

# Harmony and Conflict in a PhD Cohort Supervision Model

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## **Abstract**

Doctoral supervision has experienced an evolution from the traditional one-on-one master-apprentice model to the cohort supervision model which draws on the collective expertise of experienced and novice supervisors and student peers. An earlier exploratory study (Govender & Dhunpath 2011) which appraised student experiences and the key principles of collaboration and collegiality revealed two significant trends that seemed to characterise the cohort model. First, the relevance of cohort supervision in the post-proposal generation phase was of variable relevance to candidates and second, the challenge students experience in reconciling support from cohort supervisors and appointed supervisors; and between principal and co-supervisors undermined the model. In this article, we document the analysis of data derived from a follow-up study. We subject the two trends to further scrutiny, presenting the diversity of experiences framed by theoretical and conceptual understandings of collaboration, experiential learning and peer-partnership inquiry. Based on further evidence generated, we argue that the post-proposal supervision is as valuable as the proposal generation phase and that the cohort model cultivates greater academic maturity and intellectual autonomy; enabling students to mediate the conflicting perspectives offered by supervisors. The article concludes with some reflections on the methodological framings of the initial and subsequent studies, signalling how researcher positionalities predispose them to particular analytical frames, stances and conclusions.

**Keywords:** collaboration and collegiality; supervision conflict; academic maturity; conflict and harmony

## **Introduction**

Pemberton and Akkary (2010) describe educational cohorts as purposefully grouped students entering and pursuing a programme of study together, characterised by social and cultural processes, shared experiences and interactions, collective efforts, and mutual commitment to an educational goal. The PhD by Cohort emerged in response to poor retention, poor throughput and protracted completion of doctoral degrees internationally, which have been and still are a cause for concern (Burnett 1999; Lewis *et al.* 2010; Denecke & Frasier 2005; Golde 2005). Additionally, the unsatisfactory quality of research supervision stemming partly from traditional supervision practices has prompted an evolutionary shift from the traditional one-on-one master-apprentice model to cohort supervision of doctoral candidates. Several studies have documented significant benefits generated from the cohort model in post graduate studies (Mandzuk *et al.* 2003; Norris & Barnett 1994; Lewis *et al.* 2010; Saltiel & Russo 2001; Pemberton & Akkary 2010).

In an attempt to increase doctoral throughput, the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) School of Education has intensified support for its doctoral candidates through the cohort model of PhD supervision. The model supplements the one-to-one master-apprentice supervision with the collective expertise of a group of experienced and novice supervisors and student peers working collaboratively. Cohorts comprising approximately between 10 and 15 PhD students and their supervisors meet over 6 weekends a year (from Friday afternoon to Sunday afternoon) to support the work in progress of PhD candidates. Weekend sessions comprise critique of student presentations by cohort supervisors and student peers, as well as plenaries involving presentations by visiting academics/researchers.

The model has already been documented as effective in reducing attrition rates, elevating the quality of doctoral degrees and significantly increasing throughput rates. The exploratory study (Govender & Dhunpath 2011) which appraised student experiences of the UKZN cohort model

revealed that the cohort provided opportunities for deep research learning, superseding those provided by the traditional mentorship model alone. In addition, the key principles of collaboration and collegiality which underpin the model were reflected in interaction among students and between students and cohort supervisors as well as among cohort supervisors.

Despite the benefits reported in the 2011 study, two significant trends were observed. Firstly, students reported that the proposal generation phase was optimally useful in terms of the quality and relevance of input and support received from cohort supervisors and student peers. However, the value and relevance of the support appeared to diminish in subsequent cohort phases. Secondly, students reported tensions between cohort and appointed supervisors and principal and co-supervisors which in some instances compromised student performance. Consequently, some students found it difficult to reconcile support from cohort supervisors and appointed supervisors; and between principal and co-supervisors.

Since this data emerged from an exploratory investigation, the authors were reluctant to make any definitive conclusions. It was therefore necessary to extend the findings drawn from the initial study by generating evidence from a more focused follow-up study to interrogate the model and to establish whether the two emerging trends persist across other cohorts. The new sample of cohorts, also 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year cohorts, does not differ markedly from the previous sample with the exception that one of the cohorts comprises entirely higher education candidates drawn from the academic staff from various disciplines across UKZN. The differences firstly are that the foci of the follow-up study are the two emerging trends rather than general student experiences of cohort learning. Secondly, the analysis of the data is guided by the new foci but more especially the authors concede that upon reflection the analysis of the data in the previous study privileged more heavily the value of harmony in cohorts rather than conflict. Consequently, analysis of the new data is additionally informed by theories underpinning the value of ‘disruptive’ pedagogy in advancing deep research learning.

## **Collaboration and Contestation in Postgraduate Studies**

Our review of the literature (Govender & Dhunpath 2011) revealed that the cohort model has academic, affective and interpersonal benefits which

include the promotion of greater solidarity within cohorts by generating mutual support and protection, improved graduation rates, reduced attrition and the creation of intellectually stimulating environments within which research learning is facilitated. Among the limitations of the model, our review revealed that there is potential for discord among students in the cohort, pressures on instructors, and without purposeful faculty nurturance, departmental collaboration and administrative guidance, the cohort model simply becomes a convenient administrative tool without addressing students' individual needs.

Pemberton and Akkary's (2010:181) comprehensive review of the benefits and drawbacks of the cohort model similarly reveal that cohort candidates experienced improved academic performance related to enhanced feelings of support and connection and increased exposure to diverse ideas and perspectives. However, they noted the perceived or actual threat to faculty members of 'overly empowered' students, the negative impact of personal issues on group morale and performance, tensions between cohort groups, and pressures on cohort students to be productive. While Imel (2002) contends that an effective cohort creates a context which encourages mutual respect, fosters critical reflection, and stimulates the development of multiple perspectives, Slemp (2005) observed the proliferation of groupthink, ostracism of individuals from the cohort and mean spiritedness to instructors unpopular with the students. Perhaps most relevant to this article is Tietel's (1997) observation that a cohort model is a potential source of tension on existing structures related to the traditional teaching and learning processes, the role of Faculty/School members, and the purposes of the education programme. However, Saltiel and Russo (2001) suggest that cohort programmes will not supplant traditional programmes in institutions but will instead complement them by bringing in students and resources that probably would not have come to a traditional programme.

Literature on the cohort model, while documenting several benefits and drawbacks of the model, is limited in terms of documenting the value or otherwise of collaborative supervision over the use of an individual supervisor. The search was therefore broadened to review different schemes of doctoral supervision and not necessarily confined to those encompassed within a cohort programme. The consequent literature search (Powell & Green 2007; Davis 2004; Mahlapuu 2011) revealed some ambivalence

regarding the value of collaborative supervision versus the use of a single supervisor. Davis (2004) stresses the value of doctoral consortia where students present their work at various stages of development and receive feedback from senior researchers and students. As a counterpoint, Mahlapuu (2011) found that despite the advocacy of joint supervision on the basis that it provides efficient support and acts as a 'safety net', her study revealed that the benefits of joint supervision remained scarce when measured against the drawbacks including tensions caused by supervisors disagreeing with each other or increased distance between student and supervisor(s).

Powell and Green (2007) assessing the value of supervision by team versus individual supervisors found that their own experiences and perceptions of working in teams revealed benefits for supervisors in terms of broadening their view of the subject material and possible ways of exploring it. However, they argue that there is no compelling empirical evidence from their study to support these claims. In addition, they concede that their study does not present evidence of the benefits for students of collaborative supervision although they presume that students will make use of various kinds of methodological expertise that different supervisors bring.

Significant for this article is Powell and Green's (2007) observation of the danger of imposing team supervision on academics who are accustomed to supervising alone and the greater danger when roles within team supervision are not clarified but obfuscated. This, they contend, may lead to academics wrestling with ill-defined social structures than supervising students, and students finding themselves in academic relationships with individuals offering potentially conflicting views of their roles and conflicting views on the project in hand that remain unresolved.

Literature on the cohort model reviewed in the foregoing section while conceding the value of dissenting voices and conflicting views in some cases nevertheless privileges harmony in cohorts rather than contestation. Underpinning the views about the cohort model is a presumption that the process of learning must be seamless, harmonious and non-disruptive, a 'happy pedagogy' that insulates participants from the ravages of contestation. Ironically, perhaps, this conception of supervisor is antithetical to the very purpose of what doctoral education is aiming to provide: opportunities for extending the boundaries of knowledge, not simply confirming or expanding them within 'restricted parameters' defined and confined by the powerful

experts in the cohort. Noting that supervision of higher degrees research is a pedagogical activity, perhaps the most advanced level of teaching in our educational system (Connel 1985), and noting also that disputation is key to learning within a cohort, this literature search has been widened to include the cultural politics of pedagogic practice (Giroux 1997).

Giroux (1997) believed that if the social nature of conflict and scepticism was removed from pedagogical encounters, it would promote inert ideas and produce tunnel vision. He contends further that if pedagogy fails to encourage self-reflection and communicative interaction, it promotes manipulation and denies opportunities for critical reflection, arguing that any progressive notion of learning must be accompanied by pedagogical relationships marked by dialogues, questioning and communication. In a similar vein, the pedagogical encounter within post graduate seminars (and by implication the UKZN cohort seminar sessions) is a highly contested but a deeply enriching learning experience as so astutely articulated by Green and Lee (1995:41):

The seminar is a powerful means whereby what counts as academic-intellectual work is represented and authorised. This does not just involve the presentation itself, whether a virtuoso performance or simply the spectacle of intellection, thought thinking itself, but crucially also the exchange afterwards, in the manner in which individuals of varying authority and expertise engage with the presenter or with each other and the manner in which the presenter responds to and transacts with others in the session. It is for students a matter often of watching and learning how to be, how to interact and intervene, how to introduce and develop a commentary however attenuated it might need to be in the circumstances, [and] how to work with difference and disputation.

## **Theoretical Framing**

Drawing on existing literature on collaborative work and reflection arising from experiential learning as well as the value of student engagement with conflicting views in cohorts particularly with regards to the academic benefits of cohorts, we interrogate cohort support in different phases of the

doctoral research endeavour. Our study is thus framed by theoretical and conceptual understandings of knowledge generation through collaboration and experiential learning (Wenger 1998; Kolb 1985; Kolb & Fry 1975; Boud *et al.* 1985). Additionally we use differing discourses of supervisory relationships (Grant 2005), and peer partnership inquiry to improve PhD supervisory relationships (McMorland 2003) as lenses to view the data. To explore the value of contestation, disputation and contradictory positions which impel critical reflection in cohorts, the data is viewed through the lenses of critical pedagogy (Giroux 1997).

Lave and Wenger's (1991) model of situated learning proposed that learning involved participation in a community of practice whose members are engaged in the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise. Members are brought together by joining in common activities and by what they have learned through their mutual engagement in these activities (Wenger 1998). The shared learning experiences of both students and cohort supervisors within a context of collaboration, mutual support and reciprocal intellectual stimulation are subjected to interrogation framed by Lave and Wenger's (1991) constructs of situated, peripheral learning. Additionally, the wide range of activities within cohorts calling for learning through reflecting on 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> hand research experiences are interpreted within the frame of experiential learning, and reflection which is a critical facet of learning from experience. Cohort activities resonate with the activities that Kolb and Fry (1975), Kolb (1984), Jarvis (1995) and Boud *et al.* (1985) consider to be linked to reflection. These include the following activities: making sense of experiences we have had, comparing notes, round-table discussions, carrying out post-mortems (metaphorically speaking), and having informal discussions.

The study is also framed by peer-partnership inquiry (McMorland *et al.* 2003) which encourages dialogue among PhD candidates, supervisors and other faculty members in a reflexive mode to enhance the practice of supervisory relationships. Conversations about research and supervisory relationships are directed at developing skills in peer learning and peer engagement and strengthening a culture of learning across multiple role relationships. Peer-partnership inquiry is used to interrogate the multiple relationships existing within cohorts and the possible tensions associated with these relationships. These include relationships among students within a

cohort, between students and cohort supervisors, among cohort supervisors, between cohort supervisors and appointed supervisors, between students and appointed supervisors, and between principal and co-supervisors.

To extend understanding of relationships between students and their appointed supervisors, these relationships are interpreted within the frame of the four main discourses of supervisory relationships. The four discourses of supervisory relationships are: *psychological-supervisor/student disclosure* – the psychological supervisor is primarily a caring professional offering personal support and guiding the student to maturity as an independent researcher, *traditional academic-supervisor/student relations* - this type of supervision is seen as intellectual apprenticeship and marked by formality and distance, *techno-scientific-supervisor/student relations*– this type of supervision is marked by close monitoring of the efforts of the student, who must be schooled in the right methods of research, *neo-liberal supervisor/student relations* - here the student is an autonomous chooser, a consumer of services provided by the supervisor, with both parties having certified rights and responsibilities (Grant 2005).

The theoretical positions underpinning the models of communities of practice, experiential learning and peer partnership inquiry celebrate the agency of the individuals as co-operating and collaborating with each other in a communal, shared and common enterprise. This presumes that harmony rather than contestation is the ingredient for activating learning. While harmony can and does facilitate learning, it can also cultivate sterile learning, reaffirming existing, uncontested and potentially flawed positions. Furthermore, the community of practice is not a neutral, happy, safe or uncontested space. It embeds power relations and hierarchies and the shared enterprise is one which should recognise the degrees of dissension even if it evinces a communal character. In addition, dissension and conflict as conceptualised in a critical pedagogy can and does produce new and empowering knowledge. Therefore in designing programmes that are genuinely emancipatory, conflict must be rescued from its pejorative connotation (Vithal 2003:343). Vithal contends that a pedagogy of conflict and dialogue is as a key an ingredient for self-development, as dialogue is. Vithal views the pedagogy of conflict and dialogue in its antagonistic or conflictual character together with its co-operative or dialogic nature as a complementarity. While the value of conflict within cohorts is used as a lens

to view the data, the issue of threshold levels of disruption and the need to support students to cope with the degrees of disruption has to be a key design element, as raised by Vithal (2003:343) who cautions that learning how to critique becomes extremely important if a pedagogy of conflict is to be productive rather than damaging.

## **Methodology**

The data was drawn from questionnaire responses to open-ended questions, telephonic interviews to clarify responses in some cases, and individual face-to-face interviews. Participants comprised 12 doctoral candidates from 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year cohorts. The data focused on the quality and usefulness of cohort support in the various phases of the research project, viz. data generation, data production and analysis, and writing up the thesis. In addition, data collection covered the area of collaborative supervision and its impact on traditional supervision particularly possible tensions, conflicting advice and consequent effects on students. Informed consent to participate was elicited from all participants prior to data generation. Additional data was drawn from evaluation reports of seminar sessions culled from evaluation forms completed by students.

## **Analysis**

The data was subjected to content analysis framed by theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of the study. The analysis is anchored by a scrutiny of the two themes selected from the initial study.

### ***Usefulness of Cohort Support in the Three Phases***

Findings from the initial study revealed that cohort support in the first phase, proposal generation, was most useful, with waning relevance in the post-proposal generation phase. The data from the follow-up study reaffirms the perceived value of cohort support in the proposal generation phase but also suggests that the post proposal phase provides useful support to students of a qualitatively different kind with different learning outcomes for candidates.

As was raised earlier in the article, the positionality of the authors which privileged harmony in cohorts rather than conflict may have influenced analysis in the earlier study to produce findings that the post proposal phase was counter-productive or increasingly irrelevant to the PhD candidates.

### ***Proposal Generation Phase***

The majority of the respondents confirmed findings from the initial study that the proposal generation phase was indeed the most useful in terms of cohort support from both student peers and cohort supervisors. The general perception was that the proposal generating phase was critical to all the other phases and there was clear, focused and generic support for constructing a proposal that would stand up to rigorous critique in the proposal defence and provide an anchor for subsequent phases of the research project. The following responses suggest the significance of the proposal generation phase:

- This is a very difficult phase of the PhD as not only is there the difficulty of understanding research methodologies but there is the confusion around exactly what the research phenomenon and ultimately the research question is. The cohort provided support on multiple levels...research methodology, philosophical perspectives ... also provided a valuable forum for presenting and discussing our thinking around the development of our proposals.  
Most useful is the proposal generation phase...firstly this is when there is the most confusion, secondly everyone is essentially doing the same thing, just in different areas. This means that the ‘teaching’ is generally appropriate to everyone.

Despite the general consensus that the proposal generation phase was most useful, there were two respondents who indicated that cohort support during this phase was counterproductive. One of the respondents felt this was because cohort supervisors who operated outside of her discipline ‘had not read [her] entire proposal’; were not familiar with the discourse of her discipline and relied heavily on her inputs which compromised her progress particularly in Phase 1 of the cohort programme. The lack of discipline specific knowledge by cohort members and especially the cohort supervisors

was also raised by the second respondent who similarly found cohort support in the proposal generation phase counterproductive. He stated: ‘There was a disconnect between my thinking and [the cohort supervisors’]...we were not on the same page because of our differing disciplinary knowledge bases’.

The proposal generation phase is preoccupied with generic research issues cross-cutting various disciplines. Hence, the candidate here may not be experiencing a disconnect because of lack of disciplinary knowledge by peers and cohort supervisors but by his disconnect with the worldviews which were perhaps different from his disciplinary home traditions and rituals of research methodology. This may be particularly so when students are crossing disciplinary/ field boundaries such as when they are entering into the discipline of Higher Education from *outside*, e.g. from Management Studies or Computer Science. The orientation and substance of Educational discourses may be alienating and disempowering to some rather than emancipatory, in the initial states at least.

Notwithstanding what the candidate found frustrating and limiting, the prospect of deepening his scholarship and disciplinary knowledge was compromised as he was required to constantly orientate and re-orientate his cohort peers and supervisors to his discipline. This respondent admitted that during his proposal defence he ‘threw out everything’ suggested by the cohort in earlier sessions and reverted to substance of his original proposal on which his application to the programme had been based. He added that he experienced an epiphany which affirmed his intellectual worth when one of the cohort supervisors who was at the proposal defence conceded that he finally understood the intent of the research project.

These findings ostensibly conflict with the literature which documents benefits for cohort members such as development of critical thinking skills (Chairs *et al.* 2002), development of an enhanced knowledge base (Norris & Barnett 1994), motivation to learn more (Brooks 1998), and changes in perspectives on their own and others’ learning (Lawrence 1997). However, the literature also reflects that advancing disciplinary scholarship is the domain of the master cast in the role of discipline expert as contemplated in the traditional academic-supervisor/student discourse (Grant 2005) while team supervision benefits students by affording them a range of methodological expertise and generic research support (Powell & Green 2007). The use of the cohort model alongside traditional supervision at the

UKZN School of Education allows PhD candidates access to discipline experts as well as methodological expertise and generic research support.

Additionally, the epiphany the candidate (cited above) had experienced is perhaps suggesting that ‘research learning’ within the doctoral supervision process is not a *one way street*, i.e. that the student imbibes the supervisors’ knowledge. Instead, research learning is a *multi-tracked highway* of opposing and competing directional forces, i.e. that opportunities for ‘research learning’ for supervisors is what renders the model emancipatory, especially since supervisors may be credited with having supervised research, but are not necessarily generic discipline experts.

In addition to lack of discipline-specific knowledge, the too rigid and inflexible cohort structure, particularly (but not solely) in the proposal generation phase, was raised by a respondent as a drawback. The following response captures that position:

- I had a challenge meeting the rigid timelines for the deliverables while trying to do life. I used to feel inadequate and frustrated and I used to resent the cohort weekend – not being able to keep in sync with others who had been making good progress while I appeared to be falling behind .... I am an organic intellectual and I don’t think the cohort provides a space for that kind of individual.

However, other respondents appreciated the tight deadlines as this kept them on task. The literature also speaks of the drawbacks of structural and organisational rigidity of closed cohorts prompting Pemberton and Akkary (2010:202) to recommend an open and flexible model, wherein connection opportunities are facilitated via proximity and mutuality of purpose, absent rigid group admissions/enrolments and course sequencing requirements. However, unlike the lock-step model that Burnett *et al.* (2000) refer to, the UKZN cohort model allows for structured flexibility of movement across phases depending on the progress of individual students. Hence, the model is characterised by ‘democratic teaching/learning participation’, ‘structured scaffolding’, ‘Ubuntu’ and ‘serendipity’ (see Samuel & Vithal 2011). Additionally, candidates effectively determine the focus and content of cohort sessions within a broad developmental curriculum framework.

### ***Post-proposal Generation Phase***

While the proposal generation phase was generally regarded as most valuable in their research journeys, the respondents also underscored the value of cohort support during the data production and analysis phase. The writing phase was regarded as an independent activity requiring own effort although there was a suggestion that students be allowed more time to interact and share their experiences of writing-up together. The following comment attempts to correct a persisting misperception:

- One may be tempted to think that the cohort has less value once we all enter our various analysis modes - as we diverge in philosophy, methodology, etc. However, I must say that I learnt from every single person's presentation and the feedback they received. There is amazing value in engaging in conversations with colleagues at this stage.

All of the respondents who had progressed to Phase 2 (Data Collection and Analysis) or further in the cohort programme agreed that support in the post proposal generation phase was useful. The respondents referred to a range of support including meaningful inputs from cohort supervisors and visiting academics during the Friday night plenaries on research methodology, from peer presentations, and from cohort supervisor and peers' comments on their work in progress. The following responses reflect this position:

- In this phase (Data Generation) I have felt the advice invaluable and more constructive. There has been a lot of assistance with theory development and methodologies.
- I really valued the process of listening to other people's analysis of their data. I feel that one of the big problems at this stage of the PhD is knowing how to approach the analysis and then how to undertake the analysis. By observing other students undertaking their analysis, it gives a great insight into possibilities and pitfalls. This is extremely valuable and something that moves from the theory to the practice of analysis.

- I am only just entering this phase, but again have found the cohort to be extremely helpful. At our last cohort I presented some of my initial thoughts around the analysis of the data. This phase echoes with sentiments of confusion and drowning last felt in the proposal phase. The cohort was very valuable in providing useful insights that are often hidden from us.

These responses are indicative of sustained engagement with and commitment to cohort work and a high degree of cohort cohesiveness. One of the respondents stated: ‘in this phase [data generation]...the group is more familiar with each other and their research topics. I am also more comfortable with the cohort supervisors’. This was not evident in the findings from the initial study, where more than one respondent indicated the irrelevance for their study of the second and subsequent year seminar sessions and their desire to break away from their cohorts and work with students in similar research areas (Govender & Dhunpath 2011:92). It was evident that there was a lack of cohesiveness in the cohorts to which these respondents belonged, and the lack of commitment of these respondents to their cohorts perpetuated the weakening of these cohorts. Group cohesiveness and group support are integral to the success of cohorts, especially where there is a high degree of cohort cohesiveness; friendships that outlast the completion of the degree are forged (Potthof *et al.* 2001).

Apart from the greater cohesiveness of cohorts to which respondents in the follow-up study belonged, there was also evidence of greater academic maturity among several of the respondents which may also account for their sustained engagement with cohort work beyond the proposal generation phase. The majority of the respondents are academic staff members with six of the eleven PhD candidates belonging to the Higher Education cohort engaged in advancing scholarship and knowledge generation in their disciplines. While being an academic does not guarantee academic maturity, the reality that many of these candidates are pursuing their PhDs for purposes of ‘deepening scholarship in a discipline’ would probably translate into sustained and deeper, more meaningful engagement in their cohorts, beyond the proposal generation phase. Evidence of deep and meaningful engagement in the cohort in all the phases is apparent in the openness to a range of diverse comments and suggestions from cohort supervisors and

peers, commitment to working collaboratively, articulation of a need to constantly reflect on cohort learning, and an acknowledgement of student growth by students.

A comment captured in an evaluation report on the 4<sup>th</sup> Higher Education Cohort Seminar for 2012 read: ‘It was interesting to note how the level of comments coming from cohort members has definitely risen to being far more perceptive, confident and useful’. This suggests a shifting quest for autonomy and independence and support and dependence over different stages of their research learning process. It is not a linear or stage developmental model of learning, but a shifting and re-interpreting of the goals of the learning and teaching environment.

Many of the respondents welcomed ‘fresh opinions and viewpoints’, found it ‘useful to bounce ideas off other students’ and appreciated the value of divergence manifested as ‘people collect data in different...but extremely useful [ways]’. One of the respondents noted:

- The cohort provides a vantage point to engage with a complexity of ideas and positions and often the ideas are a product of serendipity – one little snippet offered by someone fundamentally changes your thinking...I am able to draw on these multiple sources of expertise to enrich [my study].

This response attests to the value of collaborative work in enriching learning experiences and improving academic performance through exposure to diverse ideas and perspectives (Barnett & Muse 1993) and which engenders shared learning through mutual engagement in common activities (Wenger 1998). Other responses, suggesting deep research learning triggered by reflection arising from comparing notes with peers, making sense of own and others’ experiences and engaging in informal discussions (Kolb & Fry 1975; Kolb 1984; Jarvis 1995; Boud *et al.* 1985), are captured in the following quotes:

- The critique of others assisted me to consider my own research in more critical ways.
- Allowed me to think more laterally, and anticipate possible critiques of my work.

- As the phases progress there is need for more individual reflection...more time should be built in for ‘quiet time’ where students spend an hour working on what they have just heard while having ready/easy access to the cohort leaders for advice.

The quality of cohort supervision and the enthusiasm of cohort supervisors are also critical to sustaining meaningful student engagement in the cohorts beyond the proposal defence. Lawrence (2002:84) argues that when commitment is high and contributions from all members are valued, communities have the potential to co-create knowledge, make effective decisions, and effect change. Norris and Barnett (1994) contend that a cohort is more than an administrative arrangement; cohorts must be purposefully formed and structured if they are to succeed as environments that foster learning and development. Much of this purposeful structure and encouragement of collective commitment emanates from the instructors, facilitators or cohort supervisors. The following responses suggest that high quality cohort supervision was a factor in sustaining cohort participation beyond year one:

- I am truly grateful for the level of commitment and sacrifice (of cohort supervisors) which was at the highest level which is inspirational.
- I find supervisor X to be particularly provocative and stimulating and able to push students into innovative directions. Her constant revision/revisiting of each of these aspects clarified several confusing issues. It can be seen that she takes much time to prepare all this work, and on a personal basis that also has provided inspiration to me, which is a vital aspect of support.

### **Supervisory Support - Cohort Supervisors, Principal Supervisors and Co-supervisors**

The data revealed interesting dynamics regarding relationships between students and supervisors and among supervisors within cohorts and at the interface of the cohort programme and traditional supervision. The issues of

power differentials, power plays (McMorland *et al.* 2003) and the potential tensions exerted by collaborative supervision on traditional teaching and learning processes (Teitel 1997) were illuminated.

### ***Positioning of Cohort Supervisors***

The data revealed that the position the cohort supervisors adopt in respect of students and fellow cohort supervisors impacts significantly on students' emotional states and invariably on their receptiveness to cohort learning. While the data revealed that there is a high degree of collaboration among cohort supervisors which supports the learning and development of PhD candidates, there is also evidence of what one respondent labels 'academic swagger'. By this she is referring to cohort supervisors showing off 'their wealth of knowledge and experience which can be helpful and a positive thing'. However, she adds:

- We, the students, are not so experienced or well-versed in all areas of the discipline to engage at that level. Our area of 'expertise' at this point is in our study. Perhaps later in the 3<sup>rd</sup> phase we can engage more on debates in the discipline. At this point we are just concentrating on moving ahead, with the least amount of disruption.

The reported consequences of 'academic swagger' are that sessions tend to lose focus and time limits are not adhered to. A similar finding was revealed in the initial study where one of the respondents asserted that he was at the mercy of academics that were intent on showcasing what each knew instead of assisting him. Pothoff *et al.* (2001) and Tareilo (2007) contend that cohorts should be sites of intellectually stimulating discussions and debates and incisive inputs from professors and other senior scholars. However, students' capacity to engage meaningfully with such input is also critical to research learning and what is pejoratively labelled as 'swagger' might be an articulation of students' insecurities about their knowledge as revealed in: 'The cohort has often made me feel insecure about my abilities – it has often forced me to contemplate whether the problem was actually linked to my own arrogance'. It may be argued that supervisors are expected to 'profess' and demonstrate their repertoire, to disrupt candidates'

‘arrogance’ and to elevate the quality of debate, moving candidates from the superficial to the profound.

Perhaps of greater significance than the ‘academic swagger’ of cohort supervisors are the power relations prevalent within cohorts between students and cohort supervisors. One of the respondents asserted:

- Power relations between [cohort] supervisors and myself is certainly an issue I’ve had to deal with – despite what I said about having a ‘teachable spirit’. I sometimes feel that my expertise and experiences as an academic are not acknowledged and affirmed as important and significant to my research endeavour – there’s something about the power dynamics of the cohort space that I don’t experience with my supervisor.

This sentiment was echoed by another respondent who stated: ‘One of the cohort supervisors really got to me in a serious way. I found myself frequently trying to prove myself to the supervisor – and to the cohort’. Evidently, the power differentials within cohorts favour the cohort supervisors, some of whom are cast in the role of experienced researchers, rather than the PhD candidates who are conscious of their novice researcher status.

Other respondents commented on the lack of sensitivity of cohort supervisors when critiquing students’ work in progress. One of the respondents stated: ‘At times the approach when advising students was intimidating and demotivating’. Although she conceded that ‘such powerful criticism has made us resilient and spurred us on to persevere’, she added that early cohort sessions are crucial to the emotional wellbeing of most PhD students. She advised: ‘Supervisors need to be circumspect in these early PhD weeks regarding the manner in which their vital support is articulated. Often, negative criticism is well received when the tone and manner of articulation is not condescending or demeaning’. A similar comment was made by another respondent:

- While care and critique are both borne out of interest in the student, and critique is care, the manner in which that is delivered to the student must be carefully considered. It may not have happened in

my group, but to hear that some cohort supervisors use personal, derogatory criticism is not acceptable.

Instructive for the debate around student/supervisors and supervisor/supervisor relationships within cohorts, are the findings from peer-partnership inquiry to enhance PhD relationships (McMorland *et al.* 2003:25). Reflexive inquiry involving both supervisors and supervisees revealed the following:

- One of the PhD students gained insight into the complexities of her co-supervisory panel and how to understand and better ‘manage’ the relationships between supervisors with hugely differing areas of expertise, methodology and understandings of supervision.
- The other has built on an existing strong supervisory relationship to initiate future research inquiry into the significance of power underpinning voice and silence in collaborative groups.

McMorland *et al.* (2003) suggest that more attention should be paid to the multiple and complex relationships that exist among students, staff and institution if the PhD endeavour is to be a fulfilling and creative enterprise for all. However, as was captured earlier in the article, this does not imply that a challenging disruptive pedagogy will not yield a fulfilling and creative enterprise. The goal is not to create harmonious emotionally supportive climates; the goal is to produce opportunities for producing new knowledge.

### ***Principal and Co-Supervisors – Complementary Roles***

Unlike the tensions that existed between some of the principal and co-supervisors in the initial study, data from the follow-up study revealed that where students had two supervisors they complemented each other. Each had strengths that were brought into the supervisory relationship to enhance the quality and depth of supervision. The teamwork and effective collaboration demonstrated by principal and co-supervisors are alluded to in the following responses:

- My supervisors work in unison with one another... one supervisor is very practical and gives clear, workable advice. The other supervisor is very strong academically and provides a clear critical perspective that is very useful.
- We work as a team ... [Where there are differences] we talk it through - one is an educator cum applied linguist and the other one is an educator public health practitioner - it's sometimes quite emotionally exhausting - but it makes me think things through.

It is evident from the responses that the principal and co-supervisors are able to work in unison when their roles are well defined, and often they play differing but complementary roles. Additionally, and contrary to an earlier assertion by the authors, students are not pulled in different directions, nor is there increasing distance between student and supervisors (Mahlapuu 2011). Here we are reminded of Powell and Green's (2007) caution that roles within team supervision should be clarified to obviate academics wrestling with ill-defined social structures instead of advising students.

In spelling out the role played by appointed (principal and co-) supervisors compared to cohort supervisors, respondents commented not only on the increasingly important function they served after the proposal defence but also their attention to detail and their preoccupation with keeping students on task constantly. Appointed supervisors did not only play an academic role but also a caring, nurturing role according to the respondents. In terms of the four main discourses of supervisor-student relationships, the data revealed that appointed supervisors emerged increasingly as the psychological supervisor. According to Grant (2005), psychological supervisors are caring professionals who offer personal support, act as a source of motivation and encouragement and guide the student to maturity as an independent researcher. The roles played by appointed supervisors and the relationships between students and appointed supervisors are captured in the following responses:

- My supervisor has provided appropriate guidance without taking ownership of the study. She allows me to have enough freedom, while also providing adequate support.

- My supervisor presented me with many opportunities. She is prompt and gets back to me weekly about my progress. But she is also helping me develop in other ways, with her words of wisdom, support and concern.
- During the proposal generation stage the continual engagement with the cohort was the main support. However, my supervisor support needs are beginning to increase ... I now see [my supervisor] becoming more of a key resource in advising me and reading drafts of chapters, etc.

### ***Appointed and Cohort Supervisors – Conflicting Advice***

The data reinforces findings from the initial study of conflicting advice from cohort supervisors and appointed supervisors, which, in some instances, had generated tensions. Conflicting, unresolved views can be potentially dangerous (Powell & Green 2007) as illustrated by the case of one respondent. When the cohort supervisors' 'advice conflicted with [her] appointed supervisor's, it threw [her] off course and [she] had to defend [her proposal] twice.' However, the more academically mature the student becomes, the more easily can the contradictory advice be mediated. Not surprisingly, some of the respondents thrived on conflicting and contradictory views, arguing that 'multiple independent perspectives are more useful than consensus' and that this is what defines doctoral studies. The following responses underscore conflicting support from cohort and appointed supervisors:

- In the first year I did get mixed signals from the cohort and my supervisor and that was a source of frustration - until I changed my attitude. I resented it initially, until I accepted that I had the power to assess the validity of the multiple sources and derive what I thought was valuable... it's not easy to deal with this conflicting situation but you learn to see the bigger picture and learn how this is a source of enrichment.
- I don't think contradictory support and suggestions should be limited or eradicated. This is vital to the process, especially at a PhD level.

- There is no single way, or depending on philosophical paradigm - single 'truth'.
- Why would you want to eradicate [contradictory advice]? It's part of what I enjoy about the cohort model. Contradiction and paradox are central to themes in my study, so why should this be a problem for me in the supervision?

Despite some respondents recognising the value of contradictory and conflicting perspectives, there was, nevertheless, ample evidence that students wished to bridge the perceived or real divide between cohort and appointed supervisors. More than one respondent suggested ways of bridging this divide. One suggested inviting appointed supervisors to the cohort. Since several appointed supervisors also act as cohort supervisors, it might be correct to assume that the respondent is referring to inviting appointed supervisors to witness their students' presentations in the cohort. Another respondent considered the pros and cons of inviting appointed supervisors to their students' cohorts:

- Absence of the primary supervisor from the cohort frees the candidate to speak and present confidently without the apprehension of contradicting the primary supervisor. Of course the downside is that the supervisor does not get the benefit of the critique.

Some respondents suggested encouraging greater dialogue between cohort and appointed supervisors so that they could reach common ground:

- Both groups of supervisors must meet and be aware of what the other says to their students.
- I think at least one of the supervisors should also be a cohort supervisor so that there is a greater understanding of how the cohort could work to enhance the study and help the student to finish the study on time.

- Co-supervisors must meet with each other and understand each other's perspectives. Given the nature of academic discourse, supervisors must remain open to differing viewpoints. Then together they can try to assist the student. An appreciation of each other's contribution will help the student.

The literature also recommends greater dialogue among supervisors, not to silence conflicting and contradictory views, but to enhance supervisory relationships through peer partnerships and reflexivity (McMorland *et al.* 2003). Perhaps the following comment from McMorland *et al.* (2003:3) sums up the need to rethink relationships in collaborative supervision:

It is only by seeing supervision and research collaboration as relationship as well as a project, that intellectual intimacy, reflexive practice and creative inquiry can be fostered and enhanced.

## **Findings and Emerging Insights**

Some of the more noteworthy findings and insights that emerged from the study include:

- The proposal generation phase of the cohort programme was still perceived by students to be very significant and offering the most useful and important support. Students considered proposal generation to be integral to the entire research enterprise. While quality input and focused support in this phase made it an effective learning and development phase, issues of inflexible structuring of the cohort model and the challenges of a limited discipline-specific knowledge base in cohorts compromised students.
- Contrary to previous findings, the post-proposal generation phase was perceived as being extremely useful as well. The high degree of cohort cohesiveness, greater academic maturity of students and high quality cohort supervision were critical to maintaining meaningful student engagement in the cohort beyond the proposal-generation phase. Opportunities to enhance cohort supervision and invariably to

enhance student participation in cohorts should be exploited through appropriate supervision training.

- As opposed to previous findings, there was evidence to suggest that principal and co-supervisors complemented each other, which impacted positively on the supervision experience for students. Critical to the complementary roles played by dual supervisors is the clear demarcation of roles, which is advisable to negotiate and document officially at the commencement of the research project.
- There was ample evidence of conflicting and contradictory advice from cohort and appointed supervisors which in some instances compromised students. However, in the main, with greater academic maturity, students are able to mediate the differing perspectives offered by the supervisors.
- Students recommended greater dialogue between appointed and cohort supervisors to bridge perceived gaps between cohort and traditional supervision. Dialoguing and reflection among supervisors and students are critical to enhancing supervisory relationships and not necessarily to silence disparate views.

## **Concluding Comments**

This article has attempted to document, more objectively, findings from a follow-up to an earlier study which interrogated the cohort model of PhD supervision used in the School of Education (Edgewood Campus: UKZN). Two claims identified in the earlier study were interrogated to test their veracity, namely: relevance of the post-proposal generation support of the cohort programme, and the perceived tensions among cohort, principal and co-supervisors emanating from conflicting advice given to students. The findings from the follow-up study confirms that the proposal generation phase is still considered by students to be the most critical for their research studies, and the contradictory advice from the different supervisors do impact on the relevance and quality of supervision support.

However, the findings from the subsequent study reveal that the post-proposal generation phase is also useful and its relevance does not wane

in subsequent years. In addition, while students suggested bridging the perceived or real divide between cohort and appointed supervisors, students welcomed differing perspectives as these multiple perspectives enriched their own understandings, allowing them to affirm their own voices. Notwithstanding the positive elements identified by doctoral candidates, perhaps of greater significance, is the suggested need for dialogue and reflection involving all supervisors and PhD candidates in a peer partnership mode to enhance supervisory relationships while not silencing conflict and contestation in these relationships either in cohort sessions or one-to-one sessions between candidate and appointed supervisor.

A question which requires some attention before we conclude this article is what accounts for the discrepancy in findings between the initial and subsequent studies. One explanation is that the limited size of the initial sample generated a partial view of a limited number of participants. However, a more plausible explanation relates to how and why the initial analysis and conclusions were framed, particularly the reported tensions between cohort and appointed supervisors and principal and co-supervisors, which the authors identified as compromising student performance. That the tensions did indeed 'compromise' the learning experience for some of the respondents in the initial study is beyond dispute. What is under scrutiny is why the authors hastened to generalise this conclusion. Perhaps this may be attributed to the positionality of the authors, one of whom is a cohort supervisor. In concluding that the supervisor tensions were potentially disruptive, the authors de-valued the importance of a disruptive pedagogy in doctoral education and by implication, were advocating a 'confirmatory pedagogy'. Upon critical reflection, it is abundantly clear, that the doctoral education project should never strive to propagate 'harmonious happy families' or endeavour to achieve 'pedagogies of consensus'. In the words of Samuel (2009) we should aspire 'beyond the Garden of Eden' where a disruptive harmony is valued while recognising the importance of balancing thresholds of harmony and conflict in higher education pedagogy.

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*Harmony and Conflict in a PhD Cohort Supervision Model*

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