. Thus, the students claimed that they had good relationships with their supervisors.

"..so far no problem..if I have problems I go to see him..his office is near to mine..I don't have to make appointments..he doesn't mind..the formal meeting is every fortnight.." Dija (Engineering)

"..I think my supervisor is very good..I see him every fortnight..sometimes he was the one who came to me..every semester I have to attend postgraduate gathering in Kuala Lumpur..there are four of his students there..we had brainstorming sessions..supervisor would give ideas on how to do research, literature review..then he invited me to his house in Kuala Lumpur..." Amni (Engineering)

It is interesting to find that the results in a study conducted by Manathunga (2005) are similar to the findings in my study. Two of my Engineering participants were unfortunate since they had issues with their supervisors. Fira, a third year PhD student confessed that her progress was slightly behind since she had not completed her experiments. Her study momentum was disrupted when her supervisor decided to transfer to another university. Although the supervision still continued, the long distance relationship became a hassle for her. Therefore, she was given another supervisor, with whom she was unable to work well with.

"..I have good personal relationship with my second supervisor but not academically. He does not understand my project. I still have to travel to Kuantan (about five hours drive from the campus) to meet my first supervisor..I don't like to see my supervisor here, I don't know why..when I met the first supervisor, the meeting was very productive, I have a better relationship with him compared to my second.." Fira (Engineering)

Similar to the realisation that she could not work well with the supervisor who was appointed to her at the outset of the study, Alia decided to outsource academicians from other faculties. The effort was fruitful since she claimed that she managed to receive better guidance from her second and third supervisors.

"..since it was an accidental decision to study locally I just grabbed him (the first supervisor) to be my supervisor. I had to come up with the research idea myself, therefore, he does not bother with what I am doing..I got high marks for progress reports..but it was my own initiative in the project. I have only met my first supervisor twice..after the second meeting there was no input..I work more with my second and third supervisors.." Alia (Engineering)

4.3 "They are your garments and you are their garments"¹⁴

Getting married is encouraged in Islam and it is considered as a form of Ibadah (an act to show obedience to Allah). Consequently, Muslims who choose to commit themselves in marriage will be blessed for all the kind deeds that they do for their spouses throughout the relationship. The above quotation is an excerpt taken from the Quran. It describes the beauty of the relationship between spouses in terms of complementing each other's needs and desires. I have chosen the above quotation since it is truly relevant to my subsequent findings.

From thirty-eight of my research participants, twenty-eight of them are married. Responses from my participants who are married indicated that the above heading can be used to represent the significance of their spouses in making their PhD journey possible and manageable. Although marriage ties are considered as personal, some husbands are capable of becoming 'pillars of strength' for not just personal reasons but also for professional matters. They are fortunate enough to be able to fill both shoes. However, the significance of husbands due to personal matters outweighs the professional ones.

Thus these data contradicts one of the findings reported by White (2004:232). She cited "lack of support from spouses" as one of the obstacles for women to further to postgraduate level at two Australian universities. As 'pillars of strength' in terms of providing personal support, some of my participants from Education confessed that they could rely on their husbands for shouldering the maternal roles during their absence.

One of my participants from education had to leave home in order to be at the university. Ain had to leave her husband and three children in their hometown, which is about six hours drive from the university. Therefore, in the pursuit of this PhD, she had to become a weekend mother and fortunately the husband was willing to compromise with this arrangement.

"..now I'm studying full time..I am in the university alone..my husband is looking after my three children at home..they are still small, 7, 5 and 4 years old..so all this while my husband has sacrificed a lot ..." Ain (Education)

The above situation was also experienced by one of my Engineering participants. She had to be on the campus for her PhD and the three-hour drive from the university was not practical for her to commute every day.

"..my husband is a good supporter..I have to be at the university three days a week..he gives me a more comfortable car to use..I have to leave my two children at home..he handles them ..sending them to a babysitter during the day and taking care of them at night ..he sacrifices also..sometimes I was engrossed with housework..then he would remind me that I am a student.." Fasha (Engineering)

In addition to the above, my participants from Education also expressed that they were determined to stay in this endeavour and were persistent due to their husbands' encouragement, understanding and different forms of assistance provided throughout the journey.

*"I think a significant person is my husband..he has to be understanding ..I'm not the sort of person who does work at home..I don't show that I am miserable at home..it's just in the office ..so far he is understanding..he accompanied me when I did my data collection..he is not fussy in terms of expenditure..he gives moral support..not academically since he is not an academician..moral support ..he understands that I am studying...."*Nadia (Education)

4.4 "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." Maya Angelou

Thematic analysis of the data for my second research question indicates that supervisors and husbands are two 'pillars of strength' in the lives of female PhD students from Education and Engineering at my university. However, there were also other individuals highlighted and I would like to group them under one theme which is 'Significant Others'. They constitute friends, family members and lecturers. This finding supports the idea by Leonard (2001:76) when she states that,

So, particularly if you are older and considering doing a doctorate, look to and believe the support and encouragement you get from family and friends; and at any age accept that you should be confident and prepared to put yourself forward.

I have decided to choose the above quotation from Angelou for this sub-heading since it is highly relevant to what I am going to present. My participants chose these 'significant others' as their 'Pillars of strength' since their good deeds contributed towards the progress in their studies. The kindness managed to instil positive values in students. Friends and lecturers were there for academic support while families were more personal.

"..my friends who are doing PhD..my colleagues.. in a way they gave input or gave their thoughts about my research.." Anis (Education)

However, the data reveal that more Engineering participants chose friends as their significant individuals compared to those in Education. I believe that discussion of ideas and sharing of thoughts among engineering students are more prevalent compared to education due to the nature of conducting PhD in their field. This notion is as highlighted by Hasrati (2005:565),

In other words, what seems to be quite 'legitimate' in engineering, such as sharing programmes, collaborating in collecting data and sometimes even in writing the outcomes of the research, might be considered 'illegitimate' in the social sciences/humanities.

Some students belong to a research team under the same supervisor where they have a similar research focus but with a different angle of study. Furthermore, some students conduct their studies in laboratories; therefore sharing of equipment and materials assists in generating communication among them. This allows room for discussion about their research projects. However, although some students in education share the same supervisor, their research areas may differ from each other. In addition, each student has their own fieldwork setting, which is rarely similar to each other.

"..all my PhD friends are ok..I can discuss results with them even though they are not doing membranes.." Fatin (Engineering)

"..then friends..I have a female colleague who is also doing PhD..we always comfort each other..if I don't understand I can ask .." Amni (Engineering)

For some of my participants who are still single, the data show that they rely on family members as 'pillars of strength'. For Mira from Education, it was comforting to have someone to talk to.

"...family also although my mother does not understand what I am doing..she says if I have a problem I need to call her..then if I called her she would say she has never heard me saying it's easy..she just listens...but the most important are family members, my mother, sister and brother.."

In addition, as a daughter in a Chinese family, Mary thought that by being supportive towards her study, her parents had broken a common Chinese tradition.

"..my parents since they are very supportive..I'm grateful because they encourage me to go after my dreams, which is not normal among the Chinese..especially towards daughters.." Mary (Engineering)

For one participant, having doctorate holders in the family has somehow become a source of motivation.

*"..then the encouragement comes from my husband's siblings who have got their PhD..my family members understand that we have to study at this age..."*Hyda (Engineering)

Students who are doing PhD in Education at my university have to take compulsory courses before they are allowed to present their proposals to the faculty research committee. Therefore, one of the participants chose the lecturers for those courses as significant individuals in her PhD journey. Subsequently, the academic support received during tutorials helped to shape her research project.

"..in this faculty I have to attend classes ..although many people complained that seven courses were too many but to me it helped..since when I joined the second Research Method class..that's when I took the opportunity to settle my proposal..I asked the lecturers about what I wanted to

do..although I had discussed with my supervisor..at the same time I looked into different views..so to me the lecturers are very important..when I read I might get confused so I can ask for clarification from my supervisor as well as lecturers..” Zura (Education)

4.5 “No Man is an Island” John Donne

The focus group discussions on students’ ‘pillars of strength’ managed to substantiate the responses that arose during individual interviews. The group from Education verified the notion that there were certain individuals significant to them in their PhD pursuit. Themes, which refer to supervisors, husbands, friends and family members, emerged from the data. Furthermore, the themes of providing academic and personal support were also highlighted in the conversations.

There was a very distinctive reference to husbands and family members in my Education focus group since all of them are married and have children. Matters regarding child care support and the understanding of husbands towards the demand of studying helped these participants to juggle between their roles as wives, mothers and students.

Anis: Family is important...husband’s consideration..important to help me to juggle..

Zai: Both of us are studying, therefore, both of us are stressed..husband must give strong support..

Ain: Those who have families, cannot neglect them.. family and children support are important..

Zura: I agree with others..I have to think about family..family give support but they don’t understand..

However, the reference to supervisors as ‘pillars of strength’ was emphasized in the focus group discussion among engineering students and supervisors’ academic and personal support were mentioned. Then, they also highlighted the significance of friends and family members. However, one of them cited an individual who is not in the interview data. Rina pointed out that the Research Officers in her laboratory were also important in her studies.

Mary: At times when you feel like giving up, not achieve anything, your supervisor will tell you that actually you have done this, then you feel ok, easier to move on, supervisor is very important.

Shaz: Aside from supervisors, friends also help a lot, when I am stuck, they will guide me on where to search, feel relief after talking to friends, they give ideas, the path is clearer.

Devi: Supervisor, friends and family, when I achieve something they are happy, when I am down, they are there to pat me, friends also go through turbulence in their studies, supervisor also said that it was difficult for him before, a good supervisor will guide you..

Rina: First supervisor then second, friends like my senior, they guide me on how to use the lab equipment, how to order materials, research officers help a lot in technical matters.

5.0 DISCUSSIONS OF THE STUDY

5.1 Discussions on ‘Pillars of Strength’

All of my participants acknowledge the importance of supervisors for their PhD journey and I believe it is a wise strategy since the benefits have been highlighted in various writings, such as Wisker (2001), Phillips and Pugh (2005), Golde (2005) and Ismail and Zainal Abidin (2009). While most of them relate to the roles of supervisors on academic matters, some of my participants expressed gratitude over personal encounters. This thought is expected since the ‘ups and downs’ along a PhD journey also involves “emotional changes” (Ibrahim, 2005:2). Furthermore, this notion further exemplifies the significance of maintaining a good relationship between supervisors and supervisees (Wisker, 2001).

The insight on how women are positioned in Islam is exemplified in the findings. As seeking knowledge is also compulsory to women, husbands’ assistance is being sought after to make the journey possible. Thus, the theme ‘dependency on husband’ acknowledges the practice that is encouraged in the married lives among Muslims. By being tolerant and cooperative towards the needs and demands of their wives who are studying, those husbands have created the opportunities for their spouses to perform a form of ‘Ibadah’ (obligation to Allah) (Kausar: 2006). Subsequently, this theme also shows that the factor of family commitment which hinders women from continuing their studies (Muhammad and Ahmad: 2009), does not exist if husbands play their roles according to religious practice and not culturally-based as highlighted by Kausar (2007).

Furthermore, when some of my participants regarded family members as their ‘Pillars of strength’, it signifies the importance of good family support in enduring their PhD journey. This notion is not surprising since dependency on family members for motivation and assistance in terms of childcare also exists in the studies by Schwartz *et al.* (2003), Bradley (2007), Brown (1995) and Pillay (2007). While female students with children talked specifically on matters concerning childcare, students who are still single focused on support in terms of giving motivation and encouragement.

As one of the assumptions in Knowles’ Concept of Adult learning emphasizes the value of experiences (1990:237) in facilitating the learning process among adults, I believe my respondents’ dependency on other people such as supervisors, PhD peers and friends fits with this concept. Consequently, this move indicates the realisation among my participants concerning the significance of experiences, either theirs or others, in the acquisition of relevant skills and knowledge. This finding can also be found in studies by Churchill and Sanders (2007), Connell (1998), Rugg and Petre (2005) and Leonard (1998). Finally, the significance of individuals such as librarians and lab technicians in assisting some of my participants’ PhD stages were also raised by Ibrahim (2005) and Rugg and Petre (2005).

6.0 CONCLUSION

Presenting these amazing ‘pillars of strength’ in the lives of my research participants and also reflecting on my personal experiences on this matter has made me realize that our PhD journey is definitely not a solo expedition. Therefore, whenever I look at a completed thesis, it would not be ‘ethically’ right for me to award sole credit to the writer, people who were behind the successful completion of that thesis

deserve recognition also. Although there is room to mention about them in the acknowledgement section of the thesis, I truly believe that it is inadequate to portray the story about them. I am glad that this article has given the opportunity for my research participants and me to talk about these people, namely, supervisors, husbands, friends, family members, lecturers and also 'significant others'. In short, my data supports the notion highlighted by Lawton (1998:126), "Thus, while the ultimate responsibility for completing a PhD thesis is the candidate's, my experience suggests that professional and personal support have a vital role to play".

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