Editorial:

Research Practice in Research Assistantships: Introducing the Special Issue on Research Assistantships

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1. Purpose of This Special Issue

The idea for this special issue came from our mutual interest in research education and the development of future researchers. Our shared program of research has led us to discover the potentials, complexities, and dilemmas associated with research assistantships where newcomers assist more experienced researchers to conduct research projects (Grundy, 2004; McGinn, 2006; McGinn, Niemczyk, & Saudelli, in press; Niemczyk, 2010; Ratković, Niemczyk, Trudeau, & McGinn, 2013). Through personal experience coupled with our research studies, workshops, conferences, and reviews of the literature, we have learned that research assistantships provide distinctive spaces for learning and teaching research. Research assistantships provide natural settings for research team members to acquire, practice, and enhance research knowledge and skills through participation and collaboration with others who have different skills, interests, and background experiences (Grundy & McGinn, 2009; McBurnie, 2011; McWey, Henderson, & Piercy, 2006). Unfortunately, however, some research assistantships are minimally effective, dysfunctional, or even exploitative (Grundy, 2004; Hinchey & Kimmel, 2000; Hobson, Jones, & Deane, 2005). To best support the advancement of

research and the development of researchers, we believe there is a need to better understand the nature and outcomes of research assistantships. We concur with other scholars who have advocated for more research in this area (Edwards, 2009; Hutchinson & Moran, 2005; Molony & Hammett, 2007; Turner, 2010).

The purpose of this special issue is to respond to this need for further research. We sought contributions that would cover the topic of research assistantships substantially and illustrate working conditions, opportunities, outcomes, and challenges within research assistantships. It was our intention to showcase the multilayered complexities of research assistantships from different perspectives, nations, and disciplines. Our underlying goal was to uncover strategies to maximize the potential of this hands-on research space to enhance the experience for research assistants and their supervisors, and to contribute most effectively to research advances. We wanted to hear about the many ways, positive or negative, that research assistantships contribute to research and to researchers. Consistent with the focus and scope of the *Journal of Research Practice*, this issue is intended to prompt interdisciplinary dialogue, promote mutual learning, and share original research with an international readership.

Given the multijurisdictional and multidisciplinary contents of the issue, readers will find some differences in the terminology and expressions used across articles. Terms such as *faculty*, *professor*, or *academic staff* should be considered synonyms to identify those individuals who are employed to undertake both research and teaching functions in universities. These individuals also serve as *supervisors* or *advisors* to students appointed as research assistants, as well as to students completing *theses* or *dissertations*. These students may be studying at the *undergraduate* level to achieve *bachelor's* degrees or they may be studying at the *graduate* level to achieve *master's* or *doctoral* degrees. This latter group (master's and doctoral students) is called *postgraduate* students in some locations. Some graduate (or postgraduate) degrees require coursework as well as a research component. Authors were encouraged to explain the terminology as used in their articles, but readers should not expect consistent terminology across the entire collection.

2. Introducing the Collection of Articles

We considered a wide range of proposals and papers addressing different aspects of research assistantships. Although the choices were sometimes difficult, we whittled these broader options down to a final set of seven articles. The resulting collection includes self-studies and analyses of others, as well as policy reviews and recommendations. The pieces consider research assistantships involving bachelor's, master's, and doctoral students in four different countries (Canada, Denmark, South Africa, United States) and across a range of disciplines. The analyses are written from the perspectives of research assistants, supervisors, or both. The articles focus on individual dyads, multiple dyads, or larger teams. The documented research assistantships occurred in the context of academic-led research projects, required course curriculum, or independent studies. There is considerable variability, as well as some intriguing similarities within the collection. Major themes across the articles relate to research learning, mentoring, collaboration,

intentionality, and career options, as well as ethical and regulatory issues associated with research assistantships.

The collection opens with the article entitled, "Cognitive Apprenticeship and the Supervision of Science and Engineering Research Assistants." **Michelle Anne Maher**, **Joanna Gilmore**, **David Feldon**, and **Telesia E. Davis** explore and critically reflect on the research development of eight science or engineering doctoral students who served as research assistants. They use a cognitive apprenticeship framework to explain doctoral student skill development, to interpret narratives of skill development for these student research assistants, and to compare these narratives against empirical measurements of research skill development over the course of an academic year. The authors demonstrate the specific areas of research skill development for each student and relate this development to the nature of their relationships and interactions with their supervisors. They argue that productive developmental trajectories depend upon the "deliberate intent and intention" of research assistants and their supervisors.

The importance of intent and intentionality is further explored through the next set of articles, which are all self-studies of the specifics of research assistantships from the insider perspectives of the research assistants or supervisors involved. In "From Research Assistant to Professional Research Assistance: Research Consulting as a Form of Research Practice," **Dawn E. Pollon**, **Monique Herbert**, **Saad Chahine**, and **Olesya Falenchuk** argue that the developmental potential of research assistantships relies not only upon the individual intentions of research assistants and their supervisors, but also more broadly on the commitments of the institution or the academy as a whole. They assert that research assistantships should be intentionally cultivated as learning spaces for future research practitioners. This conclusion arose from reflecting back on their past experiences as research assistants during their master's and doctoral studies to consider the influences on their present careers as professional research consultants. They identify their research assistantship experiences as foundational in advancing their research knowledge and skills, discovering their passions for research, and adopting subsequent careers as professional research consultants. The article is an interesting exploration of a seldom-examined research career. Through their analysis, Pollon and colleagues draw attention to the critical roles played by their research supervisors, which is an issue explored more fully in the subsequent two articles.

The next two articles are self-studies co-authored by former research assistants and their supervisors. The first of these two articles, "From Research Assistant to Researcher: Being Wakeful in a Mentorship Journey About Methodology, Poverty, and Deficit Thinking," was written by **Heather Grenville** and **Darlene Ciuffetelli Parker**. The authors provide a reflective analysis of their experiences as a master's student (Grenville) and a supervisor (Ciuffetelli Parker) who engaged initially through a research assistantship and subsequently a thesis research project. Their self-study documents the ways Grenville reformed her understandings about poverty, herself, her students, and her teaching practice as she engaged in narrative inquiry alongside Ciuffetelli Parker. The article is a thoughtful and informative exploration of the ways engaging in research can lead one to become more *wakeful* about one's position, actions, and relationships. Central

to this wakefulness is Ciuffetelli Parker's role as a supportive and nurturing mentor to Grenville.

The subsequent article, "The Light and Shadow of Feminist Research Mentorship: A Collaborative Autoethnography of Faculty-Student Research," continues the examination of mentoring within research assistantships. **Julia Moore**, **Jennifer A. Scarduzio**, **Brielle Plump**, and **Patricia Geist-Martin** explore their engagement in faculty-student research in the context of independent study courses. The first three authors (Moore, Scarduzio, and Plump) define themselves as three "generations" of students (protégés) who completed independent studies as master's students at different times under the supervision of their mentor, Geist-Martin (the fourth author). Through narrative writing and collaborative autoethnography, they explore the independent study context as a space for engaging in research assistantships. They draw attention to the successes and the struggles (the "light and shadow" cued in their title) encountered in their mentoring relationships and consider the underlying factors that contributed to the value and productivity of their relationships. Through their analysis, they advance a model for feminist research mentorship that could be enacted across contexts and disciplines.

The final self-study article, "Researching with Undergraduate Students: Exploring the Learning Potentials of Undergraduate Students and Researchers Collaborating in Knowledge Production" introduces a larger team focus. The authors (**Trine Wulf-Andersen**, **Kevin Holger Mogensen**, and **Peder Hjort-Madsen**) document an innovative approach combining research, teaching, and learning. At their institution, undergraduate students are mandated to engage in research projects as part of the standard curriculum each semester. As an extension to the typical requirements, the authors invited undergraduate students to develop subprojects within the framework of the authors' research project. This invitation led to 16 research subprojects involving 59 undergraduate students as research assistants. The authors were simultaneously teachers, researchers, and supervisors. The authors document learning potentials and dilemmas associated with these multiple roles and the institutional emphasis on students as "research learners."

The final two articles present policy analyses and proposals, focusing on ethical conduct between research assistants and supervisors, and the need for regulations to safeguard those involved in research assistantships. **Johannes Petrus Rossouw** and **Ewelina Kinga Niemczyk** present an article entitled, "A Dual Perspective on Risks and Security Within Research Assistantships." Rossouw and Niemczyk explore the need to implement formal regulations specific to research assistantships in order to enhance working conditions for research assistants and research supervisors. The article is written from a dual perspective reflecting the authors' respective roles as a research supervisor and a research assistant in two institutional locations (Faculties of Education in South Africa and Canada, respectively). The authors reviewed existing literature, analyzed policies and practices at their universities, consulted with institutional administrators, and contemplated their personal and professional experiences to illustrate the potential risks faced by research assistants and research supervisors. They argue that research assistantships are a unique form of employment focused on educational and professional development that requires

specific regulations. They conclude with recommendations for research assistants, research supervisors, administrators, and human resources personnel to work together to create a Standards of Good Practice document for research assistantships in their specific contexts.

The final article focuses explicitly on the rights of research assistants. **Karen Z. Naufel** and **Denise R. Beike** pose a very important question in their title, "The Ethical Treatment of Research Assistants: Are We Forsaking Safety for Science?" Their article is a detailed response to this question, identifying ways in which safety has been sacrificed and, most importantly, introducing clear guidelines to prevent such situations in the future. They provide evidence that research assistants may experience substantive risks when implementing their assigned responsibilities. They further explain that research assistants may feel coerced to continue to work in unsafe environments out of fear of losing rapport with the supervisor or letters of recommendation for their future endeavours. In order to safeguard vulnerable research assistants, the authors propose a "Research Assistant's Bill of Rights" that can serve as an ethics code for improved practice across contexts.

3. Developing the Field

Individually and collectively, the seven articles represent important contributions to the field of research practice and research education. There is much that readers can learn from the examples and analyses presented herein to enhance practices in their contexts by overcoming challenges and capitalizing on the potential of research assistantships. At their best, research assistantships can contribute to the advancement of research and of researchers (McGinn, Niemczyk, & Saudelli, in press; Nicolas, 2008); at their worst, they may undermine research and future researchers. The scholars in this collection provide multiple perspectives to ensure many more positive outcomes than negative.

It is important to us that this collection appears in the *Journal of Research Practice* (JRP), a journal devoted specifically to understanding research as practice and to documenting individuals' experiences doing research. Serving as research assistants and supervising research assistants are common research practices, yet these practices have received sparse attention in this or any other journal. JRP is the ideal place to advance a conversation about the nature of research practice within research assistantships and to strategize about ways to extend and enhance research assistantship practice across multiple domains.

Despite the valued contributions of these seven articles, there is still much to understand about research assistantship practice. This special issue is intended to open the conversation within JRP, not provide the final word on research assistantships. We encourage other authors to continue to share their experiences and analyses in JRP. We want JRP to be the place to seek out and to publish scholarship about research assistantships. As you read this interesting collection of articles, we encourage you to continue the conversation on your campuses and in subsequent issues of this journal.

Acknowledgments

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