

HOW CAN DOCTORAL SUPERVISION BE IMPROVED? VIEWS FROM DOCTORAL STUDENTS IN TWO FACULTIES OF EDUCATION AT SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to address the void left by earlier researchers by establishing how full-time doctoral students' views can be employed to improve doctoral studies. By employing habitus, field, social and cultural capital, and agency as a theoretical framework for this article, open-ended questions in a qualitative study were designed and executed purposively among sampled doctoral candidates at two faculties of education in South African universities. This approach was hinged on the thought that what PhD candidates were going through was vital when thinking of improving PhD supervision. Out of this study, PhD students point to some of their experiences as the starting point for possible supervision improvement. The study findings reveal that if academic leadership at the faculty level is actively involved in this process at the strategy formulation level, the experiences of students can change for the better. This can be done through the introduction and establishment of seminars, small and large group engagements, and the widening of social capital. Widening of social capital will ensure that both PhD supervisors and PhD students share productive supervision experiences while buttressing multidirectional relationships between supervisors, students and their peers aimed at improving completion rates and the doctoral journey.

Keywords: doctoral supervision, challenges, improvement

INTRODUCTION

Supervision of graduate students is a vital social and educational component of the lives of doctoral (PhD) students, and doctoral supervisors are important during this encounter.

Supervisors, according to Nulty, Kiley, and Meyers (2009), engage in a variety of roles in guiding PhD students, and they adapt their supervision approaches to guiding individual students instead of assuming a one-size-fits-all approach. Although this aspect of doctoral supervision is important to those involved, Mapesela and Wilkinson (2005) observe that good supervision is still not well understood as a critical pedagogical approach to successful doctoral research. Chiappetta-Swanson and Watt (2012) recognise the potential role played by graduate students and their supervisors as participants, thus encouraging and enhancing effective teaching and learning. The partial understanding of this pedagogy has compelled researchers to look at the challenges facing doctoral candidates in university faculties in South Africa. This study thus sets out to answer two important questions: One, are there experiences that lead to students' failure to complete their PhD studies? Two, how can PhD supervision be improved from the perspective of full-time education doctoral students at South African universities?

Naim and Dhanapal (2017), Bitzer and Albertyn, (2011), Herman (2011), Wadesango and Machingambi (2011), and Dell (2010) in their studies indicate that most postgraduate students terminate their higher education studies. But they inadequately explain what causes doctoral students to drop out or delay the completion of their studies. Others attribute failure to complete doctoral studies to several factors, including inexperienced or overburdened supervisors, poor preparation of candidates or relationship with their supervisors, and insufficient care/support for their graduate studies (Castelló McAlpine and Pyhältö 2017; Löfström and Pyhältö 2014; Bitzer and Albertyn 2011). Apart from this, South Africa's "current capacity to produce doctoral graduates hovers at around a little more than about 1 800 per year; just over 2 000 in 2014" (Tefferra 2015, 10). This PhD data indicates graduates produced per year per million people of the South African population. Although Herman and Frick (u.d.) as reported in 2019 observed that "there has been notable growth in both doctoral enrolments and graduations", from 1 188 graduates in 2005 to 3 057 per year graduates, this "depict[s] the poor state of postgraduate supervision in South Africa" (Kritzinger and Loock 2012).

Although statistics by Tefferra, (2015) impact researchers, postgraduate students continue to experience difficulties and delays that prevent them from completing their studies on time, attributing some of these challenges to supervision issues and the allocation of supervisors (Heeralal 2015). Lessing and Schultz's (2003, 159) 2001 study in South Africa on postgraduate students also indicated that PhD students' expectations of supervision were not fully realised. Other studies have indicated that doctoral students' experiences are either negative or positive and have significant effects on their completion (Pyhältö and Keskinen 2012; González-Ocampo and Castelló 2019).

However, some studies have revealed the vital role of supervision in the educational and

research development of PhD students in the process of pursuing doctoral studies (Barnes and Austin 2009; Kobayashi, Grout, and Rump 2013). For instance, a study by Heeralal (2015) aimed at looking at how distance postgraduate students' views can improve student supervision in an online learning context. The study aimed at finding ways of improving supervision experiences in a selected online university in South Africa for timely completion. It recommended that supervisors be promptly allocated to candidates and frequently attend in-service training programmes. However, the study did not consider the context of full-time PhD students in South Africa.

Watt (2012) acknowledges the link between postgraduates and the academic research principal investigator's vital role in the success of pedagogical encounters. This relationship leads to a degree of satisfaction for both participants in the development of research skills for the student (Watt 2012). Both participants benefit morally and psychologically in terms of shaping successful social and career trajectories. Ives and Rowley (2005) and Mainhard et al. (2009) have also noted that better guiding relationships may lead to the growth and improvement of doctoral studies. Other studies on the improvement of PhD supervision have been too general, focusing on numerous contextual issues (Collins 2015). However, concurring with these views, Manderson et al. (2017) observe that supervisory relationships are complicated, dynamic, and lengthy, and participants in supervision encounters may engage in conflict. Even with these views, studies on issues or contexts that contribute to doctoral studies' success are still scarce (Bitzer and Albertyn 2011).

Although Mouton, Boshoff, and James (2015) acknowledge that South African doctoral graduates have risen in number from 977 in 2004 to 1 878 in 2012 and the average time taken to complete a PhD remains five years, the number of doctoral graduates released to the world of work annually per million people of the South African population (ASSAf 2010) is very small compared to other countries like China, Egypt, India, and Brazil (Maslen 2013). This experience compels us to question the level of understanding of PhD supervision as a pedagogy and how it can be improved from the perspective of PhD students.

Doctoral studies in education have generally emphasised the value of supervision in enhancing learners' research growth/development during PhD studies (Barnes and Austin 2009; Kobayashi et al. 2013; Overall, Deane, and Peterson 2011). Similarly, other researchers focused on how the quality of doctoral supervision can be enhanced by refining doctoral programmes (Malfroy 2005; Martinsuo and Turkulainen 2011; Maslen 2013). Although Cropley and Daniels (2005) assert that there is a sufficient body of literature that addresses the issue of improving postgraduate supervision, these studies have not specifically focused on the departments/divisions/schools or faculties of education and the views of full-time PhD

candidates on their supervision experiences and ways of improving doctoral supervision in South Africa.

Again, some previous studies have dealt with the challenges, and straining PhD students encounter but no studies have dealt with how postgraduate supervision can be improved (González-Ocampo and Castelló 2019) from the outlook of full-time doctoral students in the South African context. Little is known about doctoral students' views on how pedagogical improvement in South Africa can be enhanced. In addition, bigger amounts of quantitative investigations focusing on doctoral supervision improvement are rare, translating to difficulties in incorporating previous qualitative results.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The article utilizes the theory of social and cultural capital, field, and habitus as advanced by Bourdieu (1985), along with some aspects of agency (Archer 1998) as the theoretical framework. It also draws on the literature on the intersecting context (Backhouse 2009) and improvement of doctoral supervision literature. A person's cultural consumption is organized by the possessions/capital that s/he owns, the social spaces, or fields they occupy and the personal perceptions and activities within their habitus according to Bourdieu (Bunn 2016).

Social capital is partly vested in the administrative faculty and departmental structures of universities and their respective roles. The physical structures include soft structures such as the regulations, procedures, and precedents that are strategically coated with cognitive aspects of social capital such as the norms, values, roles, attitudes, and beliefs (Uphoff 2000) of PhD supervisors who execute the supervision of PhD students. As such, the norms, attitudes, and beliefs in social capital theory necessitate the need for clear expectations (Uphoff 2000) from the PhD students. In the context of this article, social capital refers to PhD candidates' ability to represent the keys that will unlock supervisors' means of social capital that extends beyond the reach of PhD students' inadequate individual understanding (Plagens 2011). Social assets point to the possibility of PhD students' supervisors' building relationships with multiple participants, including deans and departmental or divisional heads, in PhD supervision. Social capital is inherent in the structural relations (Plagens 2011) in other words, PhD supervisors and their PhD students, and departmental and structural aspects between supervisors and faculty members. It is a valuable resource that can only reside in the structures and occupants of those structures that are built and energised by the universities. This study acknowledges the numerous social relations that exist and how extensive they are as applied to various aspects of the bigger structure (Coleman 1990). Uphoff (2000) acknowledges the pivotal roles of the physical (roles, regulations, and rules) and the cognitive aspects (norms, values, and beliefs) of

social capital.

The concept of *habitus* is closely related to social capital. *Habitus* is the way societal norms and practices are transferred to a person as durable characters/dispositions and structured inclinations to reason, sense and performs activities in familiar ways that guide and direct them. (Navaro 2006, 36). It ensures “that social action is performed in an organized and routinised fashion as it immediately excludes interests and modes of acting which do not harmonise with the cultural and social legacy of the collective to which one belongs” (Kemp 2010, 2). PhD candidates’ *habitus* is vested on sets of characters/practices or attitudes, that make it a “rich interlacing of past and present, individual and collective” (Reay, David, and Ball 2001, 17) experiences that regulate a person’s place in the society and how s/he distinguishes and appreciates the world (Grenfell 2008) of doctoral supervision concerning norms, values, roles, attitudes, and beliefs in research supervision context. *Habitus* is thus flexible and transformable under varied conditions. It provides PhD candidates with an innate capacity to assume the proper perspectives and act rightfully in selected social fields (Tranter 2006) because *habitus* is a socially and traditionally constructed entity “inherited through subtle reinforcements by which a young child enters the practices and relations of family and community” (Zipin 2002, 1). Such practices include suggesting ways in which PhD candidates can socially and structurally improve doctoral supervision.

Closely related to *habitus* is cultural capital. Cultural capital is the type of knowledge, services, education, linguistic ability, and advantages people have that uplift their status in society (Bourdieu 1985). In doctoral supervision, cultural capital presents supervisors as leaning towards a certain pattern of thought and conduct (Wacquant 2006) that comes from the nature of their education and diverse experience (Halse 2011) that facilitate their ability to guide PhD candidates.

Additionally, the concept of field, used alongside *habitus* and capital, is meant to provide a clear understanding of social practices, including inequality among other practices in society. This article reflects on a power play, particularly in social spaces in institutions of higher learning, to point at inequality based on skin colour in the field of PhD supervision. Thus, in the context of this article, the field should be understood as

“... the social world [which] can be represented as a space (with several dimensions) constructed [based on] principles of differentiation or distribution constituted by the set of properties active within the social universe in question, i.e., capable of conferring strength, power within that universe, on their holder. Agents and groups of agents are thus defined by their relative positions within that space.” (Bourdieu 1985, 195–220).

The levels of power in higher education in South Africa (undergraduate, graduates, lecturers [non-PhD holders], doctors [PhD holders], and professors) are reflected in social spaces and ranks, as shown in brackets. These ranks to a very large extent determine what you can engage in based on your qualifications or space (station). On this basis, Bathmaker, (2015) notes that having both capital and power relevant to the purposes of a certain field locates institutions within a field of higher education in South Africa. In addition, Bourdieu seems to acknowledge the “sense of higher education as a force that mediates, and at the same time reproduces, fundamental principles of social classification” (Naidoo 2004, 458). It is on this basis that race seems to play a role in the speed at which PhD studies are conducted. The racial issue brings to the fore the racial inequalities that are part of higher education in South Africa. As we later observe, contextual complexities can influence an individual’s thought pattern, leading to the conclusion that the presence of some level of inequality based on skin colour affects the degree of faster completion of PhD studies and efficient, faster doctoral supervision locally.

Agency in this context refers to personal initiative, imagination, or incessant urge to focus and engage in activities that are productive yet feared (McAlpine 2012). Given that it becomes useful based on previous and current experiences, to open up a thought-provoking situation that is fruitful for the time to come, in the scope of this article, agency is a temporally entrenched process of social engagement, influenced by the previous time and focuses towards time to come (i.e., thinking alternatively) and towards the current (the ability to contextualise previous conducts and expected events with the possibilities of the present time (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 963). This understanding is crucial in locating PhD students in the context of a university that oversees the process of supervision. It also highlights PhD students’ “selves” as potential achievers who can also present other ways of making PhD supervision even better in South Africa. Agency itself “is not exclusively an individual achievement but is connected to contextual and structural factors” (Biesta and Tedder 2006, 139). Therefore, PhD students engaging in research scholarship are well-positioned to propose ways of improving doctoral research supervision experiences.

The concepts of agency, habitus and field are used to trace and appreciate ways of making doctoral supervision better. These concepts are not only useful when used to focus on PhD candidates’ habitus as a designed entity but also employ personal initiative as “a psychological and social-psychological make-up, of the actors” (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 973) in the field of higher education, particularly in PhD supervision where improvements are entrenched.

Improving doctoral supervision is also entrenched in personal and contextual realities where the supervision process is enacted. As PhD candidates and supervisors interact with the department, the subject and minute aspects of the setting as possible situations for deliberate

enhancement of supervision, doctoral candidates as personal entities intermingle with their PhD directors and who pass as part of the setting of supervision (plus the sheets in the arena of higher education). In a departmental context, the administration, the subject (field) and the utilization of instructions and guidelines that aim at making supervision better (De Boer et al. 2002) constitute part of the context of PhD supervision. Thus, the areas of study, nature of investigations, and what PhD students undergo constitute their experiences and thus, the supervision process can be improved by PhD students in addition to supervisors. For research supervisors who attended training out of South Africa, contact and guiding encounters with South African PhD candidates automatically means that PhD students' current context forms part of their setting. As for PhD students, the research supervisor's background also constitutes part of their context in launching relations and the resultant supervision experiences. But still, an enumeration of contextual topics and how they can be implemented to better the process of PhD supervision practices cannot be completed.

Boud and Lee (2005) also are of the view that the place to model improvement in doctoral supervision results from the perspective that PhD supervisors and PhD candidates are part of their context. Backhouse (2009) presents a similar perspective in her reference to the intersecting context of PhD students to expound on different diverse contexts that govern doctoral education occurs (in other words, the department, family and friends, supervisor(s), discipline(s), workmates, and other contexts influence how PhDs are completed in South Africa. We transpose the logic by Backhouse (2009) to further explain approaches that can be employed to make doctoral supervision better in South African higher institutions of learning.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The research permit was obtained from the University of Johannesburg's ethical approval committee. This ethical permit allowed those who would contribute time to assess their participation and provide personal protection against any possible maltreatment from the study (Creswell 2013). A face-to-face open-ended interview (Merriam 2002) that focused on ways of improving doctoral supervision in South African higher institutions of learning (universities) was conducted among six PhD students. The interviews sampled included PhD candidates in the faculty of education, the University of Johannesburg and school of education, the University of the Witwatersrand to suggest how PhD supervision can be improved (in other words, not comparing PhD supervision strategists in the two higher learning institutions). Specifically, it purposively sampled "information-rich cases" (Patton 1990), in other words, PhD students who were writing their theses. Individual, open-ended interviews (Merriam 2002) lasting thirty minutes were executed, documented, and written down in English. The items on the interview

schedule focused on different ways of making doctoral supervision in South African universities better. To evoke the desired response, questions on the PhD production rate, the nature of the PhD, and learning and diversity in PhD studies were raised.

Using Tech's open coding approach (Botma et al. 2010), the data was analysed. The transcribed interviews were structured for every interview sitting, transcribing each session. Analysed transcriptions led to making effective interpretations of all the transcribed interviews. The ideas that arose were recorded and noted, with comparable topics grouped into codes. Finally, the participating researchers came up with themes and smaller aspects of the main themes that represented the views of the doctoral students. In reporting the findings, and considering the requirements of ethical issues, pseudonyms were used in reporting the findings of the research.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The current study paid attention to ways of enhancing the environment of PhD supervision, and strategies for improving the business of doctoral supervision. Actions suggested by PhD candidates seem to rattle conformist ways of acting, thus calling for alteration to their habitus.

Enhancing the context of PhD supervision in South Africa

The main function of a doctoral supervisor is to direct and lead PhD candidates when undertaking the research process resulting in their joining specific professions. PhD supervision occurs in avenues determined by varied resources including social, political, economic, institutional, personal, and cultural factors which reveal the accomplishment of the research process. The triumph of doctoral supervisors, notwithstanding their academic knowledge and experience, relies on the extent to which they circumvent the existing factors in the setting. However, not much is known about the kind of candidates and context that will shape the process of supervision. They are confronted with diverse encounters and tensions related to the complications in academic circles and personal relations, that end up affecting one's social resources and habitus in the field of education. Thus, PhD students' views on improving doctoral supervision are outlined as follows.

Involvement deans and heads of departments

PhD students feel that a fruitful way of improving the doctoral supervision setting is to involve the deans of faculty and the immediate departmental heads or schools of education heads in South African universities. In some cases, PhD candidates reveal that the management is inclined to be indifferent to supervisor-supervisee relations or

meetings. Even though interviewees' responses varied a little, they nevertheless showed that creating and maintaining active networks with administrators could improve PhD supervision.

“I think they can be addressed if the deans and heads of departments can start developing a keen interest in the goings-on in the department ... as far as supervision is concerned. I don't think deans are actively involved in monitoring. Perhaps if deans and HODs ask for constant reports on progress from each supervisor, or even monthly reports on how supervision is going on, I think that way things can improve. ... I think what is needed is that the heads of departments and deans of faculties need to be (involved) thoroughly in their monitoring of PhD supervision by their lecturers” (SPh 2).

The participant believes that supervision can be improved if the administrative structures like the offices of the deans and HODs constantly monitor the work of research supervisors and give them feedback. Such social networks and engagements are likely to improve PhD supervision, thus appealing to what McAlpine (2012) regards as human initiative and determination to change the way of doing things for a better supervision experience.

“Constant checks ... monitoring ... maybe they should also get feedback about the progress of students not only from supervisors but also from students ... they must also track the feelings of the students Maybe a quarterly report or a semester report on how you feel about your supervisor so that supervisors become accountable once as a mentee or as a student you mention things that did not go right ... they will be able maybe to improve. And they should use the weaknesses of the supervisors to rebuild for the future.” (SPh 4).

The semester/quarterly reports on supervision happenings along with timely feedback may inform deans and HODs of students' feelings about supervision experiences, and in that way deans and HODs would influence the improvement of PhD supervision. Cultural capital vested in PhD supervisors should not present an obstacle to the operations of deans' and HODs' mandates in managing and providing supervision.

“I would suggest that there be a social contract for the whole PhD supervision process. There must be agreed-upon conditions to which both parties must agree to adhere to. That ... is where I would start. Deans and HODs should also be involved.” (SPh 3).

This participant noted that PhD supervision can be of better quality if faculty deans and heads of departments introduce and use a student/supervisor agreement about research supervision.

Generally, there seems to be some level of laxity in deans and heads of divisions or departments offices, which, if fixed, PhD students feel would improve doctoral supervision. While these offices are institutional structures meant to enable supervision, inadequate monitoring of PhD student-supervisor progress suggests that beyond admission and providing

other enabling resources in the faculty and department or divisions, interactions between students and supervisors do not attract much of their attention. PhD candidates also suggest that progressive and steady scheduled reports for each PhD candidate tracking their feelings and attitudes, their relationship with supervisors, and establishing a clear policy framework to enhance accountability in this process, could greatly improve the supervision process. These kinds of measures negate positive values engrained in the social and cultural capital vested in PhD students and their supervisors.

Generally, this student articulated misgivings related to the place and role of subdivisions/departments in enabling and improving supervision, therefore underpinning the fact that both deans and heads of departments ought to effectively link their administrative structures to PhD supervision. For him:

“Department[s] just takes for granted that ... students work well with their supervisors. But there is nothing that they can do to enhance the relationship between the supervisor and the student. Not much that I know of.” (SPh 6).

The participant says that remarks from the dean are only heard when PhD candidates extend beyond completion time:

“For any student who exceeds the four years, the dean will always be on the supervisor to ask him or her why the student is not completing. ... the dean is also worried when the students don't complete their [PhDs] on time. So most probably they have a time limit to say that a student ... takes more than four years they begin to wonder why he or she is taking too long.” (SPS 6).

Thus, the data points to laxity exposed by deans and HODs in the encounter contributing to inadequate progress in the PhD supervision encounter. There is also a need for efficient collaboration between deans, HODs and PhD students to effectively improve doctoral supervision. Deans and HODs should strategically and repeatedly remind PhD supervisors about the timely completion and dangers related to untimely completion of the PhD thesis. They also ought to tighten their administrative role in presiding over supervision practices, securing participation in most of the actions needed in candidates' supervision and thus providing central leadership that serves as an example to others. For example, deans and HODs should regularly attend PhD students and their supervisors' functions, thus inversely encouraging those research supervisors to attend such functions as well. In this way, they would strengthen their offices and set the stage for an ever-revolving transformation as we move into the future.

Supervision and entrenchment in communities

Working with colleagues in different groups of communities of doctoral candidates can lead to enhancing improvement in doctoral supervision in South African higher institutions of learning. At the University of the Witwatersrand, for example, interviewees proposed that PhD weekends were one of the most ideal contexts for improving PhD supervision. It resonated well with the idea of habitus as proposed by Bourdieu (1985).

“I have learnt that you are not an island. I think we share the same feelings ... fears and ... backgrounds, I have learned from other peers that you must endure, you must be loyal, and you must persevere for you to get your PhD at the end of the year” (SPh, 5).

For effective writing and reading, groups are vital during doctoral supervision development. This is articulated by these participants.

“We attended seminars together, presented, shared ideas, we mentored each other. Sometimes I would go to their offices, and I would say I am not good at this, and we would help each other ... it was very good.” (SPh4).

“So, I have learned sometimes it is not also good to live isolated on an island, it is good also to relate to other colleagues because you may think you are alone, but you share the same experiences.” (SPh5).

Thus, these spaces propose inclusion, practice, anticipation, and including some practices in higher institutions as imperative for the upgrading of postgraduate supervision. Peer groups deliver applicable assistance beyond doctoral supervision and studies. Such approaches and aspects of supervision ought to be reinforced in places where they are practised and implemented in places where they have never existed to improve doctoral supervision. By encouraging such spaces, supervision exercise increases social capital as the assumed barriers to cultural capital are weakened. This improves communication and learning in groups and enriches students’ and supervisors’ characters or habitus that are and will remain useful to the participants now and in future.

Flexibility in supervisors’ perspective

Studies at the doctoral level are guided by a strong desire for a particular topic or research problem in an area of interest. PhD students see themselves as located in these research areas. Based on their inclinations and interests, it may take persuasive influence to have them change their research topics. These research topics may be a product of students’ growing habitus and the need to provide answers to certain issues. The act of allowing doctoral students to pursue

their research problems/topics (location) can slowly enhance student-supervisor relations during PhD supervision.

“There is a need to accommodate diversity in terms of perspectives, opinions, and paradigms. I would ... say that the supervisors do away with this concept of wanting to monopolise knowledge. Knowledge is progressive, and knowledge in modern society is socially constructed ... some of these supervisors ... don’t read, they try to recycle some old ideas. So, I would also ... recommend that they try to delve ... in areas that their students are interested in if they are not familiar with them instead of dissuading them into areas, they [supervisors] are interested in because they are not familiar with those areas” (SPh2).

Some PhD supervisors seem to be rooted in a particular perspective and they compel PhD students to approach their topics using similar lenses or perspectives. This approach is not welcome for some PhD candidates who participated in this study. Such students suggest that investigators (researchers) should be flexible and willing to have things done from students’ perspectives or still clarify their perspectives.

“The other impediment is that ... they don’t allow you to be yourself. You can’t express yourself. Most of the time it happens when you finish. You find that your voice is very low. You express the voice of the supervisor. Everything you get cut and pulled out because the supervisor is very famous and will not allow you as a student to put your voice even if they are expecting you ... They must allow you to run with your work not that they determine what your work should be and how it should be.” (SPh 4).

PhD students think that supervision can be improved if PhD supervisors can let candidates’ views/opinions be heard in their work. Altogether, PhD students should start deconstructing the myth that supervisors are special people whose word is final. But given what the society (habitus) has constructed and taught PhD students, they must engage human initiative (agency) to walk out of this. PhD students, therefore, need to be informed about the issues their academic supervisors are responding to, apart from academic supervision. Otherwise, the field, full of power dynamics will not favour the PhD students.

“At times when supervisors tell us things, they take their sides and never listen to our sides. When I have written a chapter, I would have done some research. So, at times the supervisors should not take advantage of that as just an empty box that has got to be poured water into. They must also listen to what I must have said. They must read what I have done and so on. Not to just condemn the work that I have just done because after doing some research I would have done some research and worked very hard. ... At times, it becomes very discouraging. Although they are there to supervise at the same time, they must know of the individual differences. If we are told to write on one topic we cannot just go in the same direction. At times ... supervisors have got their ways ... their sides and they see the direction in which the student is going. Not to just be on their side to say that this is the direction that ... this is the direction that is to be taken by the student. They

must look at the side that I am taking and weigh the advantages and disadvantages. Not just to give outright statements and say we are going in the wrong direction. At times, they must listen to why I think I have done it the way I have done it. And then from there, we can discuss. Not to just look to their side and say no this is not right.” (SPh6).

For this participant, PhD supervision can be improved when supervisors are willing to listen and shift their perspectives to PhD candidates’ perspectives. Supervision is informed by past knowledge and experiences that seem to be undervalued as the participants undergo PhD supervision. By listening and seeking clarity from the PhD students to attend to certain issues in the thesis, PhD supervision can significantly be improved.

PhD supervisors should display patience and understanding as they guide PhD students. This understanding is vital because the basis of topics of investigation is diverse and bound by the place where the research is to take place. Some students suppress their feelings of having been overly dominated because of their past beliefs (*habitus*) that the teacher or supervisor’s opinion is always correct. Thus, improving doctoral supervision calls for an adequate understanding of the student’s *habitus* and social capital in academic settings. Doctoral supervisors must deal with a multifaceted contest of nurturing candidates’ abilities and managing them as they try to understand the student’s past experiences.

Regular feedback, meetings, and time for supervision

Providing resources, frequent conferences, consistent and appropriate responses to academic work, and a satisfactory period for regulation can significantly enhance doctoral supervision in South Africa. Some PhD candidates felt that supervisors would explicitly tell them what books to read.

“Don’t just supervise by giving feedback ... they know which material is relevant, [and they should] guide you towards it. ... Don’t just give feedback, [tell the student to] use this book, this one, it is like a pillar” (SPh 1).

A lack of regular meetings and time can be emotionally and financially costly to both PhD candidates and supervisors. Appropriate comments for candidates are indispensable for they [PhD candidates] have a static accomplishment time and may not have the [financial] capital and time to meet an extended doctoral programme.

“My supervisor [should] meet me regularly at a fixed time If it is Thursday, we meet every Thursday at a particular point and time.” (SPh5).

PhD students feel that regular feedback enhances critical response, leading to informed

decisions about the topic, literature review and the use of the review to extend research. This can significantly improve the quality of PhD supervision. Several PhD researchers adopt the view that PhD candidates need to be permitted time to explore different strands of literature and decide, separately, what is valuable for their investigation. This view can negatively impact PhDs students' habitus.

Attending to race and intimidation: supervision experiences

PhD candidates read the connection between race and ethnic alliance/nationality during doctoral supervision in South Africa. Racial discrimination cannot be underrated in the South African setting given its past heritage of apartheid and other forms of discrimination in independent South Africa, where the fragments of apartheid remain a reality. PhD candidates Students call for equality in the supervision of doctoral students notwithstanding their colour, race, creed, or nationality, a feature that can meaningfully enhance doctoral supervision. Inequality in doctoral supervision is reflected in the field, as Bourdieu notes that the capability of strengthening power within that space or universe on PhD students or sets of representatives is well-defined by their virtual locations inside that space (Bourdieu 1985). When referring to higher education, race reflects one of the many ways in which social and academic classes (Naidoo 2004, 458) are generated and nurtured to attract reference. This participant notes that.

“The level of discrepancies is a cause for concern ... how do you explain two different students in the same faculty or same department, one starts ... takes 5 years, one takes 2 years one takes 3 years – all full-time! ... I noticed this from experience, there was a *racial component* in the supervision of doctoral students. ... you will notice that most White students in whole departments in the faculty (of education) take a very short period to complete their PhDs ... they joined us in the PhD programme and completed it before me and other colleagues who they found doing a doctorate. ... But I think it also depends on the way the *Black supervisors* scaffold their Black students I think I don't know whether to say White supervisors tend to afford more time and resources to White students. Because there is a serious discrepancy in this university, particularly in this department. If you check, you ... find some PhD students are White, they don't spend three years here. The longest they can stay here is three years. Most of them finish in two years as if to say, Whites are more intelligent than Blacks” (SPh2).

Additionally, a doctoral candidate observed that: “I don't know ... but White PhD students take a short time to graduate on this campus than us (Black students)” (SPh5). Some of these students are black foreign students who are exposed to this racial disgruntlement, as conveyed in this section, our physical look at most of the candidates in this study had a White or Black supervisor. The PhD students had been registered for at least four or more years. However, Black South African PhD who participated in this study noted that:

“You know I cannot compare [South Africans], I am sorry to mention people who come from other parts of Africa ... succeed because they have no choice and have mastered the art of survival and studies.” (SPh4).

While PhD candidates' views may sound unfair because of their partialities and negative feelings about their duration at the university and their learning experiences, their opinions echo the declaration that “how learning is organized, perceived, and debated are always rooted in the particularities of national histories, habits, and national aspiration” (Westbury' 1998, 5). However, improvement of supervision can be realised when procedures are established to eradicate any form of disparity/skin differences in the direct experiences with PhD candidates that can raise silent concerns so that all students are treated equally as a move towards success within the doctoral programme.

Enhancing strategies for doctoral supervision

Supervision and mentoring

Supervision of PhD candidates should not only focus on their research project areas but also mentor and graduate students in matters of life and professional development as a means of making supervision better and whole rounded way of improving it. This is evident in this remark:

“... [What] I believe in is that you hold a person, it is like showing a baby how to walk. ... my last supervisor taught me the real word ... scaffolding, how to scaffold a person to give support structure. Where you give support structures for a person to grow, to help and become, you avail yourself of help. So, I think to be a mentor, you mentor. Literary means you take the person by the hand and show how it is done and take the person to the winning post.” (SPh4).

Thus, PhD guidance should not only involve giving academic leadership to students but also being thoughtful, dedicated, considerate, kind and more responsive to the psychosocial requirements of PhD students thus supporting the student in diverse ways. It suggests that one must be viewed as climbing the ladder of social capital using a section of cultural capital.

“Let me say being considerate ... caring and the spirit of empathy, so that those are the things that they should know ... and understand your students and what makes them tick ... supervise to develop ... to build ... for growth and ... supervise because you want to help a person grow emotionally, socially, especially intellectually” (SPh 4).

Thus, supervision can only grow further when there is a “change of perception by the people concerned ... the supervisors themselves should change their perceptions about what they are

doing to students” (SPh5). Research supervisors should examine their engagements and appreciate what they do for PhD candidates as they lead them in the supervision process. Their varied “social relations that exist and the rapidity of their application to different aspects of the bigger structure” (Coleman 1990, 98) affects supervisors’ relationships with their students. Uphoff (2000) acknowledges the pivotal roles of the physical (roles, regulations, and rules) and cognitive aspects (norms, values, and beliefs) of social capital that are finally reflected as a form of mentoring. Mentoring is a necessary strategy to improve the supervision of the current PhD candidates in universities. It is regarded as mentoring when it is apparent that the “teaching and learning process in a one-on-one career development relationship [is] between two individuals where one serves as the teacher and counsellor, based on his or her experience, professional status, and credentials, and having gone through a similar experience” (Mda 2013, 94). This perception and understanding help to entrench cultural capital and entrench social classification as PhD supervision improves.

While mentoring has many meanings, its use in the current study is exclusive and involves information construction and the evolving expressive provision among PhD scholars. PhD expert researchers can aid doctoral candidates to grow and establish themselves as researchers, be honest in their research, and remain truthful in knowledge production (Files et al. 2008). Mentoring is the beginning stage of social and cultural capital towards doctoral supervision enhancement. However, as interviewees imagine this kind of mentoring, there is a need for more relevant research to comprehend what mentoring at the doctoral level involves and embraces globally where graduate students present diverse upbringings.

Organizing training programmes

Subjecting research supervisors to training programmes can significantly improve PhD supervision. Some PhD candidates feel that:

“... supervisors themselves might need “some workshops on supervision so that we can see some uniformity. ... different supervisors have different stories to tell (when it comes to PhD supervision).” (SPh2).

At times, supervisors rely on past experiences to supervise the current PhD students. Based on this experience, this participant observes that,

“People just learn and create ways to become doctoral supervisors without a theoretical base. [They] try to refer to days when [they] were PhD students, how [they] were supervised and try to emulate that in helping PhD students to become ... supervisors ... they do ask around; how do we help these people [PhD students]? ... There is no school for supervision, and there is no course for supervision.” (SPh3).

Doctoral education is a valuable and significant level of education that calls for supervisors to have at least a common entry understanding of what doctoral supervision entails. As told by varied doctoral students, supervision skills can be improved if training programmes are introduced and entrenched in departments. These pieces of training should be mandatory for all doctoral supervisors. While these views from doctoral students are accurate, they are strangely subjective, and apportion blame to research supervisors but leave PhD students blameless. Amazingly, doctoral students have suggestions for how doctoral supervision can be improved in South African universities focusing on what supervisors and university faculty administrators should do. These reactions are not only distinctive of biases built for some time by PhD candidates, with a solitary mindset, but they also represent the lived experiences of individual guidance experiences and encounters, told by individuals who trust that they should have finalized their education earlier. While these students appear to have some personal expectations of making doctoral supervision better by providing training programmes for research academic supervisors, issues such as supervisor's knowledge and creation of relationships and supervising PhD candidates that may not automatically be contingent on the official supervision training course.

CONCLUSION

This article proposes avenues in which PhD supervision can be of better quality in South Africa and claims that enhancement of doctoral supervision should be approached in multiple ways, with PhD candidates, academic supervisors and those in administration taking the centre stage. We claimed that notwithstanding the encounters in overseeing doctorates in South Africa, the supervision process can be enhanced. Refining doctoral supervision, with specific people among doctoral candidates and supervisors, the environment of academic supervisors and the related awareness of supervision, was an important aspect that emerged out of the data.

Structural and institutional culture creates fertile conditions for improving doctoral supervision, and, in turn, those in a position to keep in place those structures and enhance their effectiveness. Because of this, participants feel that the inclusion of faculty and departmental management can improve PhD supervision process. Policy preparation along with doctoral supervision, the introduction of coursework to complement doctoral training and being helpful rather than perilous, the administration can significantly advance doctoral supervision. More critical to improving the process is launching seminars and establishing groups as well as official and unplanned meetings for PhD students and their supervisors, thus broadening social capital and guaranteeing that both supervisors and PhD candidates discuss their supervision

understandings and experiences. Progress can also occur if supervisors upheld consistent and timely responses to students' work, accompanied by frequent consultations. Moreover, teaching PhD candidates ought to be a mentoring process, that is helpful to both candidates' academic progress and other features of social, and cultural facets of life.

Higher institutions of learning (like universities) should envision an expanded and inclusive way of putting faculty deans and heads of divisions or departments at the centre of doctoral supervision as a way of improving PhD supervision. The issue of race and PhD improvement should however be considered from the view of Bell (1993, 573), namely that "we can only delegitimize it if we can accurately pinpoint it". PhD students in South Africa should thus try to disrupt the racist narrative in higher education and be able to create spaces that acknowledge the nature of the field as regards academic supervision. The upsurge and completion of doctoral studies by White South Africans should also be viewed with their habitus, and social capital other than restricting their record completion on their cultural capital and skin colour.

The article highlights some policy, epistemological and theoretical implications for postgraduate supervision in universities locally and Africa.

- Firstly, we believe that policy formulation as an avenue for improving doctoral research supervision will involve the institutions of higher learning coming up with policies that incorporate doctoral supervision improvement views from active current PhD students. Such policies include making it a requirement for PhD supervisors to be allowed an average of one month to mix, gel, and establish genuine relationships with their prospective PhD students. Policies should also be enacted by the faculty, underlining the genuine and effective involvement of faculty deans and HODs in the PhD research supervision encounters.
- Secondly, this article utilized the theory of cultural and social capital, field (Bourdieu 1985), along with agency by Archer (1998). The perspective provided by these theories distinctively underscores the value of group work and the importance of sharing knowledge, thus furthering one's social and cultural capital in addition to the positive effect on policies governing graduate supervision. The cultural capital theory is further expanded to handle issues of research supervision and learning in higher education. This theory makes the findings of the study distinctive by generally revealing that doctoral learning is a collective endeavour that brings together PhD students, supervisors, and knowledge in the process of learning, hence dealing a blow to loneliness associated with PhD learning. In doing so, we open considerable opportunities for maximizing student

agency in suggesting ways of improving pedagogies of doctoral supervision.

- Thirdly, we call upon faculty leaders to embrace and incorporate views from doctoral students as they strive to improve doctoral supervision in Africa. This study implies that universities in Africa need to frequently seek the views and opinions of postgraduate students when in need of improvement and implement changes aimed at improving doctoral supervision. Much as the study identifies issues that if implemented, can improve doctoral supervision, universities in Africa need to conduct large-scale studies to identify means and ways of improving doctoral supervision in all the faculties in each university. At this level, the context of each institution will be used to determine issues to implement as factors that lead to the improvement of doctoral supervision.

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