A reflective study of supervisors in Higher Education on humanistic strategies of working with 'difficult' students during COVID-19: Umuntu Akalahlwa supervisory style.

Maserole C. Kgari-Masondo [1]
Bernard Chingwanangwana [2]
Aboshioke L. Umejei [3]
Silindile P. Zulu [4]
Balungile C. Zondi [5]
Gabriel G. Darong [6]
Monica Out [7]

[1] Associate Professor, Department of Human Sciences, University of Venda, orcid 0000-0002-1850-6363
[2] Research Fellow, Department of Human Sciences, University of Venda, orcid 0000-0002-8370-3822
[3] Department of Culture, Heritage and Tourism, orcid 0000-0002-4226-7841
[4] Lecturer, Department of Anthropology
[5] Lecturer, Department of Culture, Heritage and Tourism, University of Kwa Zulu Natal, orcid 0000-0002-5201-1129
[6] Lecturer Département of Anthropology, Rhodes University, orcid 0000-0001-5498-4146
[7] Researcher, Academic Services and Research, Workers College of South Africa orcid 0009-0006-4862-0956

Abstract

This article concentrates on how the migration to digital research supervisory mode affected students in Higher Education (HE) because of COVID-19 globally. Literature on COVID-19 and HE reveals that there have been a lot of hiccups because many students inhabit under-resourced difficult geo-historical and social contexts. These ramifications produce some 'difficult' students who become unproductive in their research as such supervisors required during and beyond the pandemic period are the ones who adopt a humanizing supervision style. The paper tries to close the gaps in the literature on supervisory styles that ignore the role of the geo-historical and social contexts of developing countries by drawing from the qualitative reflections of four supervisors' experiences in HE on how they navigated the context of the 'difficult' students to ensure a success story. The paper's findings are that during COVID-19 and other "challenging times", it is important to use styles of supervision that focus on humanism to make sure that no student is left behind in his/her research. Hence this study proposes the Umuntu Akalahlwa (a person cannot be disposed) supervision style because it emphasizes respect, love, care, hospitality, social justice, and participation as a means of success in research output.

Keywords: Educators, 'Difficult' student, COVID-19, Higher Education, Honours Supervision, Autoethnography and Umuntu akalahlwa

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every facade of life, including the supervision of research in Higher Education (HE). This is because the pandemic forced teaching and learning (T&L) to be online because of the lockdown and the government's strategy of stopping the spread of the virus by limiting face-to-face contact. As a result, online T&L was adopted by many HE institutions to make sure that T&L is ongoing. Literature on COVID-19 and HE exposed that many countries especially previously colonized countries were not ready for online T&L because they are under-resourced and not supported technologically (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Karalis and Raikou,

2020, Sutton & Jorge, 2020). From enrollment to graduation and beyond, it is crucial to give underprivileged students the environment to feel appreciated, supported and sought after (Spellman, Dillenbeck, Edwards & Bohecker (2022).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2020) reveals that around 290.5 million students worldwide who come from disadvantaged contexts are those who tend to be affected the most using online T&L because of the areas they come from. In South Africa, most students in HE are black, and they reside in rural areas that lack running water, electricity, and internet connectivity. Such geohistorical and social contexts stem from the colonial era, which left them underdeveloped and poor.

Many students from such challenging contexts struggle with connectivity and obtaining the necessary instruments required for online teaching, which are essential during COVID-19 instruction (Kgari-Masondo & Chimbunde, 2021) and end up making them 'difficult' students. There are diverse conceptualizations of 'difficult' students – some scholars relate it to disruptive behaviour (Canter & Canter, 2011; Jenson, Clark, & Burrow-Sanchez, 2009). The conceptualization of a 'difficult' student is one of the contributions that this paper puts forward - we adopt the definition that goes beyond the behaviour to include the geopolitical and social context of the student like poverty, lack of infrastructure, and other resources.

The conceptualization of 'difficult' students during COVID-19 in research supervision in HE, in this paper, agrees with Viner *et al.'s* (2020) the suggestion that we should reconsider new methods for digital delivery of experiential education. As suggested by Searle (2015), the role of supervisors is to keep students engrossed and focused on the goals set by the research. Unfortunately, the literature available on HE and COVID-19 focuses more on T&L. To mention a few: in China (Bao, 2020), Greece (Karalis & Raikou, 2020), Morocco (Hibbi, Abdoun, & El Khatir, 2021), and South Africa (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020). However, through the literature review, we discovered that there is a dearth of research in understanding supervisors' reflections in HE about using humanistic strategies for working with 'difficult' students during COVID-19.

The literature survey revealed no studies using a decolonial supervisory style, suggesting a departure from Eurocentric styles that prioritize survival. The proposed style is the Umuntu Akalahlwa supervisory style, which emphasizes well-being and concern for humanity, even in nonconformity, (Kgari-Masondo & Masondo, 2019). Based on Masondo's idiom, *Umuntu Akalahlwa*, this style asserts an ethical obligation to care for others, regardless of their actions or nonconformity (Masondo, 2018).

The Educational Literature Review
Supervision and the role of supervisors

Supervision and training of postgraduate students is one critical function of any university. Thakral (2015), Siddle (2001), cited in Grant and Hackney (2014), stated that most universities strive to occupy recognition ranks because of the number and the quality of research cadres that have been confirmed as annual throughputs. This task is seen as deceptive because it does not prepare students under supervision to be active role players in their research process, as student success becomes the sole responsibility of the supervisor (Siddle, 2001, cited in Grant & Hackney, 2014). This university expectation makes the whole process a complex one for supervisors who are dealing with lagging students. Mokoena and Seeletse (2024) propound that in South African universities there is an inexcusably high level of high master's and doctoral dropout and incompletion rates, significantly due to supervisory issues.

Pillay and Balfour (2011) define supervision as a provision that is provided or expected from an academic to a student or a group either as expert guidance in that research area or genre knowledge concerning postgraduate thesis development. Mutula (2009 cited in Kimani, 2014), defines a supervisor as one in a position of trust to guide the student during the research work while being held responsible for the quality of work and performance in line with the research guidelines and expectations of the Graduate School/Board and the university.

Cognizant of the above conceptualization authors in this current paper note the critical role that an interpersonal-focused one-to-one relationship between the supervisor and supervisee can play in the successful completion of student research projects. The *Umuntu akalahlwa* (Kgari-Masondo & Mkabela, 2020) supervisory style has, therefore, been adopted in this paper to deepen this interpersonal relationship, with the hindsight of ensuring that even a 'difficult' student is allowed to complete his/her research. The *Umuntu akalahlwa* approach calls for yielding to the *Ubuntu* philosophy that may enhance interactive learning during student supervision.

Supervisory pedagogies

Many scholars (Hill, 2008; Hadingham, 2011; Zeegers & Barron, 2012) assert that supervision, a critical pedagogy, has gained considerable support and criticism because of the various dynamics that form the process. Halse and Malfory (2010) further state that pedagogy is dependent on what is called a "professional learning alliance", which sets supervision conditions to build mutual relations between students and their supervisors. This

happens when rules, principles rights, trust, and mutual interdependence are part of the supervision foundation or basis of successful relations. Watkins and Mortimore (1999) further provide that pedagogies thus become a conscious activity that allows one's "supervisor" to enhance mentorship, particularly during the initial research processes and procedures. Okoli (2019: 28) further alludes that pedagogies should be rooted in the constructivist theory.

The constructive theory allows flexibility in the process of supervision because knowledge and realities of this process are constructed through supple social interactions which allow supervisors and supervisees to learn from each other. Social pedagogy also allows supervisors to understand the social context of students under their supervision. Ngulube (2021) also recognizes that supervision has become central to the acquisition, assimilation, and sharing of knowledge; hence flexible pedagogies are to become amicable supervision relations.

Gatfield and Alpert (2002:34) discuss pedagogical styles of supervision, including laissez-faire, pastoral, directorial, and directorial styles. Laissez-faire supervision has low structure and support, limiting motivation and management skills. Pastoral supervision has low structure and high support, while directorial supervision focuses on high structure and low support. Directorial supervision involves high-structural activities without institutional support while maintaining a close, interactive relationship.

This study proposes an appropriate supervision style for students, particularly those who are difficult. It highlights the need for supervisors to focus on Ubuntu values, which focus on well-being and concern for humanity. Effective supervisors appreciate individual differences and adjust their expectations to accommodate these students, ensuring focused and intensive guidance, genuine concern for their progress, and quality feedback (Masondo,2018). Additionally, these supervisors are resistant to burnout, which can spread throughout their supervisory relationships and research communities (Lotta, Henrika, & Kirsi, 2024).

Theoretical framework

The study focuses on how the 'difficult' students engaged in Honours research were assisted by their supervisors. All students that the supervisors identified were of indigenous African descent. It is, therefore, the reason for the study to adopt the knowledge process of the students to remedy their situation. Hence this paper used the Anti-colonial theory, which concentrates on "mechanics and operations of colonial and re-colonial relations and the implications of imperial projects" (Simmons & Dei, 2012: 74)**.** The Anti-colonial theory advocates that all knowledge must challenge the colonial imposition. The theory emphasizes that colonization should not be articulated simply as "foreign or alien" but as an executed and dominating system over the colonized (Simmons & Dei, 2012: 74). Anti-colonial theory is at the centre of the transformation of education as it emphasizes the idea of considering the contexts of the learners, their cultures that are characterized by respect for all people and their knowledge systems when constructing and implementing the curriculum (Chimbunde & Kgari-Masondo, 2020). Hence Young (2003:7) maintained that the theory "threatens privilege" and control of the epistemology of the colonized by challenging domination through safeguarding and promoting quality and justice for all people. For Fataar (2018:vi) administering epistemic freedom can be achieved through decolonization by nullifying contemporary foreign training whose systematizing attitude is aligned with modelling the people as foreign subjects and, in the process, "stripping them of their humanity and full potential". So by decolonizing the curriculum, we are giving space to those historically marginalized to communicate from their frames of reference (le Grange, 2018). Therefore one can argue that Anti-decolonial theory is constructed on a robust underpinning as evidenced by many studies whose emphasis is secured on the need to respect the marginalized people, their culture, and their knowledge systems (Fataar, 2018; Charles, 2019; Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Tafira, 2019).

Decolonizing the supervision style of 'difficult' students therefore means creating spaces and resources for a dialogue among all members of the university on how to imagine and envision all cultures and knowledge systems in supervising the students with respect so they can be assisted to excel and be able to contribute to nation-building. Charles (2019:3) explains that Anti-colonial theory prompts us to examine our professional practices. This suggests that as lecturers, we need to constantly self-reflect and interrogate how we supervise research in HE, drawing from the epistemology of the students we work with to make a resoundingly positive impact on the research output of students.

Unfortunately, Anti-colonial theory is not specific on which framework can be drawn from as it maintains that it is important that the epistemology of the previously colonized must be pushed from the periphery to the centre of knowledge. Hence this paper proposes the *Ubuntu* supervision framework to ensure research output from 'difficult' students. The theory of *Ubuntu* is perceived by Kgari-Masondo and Mkhabela (2021) as strengthening the humanization of others. Hence, they argue that the idiom of *Umuntu Akalahlwa* is critical in the theory of *Ubuntu* because the theory safeguards a socially just education system, which ensures that no student is left behind in his/her T&L. Hence Bewaji (2004) argues that, in African epistemology, the source of morality and ethics

is the quest of equilibrium of an individual with communal wellbeing by ensuring that there is the protection of the rights of everyone so that there can be peace and progress. This suggests that values like love, care, hospitality, participation, social justice, and respect are critical in the *Ubuntu* style of supervision. It became useful in introspecting and investigating why the selected students were not progressing with their research during this era of COVID-19 and how we should employ humanistic approaches instead of the laissez-faire, pastoral, and other styles that normally alienate students because they are more Western than African based in approach. As succinctly put by Mackinlay and Barney (2014: 54) "putting in conversation humanizing pedagogies with decolonizing discourses, the goal is to reconfigure those pedagogical practices through which HE continues to operate as a site of colonial power". The Anti-colonial theory tallies with the *Ubuntu lens* as they both safeguard humanity's rights and ensure that no child must be left behind in their education process. This implies that amid COVID-19 and beyond, it is significant that transformation in HE should not disregard the geo-historical, social, and economic context of the marginalized students. Again, there are issues of power dynamics and feedback, a lack of support and belonging, a racial lens on academic ability, (mis)understandings of cultural differences, and communication and language hurdles, supervisors need to pay attention to these for effectiveness with difficult students (Showunmi, Younas & Gutman (2024).

Methodology

The study utilized an autoethnographic approach, which involves systematically analysing the personal experiences of individuals within a social context (Bochner and Ellis, 1992; Freeman et al., 2004). This approach, which connects participants as co-researchers, seeks to understand life's intersection with cultural contexts (Harrison 2012). The study aims to share the authors' lived experiences as research supervisors, acknowledging subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research (Jones 2019). This approach encourages readers to reflect on their own lives and navigate difficult student supervision processes (Daramola 2021).

The researchers are all based in the School of Social Sciences at one university in KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. They spread across two campuses of the university and are involved in the supervision of postgraduates' honours in anthropology and culture and heritage tourism students. Five of the researchers are doctoral graduates, while one holds a master's degree in social sciences.

Findings

Considering the narrative submitted by the different supervisors in this paper, 'difficult' students were identified as those students who struggled with the process, and also those who took a long time to respond to a given task or put very minimal effort into their work (Reflection: Otu, Umejei, Darong & Zulu). According to Otu, these students are hardly available during meetings. They are always late either in responding to feedback or submitting assigned tasks. Some of them have temperamental issues and are quick to make excuses to cover up for their shortcomings; these excuses could range from complaints about their remote location to poor internet access or even personal challenges like the loss of loved ones or mental health-related issues. While recounting her experiences with students in general, Umejei believed that some of the students were cajoled to embark on their educational journey. According to her, these 'difficult' students include those who knew what to do, which was evident during meetings and interactions, but were just sluggish to do the work and then there were those who did not know what to do and were not eager or even ready to learn.

Darong submits that these 'difficult' students would also include those who try to make an initial effort but would take a longer time to produce the desired output. Darong shared that he provided guidance on the research process and study materials for the students. In some instances, when the students were grieving, anxious or depressed, he offered to pray with them and provided details of student counselling services for professional help. He stated further that he sometimes also provided minor financial assistance to some of these students to purchase data or for transportation to get their gatekeeper's letters. For Umejei, dealing with these 'difficult' students involved many interaction sections where she had to listen to whatever the students may bring forward. No matter how irrelevant or inconsequential the excuse was, the idea was to listen and give some possible advice on how they could handle that challenge that was acting as a distraction for them from achieving their goals.

Otu, Darong, Umejei, and Zulu all experienced challenges in their careers, but they all adapted to different supervisors' approaches. Otu offered to work with students beyond hours, providing counselling and being diplomatic. Darong's experiences with financial struggles, depression, and theft influenced his decision to adopt this approach. Umejei adopted the 80/20 approach, which she found effective. Zulu, however, found the relaxed approach to be less effective, as it made students lose focus when not under pressure.

As a result of the above, Zulu said that she had initially decided to utilize the strict approach when dealing with her students though some students labelled her as unloving. When she realized this, she had to re-evaluate her

strategy and decided instead to work more calmly with the students. By putting herself in their shoes and relating to them more calmly, she realized that she was able to achieve more progress with the students. Otu states that her characteristic of resilience – 'push until I can push no more' has helped her to adopt this approach. She believes that everyone has the potential to succeed if well-guided. This she thinks can be achieved by understanding the students' background and trying to relate to their struggles. Umejei opines that although this process cannot be claimed to be a failure- proof it has, however, recorded more success than not. According to Zulu, "As a supervisor, we must work with the mindset that no matter how 'difficult' students might be, we should never give up on them. Hence the concept of *'Umuntu Akalahlwa.'*

Discussion- Conclusions

Postgraduate supervision has been a subject of scrutiny all around the globe, demanding transparency, parity, and rigor. As earlier illustrated in the review of literature, it is an academic process that is a key performance area for academics and a process that determines the completion of degrees for students (Sidhu et al., 2013). Literature and reflections of supervisees concur that supervision plays a vital role during thesis or research work, and the relationship between the supervisor and the student determines the successful completion of the research thesis. However, as noted by Lee (2007), educating early researchers is becoming more complex, especially with the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic as more students become 'difficult' to supervise especially due to the socio-geographical context in which they live.

Being students at some point in their academic life, supervisors in this study reflected and could all relate to some of the challenges expressed by the so-called 'difficult' students. Such reflections became a fundamental factor that pushed some supervisors to incorporate personal acumen to assist students in unleashing their potential in their research projects (Reflection: Darong, and Zulu). In the spirit of *Umuntu akalahlwa,* some of the supervisors laboured beyond working hours to attend to students whose research tasks were constrained by socio-economic problems such as poor internet connectivity and power outages in rural communities. Being the link between the university and students, supervisors in this study deemed it necessary to adopt a personalized supervisory approach to address individual learning abilities.

Therefore, the supervision process calls for the active engagement of the supervisor to reflect on his/her role in the relationship as a provider of support and co-developer of knowledge. The failures of some supervision as supervisees have evidenced is that they lack humanistic and African indigenous values of support which are based on *Ubuntu. Ubuntu* is the foundation of positive energies while enforcing the full participation of students in their research. Shutte (1993: 47) asserts that participation is key in African Indigenous knowledge because through working with others, people grow and learn from one another. Masondo (2018) submits that *Ubuntu* concentrates on well-being and concern for humanity, especially those suffering but also deals with nonconformity. This latter understanding, which incorporates the *Umuntu akalahlwa* approach, led supervisors in this study to run collective workshops where students and their various supervisors could share their knowledge and experiences relating to the journey of their research projects. In these workshops, supervisors were encouraged to share their laid down achievable goals with students, and students were also encouraged to share their knowledge through peer teaching.

Umuntu Akalahlwa research pedagogies are adopted as an ideal supervision style due to their ability to prevent children from being left behind during the COVID-19 pandemic. These pedagogies align with decoloniality and the agenda of transforming traditional supervision, focusing on Ubuntu, patience, and trust as premised by Kgari-Masondo and Mkhabela (2021). The ultimate contribution is safeguarding the humanization of students by protecting their identities and fostering a welcoming environment. Umuntu Akalahlwa translates to care and love within academic institutions as stressed by Masondo (2018).

The critical aspect of the *Umuntu Akalahlwa* idiom also translates to agency. As argued by Kgari-Masondo and Mkhabela "Agency is key during this time of the Coronavirus advent, action must be taken by all involved in HE to ensure that education continues, and no child/student is left behind" (2021:78-80). The style of supervision allows supervisors to understand different contexts as diverse and none are superior to the other. In the process, students will understand their identity as varied South Africans in a globalized world which will assist in safeguarding the humanization of all students. Kgari-Masondo and Mkhabela (2021) assert that this will contribute to nation-building by empowering students in HE to embrace an identity that is – inclusive of everyone in terms of class, culture, religion, sexual orientation, and other ways.

Way forward

A review of existing literature from early scholars presents a conclusion on what makes a good or bad supervisor which is mostly expounded when working with 'difficult' students. The conceptualization of supervision proves to be silent about the active role of the students in their research journey. Furthermore, literature is silent

on how best to work with students who are termed 'difficult' because of their "geohistorical" and social background, especially during these times of COVID–19. Hence this study proposes an appropriate style to implement in research supervision of students, especially the 'difficult' students. Drawing largely from the epistemic lens of *Umuntu Akalahlwa*, the study explored how best to supervise students who are regarded as 'difficult'. As earlier stated, the idiom of *Umuntu Akalahlwa* is focused on enhancing the well-being of humanity, especially for those dealing with challenges and struggling to conform to expectations.

The Umuntu Akalahlwa supervision process involves the ability of the supervisor to adopt different styles of supervisory practices that best fit the capabilities of his/her student. It takes into consideration the fact that each student has his/her individual and unique background. Furthermore, their exposure to academic work, their abilities, preferences, expectations as well as approaches to research work differ from one student to the other. Highly successful supervisors tailor their approaches to guiding individuals on their level of competencies rather than adopting a "one-size-fits-all model" (Nultya et al., 2008). This involves supervisors encouraging, mentoring, and being aware that students' lives extend beyond just carrying out their research. *Umuntu Akalahlwa's* supervision style is focused on intensive guidance with a genuine concern for the student's progress.

Conclusion

The paper discusses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on research supervision styles in Higher Education (HE). It highlights the challenges faced by KwaZulu-Natal cluster honours research supervisors in 2021 and proposes the *'Umuntu Akalahlwa'* supervisory style, which prioritizes students' psychosocial wellness and ensures timely graduation. The supervisory style encourages students to overcome difficulties and maintain a mindset of never giving up, promoting the *'Umuntu Akalahlwa' concept.* The proposed supervision style will allow supervisors to support students beyond many difficulties. As one supervisee has articulated working with 'difficult' students requires a "supervisor who has a mindset that no matter how 'difficult' students might be, we should never give up on them. Hence the concept of 'Umuntu Akalahlwa'" (Reflection: Zulu).

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