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The Academientia of ECAs: Navigating Academic Terrain Through Critical Friendships as a Life Jacket⁷

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore our experiences as early career academics (ECAs) and examine how we forged a collaborative, critical friendship to navigate the challenges that we faced in a South African higher education institution. Our inquiry is guided by the following question: “How are we learning to navigate the organisational academic space through critical friendships?” Grounded in the self-study methodology, we use personal narratives to share our experiences of marginalisation. We use liminal and intersectionality theories as lenses to highlight the formation of our critical friendship. The narratives suggest an organic formation of our critical friendship, which has become a life jacket to enhance ourselves and our practice. Through exploration of our critical friendship, we elaborate on the pleasure, power, and possibilities of collaboration among ECAs that might open up opportunities for professional development leading to social change and academic success.

Keywords: Early career, intersectionality, liminality, self-study, critical-friends

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Introduction

Being the youngest in my cluster and discipline, I remember in the 1st semester of employment, that I had a difficult relationship with a contract staff who was a friend with my discipline coordinator. The contract staff member was supposed to work with me but refused to take any directives from me, and wasn't afraid to tell me to my face. When discussing this with my discipline coordinator, who was also a man, I was advised that in the contract staff member's culture, women are not leaders; therefore, he struggles to take instruction from me. I was also politely advised that since I am new and young, I shouldn't be too pushy with the people I found here. —Nosipho

We write this paper as early career academics (hereafter ECAs) employed at a teacher education institution in South Africa. We are writing about our experiences and learnings of how critical friendships have served as a life jacket and assisted us to navigate the academic space. We draw from a foreword written by Professor Magubane to *Black Academic Voices: The South African experience* (Magubane, 2019). For Magubane, the book is not a “pity-party or a celebration of victimhood” (2019, p. iv); we share the same sentiments about our paper. In that vein, we reflect on our experiences as ECAs and how we (as critical friends) navigate power and structural systems that are unfavourable to ECAs. Nosipho's story exemplifies the dilemmas we have experienced as ECAs, where we have been marginalised due to age, gender, lack of experience, and even culture. In this paper, we highlight some of these experiences and illustrate how they have pushed us into liminality—and how we have turned that into an opportunity to thrive.

Our Dilemma as ECAs

When initially appointed as teacher educators in 2016, 2017, and 2019, we came into a space that was fast-paced and had different demands compared to our former employment. Because most of us were school teachers, the only key performance area (KPA) that we could readily identify with in the school of education was teaching. KPAs come with the pressure of accountability because they are closely monitored in our institution to measure efficiency in the enactment of teaching, research, community engagement, and administration (Debowski, 2012; Foote, 2010). All academics are expected to perform all these activities. In addition, those without doctoral degrees are expected to enrol and complete their doctoral studies within a prescribed period of time (Nathane, 2019). We do not have doctorates, we have had no prior experience of supervising students, writing research papers, and establishing community engagement projects (thus, we have a shared interest in developing professionally).

This meant that we had to devise a strategy of ensuring that the missing aspects of our KPAs were addressed in order for us to flourish in academia. Our intention is not to lament the challenges we face, but to make a scholarly contribution by sharing how we are navigating the academic terrain. This may be useful for other ECAs who may not have found a way to cope with the overwhelming expectations and frustrations in the university workplace and may need a life jacket (Casey & Fletcher, 2017; Kensington-Miller, 2018; Masinga et al., 2016). We further wish to problematise the current definitions of ECAs (Bosanquet et al., 2016; Price et al., 2015; Teferra, 2016) given that associating it with the prerequisites of having a doctoral degree, being a permanent staff member, and having five years of uninterrupted research development (Bosanquet et al., 2016; Misiaszek, 2015; Teferra, 2016) no longer suffices. Guided by the research question: “How have we used critical friendships to enable us to navigate academic spaces?” We will elaborate on our use of liminal space and how forming a critical friendship through our intersecting identities kept us afloat and worked as a life jacket, contributing to our professional learning.

Literature Review

In one of our cluster meetings, it was announced that all academic staff, including professors, should teach undergraduate modules. There was an uproar. I remember one professor responded: "I am willing to take undergraduate modules, but I will have to reduce my PhD supervision load as well as the extra mentorship work I do for the university." This changed the mood of the meeting. What I took from this meeting was that supervision had more currency than teaching as the professor did not take any undergraduate modules. They were given to junior and contract staff members instead.
—Vusi

We find ourselves entering higher education when it is in a state of flux, particularly through massification, which has reshaped the academic space. Academics have had to adapt to teaching large class sizes (up to 510 students per class), and providing instruction to a diverse student population with differing needs, capabilities, and expectations (Hlengwa, 2019; Teferra, 2016). These challenges, although affecting all academics, are a burden predominantly on ECAs who are given more modules to teach because senior academic staff members are typically unwilling to teach undergraduate modules (Phaswana, 2019). This is illustrated in Vusi's experience—the assertion of power by senior staff members that ensures that junior staff are given what no other academic wants.

Although not explicitly stated in institutions, publishing is arguably the top determinant in defining success in academia (Hemmings & Kay, 2010; Sutherland et al., 2013) and, for ECAs, it is crucial to building their research profiles for career progression and recognition in the academic field (Eley et al., 2012; Moodley et al., 2015). This becomes a great advantage for senior staff who have published, and are supervising students because they already have academic capital. However, it is a daunting task for ECAs because they are still at the phase of cultivating their research skills (Hemmings, 2012). It is a greater frustration for those who are still in the process of obtaining their doctoral degree because they enter these positions with even less research capital (Teffera, 2016). It is therefore not surprising that narratives such as "publish or perish" (Moodley et al., 2015) and "sink or swim" (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2016; Ssempebwa et al., 2016) often dominate scholarship on ECAs—as if being an ECA is some extreme sport that threatens survival (Kensington-Miller, 2018; Merlo, 2016).

As ECAs, we face the predicament of having limited support from those who view the phase of being an ECA as a rite of passage, and see academia through the "survival of the fittest" mentality (Foote, 2010). Those who employ this lens believe that if we cannot do well without help and support, then we do not have the talent and pedigree to be in the academy (Foote, 2010). We know too well the utterances that we are dead weight because we are unable to generate the desired income for the university through research publications. Overall, more often than not, we feel overwhelmed, confused, isolated, and sometimes even inadequate as we grapple with teaching, research, service, and having to complete our doctoral studies (Masinga et al., 2016; McKay & Monk, 2017). We seem to be in a state of what Tomaselli (2015, p. 63) referred to as *academentia*.

Without a doctoral qualification, we are made to feel that we are not certified academics. However, we are still expected to carry out a full workload except for supervising doctoral dissertations. Being supervised by our colleagues creates a dichotomy; they see us as their star students in supervision cohorts but as sub-academics in staff meetings. Being in a predominantly black campus, we experience intersections within one race—the nuances in these intersections are those of ethnic identities and age. Senior academics and ECAs who are older in terms of age find it acceptable to infantilise/juniorise us by asking for coffee or making comments such as "you are of the same age as my child." Black young women who are ECAs experience extreme levels of patriarchy, sometimes even through female academics in positions of authority. Through ageism, young female academics are marginalised by a

patriarchal culture that expects them to be submissive. The experiences of Vusi, the only male coauthor, do not relate to gender but more to age.

In our corridor talks, we realised that we all had similar frustrations of belonging because we felt typecast in the academic space by our lack of a doctoral qualification, being doctoral students, our lack of experience in academia, and our age. We had also observed seasoned academics excelling in meeting their KPAs, while others rejected them, arguing that they identify themselves as dissertation supervisors and teachers, not researchers who publish. Unhappy and frustrated by this typecasting, we felt we did not belong to the dichotomic spaces available to us. As a result, we created an alternative space for ourselves—fit for us—with no norms or organisation. We identified it as a liminal space, detached from the fixed organisational structures and practices (Ratiani, 2007). Our liminal space was new to us and had no formal validation or location in the workplace (Turner, 1969). It was thus invisible and ambiguous, a vacuum of uncertainty, and uninformative. It was the *in between and betwixt* space (Turner, 1969). Our liminal space, undefined and ambiguous, allowed us to find refuge—our safe space where we all belonged. The vacuum allowed for possibilities of being and belonging in academia, the way we chose to, an alternative to what we were forced to choose in the dominant organisational structure of academia.

Late 2017, the dean of the school hosted academics according to their age, group, and rank. In attendance, were those at lecturer level and below the age of 40 years. Dominant in the discussions were the dean's plan and support for the group. Each person shared their challenges either in their studies, department, or in the school. At the end of the meeting, I met with a progressive few of the attendees. Driven by our common challenges such as teaching and assessing large classrooms, workloads, and aspirations to thrive in academia, we established a young academics writing group. The group was not only "shut up and write" but we provided each other constructive feedback on our studies, conference presentations, and draft manuscripts. This was a point where I began to realise that these were critical friends. —Vusi

During the course of the years, other members of our group who had completed their doctoral studies exited the group. Those who remained saw the need to continue and encourage the scholarship we were trying to develop because we had committed to a long-term collaboration, even beyond our doctoral studies. We had to reevaluate the necessity and purpose of the group. Once we came to this awareness, we were deliberate about our intention. We reframed our thinking and what we wanted from our partnership—reinventing ourselves as teachers (LaBoskey, 2004; Mitchell & Weber, 1999). The process of reestablishment occurred organically. We shared our goals regarding our career aspirations and spoke of the various pathways to achieve them. We formed a WhatsApp group where we communicated paper calls, shared resources, and motivated each other. In our meetings, we provided support, care, and critical feedback to each other. We started recording our meetings and discussions. One of the enablers was our dean, who motivated us and provided us with resources and support. We are fortunate to be under his leadership because it is part of his vision to develop the future generation of academics.

On the basis of this experience, we identify critical friendship as a collaborative, supportive, and challenging relationship between professionals (Swaffield, 2007). It is collaborative and supportive because, through discussion and constructive critique, it provides a different lens on one's practice (Ainscow & Southworth, 1996). The friendship is also challenging because constructive criticism is often uncomfortable, yet enhancing, because through the engagements shared, understandings and alternative perspectives on learning and unlearning emerge that would otherwise not have been possible (Fletcher et al., 2016). Through constructive feedback, an openness to sharing one's

scholarship, and willingness to learn from others, the friendship itself becomes educational because it teaches about integrity, accountability, and discipline (LaBoskey, 2004).

Transitioning Through Spaces

This paper is informed by two theoretical concepts. First, we use liminal theory (Turner, 1969; van Gennep, 1960) followed by intersectionality theory (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1991). Liminality emanates from Arnold van Gennep's pioneering work, *Rites de Passage* (1960), in which he formulated the three rites of passage that accompany almost any change in state or position in one's life. Victor Turner (1969) also extended liminality, positioning it as the between and betwixt space. Shortt (2015) and Dale and Burrell (2008) identified a liminal space as one that is on the border, somewhere in between—a space at the boundary of two dominant spaces, and which is fully part of neither. Liminality is a transitional process of becoming where an individual is temporarily separated from the dominant or mainstream organisational forms (Cook-Sather, 2006; Ratiani 2007; Turner, 1969). The liminal space is also the between and betwixt space (Turner, 1969) that bridges the “what is and what can/will be” and, as such, creates a “realm of possibility” (Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 110). In the liminal period, the secluded space becomes a transitional, invisible, or visible dwelling place without arrayed conventional forms where the individual may detach, unlearn, and learn through being dispositioned into the liminal space (Vinz, 1997).

Shortt (2015) identified how liminal spaces in the workplace are under-researched; they have become a fluid space conducive for productivity that warrants attention for these non-normative spaces. For the purposes of this paper, we identify the dominant space as the university workplace and the liminal space as the alternative space we created for ourselves. Our liminal space is understood on two levels. Firstly, as an undesignated “ignored” physical place on the university premises; we identified a space that had not been used for a long time, which we called, Room 32. The second level of our liminal space is embodied space. Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga (2003) described embodied space as allowing the space to be occupied by the body—locating the human experience to consciously take on material and spatial form. The experience of the space expands to a person's state of mind and self. In our friendship, the liminal space connected us through lived experiences in the dominant space. It allowed us to inhabit it subjectively and to embody it.

Our liminal space, undefined and ambiguous, allowed us to find refuge, comfort, and to settle. Its establishment allowed for multiple forms of collaboration such as studying and writing together, mock presentations to each other for conference presentations and proposal reviews, establishing a dissertation writing cohort for our students, advice on professional work issues that we encountered individually, celebrating academic and personal achievements together, and the occasional social lunch. In these multiple forms of collaboration, we were critical in bringing our lens to every issue tabled by each person. We viewed our liminal space as a continual transitional space where the liminal space was a place that we used for professional productivity, therapeutic remediation, and relational fastening. Consequently, we were teaching ourselves about the academy and capacitating each other on ways to keep afloat, which, in turn, was strengthening our professional practice.

What influenced our agency to seek the liminal space was our common identities (Gee, 2000) and the need to move away from the hegemonic space in which we felt we did not belong. We used intersectionality to study the complexities that are produced by intersecting identities, structural systems, and power (Collins & Bilge, 2016; May, 2015) as ECAs in a teacher education institution. We concur with May's (2015) argument that intersectionality should not only be restricted to gender, race, sexual orientation, and ethnicity; age and ableness should form part of the intersectional categories of analysis. Given that we carry multiple identities, including being an early career academic, intersectionality as a framework enables us to delve deeper into our lived experiences of navigating

the academic space. According to Collins and Bilge (2016, p. 135) “identity is central to building a collective we,” therefore, intersecting identities, power, and structural systems produce not only marginality but also privileges (May, 2015). Intersectionality for us as ECAs is “not simply a method for doing research, but it is also a tool for empowering” and educating ourselves (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 37).

Self-Study Methodology

This study was conceptualised under the self-study methodology that is a critical feature to social action (Pithouse et al., 2009), focusing on collaborative self-study and its fundamental feature of critical friendships (Samaras, 2011; Samaras & Freese, 2006). In our informal self-study approach, we regularly meet three times a week for the purposes of writing our dissertations, working on research papers, reflecting on the week, or carrying out the group’s administrative duties. In these meetings, we selectively audio record relevant conversations that include challenging experiences faced in the workplace, any feedback, or conceptual session we may be having. Therefore, to generate data, we used the stored audio recordings and each wrote a personal narrative specifically to contribute to this paper.

Personal narratives focus on particular events that do not necessarily cover the full trajectory of an individual’s life (Nash, 2004). Hence, they were relevant for this paper because we present select lived experiences of our academic journey. Personal narratives are a creative approach to self-study used to engage those participating in it. Working collaboratively is important because it encourages individuals to move beyond their thoughts and views about their own practice while providing support and new perspectives on their work (Samaras & Freese, 2006). We draw from Nash (2004), who engaged in-depth about the power of personal narratives and described how personal narratives have the ability to help others become wiser because stories are often filled with intellectual and experiential truth.

Self-study involves using methods that require us to step back and reflect on our situated selves (Pithouse et al., 2009). Listening to our audio-recorded conversations, and writing our individual narratives, gave us an opportunity to reflect on our lived experiences in the university workplace and how our critical friendship emerged. Our personal narratives were written in response to the questions we formulated when conceptualising this paper. They are also used as guiding points in our analysis below. To analyse our data, we used narrative analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995). Our narratives were given to one person to reduce and re-story into a coherent narrative account (Polkinghorne, 1995). This process was guided by our research question. Thereafter, each of us reviewed them to ensure that our reflections were captured correctly. Furthermore, we used discussions and the audio-recordings to validate some of the data. We took these measures to ensure the trustworthiness of the accounts that we produced (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). To conclude the analysis process, we continued to re-story the narratives until we were satisfied that we had produced a complete portrait of our lived experience as presented below (Polkinghorne, 1995).

Discussion

Our narratives are structured using the main research questions of the paper and sub-questions that we responded to when we were reflecting. The first section is based on the following question: “How did I identify the relationship as a critical friendship?” This is followed by the second section: “How did the critical friendship become a life jacket?” We present the narratives alongside a discussion on how we are making sense of our experiences. We believe that presenting data in this way enables the reader to get an understanding of our individual responses to the section and to engage the discussion with a comprehensive account of each narrative. The narratives show different accounts of the

moments in which each of us began to identify the relationship as a critical friendship. The question was open and enabled us to identify instances that are unique and meaningful to each person.

How Did I Identify the Relationship as a Critical Friendship?

The identities of being a new staff member, an ECA, and doctoral scholar brought us together and we began to see ourselves as a collective (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Although we see ourselves as a collective, we are driven by our individual and unique lived experiences that we each reflect on, using personal narratives. For example, Vusi highlighted the dean's meeting that brought all the ECAs together as a moment that made it possible to meet other ECAs. The common identities, as noted by Nosipho, enabled the creation of critical friendship. In this case, the dominant space, which is the university and its expectations, provided the motivation for the emergence of the liminal space. The experiences produced by the intersection of our identities provided possibilities to empower ourselves with regards to our educational endeavours. As evident from Vusi's narrative below, there were more members in the group and, as the numbers declined, we reevaluated ourselves through dialogue and interactions (Olan & Edge, 2019).

***Vusi:** The critical friendship is made up of members of the school who are based in different scholarly disciplines, made up of both men and women, and all of them are black Africans in terms of race. The group has sustained various challenges, for example, at some point, we did not meet regularly for a period of six months as others were in the field, generating data (including myself). This has not deterred interactions because we communicated through Zoom video calling and WhatsApp.*

***Nosipho:** I would not say our relationship could be defined as a critical friendship before. It began under the obvious common identities we had at work. These identities helped foster a relationship as we also had similar challenges and experiences bearing these identities. The common identities and experiences at our workplace resulted in us spending more time together in a small room, away from the main buildings, on the outskirts of campus. This venue (Room 32) allowed us to find comfort while at work, to share frustrations and moments of happiness with each other. It was our safe space. The safety and comfort we found in each other and the space led to my view of seeing these colleagues as critical friends as they were fundamental to my work life and advised from a place of sincerity and honesty.*

Indeed, the liminal space should not be confined to a physical space; it is also embodied in our bodies and state of minds (Low & Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2003). Nokukhanya and Thabile in the excerpts below present the liminal space as an embodied state, for example, travelling to a capacity development workshop and sharing experiences with a member of the critical friendship showed Thabile that it is not limited to a physical space (Room 32) but is carried all the time. In addition, Nokukhanya is perceived by other people in the academy to understand the day-to-day activities of an academic. She stated that this is based on their assumptions that she has previously worked as a contract staff member, therefore, she should know what is expected of her as an academic. However, that was not the case. As contract staff, her focus was teaching and she had little knowledge of the other KPAs. In our doctoral studies, we are in different stages: some are generating data while others are writing up. Normally in a competitive and individualistic environment, the different stages would have created a hierarchy. But within the critical friendship, we embrace and see intersectional differences as an opportunity to learn from each other. It was at this moment that Nokukhanya who was returning to the university as a full-time staff member was able to catch up with the expectations of her position and familiarise herself with the organisational systems of the institution. To reflect on our experiences is a defining feature of critical friendship (Schuck & Russell, 2005), and assists us in seeing educational

value in our relationship as we continually find illuminating discoveries that contribute to our professional development.

Thabile: *At first, I did not see this relationship as a critical relationship. For me, it was a place where I could voice out my experiences good/bad. When I was appointed, it felt like the school could have done more to induct me to carry out my duties. In order to navigate the space, I leaned on a colleague who was new like me. We attended capacity development workshops together. For me, this was the start of our critical friendship as we would often discuss the challenges that we were experiencing in our teaching.*

Nokukhanya: *I had previously been employed on a fixed-term contract and had then left. So many memories had been made in my absence. The excitement of my return was soon shadowed by feelings of anxiety, confusion, and pressure of the academy. "I think we should do an AERA presentation. We can also write papers from this?" When this suggestion was posed, I asked, "Am I part of this 'we'?" In retrospect, I now know, that was a point of validation for me. From feeling like an impostor, I started to feel like "I was within."*

The discussions that ensued and continue are ideas that shape my thinking and stretch me in various ways. Through the conversations, I have also grown to understand the organisational rules of the university. Here, I have found my voice and it is here where my professional identity is being shaped in positive ways. Here, I am allowed to not know but I am pushed to not stay in this state.

As ECAs, we often experience feelings of inadequacy, professional isolation, and of being a "fringe dweller on the edge of the institutional research and organisational culture" (Sutherland-Smith et al., 2011, p. 330). In this narration, the critical friendship acted as a lifeline to keep Nokukhanya as where she experienced the dual isolation of the academy and of a space where she had once belonged. Turner (1969) referred to this as the in between and betwixt space. Our space is not characterised by the hegemonic forces that are at play in the dominant space (Shortt, 2015). The safety of the liminal space gave her a sense of belonging, allowed her to find herself, her voice, and to begin cultivating her professional identity (Pegg et al., 2014). Her emphasis on the transformation happening *here* placed emphasis on the empowering and transformative power of the liminal space wherein she is safe and is becoming what she wants to be (Cook-Sather, 2006; Pegg et al., 2014). Also of significance, is that the power of the space became more influential once she felt she was part of it and she felt she was valued and seen as an academic with whom her colleagues could collaborate. The earlier comment that liminality is a continual transitional space is highlighted here when she says it continues to shape her in positive ways. As before, we present the next discussion using a question.

How Did Critical Friendship Become a Life Jacket?

The narratives show that, although we had already identified the space as a critical friendship, we continued to experience other challenges within the broader university space. The pressure on universities to compete on publication outputs and Department of Higher Education subsidies (Khunou, Canham et al., 2019) has put pressure on early-career academics to publish research. Nokukhanya, in the excerpt below, shares her experiences with regards to conceptualising a paper alone. Her challenges developed an impostor syndrome in which she doubted her capabilities, her intelligence, and competence—making her feel like an "outsider-within" the academy (Cope-Watson & Betts, 2010; Mahabeer et al., 2018; Nathane, 2019). Another instance of impostor syndrome appears in Thabile's narrative, where the pressure was not about research but about teaching, which is another KPA. When Thabile was appointed to academia, she was a former high school teacher and the narrative shows that other colleagues have nourished the impostor syndrome by suggesting that she could have spent more years in schools.

The competitive and individualistic environment of academia, as already stated, has created conscious and unconscious gatekeepers. Given these comments and Thabile's experiences, we concur with Cope-Watson and Betts (2010), who stipulated that impostor syndrome is a form of subordination fuelled either by the self or others. The next excerpts illustrate how critical friendship became a life jacket. Nokukhanya was able to engage with critical friends, and meaningful conversations assisted with her challenges. For Thabile, the intervention made by a critical friend during and after an incident of conflict with students was useful mitigation. Since the 2015 and 2016 #FeesMustFall student movements, members of the student representative councils in various institutions have used militant approaches when engaging with staff members. Nosipho's experiences are similar to these in different ways: they all felt as outsiders. Having each other, they were able to share their strengths in assisting one another acclimatise to the environment. The value of critical friendships lies in the level and type of commitments we invest in each other (Schuck & Russell, 2005); thinking and learning arise from our collaboration and exchange of feedback with others (Samaras & Roberts, 2011).

Nokukhanya: *Having not previously published on my own, I attempted to write a paper, solo. After I had written, I realised that I had really diverted from the focus of the paper. At this point, I started to question whether I had the ability to perform this task. I questioned whether I had chosen the right vocation. Sitting at the library, lost and dismayed, I turned to Nosipho for help:*

"I first do a draft where I conceptualise the paper. I then write the purpose of the paper. The potential theoretical framework. It's not linear, you know."

After our conversation, I attempted to do what she had done. I also drew on the conversation I had previously with Vusi. He had said that sometimes he starts with writing the findings, and then these inform his purpose, and so on. He had also said that I should first identify the journal I was writing for so I could ensure that my work was within its scope. Drawing from the lessons learnt through the conversations and the teachings, I have conceptualised a paper, and I have started the write-up. I'm not there yet, but at least I have started.

Thabile: *The most significant moment I can recall when the critical friendship became a life jacket, was when I had prepared to administer a test to 310 students and invited my ECA colleagues to assist with invigilation. Minutes before the commencement of the test, some students boycotted the test with the assistance of the student representatives. In my attempt to negotiate and continue with the test, I was verbally assaulted and humiliated by the student representatives. This incident confirmed what a senior staff member had said about my appointment: "You joined academia a bit early. You are too young and should have stayed in high school to accumulate more experience." Reflecting on this conversation and test incident, I began to suffer from an impostor syndrome. It was the critical friends who dug me out of this hole and challenged me to think differently.*

Nosipho: *In the difficulties I have encountered as an ECA, I was undermined a lot and had a continuously difficult relationship with my line manager who lacked support and did not listen even to genuine concerns I raised to her. Many times, I felt belittled because I was the youngest in my cluster. My engagement with this group of ECAs has assisted me with advice, adjusting to the terrain, as they were former undergrad students and understood certain systems better—which was their invisible capital. Their support became a life jacket as it assisted me to work through the challenges I faced and, in the safe space we created, I managed to realise my strength and build on my growth as an ECA on campus.*

Our critical friendship was founded on the principle of trust (Swaffield, 2007), which is an important feature of critical friendships (Samaras & Freese, 2006). Vusi's narrative (see below) indicates that critical friendship as a life jacket provides support even on issues outside academia. However, we took caution not to delve into personal matters unless requested by the member. A significant study on critical friendships suggests that personal friendships are not a guarantee of a critical friendship (Schuck & Russell, 2005). We argue that our narratives, although not premised on a guarantee, suggest the inverse; in our case, critical friendships preceded the personal, and we became friends through learning and thinking together.

Vusi: Often, life jackets are used in critical conditions and I feel having this critical friendship became that. When I realised that the critical friendship had turned into a life jacket was when I was frustrated by the feedback from the ethics office. The frustration felt like double pain as it was feedback for the student I supervised and my own doctoral study. I decided to share with the critical friends when I got to our space, Room 32; it was after lunch and, through dialogue, they advised on possible ways to address the concerns from the ethics office. Two weeks later, the two ethics certificates were issued.

In addition, we conducted mock presentations for conferences and, prior to sending our research papers, providing feedback to each other created an opportunity to learn about ourselves and our emotions. Most significantly, we became aware of each other's studies. We provided support even outside the institution wherein members of the friendship needed non-academic support such as weddings, bereavement, and becoming a parent. It became easier to deal with the day-to-day challenges of being an early career academic.

Given that our critical friendship has become a life jacket and a safe space for growth, we envisage that the friendship will continue beyond acquiring doctoral degrees and achieving other academic milestones such as promotions in the academy. We have designed our space not only for the challenges we experience but also for doing meaningful and pioneering work. As indicated earlier, we do mock presentations prior to conferences or to presenting to the students we supervise. Working collectively by creating an additional support layer is a significant learning that we draw from our experiences. We need alternative space for ourselves in order to counter the myriad challenges facing ECAs—amongst others, the nuances emerging from the intersections within one racial category. This is not to ignore the interracial intersections (Khunou, Phaswana et al., 2019) that continue to plague the transformation agenda of the South African academy. The challenges do not only come because we are ECAs; we are also black academics and the critical friendship is predominantly female, with one male. In academia, men are confronted with different struggles compared to women; this is the case because the nature of the South African higher education continues to celebrate historically dominant discourses (Khoza-Shangase, 2019) that are centred on race and masculinity. We thus trouble those who see us as developmental projects because we see each other as assets.

We have learned that, as a collective, we are able to deliberate on the toxicity, competitiveness, and individualistic academic environment (Bosetti et al., 2008). The challenges in academia, such as teaching and assessing large classrooms, especially in South Africa, require innovative ways of conducting teaching and learning. Through our space, we have begun to deliberate on such matters and how we can enhance our offerings amid massification, especially since teaching is relegated to ECAs if not totally outsourced to contract staff members (Phaswana, 2019). We have turned the challenges we face, that often-brought frustration, into teachable moments. Learning in our space is continuous and exciting. We learn new ways of doing things, even though sometimes the learning may create initial dissonance. However, we have opened up ourselves to learning and our thinking is stretched even during group events such as having lunch together in a restaurant. In this way, we deal

with academentia (Tomaselli, 2015). We consistently process and overcome toxic and exclusionary statements such as “publish or perish” and “swim or sink.”

Conclusion

As we share our lived experiences, we hope to contribute to the ongoing conversation of ECAs and the challenges of higher education institutions in South Africa. Given that the academic space may be toxic, we also hope to begin a new dialogue about the use of liminal spaces for productivity in the academic landscape. We make the call to other ECAs to confront the challenges they face through formations of critical friendships and use of alternative spaces. We believe they are untapped spaces that possess the potential to offer non-hegemonic, self-regulated, and liberating environments that may assist them unravel and construct their own professional practice. We argue that institutions of higher learning should approach ECAs with an intersectional approach and avoid seeing them as individuals without doctorates and thus, underqualified; but rather, allow them the opportunity for growth without being stifled, suppressed, and marginalised. In this paper, we have shown how our collaborative and participatory engagements have contributed to our professional development and social change, which has led to our academic growth. Academic collaborations advance scholarship and allow for interdisciplinary partnerships, breaking the isolationist culture of the university space that promotes individualism, competitiveness, and hierarchy (Bosetti et al., 2008). Our intersectional experiences have initiated self and social empowerment through establishing an alternative space that allowed us to begin constructing our own identities as ECAs. Studying the self allows for learning to occur, for the self and others, as they understand the learning experience and the process taken for one’s own learning (Russell, 1998). Therefore, we encourage other ECAs to engage in their own learning, take up liminal spaces, and engage in partnerships beneficial to their scholarship—amplifying their voices from their spaces of power and socially changing the academy into a healthier and less toxic institution.

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