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Professional Development of Doctoral Supervisors: a Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract:

Research evidence indicates that the quality of doctoral supervision has a direct impact on student progression and attrition rates but very few studies have been written about the professional development of doctoral supervisors. Understanding how the professional development of supervisors occur and how learning takes place in the workplace led us to conduct a systematic literature review. This review included manuscripts published in English between January 2000 and March 2018 and after applying the excluding criteria eighteen manuscripts were analysed following a deductive and inductive approach. During the process of data analysis, it became clear that professional development occurred in different shapes and forms leading to formal or informal workplace learning, and that national and institutional policies played a major role in the direction and purpose of this training as well as on supervisors' motivation.

Paper:

Professional development of doctoral supervisors

The purpose of any form of professional development is to instigate learning. Many studies written in the 1980s reveal that a large percentage of learning takes place on-the-job (Carnevale & Goldstein, 1983; Kaplan, Drath, & Kofodimos, 1985) rather than through formal training. These theories are applied to the learning process of supervisors who often learn to become better supervisors with experience – reinforcing the importance of informal learning in the workplace (Marsick, 1988).

In this paper, supervisors' learning is analysed within the theories of workplace learning and with reference to Mezirow's three transformative learning types (1985): instrumental, dialogic, and self-reflective.

Instrumental learning refers to task-oriented problem solving, with a focus on technical learning where reflection is usually that of single cause-effect as in single-loop learning (Marsick, Watkins, & Watkins, 2015). It takes place when learners learn how to do a task better. In this case, supervisors identify a problem, formulate a hypothetical course of action, try it out, observe the effects and assess the results. Learning is prescriptive and usually takes place in formal learning environments

such as workshops and seminars. Dialogic learning takes place in work settings where learners have the opportunity to question organisational norms and assumptions. Reflection is carried out critically as in double-loop learning - learning includes active questioning about previously held beliefs or information (Argyris, 2005). Self-reflective learning is the way in which we learn to understand ourselves and it is directed at personal change. The focus is on the development of the learners' identity and role, and the need for self-change. Instrumental, dialogic and self-reflective learning cannot easily be separated and should be considered in any professional development activity.

The value of professional development for supervisors implies a deep understanding of the meaning(s) of the three types of learning outlined above and relating these to (their own) supervisory practice, with a view to nuancing and shifting those very meanings through scholarship and (self-)reflection in specific professional and disciplinary contexts (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Mezirow, 1985; Schön, 1983). This requires types of activities that are both formal and informal in character and include a vigorous engagement with the relevant literature, fellow academics' and one's own reflections on practice.

Methodology

The literature review presented in this paper follows some of the steps of a systematic review methodology protocol, which is often used in healthcare research (Liberati et al., 2009). We used this protocol to systematise the evidence available between January 2000 and March 2018. Benefits of systematic reviews within higher education are well documented by Bearman and colleagues (Bearman et al., 2012) who argue that it provides "a transparent, comprehensive and structured approach to searching, selecting and synthesising the literature" (p.638).

The objective of this literature review is to investigate what has been written about the professional development of supervisors and aims at addressing the following research questions: what references have been made in the literature to the professional development of doctoral supervisors and how does this learning occur?

We searched for published manuscripts written in English, including papers, conference proceedings, books, and reports in two data bases: the EBSCO and SCOPUS through the combination of keywords (table 1). From 136 manuscripts and after applying the excluding criteria 18 manuscripts were selected for thematic analysis.

Key words			EBSCO	SCOPUS
"phd supervisor" OR "postgraduate supervisor" OR "doctoral supervisor"	AND	Training OR development OR CPD	42	48
Supervisor	AND	"doctoral education" AND Training OR	68	51

		development		

Table 1: keywords used in the selection of the manuscripts.

Data analysis

During the process of data analysis, it became evident that professional development occurred in different shapes and forms leading to formal or informal workplace learning. Most of the manuscripts also presented the importance of understanding the needs of supervisors before planning the design of any form of professional development. The first step in the analysis was therefore to summarise the topics explored in the manuscripts and identify a common trend in the professional development of supervisors.

In a second stage, we made connections between the coding process and the adult learning theories (used as a theme in the data analyses) with reference to Mezirow's three transformational learning types: instrumental, dialogic, and self-reflective, and to different forms of workplace learning that is implicit and informal, experiential and situated, and formal (Evans, 2018, Sawyer 2002). This approach was extremely important to understand how institutions, senior managers and academics perceive the professional development of supervisors in the twenty-first century and how this may shape change in behaviours and attitudes, procedures and approaches to supervision.

Most of the papers were produced in Australasia (10), followed by the UK (4), South Africa (2) and mainland Europe (2). Data reveals a strong institutional culture around the quality of supervision in Australasia Universities as reported in the paper from Kiley (2011).

Final considerations

The professional development of supervisors has been identified in the analysed documents as important for raising the quality of supervision and consequently the quality of students' learning experience. References to this theme were made in relation to three dimensions: (i) evaluation studies measuring the impact of existing development programmes on supervisory practices, (ii) an exploration of models and frameworks of supervision development programmes, and (iii) and an exploration of how learning occurs in formal and informal contexts.

A common trend in the documents analysed is that professional development must be sustained around the pedagogy of the doctorate, allowing participants to be reflective practitioner, learning in a community of practice where they can safely question their own beliefs and ideas about supervision with other supervisors. Learning occurs more effectively in informal contexts or when formal learning is not imposed by senior managers, allowing interlinks between instrumental, dialogic and self-reflective learning.

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