

# Different Mentoring Styles of the Supervisors for Final Year M. Ed Students: Students' Perspectives

Nurul HidayuShafie\*, Syed Sakhi Ahmad Sultani\*\*, Siti Sarah Roselan\*\*\*, Abdullah Noori\*\*\*\*

\* Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Shah Alam, Malaysia

**Abstract-** In the journey of writing a dissertation or a thesis, the supervisor of a student plays an important role in guiding and helping the student to complete his or her work. The mentoring style of a supervisor might affect a student's progress either directly or indirectly in completing the paper. This study aims to investigate the supervisors' styles in mentoring the students from the perspectives of the students themselves. A qualitative method was conducted by interviewing two postgraduate students regarding their supervisors' mentoring styles. The results of the study showed that both supervisors use different styles when mentoring their students. The discussions with the supervisors are very important to the students, as well as the supervisors' understanding towards their ideas and work. The mentoring styles of the supervisors affect the students' work as well as their personal growth.

**Index Terms-** Mentoring styles, supervisors, dissertation, thesis, postgraduate

## I. INTRODUCTION

Writing a thesis or a dissertation, as a requirement of the program or university, is one of the most challenging tasks for postgraduate students. Most of the time postgraduate students feel a lot of pressure to complete their dissertation within the particular timeframes. Other than time constraints, problems such as family concerns, career, financial status, and etc. also add to this pressure (Abiddin & Ismail, 2011). Therefore, many cases indicate that a high percentage of postgraduate students are not able to complete the program on time due to such pressures. According to (Abiddin, 2007; Abiddin & Ismail, 2011; Cullen et al. 1994), most of the time, scarcity of satisfactory mentoring from the supervisors to the postgraduate student, is another factor that leads to the intensification of the problem. They add that if postgraduate students are provided with sufficient mentoring, it will result in the success of the students.

Chiappetta-Swanson & Watt, (2011) define mentoring of supervisors as "an activity undertaken by someone occupying a formal role within an organization that has (more or less) explicit expectations and accountabilities to both the person being supervised, and the organization which provides the context for the supervisory relationship." (p. 2).

Abiddin & Ismail (2011) add that the absence of student-supervisor bond result in the students not being able to complete their research on time, which ultimately contributes to the

low quality of research, is well. Without effective mentoring from a supervisor, problematic situations will arise which can affect the progress of students in writing their dissertation (Abiddin and West, 2007, p. 370). According to Azman, Nor, Nor, & Aghwela (2014), the feedback provided by the supervisor in writing a postgraduate thesis and its improvement are what principally terms the goals of supervisory practices. However, as Marcos & Tillema (2006) utter, the feedback provided by the supervisor depends on how the supervisor himself and the supervisee see the feedback and the mentoring. When a student is assigned a supervisor, the mentoring style and approach of the supervisor play a significant role in the completion of their thesis or dissertation (Tahir, Ghani, Atek, & Manaf, 2012).

According to Spencer (1996), the supervisors practice different mentoring approaches such as:

1. Letting go style where the supervisor and supervisee get into conversation and time is given to let things develop, waiting for things to happen in a natural way, avoiding rush and pressure.
2. Active listening style where the supervisor asks questions during the conversation with the supervisee, and the supervisee is summarizing thing and explains his/her progress.
3. Advisory style where the supervisor and supervisee get into a conversation and the supervisor provides the supervisee with suggestions for problem-solving and alternatives to improve the paper.
4. Prescribing style, where the supervisor takes the responsibility via providing specific instruction to the supervisee for how to deal with problems that have risen and requiring improvements.
5. Cooperative style where the supervisor involves the supervisees in problem solving, allows the supervisees to share their opinions freely and is being focused on cooperation.

As said earlier, the progress of students' research is greatly affected by the approaches utilized by the supervisors. Therefore, this study aims to carry out a small case study, investigating the methods and styles the supervisors utilize from the perspective of the postgraduate students, studying in their final year in UiTM. The objectives of the study are as follows:

- 1) To investigate the supervisory styles or approaches of the supervisors for the Master of Education (M.Ed) final year students from the perspectives of the students;
- 2) To investigate the perceptions of Master of Education (M.Ed) final year students toward the supervisory styles or approaches of the supervisors;

## II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Mentor and mentoring and mentorship can be traced back in the ancient Greek mythology—*The Odyssey*. (Ismail et al., 2015; Grogan, Eviner, and Hobbie, 2012; Malloy, n. d.; Clutterback, 1991, cited in Zainal Abiddin, 2006). As explained, mentor was the name of mythological character in the Greek mythology—*The Odyssey*—and who was trusted by Odysseus to look after his son Telemachus' education and training before the *Trojan War*. Indeed, the mentor once changed into a “vehicle of the goddess” Athena so that she can appear physically on earth to train and guide Telemachus—Odysseus's Son. Looking back at the history of *mentor*, it can surely be concluded that mentor is someone who provides guidance to less knowledgeable person. According to Research Council (2016), “mentoring is defined as a close relationship between a graduate student and a faculty member who provides guidance, support and research advice in an individualized manner” (p. 1).

There are a numerous studies on different aspects of mentors, mentee and mentorship—ranging from qualities and effects to students' and mentors perception mentorship; the most studies this type in the realm of higher education include Korvor and Tillema (2014), Ismail et al. (2015), Sidhu et al. (2013), Azure (2016).

Korvor and Tillema (2014) conducted their study on 37 teacher assistants and 31 teacher education students in higher education to find out mentoring approaches and how it affects perception of feedback provision. From the three types mentoring approaches—prescriptive, situational and initiator—the study found out that two approaches (prescription and initiator approaches) were dominantly used. In fact, the majority of the supervisors used prescriptive method of providing guidance. In this study, the role of the supervisor as an *encourager* was reported absent. The study also found out that supervisors had different views on feedback provision—mentors “overrated” their feedback while students saw it negative.

Sidhu et al. (2013) conducted a study on 66 postgraduate students in two Malaysian public universities to explore the students' experience of being a supervisee during their research. The result of this study showed that the supervisees were “moderately” pleased with the quality of supervision provided by their supervision. In addition, the study found the most important qualities of a good supervisor, from the students' perspective, were motivator and “confidence booster”, be good research role models, knowledgeable in research methodology, good communicators and “constructive feedback provider”. Finally, the finding of this research study showed that the supervisors

enthusiasm for supervision was at its peak at the beginning of the research process and steadily decreased toward the final stages of research, where, as reported, students faced numerous challenges. A similar study by Azure (2016) on Ghanaian graduate students found out “three most important attributes of supervisors as perceived by graduate students were: supervisors should be friendly, approachable and flexible; knowledgeable and resourceful; and encourage students to work and plan independently” (p. 1). Finally, Azure's study revealed that successful and help supervision means that supervisors are capable of establishing noble and professional relationships with supervisees; provide assistance and guidance; and gives constant motivation and encouragement.

The effect and importance of communication and support and assistance (which was indicated in Azure's study) on supervisees' self-confidence was studied by Ismail et al. (2015). The researchers' study on 150 research students in Malaysia showed that effective communication and support from the supervisor's side had a direct effect on supervisees' self-confidence. That is to say, good communication between the mentor and mentee and the support received from the mentor, boosted supervisees self-confidence.

These studies have paved a good foreground for the present small-scale in-depth case study. In the present study, we are going to find out the approaches which supervisors use while providing feedback and students' perception of supervision, in general, and of approaches, in particular. The framework of this study is the MERID (Mentor roles in dialogue) model, which was developed by Hennisen et al (2008, cited in Crasborn et al, 2011). In this model, there are four roles or styles of mentoring which are initiator, imperator, encourager and advisor. Based on this model, the study would figure out which of these roles fit the mentoring styles that the supervisors of this study have.

## III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In the present study, the researchers employed a case study method in order to extract an in-depth understanding of the issue. A case study according to Richards (2011) can be referred to as a detailed study of an individual, a small group, an organization, community, or even a country. The sample/participants of the study were two postgraduate final year M.A TESL students, studying in UiTM. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were used as the main instrument to collect data for the study. Berg (1989) utters that semi-structured interview is conducted in “a systematic and consistent order, but it allows the interviewers sufficient freedom to digress; that is, the interviewers are permitted to inquire far beyond the answers to their prepared and standardized questions” (p. 17).

In addition, the two respondents interviewed for this case study were both final year students of Master's in Education (M.Ed), in Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). Respondent 1 was a final year M.Ed student of Education Management and Leadership course, while Respondent 2 was a final year M.Ed student of Teaching English as Second Language (TESL) course. The interview sessions were conducted in two sessions, each session

with one respondent which took about 20 to 45 minutes. The interview consisted of two sections: the first section inquired about the mentoring styles of their supervisors, and the second section inquired their perceptions toward the styles and approaches used by the supervisors.

#### IV. DATA ANALYSIS

In this section, the findings of the data will be presented according to the two objectives stated for this case study which are; 1) investigating the mentoring styles of the supervisor, and 2) investigating the students' attitudes towards the mentoring styles. For the data analysis of this study, the researchers first transcribed the interview transcripts from both respondents, and then used the thematic coding to categorize the findings based on the themes that emerged from the transcribed interview.

##### Objective 1: The mentoring styles of the supervisors

###### “Letting go style”

The first mentoring style identified by the researchers is the letting go style. The first respondent's supervisor popularly used the method. The quotations from the first respondent are as below:

*“Whenever I have something to refer or to discuss, only then I would contact her and arrange a meeting...but...but...ermm...throughout the research period, we would contact each other through emails and whatsapps.” (R2, lines 21-24).*

*“I think she's flexible because I have no idea. She's very cool because she's very friendly, very motherly. She's more of a 'let go' type of mentor.” (R2, lines 41-43)*

*“...you get very comfortable to share your thoughts even though some of your thoughts might be too much or too ambitious but she's a mother kind of figure, you can like share everything.” (R2, lines 49-52)*

*“I feel okay, I feel flexible, I don't really feel pressured.” (R2, lines 152).*

###### “Active listening style”

The next mentoring style that could be found from the interviews is the active listening style. Throughout the interviews of both respondents, it was found out that both supervisors have active listening style when supervising and mentoring the respondents. The quotations from both respondents are as below:

*“...but when I went to see her, she would read or she...if she didn't understand, she would keep on asking questions.” (R1, lines 168 – 169).*

*“...she's not someone who just briefly go through, but she will be like, emm...trying to understand what we are...I'm trying to...say...trying to show...” (R1, lines 27 – 29).*

*“...she will like throw a few questions, like, 'You really wanna do this? ...Sometimes it's good for you to think negatively, you will think of the issues that will come up.' She kinda do that, even though she's kinda very supportive at the same time.” (R2, lines 107 – 111).*

*“...I told her this is how they do things, it's very different and very e-conventional and she likes it and she's like you should do this. If you are very into it, do it!” (R2, lines 78 – 81).*

###### Advisory style

Finally, the last mentoring style that could be found in the data is the advisory mentoring style. The advisory mentoring style in this study applies to the supervisor for the first respondent only. As compared to the supervisor for the second respondent, the first respondent explained that her supervisor did provide her some directive advices whenever the supervisor felt necessary. Below are the quotations from the first respondent:

*“...sometimes, yes, but then, she would give you...a few...aaaa...options on how you could improve it. How you could improvise it” (R1, lines 181 – 182).*

*“...sometimes she accepts it, sometimes if the thing is not strong enough, she would accept but aaa...she would ask me to find for something that will make it...to strengthen my justification...” (R1, lines 295 – 297).*

*“Yeah, she allowed me to defend, but if let's say, it's still em...if she still think that my point is invalid or whatever, she will just say 'I think you do not need to put that in, just omit it” (R1, lines 329 – 331).*

##### Objective 2: The students' perspectives towards the mentoring style

###### Valued discussions with supervisors

The first theme for the second objective is the respondents valued discussions with their supervisors. When interviewing the respondents, they agreed that during the discussion or meeting, they would prefer if that time was fully used to discuss about their dissertation only and not interrupted with other activities. They valued the inputs from the discussions that they had with their supervisors as per reported below:

*“...if she reads it beforehand, at least she just highlighted what she didn't understand and then we can discuss later on, because if I had to wait for her reading, it will be like, okay, just finished chapter 1, chapter 2 (laughed). Sometimes I wanted to ask her something that I want to discuss longer with her...” (R1, lines 244 – 248).*

*“Sometimes she reads beforehand, so it's easier, it's just, emm...focused on what she wanted to ask me and then I can straight away discuss with her what I wanted to ask her. That one is more effective” (R1, lines 260 – 263).*

*"I feel like we talked forever but it was only 45 minutes. But there was a lot of input even though we chit chat a bit around stuff, yeah"* (R2, lines 87 – 89).

*"We always go straight to the point ...only after do we chat about life"* (R2, lines 92 – 94).

### **Appreciate understanding from supervisors**

The second theme that emerged under this objective is the respondents appreciated understanding from their supervisors. From the interviews with the respondents, they remarked several times that they were grateful to have supervisors who understood what they wanted to do for their dissertations. They mentioned that some of their classmates had supervisors who would ask them to change some big parts of their dissertations, but they experienced none of the issues with their supervisors as they tried to understand the intentions of the respondents.

*"She would just like guide me and ask me what I'm comfortable with and then just...go with it"* (R2, lines 107- 109).

*"Yeah, she would usually lay things out 'like now you pick, you know your cards better, you know what could happen so pick your card"* (R2, lines 131 – 134).

*"...it's not that I need to do major amendments, it's like, okay, she's trying to understand what I wanna do..."* (R1, lines 228 – 230).

*"And then, em...she...she's not someone who just briefly go through, but she will be like, emm...trying to understand what we are...I'm..."* (R1, lines 27 – 29).

### **Welcome independent problem solving**

The third theme emerged for the second objective is, the respondents welcomed independent problem solving. According to the respondents, they would have discussions with their supervisors, but their supervisors let them to solve their problems the way they wanted to solve them. The discussions with their supervisors would help them to see perspectives from different angles as well as a few choices, therefore they had the convenience of solving the problems their own ways. The quotations are as below:

*"So you have to find your own way on how you want to...what does it mean by thorough discussion, how would you arrange your own chapter..."* (R1, lines 210 – 212).

*"She doesn't hold my hand all the time, but I could still walk on my own"* (R2, lines 112- 113).

## **V. DISCUSSION**

### **Objective 1: The supervisors' mentoring styles**

One of the first theme to have emerged from the data analysis of the transcripts was the 'letting go' style of mentoring. According

to MinT Mentoring Styles Questionnaire (2014), the 'letting go' style consists of several attributes such as allowing things to occur naturally, allocating large amount of time for things to develop. Furthermore, the supervisors avoid an over-emotional approach and prefer not to pressure the supervisee. Its closest counterpart in the MERID model is called the 'Initiator'. According to Crasborn (2011), the 'Initiator' is a supervisor or mentor who would usually introduce the topic to the supervisee or mentee with the intention to help them 'start off' their research; this due to the initiator belief that the supervisee's knowledge and skills could be influenced by their event-structured, context-based and practice-oriented discussions. The initiator would induce or introduce the topic of the research to the supervisee to get them to explore the topic more through non-directive supervisor skills, which include summarizing of content and feeling, and asking open questions. The non-directive supervisory skills would encourage the supervisee to reflect on more on the topic.

The second theme to have emerged was the advisory style of mentoring. The advisory style consists of several actions that include solving problems by giving suggestions and advising as an objective outsider. Furthermore, this kind of supervisor prefers to lay out alternatives that the supervisee is free to choose and the advice given are usually expertise based. The closest counterpart in the MERID model is a combination of both the 'Imperator' and the 'Advisor'. According to Crasborn (2011), the 'Imperator' and the 'Advisor' are supervisors who prefer to use directive supervisory skills in aiding their supervisee. Those directive supervisory skills include giving direct advice and honest opinion about the topic at hand and the supervisee's progress on the topic. However, the imperator and the advisor have a singular difference; the imperator would introduce the topics in a research while the advisor would not. The imperator would get to the supervisee; their strengths, their weaknesses, their research preferences and their interest and would act accordingly by pointing them to the appropriate topics that could entice the supervisee's researching interest. On the other hand, the advisor would gradually get to know the supervisee without directly pointing them to the topics that they think would interest the supervisee. Crasborn (2011) indirectly stated that both types of supervisors generally would know their supervisee on a deeper level than most.

The last theme to have emerged from the data analysis of the transcripts was the 'letting go' style of mentoring. Based on the descriptions given by the MinT Mentoring Styles Questionnaire (2014), the letting go style of mentoring consisted of acts such as allowing things to develop naturally, the supervisors prefer to avoid an over-emotional approach and would allow the supervisee to set their own pace. Generally, the supervisors would let the supervisee have freer rein than any other supervisors. The closest counterpart from the MERID model is the 'Encourager'. According to Crasborn (2011), the 'Encourager' is a supervisor would usually react to the topics; they allow the supervisee to introduce the topic of the research. The encourager would react by employing probing questioning methods and exploration.

## **Objective 2: The students' perspectives**

The first theme for this objective is that the respondents valued the discussions with their supervisors. According to the respondents, the discussions that they had with their supervisors helped them a lot in developing their ideas and the progress of their dissertations. Therefore, they preferred if the discussion time was fully utilized for discussions only and not to be interrupted with other activities. They regarded the discussions as important as they needed the feedback and information not only to improve their dissertation, but as opportunities to learn. Jones & Jowett (1997, cited in McKimm, Jollie, & Hatter, 2007) stated some benefits that could arise from the mentoring relationship and the discussion including the opportunities to close the learning gaps among each other, to be able to criticize and accept the critics given as well as for the mentee (or in this case study, the supervisee) to develop their knowledge, critical thinking and reflective skills. From this, we could see that not only the supervisees will learn from the supervisors through the discussions, the supervisors will also be able to learn something from the supervisee. When this happens (learning from each other) it is called a mutual practise (Woodd, 1997).

The discussions between the supervisor and supervisee also would enable the supervisee to learn when the supervisor deliberately ask stimulating and perceptive questions to the supervisee as well as let the supervisee to reflect deeply throughout the process (Woodd, 1997). This statement is proven when the first respondent of this study mentioned a few times in her interview that her supervisor would continuously asked questions regarding her work until she herself figured out that what she had written needed to be justified and supported more. Through the process of questioning by her supervisor, the first respondent was able to figure out that there were some things in her work that needed more research and revisions. This kind of discussions, even though the supervisor only asked questions instead of providing feedback allowed the respondents to think more and deeply regarding her work and this was the process that the respondents valued so much. The same applied to the second respondent, where his supervisor also did the same, asking questions not to seek for answers, but to get the respondent to think more and reflect upon their work.

The second theme to be discussed is the respondents' appreciation of understanding from their supervisors. Throughout the interviews with the respondents, they showed their gratitude towards their supervisors' understanding of their ideas and also their work. A study conducted by Bailey et al, (2016) on what are the ideal mentor prototype according to the mentees' perspectives showed that the students' ideal mentor prototype would be those who guide, understand and model ethical values throughout the mentoring relationship. This study showed that understanding is a characteristic that is valued in a mentor, and it will help the mentee to further put their trust in the mentor to help them to go through their ventures, no matter in what situations. The understanding of the supervisors are also needed in order to comprehend what the students are trying to achieve (Abiddin, 2006). Without understanding, the supervisors will not

be able to see what the intentions of the students are, and this may hinder the students' progress from being further developed.

Finally, the respondents welcomed independent problem solving instead of being provided direct solution on what to do to solve their problem. During the interview with the respondents, they mentioned that their supervisors let them to solve their own problems. However, the supervisors will first let them see their problems in several angles before they let the respondents to decide on their own. The way the supervisors let the respondents to deal with their own problems matched a model developed by Badley, (1989) which eventually helps the mentee to solve and manage their own problems. In his model, the mentees take part in solving the problems and finally able to be independent and not rely on their mentors as much. In this case study, both respondents have the opportunities to solve problems by themselves with guidance from their supervisors. As previously mentioned, the supervisors did not directly provide them solutions, but helped them to see their difficulties and complications in various perspectives so that the respondents would have clear perspectives before acting on their own. As McKimm, Jollie and Hatter (2007) stated, the mentoring should finally lead to the students' ability to be independent and autonomous, instead of being dependent on their mentors.

## **VI. DISCUSSION**

To conclude this case study, the mentoring styles of a supervisor will have effects towards the supervisee either in the supervisee's work or his or her own personal growth. The mentoring styles would either assist or hinder the supervisee's progress and this is among the issues that a supervisor needs to consistently monitor throughout the process. It is imperative for a supervisor to know what are the needs of the supervisee so that the supervisor would be able to develop the needs as they go along. While supervising a student, a supervisor also needs to know the importance of knowing which roles to play at different times.

Therefore, it could be said that a supervisor might play different roles in several occasions while mentoring and supervising the student. It is not definite that a supervisor should stay with one mentoring style at one time. Beside that, in a mentoring relationship between a supervisor and a supervisee, it is vital that both parties communicate each others' expectations in the process. Expectations need to be expressed by both parties so that the needs of both supervisor and supervisee will be able to be addressed and fulfilled. This is to ensure balance to exist within the process it will eventually contribute to the feelings of contentment and satisfaction in both parties.

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## AUTHORS

**First Author** – Nurul HidayuShafie, UniversitiTeknologi MARA (UiTM) Shah Alam, [nurulhidayu\\_shafie@yahoo.com.my](mailto:nurulhidayu_shafie@yahoo.com.my)

**Second Author** – Syed Sakhi Ahmad Sultani, UniversitiTeknologi MARA (UiTM) Shah Alam, [sultanisakhi6@gmail.com](mailto:sultanisakhi6@gmail.com)

**Third Author** – Siti Sarah Roselan, UniversitiTeknologi MARA (UiTM) Shah Alam, [sarahroselan1298@outlook.com](mailto:sarahroselan1298@outlook.com)

**Fourth Author** – Abdullah Noori, UniversitiTeknologi MARA (UiTM) Shah Alam, [abdullahm40@gmail.com](mailto:abdullahm40@gmail.com)

**Correspondence Author** – Nurul HidayuShafie, [nurulhidayu\\_shafie@yahoo.com.my](mailto:nurulhidayu_shafie@yahoo.com.my), +60192607008