

# IS SUPERVISION TRAINING NECESSARY?

## REFLECTING ON SUPERVISION AS A STUDENT AND NOVICE SUPERVISOR

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### ABSTRACT

The process of advancing through higher education involves the crucial role of supervision. It is, however, concerning that the training of postgraduate supervisors is often neglected. This article explored my personal experiences of supervision by comparing my past role as a postgraduate student with my present role as a postgraduate supervisor. This article emphasises the pressing need to better equip supervisors for the pivotal role they play in shaping students' academic trajectory. This article draws attention to the indispensable value of engaging in supervision training and concurrently advocates for supervisors to participate in postgraduate supervision training. It is therefore prudent that we educate ourselves and embrace opportunities for learning that can better equip us for the role of supervision. We should also not assume that the attendance of supervisor courses would sufficiently educate us but we must rather embrace the practical exposure and experience that supervision offers us. This article therefore seeks to remind both novice and experienced supervisors that supervisor training is necessary as it enriches us and assists us in unearthing our student's potential, which is the true essence of education.

**Keywords:** Supervision, novice, supervisor, supervision training, South Africa, student

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a push towards capturing the experiences of Black South African scholars in academia, either as they navigate their PhD journey (Murambadoro, Mashayamombe and Wenkosi 2022), as academics trying to survive academia while Black (Khunou et al 2019), or as novice supervisors (Makoni 2022; Blose, Msiza and Chiororo 2021). From autobiographical accounts of experiences in higher education in South Africa and in academia at large, it is evident that reflective writing is an empowering exercise. However, the use of autoethnography as a method through which one can give a voice to experiences (Arendse 2022; Makoni 2022) is not encouraged enough, as academics are often caught up in

its inability to be objective. Having engaged in autoethnographic writing in my publications (see Arendse 2023; 2022; 2021), I am convinced of its ability to create awareness of issues not always raised and being somewhat cathartic for the writer as they sift through issues they wish to bring to light.

Several publications have articulated the difficulty faced by novice supervisors as they enter academia and are expected to supervise students with confidence either independently or alongside a colleague (Almlöv and Grubbström 2023; Makoni 2022; Blose et al. 2021). In reflecting on a supervisor training course, I am left with fewer questions but also the reality that one is never completely ready for every student. This is because each student is new and differs from other students one may have supervised and, as such, offers new possibilities of supervision. As a novice supervisor, I entered the course a little apprehensive as to whether I would feel any more confident when approaching supervision. I believe that reflecting on my experiences as a student and how I engage with students as a supervisor is a worthwhile practice.

## **REFLECTIONS AS A STUDENT**

The “a-ha” moment for me when reflecting on when I was a student was realising what worked for me and what did not when it came to supervision and my supervisor. In terms of my supervision experience, I was perhaps fortunate or adaptable enough to cope with two very diverse experiences. In my master’s year, my supervisor was very invested, and we had regular meetings regarding my thesis. It was also a period that prepared me very well academically despite sometimes feeling overwhelmed that year. I am grateful for my master’s supervisor, who I believe shaped me in many ways. Her guidance gave me a framework with which to conquer difficult constructs and to write in a logical manner. The small sets of interventions equipped me with the tools I needed to continue my academic journey. My PhD was, however, quite different, and the supervision experience was very far removed from what I had previously been exposed to in my master’s experience. Although a PhD is supposed to be a journey in which one stands on one’s own and becomes independent, I felt that most of my journey had limited guidance and supervision. I embarked on my PhD five years after my master’s as I was a practising psychologist. During this period, I was able to become independent and when experiencing my PhD supervision as lacking guidance, I attributed it to the level of study and the time that had lapsed since I had been in academia. During the supervisor course, I realised that it was my full right as a student to feel dissatisfied with the limited supervision I received. I was fortunately adaptable enough to cope and work independently but those students who are not as adaptable may struggle with such a supervision style. This is not to argue that one must

be supervised closely but rather that guidance should be given throughout and when required to ensure that the student becomes confident in themselves and their work. Based on my supervision experiences, I believe that all supervisors should be guided on such aspects and to be good supervisors. I may have accepted it because I wanted to finish my PhD and did not have much choice in the matter, but this should not be the norm. If academia is to be a place of growth and to enable ethical scholarship, student supervision should be taken seriously and managed with care. We do not always know what baggage our students carry, nor do they know ours, but by being considerate of one another and creating a working relationship of care, our shared goals of thesis completion can be achieved.

## **THEORETICAL ANALYSIS OF MY STUDENT REFLECTION**

When using Lee's (2008) supervisor guide, I would say that my master's supervisor used a combination of the "enculturation" and "critical thinking" approaches. My master's supervisor therefore played the role of director, adviser, teacher, supporter, manager, and critic (Brown and Atkins 1988). In essence, my master's supervisor fulfilled multiple roles and created a productive space for learning and engaging, which ultimately led to my successful thesis completion.

Even after completing my PhD, I did not feel confident in myself or my work. I attributed it to imposter syndrome (Arendse 2022), but now I think that it could have been a combination of imposter syndrome and lacking supervision. This limited supervision fed my imposter syndrome, which made me less confident in the work I produced. It is through independent publishing that I gained some confidence, which I can now attribute to good reviewer guidance. I understand good reviewer guidance as reviewers critiquing one's work in a constructive manner and providing detailed feedback, thereby allowing one to produce a much deeper and comprehensive article than originally submitted. Through this experience, the disciplinary community validated the value of my contribution. This, however, led me to question whether this external community is as important for my postgraduate students as well, even if they receive better supervisory support than I did. The external community, particularly when it comes to publishing, can at times be punitive and does not always provide constructive feedback. They can in some ways also discourage novice writers with their critique. This being said, I believe that good supervision prepares students for some of the critique they may face and may even encourage them to contribute to the global scholarly community. Although validation from the external community is not always necessary for postgraduate students, it is of value and will reduce the effect of imposter syndrome as they continue their tertiary

education. It is perhaps supervision that allows scholars to succeed despite adversity, and when supervision is done well, scholars can thrive.

My PhD supervisor had to some extent adopted a “functional” (Lee 2008) and/or emancipatory (Lee 2012) approach and played the role of freedom giver and adviser (Brown and Atkins 1988). It was perhaps more freedom than I would have liked at the time of supervision. Even though I had wished that my PhD supervisor had been more involved with my study because I would have walked away from my PhD more confident and feeling like less of an imposter, I do, however, in some ways, perhaps because I tend to find meaning in all things, even the uncomfortable ones, feel that it shaped me to be more proactive. Due to the limited supervision of my PhD, I was forced to be more independent and to take more ownership. It also forced me to be proactive with my thesis. This is what propelled me to eventually start writing, on my own, as a novice academic. I must, however, acknowledge that were it not for the good guidance I had received during my master’s, I would not have been able to navigate my PhD with limited supervision. I also attribute my attitude as part of this, as not all students would have this attitude and be able to cope with limited supervision.

My experiences also highlight the need for a friendship to form during the supervision process that may lead to empowered students and engaged supervisors (Waghid 2010). It is through friendship that a cohesive and reciprocal learning space may be facilitated (Waghid 2010). In this way, both the supervisor and student invest in the supervision process, and they are not merely bound by obligation.

## **REFLECTIONS AS A SUPERVISOR**

When considering how my experiences of supervision relate to my current experience as a supervisor, I decided to accommodate my students where I can. In doing so, over the years I have come to realise that it is not just up to me, but also up to the student to play their part. The relationship between us can either grow or weaken depending on how we communicate and meet each other’s needs. As a supervisor, one is aware that there are certain expectations and I believe that students are aware of these expectations. During the supervisor course, one of the key aspects pointed out to me was to not assume that these expectations are clear. For some students, it may require some consultation in understanding the expectations and what it will take to meet these expectations. In reflecting on my own supervision of students, the students whom I struggled with perhaps did not fully grasp what it takes to meet certain expectations. Initial meetings are thus important for ironing out issues that tend to arise later during the supervision process.

Another aspect that I would like to practise, but may not always be afforded the luxury to, is to have a conversation with the student ahead of agreeing to supervise them. Choosing the right student and the relationship between student and supervisor are aspects that strike me as vital, especially when considering my own journey as a scholar. This is not always feasible as there is sometimes no choice in whom one supervises. Such a conversation is, however, important as it would give me an indication of where the student is in their lives, as well as a sense of their personality. The student also gets a chance to get to know me prior to the beginning of the working relationship, which allows us time to establish some boundaries and a working relationship that can suit both of us. In the past, I started the working relationship with students from the time we start engaging in the work and made myself available for conversations on the work but also on issues that may affect the work. I would arrange some social opportunities so we could get to know each other better and to lighten the atmosphere at times when they appeared overwhelmed. Having completed the supervisor course, I now know that by then it is already too late. An initial getting-to-know-each-other session, establishing boundaries, etc. need to be done prior to the beginning of the working relationship with the student. It would also give me insight into what I can expect from the student in terms of their life circumstances and their personality. Personality affects the supervision experience and often determines what is effective for both the student and supervisor. In my experience, I have noted that some students, due to their personality styles, require, for example, more structure, while others prefer less rigidity. At times it may be other factors beyond their personality, such as contextual or cultural differences. These may affect the way they relate to the supervisor and their expectations of the supervisory relationship, and how well they are able to articulate these expectations. As a result, the relationship aspect of supervision cannot be taken lightly. The supervisor enters into a relationship with the student, in a manner of speaking, and will need to know if the relationship will work and whether both parties have similar or different needs and ideas. Initial conversations would better prepare the supervisor for what the student needs to navigate the academic environment and complete their thesis.

From my experiences and considering the discussions during the supervisor course, the need to set boundaries is essential. Without boundaries, the student or supervisor can overstep their boundaries and place unfair expectations on each other. Although it is simple enough to delineate this in the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), it becomes more complex when life circumstances challenge the existing relationship status. As a psychologist, it is difficult to only show care and empathy, as one tries to go beyond the ordinary relationship to assist in a manner that truly helps the student. This can, however, place the supervisor in a difficult position because students can begin to expect this as the norm and not realise that the supervisor

was merely adapting to the circumstances. I have experienced this in my supervision, in that one shows kindness and some leniency to accommodate a student so that they can manage their workload while going through a challenging time but as they become comfortable with the new pace and accommodation, they begin to expect it. When trying to be firm about this, I have experienced that some students struggle to cope, become very dependent, and show little progress. As a result, I have seen some students not complete their psychology internship as they fail to submit revised work to project supervisors despite additional time extensions given. These circumstances have always been very awkward for me as one wants all students to complete their psychology internship as it has career implications for them. I do not believe it is as simple as not being resilient, but that other factors such as culture, background, personality, anxiety, home circumstances, and ability need to be considered. Relationships with students are thus very complex and require great insight.

According to the abovementioned factors, the MOU may appear to not be very responsive to life circumstances. These factors do, however, provide insight into how one can carefully plan the MOU and the initial engagements with students. In my experience, I believe that the goal of the relationship (the thesis) should always be the priority and that interventions should be sought to assist the student in reaching this goal (a completed thesis). With each student, there will be different challenges and different accommodations that need to be made, but I believe that being adaptable and flexible will help a supervisor to move between kindness and the disciplinary demands (functional) that are required during supervision. I would like to believe that one can balance these demands, but I realistically envision that there may sometimes be an unequal ratio between balancing the care one shows with the necessary deadlines that are needed for the student to be successful. The start of the supervisory relationship is therefore quite important as it sets the tone for the supervision experience and allows both the student and supervisor to navigate their relationship with the demands of the thesis. As such, it is essential to put systems in place from the beginning that will assist in managing the supervision relationship for both the student and supervisor.

## **THEORETICAL ANALYSIS OF SUPERVISION REFLECTIONS**

When approaching supervision, it is assumed that since a supervisor was able to successfully complete their PhD, that they can guide others to similar success (Almlöv and Grubbström 2023; Makoni 2022; Blose et al. 2021). Although this is not a far-fetched idea, it is problematic because it assumes that one's success is partially linked to having received good supervision. This is not always the case. Personally, I had such diverse experiences that I was very hesitant to supervise theses. It has, however, been quite reassuring to participate in a supervisor course

in which one is guided on the necessary approach to take with students. I thus believe that supervision training is not only necessary, but indispensable.

Although the supervisor plays an important role in the successful completion of a thesis, Makoni (2022) argues that the role of supervisor requires the fulfilment of several roles that often rely on years of experience. A novice supervisor can thus easily become overwhelmed with supervising a student, particularly a PhD candidate. Based on her experiences, Makoni (2022) recommends that universities should create compulsory supervisor programmes for novice supervisors to attend. I agree with Makoni (2022) in that inexperienced academics and the ill-suited supervision styles used by some older academics would greatly benefit from attending a supervisor course. Having just attended one, I am more certain of this fact. I may not be overly confident, but I am more prepared and ready than I was prior to the supervisor training. Another recommendation made by Makoni (2022) worth mentioning is the use of reflective engagements. I firmly believe that it is good practice to engage with students and to assess retrospectively what worked and what the areas of development for a supervisor are. As supervisors, it is important to acknowledge our mistakes and reflect on the process of supervision, as this is how we grow both academically and as people. It is a journey and even the most experienced supervisors still make some mistakes and have some concerns when supervising their students.

This article does not attempt to add anything new to the field of supervision, as many articles written on supervision (Almlöv and Grubbström 2023; Makoni 2022; Blose et al. 2021; Waghid 2010; Lee 2012) have already provided impactful insights in this regard. Why write this reflection if there is nothing new to add? It is precisely here that I believe this article is useful. In reflecting on my experiences and personal insights, the emphasis placed on supervision training appears to lag behind, especially when one considers the significant work already published on this topic (see Almlöv and Grubbström 2023; Makoni 2022 Blose; et al. 2021; Waghid 2010; Lee 2012). There is still a need to encourage supervision training as supervisors and students may derive great benefit from such practices. It is also worthwhile to incorporate compulsory training for those supervising students, because we are not always aware of our supervision preferences and our students may present with varied challenges that compromise learning and engagement. In becoming aware of these nuances, we can create a comfortable and productive space in which students and supervisors may flourish. We may therefore need to be reminded at times that as supervisors, through initiatives such as supervisor training, we have the potential to move students “towards the unimagined” (Waghid 2010, 58), which is the true essence of education.

## CONCLUSION

The process of advancing through higher education involves the crucial role of supervision. It is, however, concerning that the training of postgraduate supervisors is often neglected. This article explored my personal experiences of supervision by comparing my past role as a postgraduate student with my present role as a postgraduate supervisor. This article emphasises the pressing need to better equip supervisors for the pivotal role they play in shaping students' academic trajectory. This article draws attention to the indispensable value of engaging in supervision training and concurrently advocates for supervisors to participate in postgraduate supervision training. In closing, there are several aspects that shape a supervisor and these are not separate from experiences as a student. It is therefore prudent that we educate ourselves and embrace opportunities for learning that can better equip us for the role of supervision. We should also not assume that the attendance of supervisor courses would sufficiently educate us but we must rather embrace the practical exposure and experience that supervision offers us. We will thus only through the years, probably filled with some trial and error, grow into commendable supervisors.

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