

Student Digest

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Student article: My doctorate: The longest pregnancy

Arlene Weekes talks about her journey towards completing her doctorate in social work.

“We mek it”. My mother’s words as I tearfully read my Doctoral dedication to her the evening after I passed my viva. She had left school at 14 years old in Barbados and then raised four children as a single mother. She has a lot to be proud of with a son who is a teacher, another who owns a stationary business and a daughter who was a teacher for 15 years before becoming an ordained priest and now me - a daughter with a doctorate. Whilst she said nothing all the years I was studying, she clearly felt she had achieved this doctorate with me.

Everything associated with my Professional Doctorate can be likened to giving birth and raising a third child. I started the ‘parenting’ journey 18 years ago and it ebbed and flowed. At times, I entered no man’s land, not sure of the direction I should follow or what the outcome would be. There were times when I felt that this Professional Doctorate did not realise that, for the most part, I had no idea what I was doing; it seemed to have no notion of the sacrifice I made to give birth to the idea nor the nurturing that was needed to see it through to completion and, no matter how much I gave it, it appeared ungrateful. On many occasions I neglected it by taking extended breaks and considered throwing in the towel. So, for the most part, as the Jamaicans say, it was ‘dragged up’ rather than raised with nurture. “18 years” you say - yes but I have just passed my viva with minor amendments: typos and a paragraph or two to add. It was definitely worth the wait. “But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.” 2 Peter 3:8–9

I was diagnosed with dyslexia whilst studying for my doctorate. Initially this was a shock and whilst it didn’t affect my capacity to conduct the actual research, writing up was daunting; the act of converting what was in my brain into an academic style often seemed too high a bar to reach. Psychodynamic theories I struggled to understand during the taught part of the course but I then found myself loving and using them in the thesis. Along the way I changed jobs on a number of occasions, my two children completed their own degrees and my husband passed away. All in all, I learnt a lot about myself, particularly I believe I found myself again!

Once I submitted my thesis, I waited what seemed like a lifetime for my viva. I prepared by watching webinars and attended the Doctorate Hub’s virtual seminars. Then the day came, I attended a one-hour seminar that morning - 7 Reasons You’ll Pass Your Viva by Dr Nathan Ryder. My takeaway was “You’re talented, not lucky. Remember this. You are good. Only a talented, capable researcher could do what you’ve done.” This gave me a peace that there was nothing more I could do. Going back to the analogy of giving birth, despite a difficult pregnancy, giving birth was quick and resulted in a bundle of joy. My viva was everything it should be, a conversation about my research with two interested examiners, who encouraged, explored and probed; ultimately affirming that my research had something to offer the social work profession.