



Black African Postgraduate Students' Authorial Voice in Scholarship

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ABSTRACT

In this theoretical paper we explore the authorial voice of black African postgraduate students in their writing and scholarship experience. This includes investigating the undergirding factors that need to be interrogated when it comes to the student-supervisor relationship. Some (if not most) black African postgraduate students experience challenges in respect of expressing or formulating that all-important authorial voice in their studies, possibly due to a failure to convey ideas, thoughts and arguments systematically. In addition, cultural identity and academic requirements may be hindrances, making it more difficult for them to write successfully, and to engage appropriately in their postgraduate research journeys. In the process of postgraduate students unearthing their authorial voice, a qualitative approach was adopted in this desktop study. In terms of the theoretical framework, the critical pedagogy of Freire was used to examine this phenomenon. Freire's theory underscores the fact that supervisors cannot simply see themselves imposing their views on those who are less knowledgeable about authorial voice. The findings of this work lean towards highlighting that the student, to a large degree, are to be blamed for this oversight, because without giving students any agency in the supervision journey, supervisors tend to reproduce their experience.

KEYWORDS

Authorial voice; black African postgraduate students; scholarship; supervisors.

INTRODUCTION

“Where is your voice here? I can’t hear your voice here!” These are the words the researchers heard for the first time when they were doing their PhDs ... and the lamentations were from their supervisors. It proved very challenging to understand the meaning of “voice” in a study, which involves positioning oneself as a critical thinker and engaging with scholarship. Put differently, voice gives one a seat at the table, the right to speak and to be taken seriously. Cook-Sather (2006) refers to this in the following way:

[H]aving 'voice' implies that one has a language in which to give expression to one's authentic concerns, that one is able to recognise those concerns, and further, that there is an audience of significant others who will listen. ... voice is already there, already critical, regardless of whether the outside world allows it expression.

For students involved in writing projects and engaging with works of an academic nature, it is crucial to be heard themselves as it not only shapes them, but also positions them so that they can exhibit their skills and qualities as postgraduates. Supervisors also ask this question of their black African postgraduate students (BAPSs); be they Masters or doctoral students who are undertaking the research journey as part of their scholarship (Rathod, 2022). How many of these supervisors have pondered in any depth on the matter, and found a way of making their supervisees develop sentience of what they mean by “voice” in a study? How many BAPSs have raised their hands to say, “I know what you are talking about” or “I know what you mean by ‘voice’ in my study”? How many BAPSs have deferred their accomplishment of theses and dissertations, owing to their failure to make their voices heard? BAPSs, as students registered for their master’s and doctoral degrees (also referred to as supervisees in this intellectual piece), are students who studied English as their first additional language, meaning it is not their vernacular. Even though they can communicate in this language, the fact that it is not their home language may come into play. This may also have an impact on them successfully stamping their authorial voice on their scholarship.

Purpose of the study

An author should always write with the community s/he is writing for in mind and ensure that expressions are understood by this community. To complement this argument, Hadfield and Haw (2001) argue that voice entails the relationship the author attributes to the meaning s/he makes, based on his/her experiences. An author uses his/her voice to represent constructs and interpretations of others’ voices and realities (Atweh & Bland, 2004), while projecting their own writer’s identity. Matsuda (2015) regards authorial voice as emerging from the interplay among the reader, the writer, and the text. The author’s voice displays critical thinking and creativity (Naidoo, 2022), two skills which are amongst a variety of capabilities expected from a postgraduate student after completion of his/her studies. Butler (2011) affirms that postgraduate students who have difficulties finding their authorial voice, take longer to finish their degrees. Thus, without authorial voice, the scholarship of BAPSs leaves much to be desired.

It is therefore incumbent upon authors – in this study, BAPs – to ensure that their “voices” resonate clearly with their intended readership.

This paper was guided by the following research question: What is the authorial voice of BAPs in constructing their scholarship?

To answer this question, the researchers looked at how students should (a) navigate their postgraduate studies journey, (b) engage scholarship fully, and (c) construct their identities and engagement with scholarship.

METHOD

The investigation in this study involved a methodical and logical examination of concepts and theories, aimed at better understanding why students do not have an authorial voice during the process of writing, and interacting with their supervisors. By gathering information from a variety of sources, including books, journals, periodicals, etc. that featured literature reviews, conceptual analyses and theoretical modelling, the researchers were able to arrive at an understanding of this problem.

Theoretical framework

This article is grounded in the critical pedagogy theory drawn from the work of Paulo Freire (1970) – a grounding which helped to situate BAPs’ journey in knowledge creation. The reason for choosing this theory, is because it gives a voice to BAPs who are mostly marginalised and looked upon with dismay, when it comes to their writing endeavours. This also called for an exploration of the relationships of a “critical pedagogy which is committed to social justice”, situated in the dialogue between postgraduate students and their supervisors (Barney, 2013; Freire, 1970; Pietersen, 2022a). It further involves the pedagogical actions of discourse and care, relative to the enactment of activism and justice in black African postgraduate writing journeys, as well as the prioritisation of the student–supervisor relationship. In addition, using Freire’s (1970) critical pedagogy paradigm allows students and their supervisors the potential to interact more meaningfully with one another, and forcing supervisors to abstain from taking often-tempting shortcuts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature reviewed for this article focused on three main issues. First, the researchers looked at how BAPs develop their scholarship from the inside. Second, they addressed the authorial voice and identity of BAPs. Lastly, they scrutinised authorial voice as a discourse-dependent concept for BAPs. These issues are discussed in greater depth below.

Development of black African postgraduate students: inside–outside scholarship

Developing from the inside, suggests someone has inner traits that manifest themselves physically, on the outside. These features that are unique to every scholar, emanating from their own authorial voices. As BAPs contribute to scholarship, so they should develop from the inside out. In this regard, Mertens (2010:16) argues that “research is a product of the values of

researchers and cannot be independent of them". This means every research achievement encompasses the values researchers attach to their writings, through their own authorial voices – values which manifest themselves in the research an author produces. In addition to values, research also explains researchers' behaviour and the outcomes of their social interventions (Quaye, 2007). Supervisors may need to be a lot more tolerant of BAPSs' social values and interventions, in order to tap into diverse students' perspectives: as Chilisa and Ntseane (2014:45) emphasise, "you will have a responsibility to critically assess the research process and procedures to see if they allow the researchers to communicate their experiences from their frames of reference".

The aforementioned view can be juxtaposed with that of Quaye (2007), who writes that students' own stories, in the process of "get[ting] inside" a particular development, are critical for helping them as postgraduates to find their authorial voice. It is important, therefore, for BAPSs to demonstrate authorial voices that are interactive (O'Sullivan, 2015), supportive and authoritative (Atweh & Bland, 2004), because it is through voice that scholarship is developed, and identity created.

Authorial voice and authorial identity: black African postgraduate students

Each BAPS creates his/her own identity through his/her personal authorial voice. Thus, any authorial voice plays a marked role in scholarship. In support of this, Ivanič and Camps (2001) and Sperling and Appleman (2011) articulate that academic writing is more than the production of a text – it also entails the establishment of an authorial identity. BAPSs should always take into account that, as they engage in writing, they will come to be identified by what they wrote. It has long been argued that authorial voice represents a writer's culture and history (Bakhtin, 1986), as is evident from any written text. Hyland (2002) also notes that no writing is impersonal or objective, since all writing is infused with the author's identity. The process needs to be integrated, however, as it comprises more than this. The way in which this narrative can be challenged and better expressed, is to create a dialogue to help develop the authorial voices supervisors are looking for. This is supported by Pietersen (2022:34b), when he rewords the work of Freire in his exclamation: "[D]ialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person 'depositing' ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be 'consumed' by the participants [BAPSs and their supervisors] in a discussion."

The development of authorial identity results in a sense of autonomy and empowerment. In attributing greater clarity to authorial identity, Sperling and Appleman (2011) refer to the self in the text, which suggests that through a written text one can encounter something of the identity of the author. Therefore, it is incumbent upon BAPSs to make their voices heard through writing which contributes to scholarship.

Authorial voice: a discourse-dependent concept for black African postgraduate students

Authorial voice implies both authority and influence, in other words discourse that is deeply rooted in the ontology and epistemologies of the authors (and especially BAPSs) (Elbow, 2007). This is what supervisors need to understand before they commence the journey with their

BAPSs. This will help them to work closely through the cultural issues that cement the supervision collaboration/relationship. In many ways it also appropriates the kind of support given to students from black African communities, rural or otherwise. Matsuda (2001:40) contends that the voice of a BAPS ought to be regarded as an indication of the writer's identity that is apparent in the text, that results from "the use of discourse and non-discourse features that language users chose, deliberate or otherwise, from socially available yet everchanging repertoires". In turn, Ivanič and Camps (2001) emphasise that while written texts may lack the sound, rhythm and intonation of speech, the writer's identity is evident through the lexical, syntactical and organisational constructs used in his/her writing. This allows supervisors to think of their BAPSs' discourse as expanding and deepening the latter's research, by examining those postgraduate students' perspectives, and where they come from (Haynes et al., 2020). Students are then seen as equals, whose life experiences draw directly on both their work and their ontology, which are so often ignored in previously marginalised communities at higher education institutions (Green et al., 2018).

According to Kincheloe (2008), another major discursual factor when it comes to higher education, but in particular to BAPS, is the issue of language. The critical pedagogy is vitally important, since it examines the discourse of authorial voice from the perspective of the values students hold, as well as their language, which ought to be readdressed against the social justice perspective (Gibbs et al., 2021). Ivanič (1998) confirms this when he argues that a writer [BAPS] has an identity that is formed and portrayed through language patterns, in the same way that the spoken accent distinguishes a speaker's identity. Put differently,

[w]hile there is a growing body of literature on the experiences of Black collegians, there remains a dearth of literature on the experiences of Black students at the graduate level. Furthermore, when looking at intersections of race, gender, and ethnicity, understanding persistence at the graduate level becomes even more confounded. (Burt et al., 2019:44)

If supervisors acknowledge this, it may become easier for students to perform in their writing projects. Apparently, the authorial voice is a challenging concept for most BAPSs to master (Mili & Towers, 2022), irrespective of their command of English (or lack of mastery) (Naidoo, 2022). However, it may be that supervisors need to undertake a prior study and examination of their students' positionality. Ivanič's (1998) framework contends that the representation of the self through discourse is as important as the content of the writing, and its challenging of the assumed epistemology of supervisors. Human agency is thus brought to bear here, as it situates the BAPSs' success in their own hands and in those of their supervisors. In other words, a BAPS's success is framed within a supervisor's "claims and admissible reasoning [which differ] between disciplines, and these values and epistemologies are instantiated in aspects of a community's genre conventions" (Hyland, 1999:355).

Authorial voice is fundamental in academic writing; it is not an option (Hyland, 2002; Ivanič & Camps, 2001; Matsuda, 2015). First (and most significantly for our study), a postgraduate writer must demonstrate a significant authorial voice in a dissertation, to gain

entry into the academic community (Olivier & Carstens, 2018). Second, Ivanič and Camps (2001) urge writers to develop an awareness about voice, as it is through voice that writers exercise control over their identity in their project and their writing. Furthermore, Zhao and Llosa (2008) state that voice features are tools that novice writers and writing teachers can critically implement in creating a distinct and effective authorial voice to develop quality writing. An authorial voice does not appear overnight: it develops over time, after much reading and writing (Cook-Sather, 2002). Finally, it seems as though scholars believe although an authorial voice is a feature all students need to acquire where they become aware of the options of different voices that may be used in writing (McQuillan, 2021), prior investigations by supervisors may help BAPSs to succeed in their postgraduate journey (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Burt et al., 2019). This can help BAPSs to exercise the power to consciously construct new voices and, subsequently, identities in writing (Miles et al., 2020).

Implications of Findings

It may seem, at face value, that developing the authorial voices of postgraduate students is solely their responsibility, that somehow, they can achieve it without any real input from their supervisors, prior to starting their postgraduate studies. This is not the case, as argued above. The immediate response to this, from an African perspective, is to recall the proverb that says, "it takes a village to raise a child". So, if we were to relate this proverb to the present study, it could be applied such that supervisors are part of that village and need to use everything at their disposal – including acknowledging BAPSs' social identity and social capital for knowledge creation – in a quest to find their authorial voice. BAPSs often use their larger support network to help them get through the frequently stressful experiences associated with postgraduate studies, and this may be a lonely road to travel. Supervisors ought to take responsibility for helping to draw out BAPSs authorial voices in scholarship. How can that be achieved? First, universities should give supervisors extensive training and support around cultural competency in African dialogical engagements, which may include understanding the concept of ubuntu and how to relate to other persons. This can help the supervisor–student relationship in the postgraduate writing journey, especially during the initial stages of their engagement. As the supervisory relationship grows, so the student can find his/her authorial voice, because the supervisor managed to interrogate his/her own social identity and social capital. This will enable a supervisor to appreciate and comprehend the diversity of his/her students' cultures.

Second, students will find their authorial voice if they establish networks with and without their supervisors, thereby taking responsibility for their own postgraduate trajectory. This should be particularly emphasised for BAPSs, so that they do not become victims of a system as a seemingly marginalised group. Rather, BAPSs must be able to appropriate the agency derived from the process, as well as from their mentors and supporters, focusing especially on their unique needs. This may include giving BAPSs access to tools such as academic support, counselling services and scholarships, so that they can overcome obstacles and excel

at their studies, as they find their authorial voice and become successful in postgraduate programmes at higher education institutions.

Third, students should refrain from “praising” or “glorifying” scholars or authors. Instead, they should put themselves at the forefront of the arguments they make in their writing. We, as supervisors, so often witness BAPs downplaying the authority of their arguments, by glorifying authors. When students advance arguments, they tend to say, for example, “Dube (2022) argues that....”. By so doing, they prioritise Dube and his argument. Had a student started with an argument, and then referenced it with “for postgraduates, it is imperative that context be understood (Dube, 2022) ...”, it would be clear that it is the student who is in control of the argument, and hence the authorial voice.

Fourth, students should learn to identify key words they read in the literature, so that they make use of only key words, phrases or concepts from the text, and construct their own arguments that speak to that to which they are alluding. This process will enable them to express themselves in the text in the way they want, thus establishing their own voices and identities as researchers. Authorial identity and authorial voice can only be achieved and developed if an author independently writes to express his/her own feelings, without depending more on others to advance the argument. If authorial voice can be acquired through a student’s own writing, then the use of key terminology can play a pivotal role in creating authorial voice and authorial identity for BAPs.

CONCLUSION

Authorial voice is not just an old and controversial concept – it is one that foregrounds the student–supervisor relationship, and their academic journey through their writing and scholarly collaborations. The significance of authorial voice is a writer’s negotiated space that is intertwined with his/her identity and cultural subjectivities. It is important for supervisors to know, acknowledge, create and encourage supportive networks in order to discursively develop a student’s authorial voice, and BAPs are not exempt from this. This is poignantly put forward by Hiverla and Belcher (2001) when they argue that “voice-related experiences are multilayered and must be viewed from a variety of perspectives. That is, they are not simply stories of cultural or rhetorical imposition.”

BAPs need all the necessary support, but it ought to be clear and rhetorically meaningful, if it is to help them make vital intertextual linkages as a previously underrepresented and marginalised community in higher education spaces in South Africa. This is why it is critical to navigate their postgraduate studies and to engage fully, to construct new knowledge through their identities and engagement with both scholarship and scholars (texts and people). This is, however, a development that needs to be cultivated, and Freire’s (1970) critical pedagogy lends itself to integrating social constructs, giving credence to dialogical interactions between BAPs and their supervisors. For further investigative undertakings, our research findings suggest that developing an authorial voice is a skill students need to acquire,

where they become fully aware of the different voices that may be reflected in writing. The imperative to do prior investigations may fall on the shoulders of those supervisors tasked with assisting black African postgraduate students to succeed at their endeavours, thus supervision-related reflection is necessary before departing on this journey with students.

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