A SUPERVISION TOOL TO GUIDE POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS DURING RESEARCH SUPERVISION

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ABSTRACT

It is not uncommon for postgraduate students to postpone or terminate their studies due to emotional and/or academic reasons. The purpose of this research-based article is to propose a specific supervision tool within supervision that may enable the supervisor to meet both academic and emotional needs of students. A qualitative approach was followed with a case study design. A combination of creative drawing and a personality profile was used as a method to guide twelve students towards a better under-standing of themselves in order for them to be able to complete the course successfully. The results showed that specific selves are prominent during the supervision process that either motivate the students or act as barriers. Most students had an external locus of control, but also a need to complete their studies. Students became empowered in realising who they are and where their power lies in order to make the best possible decisions regarding their studies.

INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM FORMULATION

Postponement or termination of studies is not an uncommon reality for students. This reality is quite evident for first-year students who have to make a transition from school to university (Collins and van Breda, 2010). First-year students need to start being independent and take responsibility not only for their academic challenges, but also for the impact that they allow their social lives to have on their academic participation. In a study by Alpaslan (2010), it was found that undergraduate students who are enrolled in distance learning have developed coping strategies to cope with certain realities they have to deal with while studying. One such strategy was to engage with family and friends. However, often these support networks are not in place and students often find themselves without emotional support during a period of demanding studies. According to Lessing and Schulze (2002), postgraduate students often delay or terminate their studies. The delay or termination of postgraduate studies is an important consideration for a university as it is directly linked to subsidy allocation. According to Wingfield (2011), universities are under pressure to improve throughput rates based on annual statistics. Mouton (2001) states that research has indicated that large numbers of postgraduate students do not complete their studies. In a study by Sayed, Kruss, and Badat (1998), it was found that only 10% of master's students at a university were capable of completing their degrees in the prescribed three years and according to Wingfield (2011), about half of the PhD students took five years to complete their studies. Not completing degrees in the prescribed period of time has subsidy implications for the university. Most master's and doctoral students whom the author, as research supervisor, has supervised over the years, have part time or full time jobs and find it difficult to complete their studies in the prescribed time. The throughput rates, therefore, do not reflect positive and output subsidy from the government decreases (cf. South Africa: Department of Higher Education and Training, 2000). However, although the throughput rates are quite important for universities, Wingfield (2011) cautions that students should not be rushed to complete in the prescribed time in such a way, that it leads to them terminating their studies. The students' diversity should be taken into consideration, as well as their personal needs and circumstances.

As research supervisor, the author has experienced postgraduate students as having the need for more than just academic support. The need for emotional support is evident from numerous discussions with students during supervision. Often this need is not situated only around family members and friends (who might be completely absent), but students may also need emotional support from their research supervisors. According to Ismail,

Abiddin, and Hassan (2011) and Mouton (2001), the quality of the supervisor-student relationship is crucial when it comes to the success rate of students' research projects. The importance of this relationship for successful supervision is also emphasised by Severinsson (2012) in her study when she concluded that the success of the student's research process depends on the way the supervisor facilitates the relationship in the light of the supervisor's personal style and the quality of motivation and guidance instilled and given. However, supervisors are not always trained to deal with students who need more than the usual academic guidance. They may view supervision as a clinical process and may feel that they have done their share when students have been supported on an academic level. From the needs identified by the author during supervision with postgraduate students, a specific method was identified that could be used during supervision to also address their emotional needs and possibly prevent students from postponing or terminating their studies.

A combination of a projection technique and a personality profile is used as a supervision tool to guide students towards a better understanding of themselves and what their needs are in order to complete their studies successfully. A standardised personality profile (any instrument could be used) is done and discussed during the first meeting with each student. Usually during midterm evaluation of students, the supervisor again discusses the profiles with the students by combining them with a projection technique. This supervision approach allows students to become aware of the factors that may have an influence on their academic functioning and progress. They become empowered through realising that they can do something about it and this may have a direct influence on whether students continue with their studies or terminate them. Record is kept in the form of process notes and graphs that can be referred to in order to view growth or possible weak areas.

The aim of this article is to provide a theoretical context of supervision and to give a description of the proposed method that could be used in supervision to address the needs of students in a holistic manner. Holism forms an important part of field theory, which serves as the theoretical framework for this article. According to field theory individuals do not stand in isolation, but within a field of relationships. It is within the context of these relationships, which form part of the field of the individual, where the self is constructed (Yontef, 1993). This context supports the view of the researcher in the sense that students in supervision not only stand in relation to the supervisor, but to a number of other people. This field of relational experiences has to be taken into account when supervising students.

The proposed supervision tool can be successfully used in distance learning, although personal contact at least once or twice is highly recommended. For this article the focus falls on research supervision, but this tool can also be used successfully with all academic processes - with both undergraduate and postgraduate students. However, the researcher is aware that arguing for a specific approach only is one-sided, as there are many reasons for poor throughput at postgraduate level. This approach is merely a tool that may assist supervisors to understand their students better and accommodate the supervision process accordingly.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Supervision context

The ongoing expectations in tertiary institutions for students to complete their studies within a prescribed period may put more and more pressure on their research supervisors. According to Van der Linde and Holtzhausen (2009), the quality of research supervision is crucial in order to ensure that students successfully complete their studies. Often during the first and subsequent supervision meetings the focus is purely on the methodological process of the planned research. There might even be a helpful checklist (Mouton, 2001) to guide both supervisors and students in the process. In a study done by Lessing and Schulze (2002) on the needs and expectations of postgraduate students, many aspects are mentioned. It is striking to note that not one of these expectations refers to emotional needs. The author is of the opinion that this may be due to the possibly established notion of supervision being purely scientific in nature where supervisors take on a methodological advisory role. This notion is supported by the outcome of research done by Van der Linde and Holtzhausen (2009), which showed that the main role of supervisors is to convey their knowledge or expertise to the students in a responsible manner. However, Bitzer (2010) concluded in his research that, even while the main emphasis is on the pedagogical aspect, students' expectations of supervisors are not static and that research supervision is more than research training only. It is necessary to broaden the supervisor's role to include the roles of mentor, coach and critical reflector. It may not be enough for supervisors to merely guide students methodologically through the research process. According to Barber (2006), emotional needs are just as important as any other needs during research supervision. It is especially with distance learning that students may have a need for more than just academic guidance. According to Mouton (2001), the role of the supervisor includes being advisor, expert guide, quality controller and "pastor". As "pastor" supervisors take on the role of being emotional supporters. Bitzer (2010)

states that supervisors' knowledge should go beyond their own experience as researchers, but they must obtain knowledge and understanding of different aspects of supervision. Supervisors need to listen and reflect on the personal experiences of students. They need to understand personal or professional difficulties that might have an influence on the students' progress as researchers. It is also important to know that students take on more roles than just being students. There are other aspects and roles that might have an influence on the performance of the students. Being a student is only one role of the person sitting in front of the supervisor – especially in a postgraduate programme, students take on numerous roles, for example, being husbands, wives, parents, employees, employers, nurturers, children of older parents and so forth. These roles may have a significant influence on the students and their progress with their research or studies. Supervision is a process in which awareness of potential blind spots is raised. This awareness should "increase the range and depth" of the research vision. The author is of the opinion that these "blind spots" also include emotional difficulties that may obstruct students' progress. Supervisors may assist students in becoming aware of these emotional "blind spots" and facilitating a process in which students can be empowered to complete their studies and not fall victim to personal experiences.

Creative drawing technique as a tool

It is not uncommon for artistic techniques to be used in therapeutic settings (Grobler, 2009; Roodt and Blom, 2009) or even as a data-gathering technique in research (Roos, 2008), but it is not a standing practice to make use of such techniques during supervision in order to address possible blockages that may prevent students from progressing with their research. Creative drawing (also working with clay, sand, etc.) can be used to address barriers that prevent students from making academic progress. Such barriers may be in the form of external factors, internal factors and/or modifications to contact-making and are discussed below. Joyce and Sills (2009) describe these modifications to contact-making as creative adjustment of the individual in order to make or avoid contact, whether appropriate or not. Modifications that are mentioned are: retroflection, confluence, desensitisation, projection, egotism and introjection. According to Garcia, Baker, and DeMayo (2005), irrational introjections may interfere with healthy learning processes. Personal beliefs that have been formed by introjections may influence the progress of students' research and through projection techniques students' feelings and thoughts can be put into perspective, contributing to barriers being addressed and allowing students to move forward through their research process.

This specific creative drawing technique is combined with students' personality profiles to reach a conclusion regarding the students' processes and where there could be possible barriers that need to be resolved to address the situation of being stuck within the research process. The technique is based on self-configuration and specifically the work of Erving Polster (2005). According to Polster (2005), every person acts as a host to a population of selves. These selves may be enduring (essential selves) or situational (member selves). These selves pattern themselves during the contact-making process with the individual's field and influence the way in which the individual reacts to contact and how others react towards the individual. This applies to the supervision relationship as well. According to the author, it is important to identify the students' selves that are involved during the time that students are enrolled for their master's or doctoral studies, and specifically during that time when the students do not seem to be making appropriate progress. It is especially useful to utilise the way students pattern their selves to work with possible barriers. During this process the supervisors take on an additional role as facilitator of the process.

It is important to know that the supervisor/student relationship is not static and therefore, it is important to approach this relationship with openness and awareness. Supervisors should be aware of their students' processes and how they can be accommodated, but they should also be aware of their own processes and how these may influence the supervision relationship. Experiences of both the supervisors and students are constantly configured and reconfigured (Cavicchia, 2009). It is these experiences that also influence the research processes of students. Supervisors thus need to become aware of these influences and how, together with the students' profiles, they can be used to make students aware of possible barriers that prevent them from progressing.

During this supervision process students become aware of the selves that play a prominent role in the research process, whether positive or negative. This awareness allows them to take responsibility for who they are and how they react within their environments. They identify selves that act as barriers and those selves that are vital to complete their research. By making a list of the external and internal field factors that may contribute to the emerging of a specific self, they can see how a pattern is formed that may prevent them from completing their research. The students can now identify the internal and external role players, as well as the selves that are necessary and important for completing the research and find ways to deal with the ones that are not beneficial for the research process.

Students approach projections in different ways. They have the freedom to draw their selves in any way they like. If students are not familiar with the term "selves", they can be asked for example to draw different "parts of themselves" or different "identities". An example of a drawing could be illustrated as follows:
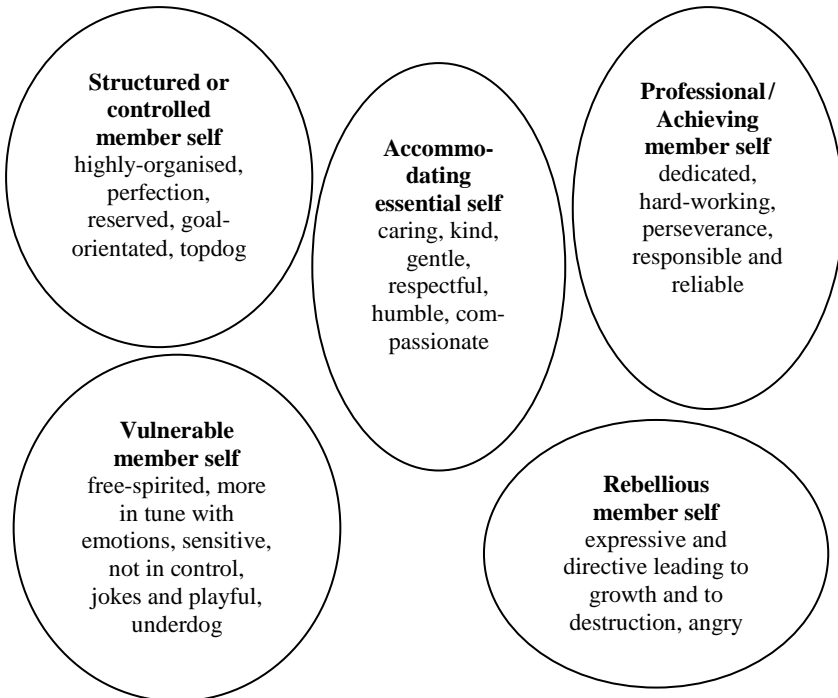

Figure 1: Example of how a student illustrated her essential and member selves

In Figure 1 above, the student drew four member selves and one essential self that play a prominent role during the research process. Each self is drawn with accompanied characteristics that make up the selves. The student sees herself as accommodating during the whole research process (essential self) with the member selves becoming more or less prominent in specific situations during the process. A discussion follows on the identified selves, and the characteristics of each one will be shared with the supervisor. Internal and external factors that influence the research process, either negative or

positive, will then be outlined. Firstly, supervisors and students can discuss the positive external and internal factors where students identify and share the internal and external drives that motivate them to continue with their studies. Then the negative external and internal drives are discussed that prevent them from reaching their potential or completing their studies.

The supervisor goes through the projection and discussion and, together with outcomes on personality profile, compiles a summary of selves involved, how they are linked to the personality profile and how the combination of the projection and personality profile enables the students to make contact with their internal and external fields. The students obtain an idea of how and why they get stuck and, together with the supervisor, can identify a plan of action that will enable students to move forward and complete their research processes. This is done either within a one-on-one face-to-face supervision session, or electronically via skype.

Subsequently students get the opportunity to respond. Between the supervisor and student a final conclusion is made and kept on file. The supervisor makes notes on what to consider for this specific student with regards to his/her personality process and what the supervisor needs to do to keep the student motivated. Responsibility is also given to the students by guiding them to identify possible aspects that need to be attended to and to verbalise how they will go about obtaining their research goals.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted under the ethical number NWU-00060-12-A1. Written consent was obtained from all participants. The aim of the article is to outline the importance of emotional support during the process of research supervision. A qualitative research approach was followed using inductive reasoning during which conclusions were made from observations (Delport and De Vos, 2011). Explorative and descriptive research was chosen as most suitable because of its purpose being to solve problems in practice (Grinnell and Unrau, 2005). The researcher used a case study as the design to understand the uniqueness of a particular case (Welman, Kruger and Mitchell, 2005), with the participants being postgraduate master's students in a specific master's programme of one university. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and data from electronic correspondence were obtained. Purposive sampling was conducted with the criteria being postgraduate students of both genders who could communicate in either Afrikaans or English and who received research supervision at the time of the research study (Maree and Pietersen, 2007; Henning, van Rensburg and Smit, 2004).

Twelve female postgraduate students voluntarily participated in the study and gave consent. No male students were enrolled for the course. All students were employed and were situated in various provinces within South Africa, specifically in the Gauteng, Western Cape, North-West, and Eastern Cape provinces. Existing personality profiles obtained as part of a selection process for the master's programme were used and students were asked to make a drawing (either during supervision session or electronically) including their internal and external fields, as well as the different selves that they feel have been involved during the research process. Students also needed to indicate what they would need in order to complete their research. The feedback was thematically transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013). To enhance trustworthiness, students were asked to reflect on the feedback given by the supervisor after data-analysis to ensure that the transcriptions and analysis of the data was credible and a true reflection of what was said by the participants. Furthermore, the researcher tried to be as unobtrusive as possible as described by Nieuwenhuis and Smit (2012). Data were obtained in the same venue where classes were presented, making the environment safe and non-threatening. The participants were also ensured that the data would be treated confidential and agreed that they would not share information given in the group with people outside the group.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Selves that featured prominently during the supervision process

In general, students identified similar selves that feature during the research process, but each student's situation came across as unique with specific selves trying to cope with the internal and external fields. The goal was not to identify similar selves with all students, but to work towards supporting the students in re-patterning the selves for optimal research output. Selves that were identified by students were: isolated self, academic self, insecure self, achieving self, structured self, ambitious self, determined self, vulnerable self, rebellious self, nurturing self, anxious self, satisfied self, critical self, competitive self, proud self, procrastinating self, dreamer, inadequate self, fun-loving self, responsible self, curious self, spiritual self, considerate self, prepared self and worrying self. These selves either motivate the students to continue and complete research or act as barriers within the research process.

One student identified her ambitious self and determined self who were involved in motivating her to start the research:

"I want to resign from my work at the end of the year and start my own practice."

However, during the research process her anxious self, insecure self and ambivalent self acted as barriers in different stages of the research cycle. She started to feel isolated because she did not have physical contact with other students anymore, she experienced a loss of a loved one and her work situation was not supportive. Her disheartened self came to the foreground and it was difficult to continue with the studies to such an extent that she postponed her studies temporarily. She stated:

"Still motivated to complete [my studies], but experiences daily battle with inner self to persevere."

However, her persevering self is quite a prominent self and motivated her to continue again and together with her perfectionistic self and dutiful self, convinced her to finish her research. This corresponds with her personality profile that indicates that she will have the tendency to be self-sufficient and work towards achievement.

It was striking that all students identified an insecure self that at some stage in the research process made it difficult for them to continue. Three students linked their insecure selves to being perfectionists. One student stated:

"This self [insecure self] is a product of my perfectionistic self and the only thing that serves as antidote is my spiritual self."

Another student referred to her insecure self as one that:

"… always asks questions and doubts: am I doing it correctly?"

The third student stated that her perfectionistic self:

"… leads to other selves to come forth like: my doubting/insecure self …"

Some students mentioned feeling isolated from other students and their supervisor, which brought about their insecure selves:

"I sometimes feel as if I am functioning in isolation and I do not know what to do … there is no contact between students like the previous year …"

Selves that seemed to be present with most students were the so-called structured selves. Some students referred to these selves as controlling selves. These selves have the need to obtain goals by working in a structured,

controlled manner. Insecurity and vulnerability set in when the supervisor does not offer such a structure or does not respond in a structured way. These selves enable the students to progress as long as there is structure within the process. One student stated that she needs routine and that she must:

"… know what is expected of (her) and (she) prepares herself to do it."

Another student emphasised the prominence of her structured self and stated that she gets motivated by:

"… my supervisor who is committed and organised and has a schedule for me."

Internal versus external field

The most prominent internal field factor that prevents these students from progressing is a feeling of insecurity. Many of these students doubt their ability to conduct research successfully. This doubt is either because of an experience in a previous degree where the research process did not go well or because of childhood introjections of not being able to perform academically. One student stated that it was difficult for her to perform academically. She had never valued academic achievement because within her family it was not important to have a qualification. She stated that:

"… the fact that qualifications were not the alpha and omega caused me not to put so much into completing [my] qualifications."

Except for two students it seems as if they have an external locus of control. When referring to factors that motivate them to complete the studies, the relevant aspects are all external motivators. One student stated:

"I need the approval of others, especially from my parents. No one in my family has a degree and my parents are proud that I am on master's level and they motivate me a lot to further my studies…"

The students also blame external factors for not being able to progress in their research process. One student refers to her demanding work as a therapist, as well as her family that needs attention. She states that there is no time for herself and that she doubts her capabilities to help others because "(she) cannot even balance (her) own life". Another student mentions her move to another country, illness, death of a loved one, an unsuccessful application for another degree and responsibilities within her family as reasons for her being stuck. Another student outlines her daily routine and presents it as a reason for not being able to progress. While these are all valid

reasons, students fail to find the motivation within themselves to overcome being stuck.

Students' needs to complete studies

From the data-analysis it is evident that the needs of students vary from individual to individual. However, there are some similarities. All students indicated that they enjoyed **one-on-one contact** even within a distance learning programme. **Structure** seems to be important, not only regarding the research schedule, but also regarding the feedback received from the supervisor. One student emphasised that it was important for her to *"see the whole picture"* and visiting the supervisor personally provided her with this picture. After discussing the outcomes of these exercises with students, some students re-established the importance of the studies for them and **took action**, for example, by communicating it to their families. One student who specifically complained about her family and work consuming her time, took two weeks' holiday to work on her studies. Another student cancelled a trip with her family and used the time to complete her research proposal. Other students became aware of their processes again and realised what was important and what was unimportant. One student who is very perfectionistic and would postpone submission of chapters to the supervisor because of fear that it would not be "correct", voiced it during the exercise. The supervisor became aware of this fear and was able to re-assure the student that writing a thesis is a process and that there is no expectation for first drafts to be perfect. This motivated the student to commit to a weekly report-back session on how she was progressing. It was evident that the moment the students **voiced their needs** to the supervisor there had already been a diminishing of barriers. By voicing realities, responsibility could be taken.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Supervision allows for a specific bounded system in which students and supervisors meet each other with a specific configuration of selves. In the context of supervision, supervisors should be aware of the dynamics of selves that are present in that specific context, not only the selves of students, but also the selves of the supervisors. The selves during supervision are formed because of previous experiences, which Polster (2005) refers to as a con-figurational reflex where personal experiences are formed into unified wholes. Polster (2005) goes further by stating that experiences are formed into selves that the person can identify with. This coincides with Philippson (2009) who describes the self in relation to the environment and how the self emerges within a specific situation. This emergence of specific selves

was evident in the research where specific selves emerged during supervision, whether unique to a specific student or representative of all. It was evident how many students identified an **insecure self** that at some stage during the research process influenced their progress negatively. According to Ronnestad and Skovholt (1993), students experience a feeling of incompetency due to exposure to extensive theoretical and empirical information. This feeling of incompetency may cause feelings of insecurity. Holton and Myukwada (2009) stated in their report for a local university that when students enroll for master's or doctoral studies, they may encounter feelings of insecurity and may become uncertain as to how to proceed. The author is of the opinion that, depending on the personality of the students, there are different ways in which students will deal with this insecurity. One such way is to find structure. The importance of structure was evident in this study as was seen in a structured self that was present with almost all students, indicating the need for structure during the supervision process. When a structured self of a student is met by an unstructured self of the supervisor, an insecure, vulnerable or even rebellious self of the student may emerge, which could lead to the supervision process to be blocked or even terminated. Supervisors thus need to have insight into the selves of the students involved in supervision.

It is also evident that students may feel isolated and in some instances the isolation led to feelings of insecurity. Students may have the need for one-on-one contact with their supervisors and also prefer a more structured way of approaching the research process. For some students security lies in the fact that the supervisors provide a time schedule and provides a specific framework within which the research process is conducted. Providing such structure, together with applying the technique as described in this article, could empower students to excel or at least complete their studies, indicated as a prominent need of the students.

Furthermore, from the data it is evident that most students seem to be functioning from an external locus of control, blaming external factors for their lack of progress or termination of study. According to Miller (2005) and Findley and Cooper in Grantz (2014), higher academic achievement is associated with an internal locus of control. As part of students' external field the important role of parents came to the fore in the data. These students, even though some of them have families of their own, still function in an insecure way due to what they were told by their parents as young children. Another prominent external field factor that prevents these postgraduate students from progressing more effectively is the fact that they are working and that most of them also have responsibilities towards their own families.

The failure to attend to the needs of their families leaves them with feelings of guilt and they rather choose to neglect their studies than not to attend to the needs of their families. This concurs with the study done by Wingfield (2011) where it was found that more than 80% of PhD students who completed their studies at a specific university in South Africa were full-time students who did not have the responsibilities involved in attending to a family.

With the exception of two students, all students blame external factors for not being able to complete their studies in time. These factors all seem to be real and valid, but are so prominent that the students cannot find self-motivation to overcome the circumstances. Their families and work become their priority and studies are shifted towards the back. This causes additional tension and a vicious cycle starts. It is important to make the students aware that they choose to prioritise their families and work above studies. This is their reality and they should not blame themselves or have feelings of guilt. They should rather sit with their supervisor and decide on a more realistic schedule to complete their research and still be able to spend time with their families. The question remains whether they should continue with their research or not. To merely stay in the process because of feelings of guilt will only cause additional and unnecessary tension. They need to take responsibility and decide what would be best for them in this moment in time and exactly what the reasons are for them to keep on re-registering for their studies, but not making any progress. If students cannot find an internal motivation to re-structure and re-commit, the best option might be to terminate their studies.

By utilising this method, students can be made aware of their realities. They can again involve their families to re-instate commitments and, together with the supervisor, work out a schedule that can be accommodated by both supervisor and student. This method also makes supervisors aware of the reality of students and enables them to perhaps adapt their personal style of supervision to accommodate the students. This may lead to successful students, a better research output and satisfied supervisors. Ultimately, all students have a need to complete their studies amidst all the obstacles. A more structured form of supervision where students also have the opportunity to voice their personal concerns, may lead to students feeling heard and understood, which in turn could motivate them to take responsibility and complete their studies.

A limitation of the study can be the argument of the researcher that is one-sided. Although the article is based on his personal experiences over years of supervision, the author acknowledges the fact that there are numerous aspects

that may lead to students not completing their studies. The approach that has been discussed in this article is only one way to address possible obstacles during the supervision process. The article only focuses on a small sample of participants within a specific context. It is recommended that, in order to gain a more representative sample, a similar study be conducted at different universities, including different cultures and both genders. It would be interesting to conduct a longitudinal study with experimental and control groups to determine the effectiveness of the specific supervision tool.

CONCLUSION

The combination of creative drawings and personality profiles seems to be a valuable tool for supervisors to get to know the thought and other processes of their students and assist supervisors in facilitating supportive and effective supervision. This supervision tool can assist in identifying possible problem areas that could be addressed in time in order for students to complete their studies. Supervision is not only a clinical academic process and this method allows supervisors to make contact with their students and in the process form a trusting relationship to facilitate academic and personal success. This may contribute to the supervisor-student relationship which, according to the literature discussion is important for the success rates of students' research projects. Not only do supervisors get to understand students better, but the students get to know themselves better. Once they become aware of the aspects that keep them from excelling in their studies, they have the opportunity to work on it in order for them to achieve success.

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