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Responding to the Call for Integration of Faith and Learning in the Postgraduate Research Supervision Context

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ABSTRACT

Postgraduate education is a key determinant for development, productivity and innovative problem-solving for developing nations and the church itself. Concerns, however, exist, especially in developing regions, about postgraduate programme quality, particularly in the areas of research standards and supervisory quality. Low standard in supervisory processes is often a consequence of high workloads and losing sight of the fact that not every academic with a doctorate degree is equipped for effective supervision; which invariably lead to a perpetuation of negative practices. There are a number of styles, frameworks, and factors within supervisory practice that can facilitate improved quality. Postgraduate supervision has evolved to emphasise broader goals beyond research product completion. It is now seen as a pedagogical relationship and form of praxis that nurtures students into independent researchers. Supervisors must, in addition to facilitating the completion of a research project, address developmental, knowledge, transformational, spiritual, and social challenges. Integrating faith and learning is essential, going beyond adding scriptural texts to work but deeply engaging religious commitments in scholarly pursuits. Integration of faith and learning in the supervision process will benefit the experience of students and ensure that supervisors are more resilient to the challenges and stressors in postgraduate supervision. This paper outlines some principles guiding the integration of faith and learning in the supervisory processes.

Introduction

The relationship between the national weighted average of university graduates and a country's economic potential, product, and security is well recognised (Holland et al., 2013; Veshapidze et al., 2021). Postgraduate education is seen as a primary driver for innovation, development, and entry into the global knowledge-economy for African countries (Okeke, 2015; Okeke-Uzodike, 2021). It is also an important mechanism for marginalised peoples to challenge hegemonic epistemologies through local knowledge systems (Sebothma et al., 2021). Likewise, Christian scholarship, informed and guided by Scripture, is essential for the Adventist Church in that it (a) advances our understanding of truth and allows us to gain new light on both new and old topics (Matt 13:52); (b) equips us to identify and oppose sophisticated heresies, ever ready to give a reason for what we believe (1 Pet 3:15); (d) fosters revival and reformation; and (d) allows us to use the best tools at our disposal in order to discover, love, and apply the truth in our specific area of expertise (Moskala, 2015). Galusha et al. (2005) define Christian scholarship as “the faithful and responsible use of our talents and skills in systematic investigation of God's self-revelation, His creation, and expressions of human creativity, for the good of the church and humanity” (p. 16).

Adventist professionals seeking to obtain the highest levels of education and training in their given field, should not have to do so under the tutelage of secular professors who are either ignorant or

antagonistic to their worldview. Ellen White (1913) spoke strongly against this: “shall the sentiments of unbelievers, the expressions of dissolute men, be advocated as worthy of the student’s attention, because they are the productions of men whom the world admires as great thinkers? Shall men professing to believe in God gather from these unsanctified authors their expressions and sentiments, and treasure them up as precious jewels to be stored away among the riches of the mind? God forbid!” (p. 25). Students choosing to study at Adventist higher education institutions often do so because they are looking for an educational experience that is qualitatively different from what they would experience elsewhere. They expect to receive a holistic education of a special Christian character and worldview, and be guided by educators that can give them more personal attention available due to the smaller nature of most of our institutions (Northcote et al., 2021). Students benefit from a sense of purpose, connection and motivation obtained when beliefs and values are aligned with the institution, are given support in reconciling their faith with their academic studies, and avoid conflict and crises precipitated when their beliefs are challenged in highly secular fields (Paris, 2018). In line with the need for improved postgraduate research development, and graduate-level programmes that are grounded in a biblical worldview, the present study reviews important factors to consider when doing postgraduate supervision with the goal of integrating faith and learning with research excellence.

Methodology

This paper utilises a narrative literature review approach in order to evaluate and synthesise key themes and understandings regarding integration of faith and learning within the research supervision relationship in the context of Adventist education. Narrative overviews are useful as they draw together multiple sources into a single readable format, provoke thought and evaluation, and allow researchers and practitioners to update their knowledge base from a single source (Green et al., 2006). A narrative overview allows a researcher to pull together relevant theories and perspectives even when there is a paucity of empirical research on a specific topic, allowing for the generation of hypothesis and frameworks for further empirical studies (Sukhera, 2022). Descriptive reviews aim to reveal interpretable patterns or trends regarding theories or methods in an area, scoping reviews provide an initial indication of the potential size and nature of the extant literature, whereas systematic reviews have a narrow focus and try to aggregate, synthesise, and evaluate empirical evidence using methodological approaches aimed at reducing bias and errors in inference (Paré & Kitsiou, 2015). A narrative review was more appropriate for this study due to limited empirical studies on the topic and the broader and more theoretical or principle-based focus of the study.

The process followed in this literature review drew from the guidelines provided by Demiris et al. (2019) and Sukhera (2022). First, the search scope was defined by identifying relevant databases where research is likely to be indexed. In order to perform the search the author searched EBSCOhost Academic Search Elite and Google Scholar. CIRCLE, which indexes journals such as *The Adventist Journal of Education*, was also included in order to find publications particularly relevant to the Adventist education context. The search was conducted by combining the following keywords: “IFL”, “Integration of faith and learning”, “postgraduate supervision”, “post-graduate supervision”, and “research supervision” in the entire text of articles rather than just the title. The preliminary list was reviewed by scanning titles and abstracts; those articles that focused on clinical supervision and non-scholarly sources were then excluded. The remaining documents were read, searching for the key themes relating to the integration of faith and learning in research supervision, and key ideas extracted. Relevant articles that were cited were also identified and sourced for

inclusion in the review. The main results were then grouped into themes and a narrative constructed in order to present the findings in a logical and coherent manner.

Results

Concerns over the Quality of Postgraduate Programme Supervision

Post-graduate training is not without its challenges. Concerns have been raised over the quality of candidates and doctoral programmes in the African and other contexts. In South Africa, for example, there has been concern that mandates for racial representativity and higher throughput rates result in a lower standard of research that is an impediment to ongoing growth and innovation and a disservice to the next generation. Jonathan Jansen (2004), president of the South African Academy of Science, put it this way: “the university ceases to exist when it represents nothing other than an empty shell of racial representivity at the cost of academic substance and intellectual imagination” (p. 11). The quality of a doctoral programme depends to a large degree on the quality of its supervisory processes and staff (Garvis & Pendergast, 2012; Yousuf et al., 2019). Institutions sometimes assume that an academic with a doctorate will automatically be capable of competently supervising a postgraduate student. This is not the reality; without training and development of their supervision practices, academics are more likely to perpetuate negative practices they were a victim of (Motshoane & McKenna, 2021). Most doctoral graduates build their expectations and understanding of supervision processes on their own supervision experience, leading to an endless cycle of mediocrity. Under pressure to accommodate ever more doctoral students, there is less and less preparation for advanced supervision, and supervisors may engage in unethical practices like cross-examination (Dietz et al., 2006). At the same time, building a strong research culture should start at the undergraduate level, with curriculum review and opportunities for students to become involved in research projects. Application of such an approach has borne fruit at Adventist universities in South America (Basualdo & Grenóvero, 2007).

Reconceptualising Postgraduate Supervision

Traditional views of supervision emphasise the processes and products required for the completion of a successful research project. The supervisor is expected to monitor the completion of the research and provide guidance and support where necessary regarding aspects such as access to resources, research contexts, methodological guidance, academic writing support, and facilitate examination (Carozza, 2011; Lee, 2020). However, when the focus is on the research study, it is possible for the student to be neglected. Instead, supervision must be seen as pedagogy (Emilsson & Johnsson, 2007). It is a relationship with the focus on learning and the development of the student into an independent researcher who can advance knowledge that has utility in the education, private and public sectors. The emphasis is more on the process than product, and on an interactive teaching relationship in which the supervisor shares knowledge and assists the student in skill acquisition and learning. It is difficult to do this because supervisors face high number of students to supervise, demands for constant monitoring and accountability, and a burgeoning undergraduate base that is unprepared for postgraduate work (Mouton et al., 2015). This encourages supervisors to adopt “quality assurance” and “supportive guide” approaches to supervision, which are solely focused on the completion and successful defence of the thesis (Wright et al., 2007). Within a Christian scholarship framework, the centrality of epistemological and values development and the transformational potential of new knowledge seen from a larger perspective requires supervisors to become more involved in a broader array of supervisory goals and responsibilities (Lee, 2008). Such supervision is not merely focused on thesis completion, but should strive to address developmental, knowledge, transformational, spiritual, and social challenges at individual, community, global, and eternal levels of analysis.

Models and Styles of Supervision

Supervision can be applied within different frameworks. The British educational system makes use of what has been called the traditional or supervisor-apprentice model: A single student working with a single supervisor on an assigned or agreed-on topic over a lengthy period of time, ending with the student submitting a doctoral thesis for examination (McCallin & Nayar, 2012). This approach can work well when a student is paired with a supervisor who provides expertise in a given field, and entry into their network of academic and industry contacts. This model can be problematic as supervisors often feel overloaded with responsibilities and this may impact on response times and supervision investment (e.g., Ramorwalo, 2022).

An alternative to this is the co-supervision model in which two or more academics share the responsibility of guiding a student to the completion of their research project. This model is also sometimes referred to as joint-supervision or team supervision (Shen et al., 2018). Generally, there is a power-hierarchy with one supervisor taking on the primary role. To the extent that roles and responsibilities are clearly defined at the beginning of the process, the system can work well and be free of conflict (Johansen et al., 2019). It also has the advantage of allowing for greater critical engagement and diversity of experience, expertise, and opinion (James & Baldwin, 1999). In the American University system, in addition to the full research dissertation there is often a minimal coursework requirement, often in the form of compulsory modules that ensure that students are academically prepared for the research process. Sometimes in this system a supervisory team model is used, where there is a hierarchical structure between a director of studies (who coordinates multiple supervisors) and research advisors, who do the direct supervisory work (Denis et al., 2018). A final model that distributes supervisory processes among staff and fellow doctoral students is the blended supervision model. In this model a supportive research community is constituted consisting of group supervision, peer-review, and individual supervision (Donnelly & Fitzmaurice, 2013).

Supervisors can also take different approaches to their role and responsibilities in the supervision relationship irrespective of the framework within which they are working. Gruzdev et al. (2019) proposed a categorisation of six supervisor styles based on empirical analyses of the types of activities supervisors at Russian universities engage in. They assert that there are: (a) superheroes, who have the highest level of engagement of these styles and not only help with the dissertation but also give advice about the field research and help with its organisation, recommend experts and reviewers, and help to prepare publications; (b) hands-off supervisors, who are the opposite of superheroes, provide very little support and leave all responsibility regarding the doctoral process with the student; (c) research advisors place much emphasis on assisting student through the research process, but provide little support and guidance in the completion of the dissertation; (d) research practice mediators assist with the preparation of the dissertation and publications, but provide little to no support in research processes and preparation for the defence; (e) dialogue partners fulfil a primarily consultative function, providing recommendations mainly relating to research, such as in the literature review, research methods, and drawing together the dissertation; and (f) mentors have an active involvement in the professional development of the student through networking, publication, access to conferences and other scientific events. Dietz et al. (2006), on the other hand, suggested a typology of three dimensions that subsume different supervision styles: (a) Relationship behaviour: businesslike or personal; (b) Intensity of task behaviour: more or less intensive (frequency and length of meetings); and (c) Orientation of task behaviour: product or process orientation. Based on these dimensions they proposed a typology of six supervision styles: (a) delegator, (b) expert guide, (c) quality controller, (d) friend, (e) coach, and (f) co-writer. These

are demonstrated as they relate to the dimensions in Table 1. The supervision style may change based on the characteristics of the supervisor and student, and where they are in the research process. For example, in the initial research question and proposal development phase it may be required for the supervisor to fill the role of expert guide. Later, during data collection a supervisor may act in the capacity of friend, and finally during the final corrections of the thesis the supervisor could work as a quality controller or co-writer (Dietz et al., 2006). Some research studies on the experiences of doctoral students suggest low preference for a coaching approach (Bégin & Géard, 2013), while the process of negotiation and exchange is considered important for harmonious working relationships to be established (Rugut, 2017).

Table 1

Supervisor-Candidate Relational Styles Proposed by Dietz et al. (2006)

Relationship orientation	Task orientation		
	No task	Process focused	Product focused
	Low intensity	High intensity	High intensity
Businesslike	<i>Delegator</i>	<i>Expert guide</i>	<i>Quality controller</i>
Personal	<i>Friend</i>	<i>Coach</i>	<i>Co-writer</i>

Characteristics of Good Postgraduate Supervision

In addition to the supervisory style, researchers have identified a number of factors that contribute to a successful supervision experience. These factors include: (a) establishing a strong conceptual frame and research plan; (b) formulating reasonable, agreed upon expectations and maintaining consistent expectation management throughout the research process; (c) building a trusting relationship characterised by empathic leadership and kindness; (d) regular, proactive, transparent and considerate communication that includes timely, substantive, and specific feedback on both products and processes; (e) conscientiousness in regard to accountability, availability, and responsibility; (f) avoiding isolation by getting students involved in the life of the department; (g) inspiring and motivating students to remain productive and engaged; (h) ensuring transfer of expertise in research, scholarly writing, and knowledge of internal and external resources; (i) facilitating a positive work-life balance; (j) anticipating, assessing, and assisting when academic or personal crises arise; (k) providing access to a diversity of role models, ensuring that a broader range of experts are involved in the process; and (l) taking an interest in transition and career progression following graduation (Burkholder & Bidjerano, 2023; Hillebrand & Leysinger, 2023; James & Bladwin, 1999; Polkinghorne et al., 2023; Wieland, 2009). In order to ensure that students are being empowered, and not stunted due to the power-relations implicit to the supervision context, supervisors must be aware of these power relations and engage students in critical reasoning and discussion while providing a supportive environment of involvement, trust, and reciprocity (Schulze, 2012). Okeke-Uzodike (2021) argues that good supervision should acknowledge the supervision space as more than an academic relationship, it is a complex social and human relationship.

Integration of Faith and Learning in Supervision

It is the role of the supervisor not only to help students integrate faith and learning (IFL) in their research and resist the pressure of secularism to suppress explicit biblical beliefs, but also avoid superficially adding an associated scriptural text to secular work in a misapplied attempt at IFL.

Integration of faith and learning in supervision will guide students to a healthier understanding of the limitations of empirical evidence (Taylor, 2019b). Marsden (1997) states that the “dominant academic culture trains scholars to keep quiet about their faith as the price of full acceptance in that community” (p. 7). It is appropriate in most fields to examine how gender, race, class, or generational ties shape one’s scholarship, but few academics explicitly engage with the intellectual significance of their religious commitments — central to their identity and social localisation (Marsden, 1997). According to Bufford (2007), a Christian worldview should influence all aspects of supervision. Key aspects would include the means (e.g. use prayer to address obstacles to completion), motives (e.g. constructive development of students for eternity), and goals (assist the student learn to integrate their worldview in work and life) of supervision. Bufford (2007) states that Christian supervision should be distinguished by supervisors “engagement in spiritual disciplines and practices and in their active encouragement of such practices in supervisees. Among these disciplines are worship, service, prayer, and active engagement in a Christian community in ways that involve fellowship, service, and giving” (p. 296). When there is integration of faith and learning in supervision, it has the potential for transformation, for genuine innervation of the head, heart, and hand. Butman and Johnston Kruse (2007) affirm that “exemplary supervision has the potential to deeply imprint the development of character, compassion and convictions” (p. 307). It is only a supervisor that is firmly grounded in their faith, a faith that is visible in their daily work and dealings with students, that can teach a student how to live a life holistically in synergy with their Creator as a competent professional. Such a supervisor, who is spiritually mature and grounded, is also likely to be happier and more committed to such work (Oberholster et al., 2000). It must be lived; it cannot merely be talked about. As Butman and Kruse (2007) noted, “By any measure, modeling has more impact than direct teaching. In a very real sense, it can be said that what we actually do is far more important than what we say” (p. 308).

A major challenge for any student is how to navigate the labyrinth of opposing beliefs, philosophical convictions, and agendas present in academia without subsuming the default relativistic distancing mandated by post-modern culture. Taylor (2019a) encourages Christian supervisors to use a biblical framework to show students how to have the courage of their convictions (1 Corinthians 16:13-14), to always be ready to explain why we believe what we believe (1 Peter 3:15), to do so with kindness and tact (Proverbs 15:1; 25:15), allowing one, as far as possible, to live at peace with those who are antagonistic to our biblical worldview (Romans 12:18). A supervisor grounded in a biblical worldview is also likely to guide their students to ask for the guidance of the Holy Spirit in gaining understanding (1 Corinthians 2:10), and critically evaluate forceful dominant narratives to ensure that all knowledge aligns with biblical principles (1 Thessalonians 5:21). A useful framework for putting all these elements together was proposed by Aten et al. (2007). They suggested that the supervisor needs to wear many hats, performing different actions within each role, that include teaching, facilitating, modelling, and inward focused action. In the teacher role, supervisors may need to assess their student’s religiosity and beliefs, provide Christian integrative resources, and instruct students on IFL approaches related to their topic. In the facilitator role, they may use Socratic questioning to deepen awareness of spiritual or moral themes in their research, identify religious transference or countertransference, and help students develop their own understandings. As models, supervisors should demonstrate integration through their approach to supervision, sharing appropriate spiritual self-disclosures, and their conduct in all aspects of their work. Finally, inward focused actions should include seeking God’s guidance in prayer and Bible study to seek solutions to problems, engaging in introspection and reflection on one’s own spiritual journey, and being visibly active in a local faith community. Such an approach requires that supervisors see their supervisory role as one of mentorship and discipleship. Whereas IFL may benefit students through more engaged and motivated supervisors, openly and actively

involving spiritual resources will benefit supervisors as well. Factors that predict supervisor withdraw include a negative organisational climate and role overload (Freund & Guez, 2018). On the other hand, when supervisors are firmly grounded in their faith and experience a personal walk with God that carries through into their work, they are less likely to experience burnout and more competent in handling spiritual issues during supervision (Bloomquist, 2017).

The Importance of Mentorship

There is a huge mental leap required from a primary degree, during which expectations are not as high and support as well as guidance are relatively easy to obtain, to the doctoral level where methodological expertise is assumed and originality is expected (Dietz et al., 2006). Mentorship is the development of a relationship in which the student can reach their full potential and the mentor demonstrates principles of servant leadership. It is best characterised by: (a) effective leadership and guidance for the mentee's scholarly and professional development, (b) values the mentee providing support and understanding, (c) role modelling, (d) reciprocity and the sharing of responsibility, (e) facilitating access to the academic community and appropriate counselling systems when needed, and (f) trust, confidence and mutual respect (Taylor, 2014). Supervisors are more likely to be able to integrate their faith and learning within a mentoring relationship when they adopt affiliative rather than authoritative, and self-disclosing rather than non-self-disclosing, approaches to supervision (Miller & Ivey, 2006). True mentorship requires the supervisor to be driven by the desire to serve and be a blessing to their student (motive) by addressing the needs of the student under the Holy Spirit's guidance (mode), with a focus on development that transcends concerns of the natural world (mindset). This entails a servant-leader supervision approach that involves a "holistic leadership approach that engages followers in multiple dimensions (e.g., relational, ethical, emotional, spiritual), such that they are empowered to grow into what they are capable of becoming" (Eva et al., 2019, p. 111).

Conclusion

This literature review has sought to bring together various perspectives and theory on postgraduate supervision as they apply to the integration of faith and learning within the Adventist educational context. Integration of faith and learning should impact on not only the product of postgraduate research but the process and nature of the relationship between supervisor and postgraduate candidate. Supervision practice within the framework of Christian scholarship should develop knowledge and innovative solutions that have a clear imperative for seeking truth, opposing heresies, fostering revival, and utilising the best available tools for knowledge advancement within a biblical worldview. The professional development of postgraduate students incorporating holistic growth and faith integration is crucial, aligning with the Seventh-day Adventist philosophy of education and the broader Christian call for discipleship. Different supervision models exist, including traditional, co-supervision, supervisory team, and blended supervision, each with their own merits and challenges. Similarly, supervisors can adopt various supervision styles, adapting their approach as needed and in response to student's needs and external factors including supervision load and organisational support. To be effective supervisors need to establish clear expectations, build rapport and a trust-based supervisory alliance, provide constructive feedback, promote work-life balance, and offer access to role models and opportunities to expand the postgraduate student's professional networks and experiences. Christian supervisors should go beyond these best practice guidelines and promote authentic integration of faith in research, professional activities, and character transformation. Mentorship or discipleship, with a clear willingness to follow Christ in servant-leadership, plays a vital role in this. Such supervision ensures emotional, spiritual as well as psychological support, guidance, role modelling, and trust. In such

relationship students are enabled to drive innovation and promote truth in scholarly sectors generally antagonistic to the expression of religiosity from a position of cultivated conviction and Spirit-derived strength.

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