CHAPTER 2

Collaboration, Collegiality, and Commitment: Cultivating Critical Hope in a Doctoral Programme

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Abstract

Research on doctoral education in South Africa portrays a sector that is struggling to disentangle itself from its colonial roots. A key factor in this struggle is moving away from the dominance of the Oxbridge model of the traditional master-apprentice, one-on-one supervision model which persists in most institutional contexts, particularly in the humanities and social sciences. While access has been widened since the demise of apartheid and the democratisation of higher education, participation rates, retention, and notably throughput rates, in doctoral education remain low and racially skewed (Cloete, Mouton & Sheppard 2016). The dominance of the master-apprentice supervision model is seen as a major contributing factor to this issue (ASSAf 2010; CHE 2022). Thinking creatively about how we can mitigate some of these challenges, we have drawn on the concept of critical hope (Bozalek *et al.* 2014), to design pedagogical interventions such as the triannual 'Doc Weeks' (McKenna 2017), externally funded project teams, research clusters (Wilmot 2022), a fortnightly online work-in-progress programme, and a pre-doctoral initiative. This chapter, which focuses on a higher education studies doctoral programme at Rhodes University, a small, rural research-intensive university in the Eastern Cape, argues that the two fundamental success factors are: (1) the building of a collaborative space within a culture of collegiality and

commitment to knowledge creation; and (2) the setting of clear, structured support with explicit milestones. In doing so, we offer examples of how we are attempting to deliberately nurture, through our diverse pedagogies, and co-produce, with our candidates, critical hope for bringing about a transformative learning experience for our doctoral scholars.

Keywords: Critical hope, doctoral education pedagogies, collegiality, transformative learning

1 Introduction

Doctoral education results in a contribution at the frontiers of a field and in a researcher who can continue to build our understandings of the world and find solutions to its problems. It is, by its very nature, an optimistic and hopeful endeavour, albeit fraught with complexities. Postgraduate education in Africa, in particular, is often characterised by its political, economic, and social inequalities and contextual complexities (Manabe *et al.* 2018; Mohamedbhai 2015). In the last 20 years, we have witnessed a rapid increase in demand and intake of postgraduate students for a multitude of reasons including improving higher education systems, developing globally relevant but locally responsive knowledge, producing highly skilled graduates who can take up key leadership positions in society, as well as contributing to the growing knowledge economy (Cross & Backhouse 2014; Cloete, Mouton & Sheppard 2015). Providing a sustainable system that can accommodate these increased demands is constrained by a lack of physical resources (such as laboratories and technical equipment), supervision capacity (particularly in relation to the dominant kinds of supervision models used), as well as the preparedness of candidates (Cross & Backhouse 2014; Council on Higher Education [CHE] 2022).

Despite such complexities, postgraduate education in Africa remains an area full of potential and possibility. Government and society more broadly, as well as institutions of higher education see it as a space for nurturing high-level skills to address social and environmental ills and to build our knowledge at the frontiers of disciplinary fields (National Development Plan [NDP] 2012). The importance of the doctorate in Africa has been substantiated outside of the African context, with postgraduate studies being positioned as playing a key role in the well-being of the continent by organisations like the Catalan Association of Public Universities (ACUP) and the International Association of

Universities (IAU) (ACUP/IAU 2012). This positive counter-narrative is often overshadowed in conversations about poor participation rates, low throughput, and supervision challenges.

This book attempts to challenge the dominant negative narrative by offering analyses of success cases across various African contexts. This chapter contributes by focusing on the South African context. It offers readers insight into doctoral education in South Africa more broadly, and then, using the concept of 'critical hope' (Zembylas 2007 2022), it reflects on the affordances and limitations of a specific doctoral programme in Higher Education Studies in providing transformative doctoral education.

2 Doctoral Education in South Africa

Research on doctoral education in South Africa portrays a sector that is struggling to disentangle itself from its colonial and settler-colonial roots (ASSAf 2010). For example, under apartheid, most universities in South Africa were actively constrained in knowledge creation through both research and the offering of postgraduate studies (Bozalek & Boughey 2012) and this continues to impact on current capacity. In 2012 the government proposed a bold plan to produce more than 100 doctoral graduates per million of the total population, per year, by 2030 (National Development Plan [NDP] 2012). This would mean an increase to 5000 graduates per year, against a figure of just 1878 doctoral graduates in 2012 when the National Development Plan was published (Council on Higher Education [CHE] 2014:30). While these targets are yet to be met, there have been significant increases with 3445 doctoral candidates graduating in 2019 (Council on Higher Education [CHE] 2021:30). The emphasis on producing more doctoral graduates stems from the view that highly skilled graduates will be able to develop the much needed locally relevant knowledge that Africa requires to contribute to the growing knowledge economy (Cross & Backhouse 2014:155). The higher education sector in South Africa is also in need of new generations of academics given the aging professoriate in many universities (Cloete, Mouton & Sheppard 2015). The increase in doctoral graduates has not, however, come without challenges. As South Africa's recent Doctoral Review undertaken by the Council on Higher Education (Council on Higher Education [CHE] 2022) shows, there is unevenness across the sector and as such, the review has raised questions about quality. In particular, concerns have been raised about the uneven policies and systems governing postgraduate

studies at universities and the problematic nature of the dominant supervision model used in the sector, which fails to provide candidates with sufficient support or intellectual community.

A key part of our decolonial struggle in doctoral education is moving away from the dominance of the Oxbridge model of the traditional master-apprentice, one-on-one supervision model which persists in most institutional contexts, particularly in the humanities and social sciences (Bitzer & Albertyn 2011; McKenna 2014 2017; Samuel & Vithal 2011). This model entails a candidate working very closely with (typically) a single supervisor, often in isolation from other doctoral candidates. To be successful, the model relies on adequate time and attention being provided by a highly skilled supervisor to the novice candidate to model, support, and induct the candidate into doctoral research. This model persists in South Africa despite an international move to more structured and collaborative approaches (McKenna & van Schalkwyk 2022). The shift has occurred in various countries in Western Europe (Keller *et al.* 2018; Baschung 2016; Ramírez 2016), the USA and Canada (Ngulube & Ukwoma 2019; Paul, Olson & Gul 2014), New Zealand and Australia (Sampson & Comer 2010; McCallin & Nayar 2012), China (Zhu, Cai & François 2017), Mauritius (Samuel & Mariaye 2014), and elsewhere. In some cases, such as Russia, national legislation has mandated a move away from the one-on-one model which is seen as an inefficient approach to doctoral education (Maloshonok & Terentev 2019).

Researchers such as Manabe *et al.* (2018) have argued that the one-on-one model is particularly inappropriate in the African context where the need for research capacity building is so acute. Furthermore, decolonial scholars such as Mbembe (2016) argue that locally relevant research in and for Africa requires a move away from individualistic approaches to knowledge creation. The implications for such doctoral education include the need to foreground an anti-coloniality agenda. Zembylas (2022: 28) warns us that without such an agenda higher education can fall foul of 'the dangers of continuous reproduction and sustenance of colonial structures and practices'.

In the South African context, where we experience a dearth of highly experienced supervisors and a growing number of doctoral candidates, the one-on-one model is seen to be unsustainable and has been implicated in low retention and throughput rates (Cloete, Mouton & Sheppard 2015; ASSAf 2010). The recent national review of the doctorate raised concerns that this model creates significant power dynamics, particularly when supervisory

relationships include persons of different cultural, racial, and language backgrounds (Council on Higher Education [CHE] 2022). Many South African universities are placing pressure on supervisors to take on more students and are expecting novice supervisors to start supervising immediately after graduating with a doctorate (Mouton, Boshoff & James 2015; Motshoane 2022). This places both supervisor and candidate in a potentially vulnerable position where supervision takes place in isolation (Zeegers & Barron 2012).

The national review of the doctorate also highlights the need for additional structures to support the academic and scholarly development of candidates, recognising that not all learning can come from the supervisory relationship alone (Council on Higher Education [CHE] 2022). This sentiment has been raised in research on supervision practices where scholars have argued for the role and value of social learning opportunities within doctoral programmes, such as bringing candidates together in ways that encourage peer learning rather than working in isolation (see, for example, Wilmot 2022; McKenna 2017 2021; de Lange *et al.* 2011; Wisker *et al.* 2007). In contrast to the master-apprentice model, which adopts a narrowly individualistic approach and intensive supervisor capacity requirements, social learning can be harnessed using more collaborative supervision models. Despite the affordances of collaborative approaches, however, the one-on-one model persists. When the pressures for more doctoral graduates are considered in relation to dominant supervision models, questions of quality and genuine opportunities for access and success arise.

Cognisant of the many challenges we face in our context, it is important to remain hopeful in our commitment to creating a learning environment that is conducive to the development of our doctoral candidates. Scholars caution us, however, to discern between celebrating marginalised individuals who have overcome significant odds to achieve and advocating for practices that critically engage and disrupt the hegemony to create success stories of transformation (Zembylas 2014:14). The concept of 'critical hope' provides a powerful organising framework for understanding this subtle but significant difference, and how it can be achieved in practice.

3 Critical Hope

Thinking creatively about how we can mitigate some of our contextual challenges in our doctoral programme, we have drawn on the concept of critical

hope (Bozalek *et al.* 2014), which we also bring to bear in our reflections here. Critical hope is a powerful response to contemporary despair premised on dialogue and reflexivity. It does not deny context but instead requires an analysis of historical and material conditions. As Zembylas (2014:14) indicates, critical hope is 'an act of ethical and political responsibility that has the potential to recover a lost sense of connectedness, relationality, and solidarity with others'.

The concept of hope can be fairly empty if it urges one to simply 'hold the faith' in the light of social inequalities and environmental degradation. This 'naïve hope' or 'mythical hope' (Zembylas 2014:13) plays into meritocracy ideals created by neoliberal forces by creating the false illusion that if one works hard enough, one will achieve (be that in education or in society more broadly). A form of blind optimism, this mindset often results in inaction, as it removes the sense of agency for transformation, or, due to despondency at the lack of transformation, it can lead to a sense of fatalism that things will never change (Zembylas 2014:13). Critical hope, in contrast, demands a deep analysis of the context of injustices and reflection on how they came to be as they are. It requires critical consideration of the status quo and asks who is served by its current framing, recognising that some privileges act to exclude others. Critical approaches can easily slip into despair and despondency, which is where hope is necessary. Hope here does not work alongside criticality as some kind of counterbalance but, rather, these concepts work in congruency (Bozalek *et al.* 2014). Hope here is not a 'lofty, wistful concept' (Bishundat, Phillip & Gore 2018:91) but, rather, is one tethered to reality through reflexivity – that is reflection and an active engagement towards change.

Working within a framework of critical hope requires one to engage in critical inquiry whilst being open to 'critique, ambivalence and uncertainty' (Zembylas 2014:15). This entails being critically aware of hegemonic norms and values and being willing to unlearn and embrace discomfort in the learning process. Such a process can, and indeed should, be a deeply uncomfortable one – whether one is positioned as the privileged or as the marginalised – in essence, it calls for a 'pedagogy of discomfort' (Boler 2014). Central to this pedagogy, is that both the dominant and the marginalised be moved beyond their comfort zone in order to critically engage with the hegemonic values they have come to internalise through socialisation (Boler 2014). A key feature of critical hope, however, is to approach this work with compassion, as Boler (2014) explains that 'to shatter worldviews … can be emotionally translated into feeling one has

no place of belonging' (p. 27) – a process that can be likened to 'an annihilation of self' (p. 31). In the process of dismantling particular worldviews, the job of the educator is to provide an alternate space as well as a framing for the development of 'new social imaginaries' (Zembylas 2014:11) that are underpinned by socially just understandings of the world. In doing so, the sense of despair and failure resulting from the critical unlearning process can be met with a compassionate alternative through which to bring about a transformative learning process.

Engaging with critical hope offers a dual approach that, on the one hand, 'bears witness to negativity' (Apple 2014: xvii) by unearthing relations of power, privilege and marginalisation, while, on the other hand, actively seeks to build alternate critical spaces of possibility and action that can lead to transformative learning processes. In this chapter, we draw on critical hope as an organising framework to explore the work we do in our Higher Education Studies Doctoral Programme and to offer critical reflections on the way the programme is (or is not) responding to the needs of our context in transformative ways that challenge dominant assumptions of academia.

4 Applying Critical Hope to our Programme: A Reflective Illustration

Bozalek *et al.* (2014:2) argue that education can be a 'purveyor of critical hope' but that to be transformative, educational practices also require critical hope. In the remainder of this chapter, we draw on the concept of critical hope to critically reflect on our practices in the Higher Education Studies Doctoral Programme (hereafter HES programme) and suggest how the programme purveys critical hope in its offerings to varying degrees.

We are situated at Rhodes University, a small, rural research-intensive university in the Eastern Cape. Our HES programme comprises 25 to 30 candidates. Our candidates tend to be older than the average age (over 40 years), predominantly female, and are racially and linguistically diverse. Most of our candidates hold full-time academic posts at other universities in South Africa with some working in other countries on the continent and thus do their PhDs part-time from a distance. The only physical contact we have with our candidates tends to be during 'Doc Weeks' (described below), which happens three times a year. Since the programme's inception in 2010, we have worked within the constraints of our context and tried a variety of interventions in our

programme to foster social learning opportunities – some of which have been more successful than others. Such interventions include a pre-doctoral initiative, triannual 'Doc Weeks' (McKenna 2017), research clusters (Wilmot 2022), a fortnightly online work-in-progress programme, and externally funded project teams.

5 Pre-doctoral Programme

As outlined in the recent doctoral review (Council on Higher Education [CHE] 2022), there is a concern about the preparedness of doctoral candidates in South Africa. The field of higher education studies is particularly affected in this regard, as it often attracts academics from diverse disciplines or leadership positions who wish to pursue research on an educational topic in their disciplinary home (e.g., Accounting) or institution (e.g., funding mechanisms in the sector). To provide a bridging structure to the PhD, we offer a one-year pre-doctoral programme with short-course accreditation. During this programme, pre-doctoral students work closely with a mentor (one of our supervisors) towards the development of a research topic. The course is structured around two assignments: a contextual framing of the topic (essentially, a literature review) and a conceptual framing of the study. Students are given access to the full suite of online offerings in the programme and are invited to attend all activities. At the end of the year, if the two assignments have been successfully completed, we invite the student to apply to the PhD programme or they may exit with a certificate. Many also choose not to complete and exit during the course of the year.

We have found this programme to be hugely successful for building a foundation of higher education studies knowledge and inducting students into the disciplinary norms and conventions of higher education research. Importantly, it also gives the student time to critically assess if their current life circumstances are conducive to doing a PhD, and if our programme is the best fit for them. Withdrawing from a pre-doctoral programme is far less emotionally complex than de-registering from a PhD, and as such, we encourage many of our candidates to start in this programme.

Returning to the subtle but important difference between 'naïve hope' and 'critical hope' (Zembylas 2014), we argue that the pre-doctoral programme provides students with a realistic 'taste' of a PhD within a supportive space which can then open opportunities for critical self-reflection on whether this is

the right way forward for them. The complex conceptual work involved in a PhD and the time commitment and effort it requires is often disguised as merely a matter of 'believing in yourself' and 'working hard'. This discourse is to the detriment of the student, and we work hard to dismantle this myth, with the pre-doctoral programme playing a primary role in this regard. The pre-doctoral programme empowers candidates to exercise agency over whether to continue into PhD studies or not. Those students who have successfully completed the pre-doctoral programme and who continued to do a PhD with us tend to enter the programme from a position of strength, both intellectually and personally.

6 Doc Weeks

Doc Weeks are structured research-oriented weeks where students engage with a variety of activities which are designed to support their own research process through social learning. We have three Doc Weeks per year where candidates travel to Rhodes University in Makhanda and attend in person. This is typically the only time that our candidates experience face-to-face learning in the programme – most of the learning and teaching happens online. The structure and content of the weeks are negotiated between the coordinator of the programme (Sioux, from 2010 – 2018 and Kirstin from 2019 to present) and the candidates. We usually include several guest seminars by leading scholars from the field from all around the world (e.g., Michalinos Zembylas, Viv Bozalek, Ronelle Carolissen, Karl Maton, Crain Soudien, Leesa Wheelahan, Margaret Archer, Shireen Motala, Lis Lange, Zodwa Motsa, to name a few), presentations by our own graduates, discussions around key readings, workshops on aspects of the research process and doctoral writing, and face-to-face meetings with supervisors. We also include candidate-led time, such as work-in-progress presentations where candidates share their thinking and work through any research-related challenges they are experiencing.

We have argued elsewhere (see McKenna 2017 and Wilmot 2022) that Doc Weeks are a particularly effective mechanism for fostering social learning and supporting candidates in ways that cannot be achieved to the same degree or in the same way through a one-on-one supervisory relationship. Working within our contextual constraints – primarily the dispersed, distance nature of our cohort – it is also an effective way to create and harness the benefits afforded by a doctoral community. The social and peer learning enabled by this community not only strengthens the academic and scholarly development of the

candidates but also helps support the affective side of doctoral education. For example, it supports the development of a doctoral identity, while cultivating key academic practices such as peer review. Importantly, the development of peer relationships with other candidates that this space enables is central to a positive and successful doctoral journey.

The work we do in Doc Weeks intentionally seeks to disrupt many of the hegemonic discourses in higher education, such as the one foregrounding a meritocratic view of education. This critical work is achieved through the conversations we have as a collaborative community as well as through the ideas and worldviews introduced by means of careful selection of readings and invited guests. In this way, we acknowledge the role of values and ethics in education and seek to reveal power relations within systems – central to critical hope approaches (Bozalek *et al.* 2014:1-2). For example, we intentionally discuss and question the normative roles of the doctorate which are often side-lined in national documents that tend to focus rather on the knowledge economy, or which posit a neutral notion of 'skills'. We explicitly engage with ideas of the doctorate as a public good, and interrogate what it means to nurture responsible, critical citizenship as part of our curriculum. This work is important, particularly in a post-apartheid society where there is a need for graduates who are 'deeply connected with the possibilities of achieving the goal of democratising societies' (Fischman & Haas 2014:60). Given that many of our candidates are themselves lecturers in other higher education institutions, the practices we model in our programme can have an impact in other contexts outside of doctoral studies.

As scholars note, reflexivity is a central part of critical hope work: it always entails both reflection and action – 'dialogue and humility' (Bozalek *et al.* 2014:2) – not only in how we understand and engage with the topics being studied by our doctoral candidates but also, in how we build, more broadly, the culture into the doctoral programme. This is challenging as it requires us to be willing to unlearn, to shift our plans midway, and to embrace other ways of doing. This is not easy when trying to manage and meet the needs of a diverse group in Doc Weeks. It requires constant reflection and engagement with the group and being keenly aware of the power dynamics between the supervisors in the room and the candidates. It is often the case that the person supervising or leading sessions in Doc Weeks is of a different age, gender, race, and language group than some of the candidates given the varied profiles of candidates and supervisors. In line with this diverse contextual reality – which

we argue is a strength of the programme–we (the authors and people integrally involved in the programme) also need to be aware of our positionality. Many of us (including the two authors) are part of the privileged, hegemonic group in our society. Even though the ideologies and ontologies we adopt might resist such hegemony, by virtue of who we are (middle-class, white women) we are part of a system that acts to marginalise others. As such, we need to keep seeking pedagogies of discomfort and practice compassion in all we do to move ourselves and the doctoral candidates, out of our comfort zones into a potentially transformative space (Boler 2014). Our challenge in this work is finding ways to unsettle our own assumptions and blind spots borne of privilege while collectively re-examining many of the hegemonic values so central to our field. As Samuel and Mariaye (2014) observe, this process is not easy and involves constant re-defining and re-negotiating of different roles and the power relations therein. In this sense, it is a personal process of 'allowing one's worldviews to be shattered' (Boler 2014:36) as well as challenging the status quo of the field of higher education studies.

7 Research Clusters

To complement Doc Weeks and provide more focused support for the theoretical development of candidates specifically, we introduced research clusters into the broader HES programme in 2020. Based on the concept of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991), clusters bring together scholars who are working with the same theoretical and analytical framework (see Wilmot 2022 for a more detailed account of the background to, and design of, the cluster initiative). At present, we have three cluster groups: a weekly Legitimation Code Theory cluster, a fortnightly Social Realism cluster; and an ad hoc Decolonial cluster. The clusters are candidate-led, but supervisor attendance is strongly encouraged to support legitimate peripheral participation of novices (Lave 1991). Each session is led by a particular candidate (decided before time using a sign-up roster) and the time is typically used to workshop a specific theoretical/analytical challenge they are experiencing, or to present a piece of analysis which is then (constructively) interrogated by the group. The key premise of the cluster programme is for candidates to present ideas early on so that they can be 'broken' by group members – with the goal of using constructive feedback to build better, stronger ideas in future. Time for cluster meetings is also included in each Doc Week programme.

The work of Zembylas has been useful for understanding our efforts to build a heightened collaborative ethos in the doctoral programme through the cluster initiative. Zembylas (2014:14) argues that collaborative work creates potential for 'affective connections that enable transgressions'. What we have found, however, is that just creating these structures does not guarantee that connections and transgressions will take place. This is especially true when spaces continue to be imbued by criticism rather than critique, and by hierarchical power over connection. We continue to learn that it takes ongoing critical reflection and willingness to change – to embrace what Zembylas describes as 'a decentred, nomadic process by which belonging is defined' (2014:15) – to create a space where candidates can develop real connection through mutual trust. For example, we recognise different patterns of participation in the cluster initiative and the doctoral programme more broadly. This is evident in how some candidates take up opportunities more often than others, and how some candidates feel more comfortable to express vulnerability in the group. We refer to vulnerability here in relation to academic work (such as presenting incomplete ideas or putting one's hand up to lead a session when one does not feel entirely confident to do so), as well as in a personal sense such as trusting the group enough to show emotion (e.g., tears, frustrations, anger) associated with the PhD and, at times, beyond. Unevenness in participation is not unique to our programme, with other scholars observing similar patterns in their own institutional contexts (see, for example, Samuel & Mariaye 2014). Despite not everyone feeling the same degree of freedom to be vulnerable, we have noticed how peer relationships have been forged in these smaller groups and are resulting in increased peer learning opportunities. We see how candidates who may be more reserved in large settings feel able to assert their voice to a far greater degree in the smaller groups.

We are mindful that we need to continually interrogate our practices and assumptions and continually work towards creating spaces where affective connections can be forged. This is one of the reasons why the cluster initiative is candidate-led. The intention was to mitigate the supervisor-candidate power dynamics so that peer learning could be more easily embraced. Interestingly, however, candidates have called for more supervisor attendance and involvement in these groups. Supervisors attending as participants as opposed to 'teachers' has been found to contribute to a productive, collaborative learning space. Initial findings from ongoing research by the first author (Kirstin) and one of the cluster leaders are also revealing how despite the focus being on the

development of theoretical knowledge, the clusters also help shape candidates' doctoral identity and scholarly practices such as peer review. In this way, they appear to be cultivating many of the necessary graduate attributes of doctoral education, as called for in the recent CHE doctoral review (Council on Higher Education [CHE] 2022). Despite the positive outcomes of the clusters, we are cognisant that more work is needed to critically analyse why some candidates continue to feel less able to contribute in these spaces. In doing so, we also need to remain open to changing our 'ways of doing' to ensure that all candidates find a sense of belonging in such spaces.

8 Online Programme

Given that our candidates are doing their PhDs by distance, we have an online programme that runs throughout the year to provide additional space for candidates to meet and share their progress. Since the beginning of 2020, this programme runs every fortnight. A roster is set up and candidates self-select a session to lead. Typically, these sessions are used for work-in-progress updates but occasionally candidates may use the platform to do a practice run of an upcoming conference paper or to workshop an issue related to their research. The doctoral coordinator is always present at the meetings to provide additional feedback and support to the candidate. Supervisors are encouraged to join but we have found that competing schedules means that they do not attend consistently. As with all our offerings, these sessions are voluntary but we find that a core group of about 15 candidates attend every session.

For many of our candidates who are middle-aged and have not studied for years, the entire doctoral journey is a pedagogy of discomfort as they take on and engage with new methods and literacy practices. We explicitly position our role as ensuring an ethic of care through compassion and the development of a collaborative community. Given that our candidates are typically full-time academics at other universities and doing their PhDs by distance, it is likely that they may feel isolated during their doctoral journeys. It is also equally likely that their academic roles can occupy all their time, often at a cost to progress in their studies. Feelings of loneliness and guilt associated with slow progress are commonly referred to in the literature (Barry *et al.* 2018) but are often backgrounded in neoliberal practices and discourses of 'counting' doctoral outputs and scrutinising timelines. In such a framing, the important work of education can be lost, particularly the 'affective qualities such as love, care,

solidarity, collective responsibility' which should be at the forefront of all educational endeavours (Apple 2014: xv).

The online fortnightly programme was therefore developed as a mechanism to provide support in a 'low-stakes' environment since attendees are limited to current candidates and supervisors and 'messy' work is encouraged, and as a regular point of contact for our candidates. Having candidates present work-in-progress updates on their PhDs helps to showcase the 'messiness' and non-linear nature of doctoral studies – an aspect that is often misrepresented in self-help style guidebooks on doctoral studies (Kamler & Thomson 2008). We argue that vulnerability is a necessary quality to embrace in doctoral communities; thus, we endeavour to cultivate the practice of offering incomplete or unpolished work to peers to review in order to develop ideas further. Such an ethos embraces critical hope principles of offering candidates a collaborative space in which criticality and compassion are foregrounded. Informal feedback suggests that this space is serving this purpose well, with candidates self-selecting to lead sessions and participating within the sessions (particularly given the voluntary nature of the programme). When asked if monthly sessions would be preferable, candidates unanimously indicated that they prefer meeting on a more regular basis.

9 Project Teams

Over the past 12 years we have had several different funded doctoral project teams. These have included collaborations between ourselves (Rhodes University) and a number of other South African universities as well as universities in the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Funding for these projects has been secured through grants from the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), the British Council and the National Research Foundation (NRF). The project teams have adopted different approaches but are typically centred around a particular substantive issue facing South African higher education. They do, however, allow flexibility in terms of research design. For example, in our latest project, Social Justice and Quality in Higher Education[1] (a project with Rhodes University, the University of Venda

[1] Find out more about this project team here: https://sites.google.com/ru.ac.za/sjqinhephd/

and Lancaster University) candidates are addressing topics on aspects of social justice and/or quality, but have constructed research projects which utilise different methodologies and theories.

The project teams have been successful in creating smaller, more focused communities for candidates to work in. While there is always input from the diverse range of collaborating supervisors and the coordinator of the larger HES programme at Rhodes University, we have observed that a significant amount of peer support and agency is shown among the candidates themselves – evident in the setting up of WhatsApp groups or scheduling online writing Pomodoro sessions independently of formal project activities. Such activities provide an extra layer of support and camaraderie and often result in long-lasting friendships between candidates, despite being geographically separate. In this sense, the project team structure appears to cultivate affective aspects called for by critical hope theorists more successfully than the larger programme where candidates often take longer to get to know one another and perhaps do not work as closely together in their studies.

Project team funding has also helped to foster stronger relationships between candidates by bringing team members physically together more often, such as for writing retreats or attending conferences. Such opportunities, we argue, foster a culture of care in our programme as supervisors and candidates get to know each other well and gain insight into each other's backgrounds and family circumstances. In doing so, we try and subvert the current pressures and influences in higher education such as neoliberalism, neoconservatism and rankings which 'put pressure on academics to think and act in particular ways' (Apple 2014: xiv). Adopting a mindset of compassion should not, however, be considered at odds with accountability. We argue that compassion needs to be bounded in relation to proper stewardship of resources. As such, we intentionally provide support in relation to milestones (for example, the research proposal) and we make the expectations of doctoral research explicit throughout candidates' journeys – whether it be in relation to the notional hours required, expected milestones, or the quality of the research project.

10 Where to From Here?

From our reflective dialogue with the concept of critical hope, we argue that our current practices reflect some of its principles We have shown how our pre-doctoral programme dismantles notions of 'naïve hope' (Zembylas 2014) in that

candidates are able to get a sense of the expectations of our doctoral programme and exercise their own agency over whether to pursue their PhD with us. We also explained how Doc Weeks enable us to disrupt hegemonic discourses while fostering social learning opportunities in the group. This discussion highlighted the need for 'dialogue and humility' (Boler 2014) as we negotiate different roles and power relations within these programmes. We have also shown through our discussion of cluster groups, the online programme and project teams how community is central to our programme, and how this community attends to the affective dimensions of doctoral education, fostering care, solidarity, and collective responsibility (Apple 2014) among candidates and supervisors.

Despite these positive attributes, there is always space for growth and improvement. While we try to push back against hegemonic discourses wherever we can, we could be making this a formal part of the curriculum through the introduction of what Jan McArthur (personal communication) describes as 'structured opportunities' in doctoral education. As Schwittay (2023:5) notes, to approach teaching as 'a deeply emotional, moral and political endeavour' we need to engage in constant critical reflection. We argue that this work can be done both informally, on an individual basis (as we are already doing), and formally, in the creation of doctoral curriculum. Despite our national systems and associated accrediting bodies not formally recognising coursework for credit in doctoral programmes, we have used coursework very effectively in some of our funded projects. We believe that there is the potential to introduce more structured support that is underpinned by critical hope principles which foster collaborative engagements that seek to disrupt worldviews while, at the same time, producing 'powerful affective connections that create even small cracks to the traditions of oppression and injustice' (Zembylas 2014:32). Including formal curriculum would require us to be more acutely aware, and overtly 'own' what Schwittay (2023:5) refers to as 'our normative values and objecttives'. This is an aspect we are currently exploring in the programme.

We believe that the principles from critical hope are not only embedded in the programme offerings but are also articulated in the kinds of research our candidates pursue. In this sense, 'unlearning the myth of a neutral education' (Boler 2014:30) is central to our practices. This is evident in the way project teams have been constructed (e.g., specifically requiring candidates to focus on social justice topics) as well as the dominant use of critical social theories in the programme. Such frameworks actively seek to identify and understand the inequalities and injustices in our system and how they impact the sector.

Reflecting critical hope principles, however, they also seek to offer alternative, more socially just ways of doing and being.

When she started the programme in 2010, Sioux specified that the measure of success would not only be the number of graduates we produced but, rather, by the quality of their experience and the ways in which their research contributes to higher education debates. The majority of our graduates have published from their research and continue to contribute to scholarly conversations in the field across a range of topic areas[2]. Some have also gone on to take up prominent roles in the field, such as Registrars, Deans and Directors of Centres of Teaching and Learning, officers in the Council on Higher Education and the Department of Higher Education and Training to name a few. The HES doctoral programme has enjoyed a positive reputation in South African higher education, particularly for candidates' robust use of theory to engage with complex social justice issues in the field. To keep this commitment, we need to work with our contextual challenges to find ways to continue to embed critical hope in and through our programme to support graduates who are able to forge 'new social imaginaries that are grounded in social praxis and solidarity' (Zembylas 2014:11).

11 Concluding Thoughts

The different structures described in this chapter provide a snapshot of our offerings, but it is, of course, not the complete story, because structures alone cannot do important critical hope work – the success of any programme depends on how it is implemented. Using the work of critical hope theorists to reflect on our programme reveals how some structures work better than others, but most importantly, that it is the culture created within structures that has the most impact. In light of this process, we argue that two fundamental success factors in the programme are: (1) the building of a collaborative space within a culture of collegiality and commitment to knowledge creation; and (2) the setting of clear, structured support with explicit milestones. In doing so, we offer examples of how we are attempting to deliberately nurture, through our diverse pedagogies, and co-produce, with our candidates, critical hope for bringing

[2] A list of our PhD graduates can be found here: https://www.ru.ac.za/teachingandlearning/highereducationstudies/doctoralprogramme/phdgraduates/

about a transformative learning experience for our doctoral scholars.

Invoking critical hope as an organising framework to research our doctoral programme has enabled a self-reflexive methodology which has helped in charting out the next steps. Zembylas' (2022) work in particular is challenging us to seek ways to move beyond critical hope to engage in 'anti-colonial hope'. We look towards this future work with hope and enthusiasm. Scholars across the continent of Africa have a critical role to play in challenging hegemonic understandings and 'ways of doing' in postgraduate research. Our reflections in this paper are just one example of such work. In as much as we have shown how community is a critical feature of our programme, we too argue that building a community of scholars working in postgraduate studies in Africa is needed. Contributing to these conversations, either in a supervisor or programme coordinator or administrative capacity, we need to share our successes and challenges. As our sector grows and matures there is learning and unlearning to be done, and we have much to offer to international debates. A volume such as this marks a starting point for these hopeful conversations. As Freire (2007:3) indicates '[w]ithout a minimum of hope, we cannot so much as start the struggle'.

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