

Winter 02-15-2022

Falling Through the Cracks: Graduate Students' Experiences of Mentoring Absence

Wendy Hall

University of British Columbia, wendy.hall@ubc.ca

Sarah Liva

Trinity Western University, Sarah.Liva@twu.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <https://www.cjsotl-rcacea.ca>
<https://doi.org/10.5206/cjsotlrcacea.2022.1.10957>

Recommended Citation

Hall, W., & Liva, S. (2022). Falling through the cracks: Graduate students' experiences of mentoring absence. *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 13(1). <https://doi.org/10.5206/cjsotlrcacea.2022.1.10957>

Falling Through the Cracks: Graduate Students' Experiences of Mentoring Absence

Abstract

Theory about how mentorship is supposed to work, its goals, and what “makes it work” is abundant. It is rarer to encounter empirical information about processes and implications when mentoring is a problem. Graduate students experience significant psychological, physical, financial, and relational challenges and likely have expectations about the ameliorating effects of mentorship. Limited qualitative literature has described graduate students' perceptions about problems with mentorship and students' outcomes. The descriptive qualitative study used secondary analysis to describe students' perceptions of problematic mentorship. Graduate student research assistants conducted 12 recorded focus group interviews and transcribed them. The authors used inductive content analysis to develop themes. Fifty-four participants were recruited, including masters' ($n=19$), PhD ($n=34$), and a graduate student not enrolled in a specific faculty ($n=1$). The students represented multiple disciplines. The major theme identified was “falling through the cracks.” The subthemes included missing mentorship, students' difficulties accessing mentorship, university structures undermining mentoring, and damage to mentees. Falling through the cracks highlights students' struggles with accessing mentorship, effects of missing mentorship, and students' solutions for modifying structural features that inhibit mentoring. Quantitative work could compare psychological outcomes associated with present and missing mentoring.

La théorie selon laquelle le mentorat est censé fonctionner, ses objectifs et ce qui fait que « ça fonctionne » est abondante. Il est plus rare de rencontrer des informations empiriques sur les processus et les implications lorsque le mentorat est un problème. Les étudiants et les étudiantes de cycles supérieurs font face à des défis psychologiques, physiques, financiers et relationnels et ils ont probablement des attentes concernant les effets bénéfiques du mentorat. Des publications qualitatives en nombre limité décrivent les perceptions des étudiants et des étudiantes de cycles supérieurs sur les problèmes liés au mentorat et les résultats des étudiants et des étudiantes. L'étude qualitative descriptive a utilisé l'analyse secondaire pour décrire les perceptions des étudiants et des étudiantes sur le mentorat qui causait des problèmes. Des assistants et des assistantes de recherche de cycles supérieurs ont dirigé des entrevues au sein de 12 groupes de discussion et les ont transcrites. Les auteurs ont utilisé l'analyse inductive du contenu pour développer des thèmes. Cinquante-quatre participants et participantes ont été recrutés, y compris des étudiants et des étudiantes à la maîtrise ($n=19$), au doctorat ($n=34$) et un étudiant de cycle supérieur qui n'était pas inscrit dans une faculté spécifique ($n=1$). Les étudiants et les étudiantes représentaient diverses disciplines. Le thème principal identifié a été « tomber entre les mailles du filet ». Les sous-thèmes comprenaient le mentorat absent, les difficultés des étudiants et des étudiantes à accéder au mentorat, les structures de l'université qui sapient le mentorat et les dommages causés aux mentorés. Le thème de tomber entre les mailles du filet met en lumière les difficultés des étudiants et des étudiantes à avoir accès au mentorat, les effets de l'absence de mentorat et les solutions des étudiants et des étudiantes pour modifier les caractéristiques structurelles qui inhibent le mentorat. Le travail quantitatif pourrait comparer les résultats psychologiques associés avec le mentorat présent et absent.

Keywords

focus groups, graduate, mentoring, qualitative, students; groupes de discussion, cycles supérieurs, mentorat, qualitative, étudiants et étudiantes

Graduate students encounter multiple challenges that can negatively affect their mental health, relationships, learning, and workforce productivity. Students pursuing advanced degrees have identified academic, personal, and professional stressors as reducing their mental health (Tobbell et al., 2010). Balancing personal relationships and responsibilities while working professionally and completing graduate work can pose significant challenges to graduate students' program completion (West et al., 2011). Rates of depression and anxiety have been estimated as 2-6 times higher for graduate students than the general population (Barton & Bulmer, 2017; Evans et al., 2018). The graduate learning culture (e.g., promoting students' responsibility for learning) and independent nature of graduate work can exacerbate stress through contributing to students' feelings of isolation and disconnection (Tobbell et al., 2010). As suggested by Nash's (2021) report of mitigating effects of a specific intervention to reduce graduate student anxiety and depression through mentorship, effective graduate student mentorship and supervision has potential to support reductions in depression and anxiety.

Literature Review

For our purposes, academic mentorship is defined as involving dynamic learning relationships between mentors and mentees where mentors share career and relational knowledge and provide psychosocial support to improve mentees' functioning and academic success (Lundsford et al., 2017; Schunk & Mullen, 2013). Successful mentoring relationships have enhanced graduate student success, retention, and program completion (West et al., 2011; Young et al., 2019). Effective mentorship can decrease confusion about program requirements and increase students' perceptions of self-efficacy and motivation to complete their programs (Brill et al., 2014). Mentorship programs can help graduate students feel valued, emotionally supported, and less isolated (Mousavi et al., 2018), resulting in personal and professional growth.

Mentoring research in academic settings has examined how to recruit and retain mentors, match mentors and mentees, promote students' professional and career successes, and assess mentoring programs (Schunk & Mullen, 2013). Factors positively affecting mentoring relationships have included perceptions of similarity between mentors and mentees and motivation (Schunk & Mullen, 2013). Schunk and Mullen's (2013) mentoring model, which theorizes how mentoring ought to work, incorporates self-regulated learning. It positions students as entering the mentoring process by setting goals, and planning strategically for outcomes. The model identifies student mentees as motivated individuals engaging in observation, practice, self-instruction, effort, and help-seeking. Mentees also regulate their engagement based on their reflections on progress, self-efficacy, affect, and attributions; they expect to acquire skills and beliefs that they can adapt and use independently (Schunk & Mullen, 2013).

Despite our understanding of mentoring and how it can be positioned so that mentees can flourish, significant factors can compromise graduate students' mentorship. Schunk and Mullin's (2013) theoretical model operates on assumptions about available time, expertise, and institutional support to facilitate students' efforts to engage in mentorship. Managing large numbers of graduate students can compromise the feasibility of these types of mentorship models (McCallin & Nayar, 2012). Graduate students may be unclear about roles and expectations in mentoring relationships when mentors lack formal mentorship training (Cornelius & Nicol, 2016). Because university structures emphasize performance and productivity, mentors may lack time to provide graduate students with the psychosocial support they expect (Graham & Gabois, 2013). Institutional

regulations also affect graduate work (Parker-Jenkins, 2018); it is important to consider effects of university cultures and structures when examining graduate students' challenges (Isike, 2018).

Authors have stressed the importance of understanding faculty and institutional factors that contribute to student challenges (Gilmore et al., 2016; Park-Saltzman et al., 2012). Empirical literature has both measured and captured some effects on graduate students' lack of flourishing but less attention has been given to how improvements could be operationalized (Mackie & Bates, 2019). Despite a progressive research emphasis on understanding negative experiences of mentorship (Chen et al., 2016; Ensher & Murphy, 2011), literature describing students' views about the nature of problematic graduate student mentorship and possible outcomes is limited because most student descriptions result from open-ended questions on surveys (Adrian-Taylor et al., 2007; Stubb et al., 2011). Schunk and Mullen (2013) argued that the roles of mentee cognitions and affects during mentoring interactions remain largely unexplored and that how mentees change while engaged in mentorship has been overlooked. A study of graduate students' perceptions about problematic mentoring can both expand thinking about the mentoring model and offer insight into potential solutions for students' perceptions of missing mentoring.

This paper aims to describe graduate students' educational experiences with problematic mentorship. Students' problematic mentorship occurred in the context of students acting as teaching assistants, engaging with research supervision, and working in research groups where multiple studies were managed. This study was conducted in a Canadian research-intensive large (n=54,232 students) university; international students comprise 32% of the 12,868 graduate students (Redish & Mathieson, 2017).

Method

The findings reported here constitute a secondary analysis. Our primary analysis described mentorship as a transformative and positive process for the same sample of graduate students (Hall & Liva, 2021). A qualitative descriptive interpretive design (Sandelowski, 2000) was used to answer the research question: What are graduate students' perceptions of mentoring? In the course of reviewing the data, many instances where students referred to problems with mentoring were identified. We responded by conducting a secondary analysis based on the broad question: What are graduate students' perceptions of problems with mentoring? The University Behavioral Ethics Review Board approved the project, with all students providing informed and signed consent. During focus groups, students used pseudonyms.

Recruitment and Sample

The Graduate Student Society and students in a variety of disciplines assisted investigators to contact 141 program departments/schools and 280 program specializations. Emails were sent by department/program representatives (including some graduate advisors) to masters and PhD students registered in research programs in 11 faculties. Beyond graduate students' involvement with supervision, no inclusion criteria were specified. Of 77 participants recruited, 16 students withdrew due to pressing demands, and seven were lost to follow-up contact. Participants included 54 students. Table 1 presents data about masters' or doctoral student identity, students' disciplines, gender identification, and year of study in programs.

Table 1
Sample Characteristics (n=54)

Variable	Frequency	%
Gender		
Female	40	74.1
Male	14	25.9
Undisclosed	0	0
Program		
Masters	19	35.2
PhD	34	63
Unclassified	1	1.8
Year of Study*		
1	12	22.6
2	15	28.3
3	14	26.4
4	6	11.3
5+	5	9.4
Faculty		
Social Sciences	17	31.5
Science	10	18.5
Humanities	4	7.4
Applied Science	23	42.6

Note: *Missing data for unclassified student; Humanities – e.g. Drama, English, Applied science – e.g. Nursing, Engineering, Medicine – e.g. Population Health, Science – e.g. Genetics, Food Science, Mathematics, Social science – e.g. Interdisciplinary Studies, Education, Psychology, Law

Data Collection

Investigators used focus group interviews to collect data. Given the masters and PhD students' participation in the same focus groups, the groups supported dynamic interaction among masters' and PhD students to generate data (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015). Because they can be less intimidating than individual interviews (Zwane et al., 2004), focus groups provided opportunities for students experiencing differing levels of mentorship (Noy & Ray, 2012) to share their experiences.

Our research team consisted of the principal investigator (an associate dean of graduate studies), three masters' students, and five PhD students (one was the study coordinator). The graduate students represented a variety of disciplines (i.e. arts, education, applied sciences). We deliberately organized recruitment and data collection so that only graduate students were in contact with the participants. We regarded such interactions as decreasing potentials for power differentials. Seven graduate research assistants had four hours of focus group training, including ethical sensitivities and interviewing skills to support environments conducive to open conversations. Focus groups had a student moderator and a student keeping records about the setting, non-verbal communication, and other participant interactions (Sim, 1998).

The 12 focus groups occurred over one year and ranged in size from two to seven student members (mean = 4.5). Some graduate students, after committing to a scheduled focus group session, withdrew just before the session, which reduced numbers of focus group participants. While the study was in progress, the principal investigator reviewed all focus group transcripts for

accuracy and mentored graduate research assistants about enhancing student elaboration on interview questions and providing supportive environments (Tiwari et al., 2005). We had two meetings where all of the study team members discussed the preliminary findings, and the principal investigator's and research assistants' views about areas requiring further focus. The principal investigator presented some preliminary findings to a meeting of the Graduate Students' Society, where input was welcomed and recorded. The principal investigator also presented preliminary findings to a group of faculty members selected by Deans to engage in a scholarship of teaching and learning course to promote excellence in graduate education. We regard these activities as enhancing our reflexivity about potential subjective values, biases, and inclinations.

Although each focus group had access to a semi-structured interview guide, research assistants adapted the guide to enhance students' elaboration. Questions included, but were not limited to: What are your thoughts about mentoring and mentorship? How would you define mentorship? How do you think that the mentoring or the lack of mentoring is affecting you as a graduate student? Can you comment on any disadvantages or advantages you face in receiving mentoring? The interview ended with were there any questions we should have asked that we did not?

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed by graduate research assistants who received additional transcription training (e.g., de-identification and use of transcription software Express Scribe®). Investigators used inductive content analysis, specifically constant comparative analysis (White & Marsh, 2006) to identify latent content. The investigators coded phrases, incidents, and types of behaviors. The principal investigator compared and contrasted codes within and between interviews, grouped codes with similar characteristics into categories, clustered those categories into themes and wrote conceptual and theory memos (White & Marsh, 2006). The research coordinator (a PhD student not involved in interviews) read the memos and commented on the analysis.

The findings are credible because the quotations demonstrate the ability of interviewees to access tacit knowledge in the focus group context (Tracy, 2010). They are transferable because the findings resonated with students in the Graduate Students' Society and with faculty members engaged with promoting excellence in graduate education. They are dependable because team debriefing occurred throughout data collection and analysis and a number of memos created an audit trail (White & Marsh, 2006). The quotations provided support claims arising from a sample that was appropriate given the study goals (Tracy, 2010).

Results

The themes and subthemes developed about falling through the cracks in the absence of mentoring are presented below.

Falling through the Cracks

Many graduate students described themselves as falling through the cracks. Students fell through the cracks when they perceived their missed opportunities for mentoring contributed to ambiguity about their activities and/or misdirection in their academic pursuits. They fell through

the cracks when lack of support jeopardized their personal relationships and financial wellbeing. Students identified motivation to be independent but a lack of clarity about what constituted independence. They felt like they were on their own and cracks were opening, which prevented their efforts to make progress.

How independent are we supposed to be? It's kind of a grey area. I've talked to other students about this. They feel like..., once you've done your comps and your proposal, you're on your own. This is your thing now. You have to show that you can do all this (FG1, Milada).

When they identified cracks, students described feeling cut-off from personal lives, having lack of access to resources, and not knowing where to turn.

The student doesn't know how to seek out another mentor or maybe they don't have the time, or maybe they are not even sure how to start. I think it can leave you in a very vulnerable position if the person that you were led to believe is supposed to be your primary mentor won't act in that way. (FG1, Christine).

Falling through the cracks involved isolation. Students indicated that they drifted away from academic work and occupied 'black' holes. They felt they were alone and cut off from others.

I think isolation is a problem, and if you don't have good mentorship you kind of fall through the cracks. You can feel, like what Amy said: 'You are the only one who's dealing with this'. (FG 8, Roger).

Four sub-themes supported the major theme falling through the cracks. The subthemes were missing mentorship, students' struggles with mentorship, university structures that undermined mentoring, and damage to mentees.

Missing Mentorship

When students indicated that mentorship was missing, they identified a violation of their expectations. Access to mentorship was missing and/or they felt that they missed the mentorship they wanted. The students expected mentor involvement but found a lack of commitment to their progress. "I was left to my own devices...there were certain things I didn't do that I was supposed to do because I didn't know I was supposed to do them and I was never told" (FG1, Mira). Complete disinterest in demands arising from students' personal lives contributed to falling through the cracks because, when mentors refused to attend to personal problems, students described their difficulties balancing their personal, academic, and professional development.

My primary supervisor [mentor] hates anything that has to do with my personal life. If it's not project-related we are not to talk about it. It is very hard because shit happens...when you have to find other people to try and work through the rest of your life that obviously infringes on what you're doing or to try to figure out where you are going (FG7, Mel).

In circumstances where they made the effort to seek help from mentors and that help was questionable, students commented on the negative effects on their success by weakening their feelings of competence. “The personal side of it was almost hazardous...every time I ask this brilliant person for help or a question I left feeling like an idiot” (FG5, Freddy).

The graduate students were clear that mentorship could take a variety of forms (e.g. peers, experts, and alumni). Nonetheless, students regarded supervisors and committee members as their primary source of mentorship because they brought tremendous expertise to graduate education. Students indicated that peers were important only if they came willingly into a mentorship relationship. “There’s a huge difference between someone who is told that they have to [peer] mentor and someone who genuinely wants to support and ensure that people have the most successful experience that they might have.” (FG7, Brynn).

Students regarded individuals who viewed mentoring as an employer-employee relationship as not succeeding in supporting their progress or self-efficacy. Those kinds of relationships created cracks. “That’s really where the relationship can break down. It becomes either perfunctory or akin to a regular employer/employee relationship (FG7, Madeline). Students not only identified the nature of missing mentorship but also identified their struggles in accessing mentorship.

Students’ Struggles with Finding Mentorship

The graduate students identified difficulties with achieving what they needed to make mentorship possible so that they could avoid falling through the cracks. They described encountering barriers to finding mentoring relationships that would work for them. For example, potential mentors told one PhD student that she had nothing to offer the university. “Because I am old...in my quest for an available advisor, people say ‘well I’m not sure what’s in it for the university because obviously I am not going to have career, if I should ever complete my PhD” (FG5, Joji). Another student described her despair when she encountered sexist and racist comments from her mentor.

My supervisor basically said ‘because that person [who accused her at a community meeting] happened to be that ethnicity and I am that ethnicity and my project is around that ethnic community, she had no interest in doing any more work with the community so I was not a suitable candidate to be working with her’. Just how she [her supervisor] framed it was super racist and super sexist (FG12, Parvyn).

International students, in particular, indicated the challenges they faced with finding mentors when they were struggling to earn money and navigate the system: “The most important resource that graduate students have is their time...We are from outside Canada...coming here, knowing the system, earning money is a struggle, especially for me. I have a kid.” (FG6, Bill).

Participants indicated that they were motivated but had difficulty planning when they could not articulate their needs clearly: “The hardest thing about identifying my needs is that I don’t know what my needs are...Trying to find a mentor before you know what your research is, it is really hard to do.” (FG4, Sam). Some international students found trying to renegotiate their goals and strategies challenging because they felt unclear about the legitimacy of seeking help and power differences.

When you came from another country...you need some guidelines...because we feel like we are lost. Some feedback and some experience from others that will help me and will be less hard just to figure it out by myself...I feel like I cannot ask [for] another topic because it is not their business so I don't want to bother. (FG3, Lucia).

Students described difficulties when individuals who they thought were their mentors set out very clear boundaries about what they would and would not do. The students did not know where to find the help that they needed. They felt abandoned and saw cracks growing larger as their personal and academic lives suffered.

She was very good at setting that out...she was there for a particular purpose...There are some things you need to go elsewhere for. And I think that is completely valid except if you don't really see where you can go elsewhere it becomes hard...A lot of the issues that I've had thus far in my PhD has been more a personal issue that bleeds into academic issues or a motivation issue that is kind of everything (FG9, Paige).

The students recognized the importance of advocating for themselves, but they found navigating academic terminology and expectations difficult. Some students indicated that they lacked necessary skills to deal with setbacks and solve problems. Losing time and hitting dead ends was part of falling through the cracks.

If you are doing your own research and the mentoring is not proper then you might go in the really wrong direction...If you don't have constant regular mentoring happening, then only at the end you might realize that all of the time you have spent was not useful (FG11, SJ).

Students who were depressed were afraid that their mentors would judge them if they were open about their problems so they avoided seeing them. "If you are not in a good place psychologically you don't really want to seek out your supervisor...You're not going to say 'I have been really depressed and I can't sleep this whole term...because you might be judged'" (FG2, Milada).

Students described their obligation to impress their expected mentors. They worried that they would be viewed as incapable or lacking the independence and confidence to defend their work if they did not try to excel at everything and maintain a façade.

We feel we are obligated to impress our supervisors [mentors] all of the time...In the aim of impressing our supervisor... we try to achieve goals that are simply not achievable by ourselves...I think I was carving myself a little hole from which I was not able to come out just because I was trying to impress everyone (FG2, Bob).

Peer mentorship raised questions for some students. One student expressed concerns about lack of peer accountability.

I think of my peer-to-peer experiences in terms of mentorship...it was more informal...There isn't necessarily any kind of follow up. With faculty members, there's

an accountability. I feel like there's a different level of accountability that is based on what I feel between myself and a faculty member versus myself and the peers (FG8, Roger).

Another student described peers forming exclusive relationships that excluded him and contributed to his isolation.

The single largest cultural group in my department is made up of international students..., which is not in any way a problem, but naturally they form a very tight knit community...The fabric that holds their little student community together excludes other people. The second group would be students who have gone through their undergrad here and are mostly natives of (city) and it's another social circle (FG2, Tyrone).

In addition to struggles finding mentorship that met students' expectations, students also identified structural features associated with the university that contributed to problematic mentorship and them falling through the cracks.

University Structures that Undermine Mentoring

The students described structures in central administration and at the department/school level that undermined mentoring. They wanted new approaches that could prevent students from falling through the cracks. At the central level, students identified a lack of university-led initiatives to facilitate mentorship:

Time is a huge thing. It's not a priority for the university to allow time for less formal mentorship. They only allow for time for supervisorship. That kind of thing might be worked into the structure... [that] formal and informal mentorship is a priority (FG4, Hadassah).

Participants noted lack of administrative attention to mentorship in formal documents and tenure decisions, which contributed to students feeling helpless about problematic mentoring.

It would be nice if, for tenureship, there had to be some consideration, maybe not a yearly review where students can be identified but a summary of how your mentored students perceive your skills. I don't know if that's realistic but there's currently nothing (FG6, Cheryl).

The graduate students identified university-built walls that left nowhere to turn. They were afraid to draw attention to mentors' problems because they believed that there would be no anonymity and they would fall further through the cracks.

A big structural problem is a lack of capacity to give feedback when there's a bad supervisor, a bad mentor...I am struggling with my supervisor. The other students she supervised in the past have faced exactly the same thing...the university really doesn't provide that structure [with] PhD students you have so few of them ...it's going to be obvious who the feedback is coming from. I've never felt like I can go to anyone in my department (FG6, Jo).

At the department/school level, students identified lack of a scholarly community, which they believed would have offered multiple options for finding mentors. The net they viewed as potentially preventing them from falling through the cracks did not exist.

When I was still involved with coursework, I just had access to a greater number of faculty... Now, [when] I am doing the PhD I've become deracinated from the department... It seems like the department is more interested in incoming students than they are in actual students... who are actually struggling their way through it (FG2, Douglas).

In departments with locked or dispersed units, participants described a lack of informal contact with faculty members, which increased their problems with accessing missing and potential mentors. 'The faculty members are actually in two different buildings...you need key access to get into...and physically getting access to people is intimidating' (FG4, Sam).

The students identified problems in departments that relied heavily on individuals to provide mentorship who were not accessible. Particularly, when faculty members were constantly traveling or unavailable and departments did not take any steps to improve the situation, mentorship was missing.

I definitely had a problem where my supervisor traveled so extensively... it was really challenging to ever find a time to meet... There should either be expectations from the university in terms of how often you are here, or if you're here very infrequently of doing a better job of making yourself available in those tiny moments when you are available (FG7, Madeline).

Many students shared situations where departments were aware of problems but did not act when faculty members failed to mentor. The students saw power dynamics as supporting the status quo.

As far as I know it [department] has done nothing to affect this person's ability to take on more students. Nothing has been done to make sure that students just constantly leaving this person's team and being unhappy and miserable has changed (FG6, Betty).

Lack of administrative attention to problematic mentorship, both centrally and at the departmental level, resulted in poorer outcomes for students, which they equated with falling through the cracks.

Damage to Mentees

Student participants were clear that missing mentorship and falling through the cracks created multiple negative outcomes for their productivity, wellbeing, and motivation.

When you have to study with your supervisor... it has a lot of impact in various areas of your life, your schedule, your family, your finances, your motivation, your psychological state, even your physical state. The effect is even more for international students who have a lot of pressure with money and uncertainty of their status here...away from their families. ... If I [supervisor] reply to your email two months later, in your world that means something very different than in my world. That may mean I can't apply to another

scholarship, your family is running out of money, you are stressed out and can't complete things (FG10, Michelle).

When mentorship was missing, students described drastic consequences for their futures.

I have a lot of pressure from my supervisors to enter academia because I have been successful and I am good at it. I don't think that I am personally a good fit or that is what I want. I feel like bridging that conversation with my supervisors would be a disappointment to them and they would see any other options that I could choose as being second best. And that's not a good mentorship relationship. That you have squandered your life and your academic potential. (FG9, Sarah).

Even when mentees recognized what they needed to achieve their aspirations and actively engage independently, missing/problematic mentorship resulted in a loss of academic progress and undermined trust: "Something I encountered with me and supervisor is that... I did all this research, and my supervisor scooped me and published it" (FG3, Arthur).

The students indicated that missing mentorship resulted in an inability to take next steps. It undermined their career advancement, feelings of self-efficacy, and progress. Without mentoring, trying to progress created cracks.

I can't talk about specifics of my many ethical dilemmas...but one of them relates to keeping confidentiality while witnessing things that maybe you think you should report to an authority. So, this is a situation that I'm in. So, you have to have a discussion about it with your supervisor, and you have a lot of disagreements because you have two conflicting principles. If you don't feel comfortable saying well I disagree with you. How do you [if] you don't have the trust, where you can disagree with your supervisor, and tell them well, I think this is a problem (FG1, Tyrion).

When international students could not access the mentorship they required, they described emotional breakdowns.

For my Master's, when I came in to the department having overly high expectations of mentorship, my supervisor is not always there for me. He initially met me once a week, but after that he barely replied to my emails. I suffered a lot [because] I was not independent enough. I required more supervision, more advice, and I did not get that. I had a lot of emotional breakdown that stopped me from working (FG10, Ron).

The graduate student participants provided extensive descriptions of characteristics of missing mentorship, lack of university attention to problems with mentorship, and major consequences of missing mentorship for their personal and professional lives.

Discussion

This secondary qualitative analysis captured graduate students' perspectives about the characteristics, challenges, and negative outcomes associated with problematic mentoring. The major theme, falling through the cracks, had four subthemes: (a) missing mentorship, (b) students'

difficulties accessing mentorship, (c) university structures undermining mentoring, and (d) damage to mentees. Students perceived significant consequences to their well-being and productivity when they believed they were missing mentorship, it was inadequate, and/or mentorship was undermined by university structures. The study findings help address Schunk and Mullen's (2013) identification of gaps in the literature, where the roles of mentee cognitions and affects during mentoring interactions remain largely unexplored. Other Canadian authors have referred to 'falling through the cracks' but have focused their comments on immigrant graduate students' cultural transitioning (Sinacore et al., 2011). Our results not only provide some face validity for cultural challenges faced by international graduate students but also indicate the vulnerability of all students in graduate academic cultures.

The students characterized missing mentorship as lacking the career and psychosocial support qualities of academic mentorship articulated by other authors, such as Lundsford et al. (2017). Participants described difficulties expressing their needs, focusing their research, finding information and planning, problem solving, and strategizing to achieve their academic and career goals when they lacked mentorship. Missing psychosocial mentorship occurred when mentors were unavailable, uncommitted to participants' progress and/or unwilling to understand how personal issues affected their academic engagement. The problems graduate students described in this study occurred pre-COVID-19 pandemic. Further research is necessary to describe the effects of a pandemic, in terms of faculty members, peers, and students "working from home" and having limited engagement with university facilities. Such conditions would likely exacerbate students' difficulties. In the absence of COVID-based research, personnel associated with graduate studies departments or faculties could currently provide strategies to support for students' and faculty members' engagement at distance.

The findings suggest some students lack the requisite skills to prevent falling through the cracks when mentorship is missing or problematic. Students were confused about expectations of independence and had difficulty asserting their learning needs, advocating for themselves, and managing setbacks. Authors have criticized assumptions that graduate students, as 'expert students', can adjust to graduate school without education about self-care, time management, and leadership development (McPherson et al., 2017; Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013). Participants in this study indicated that missing mentorship amplified their concerns about role confusion and time management. Their feelings of powerlessness in the face of university structures that failed to document supervisory failures and lack of mentorship point to the need for administrative accountability to document negative student outcomes in faculty members' curriculum vitae. Such documentation would support a culture where faculty members' privileges for graduate supervision were earned rather than automatically granted or renewed.

Students in this study described feeling cut off from others and being unsure of where to turn for mentorship when mentors set narrow boundaries for support. Students who were struggling and experiencing psychological stress described being worried about judgement and avoiding supervisors. When students are isolated, fearful of being labelled as failures, and unclear about where to obtain help, it is important to go beyond arguing that access to social support and self-efficacy to manage negative situations protects university students' mental health (Alsubaie et al., 2019; Sawatzky et al., 2012). Universities can support voluntary mentorship by peers and faculty members who are not directly involved in supervision by providing resources and acknowledging time costs.

The study suggests that problematic mentorship compromises students' motivation and capacity to focus efforts towards their academic work. Mentors' disinterest in students' personal

lives and lack of psychosocial support affected students' motivation and compounded their challenges around personal and professional balance and adequate income. This finding aligns with research indicating that the quality of faculty mentorship accounts for students' program and life satisfaction beyond peer and personal support (Tompkins et al., 2016). Because some international student participants identified struggles to access mentorship while they were trying to learn the system and negotiate time to earn adequate money to support them and their families, our findings support previous work that suggests mentors' sensitivity to cultural issues is critical to effective mentoring (Heeneman & de Grave, 2019). Education about cultural sensitivity could be built into university workshops that support excellence in supervision and mentoring.

Students felt power differences with their mentors keenly, particularly international students. Participants described ageist, racist, and sexist comments from mentors diminishing their feelings of competence and intelligence, and career prospects. These findings concur with the report that 50% of Canadian graduate students experienced or witnessed racism and sexism, and 70% experienced verbal abuse, from individuals with the potential to mentor students (Canadian Federation of Students, 2017). Students would benefit from development of and access to online workshops about how to respond to bullying from faculty members and peers. We found that it was difficult, even for interested students, to create time and space during the day to attend the focus groups. Online workshops about bullying could overcome some of the scheduling barriers students experience. Nash's (2021) model of a commercially-supported self-directed online learning community suggests that graduate students respond to such formats.

Our findings identified ways that university structures could intensify students' experiences of isolation and perceptions of lacking recourse to address problems. The study participants highlighted lack of university-led initiatives to support mentoring and lack of attention, at the departmental level, to faculty members' power dynamics when students received poor treatment. Lack of anonymity in reporting missing or problematic mentoring experiences contributed to participants' perceptions of limited recourse to address mentorship issues and claims that evidence of problems was in short supply. Students wanted universities to anonymize records of students' perceptions of problematic mentorship. Ballantine and Jolly-Ballantine's (2015) participants also referred to a need for anonymous evaluations. Supervisors have extensive reach into graduate students' lives because references from supervisors are expected for any further graduate work, postdoctoral fellowships, or even faculty appointments.

Although some degree of stress is inherent within graduate studies, our findings highlight effects of problem mentorship for graduate students' stress and decreased capacity for success. Additional quantitative work could explore students' cognitive and behavioural responses to lack of mentoring interactions over time to explain the effects on student outcomes. Because mentoring support varies at different phases in the mentoring relationship and students' year of study, accounting for these variables would be important (Heeneman & de Grave, 2019).

Limitations and Conclusion

Although investigators contacted many departments and units, the sample size, while robust, did not reach expectations ($n=150$). Data about international versus domestic categories of graduate students were not collected. The findings represent students' perceptions about problematic mentorship. The major theme was falling through the cracks. The study participants described how missing mentorship limited their focus, motivation, well-being, and actions - factors they perceived as necessary for successfully navigating program completion and avoiding poor

outcomes. Students described struggles with trying to access mentorship that cut across personal, academic, and professional aspects of their lives. Our findings emphasized the reach of missing mentoring into students' lives. To counter those effects, we suggested multiple levels of strategies to enhance students' graduate experiences and prevent damage to them.

References

- Adrian-Taylor, S. R., Noels, K. A., & Tischler, K. (2007). Conflict between international graduate students and faculty supervisors: Toward effective conflict prevention and management strategies. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 11(1), 90-117. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315306286313>
- Alsubaie, M. M., Stain, H. J., Webster, L. A. D., & Wadman, R. (2019). The role of sources of social support on depression and quality of life for university students. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2019.1568887>
- Ballantine, J. H., & Jolly-Ballantine, J. A. (2015). Mentoring graduate students: The good, bad, and gray. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 26(2), 5-41.
- Barton, B. A., & Bulmer, S. M. (2017). Correlates and predictors of depression and anxiety disorders in graduate students. *Health Educator*, 49(2), 17-26.
- Brill, J. L., Balcanoff, K. K., Land, D., Gogarty, M., & Turner, F. (2014). Best practices in doctoral retention: Mentoring. *Higher Learning Research Communications*, 4(2), 26-37. <https://doi.org/10.18870/hlrc.v4i2.186>
- Canadian Federation of Students. (2017). *Not in the syllabus*. https://cfsontario.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Not-In-The-Syllabus-Report_ENG.pdf
- Chen, Y., Watson, R., & Hilton, A. (2016). A review of mentorship measurement tools. *Nurse Education Today*, 40, 20-28. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2016.01.020>
- Cornelius, S., & Nicol, S. (2016). Understanding the needs of masters dissertation supervisors: Supporting students in professional contexts. *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice*, 4(1), 2-12. <https://doi.org/10.14297/jpaap.v4i1.161>
- Ensher, E. A., & Murphy, S. E. (2011). The Mentoring Relationship Challenges Scale: The impact of mentoring stage, type, and gender. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 79(1), 253-266. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2010.11.008>
- Evans, T. M., Bira, L., Gastelum, J. B., Weiss, T. L., & Vanderford, N. L. (2018). Evidence for a mental health crisis in graduate education. *Nature Biotechnology*, 36(3), 282-284. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nbt.4089>
- Gilmore, J., Wofford, A. M., & Maher, M. A. (2016). The flip side of the attrition coin: Faculty perceptions of factors supporting graduate student success. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 11, 419-439. <https://doi.org/10.28945/3618>
- Graham, E., & Gadbois, S. A. (2013). Perceptions of graduate supervision: Relationships with time of reflection and post-secondary climate. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, 150, 1-29.
- Hall, W. A., & Liva, S. (2021). Mentoring as a transformative experience. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 29(1), 6-22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2021.1899583>
- Heeneman, S., & de Grave, W. (2019). Development and initial validation of a dual-purpose questionnaire capturing mentors' and mentees' perceptions and expectations of the mentoring process. *BMC Medical Education*, 19, 133. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-019-1574-2>

- Isike, C. (2018). The impact of University of Zululand structural and cultural contexts on postgraduate supervision practice (2011–2016). *Africa Education Review*, 15(2), 112-130. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18146627.2017.1341292>
- Lundsford, L. G., Crisp, G., Dolan, E. L., & Wuetherick, B. (2017). Mentoring in higher education. In D. A. Clutterbuck, F. Kochan, L. G. Lundsford, N. Dominguez, & J. Haddock-Millar (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of mentoring* e-book (pp. 316-324). Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526402011.n20>
- Mackie, S. A., & Bates, G. W. (2019). Contribution of the doctoral education environment to PhD candidates' mental health problems: a scoping review. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 38(3), 565-578. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2018.1556620>
- McCallin, A., & Nayar, S. (2012). Postgraduate research supervision: a critical review of current practice. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 17(1), 63-74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2011.590979>
- McPherson, C., Punch, S., & Graham, E. (2017). Transitions from undergraduate to taught postgraduate study: Emotions, integration, and belonging. *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice*, 5(2), 42-50. <https://doi.org/10.14297/jpaap.v5i2.265>
- Mousavi, M. P. S., Sohrabpour, Z., Anderson, E. L., Stemig-Vindedahl, A., Golden, D., Christenson, G., Lust, K., & Bühlmann, P. (2018). Stress and mental health in graduate school: How student empowerment creates lasting change. *Journal of Chemical Education*, 95(11), 1939-1946. <https://doi.org/10.1021/acs.jchemed.8b00188>
- Nash, C. (2021). Improving mentorship and supervision during COVID-19 to reduce graduate student anxiety and depression aided by an online commercial platform narrative research group. *Challenges*, 12, 11. <https://doi.org/10.3390/challe12010011>
- Noy, S., & Ray, R. (2012). Graduate students' perceptions of their mentors: Is there systematic disadvantage in mentorship? *The Journal of Higher Education*, 83(6), 876-914. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2012.11777273>
- Park-Saltzman, J., Wada, K., & Mogami, T. (2012). Culturally sensitive mentoring for Asian international students in counselling psychology. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 40(6), 895-915. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000011429831>
- Parker-Jenkins, M. (2018). Mind the gap: Developing the roles, expectations, and boundaries in the doctoral supervisor-supervisee relationship. *Studies in Higher Education*, 43(1), 57-71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2016.1153622>
- Redish, A., & Mathieson, C. (2017). University of British Columbia 2016/17 annual report on enrolment. University of British Columbia.
- Sandelowski, M. (2000). Whatever happened to qualitative description? *Research in Nursing & Health*, 23, 334-340. [https://doi.org/10.1002/1098-240X\(200008\)23:4<334::AID-NUR9>3.0.CO;2-G](https://doi.org/10.1002/1098-240X(200008)23:4<334::AID-NUR9>3.0.CO;2-G)
- Sawatzky, R., Ratner, P. A., Richardson, C. G., Washburn, C., Sudmant, W., & Mirwaldt, P. (2012). Stress and depression in students: The mediating role of stress management self-efficacy. *Nursing Research*, 61(1), 13-21. <https://doi.org/10.1097/NNR.0b013e31823b1440>
- Schunk, D. H., & Mullen, C. A. (2013). Toward a conceptual model of mentoring research: Integration with self-regulated learning. *Educational Psychology Review*, 25, 361–389. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-013-9233-3>
- Sim, J. (1998). Collecting and analyzing qualitative data: Issues raised by focus groups. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 28(2), 345-352. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2648.1998.00692.x>

- Sinacore, A. L., Park-Saltzman, J., Mikhail, A. M., & Wada, K. (2011). Falling through the cracks: Academic and career challenges faced by immigrant graduate students. *Canadian Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy*, 45(2), 168-187.
- Stewart, D. W., & Shamdasani, P. N. (2015). *Focus groups: Theory and practice* (Vol. 20). Sage.
- Stubb, J., Pyhältö, K., & Lonka, K. (2011). Balancing between inspiration and exhaustion: PhD students' experienced socio-psychological well-being. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 33(1), 33-50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2010.515572>
- Tiwari, A., Lam, D., Yuen, K. H., Chan, R., Fung, T., & Chan, S. (2005). Student learning in clinical nursing education: Perceptions of the relationship between assessment and learning. *Nurse Education Today*, 25(4), 299-308. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2005.01.013>
- Tobbell, J., & O'Donnell, V. (2013). Transition to postgraduate study: Postgraduate ecological systems and identity. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 43(1), 123-138. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2012.749215>
- Tobbell, J., O'Donnell, V., & Zammit, M. (2010). Exploring transition to postgraduate study: Shifting identities in interaction with communities, practice, and participation. *British Educational Research Journal*, 36(2), 261-278. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920902836360>
- Tompkins, K. A., Brecht, K., Tucker, B., Neander, L. L., & Swift, J. K. (2016). Who matters most? The contribution of faculty, student-peers, and outside support in predicting graduate student satisfaction. *Training and Education in Professional Psychology*, 10(2), 102-108. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tep0000115>
- Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight "big tent" criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10) 837-851. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121>
- West, J., Gokalp, G., Vallejo Pena, E., Fischer, L., & Gupton, J. (2011). Exploring effective support practices for doctoral students' degree completion. *College Student Journal*, 45(2), 310-323.
- White, M. D., & Marsh, E. E. (2006). Content analysis: A flexible methodology. *Librarytrends*, 55(1), 22-45. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2006.0053>
- Young, S. A., Vanwye, W. R., Schafer, M. A., Robertson, T. A., & Poore, A. V. (2019). Factors affecting PhD student success. *International Journal of Exercise Science*, 12(1), 34-45.
- Zwane, I. T., Mngadi, P. T., & Nxumalo, N. P. (2004). Adolescents' views on decision-making regarding risky sexual behaviour. *International Nursing Review*, 51(1), 15-22. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1466-7657.2003.00214.x>