Diversifying and Transforming the Doctoral Studies Terrain: A Student's Experience of a Thesis by Publication

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Abstract

While a PhD 'by publication' in the Human and Social Sciences Faculties is not a new phenomenon in Scandinavian countries, it is a less popular approach in other parts of the world where it is often viewed with skepticism and its uptake is limited. Faculties of Education and Humanities in South African universities are no exception. This article reports on my own experience of completing a PhD by publication and foregrounds my voice, as a University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) student, in this doctoral learning process. Central to a PhD by publication is the notion of connectedness, and this article focuses on my 'logic of connectivity' which operated at five levels in the PhD. These levels include the clustering of the articles (which I refer to as chronicles) according to the research questions to guide the synthesis process; the literature thread throughout the chronicles; distributed leadership as the theoretical framing for the thesis; the design of the PhD as a mixed research synthesis study and, finally, the insights gathered as a result of the synthesis process. The article offers a critique of the PhD by publication, highlighting the concomitant benefits and challenges and concludes by arguing that the advantages of undertaking a PhD by publication outweigh the disadvantages.

Keywords: Doctoral education, PhD by publication, 'logic of connectivity', mixed research synthesis study, meta-inference

Setting the Context: Newness and Difference

This article reflects upon my experiences of undertaking a PhD by publication as a collection of seven journal articles and a book chapter in an Education Faculty. Its purpose is to raise awareness of this non-traditional form of the doctorate and to contribute to debates surrounding this relatively new form of doctoral education practice in the human and social sciences in the South African Higher Education terrain.

Since joining the university as an academic in 2002, my research began with a focus on the voices of school-based educators, both Post level 1 teachers and School Management Team (SMT) members about their perceptions and practices of 'teacher leadership' in a range of school contexts in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN).

Motivation for work in this under-researched area came from my increasing interest in the leadership practices of teachers in terms of their capacity as 'agents of change' in schools. Teacher leadership challenges traditional understandings of school leadership and, when fully developed, has the power to make a critical contribution to transformation at the level of the school, while at the level of higher education, it has the potential to problematise the terrain of education faculties where the concept straddles two fields in the making, 'Education leadership and management' (ELM) and 'Teacher education and professional development' (TEPD). As a consequence, it may create discomfort in those academics who value clear and rigid boundaries between fields and, in the field of ELM particularly, it offers a radical departure from traditional research which foregrounds the school principal as leader by virtue of his position. Thus, the likelihood is that teacher leadership will 'trouble' the leadership terrain, at both the school and the higher education levels, and challenge the status quo with a view to effecting inclusivity and transformation.

In 2004, I set up a small qualitative research study together with the tutors on the Bachelor of Education (Honours) programme I was coordinating. At that point in time, I had no idea that this initial research project would become a part of my doctoral work. At that juncture, I was certain that I would never do a PhD and was quite vocal about this to both my family and colleagues. As a novice researcher, I was content to develop my research experience in a fairly contained manner by involving myself in small independent research projects and then publishing the findings. This, I

could manage, while balancing my university teaching with my home commitments as mother and partner. In retrospect it was indeed an irony that whilst I was so resistant to doing a PhD, that initial study became the first of six research projects underpinning the eight articles which constituted the core of my thesis. But I must reiterate that there was no formal signaling of the publication-based study in 2004 and there was certainly no formal research design at that stage.

The possibility of a thesis by publication unfolded as I involved myself in research and explored an array of questions in relation to teacher leadership; the central one being how teacher leadership was understood in a South African schooling context. As each research project concluded, I reflected on the findings and where possible took into account the new learning when designing the next study. Thus, mine was an emergent research journey in which succeeding steps were based on the results of steps already taken, implying 'the presence of a continuously interacting and interpreting investigator' (Lincoln & Guba 1985:102).

As my research continued, salient elements began to emerge, insights grew and theory began to be grounded in the data obtained (Lincoln & Guba 1985). My approach was therefore open-ended and, with hindsight, I adopted theoretical sampling which is the process where 'data are collected on an on-going, iterative basis' (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2007:492). As researcher, I kept on adding to the sample until there was sufficient data to describe what was going on in the situation under study and until 'theoretical saturation' (Cohen *et al.* 2007) was reached. Through this process of theoretical sampling, I extended my research design until I gathered sufficient data to create a theoretical explanation of how teacher leadership was understood and practiced in the South African schooling context and could thus determine what contexts supported or hindered the take up of teacher leadership.

Thus the thesis by publication was retrospectively conceived when, in 2008, five research projects which explored teacher leadership within a distributed leadership framing were completed, three articles were published while two articles and a book chapter were in the process of publication. I realised then that there was the possibility of bringing the various projects and articles together in a connected whole for the purposes of knowledge contribution. It was only at this endpoint that I was able to count up the

research projects (there were six) and become 'empirically confident' (Glaser & Strauss 1999: 61) that my category was saturated. While this moment served as the 'endpoint' to the data collection process, it also served as the 'formal starting point' for the doctorate. It was at this juncture that I registered for the PhD by publication, became a part-time student and, at this point in time, approached two colleagues to supervise me. They agreed to do so.

A PhD by Publication: Diversifying and Transforming the Terrain of Doctoral Education

Doctoral research, as Green (2009) argues, is knowledge work. However, he goes on to observe that 'the traditional PhD is no longer the sole object of concern nor the singular sign of value' (Green 2009:240). Lee (2010) concurs and contends that the space of doctoral education is a contested space because the PhD 'is changing and metamorphosing rapidly into a wide variety of different forms of output and different 'routes' to the attainment of a doctoral qualification' (Lee 2010:13). While Nyquist acknowledges that re-assessing and re-envisioning the PhD is not something new, she believes that 'this time round, the reconsideration of the purposes and future of the PhD degree seems to differ significantly from past assessments in several ways' (2002: 13).

Within this contested space of doctoral education, this article focuses on the PhD by publication as one of the routes to the attainment of a doctoral qualification. A PhD by publication, Lee argues, is not a single monograph or book-length dissertation but rather 'a series of shorter pieces, which are assessed by a range of different readers and reviewers before they are submitted for a final examination' (2010:13).

While the PhD by publication is common in Scandinavian countries, in other countries the notion of a PhD by publication 'is sometimes seen to be problematic – counter-intuitive, even' (Lee 2010:26). In the United Kingdom, for example, while the model of PhD by publication is not new, its uptake has been limited (Robins & Kanowski 2008). In South African universities, a PhD by publication in the Human and Social Sciences Faculties is a relatively recent phenomenon. For example, in the Faculty of Education where I was employed, I was one of the first candidates to register

for a thesis by publication and the first to complete. This alternative mode of PhD is still in its inception, particularly in the Education and Humanities faculties, and the rules for a publication-based study have only recently been accepted at the level of the University Senate.

As a consequence, when I embarked on a PhD by publication, there were no education theses of this type in the libraries for me to peruse and neither was there a detailed set of guidelines which I could follow. I turned to other faculties within the University and found a few publication-based studies in the sciences but these were not particularly helpful because connectivity of the articles did not seem to be a central focus. Thus, mine was a pioneering journey, at times a lonely one, filled with uncertainty in respect of process and format.

With little to guide me, my PhD registration process in early 2008 was directed by rule DR9 of the university's handbook entitled 'General academic rules and rules for students', which outlined the format of a PhD thesis. Part C of this rule pertains to a thesis by publication and reads as follows:

> A thesis may comprise one or more original papers of which the student is the prime author, published or in press in peer-reviewed journals approved by the Board of the relevant Faculty, accompanied by introductory and concluding integrative material (University of KwaZulu-Natal 2007: 27).

In the Swedish context, Lee (2010:12-13) describes the requirements for the PhD by publication as four journal articles in international peer-reviewed journals brought together into

> a compilation for examination with an exegesis or 'cover story', that gives an account of the collection, the research that informed the production of the articles, and the 'doctoralness' of the body of work submitted in the portfolio for examination

Similarly, writing from the context of Australia, Robins and Kanowski (2008) advise that, typically, three to five research articles are required to constitute a PhD thesis, accompanied by introductory and concluding chapters.

In accordance with University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) rule, my thesis consisted of eight academic, peer-reviewed, independent pieces of work (seven peer-reviewed journal articles and one book chapter) which satisfied the condition of *quantity* in the above statement. Draper prompts us here to bear in mind that a conventional PhD may result in between one and three journal papers so 'any PhD by publication that submits more than three papers has easily satisfied the quantity implicit criterion' (2008:3). However, Kamler (2008:284) reminds us that doctoral publication is not a given and only flourishes when

> it receives serious institutional attention, and skilled support from knowledgeable supervisors and others who understand academic writing as complex disciplinary and identity work.

In terms of the *quality* condition within the UKZN rule, six of my pieces of work were published in academic peer-reviewed journals, one was published as a chapter in an edited book while the final piece had been submitted to an academic journal and was in the process of peer-review. Accordingly, the thesis thus satisfied the condition of quality in the above statement.

The final part of the UKZN rule refers to the inclusion of introductory and concluding integrative material. To my mind, this condition is critical to a thesis by publication as it requires the student to synthesise the independent papers (or in my case chronicles) into a coherent whole and, in the process,

> make a distinct contribution to the knowledge or understanding of the subject and afford evidence of originality shown either by the discovery of new facts and/or by the exercise of independent critical power (University of KwaZulu-Natal 2007:25).

For me this was the intellectual challenge of my doctoral work. How was I to bring all the papers together into

> a thesis, i.e. a single coherent argument, with all the components (empirical work, research design, literature review, critical self-evaluation) all subordinated to, related to, and serving to support, this single argument (Draper 2008:3)?

How was I to develop my 'cover story'?

In Sweden, Lee (2010) explains how agreement is reached on the criteria for the 'cover story' through public debate in each department within the university where the PhD by publication is seen as a collective responsibility. However, this was not the case in my institution. I worked independently on my 'cover story' and drew on the expertise of my two supervisors when necessary. To achieve the requisite integration in my 'cover story', I developed what I called my 'logic of connectivity'. Here 'logic' denotes reasoned thought while 'connectivity' implies a form of linking, joining or relating. My 'logic of connectivity' in relation to the additional integrative material worked at a range of levels and guided the development of the various chapters of the thesis. These five levels of connectivity are listed below and then each is briefly discussed:

1. The development of three research questions and the clustering of the chronicles according to these questions to guide the synthesis process;
2. The literature thread throughout the chronicles;
3. Distributed leadership as the theoretical framing for the thesis;
4. The design of the PhD as a mixed research synthesis study; and
5. The insights gathered as a result of the synthesis process.

The First Level of Connectivity: The Retrospective Use of Research Questions and Clustering

On the issue of connectivity and coherence in the thesis, the doctoral process was driven by a broad aim and research questions which were generated retrospectively from the eight articles, which I called chronicles, in the thesis. The aim of my study was to 'trouble' the terrain of teacher leadership – at the level of both theory and praxis, in the South African schooling context through the synthesis of the chronicles. To assist in this synthesis process, the chronicles were clustered according to their ability to best answer the research questions which were:

1) How is teacher leadership understood and practiced by educators (teachers and SMT members) in mainstream South African schools?

2) What are the characteristics of contexts that either support or hinder the take up of teacher leadership?
3) How can we theorise teacher leadership within a distributed leadership framing?

Research question one was the primary question. However, this question presupposed the possibility that teacher leadership was already understood in contexts other than South Africa, and indeed it is, and I made reference to this extensive body of literature on teacher leadership in the thesis. Research question two was the secondary question which proceeded from the responses received to the first research question. It explored the characteristics of contexts which enhanced the take up of teacher leadership as well as two contexts which hindered the take up of teacher leadership: i) gender within a rural context, and ii) the context of HIV/AIDS. Finally, research question three aimed to develop a theoretical dimension to our understanding of teacher leadership for mainstream South African schools by locating it within a distributed leadership framing. While developing a theoretical dimension to one's research is a standard criterion for a PhD, I argued that in order to ensure connectivity across the eight chronicles in my publication-based study, the explicit inclusion of this question was critical.

However, while the research questions were crucial to the connectivity of the thesis, I argued that this logic of connectivity was insufficient on its own. As a consequence, further levels of connectivity were sought across the chronicles.

Literature Review as the Second Level of Connectivity

The second level of connectivity operated in relation to the literature relevant to the study. The chronicles which informed the publication-based study were initially written as stand-alone articles and they conformed to the typical journal requirements of empirical research articles of the journals in which they were published. As such, each chronicle had a part which discussed a feature of the literature on teacher leadership pertinent to the argument it raised. However, discussion of the literature in each of these parts was constrained, in line with the journal limits on article length. The purpose of the literature review in the doctorate was therefore to generate an

updated literature review which incorporated the literature from each of the chronicles into a coherent body of work and merge it, together with additional literature on teacher leadership, into a consolidated literature review. To assist with the process of connectivity I made extensive use of footnotes to indicate connections between the literature review sections in the chronicles and the PhD literature review chapter.

Connectivity through the Theoretical Framing

A further chapter in the thesis introduced the theoretical framing of distributed leadership as a means to achieve the third level of connectivity across the chronicles. Common throughout the eight chronicles was that each was framed by distributed leadership theory. At an intuitive level, I was convinced that any research about the leadership practices of teachers had to be framed by distributed leadership because I argued that teacher leadership beyond the classroom could not be enacted without a distributed leadership practice in place in the school. Here I defined distributed leadership as a social practice which centres on the dynamic interactions between multiple leaders who interact with followers in particular situations (Spillane, Halverson & Diamond 2004; Spillane 2006). In other words, the theoretical framing of distributed leadership provided the conceptual tools from which to begin to understand, describe and explain the practice of teacher leadership. Understood in this way, teacher leadership was but one manifestation of the practice of distributed leadership.

Thus, I made the decision to privilege distributed leadership because it offered a set of ideas which formed the starting point of my research. For this reason, I dedicated a chapter in the thesis to distributed leadership as the theoretical framing for the study. The additional concepts and theories which were adopted in the individual chronicles were not discussed in this chapter but were introduced and discussed in relation to the three insights chapters later on in the thesis. As with the literature review chapter, I made use of footnotes to demonstrate the connectivity of the chronicles to each other and to the argument in the theoretical framing chapter.

Methodological Framing as a Fourth Level of Connectivity

As already mentioned, the eight chronicles which I elected to include in the

study were originally written and published as stand-alone entities and were underpinned by six individual, context–independent research projects or 'strands' (Teddlie & Tashakkori 2006) on teacher leadership. Because five of the research strands were qualitative and the sixth a quantitative strand, I turned to mixed methods research and, in particular, 'mixed research synthesis studies' (Sandelowski, Voils & Barroso 2006) to locate my study.

'Mixed research synthesis studies' refers to the mixing of methods across *studies* (my emphasis) where the data are 'the *findings* (authors' emphasis) of primary qualitative and quantitative studies in a designated body of empirical research' (Sandelowski *et al.* 2006: 29). In line with Sandelowski *et al.* (2006)*,* my aim was to 'sum up' the findings of my own research into teacher leadership in mainstream South African schools in the hope that 'the sum of the data collected will be richer, more meaningful, and ultimately more useful in answering the research questions' (Preskill in Johnson *et al.* 2007:121). To achieve this aim, I adopted a contingent design which involved three phases, guided by the research questions.

However, in the initial stages of the writing process, I grappled with the purpose and design of the methodology chapter. I was unclear about the relationship between the PhD research design and the research designs of the six individual research strands. Because I was so familiar with the research strands which underpinned the chronicles, I kept privileging them in the presentation of the chapter and I was unable to distance myself sufficiently from them in order to be able to present the methods used in the synthesis process of the thesis. It was only once I had begun the synthesis process in practice that I truly perceived the importance of the PhD design, was able to articulate the process properly and grant it the privilege that it warranted in the chapter.

On reflection, I believe that a mixed methods approach was most suited to my work because of its ability to embrace the multifaceted and complex character of my study and the multiple paradigmatic traditions underpinning it. Adopting a mixed methods way of thinking within a post modern positioning afforded me a platform from which to use 'multiple approaches and multiple ways of knowing' (Greene 2008:20), each of them inevitably partial, in my exploration of the practice of teacher leadership. In so doing, I believe that my research afforded me the opportunity for 'respectful listening and understanding' and engaged me with 'difference and

diversity in service of both better understanding and greater equity of voice' (Greene 2008:20).

The Insights as a Final Level of Connectivity

The PhD insights, which formed the final level of connectivity in the thesis, evolved out of a secondary analysis of the findings in each of the chronicles, a 'meta-inference' (Tashakkori & Teddlie 2003), guided by the research questions. The purpose of the synthesis was one of 'expansion' (Greene, Caracelli & Graham 1989) rather than convergence in the classic sense of triangulation. This enabled me to acknowledge and listen to the participant voices, both consenting and dissenting, across contexts in the pursuit of 'multiple comparisons' (Glaser & Strauss 1999) and 'multi-nodal dialogic explanations' (Mason 2006).

Mine was an iterative, back and forth process across chronicles and between chapters as I struggled to organise and make sense of the data in response to the research questions and then endeavoured to design chapters that were relevant and meaningful to the study. It was the findings from each cluster of chronicles, in this back-and-forth process which informed 'the emerging conceptual scheme' (Morse 2003:199) and contributed to theory generation of teacher leadership within a distributed leadership framing for mainstream South African schools and constituted an original contribution to the existing knowledge in the field. Thus my theorising of 'distributed teacher leadership' (see Grant 2010) fulfilled one of the core competences of successful PhDs as outlined by Nyquist who asserts that 'disciplinary knowledge – what is known, plus creative and adventurous ways of discovering new knowledge' (2002) is the foundation of the PhD. However, let me explain at this juncture that the phenomenon of teacher leadership could have been researched following the traditional PhD route (see for example Forde 2011). It was a strategic decision to elect the PhD by publication route primarily because of my completed research and publication record on the topic.

As a consequence of the complexities and back-and-forth maneuvering of the retrospective design process of my doctorate, there were moments when I yearned for the security and relative simplicity of a preplanned research design. There were instances when it felt like I was

forcing a fit between the chronicles and the research questions in the 'unnatural circumstances' of the synthesis process. I lived through times of incredible self-belief when I confidently claimed the scholarship to design the thesis as I deemed best and other times when I felt completely disempowered by the daunting task ahead of me.

Furthermore, because connectivity in this type of thesis is central, I was also aware of the danger of too much repetition. It became clear to me that for my logic of connectivity to work, with as little repetition as possible, the purpose of each chapter had to be unequivocal. It therefore took me multiple drafts involving multiple layers of re-thinking, re-reading, re-writing and re-tensing before the construction of the meta-inference and the construction of the chapters were complete. It was only at the end of this post modern process that I was able to argue more confidently that the insights, the meta–inference that emerged from the study, were greater than the sum of the individual findings from the chronicles and offered an original contribution to knowledge and scholarship in the sub-field of teacher leadership. My experiences led me to recognise my doctoral experience as a journey, an 'internal process of increased understanding; and as 'trading', producing a product of original knowledge to contribute to the academic community' (Leonard & Becker 2009:72).

Developing my Doctoral Voice and Doctoral Identity

Writing, as Lee and Aitchison (2009) suggest, is part of the business of being an academic. Given that I had successfully published prior to registering for my doctorate, I was accustomed to the external review process and the way scholarly work was produced. I had been exposed to the process of repeated review and criticism of my academic writing from my university colleagues in an informal writing group I belonged to as well as from anonymous peers outside of my institution in the various journal review processes.

However, as a consequence of my struggles around the retrospective design of the doctorate, I lost my 'writerly capacity' (after Lee 2010) and began to doubt my ability to become a doctoral graduate. There was a period where I struggled to write in my own voice tending, instead, to adopt the words of published authors to speak on my behalf. Whilst my colleagues and supervisors reminded me that I had already established an academic voice

and publication profile through the eight chronicles, it was indeed an irony that there were times when I was unable to develop my voice and agency in relation to the thesis – I could not find my doctoral voice.

At some point in the struggle to reclaim my voice and agency, I came across the work of Richardson which helped me to navigate the writing process. She argues that the mechanistic or static writing model of traditional quantitative research 'ignores the role of writing as a dynamic creative process' (1994:517). She challenges us to put ourselves in our own texts, 'nurture our own individuality and at the same time lay claim to knowing something' (Richardson 1994:517). I realised some time later as I revisited my methodology chapter that I was searching for the 'single' way of writing an academic text – the one truth – I was searching (in vain) for the voice of someone who had 'got it right'. In essence I was colluding with the positivists who claim the existence of a one universal truth, one 'right' way of knowing and doing. I was struggling with what Bell Hooks (1990) calls a 'politics of location':

> Within a complex and ever shifting realities of power relations, do we position ourselves on the side of colonizing mentality? Or do we continue to stand in political resistance with the oppressed, ready to offer our ways of seeing and theorizing, of making culture, toward that revolutionary effort which seeks to create space where there is unlimited access to pleasure and power of knowing, where transformation is possible (cited in Fine 1994:71).

I found my subconscious positioning of myself on the side of the 'colonizing mentality' in relation to my PhD writing process exceedingly ironic given my claimed identity as a critical education leadership theorist and my standpoint on the transformative power of teacher leadership to bring teachers from the margins into the process of leadership. It therefore came as a relief to me to read Richardson's work and be reminded that one is allowed 'to know 'something' without claiming to know everything' (1994:518). I did not have to have 'all the answers' on teacher leadership and neither was there one 'right' way of synthesising the chronicles. It was up to me to own the synthesis process and insert myself – my voice – into my work as I re-interpreted the chronicles and organised them into a coherent whole.

I also came across Govender's (2009) use of the term 'logic of discernment' which assisted me in finding a way forward. For her, 'logic' denotes reasoned thought while 'discernment' implies good judgement. Govender (2009:113) explains how her 'logic of discernment' draws from,

> the authoritative guidance of scholars (external guiding logic) and my total (both sub-conscious and conscious) imprints of my own experiences and intuitive sense (an internal guiding logic).

Claiming my own 'logic of discernment', the liberty was mine to discern the way forward and I had to trust my own insights and perceptions in weaving the chronicles together in a creative and imaginative way. In doing so, however, I had to remember that my purpose was not to homogenise and suppress individual voices (Richardson 1994) but rather to extend, in a trustworthy manner, the scope, breadth, and range of inquiry into teacher leadership through the eight chronicles in the search for multi-nodal dialogic explanations. This was a critical moment in my journey, a turning point, and it served as a catalyst to restart the writing process. It was as a result of this critical moment that I developed the courage to claim my doctoral voice and, in so doing, developed my 'doctoral capabilities' (Lee 2010) and my doctoral identity.

The Supervisory Role

The role of the supervisor(s) in a PhD by publication requires mention because of the fundamental importance of supervisory support to doctoral students registered for this route. As Robins and Kanowski (2008:7) suggest, students considering doing a PhD by publication

> should establish the perspectives of potential supervisors prior to appointment, and may need to consider changing supervisors if they are unable to resolves opposing views about the appropriateness of undertaking a PhD by publication.

As already mentioned, at the time of my registration for the PhD, I approached two colleagues in my faculty to request them to supervise me. I selected the main supervisor primarily because she had experience of

examining PhDs by publication from other faculties and other universities and also because she had engaged with the rule generation process for this form of the degree at a faculty and senate level. I selected the co-supervisor because of his disciplinary knowledge in the field of education leadership. These two colleagues were willing to supervise me and were formally appointed following my registration.

Given that mine was a retrospective research design because of the already published and in-process articles, it is self evident that my supervisors only needed to support me in the development of my cover story as I developed my logic of connectivity and embarked on the synthesis process. Thus, at some level, their work was made easier because they were not required to support me in the publication of the eight chronicles which, as Lee (2010) maintains, is likely to be one of the tasks of the supervisor of this form of the degree. In this regard, Robins and Kanowski (2008:15) warn,

> the process of PhD by publication is likely to add to the workload of supervisors across the PhD, depending on the extent to which they are prepared to support their students in pursuing publication.

As it is well known, in the traditional PhD the supervision process essentially takes place between the student and the mentor/supervisor. Here the supervisor 'poses critical questions, offers counterarguments, models the discipline's specialised logic, and otherwise helps the student find a voice, identity, and location in the community's conversation' (Pare and colleagues quoted in Lee & Aitchison 2009:93). I received this type of support from each of my supervisors as they assisted me in the content (co-supervisor) as well in the format and coherence (primary supervisor) of my integrative material. Given that I published the articles without formal supervisory support, I agree with Lee and Boud (2009:22) that 'the iconic student-supervisor relationship is subsumed into a diverse matrix of opportunities, resources, monitoring processes and expectations'. None-the-less, I would have been unable to complete the PhD without the creative ideas and counterarguments that my supervisors challenged me with.

The PhD by Publication: A Critique
My experience of having completed a PhD by publication has stood me, as

an academic and a PhD supervisor, in good stead to engage with this mode of PhD. The PhD is now a minimum requirement for a university lecturer at our institution and there is mounting pressure on academics to obtain this degree. As a consequence, this mode of PhD is currently becoming 'in vogue' in many education faculties as academics engage with this option and, in many instances, consider it a more manageable and viable alternative.

Would I advise students to do a PhD via this route? Perhaps. The PhD by publication opens up the possibility of choice for prospective students – it offers an alterative route of study – and choice within a high stakes qualification such as the doctorate can only be beneficial. I would advise all candidates to engage with the alternative forms of a PhD open to them, explore the benefits and challenges of each of the forms and make an informed (and deeply personal) decision in the light of this exploration, prior to registration. However, the experience of Robins and Kanowski (2008:4) suggests that

> the existence of a choice between undertaking a traditional PhD or a PhD by publication is not always made apparent to students by their institutions or their supervisors; nor are the likely advantages and disadvantages of adopting a particular approach.

My experience has led me to believe that the PhD by publication is a fascinating, creative and viable option which approaches differently the knowledge generation journey and, in the process, challenges the student imagination because of its post modern underpinnings. This is in line with the view of Lee who contends that this form of doctoral degree opens up the space for 'new and flexible forms of knowledge products' (2010:15). Publishing progressively, as in the PhD by publication, provided me with proof of progress which, inevitably, built my self-confidence (see also Kamler 2008; Robins & Kanowski 2008) as I developed a credible profile in my chosen area of teacher leadership. An additional benefit to this form of PhD, which Kamler (2008:292) argues, is that

> if students publish in their formative years, they are more likely to do so as established academics or informed professionals in their chosen fields of practice.

However, having indicated my support for this alterative route, I do not believe that this form of doctorate would necessarily suit all prospective students. I think it has particular benefits for people, such as academics, who are immersed in organisations with a research culture and who are expected to publish their research as part of their job description. South African universities are following the trend in the United Kingdom and Australia where

> publications are increasingly used in universities to measure personal and institutional performance, and as a criterion for achieving academic promotion and competitive research funding (Kamler 2008:283).

Similarly, Robins and Kanowski describe the strong impetus within higher education institutions in Australia and the United Kingdom to increase the low publication output through 'the implementation of university funding models which reward publication and research student completions' (2008: 3).

Pursuing a PhD by publication may well be an attractive option for academics like me, who cannot bear the thought of embarking on a great tome of work. Its strength lies in the fact that the publication of journal articles towards the doctorate is a far less threatening option. This is because, as Robins and Kanowski (2008:11) explain, the PhD by publication

> effectively partitions what is a large undertaking into smaller, more manageable pieces of work, and helps to establish boundaries around the relevant bodies of literature.

The student is tangibly rewarded, at intermittent stages during the doctoral journey, for work published. Thus, even if the student elects not to complete the degree, aspects of her work which she published are recognised and rewarded accordingly.

However, this form of the doctorate is not without challenges. The lack of specificity of the University of KwaZulu-Natal DR9 rule for a PhD by publication, with regard to the purpose and length of the cover story, i.e. the integrative material, constitutes the first problematic. Is the purpose of

the integrative material merely to insert an introduction and conclusion to hold the substance of the thesis, the publications, together? In this instance, the conceptualisation is that the new knowledge is located within the publications and, as a consequence, the integrative material is short. Here, as Lee (2010:18) explains in the Swedish context,

> the article *is* the dissertation, the published work is addressed to an international scholarly readership as well as to a set of examiners and, along its way, to peers within the department, through seminars and conferences.

Alternatively, is the purpose of the integrative material to generate new knowledge? If this is indeed the case then the thesis is conceptualised as being greater than the sum of the parts (the publications) because the substantive part of the PhD lies in the integrative material which holds the thesis together. In this instance, the integrative material constitutes an extended piece of work, as was the case in my thesis where the purpose of the integrative material was to generate knowledge out of the synthesis of findings of the eight chronicles and constituted 220 of 346 pages. Thus, I sought to ensure an in-depth analysis and coherent argument in my cover story, given the relatively discrete nature of my chronicles and my retrospective design. As a consequence, while my doctorate was a compilation, the Swedish term for a PhD by publication (Lee 2010), it also exhibited many of the norms of the monograph, the Swedish term for the traditional PhD. This lack of specificity regarding the integrative material in the UKZN rule constitutes the first problematic and I argue that this requires urgent deliberation at a faculty level.

The design and format of the PhD by publication constitutes the second problematic. Should a PhD by publication follow the conventional PhD format or should alternative formats be acceptable? In responding to this second problematic, I align myself with Draper (2008:6) who contends that

> PhDs by research should surely be about recognising attainment: about judging the outcome and product, regardless of the means and process by which it was arrived at.

Thus, in a thesis of this nature, the product, rather than the process, is significant. From this standpoint, there is no need to mandate the process and format to be followed. Instead, I want to argue for the creative freedom of the student to craft the PhD together in the way best suited to his/her unique piece of work and therefore contend that imposing the conventional format onto a thesis by publication may well be counter productive and lead to unnecessary repetition. This form of the PhD by publication should encourage innovation and must therefore allow for flexibility in its design and format. This second problematic also necessitates debate at the faculty level.

Aside from the problematics identified, which require resolution at a faculty level, I have some advice for students who have elected to do a PhD by publication. This advice centres on the retrospective / prospective use of publications. As mentioned earlier in this article, my purpose in embarking on a thesis by publication was to employ and synthesise my existing published research in the sub-field of teacher leadership in order to develop a coherent body of work and, in the process, make an original contribution to knowledge. Thus, my thesis was retrospectively conceptualised.

However, the retrospective multi-level connectivity process was complex and cumbersome. While the research questions formed the pillars of the study and directed the initial phases of the synthesis process, the process was a difficult one because the breadth of findings of some of the chronicles related to more than one research question and there were often overlaps between chronicles across the artificial clusters. This impacted on the research design and the original clustering of the chronicles. As a consequence, there was much back-and-forth maneuvering as I attempted to match the sometimes disparate findings with the various research questions. As an academic and PhD supervisor, I would advise students to think carefully before embarking on a retrospective design.

Nevertheless, having said this, I am persuaded that my retrospective use of publications, whilst not the easiest of designs, was feasible because of one fundamental condition. My research was driven by my passion to find out as much as I could about the phenomenon of teacher leadership and particularly how it was understood and practiced in South African mainstream schools and this sustained interest underpinned all eight chronicles. It was this prolonged interest in 'a central topic' (see Robins & Kanowski 2008) together with the conceptual coherence across the

chronicles which enabled the synthesis process. Each of the eight chronicles cohered in relation to the broad aim and research questions I posed, the related literature and the theoretical framing. I am of the firm opinion that it would be far more difficult, and perhaps close to impossible, to design a publication-based study retrospectively without this conceptual coherence. Thus, the critical point for prospective students intending to use their publications retrospectively towards a doctorate is that their publications should cohere conceptually through their sustained interest in and pursuit of a central topic.

I imagine that a less complicated thesis by publication route would involve the design of the thesis prior to the publication of articles. In this approach, the process would be more logical and forward thinking where articles can be conceptualised and written up in direct response to the questions and the requirements of the research design. It is my belief that a pre-planned research design would offer the researcher a simple, yet effective tool – almost like a compass - for moving ahead in the safest possible way. The safety of the tool would stem from the fact that it is far easier to plan forwards than to plan backwards. However, publication of an individual article is seldom a straightforward process; it is time-consuming (see Robins & Kanowski 2008) because it can sometimes take up to two years to get one article published. Should a student wish to include five published articles in her doctorate, the degree could well be a protracted process.

Concluding Comments

Undoubtedly the field of doctoral education is experiencing a major transitional phase as doctoral scholars are

> seeking to broaden the scope of intellectual expression and presenting for examination what are, for many 'old-timers', challenging and innovative portrayals of knowledge, learning and insight (Green 2009:241).

The PhD by publication is one such example. My experience of undertaking a PhD by publication leads me to agree with Robins and Kanowski (2008) that the advantages of undertaking a PhD by publication outweigh the disadvantages. Despite being troubled by a range of challenges in relation to

my levels of connectivity in the thesis, I benefited in many ways from electing this PhD route. Firstly, the thesis was completed in a much shorter period of time (18 months from registration to examination) when compared with the average time taken for a traditional PhD thesis. This was because much of the work had been completed in the four years prior to registration.

Secondly, as an academic in a higher education institution, I had the privilege of working with students, tutors and colleagues who collaborated with me during a few of the research strands and in the writing up of some of the chronicles prior to and during the PhD. These relationships are ongoing and have contributed to the development of an 'academic community' (Robins & Kanowski 2008) or what Kamler (2008) refers to as a 'discourse community' of interested researchers in the sub-field of teacher leadership in the higher education arena.

Thirdly, although daunting, it was exciting to pioneer this alternative PhD route in the faculty. I enjoyed the challenge and hope my choice of doctorate has contributed, particularly in South Africa, to what Nyquist calls 'the weaving of a new tapestry in doctoral education' (2002:15). In conclusion, I agree with Kamler that the issue of doctoral education, and particularly PhDs by publication in South Africa, requires 'serious pedagogical attention from the higher education community' (2008:293). I believe that in faculties such as Education and the Humanities, the PhD by publication challenges academics and students to think creatively and differently about knowledge generation and doctoral work.

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