

Education Research in African Contexts

Traditions and New Beginnings
for Knowledge and Impact

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CHAPTER 6

Picturing the experiences of the student–supervisor relationship towards completion of doctoral studies in African universities

Cornelius Kipleting Rugut

Introduction

Nations around the globe need scholars and lifelong researchers who can be involved in knowledge creation to meet national and global challenges. Governments are recognising that the foundation of a productive and prosperous country is a well-educated population, especially doctoral graduates who can be involved in research and take the lead in coming up with new and better ways of dealing with various aspects of the development of a country. However, statistics show that the completion rate of doctoral studies in Africa is still very low (Bacwayo et al., 2017). In order to increase the number of doctoral graduates, there must be quality postgraduate supervision which is one of the invaluable areas of higher education.

This study, therefore, focused on the experiences of the student–supervisor relationship in postgraduate supervision and the completion of doctoral studies in African universities. The relationship between the supervisor and the doctoral student is paramount to the completion of doctoral studies. Research indicates that the most important factor in students' decisions to continue and complete their doctoral studies or to withdraw is their relationship with their supervisors (Jones, 2013; Kiley, 2011). Several studies have also revealed that successful supervision is anchored in a quality student–supervisor relationship (Abiddin, 2009; Hodza, 2007) and yet there is no established procedure for effective supervision nor student–supervisor relationship. Individual supervisors seem to approach the student–supervisor relationship differently.

Research objective

As already stated, the focus of this study was to explore the experiences of the student–supervisor relationship in postgraduate supervision and the completion of doctoral studies in African universities. The study participants were doctoral graduates who recently completed their educational doctoral studies in two African universities.

The research question was framed as 'What are the experiences of the student–supervisor relationship in a doctoral study?'

Theoretical perspective on experiences of the student–supervisor relationship

Doctoral students have varied experiences of their doctoral studies depending on the nature of the student–supervisor relationship. Most researchers agree that a close working relationship between the student and the supervisor is central to the completion of the study (Bacwayo et al., 2017; Matheka, 2020b). Compared to other educational relationships, the student–supervisor relationship can make or break students' success and career for life if it is not properly managed (Grevholm et al., 2005). This literature refers to pleasant and unpleasant experiences encountered by doctoral students.

Sverdlik et al. (2018) noted that students sometimes experience discontent in their relationship with their supervisors. This happens mostly when students have a poor relationship with their supervisors. These authors identified three main causes of student discontent in the student–supervisor relationship, namely, personality factors, professional factors and organizational factors. Personality factors may include interpersonal differences or a personality clash between the student and the supervisor. Professional factors that may cause discontent could be a supervisor who is misinformed or who has different research interests to that of the student. Lastly, organizational factors such as the supervisor having too many competing responsibilities or too many students may lead to less attention to the student and as such, the student may feel neglected (Krauss & Ismi, 2010). Such experiences of discontent may lead to failure in completing the PhD (Sverdlik et al., 2018). Students with feelings of discontent in the relationship may choose to drop out or discontinue their studies (Grevholm et al., 2005; Zainal, 2007).

Some students described their relationship with their supervisors as a frustrating experience (Sayed et al., 2006). In the study by Krauss and Ismi (2010), which explored student experiences in the student–supervisor relationship, some doctoral students pointed out frustrating experiences where their supervisors suppressed their opinions, or rejected their work with unpleasant comments, even when such arose from supervisors' suggestions. There are also instances in some relationships where students have been compelled to change their supervisors due to frequent disagreements with their supervisors (Sverdlik et al., 2018). In spite of the difficulties, many doctoral students do their best to produce a good piece of work that would impress their supervisor (Sayed et al., 2006).

Kosgei et al. (2019) outline the negative critiques received by doctoral students in their relationship with their supervisors. According to Morris (2011), some supervisors treat their students with a dictatorial and commanding attitude. Participants in Morris' study narrated how their supervisors talked to them in a demeaning way, dismissing their ideas and rarely acknowledging the good work they were doing (Kosgei et al., 2019). Some students have reported how their supervisors expressed anger towards them by condemning or shouting at them or even yelling at

them in front of others to publicly humiliate them (Morris, 2011; Kosgei et al., 2019; Zainal, 2007). While referring to the humiliating critiques, one of the students in Morris' study said, "I had my PhD from hell" (Morris, 2011, p. 551).

The power dynamic in the student-supervisor relationship is perceived to be unequal (Ahmadi et al., 2020). Several scholars (Dimitrova, 2016; Grant, 2003; Morris, 2011) have highlighted experiences of power-struggles between the PhD students and their supervisors. Students have reported bitter feelings of powerlessness in the student-supervisor relationship (Ahmadi et al., 2020). The power dynamics play a key role in the success of the doctoral student, as well as the satisfaction of the student in the relationship (Grant, 2005). While the relationship between two professionals can occur on an equal basis, the relationship between the student and the supervisor is seen to be a teacher-student relationship and therefore being unequal (Wubbels & Mieke, 2006). Negative experiences in the relationship can have a profound impact on the student's research productivity (Dimitrova, 2016). If the power dynamic in the relationship is not properly managed, it may lead to delay or non-completion of the PhD (Grant, 2005).

Doctoral students have also expressed their experiences of confusion and unrealistic workload demands from their supervisors (Sverdlik et al., 2018; Philips & Jonson, 2022). Some students are left by their supervisors to work on their own, while others do not receive the advice they expect from their supervisors and as such students feel abandoned and confused (Sverdlik et al., 2018; Smallwood, 2004). Other students have expressed how their supervisors placed unrealistic deadlines for submission of their written chapters during their candidature. They described working long hours, even spending sleepless nights, and working during weekends to meet their supervisors' demands (Kosgei et al., 2019).

Bullying is a bad experience that PhD students have complained about in their studies (Lewis, 2004; Morris, 2011). Students have reported situations where their supervisors project their workload pressures onto them in the form of insults, intimidations, and other forms of bullying (Philips & Johnson, 2022). Unlike the university staff who are protected from staff bullying, research students are not protected by any law in the university and as such, they are vulnerable to any kind of supervisory bullying (Lewis, 2004). Some scholars have grouped doctoral supervisory bullying behaviours into five categories, namely, "threat to professional status, threat to personal standing, isolation, overworking and destabilization" (Morris, 2011, pp. 547-548). Threat to professional status involves humiliations like accusations regarding lack of effort, while threat to personal standing can be insults, intimidation and name-calling. Isolation may come in the form of withholding of information or preventing access to opportunities; overworking involves undue pressure and impossible deadlines, while destabilisation refers to

failing to give credit when due and repeated reminders of blunders (Morris, 2011). Students experiencing supervisory bullying may take longer to complete their studies, while others may drop out due to humiliations (Dimitrova, 2016).

Even though many PhD graduates have described going through unpleasant experiences in their studies, many others hold a different view. Some graduates have expressed positive experiences in student–supervisor relationships (Cadman, 2010; Grevholm et al., 2005; Halse, 2011). They reported that their supervisors offered different comments which gave them direction in their work and enabled them to do their best. Others noted that, even though their supervisors were too busy, they created time to meet with them and discuss their work (Ali et al., 2016; Malfroy, 2005). A study in an Australian university by Cadman (2010) found that students have varied views on their experiences with their supervisors. Some students paid tribute to the commitment of their supervisors, acknowledging their supervisors as guides and mentors. They appreciated having learned many things they had not been aware of through their interaction with the supervisors (Cadman, 2010). These students showed strong attachment to their supervisors by using words like “especially my supervisor”, “I am grateful of my supervisor”, “I got this from my supervisor” (Cadman, 2010, p. 483).

Different cultural backgrounds are another aspect within supervision that supervisors have to acknowledge. This was evident from a study by McClure (2005) when he interviewed postgraduate students of Chinese origin who had newly enrolled for their studies in Singapore. The study found that culture-based differences brought a unique challenge in supervising international students or students of different races and cultures within a nation. The students go through an experience of adjustment and are challenged to fit into the new system (Son & Park, 2014). According to Son and Park (2014) it is advisable to appoint a local mentor or supervisors with intercultural competence who can work well with students of different cultural origin. There is a need for supervisors to be intellectually and culturally flexible in order to accommodate the expectations of different students with different cultural backgrounds (Son & Park, 2014).

A study by Backhouse et al. (2015) also gives some insight into the student experiences with their supervisors. In this study, students told stories of experiences with their supervisors who were in the same discipline and the same department, but had widely differing opinions of what the PhD students had to do, how they had to do it and what the supervisor’s role was in the process. Even though there is no set formula for successful supervision, supervisors need to be aware of students’ concerns (Philips & Johnson, 2022; Backhouse et al., 2015), as this enables them to become more mindful of their interaction with the students and hence work towards improving the student–supervisor relationship.

Materials and methods

This was a qualitative study located in the interpretivist paradigm in which reality is socially constructed. The participants for this case study were purposively selected. They had a doctoral degree in education and were within a bracket of five years after graduation. The ten participants, seven women and three men, were graduates from Moi University (five) and Nelson Mandela University (five) and were willing to share their experiences of their student–supervisor relationships, making the voices of postgraduate students heard. Contacts were obtained through administrators in postgraduate offices in each university. Emails were sent calling for their participation. The first ten positive responses, five from each university, participated in the study.

The data were generated by use of drawing as a data collection method. Drawing is a technique which is used to explore conscious and unconscious issues and experiences (Theron et al., 2011). It has the potential of bringing out hidden or repressed perceptions or views not previously known or expressed (De Lange, 2011). Hence, utilizing drawing is an important method that has the possibility of prompting discussion around a topic of concern, and it helps a researcher to get access to the aspects of knowledge which could be very hard to express in words and might be ignored or remain hidden (Theron et al., 2011). When drawing is used as a research method the participant is given time to draw and write a caption (De Lange, 2011). A caption is a brief explanation provided by the participant in writing to describe the meaning embedded in the drawing (De Lange, 2011). The participants in this study were engaged in drawing their experiences of the student–supervisor relationship during their study. The participants were assured that there is no such thing as a wrong or poor drawing, the rationale being to encourage them not to worry about the aesthetics of their drawings. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the captions of the ten drawings.

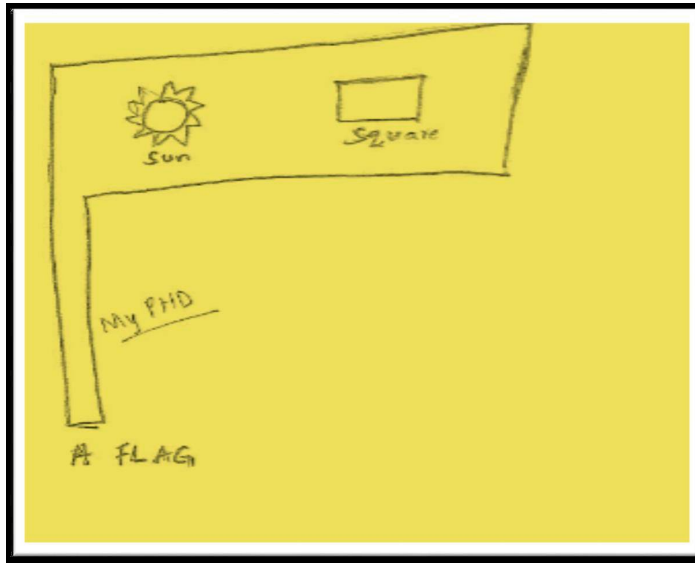
The following prompt was provided to them:

- Draw how you experienced your student–supervisor relationship.

Every participant was given a plain piece of A4 paper and a pencil and had ten minutes to draw and to write a caption.. The participants had to explain the meaning embedded in the drawing by writing a caption of what the drawing meant. Each of the drawings made was scanned and the accompanying captions typed in Microsoft Word below the drawing. Ten drawings were made. Figures 1 to 5 are examples of the drawings made by the participants. Where supporting quotations come from these five drawings and their captions, the figure number is inserted. Where the supporting quotations come from drawings which are not included in this chapter,

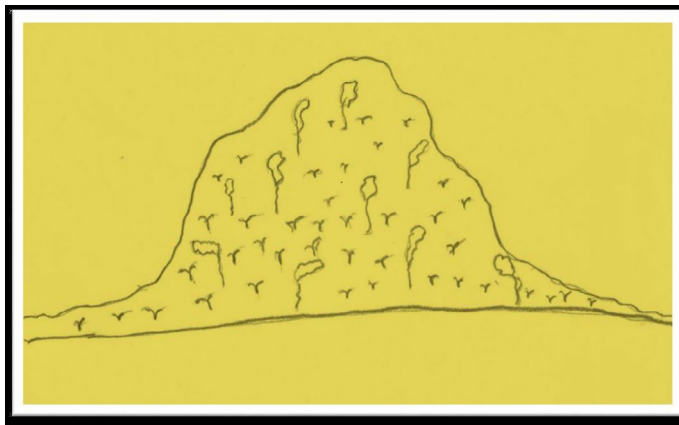
only the pseudonym of the participant is inserted. It is important to take note that the captions as written by the participants have been typed without any alteration or correction of punctuation, spelling, or tense. The names given to the participants are pseudonyms.

Figure 1: Drawing by Dr Nelly. A Flag to Represent My PhD Experience



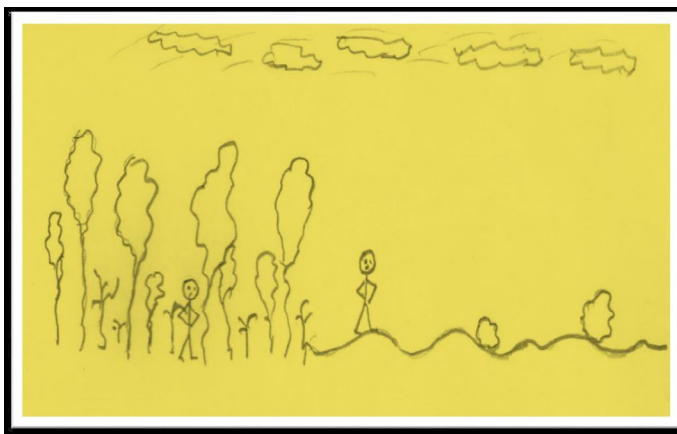
I have drawn a flag which represents my PhD. I believe that a doctoral relationship encompasses the PhD, the student and the promoter. As you might know, a flag symbolises unity of a nation, it is sovereignty and the values it encompasses. In my case, the flag represents my PhD which brought us together in unity with my promoter. We had a relationship in the study itself. I drew a sun because it is a source of energy, whenever I was discouraged in my study I would get an encouragement from my promoter and be energised again. The sun also represents the light. With the support of my supervisor I would see where I was going because there was light in terms of guidance I was getting from my promoter. I have also drawn a square. A square has four equal sides with opposite angles. This is to represent that I was bring knowledge into the study as much as my supervisor. We had different lenses to look at some aspects of the research. In a nutshell my experience was enjoying though we did not always agree.

Figure 2: *Drawing by Dr Winnie. A Hill Representing My Experience*



This is a hill which represents my experience. My supervisors were knowledgeable and experienced, but they never had time for me. Arranging meetings and getting feedback from them was an uphill task, it was like climbing a thick-forested hill. Sometimes I would send my work but it takes over six months without any response. I would call them several times or send text messages, but they rarely pick my call or call back. Whenever I got an opportunity to meet them, they would guide me very well but again they would disappear with no communication or response for a long time. It was an uphill task working with them.

Figure 3: *Drawing by Dr Beatrice. Forest and Clear Road Representing My Experience*



The drawing shows a forest, at the edge of the forest is a clear road but with some stones. My experience with my supervisors at the beginning of my PhD was difficult, they did not give me the assistance I needed and they always disagreed, I have drawn a forest to represent this difficult experience with them, they are the dark moments in a forest without direction and guidance from the supervisors, I was just confused. Later the supervisors were changed and my new supervisors gave me direction and guidance, I see this as coming of the forest and following a clear route. We worked together with the new supervisors, and they always encourage me to complete my PhD.

Figure 4: Drawing by Dr Dan. Two Hills Representing My Student–Supervisor Relationship

I represent my student-supervisor relationship with the two hills above that are linked by a bridge. The two hills represent me and my supervisor. I saw my supervisor as a knowledgeable person experienced in research, my study was a link (the bridge). The bridge enabled me to tap the knowledge from him. Our relationship was bright and warm as you can see the sun in the drawing which represents the warmth of our relationship, my supervisor was supportive and he motivated me throughout my study. I have also drawn clouds to represent the challenges in my relationship with my supervisor, it was not always bright and warm but sometimes gloomy when I felt my supervisor was criticising my work even when I thought I had done my best. I had to do it several times until he was satisfied. There was also a time when my supervisor was busy and would not be available for me, these were dark moments for me.

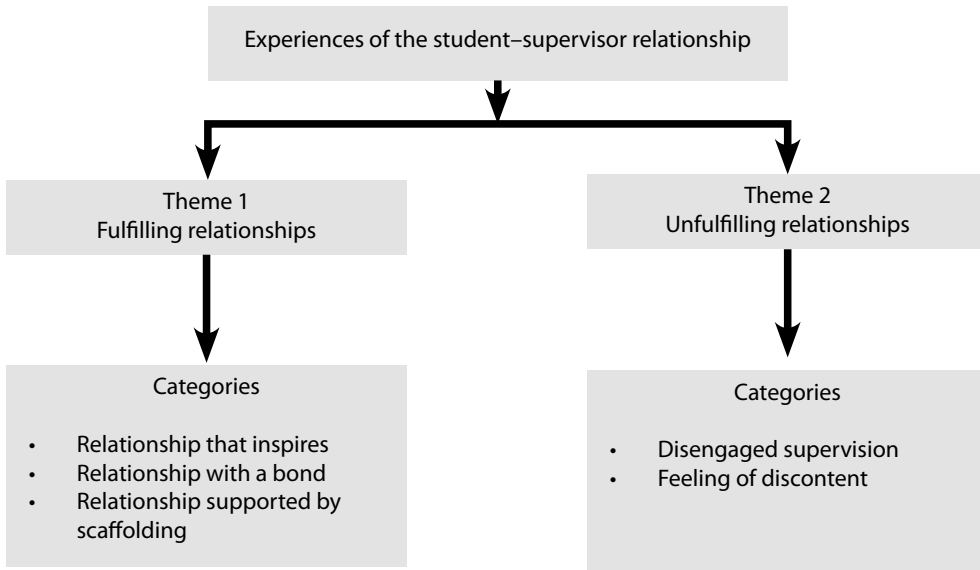
Figure 5: Drawing by Dr Careen. A Dove Representing My Student–Supervisor Relationship

The drawing shows a dove. A dove is mostly used to represent peace. In my experience, this dove represents the peaceful working relationship with my supervisors. My supervisors were humble and peaceful, they were not arrogant, and they did not create barriers in our relationship. It was easy to work with them because there was respect for one another. They were busy people and sometimes feedback would delay but I understood them. They created time for me and we worked with understanding.

Findings and discussion

A summary of the findings is presented in the figure below.

Figure 6: Diagrammatic Representation of the Findings; Experiences of the Student–Supervisor Relationship



The findings presented in Figure 6 highlight two themes which are discussed in this section, *fulfilling relationships* and *unfulfilling relationships*.

Fulfilling relationships

Experiences of doctoral studies can be fulfilling and satisfying to the doctoral student. A fulfilling relationship is a supportive relationship that enhances learning and enables the research student to work in the best way possible. It is a relationship that promotes the completion of the research project and the production of quality work. The participants highlighted three aspects that related to fulfilling relationships namely, (i) a relationship that inspires (ii) a relationship in which there is a bond and (iii) a relationship supported by scaffolding.

A relationship that inspires

In this context an inspiring relationship refers to how the supervisor manages the relationship in order to enable the doctoral student to work confidently and creatively during the research process. In describing their experiences, the participants expressed their views on how their supervisors inspired them to progress and

complete their studies. They recalled the encouragement, energy, and motivation from their supervisors, as can be seen from their captions:

“My supervisor was supportive, and he motivated me throughout my study.” (Drawing caption, Dan, Figure 4)

“I drew a sun, because it is a source of energy, whenever I was discouraged in my study; I would get an encouragement from my promoter and be energised again.” (Drawing caption, Nelly, Figure 1)

“We worked together with the new supervisors and they always encourage me to complete my PhD.” (Drawing caption, Beatrice, Figure 3)

“I am at my own, but I know that my supervisor is there for me and I am safe.” (Drawing caption, Alice)

The quotations above suggest an inspiring relationship that promoted the student’s doctoral learning. It seems that supervisors played an important role in encouraging and motivating the candidates to persevere and complete their studies. According to Matheka (2020b), research students flourish when their supervisors give them the energy to work smarter and produce quality work within the expected time. Schulze (2012) argues that it is important for the supervisor to acknowledge the candidate as a person first, in addition to being a learner and as such motivate them to continue the research process. However, it is important to note that some doctoral students also experience harshness and discouragement from their supervisors, which make them feel demotivated and insecure in the relationship and may opt to discontinue their studies (Morris, 2011). It is therefore necessary for the supervisor to provide support through encouragement and motivation (Schulze, 2012). This could create a bond in the relationship, as discussed in the next category.

A relationship with a bond

A relationship with a bond refers to the kind of relationship where there is a strong affiliation between the student and the supervisor. The participants expressed their experiences of a bonding relationship which involved working with the supervisor as a friend, being in a warm relationship and a relationship of understanding and peace. This became evident from the following quotations:

“They became great friends to me. It was an interesting and nurturing experience with them.” (Drawing caption, Mike)

“Our relationship was bright and warm as you can see the sun in the drawing which represents the warmth of our relationship.” (Drawing caption, Dan, Figure 4)

“They created time for me and we worked with understanding.” (Drawing caption, Careen, Figure 5)

“In my experience, this dove represents the peaceful working relationship with my supervisors ... it was easy to work with them because there was respect for one another.”

(Drawing caption, Careen, Figure 5)

The quotations above suggest that a bond between the student and the supervisor seems to promote the doctoral learning process, as it opens the possibility for engagement. Most researchers agree that completing the PhD is a process that depends on a close working relationship between the student and supervisor (Abiddin et al., 2009; Dimitrova, 2016). A bond between the doctoral student and the supervisor offers strong support which enables the student to progress steadily in the research process (Radloff, 2010). Many supervisors work closely with students to nurture them in the research field (Bacwayo et al., 2017). A supervisor who is friendly creates opportunities for a peaceful working relationship with the student, which enhances the learning process, hence promoting the completion of doctoral studies (Mainhard et al., 2009). A relationship guided by respect and understanding not only promotes faster completion of the doctoral studies, but also enables the student to produce quality work (Bacwayo et al., 2017). The production of quality work requires the supervisor’s support through scaffolding, which is the focus of the next category.

A relationship supported by scaffolding

Scaffolding is a supportive learning process that aims at promoting a deeper level of learning for the doctoral student. It involves a variety of techniques applied by the supervisor to enable the doctoral student to progress towards a stronger understanding of the doctoral work. The participants explained how they had supportive and satisfying experiences with their supervisors. They described their supervisors as people who nurtured them in the research process by providing thorough guidance and training. This was evident from the following responses:

“With the support of my supervisor I would see where I was going because there was light in terms of guidance I was getting.” (Drawing caption, Nelly, Figure 1)

“They gave me thorough training in how to do my work just like a leopard trains its young one to hunt perfectly.” (Drawing caption, Mike)

“She will also show me the interesting things in her book which I also need to go and learn. When I am nourished and ready to continue playing and exploring, I go back across the river to my own place where I continue.” (Drawing caption, Alice)

“I enjoyed my relationship with my supervisor, and I was happy and satisfied with the guidance she gave me.” (Drawing caption, Mary)

The quotations above provide evidence of the efforts made by the supervisors to scaffold the students' doctoral learning. Mainhard et al. (2009) describe a helpful working relationship where the supervisor balances between controlling the student's research process and ensuring that the required guidance is provided to support the progress of the student. The supervisor should take the responsibility of guiding and training the research student to produce quality theses and complete their studies on time (Vladimir, 2010). The supervisor's guidance is the light that illuminates the way for the research student to progress. Sayed et al. (2006) argue that students like to work with supervisors who read their drafts and provide thorough guidance on their work, as it gives direction to the student on what is required of a PhD.

Even though the student–supervisor relationship can be fulfilling as described in this section, some relationships can be disappointing to the doctoral students. The next theme refers to experiences which caused dissatisfaction in the student–supervisor relationship.

Unfulfilling relationships

While the student–supervisor relationship can work to the benefit of the student and be fulfilling, it can also be unfulfilling. An unfulfilling relationship refers to a less supportive working relationship between the student and the supervisor. In this theme, the participants pointed to their dissatisfaction with and within the relationship, referring to two issues, namely, (i) disengaged supervision and (ii) feelings of discontent.

Disengaged supervision

Disengaged supervision refers to a relationship of little contact and little communication between the student and the supervisor. The research process is an arduous task that requires frequent communication and contact in the student–supervisor relationship, enabling engagement with the study. However, minimal engagement between the student and the supervisor during the study or during some phases of the study, places strain on the student, who then might not know how to proceed. Participants spoke of their experiences of being lonely in the relationship when their supervisors are unavailable to attend to them. Some talked of delayed feedback and insufficient communication. The above is evident from the following quotations:

“Sometimes I felt that my supervisor was too busy to attend to my work or meet with me, I felt I was lonely.” (Drawing caption, Mary)

“My supervisor was busy and would not be available for me, these were dark moments for me.” (Drawing caption, Dan, Figure 4)

“My supervisors were knowledgeable and experienced, but they never had time for me.”
(Drawing caption, Winny, Figure 2)

“Sometimes I would send my work, but it takes over six months without any response.”
(Drawing caption, Winny, Figure 2)

These quotations provide evidence of a dissatisfying relationship where the engagement between the student and the supervisor is not adequate. Grossman and Crowther (2015) concur with the stated quotes that research students can sometimes find themselves lonely in a relationship where their supervisors are busy and unavailable for consultation. The issues raised above were due to the supervisors being busy with administration, teaching responsibilities, having too many students to supervise or sometimes being away from the university (Philps & Johnson, 2022). A supervisor’s workload may cause less contact with the student and delayed feedback (McClure, 2005). Students feel abandoned when they work on their own without the supervisor’s guidance (McClure, 2005). It is therefore important for the student and the supervisor, at the outset of the study, to negotiate the frequency of meetings and the way consultations are to be done in the relationship (Detsky & Baerlocher, 2007). This should include arrangements for supervision when the supervisor is busy or away for an extended period of time (Kosgei et al., 2019). Disengaged supervision may cause discontent in the relationship, as outlined in the next category.

Feelings of discontent

Discontent, in the context of the student–supervisor relationship, refers to the student feeling dissatisfied with the supervisor’s guidance. The relationship between the student and the supervisor can be characterised by discontent if not well managed and if it lacks transparency. Participants expressed their experiences which led to discontent, as the lack of robust guidance and direction, the lack of regular and clear communication from their supervisors, being discouraged by supervisor critique and the demanding nature of the research work. These aspects became evident when the participants articulated their experiences as follows:

“My experience with my supervisors at the beginning of my PhD was difficult, they did not give me the assistance I needed and they always disagreed, I have drawn a forest to represent this difficult experience with them, they are the dark moments in a forest without direction and guidance from the supervisors, I was just confused.” (Drawing caption, Beatrice, Figure 3)

“I would call them several times or send text messages, but they rarely pick my call or call back.” (Drawing caption, Winny, Figure 2)

“It was not always bright and warm but sometimes gloomy when I felt my supervisor was criticising my work even when I thought I had done my best.” (Drawing caption, Dan, Figure 4)

“My relationship with my supervisors was an overburdened relationship which I can compare to a donkey’s work.” (Drawing caption, Newton)

From the quotations above it seems that the participants experienced discontent in their relationships. Doctoral students expect their supervisors to guide them during the research process and when this does not happen, it creates feelings of discontent. A study on student experiences by Krauss and Ismi (2010) concurs that research students tend to experience discontent when they fail to receive the necessary guidance from their supervisors. Furthermore, it is frustrating to the student when the supervisor fails to communicate and to provide direction related to the research process (Ahmadi et al., 2020). Communication is the key to establish and sustain a productive student–supervisor relationship (Ahmadi et al., 2020; Dimitrova, 2016).

Supervisor critique is an important factor that provides a blend of ideas to strengthen and support the research project (Grossman & Crowther, 2015) and to enable the doctoral student to think critically about his or her own work. However, the critique may not always go down well with the student and can be a source of discontent, especially when the student feels unfairly criticised (Sayed et al., 2006). The student workload can also be very demanding and as such this could also cause student discontent as indicated by McClure (2005) who refers to the doctoral studies as a demanding research process. Many research students work long hours, spend sleepless nights and work during weekends to meet PhD demands (Sverdlik et al., 2018). When this does not yield satisfactory results and positive feedback from the supervisor, the student may feel discontent and reluctant to continue with their studies.

Conclusion

It is clear from the findings that student–supervisor relationships have a significant impact on doctoral students’ success. African universities struggling with the through-put rate of doctoral students could learn from this research. Establishing effective student–supervisor relationships is central in promoting the success rate of doctoral students. It is therefore necessary for universities to develop a culture of continuous negotiation and constant communication between the student and the supervisor to promote a positive relationship. There should also be mechanisms within faculties and departments for amicable conflict resolution in case conflict occurs in the supervision process. This could prevent a dissatisfying supervision relationship that may delay doctoral completion or lead to students’ discontinuing their studies.

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