

# Chapter 11: A Critical Review of Different Supervision Approaches and Styles in the Social Sciences: Aspiring Supervisory Reflections on African Languages

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## Abstract

The success of postgraduate supervision is affected by various factors. Many students enter the postgraduate education environment without sufficient knowledge of research methods. They may not be able to sail through the postgraduate phase without acquiring the required skills to conduct postgraduate research. And adequate support. This paper critically reviews the different approaches and styles that supervisors can adopt in African Languages postgraduate research. A qualitative approach located within the constructivist paradigm was adopted. Data for this study were collected through documents review. A search for effective postgraduate supervision literature was conducted to identify relevant research published from 2015-2024. The following search words were used on various search engines effective supervision, constructive feedback, postgraduate research, and higher education. Reference lists of retrieved publications were also searched for other additional sources. The theoretical framework of this study is Developmental Supervision Theory by Glickman (1980). Findings of this study suggest that supervisors need to provide the type of supervision, which ensures that the students produce work of a high standard, thereby increasing throughput rates. It also revealed that a group supervision (supervision cohort) and bringing on board researchers with different skills enhances the students' understanding.

**Keywords:** Throughput, constructive feedback, effective supervision and HE

## **1 Introduction**

The success of postgraduate supervision is affected by various factors. Many students enter the postgraduate education environment without sufficient knowledge of research methods. This chapter critically examines supervision approaches within African Languages postgraduate research, a field often marginalized in broader Social Sciences discourse, to identify culturally responsive strategies. Postgraduate supervision is a key practice at universities worldwide and the pinnacle of academic engagement (Wisker 2012:2). In an era where the pressure on higher education institutions to contribute to the knowledge of economy is ever increasing, postgraduate supervision practices that focus on expanding student throughput rates and research outputs are becoming key in moving towards global competitiveness. The production of postgraduate students is a national priority, as South Africa needs a new generation of researchers to drive growth and development (De Lange, Pillay & Chikoko 2011:16).

Supervision goes beyond adherence to the norms and expectations of a discipline; it speaks to human relations between a student and a supervisor. In other words, a supervisor needs to be cautious not to treat supervision as a research project where the student is reduced to a passive recipient of the supervisor's input. This calls for the supervisor to be critical in his or her approach to supervision. Being critical in this respect entails reflection on how the supervisor manages the relations with the student. As Scott and Usher (2011, cited in McKenna *et al.* 2017) argue, critical approaches to knowledge construction relate to a range of approaches that problematise the universality of knowledge construction. Supervision in African higher education presents unique challenges and dynamics shaped by historical, social, and institutional factors. Studies by Mahlomaholo (2013) and Samara (2006) highlight critical issues such as resource constraints, limited supervisory capacity, and the influence of cultural expectations in shaping supervisory relationships. By fore-grounding these perspectives, this paper positions its argument within the broader context of African higher education, emphasizing the need for context-sensitive approaches to supervision that directly address these specific challenges.

This chapter critically reviews different approaches and styles that supervisors might adopt in their respective discipline or faculty. The discourse of different approaches and style that supervisors might adopt is done through outlining the kind of supervisors. It is a known fact that the continuous act of reflection is grounded in reflexivity, and some studies like that of Darawsheh (2014) has classified reflexivity into introspection, intersubjective reflection,

mutual collaboration, social critique, and discursive deconstruction. According to Darawsheh (2014:560), ‘reflexivity refers to the continuous process of self-reflection that researchers engage in to generate awareness about their actions, feelings and perceptions’. In qualitative research, proponents of reflexivity claim that its use in research promotes rigour, reliability and validity. It is further believed to improve ‘transparency in the researcher’s subjective role, both in conducting research and analysing data’. While this review engages with the Social Sciences broadly, we focus on African Languages due to their unique supervision challenges, such as limited availability of scholarly resources in indigenous languages, difficulties in aligning Western theoretical frameworks with African epistemologies, and the marginalisation of African languages in academic publishing. These challenges often result in supervisors and students navigating complex questions of translation, contextual adaptation, and knowledge validation, which are less pronounced in other disciplines.

## **2 Defining Supervision**

In African Languages research, supervision often involves additional layers of negotiation, as students and supervisors navigate indigenous knowledge systems alongside Western academic frameworks (Mkhabela 2019). Postgraduate supervision has garnered significant attention globally, with calls for transparency, equity, and rigor (Sidhu *et al.* 2013). Various authors have offered diverse definitions of the supervisory process. According to Loganbill and Hardy (1983, cited in Okeke-Uzodike 2021), supervision refers to a formal process based on the relationship between supervisor and supervisee (candidate), where the supervisor’s role is to help the supervisee acquire appropriate professional behaviour and competence in professional activities. Lee (2010) argued that supervision means discipline and oversight of work. A recent definition within the same context posits that supervision is a two-way interactional process that requires the student and the supervisor to connect intentionally with each other and within the spirit of professionalism, respect, collegiality, and open-mindedness (Ismail, Abiddin & Hassan 2011).

Given these definitions, Brew (2001: 272), opined that a postgraduate supervision could be a personal journey of discovery. It is a relational and empowering process (Tian & Singhasiri 2016) because the supervisor is deemed the closest person who can mentor and provide the necessary support and guidance to the student in need (Cryer & Mertens 2003; Ellis 2001; McAlpine & Weiss 2000). Acknowledging this, Tian & Singhasiri (2016) noted that

supervision occurs under a hierarchical relationship and provides a unidirectional mode of knowledge transfer from the powerful supervisors to powerless supervisees. The mutual outcome of such a relationship not only improves the supervisor's knowledge capacity but leads to transformation and the creation of a strong personal identity for the supervisee as a researcher and professional. Supervision, therefore, entails various aspects that determine the supervisor-supervisee relationship. Mapesela and Wilkinson (2005: 2, cited in Cekiso *et al.* 2017) point out that supervising as a scholarly practice might be effectively promoted where academics themselves are closely involved in research, but also when they reflect, write and publish on their supervisory experiences, seek student feedback and allow peers to critique their work.

### **3 Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of this study is Developmental Supervision Theory by Glickman (1980). This theory provides a framework that facilitate the understanding of how supervisors should go about with their supervisory approach while trying to meet the needs of the students in postgraduate studies, even for students in African Languages research. In this theory, it was suggested that there is need for supervisors to modify their behavior and the strategies they use in supervising students, in order to suit the developmental stages of the students, and importantly, they should also focus much on promoting growth and skill acquisition (Wu 2017). This theory believes that students in postgraduate studies come into a learning environment with various levels of readiness and diverse research skills.

According to Gordon (1990), Glickman's developmental supervision theory outlined three main approaches for supervisors, and they are based on the conceptual level (CL) of those being supervised. These three main supervisory approaches are directive, collaborative, and nondirective supervision. In the directive supervision, there is more prescription involved, and it involves the standardization of actions for students that have lower conceptual level may need more guidance. As students begin to advance, the supervisor will then adopt the collaborative approach. In this approach students are now engaged in negotiations and problem-solving activities. For students that are highly advanced, the non-directive supervision approach is applied as it allows for greater autonomy. In this approach, the supervisor mainly offers reflective feedback and encouragement.

This phased approach directly aligns with the goals set by Glickman.

These goals majorly centers on enhancing cognitive growth and problem-solving abilities through the gradual shifting of responsibilities from supervisors to those that are being supervised, which in this context, are the students. Sonia (2022) noted that the developmental model gives supervisor's the opportunity to modify and direct their methods towards the background and experience of the students which in the long run, enables a long term professional growth for them which is very necessary because the ultimate aim of the developmental supervision is to actually empower students to become independent researchers who are capable of producing works that are of very high quality.

Furthermore, Glickman's framework is being supported by recent findings like that of Muda *et al.* (2020) where they developed a seven-stage behavioral supervision model that was based on the developmental supervision theory. In their model, they included stages like listening, presenting, negotiating, and standardizing. They were certain that these stages contribute massively to the systematic of students as it involves structured support framework that is important in enhancing an effective educational outcome. This is directly aligned with Glickman's assertion that developmental supervision is very effective in enhancing effective outcomes for students since it adjusts to the needs of individual students and guides them through their journey of research. Generally, in the context of postgraduate research this framework helps students become independent scholars and easily navigate the very challenges faced in the process of conducting research. For example, when students conduct their research in isiZulu, they often face the challenge that most theoretical frameworks are written in English and are grounded in Western epistemologies. Such theories do not always account for African worldviews, cultural contexts, or indigenous knowledge systems, making it difficult for students to apply them meaningfully in their research. This mismatch not only limits the relevance of the theories to local realities but also perpetuates epistemic dependency on Western scholarship. As a result, there is a pressing need to develop, document, and promote theoretical frameworks that are rooted in African languages and perspectives, so that research conducted in isiZulu and other indigenous languages can be both academically rigorous and contextually relevant.

#### **4 Methods of Data Collection**

This paper critically reviews the different approaches and styles that supervisors can adopt in African Languages postgraduate research. A qualitative approach located within the constructivist paradigm was adopted. Data for this study were

collected through documents review. A search for effective postgraduate supervision literature was conducted to identify relevant research published from 2015-2024. The following search words were used on various search engines: effective supervision, constructive feedback, postgraduate research, and higher education. The search engines consulted to gather data included Google Scholar, Web of Science, ERIC, JSTOR, and Scopus. In addition, the Southern African Journal of African Languages was reviewed. Only articles written in English were considered, as there is limited scholarship published in isiZulu on supervision in higher education. The reference lists of retrieved publications were also searched for additional sources. Out of the 23 peer-reviewed articles initially collected, only 15 were found to be directly relevant. Existing literature was used to create themes of important components to consider in the postgraduate supervision framework. Thematic analysis in this research was theoretical, where the focus was on coding towards themes to answer a specific research question, driven by the researcher and her concerns (King & Brooks 2018:10). A total of 15 sources were analysed to create themes. The emphasis was on identifying patterns in the data that are important or interesting and using these as themes to address the research question (Maguire & Delahunt 2017:3353). Thematic analysis was conducted using a hybrid coding approach, combining both inductive and deductive methods. Initially, codes were generated inductively from the data to capture emerging themes, while deductive coding was guided by existing theoretical frameworks relevant to supervision in African higher education.

## **5 Presentation of Findings**

Data analysis yielded five main themes: The act of kindness, Timely and constructive feedback, Good Supervisory Relationship, Cohort Supervision, Proper Guidelines, monitoring and collaboration. These themes reflect approaches and styles for effective postgraduate supervision.

### ***5.1 The Act of Kindness and Trust***

The act of kindness and trust Kindness is generally regarded as a common everyday word, but in view of Binfet & Passmore (2019), it is a multifaceted, distinct and complex construct imbued with deep meaning and far-reaching ramifications on both an individual and a social level. In the SAGE encyclopaedia of lifespan human development, Israel and Abramson (2018) defined

kindness as a general inclination or tendency to be warm and affectionate, and to show some elements of concern, charity, and cooperation. Similarly, trust is considered a vital component in building relationships. Accordingly, Mayer, Davis and Schoorman (1995; Okeke-Uzodike 2021) defined trust as ‘the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the one instilling the trust (the supervisor, in this case), irrespective of the availability of any control measures’. Research studies within the academic environment have shown the centrality of trust as a key component in the capacity development of postgraduate students, knowledge innovation and creation (Robertson 2017, cited in Okeke-Uzodike 2021: 1176). Trust between the supervisor and the supervisee develops as an emergent state being influenced by factors such as interactions, context, situation, motivations, and thoughts involved in the supervision process (Burke, Sim & Lazzara 2007). In addition, Ten Cate (2007) noted that trust includes quality care that reflects a dimension of competence beyond observed ability.

Mkhabela and Frick (2016) argued that kindness and trust represent the mutual core aspects that define student-supervisor relationships, while Mantai and Dowling (2015) posited that kindness and trust within the pedagogy reflect as an acknowledgment. From my experience as a post graduate student with my supervisor the enactment of kindness that my supervisor provided me with the necessary help to address the assignment and in conducting a session with her to help her prepare for examinations. The stance of Cole-King and Gilbert (2011), who defined kindness as being sensitive to the distress of others with a commitment to try and do something about it (Okeke-Uzodike 2017). Act of kindness and trust from supervisor in my experience gave me the courage to excel in the work, assignment and test that I was given because I was shown the act of kindness and trust. When someone assures you and tell you that they trust you specially when its exam time and you need to do well. It just gives you that power as a student and strength to excel.

## ***5.2 Timely and Constructive Feedback***

Communication and feedback, whether in writing, oral, online or in combination, can only be effective if the message that the supervisor wants to convey corresponds directly with how the student perceives that message. In a diverse South African context, feedback and communication between student and supervisor may be in a language that is in neither the person’s mother tongue

(Bell 2007) and can very easily be misinterpreted (Batane 2010). Good communication skills are therefore essential in order to engage with students on a face-to-face basis, as well as within the online environment (Betts 2009, cited in Nurie 2018: 540).

Good quality feedback to students is essential (McCallin & Nayar 2012) and should alert the students to the areas in their work that need improvement. This should, however, also nurture the student by identifying and praising positive features of the work and providing constructive advice on how to improve in the areas of weakness (Wolff 2010). Critical and constructive feedback should be ‘delivered and received in a manner that contributes to an educational relationship’ (Li & Seale 2007) without provoking resentment, resistance, defensiveness, hurt feelings, shame or a sense of failure. It should be non-judgemental, appreciative of good work, as well as identifying problem areas, and provide options for change (Hamid & Mahmood 2010).

The relationship between student and supervisor influences how students perceive feedback and therefore the affective relationship between supervisor and student is important (Clynes & Raftery 2008, cited in Nurie 2018: 524). Feedback should be carefully planned. Questions can be asked to encourage critical thinking, rather than simply pointing out changes which may need to be made (Formeris & Pedan-McAlphine 2006, cited in Nurie 2018: 524).

Whether feedback is given face-to-face or via electronic media, the key to the success of feedback and its acceptance is the commitment of the supervisor to support the student (Holberg 2008). The basic principles of constructive feedback and communication thus remain the same, although the medium might be different. In the face-to-face environment, non-verbal communication plays a very important role that is often compromised in the online environment. In the virtual and online world, the body language of neither the supervisor nor the student is visible (Betts 2009) and the nonverbal message can become lost in translation. Online communication skills are a very important supervisory attributes in providing appropriate feedback.

### ***5.3 Good Supervisory Relationship***

Supervision is an inter-relational process, including interior and exterior factors as well as individual that occur between student and supervisor. The bond that develops between them depends on how well they manage their relationship (Abiddin 2007). Supervision requires professional commitment, as it is an



intensive form of educator-student engagement. The multiple layers of the supervisor-student relationship need to be recognised and engaged with for a successful outcome to be achieved (van Rensburg *et al.* 2016).

Halse and Malfroy (2010) argue that doctoral supervision requires specialised professional activities that comprise five features: the learning agreement, habits of mind, intellectual expertise, technicalities and contextual expertise. Most of the supervision activity must be supported with supervisors' input (Abiddin & West 2007). There are series of tasks and responsibilities that should be considered (Ismail *et al.* 2014). How a supervisor works depends on the range and depth of supervision concept that he/she possessed. A vital component of academic endeavour, the supervisory relationship between research students and their supervisor shapes students' scholarly growth and success. Students frequently negotiate a complicated web of expectations, assistance, obstacles, and interactions with their supervisors within this dynamic relationship (Mohammad *et al.* 2024).

#### **5.4 Cohort Supervision**

Learning within the cohort is based on the theory of constructivist learning, where learning is seen as an active process to promote understanding, based on individual and socially shared experiences (Van Biljon *et al.* 2014:167). Cohort supervision enables students to progress through their studies as an interdependent collective that are, so that all members of the group can benefit simultaneously from the learning experience (Santicola & Morris 2013:253). This supports the view that engagement in the cohort enables group-work, the sharing of ideas and support development (Wisker *et al.* 2007:309). Specifically, cohort supervision helps participants of that group to remain motivated, maintain momentum, comment on work in progress, and receive critique on their research that may support progression. Within a cohort supervision construct the emphasis is on support, since students are at the same stage of their research journey and are grappling with similar issues.

To promote progression, the aim of cohort supervision is to encourage peer learning and promote the provision of regular feedback from peers and supervisors; allowing students to learn from experiences and the viewpoints of others (Agné & Mörkenstam 2018:669). The structure provided via cohort supervision may stimulate creativity and make it easier for students to engage; thereby reducing academic isolation (Samara 2006:1116).

### **5.5 Proper Guidelines, Monitoring and Collaboration**

Any supervision process should follow a certain guideline to ensure an effective supervision, which needs to be discussed beginning of the supervision. Proper guideline, monitoring and collaboration with their supervisor are at utmost important. Any supervisory process needs to acknowledge the differences between student-supervisors' roles to enhance research skills (Ismail *et al.* 2014). Monitoring of the process is significant to identity challenges and obstacles as early as possible and to ensure that the student is on the right track. Supervision process begins when student identify the supervisor based on the field of specialisation. Supervisor decides whether to accept or decline, which may be influence by various factors, such as relevance of the proposed study, workload etc. Setting up of proper guidelines and expectations should be done at the beginning of a supervision process. This is needed so that clarity will be ensured especially in areas like roles, responsibilities, schedules for meetings, and timelines for submission. Continuous monitoring of the progress of students is necessary in identifying challenges very early and hence provide support that is adequate in addressing such challenges. Additional resources like mentorship programs, writing retreats and collaborations platforms which assist and enable students develop their research and writing skills should be provided by institutions.

The second stage is to discuss the proposed topic, objectives and research questions. When the student and the supervisor reach a common ground, the third step is to sign a memorandum of understanding before starting the process of proposal writing. Many universities have introduced the process of proposal defence that the student needs to undergo before proposal serves to different ethics structures. The supervisor needs to monitor the whole process, doing back and forth with the student and internal ethics structures until the student proposal is approved. After that the monitoring will be between the supervisor and student. Van Rensburg *et al.* (2016) argues that the supervisory agreement should be negotiated within the framework of institutional requirements. Essential aspects of this agreement include, accessibility of the supervisor; regularity of meetings (whether face-to-face or via other media); preparation for such meetings and the timeline for submission of written drafts; responsibility for keeping a record of meetings; expected targets and timetable; assistance from other sources such as writing centres, librarians and computer literacy programmes (Van Rensburg *et al.* 2016).

Eventually, supervision should benefit both student and the supervisor,

not only in terms of student being able to complete the study but also in terms of development as a researcher. Therefore, collaboration becomes more crucial. Any research report requires sound academic writing (Wolff 2010). Based on the framework for supervising students as proposed by Lee and Murray (2015), the student will first have to understand the principles of academic writing and acquire the skills through simple tasks and experiences before those of scientific writing. When students collaborate with their supervisors, they quickly develop the scientific writings skills.

## **Recommendations**

Several recommendations have been made based on the findings obtained from this research. The recommendations are made to enhance the appropriate supervision of postgraduate students in African Languages and other related disciplines. Here are the recommendations Supervisors should provide multi-lingual feedback options (e.g., oral feedback in students' primary African languages) to bridge comprehension gaps in academic writing. It is also important to encourage students to employ theories that reflect African epistemologies to advance the Africanisation and decolonisation of the curriculum.

Supervisors should make sure that they consistently provide feedback to the students, and this feedback should be timely, constructive and non-judgmental. The students should be given appropriate guidance that is clear and actionable, especially in cases where the students come from different linguistic backgrounds which may give room to communication barriers. The feedback given by supervisors should be given in a manner that promotes learning and confidence in the students.

It is necessary for supervisors to cultivate and nurture an environment of kindness and trust in their dealings and relationship with postgraduate students. This is very essential in making the students feel comfortable, while also having the feeling of being supported and empowered to succeed. For this to be very effective, supervisors should try to always engage in communications that are sensitive and empathetic in order to help them recognize the different cultural and academic backgrounds of the students. The trust between the supervisors and their students can be built when there is consistent positive reinforcement, and provision of an environment that is non-judgmental but rather supportive for academic growth.

Academic departments and universities in general should give priority to the development of supervisory relationships that are strong and very

professional. It is imperative for supervisors to balance intellectual relationships by enhancing them further with emotional and psychological support, because all these are necessary for student's to thrive in the academic environment. This is achieved by firstly offering training programs and workshops to supervisors in order to equip them with necessary skills needed to effectively manage this relationship, especially in academic environments that are very complex. To ensure the effectiveness of those trainings and workshop, it is important there are conducted in both language (English and isiZulu).

Last but not the least, for postgraduate studies, universities should adopt the use of cohort supervision model especially within specific disciplines like the African Languages. This approach is very useful because it enables the students to benefit through different media such as peer learning, shared experiences, and mutual support. Cohort supervision is very useful in the sense that it reduces academic isolation, it motivates students to not lose focus but stay on track, and likewise, it fosters collaborative feedback mechanisms. This supervision model can be achieved and fully functional when faculties provide the opportunity for a structured cohort-based learning and supervision with the aim of enhancing the overall engagement and progression of the students. Institutions should mandate biannual supervisor training on: Delivering constructive feedback in cross-cultural settings, Recognizing implicit biases in assessment, and Mentoring strategies for non-native English speakers.

## **Conclusion**

This article is a critical review of different supervision approaches and styles in Social Sciences. Supervisors need to provide the type of supervision which ensures that the students produce work of a high standard which enhances throughput rates. They need also to know that they have a huge impact on the supervision, they are not just doing their work, but they are influencers to a successful supervision. This paper critically reviewed different approaches and styles that supervisors might adopt in their respective discipline or faculty. Upon critical reflection, we conclude that for supervisors to support vast numbers of underprepared students entering the postgraduate sphere, alternative supervision approaches require exploration. Individual supervisors no longer have the capacity to supervise large numbers of students by relying solely on the apprenticeship style. Different needs of students, who demand engagement and attention, and who are used to collaborating via social media, require supervisors to reconsider the ways in which they supervise. According to

Mahlomaholo (2013:389), embarking on an alternative supervision approach such as cohort supervision may be very difficult ‘as it demands that we step out of our operational comfort zones and create meaningful interaction with local communities through debate and negotiation’. It was found that the act of kindness and trust, Constructive feedback and towards emancipation approach are styles that supervisor must consider for an effective supervision.

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The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research.

## **Author’s contributions**

Both authors contributed equally to this chapter.

## **Ethical considerations**

This article does not contain any studies involving human participants performed by the author.

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