

From policing conformity to nurturing difference: Neurodiversity in postgraduate research supervision

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Abstract

Postgraduate research supervision is a complex pedagogical and relational practice shaped by institutional norms, power relations, and assumptions about academic productivity. Supervisory expectations sometimes prefer certain cognitive styles and modes of engagement. These preferences can marginalise students whose ways of thinking and working differ. This reflective theoretical article critiques postgraduate supervision through a neurodiversity-informed perspective in a South African university. Neurodiversity questions hegemonic discourses of productivity and standardisation. The article is positioned in the discourse of how supervisory expectations are influenced by supervisors' academic biographies and how disparities between expectations and student practices are mostly framed as deficits. It critically evaluates technical–rational and enculturation-focused models of supervision and advocates a shift towards negotiated, dialogic, and emancipatory supervision approaches that are more inclusive, relational and ethically responsive. The article reimagines supervision as a space for nurturing difference, promoting epistemic justice, and supporting diverse forms of scholarly development.

Keywords: higher education, inclusive pedagogy, neurodiversity, postgraduate supervision, social justice, supervisory practices

Introduction

Postgraduate supervision is a complex pedagogical, relational and institutional practice rather than a neutral or purely technical process (Boughey, et al., 2017; Kreber, 2023). Hopwood and Frick (2023) observed that, at its core, supervision involves the negotiation of expectations about appropriate research conduct, academic productivity, and scholarly becoming. They importantly added: 'we never act as supervisors who have no history, no location among others: we always act from and take up a position in relation to others (supervisees, colleagues, institutions), and one's (past and future) self' (Hopwood & Frick, 2023: 149). These expectations and



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positionings are shaped by deeply sedimented norms in higher education, including assumptions about independence, pace, self-regulation, and linear progress. While such norms are presented as universal or common-sense, they are in fact historically and culturally produced, and they can function to privilege particular ways of thinking, working, and being academic while marginalising others.

This article critically engages with postgraduate supervision by interrogating how supervisory expectations are formed, enacted, and justified, and how they might be re-imagined through a neurodiversity-informed perspective. The point of departure for this theoretical exploration is my experience as a co-supervisor of postgraduate research students in inclusive education at a small research-intensive South African university. Instead of positioning this experience as anecdotal or purely introspective, I use it as situated evidence from which to examine broader questions about supervision, difference, and power in postgraduate education. My supervisory practice has been shaped by my own academic trajectory, which was characterised by strong self-motivation, adherence to structured timelines, and a high degree of autonomy. These qualities shaped a particular understanding of what constitutes academic commitment and success. As I have transitioned into a supervisory role, however, I have become increasingly aware that these expectations are not neutral benchmarks but are instead reflective of specific cognitive styles, educational histories, and institutional logics. This realisation has generated some productive discomfort. It has prompted a critical reflection on how my assumptions about productivity, learning pace, and engagement shape my interactions with students.

Central to the argument advanced in this article is the claim that disparities between supervisors' expectations and students' research practices are usually interpreted through deficit-oriented frameworks that locate the "problem" in the student. Such interpretations may raise concerns about a lack of motivation, poor time management or insufficient academic discipline. While these concerns are not insignificant, this article suggests that they risk obscuring more fundamental questions about how difference is understood and managed in postgraduate supervision. To address this, I draw on neurodiversity theory as a critical theoretical framework. Neurodiversity reframes cognitive variation as a natural and an important aspect of human diversity rather than as a deviation from an assumed norm (Mcgee, 2012). From this perspective, differences in how students process information, organise their work, communicate ideas or engage with supervision are not deficits to be corrected but variations that demand responsive and flexible pedagogical approaches. As such, this article contributes to debates about inclusion, equity, and transformation in higher education.

Apart from a brief methods section hereafter, the article proceeds in three main movements. First, it situates my supervisory context in the broader landscape of postgraduate education in South Africa. This section highlights supervision as a pedagogical and relational practice shaped by institutional histories and expectations. Second, it engages theoretically with literature on supervisory approaches and neurodiversity to develop an alternative conceptualisation of the supervisor–student relationship that moves away from policing

conformity towards nurturing difference. Finally, the article reflects critically on the implications of this reconceptualisation for supervisory practice by arguing for a shift towards more negotiated, emancipatory and inclusive forms of supervision.

Methods

The article employs a qualitative, reflexive and theoretically informed methodological orientation, best described as a reflective conceptual inquiry grounded in the researcher's positionality (Goundar, 2025). The inquiry is situated in my experience as a co-supervisor of postgraduate research students. This context becomes an analytically productive location from which to interrogate broader supervisory norms and power relations in higher education. The reflection is conducted through iterative theoretical synthesis to reinterpret supervisory practices and challenge deficit framings of student difference. No empirical primary data inform my writing in this article. Instead, I utilise my experiences and the literature to reconceptualise what I regard as an epistemologically just research supervision. Therefore, I do not make references to any specific student that I co-supervise or any main supervisor I work with. In tandem with research that does not involve contact with human or animal subjects, ethical clearance was not required in this case.

Context, positionality and supervision in South African higher education

The immediate catalyst for this inquiry has been a growing sense of discomfort regarding the apparent gap between my expectations of postgraduate research engagement and the outputs produced by some of the students I co-supervise. Importantly, this discomfort is not framed as a deficit judgement of students' capacities or commitments, but rather as a recurring pedagogical puzzle that has prompted deeper reflection on my own supervisory assumptions and practices. Following Motshoane and McKenna (2021), such moments of tension are understood here as analytically productive. They reveal how supervisory expectations can be shaped by prior academic socialisation rather than being inherently pedagogically sound or universally applicable.

Instead of resolving this discomfort by tightening controls or intensifying monitoring mechanisms, I take it as an invitation to question how I lead, set expectations, and enact accountability in supervisory relationships. This move speaks to the discourse that cautions against treating supervision as a purely managerial function concerned with timelines, deliverables and compliance. In the South African higher education context, postgraduate supervision has increasingly been conceptualised as a complex pedagogical and relational practice that involves ongoing negotiation, interpretation and mutual learning (Cekiso, et al., 2019; Tsampiras, 2017). From this perspective, supervision cannot be reduced to the efficient management of research tasks. Instead, it should be understood as a form of teaching that is deeply entangled with questions of power, identity, and epistemic authority.

Situating my experience in this broader scholarly discourse allows for a shift from individualised concern to contextualised critique. South African higher education is shaped by historical and structural inequalities that continue to shape who enters university, under what

conditions, and with what forms of academic capital, especially historically disadvantaged students (Woldegiorgis & Chiramba, 2025). Supervisors operate in institutions that are simultaneously tasked with redress, transformation and increased research productivity. These competing demands place pressure on supervisory relationships, usually encouraging regulatory expectations about what a “good” postgraduate student should look like. These expectations may be detached from students’ diverse educational trajectories and ways of engaging with knowledge. Recognising supervision as a relational practice foregrounds the need to attend to these contextual dynamics instead of attributing challenges solely to individual students or supervisors.

Boughey, et al. (2017) highlighted that postgraduate supervision involves the intertwined domains of teaching, research and service, and that responsibility for effective supervision extends beyond the individual supervisor. Strengthening supervisory practice is therefore understood as a collective and institutionally significant project rather than a matter of personal competence alone. This framing is particularly relevant for novice and early-career supervisors, who are mostly inducted into supervisory roles with limited formal preparation and are expected to reproduce established norms of academic practice. As Motshoane and McKenna (2021) argue, the transition from student to supervisor is fraught with complexity, as supervisors draw on their own doctoral experiences to guide others, usually without critically examining the assumptions embedded in those experiences.

My positionality as a co-supervisor in inclusive education further complicates this landscape. Inclusive education as a field is concerned with challenging deficit-based models and advocating for responsiveness to difference (Slee, 2018). Nonetheless, supervisory practices in this field are not immune to prescribed assumptions about productivity and academic engagement. This tension raises important questions about coherence between the epistemological commitments of inclusive education and the pedagogical practices through which postgraduate research is supervised. By situating my discomfort in this context, I argue that the gap between expectations and student outputs should not be read as failure, but as a signal that dominant supervisory frameworks may be insufficiently attuned to diversity in learning, cognition and scholarly development.

Supervisory approaches and pedagogies

My supervisory practice has largely been shaped by what Wisker (2012) described as a technical–rational approach to postgraduate supervision. This model foregrounds structure, clearly defined milestones, adherence to institutional timelines, and compliance with formal research requirements. In this framework, effective supervision is usually equated with efficient project management, in which progress is measured by deliverables such as proposal approval, draft submissions, and completion within prescribed timeframes. As a postgraduate student, this approach resonated closely with my own learning preferences and academic dispositions. It offered clarity, predictability and a sense of control over the research process. It enabled me to navigate postgraduate study successfully within the parameters defined by the institution.

However, while the technical–rational approach can provide necessary structure, particularly for novice researchers, it also carries some pedagogical limitations. It privileges efficiency, compliance, and procedural correctness, thereby narrowing the supervisory relationship to a transactional exchange rather than a dialogic and developmental engagement. Wisker (2012) cautioned that such approaches can constrain opportunities for critical reflection, experimentation and shared meaning-making, particularly when students' ways of thinking or working do not align with preferred academic norms. In this sense, the technical–rational model may inadvertently reproduce exclusionary practices by valuing certain forms of academic behaviour over others. Recognising these limitations has prompted me to question whether my reliance on structure and timelines serves all students equally, or whether it reflects an unexamined projection of my own academic biography onto those I supervise.

Moving beyond a purely technical–rational orientation opens conceptual space for more relational, negotiated, and emancipatory forms of supervision. Such approaches position supervision as a pedagogical practice concerned not only with producing a completed thesis, but also with nurturing students' intellectual confidence, autonomy and scholarly identity. Reframing supervision in this way aligns with broader critiques of instrumentalism in higher education and supports more inclusive forms of postgraduate education. Importantly, this does not entail abandoning structure altogether, but rather rethinking how structure is mobilised as a flexible scaffold that supports learning, rather than as a rigid mechanism of control. This shift emphasises supervision as a shared, adaptive journey shaped through dialogue, reflection, and mutual learning (Govender & Markus, 2025).

To theorise this shift more deeply, I draw on Lee's (2008) typology of supervisory approaches, which identifies five overlapping orientations: functional, enculturation, critical thinking, emancipation, and relationship development. This framework provides a useful analytical perspective for examining how supervisors conceptualise their roles and enact pedagogical authority. Reflecting on my own practice, I recognise a strong alignment with the enculturation mode, which emphasises modelling disciplinary expertise, inducting students into established academic norms and maintaining standards through a gatekeeping function. Enculturation has undeniable value in helping students understand the expectations and conventions of academic research (Rathilall, 2025). However, when overemphasised, it can encourage hierarchical relationships and limit students' capacity to question or reshape those norms because 'postgraduate research demands independence, critical thinking, and novel contributions, contrasting with the more structured nature of undergraduate studies. Effective supervision fosters a supportive, collaborative relationship, with modern practices emphasizing mentorship and holistic student development' (Rathilall, 2025: 493).

While I continue to value the clarity and disciplinary grounding that enculturation offers, I am increasingly drawn to Lee's emancipatory approach to supervision. The emancipatory mode prioritises mentoring, reflexivity and the development of students' independent scholarly voices (Nkoane, 2013). It positions supervision as a space for transformative learning, where students are encouraged not only to master existing knowledge but also to interrogate its assumptions

and imagine alternative possibilities. Moving towards this approach requires supervisors to relinquish some degree of control and to engage more openly with uncertainty, difference and negotiation. Framing my practice through Lee's typology enables me to identify habitual tendencies and to intentionally blend supervisory approaches in ways that are responsive to individual students and contexts.

The second insight shaping this argument is the emerging body of work on neurodiversity in higher education, particularly in relation to postgraduate research supervision. From a neurodiversity perspective, disparities between supervisory expectations and student practices are not interpreted as deficiencies in motivation or ability, but as differences in cognitive processing, communication styles and engagement with time and structure (Butcher & Lane, 2025; Szorenyi & Payne, 2025). This reframing entails the need for supervisory approaches that are flexible, dialogic and attentive to diversity. When read alongside Lee's emancipatory model, neurodiversity theory strengthens the case for supervision that moves beyond standardised expectations and towards practices that recognise and work with cognitive variation as a resource rather than a problem.

Neurodiversity as a critical perspective

Neurodiversity theory is a critical framework for rethinking how difference is understood and managed in academic and professional contexts, including postgraduate education. Although the term "neurodiversity" is most commonly attributed to sociologist Judy Singer, who introduced it in the late 1990s to describe the natural variation in human cognition, recent scholarship has challenged simplified origin narratives that locate the concept in a single individual or discipline. Botha, et al. (2024), for instance, argue that neurodiversity emerged through a collective and community-led process involving autistic self-advocates, disability scholars and broader social movements. This corrective is important, as it situates neurodiversity not merely as an academic theory, but as a politically and ethically grounded intervention aimed at contesting dominant deficit-based models of neurological difference.

At its conceptual core, neurodiversity theory rejects the pathologisation of cognitive variation. Instead of framing neurological differences such as autism or dyslexia as disorders to be cured or corrected, neurodiversity understands them as natural and important forms of human diversity (Butcher & Lane, 2025; Szorenyi & Payne, 2025). This shift has implications for how inclusivity is conceptualised in higher education. It challenges the assumption that there is a single and prescribed way of thinking, learning or producing knowledge against which all students should be measured. Rather, neurodiversity argues that academic spaces are inherently populated by diverse minds, each bringing distinct strengths, needs, and modes of engagement.

Importantly, neurodiversity theory redirects analytical attention away from individual impairment and towards the social, structural and pedagogical conditions that enable or constrain participation. From this perspective, difficulties encountered by neurodivergent students are not located in their cognitive profiles, but in institutional practices that privilege particular forms of communication, time management and productivity. Butcher and Lane (2025)

highlighted how higher education environments usually assume linear progress, sustained attention and rapid textual production as indicators of academic competence, thereby marginalising students whose cognitive rhythms do not align with these expectations. Neurodiversity thus operates as a critical perspective through which the norms governing academic success can be interrogated rather than taken for granted.

When applied to postgraduate research supervision, neurodiversity theory invites a fundamental rethinking of supervisory processes and expectations. Supervisory practices are largely organised around implicit assumptions about how students should plan, write, communicate and respond to feedback. These assumptions are rarely made explicit, but they shape judgements about student engagement, progress and capability. Szorenyi and Payne (2025) argued that neurodiversity-informed supervision requires supervisors to recognise that students may process information differently, manage time in non-linear ways and express understanding through varied communicative practices. Such differences are not indicators of insufficient commitment or intellectual capacity, but reflect diverse cognitive styles that demand responsive pedagogical approaches.

Adopting a neurodiversity-informed approach to supervision, therefore, involves more than accommodating individual students on a case-by-case basis. It requires supervisors to critically examine the stipulated frameworks that underpin their expectations of productivity, interaction and progress. This includes questioning strict timelines, standardised feedback practices, and assumptions about independence that may inadvertently disadvantage neurodivergent students. Rather than expecting students to adapt to inflexible supervisory regimes, neurodiversity theory calls for greater flexibility, dialogue, and negotiation in supervisory relationships. This shift aligns with broader critiques of managerialism in higher education, which have highlighted how standardisation and performance metrics can undermine pedagogical responsiveness and relational care (see Vican, et al., 2020).

At an institutional level, neurodiversity theory poses a challenge to universities to create environments that actively promote the flourishing of all minds. This entails moving beyond compliance-driven inclusion policies towards pedagogical practices that value cognitive diversity as a resource for knowledge production. In the context of postgraduate supervision, such an orientation strengthens ethical responsibility and relational accountability. Supervisors are called not only to guide students towards completion, but also to create intellectual spaces in which diverse ways of thinking and knowing are recognised as possibilities. In this sense, neurodiversity functions as both a descriptive and visionary framework. It describes the reality of cognitive diversity in higher education, while simultaneously offering a vision for more just, inclusive and transformative supervisory practices.

Reframing the supervisory relationship: Neurodiversity and knowledge economies

The issue I am reflecting on centres on the supervisor's role in relation to the student and the various tasks and expectations that come with it. In my current position as a co-supervisor of postgraduate research students in inclusive education at a small research-intensive university, I

operate in a space that is both developmental and disciplinary. My co-supervision duties aim to develop my professional skills. At the same time, my expertise in disability and inclusion contributes to a broader departmental effort to promote equity and diversify knowledge in postgraduate education. This role as a supervisor has made me realise that supervision is a layered pedagogical relationship, and not just a simple hierarchy (cf., Arendse, 2025).

Boughey and McKenna (2021: 49) observe that postgraduate supervision 'can be seen to be tied to the notion of the knowledge economy', a context in which universities emphasise transformation, excellence and the production of graduates who can contribute economically valuable knowledge. When postgraduate education is framed in this way, supervision tends to prioritise efficiency, productivity and outputs that align with institutional metrics. In an awareness of diversity and neurodiversity, however, this framing carries important implications. It risks narrowing acceptable ways of thinking, producing and communicating knowledge, and may inadvertently marginalise students whose cognitive styles do not map neatly onto these expectations. My role, working under the guidance of primary supervisors while leading certain aspects of student research related to inclusion and neurodiversity, positions me to navigate these tensions. The main supervisors provide the institutional and procedural anchor required by a knowledge-economy-oriented system, while I contribute disciplinary expertise and close mentorship that emphasises flexibility, diversity and accessible research practices. This arrangement has enabled me to move from being a candidate to a supervisor, and to reflect on the implications of supervision in such an arrangement (see Arendse, 2025; Motshoane & McKenna, 2021).

Supervision as dialogic pedagogy

Through my experience of co-supervising postgraduate research, I have come to conceptualise supervision not as a fixed or linear set of tasks, such as guiding topic selection, providing feedback or monitoring progress, but as an interactive and dynamic pedagogical process. This understanding aligns with Skidmore's (2016) notion of pedagogy as dialogue, in which knowledge is not transmitted from expert to novice but co-constructed through sustained interaction, questioning and reflection. In this dialogic framing, supervision becomes a process of meaning-making in which both supervisor and student are actively involved in shaping the research trajectory. Such a perspective challenges instrumental views of supervision and foregrounds its pedagogical and relational dimensions.

Viewing supervision as a dialogic pedagogy requires careful navigation of multiple and sometimes competing responsibilities. Supervisors are simultaneously accountable to institutional expectations, disciplinary standards and the individual needs of students. These layers of responsibility are not easily reconciled, particularly in systems that privilege measurable outputs and timely completion. My learning challenge has been to balance these demands without defaulting to strict supervisory practices that prioritise institutional compliance over pedagogical responsiveness. It is at this juncture that neurodiversity theory offers a critical extension to dialogic pedagogy. If cognitive and communicative diversity are understood as

inherent features of human learning, then dialogic supervision should actively recognise and accommodate differences in how students think, write, organise their research and engage with feedback (Butcher & Lane, 2025; Szorenyi & Payne, 2025). From this standpoint, supervision extends beyond academic guidance to the cultivation of inclusive research environments that value diverse modes of scholarly engagement.

This reflexive reorientation is deeply entangled with my own academic biography. As Arendse (2025) observed, the transition from postgraduate student to supervisor is shaped by tensions arising from the uncritical transfer of one's own doctoral experiences into supervisory practice. My postgraduate journey was characterised by a high degree of self-direction, strict adherence to deadlines, and proactive engagement with supervisors. These practices were both expected in the academic contexts I inhabited. They shaped my understanding of what constitutes academic discipline, independence, and commitment. As a supervisor, I initially assumed that these qualities were universal indicators of successful postgraduate engagement and, therefore, appropriate benchmarks against which to assess my students' progress.

However, my supervisory experience has increasingly disrupted this assumption. I have encountered students whose engagement with research does not mirror my own trajectory, but whose intellectual contributions and commitments are no less significant. What I once interpreted as delayed progress or lack of initiative now appears, through a reflexive perspective, as evidence of diverse cognitive and working styles. This realisation has required me to confront the normalised assumptions embedded in my expectations and to acknowledge how my own life experiences and academic socialisation shape my interpretive frameworks. Rather than viewing difference as deviation from a standard, I have been compelled to seek theoretical resources that allow for a more generous and analytically rigorous understanding of variation in postgraduate research practices.

In extending supervision as a dialogic pedagogy, it is productive to situate dialogue in material and relational entanglements foregrounded in recent higher education discourse. Gravett, et al. (2024: 388) emphasise that relational pedagogies must move beyond humanist framings to recognise how 'human relationships are entangled within the spaces, places, contexts and environments', thus reframing supervision as a socio-material practice. This is complemented by where pedagogic frailty is understood as emerging from 'the quality and degree of interaction with and between key elements of the professional environment' (Kinchin, et al., 2016: 2), highlighting how fragile dialogic spaces are shaped by institutional ecologies. Finally, Bozalek, et al. (2017: 4) underscore that 'dialogue is central for the formation of a CoE [Community of Enquiry] and for facilitating a democratic, participatory approach to research and writing', thereby positioning supervision as a collaborative and participatory inquiry. These perspectives deepen dialogic supervision as materially entangled, institutionally situated and collectively enacted in a community of practice (Lotz-Sisitka, et al., 2010). However, 'a community of practice-approach helps to enhance support for the technical aspects of research supervision, but that this cannot be left solely to the community of practice – there is a need for individual supervision, close reading of studies and technical proficiency' (Lotz-Sisitka, et al., 2010: 147).

Neurodiversity theory affords such individual-oriented tasks by redefining difference as diversity rather than disorder (Botha, et al., 2024). Applied to postgraduate supervision, neurodiversity shifts the analytical focus from individual performance to the relational and structural conditions under which research is conducted. Boughey and McKenna (2021) emphasise that supervision operates in a complex web of expectations shaped by historical patterns of privilege, access and epistemic authority. In this web, neurodiversity enables a reframing of supervisory encounters, such as students' ways of thinking, communicating and pacing their work, which are understood as expressions of cognitive diversity rather than as shortcomings to be corrected. This reframing moves supervision away from policing conformity to supportive academic behaviours and towards nurturing difference as a recognisable dimension of scholarly practice.

For me, this shift has significant ethical and pedagogical implications. It challenges deeply held assumptions about excellence, productivity and academic worth. It prompts a reconsideration of how progress is assessed and supported. Supervising through a neurodiversity-informed and dialogic perspective requires humility, empathy and a willingness to remain open to alternative ways of learning and knowing. These qualities are not ancillary to academic rigour. Instead, they are part of a supervisory practice that seeks to be inclusive, reflexive and just. In articulating this reflexive analysis, I position supervision as a pedagogy of becoming. Mills (2002: 1) notes that

education is a being, a being that constantly stands in opposition to itself. It is precisely through such opposition that it comes to understand itself by confronting its own process, the process of its own becoming. And with any system that confronts its own being, change becomes the language of life.

This entails that in a supervision context, both student and supervisor are continually reshaped through dialogue, difference and critical engagement.

Reconfiguring supervisory practice: From enculturation to emancipation

The tensions explored throughout this article have precipitated a substantive shift in how I understand and enact my role as a postgraduate supervisor. This shift is not limited to changes in supervisory technique, but extends to a more fundamental interrogation of the purposes and values underpinning supervision. In particular, I have been compelled to reconsider how my own academic socialisation has shaped not only what I expect of students, but also how I interpret their engagement, progress and scholarly potential. Recognising that supervisory approaches are neither objective nor universally dogmatic, I now understand the need to move away from implicit assumptions that prefer certain cognitive styles and academic dispositions over others.

Central to this reconfiguration is an engagement with Wisker's (2012) notion of the negotiated order of supervision. Unlike technical-rational models that emphasise compliance with predetermined processes, the negotiated approach emphasises dialogue, flexibility and co-

construction of meaning. Supervision, in this framing, becomes an evolving relationship in which expectations, timelines and modes of engagement are openly discussed and revisited rather than imposed unilaterally. This does not imply the absence of academic standards or accountability. Rather, it entails a more reflexive and responsive approach to how such standards are interpreted and enacted in relation to individual students. For supervisors working in diverse postgraduate cohorts, the negotiated order offers a pedagogical framework that accommodates difference while maintaining scholarly rigour.

Lee's (2008) typology of supervisory approaches provides further conceptual clarity in understanding this shift. Reflecting on my own practice, I continue to identify strongly with the enculturation mode, which emphasises modelling disciplinary expertise, inducting students into established academic norms and ensuring adherence to disciplinary standards. As noted earlier, enculturation plays an important role in supporting students to navigate the usually opaque conventions of academic research and to develop a sense of belonging in scholarly communities. However, when enculturation becomes the dominant or unexamined supervisory stance, it risks positioning supervisors primarily as gatekeepers of the acceptable knowledge and students as passive recipients of disciplinary norms.

In contrast, Lee's emancipatory approach reframes supervision as a process of mentoring, critical self-reflection and personal growth. This mode emphasises the development of students' agency, encouraging them to question assumptions, articulate their own scholarly identities and engage critically with knowledge production. For me, moving towards an emancipatory supervisory stance represents a deliberate departure from viewing supervision as a mechanism of gatekeeping towards understanding it as a partnership grounded in mutual respect and shared responsibility. This shift resonates closely with neurodiversity-informed perspectives, which emphasise the importance of recognising and valuing diverse ways of thinking, learning and engaging with research.

Importantly, reconfiguring supervision from enculturation to emancipation does not entail a wholesale rejection of structure or disciplinary guidance. Rather, it involves a more intentional blending of supervisory approaches, where the clarity and support offered by enculturation are complemented by the reflexivity and openness of emancipation. Such an approach requires supervisors to remain attentive to students' cognitive preferences, educational backgrounds and evolving needs, and to adapt supervisory practices accordingly. This responsiveness is particularly crucial in contexts where postgraduate education is expected to advance both excellence and equity.

This reconfiguration positions supervision as an ethical and pedagogical practice that extends beyond the successful completion of a thesis. It foregrounds the responsibility of supervisors to create learning environments that support diverse forms of scholarly becoming and to engage critically with the power relations embedded in academic mentoring. By embracing a negotiated, emancipatory approach to supervision, I aim to contribute to more inclusive and socially just postgraduate practices that honour difference while sustaining academic integrity.

Implications for postgraduate supervision and higher education

Understanding supervision as a pedagogy of becoming, as Mills (2002) argued, emphasises its fundamentally relational and transformative character. Calderwood and Rizzo (2023) argue that supervision is not a unidirectional process in which knowledge and expertise are transmitted from supervisor to student, but a dynamic relationship in which both parties are continually reshaped. This conceptualisation disrupts static notions of supervisory authority and positions supervision as a praxis of mutual learning, ethical engagement and identity formation. When analysed from a neurodiversity-informed perspective, this pedagogy of becoming acquires additional significance, as it demands attentiveness to cognitive variation and challenges assumptions about what scholarly development should look like.

Neurodiversity theory has sharpened my understanding of difference as a constitutive feature of learning rather than a deviation from a recognised academic ideal. For postgraduate supervision, this implies a shift away from standardised expectations regarding writing practices, timelines and modes of engagement. Instead of assuming that all students will thrive under the same structures that once enabled my own academic success, a neurodiversity-informed supervisory approach requires responsiveness to diverse cognitive rhythms and communicative preferences. This responsiveness does not dilute academic standards. Instead, it reorients supervisory practice towards supporting meaningful engagement and intellectual growth in ways that are contextually and cognitively attuned.

At the level of supervisory practice, these insights translate into concrete pedagogical commitments. They involve taking time to listen carefully to students' articulations of their needs and working styles, negotiating expectations explicitly instead of assuming shared understandings, and adapting feedback practices to accommodate different modes of processing and engagement. Such practices align with dialogic and negotiated models of supervision, where authority is exercised relationally rather than hierarchically. Importantly, this approach positions reflexivity as a shared responsibility as supervisors are called to examine their own assumptions and positionalities, while students are supported in developing self-awareness and agency in relation to their research practices.

Beyond individual supervisory relationships, the implications of this analysis extend to institutional cultures of postgraduate education. Boughey and McKenna (2021) highlight that supervision operates in broader systems shaped by historical inequalities, epistemic norms and performance-driven imperatives. In such systems, neurodiversity challenges institutions to reconsider dominant metrics of productivity and excellence that privilege particular ways of thinking and working. Creating supervisory environments that genuinely value cognitive diversity requires institutional support for flexible practices, professional development opportunities that support inclusivity, and a willingness to question managerial logics that prioritise efficiency over pedagogical care.

In the South African higher education context, these implications are particularly resonate and relevant. Postgraduate education is tasked with advancing transformation, equity and

knowledge diversification in a sector still shaped by colonial and apartheid legacies. Neurodiversity-informed supervision contributes to this project by expanding understandings of who can participate in knowledge production and how scholarly work can be conducted. By recognising cognitive diversity as a resource rather than a problem, supervision can become a way for enacting epistemic justice and supporting a broader range of scholarly voices and trajectories.

The implications of this article point towards a reimagining of postgraduate supervision as a humane, inclusive and responsive pedagogical practice. Such a reimagining requires supervisors to engage ethically with difference, institutions to support flexible and relational approaches, and the sector as a whole to move beyond narrow definitions of academic success. In aspiring towards supervisory practices that embody the transformative ideals of South African higher education, this article argues for supervision that honours the diversity of minds entering postgraduate spaces and affirms their right not merely to complete degrees, but to flourish as scholars.

Conclusion

This article argued for a reconceptualisation of postgraduate supervision through the theoretical perspectives of supervision models and neurodiversity theory. It positioned supervision as a pedagogical, relational and ethical practice rather than a neutral or managerial task. The analysis has shown how prescribed expectations around productivity, pace, independence and academic conduct are historically and institutionally produced as they privilege particular cognitive styles while marginalising others. Read through the neurodiversity theory, these expectations are revealed not as standalone standards but as mechanisms that reproduce exclusion in postgraduate education. The significance of this argument lies in its challenge to hegemonic discourses of standardisation and efficiency that continue to shape supervision in higher education. By theorising neurodiversity not as an accommodation strategy but as a framework for reconfiguring supervisory pedagogy itself, this article extends research on postgraduate supervision and contributes to debates on socially just teaching and learning. Conceptualising supervision as dialogic, negotiated, and emancipatory highlights supervisors' ethical responsibility to create inclusive research environments that recognise diverse ways of thinking, learning and becoming scholarly. The article suggests that transforming supervision requires sustained reflexivity and institutional support to rethink what qualifies as academic excellence and progress. For supervisors and institutions alike, nurturing difference instead of policing conformity becomes central to advancing epistemic justice and more humane forms of postgraduate education.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, I utilised Grammarly Pro for improving language use. After using this tool, I reviewed and edited the content as needed. I take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

About the author

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