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## CURRICULUM & TEACHING STUDIES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# PhD Students' Perceptions of Research Seminars in Doctoral Education: A Case Study

David Addae<sup>1,2\*</sup> and Olivia A. T. F. Kwapong<sup>3</sup>

**Abstract:** There is no doubt that supervision plays a significant role in doctoral education. Supervisors have a fiduciary responsibility for guiding their supervisees throughout their doctoral research and theses writing journeys. In recent times however, many doctoral education programmes have adopted a collegial support system for doctoral students by introducing students' research seminars to supplement traditional supervision. Research seminars offer both students and faculty the opportunity to engage in scholarly dialogue aimed at improving the former's research and thesis. Although such seminars have become commonplace in many doctoral education programmes worldwide, little research exist on students' perceptions of research seminars in doctoral learning. In this paper, we contribute to the literature by exploring the perceptions of 12 PhD students from a University in Ghana about research seminars and their usefulness in doctoral education. The findings indicate that the students perceived research seminars in doctoral education as spaces evoking manifold purposes—constructive advice; discrediting students' work; varied views; and “muffling” students' voices. Furthermore, the students' perceptions of the usefulness of research seminars in their learning were trifocal in scope—research and thesis writing, presentation skills, and confidence-building. The paper makes some recommendations for improving research seminars in doctoral education for the purpose of enhancing collegial learning.

**Subjects:** Educational Research; Education Studies; Higher Education; Assessment; Teaching & Learning

**Keywords:** research seminar; doctoral learning; scholarly dialogue; collegial support system

### 1. Introduction

Doctoral learning is a complex journey. On the part of the student, it involves years of reading, research and writing of the thesis for examination. For the supervisor, however, it is an opportunity to facilitate a successful and timely thesis submission while producing a career-ready graduate (Carter & Kumar, 2017). At times, students may find the journey lonely, tiresome, and not worthwhile due to the pressure and perceived independence associated with this academic pursuit. This is because university faculty often assume that their doctoral students begin their graduate studies as proficient writers or that they will develop this skill during their programme of studies, while in reality many graduate students not only do not write like scholars, but also may not think like scholars (Merriam & Barnett, 2000, p. 39). This issue is even more profound in Ghanaian Universities where many PhD students are in full time employment and like Merriam and Barnett's observation of USA students, have little time for research and writing. Implicated in this problem is the recent restructuring of doctoral programmes in some universities in the country

to include a coursework component leaving only a two-year period for students to conduct research and compile the thesis. These issues compound the already intellectually and emotionally challenging process for the student.

It is therefore not surprising that concerns about high rates of non-completion and lengthy registrations are longstanding issues in doctoral education (Dowle, 2022). These concerns are also attributable to the increasing realization of the role of doctoral education within the knowledge economy particularly in relation the supply of knowledge and knowledge workers (HEFCE, 2003). While there is a plethora of research to suggest that undergraduate attrition is often the result of the connections between the individual student and the larger institution (Tinto, 1993), other commentators (Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001; Nerad & Miller, 1996) have noted that attrition at the doctoral level can be thought of more as the connection between the student and the student's discipline and department, rather than the institution as a whole (in Gardner & Barnes, 2007). To reduce student attrition in doctoral education, the University of Ghana (the focus of this study) has incorporated research seminars into the curriculum and academic calendar of all doctoral programmes to stimulate students' engagement with faculty and their peers on various sections of their on-going research and thesis writing. The goal of such seminars is to provide students with a platform to share their research in a scholarly and supportive environment, with their student peers and faculty. These students are usually required to give 6 research seminar presentations throughout their doctoral studies during "which both the quality of their proposed research project and their skills as potential researchers and presenters are judged" (K. Adams, 2004, p. 115). In this space, educational conversations ensue between students and faculty where the former receive varied forms of critique, comments, and suggestions on their research and are afforded the opportunity to respond befittingly to the issues raised. The purpose of this aspect of the doctoral education is not to usurp the key supervisory role in the process, but to augment it through enhancing students' thesis writing while facilitating the development of their academic presentation skills. Actually it is the task of the supervisor to provide consistent, detailed, constructive, and personalised feedback throughout one's doctoral studies (Can & Walker, 2011). Since supervision in postgraduate education appears to be a lonely task, as it is mostly an activity involving only the supervisor and the student (Gunnarsson et al., 2013), the introduction of research seminars in doctoral education is a timely intervention to offer students the opportunity to receive variegated feedback from departmental and disciplinary "luminaries". As stated by Bhandari et al. (2013), apprenticeship models such as research seminars establish socialization processes, allowing for the legitimization of role identities. Despite the growing presence of research seminars in doctoral education, there appears to be a lacuna in the literature pertaining to its value to students in their learning. Unsurprisingly, much of the literature has focused on the impact of supervisory feedback on doctoral students' theses writing (Carter & Kumar, 2017; Odena & Burgess, 2017; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2011; Xu, 2017), doctoral students' wellbeing (Hunter & Devine, 2016; Pyhältö & Keskinen, 2012; Schmidt & Umans, 2014; Shavers & Moore, 2014), and supervisor—supervisee relationship (Gunnarsson et al., 2013; Mainhard et al., 2009; Olmos-López & Sunderland, 2017).

This paper therefore, attempts to fill this void by drawing on a study undertaken at the Department of Adult Education and Human Resource Studies at the University of Ghana aimed at exploring the perceptions of doctoral students regarding the value of research seminars in their learning. The Department is one of three departments under the School of Continuing and Distance Education, College of Education in the University. For decades the Department has contributed to the university's vision of becoming a world class research intensive university by producing a significant number of PhD graduates. In 2014, the university introduced a new structure to doctoral education in all departments to replace the existing 3-year research-only programme structure. This new structure entails four years of academic work comprising an initial one year coursework, one year experiential learning, and the remaining two years for independent research and thesis writing. Since this change, the Department's high output in terms of PhD graduation rates surpasses all other departments in the college. The Department has also witnessed minimal student attrition in doctoral education in the past decade. This could be the result of the supportive

environment for doctoral studies in the Department. Within this supportive framework are research seminars that enable doctoral students to engage with disciplinary and departmental others on various aspects of their research and thesis. Altogether, the paper seeks to achieve the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the PhD students' perceptions of research seminars in doctoral education?

RQ2. What are the perceptions of the PhD students with regard to the usefulness of research seminars in their learning?

In pursuing these questions, the paper is structured as follows: an introduction that sets forth the purpose of the study has been provided in the first section, followed by an exposition of the theoretical foregrounding of the study in the second section. In the third section, we unpack the conceptualisation of research seminar feedback in doctoral education. The method, findings and discussion and the conclusion are presented in the fourth, fifth, and sixth sections of the paper, respectively.

## 2. Theoretical Framework—Social Constructivism

The research presented in this paper explores the perceptions of PhD students at the University of Ghana regarding the value of research seminars in their learning. It has been noted in the previous section that in these seminars students engage in educational conversations with departmental and disciplinary others on various aspects of their research and theses. In this study, we drew on Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory to understand the students' perceptions of research seminar engagements. Vygotsky (1978) posits that when a less competent person engages in social interaction with a knowledgeable person, it facilitates cognitive development. Moreover, the construction of knowledge entails a sociocultural process where language forms the basis for knowledge construction. Within this theory, learners are believed to be enculturated into their learning community and appropriate knowledge, based on their existent understanding, through their interaction with the immediate learning environment (Liu & Matthews, 2005, p. 388). During this process of enculturation, students are ushered into the community of scholarship and this happens through engagement with disciplinary "superiors". Learning is also connected to the "space"—place and context—within which it occurs due to its "situatedness". Those individuals in this space contribute to knowledge construction and reconstruction.

From a sociocultural perspective, learning is therefore a socially mediated process influenced by different modes of semiotic tools, of which language (ability to communicate) is most significant and consequently, social mediation triggers higher forms of a person's mental functioning (Shabani, 2016). We conceptualise research seminars as a space that fosters a socially mediated encounter between faculty and the student. Students engage in dialogic process of knowledge generation through negotiation with departmental and disciplinary "luminaries". Gravett and Petersen (2002) note that dialogue transcends mere conversation; it involves relationships where participants think and reason together. It is a process of collaborative effort in knowledge generation. The idea of enculturating a novice into the realm of "expert" creates an imbalance in power relations between the student and faculty. This imbalance can stifle effective communication between the two, which may impede progress in thesis writing and the student's learning in general. This is because the perceived power relationship has a unidirectional potential and hampers scholarly engagement that is key in doctoral studies.

To address this issue, there is a need for faculty and students to build consensus on converging and diverging views on issues pertaining to the latter's interpretations of facts. In the social constructivist perspective, consensus between different actors is seen "as the ultimate criterion to judge knowledge" (Heylighen, 1993, p. 2). The realisation of "truth" is dependent on the participation of students and faculty in its construction and consensus. As interactive, dialogic enterprises, Tharp and Gallimore's (1988) idea of "instructional conversations" helps to uncover

that which has hitherto remained fully or partially hidden so that constructed ideas and beliefs might be pondered for complexity, meaning and implication (Adams, 2006, p. 253). Thus, in a learning encounter (of which doctoral research seminars feature prominently) the constructivist teacher or faculty engages students in conversation and guides them through the process of co-construction of knowledge and understanding. In this sense, the teacher is a facilitator in the entire process, often stimulating students' engagement through social interaction, acknowledging and respecting the rich diversity of truths in the learning situation.

### 3. Literature Review

Quality feedback is very essential in the thesis writing journey of doctoral students. It helps them to shape, (re)focus, and strengthen their academic writing. Feedback conveys "implicit messages" about the community's expectations, values and beliefs, the nature of disciplinary knowledge and student roles in the community (Hyland, 2009, p. 132). In doctoral education, "the pivotal role for a supervisor is that of a guide, or feedback provider, while developing the thesis and shaping the candidate's identity as a researcher" (Stracke & Kumar, 2020, p. 226).

However, supervisory feedback alone is not enough to improve the students' thesis writing and learning. We argue that the doctoral education space allows for various comments, suggestions, and advice from "others" within the academic and disciplinary community in respect of the student's research decisions and ultimately the content of the thesis. Consequently, the focus of this paper is on feedback that occurs outside the supervisory space—those that occur in research seminars in a doctoral education programme. By presenting aspects of their research at these seminars, students can develop a scholarly voice and a holistic understanding of their discipline (Frick, 2012) through engaging with faculty and peers alike. This aligns with Ramani, Könings, Ginsburg and van der Vleuten's (2019) understanding of the contemporary view of feedback as follows:

... newer conceptualizations of feedback place the learner at the center of the feedback loop and emphasize learner engagement in the entire process. But, learners reject feedback if they doubt its credibility or it conflicts with their self-assessment. Therefore, attention has turned to sociocultural factors that influence feedback-seeking, acceptance, and incorporation into performance. (p. 744)

This perspective of feedback is notably different from the often monologic, unidirectional notion of feedback as "telling, which positions the student as a passive recipient" (Boud & Molloy, 2013 in Ajjawi & Boud, 2017, p. 253) of information. Instead, it situates the student within a socially constructed environment where he/she engages in dialogue with disciplinary others. Centring and engaging the student in the feedback process comprises a dialogic encounter that, according to Nicol (2010) and Yang and Carless (2013), ensures that the receiver has the opportunity to analyze the feedback, ask questions about it and connect it with prior understandings to change their behaviour and performance (Duitsman et al., 2019, p. 578). Dialogic feedback can be seen as "interactive exchanges in which interpretations are shared, meanings negotiated and expectations clarified" (Carless, 2013, p. 90). Effective dialogic feedback depends on the active involvement of both sender and receiver in a two-way conversation. Such a conversation enables the co-construction of knowledge by faculty and students. Ultimately, it "gives [students] the opportunity to interact with notions of quality and standards in the discipline. This in turn makes it possible for students to make sense of and understand feedback" (Steen-Utheim & Wittek, 2017, p. 19). In research seminars, constructive criticism is necessary if good work is to be produced, since this assists students in thinking analytically and moving forward in their development (Gunnarsson et al., 2013).

However, certain conditions in the learning situation compromise the value of feedback in research seminars to doctoral students. For instance, Price et al. (2010) observes that when feedback is vague and ambiguous, it leads to students' frustration, dissatisfaction, and a feeling

of confusion. Young (2000) looked at students' responses to positive and negative feedback and found that students with higher self-esteem held a positive attitude to being assessed and receiving criticism, while students with lower self-esteem tended to perceive comments intended to be positive as negative (Wang & Li, 2011, p. 102). Wingate (2010) maintains that when students find feedback difficult to understand or to be acted upon, they can develop low self-efficacy coupled with low expectations of being successful in the given task. Similarly, poor communication, language barriers and excessive criticism that have been attributed to "collapses in cordiality" (S. Li & Seale, 2007, p. 512) can derail the value of the message to students. In these situations feedback serves counterproductive purposes in the development of students' capacities because students may not implement feedback from faculty. Not acting upon suggestions, advice or feedback from faculty can also lead to students' low self-confidence in the research and writing process. Hyland (1998) found in a case study of six second-language writers that the student who took the least action on teacher feedback was also the one who had the lowest perception of his/her writing ability (Wingate, 2010, p. 521). On the other hand, students who see feedback as constructive have a higher self-efficacy of their own writing skills (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000). We therefore perceive that the dialogic feedback approach will be adhered to among faculty and their doctoral students. This will enable students to build confidence in their scholarship and own their scholarly work (thesis), which, as a matter of principle, is largely believed to be their work/novelty.

#### 4. Method

##### 4.1. Approach and Design

As has been noted, the main crux of this study is to explore the perceptions and experiences of PhD students with regard the value of research seminars in doctoral learning. As such this study is approached from an interpretivist paradigmatic standpoint. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007, p. 21) state that "... the central endeavour in the context of the interpretive paradigm is to understand the subjective world of human experience. To retain the integrity of the phenomena being investigated, efforts are made to get inside the person and to understand from within". We were of the view that by getting "inside the person", a deeper, richer understanding can be gained about a phenomenon. In line with this philosophical orientation, the study employed the qualitative research approach. The preoccupation of qualitative researchers is to understand how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences (Merriam, 2009). The PhD programme of the Department of Adult Education and Human Resource Studies constituted a case for investigation. This study is exploratory in nature and the case study design is appropriate because it offers insights and illuminates meanings that can be construed as tentative hypotheses that help structure future research. The purpose of case study research is to understand the intricacies of a bounded entity or case (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Harrison et al., 2017; Yin, 1994). Thus a case study plays an important role in advancing a field's knowledge base (Merriam, 2009). The design of this case study was not preset or structured by a causal theoretical model or hypothesis to be tested, but follows the emic issues of the case and therefore the researchers' position was important in deciding what is seen and deemed significant to the research (Abma, et al., 2020). This enabled us to weave together all the nuances, interpretations and above all experiences of the participants through their narratives.

##### 4.2. Participants

Participants for the study were 12 PhD students conveniently selected from the penultimate (3<sup>rd</sup> year) and final years (4<sup>th</sup> year) of their studies in the Department of Adult Education and Human Resource Studies, University of Ghana. The selection criteria were that the participants had to belong to the specified year groups and be willing to participate in the study. All the PhD ( $N = 14$ ) students in the two year groups (eight from the 4<sup>th</sup> year and six from the 3<sup>rd</sup> year) were invited through emails to participate in the study, however, 12 students responded favourably to the request. They included eight females and four males with their ages ranging between 40–50 years.

In relation to ethical compliance, we sought the consent of the students prior to their participation in the study. The consent letter explained to the students (prospective participants) the purpose of the study and described what their participation in the study entailed. To safeguard the anonymity of the participants, they are not identified by their respective names, rather pseudonyms (P1, P2, P3, etc.) are used to denote them.

#### **4.3. Data Collection**

Data were collected through interviews via zoom meetings with the participants. We developed a four-item semi-structured interview guide to facilitate data collection. The participants were first contacted through email with details of the study and a request seeking their participation in the study. After receiving their consent, we then proceeded to schedule the Zoom meetings with the participants. In all, we conducted 12 separate zoom meetings with the participants, which were recorded. Each meeting lasted an average of 40 minutes. The instrument was informed by twofold research questions and solicited information pertaining to the participants' perceptions of research seminars in doctoral education; and the participants' perceived usefulness of research seminars in their doctoral learning experiences.

#### **4.4. Data Analysis**

Attride-Stirling (2001) argues that “if qualitative research is to yield meaningful and useful results, it is imperative that the material under scrutiny is analysed in a methodical manner ...” (p. 386). Bearing this in mind, we employed Braun and Clarke (2020) *six-phase* process for data engagement, coding and theme development generally referred to as thematic analysis. We acknowledge that these “six phases can blend together somewhat, and the analytic process necessarily becomes increasingly recursive”. The first phase of the data analysis in this study entailed us familiarising ourselves with the data and jotting down some familiarisation notes. In the second phase, we conducted systematic data coding that facilitated the generation of initial codes—words or phrases that assign salience to portions of data due to their repeated mention and link to the entire meaning making process. From these codes, we generated initial themes. To ensure that we generate themes that fully represent the data, we had to keep notes of the development and hierarchies of the themes and their connection to the wider data set. In the next phase, we vetted the themes and subthemes and tested for the referential adequacy by returning to the raw data (Nowell et al., 2017). Next, we then agreed on the various themes, defined and named them. During this phase, we created narratives that captured various aspects of the data. We revisited and revised the themes on several occasions to arrive at generally acceptable themes that reflected the focus of the data and the objectives of the study. The last phase entailed finalising the report. Here we used verbatim accounts from the participants to explicate the various themes. This was done to preserve the value and originality of the narratives from the participants. Table 1 provides a summary of the themes, sub-themes and examples of the narratives from the participants.

### **5. Results and Discussion**

In this section, we present and discuss the results of the study. Three main themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the data—positive perceptions of research seminars in doctoral education; negative perceptions of research seminars in doctoral education; and students' perceived usefulness of seminars in their learning experiences.

#### **5.1. Positive Perceptions of Research Seminars in Doctoral Education**

One of the study's preoccupations was to explore the students' perceptions of research seminars in doctoral education. The responses provided by the students indicated that the research seminars represented spaces evoking certain purposes in doctoral education—a space for constructive advice, and a space for varied views. These purposes point to students' positive perceptions of research seminars in doctoral education.

**Table 1. Examples of Themes, Sub-themes, and Participants' Narratives**

Theme	Sub-theme	Example of narratives	Participant
Positive Perceptions of Research Seminars in Doctoral Education	Space for constructive advice	<i>It is a platform to receive constructive suggestions through feedback which enhances and improves the quality of the student's thesis. Seminars should help to advance scholarship</i>	P4
	Space for varied views	<i>Seminars enable students to get varied feedback which could enhance their research and theses.</i>	P11
Negative Perceptions of Research Seminars in Doctoral Education	Space for discrediting students' work	<i>PhD seminar is an invitation for lecturers to criticize the work of students.</i>	P9
	A Space for 'Muffling' Students' Voices	<i>The whole seminar process is set up as a time to critique the work of an amateur and a novice researcher and where their (students) voices are not recognized</i>	P7
Students' Perceptions of the Usefulness of Research Seminars in their Learning	Research and thesis writing	<i>They have impacted my work positively. Seminars have enabled me refine, fine tune and change ideas and objectives and sometimes overhaul completely some unsuitable methods and approaches. For example the topic for my study was changed severally to provide a better focus.</i>	P1
	Presentation skills	<i>Generally they have been helpful with regard to my presentation skills. I now know how to organize my presentations properly and also how to connect with the audience when presenting</i>	P5
	Confidence	<i>Through the seminars, I have gained confidence to advance my academic position as a doctoral student. I am able to articulate my views because I know that some faculty members may support my ideas.</i>	P8

### 5.2. A space for Constructive Advice

Given the arduous demands on students in doctoral education, research seminars have emerged as a platform for immense academic engagement between doctoral students and faculty for the former's academic development. Feedback received in these spaces, according to Caffarella and Barnett (2000) and Kumar and Stracke (2007), is very crucial to helping doctoral students understand the expectations that come with doctoral learning. By all indications, some of the participants perceived the research seminar space as promoting a rich diversity of constructive



comments, which help to enhance doctoral students' learning. P1, for instance conceived research seminars:

*... as an opportunity for doctoral students to receive constructive advice on how to go about their work (thesis writing). It also provides students with the opportunity to gain diverse insights and viewpoints on methods and approaches and generally provides the inputs and directions that enables students to review, refine and shape their work in its entirety to meet standard academic requirements.*

Speaking along similar lines, some other participants stated the following:

*I think that research seminars are supposed to help the student shape and fine tune his/her PhD research from the topic through to the conclusion of the research. (P2)*

*It is a platform to receive constructive suggestions through feedback which enhances and improves the quality of the student's thesis. Research seminars should help to advance scholarship (P4)*

For these participants, research seminars in doctoral education facilitate a collaborative environment for exchange of ideas between students and faculty. It is an opportunity for students to be socialized into the desired scholarly identity and to help them “discover, integrate, and apply knowledge, as well as to communicate and disseminate it” (Council of Graduate Schools, 2005, p. 1). Indeed in this study, the results give an indication that the research seminars promote the socialization of “students into the discipline's [research and] writing practices” (Cotterall, 2015, p. 423). The results are also reflected in Caffarella and Barnett's (2000) study, which found that feedback from faculty and their peers, through face-to-face and continuous feedback, were most helpful in doctoral students becoming stronger and more confident scholarly writers (in Garcia & Yao, 2019, p. 45).

### **5.3. A Space for Varied Views**

Some of the participants perceived research seminars as spaces for the “interplay of multiple influences” (Kim, 2018, p. 965) and views which impact on students' meaning making processes. Indeed during PhD research seminars, a confluence of converging and diverging views from faculty and disciplinary others help to shape the students' understanding of the various issues at stake. These viewpoints reflect the diversity of philosophical, theoretical and methodological orientations of faculty. For Espeland and Stevens (1998), this diversity of thought should trigger the social process of *commensuration*, whereby common ground is found between different groups who offer different interpretations and understandings of the same phenomenon (Adcroft, 2011, p. 406). For P9, the varying views in research seminars present an opportunity for students to enhance the accuracy and strength of their research, and by implication their theses.

*In my opinion research seminars afford students with different views which are essential for enhancing rigor and robustness in their research.*

According to P11:

*Research Seminars Enable Students to Get Varied Feedback which could Enhance their Research and Theses.*

Also in the words of P12: *Research seminars help doctoral students to receive and synchronize various comments from lecturers and peers.*

While engaging in focused conversations with departmental and disciplinary others within a research seminar, students develop their own understandings based on the varied viewpoints presented on the given topic, the conventions and practices within the scholarly community and

their ability to decipher truths from multiple realities. Impliedly, the varied comments impel students to compare, analyze and make logical conclusions from multiple perspectives from the faculty and their peers. Furthermore, students engage in the construction of new knowledge based on their previous understanding, new and revised understandings, adopting specific learning strategies to fulfill new tasks, and scrutinize their own ideas and thoughts (Pham, Lin, Trinh, & Bui, 2020). To do this, students' reflective thinking and agency help students to avoid a dependent relationship on the supervisors because they are able to take control of their learning. This situates learning within an individualized discursive practice. The study's findings resonate with Oosterbaan, Van der Schaaf, Baartman, and Stokking's (2010) qualitative analysis of teacher-student feedback dialogues about students' portfolios, which found that specific cognitive and affective thinking activities occurred significantly more often during reflection than during non-reflection (Schaaf et al., 2013).

## **6. Negative Perceptions of Research Seminars in Doctoral Education**

The findings of the study point to a twofold negative perception in relation to students' perceptions of research seminars in their doctoral education. Specifically, the students perceived research seminars as spaces for discrediting students' work; and for muffling students' voices.

### **6.1. A Space for Discrediting Students' Work**

In some instances, research seminars may be misconstrued as being overly critical by the student leading them to believe that lecturers do not appreciate their academic efforts in their doctoral studies. This may lead students to disregard "seminar feedback", which may adversely affect their theses writing and learning in general. In this study, some of the participants perceived research seminars as being a space for discrediting students' work due to negative feedback often received within that space. This is consistent with Caffarella and Barnett's (2000) observation that for students new to the academia, receiving feedback that challenges their thinking and actions can be an emotionally negative experience (Sun & Trent, 2020, p. 6). The following encapsulates the perceptions of some of the participants with regard to research seminars in doctoral education:

*Research seminars provide lecturers with the opportunity to discredit and discourage the efforts of students instead of serving as a guide on the PhD journey (P5).*

*PhD research seminar is an invitation for lecturers to criticize the work of students. (P9)*

Given these perceptions about research seminars, it could be argued that feedback received by students in such spaces, may not enhance their learning. This aligns with findings of Higgins et al. (2002) and Carless (2006) that critical feedback, although intended to be helpful, was frequently viewed by students as not helpful (Ackerman, Dommeyer & Gross, 2017, p. 19). As has been noted by Ackerman et al. (2017), often times what an instructor might provide as a suggestion for future improvement might be perceived by the student to be merely a critique which might discourage him/her. This may also contribute to students perceiving the instructor as authoritarian, overly judgmental, and detached.

Aside students' feeling unappreciated through repeated criticisms, it was found that the research seminar environment was not friendly for healthy student—faculty academic engagements. It is worth noting that to succeed in a research seminar environment, students must be willing to participate fully in interactions leading to their academic development. However, in some instances the imbalance in power relationships between students and faculty adversely affects the chances for meaningful and shared engagement between them. A participant hinted that in some cases, students became passive in research seminars, due to the perception that by responding to the various comments from faculty, students may be perceived as being disrespectful. He specifically had this to say:

*In research seminars, generally students are at a loss as to whether to give their candid opinion about comments or not. Because they will be seen to be challenging the faculty members present. (P8)*

Such a perception resonates with Cryer's (1996) caution that while students should not feel they have to agree with everything, they ought to hide feelings of embarrassment or anger and suppress the desire to justify the criticised work immediately (S. Li & Seale, 2007, p. 513). This may be due to students' perception that by challenging negative comments, it may affect their relationship with faculty in the Department and the progress of their academic work. In a study conducted by Can and Walker (2011) it was found that some of the participants expressed that they showed humility towards faculty because they wanted to maintain a good relationship with the lecturers and be able to access them for more feedback. This could also be the result of a breakdown in communication caused by a faculty's dictatorial style offering little opportunity for students' response (McMichael, 1992).

### **6.2. A Space for “Muffling” Students’ Voices**

Under this sub-theme, the participants perceived research seminars as spaces to “muffle” the student's voice. This perception (perhaps as a result of the study's context—African context) of seminars entails a power dynamic in the scholarly community where faculty are seen as experts and students as novices. It also connotes a power relation which positions the student within a passive, subservient and obedient position in relation to the supervisor and other faculty members who are often seen as experts. However, we opine that in research seminars—conceived as dialogic spaces—the student's voice is crucial to negotiating meanings and truths in a community of practice. Although research seminars are meant to foster collegiality—balanced interaction between faculty and students—one of the Participant's positioned students within a “voiceless” state, *in seminars the student's voice is limited because he/she is still in the learning process and for that reason, is expected to always listen more from the panel (P10)*. This participant's perception is not a peculiarity but represents, to some extent, the common perception of doctoral students in the Ghanaian and African contexts. The power of supervisors and faculty members in general originates from multiple sources—their specialized knowledge and professional status, but also from the expectation that the student who is in a position of less power will receive support and guidance (De Stefano et al., 2017). This view was shared by P1 as follows:

*Research seminars do not encourage students to adequately express their views especially within our context where if they (students) overstep in terms of their assertiveness, it may affect their relationship with the lecturers.*

In fact, in doctoral education, the inherent power advantage afforded to supervisors and faculty members creates the situation where uninformed, misguided, or even malevolent individuals may exploit the power dynamic or use their power inappropriately (De Stefano et al., 2017). For other participants, the research seminar environment fails to foster dialogue due to the intimidating and critical environment. The following statements encapsulate the participants' frustrations:

*Research seminar is generally not welcoming to students hence they are not confident to speak out their minds. (P2)*

*The whole research seminar process is set up to critique the work of an amateur and a novice researcher and where their (students) voices are not recognised. (P7)*

The fact that the support structure for students in doctoral education constitutes an arrangement between individuals with unequal power and status makes having an authentically collaborative and non-hierarchical relationship a challenge (De Stefano et al., 2017). In research seminars, a triadic relationship develops between the supervisor, other members of faculty and supervisee who work together to promote the enculturation of the latter into the discourse community. There

is an unequal power dynamic in this relationship. Critiques from the supervisor(s) and other faculty members are recognized as essential to the process of developing the ideal scholar or researcher. However, when critiques limit the level of engagement in the research seminar space, it defeats the overall purpose of promoting a collegial learning community. It is evident in this study that the students' perceptions of research seminar as a hostile environment restricts students' critical development and creativity since their voice is muffled by other powerful voices.

### **7. Students' Perceptions of the Usefulness of Seminars in their Learning**

Doctoral education places tremendous academic demands on the student. For learning to occur, it may be necessary for the student to experience repeated exposure to the type of conversations that characterize ways of researching and writing in a particular academic community (Kim, 2018). The student's ability to conduct independent research and compile the thesis is a mix of several factors of which feedback plays a prominent role. The essence of feedback in doctoral education is to shape the student's research and thesis writing and to eventually mould a desirable scholar. Research seminars have been introduced in many universities to augment the fiduciary role of supervisors in the doctoral education and provide a space in which students "can rethink an established representation of an issue, deconstruct the concept if necessary, and adjust literacy practice" (Kim, 2018, p. 974). In this study, one of the key issues of concern was students' perceived value of seminars in their learning. Generally, the findings suggest that students perceived the usefulness of seminars in their learning in three main areas—enhancing research and thesis writing; enhancing presentation skills; and boosting their confidence.

#### **7.1. Research and Thesis Writing**

Intellectual engagement through scholarly, in-depth discussions and collaboration on research (Bhandari, 2013) as is the case in research seminars—while seeking to shape students' evolving identities—should ultimately lead the student to "clear the misty landscape" (Griffith, 2010, p. 32) of research and thesis writing. Heathcott (2005) posits that the central purpose of doctoral education (and generally graduate education) is to assist students in mastering the content of their disciplines, conceptual frameworks, and also build their research and writing skills—competencies that are further strengthened through seminars. Therefore, opportunities for doctoral students to engage in discussions that center on research of their interest, while receiving constructive feedback (Bhandari et al, 2013), highlights the value of research seminars in doctoral learning.

In this study the participants reported that research seminars had enhanced their research and thesis writing. The following excerpts illustrate, from the participants' perspective, the value of the research seminars to the participants:

*They (research seminars) have impacted my work positively. They have enabled me to refine, fine tune and change ideas and objectives and sometimes overhaul completely some unsuitable methods and approaches. For example, the topic for my study was changed severally to provide a better focus. (P1).*

*For me, my target population changed as a result of the feedback I received at the research seminars which enriched the data gathered as well as the study design. They (research seminars) have also served as mediums for critical reflection on one's study and a means of identifying inconsistencies in the work. (P3).*

*The research seminars have helped to enrich my PhD thesis especially the methodology and data analysis sections of the work. (P10)*

These statements point to the eventual support that research seminars offered the students in their research and thesis writing. Bloxham and West (2007) have identified feedback as the primary means through which students enhance their performance over time. In the thesis writing

process, feedback received within the research seminar space was found to stimulate doctoral students' thinking, enhanced their arguments, and helped them to connect and integrate varying ideas (Eyres et al., 2001). In doctoral education, feedback is crucial in the thesis writing journey of students due to the need to develop understanding of the requirements of academic writing practices in their field of study, as well as the institutional expectations and standards of thesis writing (L. Y. Li & Vandermensbrugghe, 2011). The social constructivist theory informs newer conceptualisations of feedback (Ramani et al., 2019), which places the students and teachers in a dialogic space where they engage on issues pertaining to the former's performance during which period various interpretations, meanings and expectations are negotiated and clarified (Carless, 2013). An argument has been advanced that doctoral research seminars foster a dialogic engagement between students and faculty on various aspects of the former's theses. From the participants' accounts in this present study, it is evident that various aspects of their research and thesis have improved as a result of their participation in the departmental research seminars. Even though the faculty in these seminars may not have primary responsibility for supervising the students, the results shows that their comments have made a difference in the content, focus and structure of the students' theses.

### **7.2. Presentation Skills**

Van Ginkel et al. (2015) notes that the acquisition of oral presentation competence has become increasingly essential for a wide range of disciplines and especially in postgraduate education. Also oral presentations serve many functions in providing messages to, or interacting with, audiences, like informing or persuading (De Grez, 2009 in Van Ginkel et al., 2016). In doctoral education, research seminars present an opportunity for students to communicate to departmental others the progress of their research and thesis. However, there is no denying that not all doctoral students have the capacity to "deliver an acceptable oral presentation" (Amirian & Tavakoli, 2016, p. 1096). K. Adams (2004) asserts that the ability to give effective seminar presentations is essential to the future academic and professional success of students and most universities offer instruction, centrally or through academic departments, to their postgraduate students on the skills and attributes required of good presenters. According to De Grez (2009) oral presentation competence is "a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to speak in public in order to inform, self-express, relate, or to persuade" (p. 5).

The findings of this study suggest that some of the participants found the feedback provided to them during the research seminars as being instrumental in enhancing their presentation skills. For instance, P5 noted that:

*Generally they (research seminars) have been helpful with regard to my presentation skills. I now know how to organize my presentations properly and also how to connect with the audience when presenting.*

This participant found the research seminars to be useful in the sense that they have helped him to properly organise his presentations as well as enabling him to connect with the audience.

Relatedly, P4 had this to say:

*In the research seminars, I often get feedback on my presentations which have enhanced my presentation skills.*

These narratives suggest that although the manifest function of research seminars is to provide students with feedback on their research and theses writing, they also serve other very important latent functions. Prominently, doctoral students require oral presentation skills to thrive in their work environments and it is for this reason that this finding is crucial due to the significance of oral presentations in doctoral education worldwide. As indicated by Amirian and Tavakoli (2016) "making a good academic oral presentation is an art and involves many more components such

as attention to the needs of the audience and their feedback, pace and difficulty level of delivery, careful planning and practice” (p. 1105). The responses from the participants are more in line with the view that oral presentation skills, which are deemed essential in doctoral education, are transferable and the research seminar could be an ideal platform to harness such skills.

### 7.3. Confidence

Adams (2004) argues that one attribute, presenter confidence, is an important element of any successful seminar presentation and enables the performer to display academic skills in the best possible (p. 115). However, students have explicitly described a lack of confidence for oral academic presentations (Adams, 2004, p. 116). For instance in a survey of 168 international undergraduate and postgraduate students, Felix (1992 as cited in Adams, 2004) found that the students who sought academic assistance, perceived their competence to be lowest for oral presentations. Therefore, any activity that enhances the confidence of students in their learning is a welcome intervention in doctoral education.

In this study, some of the participants indicated that their confidence had been boosted as a result of the research seminars. The following are some of the responses provided:

*I think I am now more confident to advance my viewpoints. The research seminars are very intimidating but when one (the student) is able to respond to the various questions and comments from the faculty members, it boosts the confidence of the student and for me that is what I have gained from the seminars. (P6)*

*Through the research seminars, I have gained confidence to advance my position as a doctoral student. I am able to articulate my views because I know that some faculty members may support my ideas. (P8)*

Research seminars enable students to “clarify their thinking through discussion, to test their ideas against other students and appreciate new perspectives” (Johnson et al., 1998). This helps students to get buy-ins from departmental others which serves to enhance their overall confidence. It is worth noting that confident students are able to articulate their [conceptual and theoretical] viewpoints in a more succinct manner and can speak before an audience. However, confidence, a desired competence needed by students, is not taught or evaluated in any doctoral education programme; instead, as the findings of this study point out, it is a by-product of the scholarly engagements that take place in research seminars.

### 8. Conclusion

This exploratory study enhances our understanding of doctoral students’ perceptions about the value of research seminars in doctoral learning. We have used the social constructivist theory to extend our understanding of doctoral learning as comprising a process of socially mediated and dialogically negotiated meaning making. In this study, we operationalized research seminar as a dialogic feedback space—where a confluence of different voices interact to facilitate understanding and unsurprisingly, some of the students conceived research seminars as spaces for constructive advice and varied views. Counter intuitively, at least through the prism of some of the students’ perceptions of research seminars in doctoral education, dialogue seem to be missing from the students’ conceptualisations which fails to resonate with our view of research seminars. Specifically, the perceptions of research seminars as spaces for discrediting students’ work, and muffling students’ voices seem to occlude the student’s voice and the student-centeredness that is expected of the research seminar space. In fact these perceptions suggest that research seminars may be monologic, directive feedback spaces where students’ passivity and “voicelessness” are perpetuated in an intimidating environment. However we believe that when research seminars invite students into a dialogue, they can present students with opportunities for individual growth and development (Steen-Utheim & Wittek, 2017). The findings also indicate students’ perceived trifocal usefulness of research seminars in their learning—research and thesis writing,

presentation skills and confidence. These competencies put together, it is our belief that doctoral research seminars may facilitate an all-encompassing student capacity development framework in doctoral education. The findings provides promising evidence that when doctoral research seminars are properly organised to promote mutual engagement of students and faculty within a collegial learning community, more positive outcomes would be accentuated.

### 9. Implications of the Study for Doctoral Education

Green and Usher (2003) write as follows:

[Doctoral students and faculty work] in a context where the emphasis is placed firmly on successful, timely completion. The race to complete is on and contributing to the knowledge economy ... must now not only be significant but timely too. (p. 44)

Mercer et al. (2011) have also noted the turbulent nature of the PhD process, indicating that it can be euphoric and engaging, yet also lonely and isolating; and thus, students may feel unable to cope in a variety of contexts including the academic, social, cultural, financial, personal and the emotional. Moreover, the individualized nature of doctoral study and the need for greater responsibility and creativity on the part of the student are factors that may lead to most of the frustrations involved in the doctoral process (Gardner, 2008). This notwithstanding, it can be argued that without the needed institutional support structures to help doctoral students succeed, the race alluded to by Green and Usher (2003) would not only be difficult but also utterly impossible. Research seminars have been institutionalized in many universities around the world to offer doctoral students a space for scholarly dialogue and engagement with the intention of helping to shape their research, thesis, and learning. From the findings of this study, it is clear that the students valued research seminars in their academic journey. These seminars form part of the socialization experience for doctoral students and from a practical perspective, we believe that the perceptions of participants in this study would stimulate conversations in the academic space in relation to how universities can leverage on research seminars as an avenue for socialization aimed at supporting and enhancing the learning experiences of doctoral students.

While this study explored students' experiences in one university (and one department), the findings of this study may be valuable to other universities who seek to enhance the doctoral programmes they offer. More specifically, there is need for further research to examine the complexities of research seminars and how the feedback system in such spaces contributes to making the doctoral journey more efficient. Also, future research could be expanded to examine students' level of satisfaction with research seminars as a support system in doctoral education. From a curricular standpoint, the negative perceptions about the research seminars as reported by the participants could serve as clues to universities in an attempt to review this aspect of the curriculum to make it more meaningful to the learning experiences of students. When a space meant to promote collegiality and scholarly dialogue departs from the acceptable practices and entertains certain comments which are perceived to muffle the voices of students, this could affect the nature of scholarly engagements that should take place thereby defeating the purpose of research seminars. Therefore, universities and faculty alike should reimagine the structure and scope of research seminars from the traditional unidirectional nature of scholarly conversations in such seminars to stimulating students' engagement by encouraging social interactions that acknowledge and respect the rich diversity of truths in the learning situation.

### 10. Limitations and Future Research

This study had a number of limitations. First, we adopted a qualitative methodology to explore the problem of interest and a convenient sample of doctoral students was interviewed, hence limiting the chances for generalizability. Second, the study was biased in its selection of the participants. We relied solely on students' accounts although we acknowledge that a complete understanding of the phenomenon of interest could have been gained by listening to the voices of faculty in the Department. Despite these setbacks, this study has broken new ground to deepen our

understanding of the value of research seminars in doctoral education from the perspective of PhD students. We believe that future studies could pursue deeper conceptual engagement and quantitative analysis with a much larger sample of faculty and students to understand the nuanced experiences of these persons in the context of research seminars and how they impact the learning of doctoral students.

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