Mentorship Dynamics in Graduate Research: A Qualitative Exploration of Student–Adviser Interactions

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HOW TO CITE:
Cynthia M. Cariño(2026). Mentorship Dynamics in Graduate Research: A Qualitative Exploration of Student–Adviser Interactions. International Journal of Special Education, 41(18s), 1290-1295

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ABSTRACT:
This qualitative study examines the experiences of students with research advising and mentorship. Although adviser effectiveness is frequently assessed through surveys, few studies look closely at the interpersonal processes between students and advisers, such as supervision styles, feedback methods, and power dynamics. Through in-depth interviews with graduate students, the study shows that advising relationships greatly affect motivation, confidence, and the quality of research work. Thematic analysis identifies three main themes: supportive mentorship as an enabling factor, power and control as sources of conflict, and feedback as both a learning tool and a source of tension. The findings highlight the need for structured mentorship training for advisers and institutional policies that promote healthy advising relationships. Based on the findings, it is recommended that the college implement a mentorship training program for advisers that emphasizes effective, ethical, and relationship-centered mentoring practices. Furthermore, institutions should develop and strictly enforce clear guidelines on providing constructive feedback to help foster a positive and supportive learning environment. The college may also establish institutional policies that enable students to report and address conflicts in advising relationships, thereby promoting accountability and ensuring ethical advising practices.

Keywords: Research advising, mentorship, feedback, power dynamics

1. Introduction

Conducting research is vital in higher education. It lays the groundwork for academic growth, critical thinking, and the development of scholarly skills among graduate students. As they engage in research, students are expected to master research methods while navigating complex relationships with their advisers. These relationships often involve a sensitive mix of support, guidance, authority, and influence, which can significantly impact students' motivation, confidence, and overall research success.

Advisers play a crucial role in shaping the research paths of graduate students. They offer mentorship, essential feedback, and a foundation for students to build independence and professional identity. However, academic environments often emphasize technical aspects of research, overlooking the interpersonal and relational sides of advising. Existing literature typically focuses on quantitative measures like satisfaction ratings or completion rates. While helpful, these metrics do not capture the nuanced experiences of students

in these relationships. Understanding these interpersonal dynamics is important. They can either support positive learning environments or lead to tension and disappointment.

In the Philippines, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) has set guidelines that stress the importance of effective research supervision and mentorship. The CHED Memorandum Order No. 15, series of 2019, outlines the role of advisers as not just guiding research efforts but also creating a supportive environment for academic and personal growth. The memorandum emphasizes that mentors should focus on student welfare, adhere to ethical standards, and encourage a collaborative learning atmosphere, all crucial for developing competent researchers and professionals. Despite these directives, challenges remain in putting them into practice, especially related to the everyday mentorship experiences of students and the interpersonal dynamics that affect their research journeys.

This study uses a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of graduate students regarding research advising and mentorship. It aims to uncover how supervision styles, feedback methods, and power dynamics shape their perceptions, feelings, and overall research journeys. Specifically, it seeks to understand how graduate students describe their interactions with advisers, how these relationships affect their motivation and confidence, and how power dynamics impact their personal and academic growth.

Understanding these relational aspects is essential for informing institutional policies and training programs that seek to enhance mentorship quality. Insights from students' perspectives are hoped to contribute to ongoing efforts to align mentorship practices with national guidelines and best practices. Ultimately, the study aims to underscore the importance of empathetic and ethical mentorship and advocate for comprehensive mentor training that focuses on relational skills, in line with CHED's directives, ensuring that graduate research remains a positive, empowering, and transformative experience.

2. Methodology

- **Design:** This study utilized a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological design to explore and interpret the lived experiences of students in research advising. Guided by the phenomenological approach developed by Martin Heidegger, the study sought to understand the meanings students attach to their experiences with research advising. In this approach, the researcher served as an active interpreter who continuously examined the relationship between the participants' individual experiences and the wider context in which these experiences occurred.

- **Participants/Sample:** The study made use of purposive sampling. The following are the criteria: graduate students enrolled in the Thesis Writing Course for the Second Semester of AY 1290-1295 at the Graduate School of ISPSC, Sta. Maria Campus.

- **Instruments:** Semi-structured interviews (30–60 minutes each)

- **Procedure:** In the implementation of the study, the researcher will secure the necessary permissions from all concerned authorities, including institutional review boards, school administrators, or other relevant bodies. This ensures compliance with ethical standards and respect for the participants' rights and privacy. Then, the researcher will develop an interview protocol based on the objectives and scope of the study. The instrument will focus on collecting in-depth information regarding students' lived experiences of research advising. The questions will be designed to elicit responses that explore the students' lived experiences of research advising while aligning with the research objectives. An interview protocol will be established to ensure consistency, transparency, and respect throughout the data collection process. This protocol will include: a) Introduction: The researcher will introduce the study to participants, explain the purpose, and outline the expected outcomes. Participants will be informed of their rights, including voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time. b) Consent: Participants will be asked to sign an informed consent form, acknowledging their understanding of the study and agreeing to participate. c) Interview Process: The semi-structured interview will be guided by the interview protocol

but remain flexible enough to allow for follow-up questions based on participants' responses. Interviews will be audio-recorded with participants' consent for accuracy. d) Duration: Each interview is expected to last approximately 1290-1295 minutes, depending on the depth of the discussion.

Finally, the interviews will be conducted. Each interview will be recorded to fully cover the needed data. Then, the interviews will be transcribed. Last, the interview transcripts will be analysed using thematic analysis.

- **Data Analysis:** Thematic Analysis will be employed to analyze the data to be collected. Thematic analysis is a method used in qualitative research to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns, themes and meanings within data (Cresswell, 2018). Braun and Clarke (2006) outlined a widely used framework for conducting a thematic analysis, which involved six stages including familiarization of data, gathering initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Thematic analysis allowed the researcher to uncover rich insights and understanding from the data, making it a widely utilized approach in qualitative research across various disciplines. Coding will be done using NVivo software for systematic categorization.

3. Results and Discussion

Three major themes emerged:

Supportive Mentorship as an Enabling Factor. Participants with approachable advisers reported increased motivation, clarity in their work, and confidence. Below are some of the statements of participants:

"My adviser is very supportive, and I have no problem working with her. My adviser always

guided me step by step, which made me feel capable of finishing my thesis." (P6)

"My experience with my adviser is good. She boosted my confidence with

her encouragement and very supportive gestures." (P11)

"I felt empowered because my mentor trusted me to make decisions about my study." (P14)

Based on my investigation, supportive mentorship emerged as a crucial factor that boosts motivation, confidence, and clarity in students' research activities. Participants with approachable, encouraging advisers reported greater enthusiasm, increased motivation, and a sense of empowerment in their research. Such mentorship aligns with literature that highlights how warm, accessible, and empathetic supervision can greatly impact student success. Johnson (2016) emphasizes that effective mentorship involves emotional support, guidance, and fostering independence, all of which contribute to academic success and personal growth. Similarly, Allen, Eby, and Lentz (2006) show that relational support from mentors enhances mentees' confidence and motivation, highlighting the need for accessibility and encouragement.

Sub-Themes:

a. Adviser Approachability and Emotional Support. Students felt more comfortable and motivated when advisers were approachable, understanding, and encouraging.

b. Guidance and Confidence Building. Constructive mentoring helped students gain clarity in conducting research and strengthened their confidence in academic tasks.

Research highlights that supportive mentorship positively influences students' academic motivation, self-efficacy, and research productivity. According to Lev Vygotsky, social interaction and guided learning play a vital role in cognitive development. Similarly, studies by Kathy Kram emphasize that mentorship provides both psychosocial and career-related support that enhance learners' confidence and performance. Effective adviser-student relationships are associated with increased engagement, persistence, and academic satisfaction.

Power and Control as Sources of Conflict. Some students experienced feeling silenced, pressured, or disregarded in decision-making. One of the participants stated:

Sometimes, "I felt my ideas were not considered just because I am a student.

It was hard to argue back." I experienced control issues, but it taught me to be more patient and strategic in dealing with my adviser."

This theme highlights the hierarchical nature of academic advising, where power imbalances can hinder open communication and student agency. Some participants felt silenced or overlooked, which reflects Grant's (2003) view that advising includes power dynamics that can lead to dependency, tension, or exploitation if not properly managed. This emphasizes that unequal power relations can create barriers to effective communication and collaborative decision-making, hindering mutual trust and respect. These findings suggest that addressing power imbalances is vital for building fair and healthy mentoring relationships.

Sub-Themes:

a. Limited student voice in decision-making. Some students felt excluded from important research decisions and perceived unequal power dynamics.

b. Pressure and authority in advising relationships. Participants experienced stress when advisers imposed their preferences or exercised excessive control over the research process.

Studies on academic supervision reveal that unequal power relations may create tension and hinder students' autonomy. Michel Foucault explains that power structures shape interactions and influence behavior within institutions. In higher education contexts, authoritarian advising practices may lead to feelings of intimidation, dependency, and reduced academic confidence among students. Research further suggests that collaborative advising relationships promote healthier communication and more positive learning experiences.

Feedback as Both a Learning Tool and a Source of Tension. Feedback was valued for fostering growth, but also sometimes experienced as overwhelming or demotivating, especially when delivered harshly. Here are the participants' responses:

"Feedback is super important to me. It's how I learn and improve,

so I always appreciate it. It helps me see things from different angles

and identify areas where I can grow. (P1)

"I feel appreciated if I receive feedback, but I also feel neglected if not.

I wanted to improve, but sometimes, the comments were so blunt that

I questioned if I was capable at all." (P12)

This illustrates how feedback plays two roles: it is essential for learning and can also be an emotional burden. Supportive and constructive feedback helps students understand better and build confidence. However, blunt or harsh comments can cause discouragement and emotional pain. Participants noted that different feedback styles greatly affected their emotional well-being and motivation. Therefore, the way advice and critiques are shared can either build trust and growth or create anxiety and withdrawal.

To address these issues, we need to understand the mentor-mentee relationship. This understanding highlights the importance of support systems in institutions, such as training for mentors, clear feedback guidelines, and ways to resolve conflicts. These systems should follow national policies. The CHED guidelines promote ethical, supportive, and capable supervision. They also stress the need to recognize power dynamics and communication styles to improve mentoring relationships.

By exploring these themes, this study aims to provide insights into how mentorship practices can be improved to create more supportive, fair, and emotionally aware research environments. This understanding emphasizes the need for thorough mentor training and institutional policies that meet CHED standards. Such efforts can help ensure that the graduate research experience is positive and empowering for students.

The findings support earlier research that shows supportive mentorship leads to better student outcomes. In contrast, authoritarian or negative styles can block progress. The emotional and psychological aspects discussed add to our understanding of feedback, showing it is not just a cognitive action but also an emotional experience that can either uplift or discourage students. Issues related to power dynamics were significant, reflecting Grant's (2003) assertion that advising often involves power imbalances. These can result in dependency, tension, or exploitation if not managed ethically. Institutional support, including training for advisers that focuses on relational and ethical mentoring practices, is therefore crucial. Establishing clear feedback guidelines and ways for students to express concerns can help create healthier advising relationships.

Sub-Themes:

a. Constructive feedback as academic growth. Students recognized feedback as essential for improving the quality of their research and developing critical thinking skills.

b. Harsh criticism and emotional stress. Feedback delivered in a negative or overly critical manner sometimes caused discouragement, anxiety, and reduced motivation.

Educational scholars emphasize that feedback is a crucial component of learning and performance improvement. John Hattie identifies feedback as one of the most influential factors affecting student achievement. However, literature also notes that poorly communicated or excessively critical feedback can negatively affect students' emotional well-being and motivation. Supportive and timely feedback encourages reflective learning, whereas harsh criticism may create tension and resistance in adviser-student interactions.

4. Conclusion

This study emphasizes that advising and mentorship dynamics play a major role in students' research experiences. Supportive mentoring boosts confidence and productivity, while negative power dynamics and harsh feedback can harm academic success and emotional health. Addressing these concerns can improve the quality of graduate research experiences, promoting both academic success and overall growth.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are forwarded:

1. To conduct a mentorship training program. The college should create training for advisers that focuses on effective, ethical, and relational mentorship skills.

2. Institutions should establish and enforce clear guidelines for giving constructive feedback to create positive learning environments.

3. To have an institutional policy for interventions. The college may consider setting up grievance systems to allow students to report and resolve conflicts in advising relationships, ensuring ethical practices.

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CHED Memorandum Order No. 15, series of 2019

Acknowledgements (Optional)

The researcher expresses her indebtedness to Dr. Mario P. Obrero, SUC President III of Ilocos Sur Polytechnic State.

Author Declaration

- The researchers declare that this manuscript is an original work and has not been previously published, nor is it currently under consideration for publication elsewhere. All sources of information, data, and ideas from other authors have been properly acknowledged and cited in accordance with ethical research and publication standards. Moreover, the researchers declare that there are no financial, professional, personal, or institutional conflicts of interest that could have influenced the conduct, findings, interpretation, or presentation of this research