Successful students' negotiation of township schooling in contemporary South Africa

Rochelle Kapp; Elmi Badenhorst; Bongi Bangeni; Tracy S. Craig; Viki Janse van Rensburg; Kate Le Roux; Robert Prince; June Pym & Ermien van Pletzen.

This article draws on data from a larger longitudinal qualitative case study which is tracking the progress of students over the course of their undergraduate degrees at a South African university. For this paper, we used background questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with 62 first-year students from working-class, township schools who were first registered for Extended Degree Programmes in 2009. The article draws on post-structuralist theory on learning and identity to describe and analyse the participants' perspectives on how they negotiated their high school contexts. We analyse the subject positions in which participants invested, as well as how they negotiated their way through social networks and used resources. Our data illustrate the ways in which students had to carry the burden of negotiating

Rochelle Kapp
School of Education, University of Cape Town
E-mail: rochelle.kapp@uct.ac.za
Tel: 021 650 4891

Tracy S. Craig
Academic Development Programme, University of Cape Town
E-mail: tracy.craig@uct.ac.za
Tel: 021 650 5973

Robert Prince
Academic Development Programme, University of Cape Town
E-mail: robert.prince@uct.ac.za
Tel: 021 650 5833

Elmi Badenhorst
Human Biology, University of Cape Town
E-mail: elmi.badenhorst@uct.ac.za
Tel: 021 406 6336

Viki Janse van Rensburg
Education Development Unit, Health Sciences, University of Cape Town
E-mail: viki.jansevanrensburg@uct.ac.za
Tel: 021 406 6241

June Pym
Academic Development Programme, University of Cape Town
E-mail: june.pym@uct.ac.za
Tel: 021 650 3866

Bongi Bangeni
Academic Development Programme, University of Cape Town
E-mail: abongwe.bangeni@uct.ac.za
Tel: 021 650 5040

Kate Le Roux
Academic Development Programme, University of Cape Town
E-mail: kate.leroux@uct.ac.za
Tel: 021 650 3707

Ermien van Pletzen
Academic Development Programme, University of Cape Town
E-mail: ermien.vanpletzen@uct.ac.za
Tel: 021 650 5054

their way through home, school and neighbourhood spaces that were generally not conducive to learning. Nevertheless, participants consciously positioned themselves as agents. They were resilient, motivated and took highly strategic adult decisions about their learning. We argue that a focus on how successful students negotiate their environments challenges the pathologising paradigm of "disadvantage" that characterises research and debates in higher education. It also offers an additional lens for admissions processes and for providing appropriate intervention strategies in the tertiary setting.

Keywords: working-class township schooling; disadvantage; agency; identity; school-university transition.

Introduction

This article analyses black,[1] first-year university students' perspectives on how they negotiated their working-class, township school contexts. Education commentators agree that South Africa effectively has two school systems with educational outcomes which still correspond to racial outcomes (Soudien, 2007). Spaull (2013: 6) illustrates that "the smaller, better performing system accommodates the wealthiest 20-25 per cent of pupils who achieve much higher scores than the larger system which caters to the poorest 75-80 per cent of pupils". His report shows that 50 out of every 100 pupils that start Grade 1, will drop out before Grade 12, 40 will pass the National Senior Certificate examination and 12 will qualify for university. Research by CHE (2013: 41) indicates that the participation rates for "African" and "coloured" students are "persistently very low" (14% in 2011), and generally under a quarter of that of white students.

While there has been a great deal of theorisation about education in South Africa, recent studies of working-class township youth have pointed out that there has been relatively little attention paid to how young people interpret their school and home contexts and take decisions or action (Bray, Gooskens, Moses, Kahn & Seekings, 2010). Luckett and Luckett (2009: 469) argue that individual agency tends to be "dissolved" in learning theories that prioritise cognition, as well as theories on situated learning. In post-apartheid South Africa, black youth are often described as failures or victims, characterised in terms of their disadvantage as the "lost generation", "disadvantaged" and "marginalised" (see Swartz, 2009: 13). Swartz (2009) and a number of recent researchers (see Marshall & Case, 2010; Fataar, 2010; Janse van Rensburg, 2011) have pointed out that labels such as these have the effect of stereotyping and thereby reifying identity.

While there is consensus that students' social backgrounds heavily influence success in school and their access to necessary resources, recent post-structuralist theory has emphasised the complex interplay of structure and agency in the educational process and has shown that the discursive practices of schooling are

powerful, but not necessarily overdetermining. Theorists such as Thomson (2009: 154) argue that individual lives are both "constrained" and "agentic". Here, agency is understood as an individual's capacity to make conscious choices and to act and improvise in response to particular situations (Giddens, 1993; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain, 1998). In this reasoning, educational success and failure are influenced by "structures of opportunity" as well as individual motivation, effort and ability to reflect at a meta-level (Christie, 2008: 8; Mann, 2008; Luckett & Luckett, 2009).

This paper argues that South African higher education institutions have tended to conceptualise students' backgrounds in fairly unnuanced, homogenised and often deficit ways, thus overlooking individuals and the psycho-social resources that play a role in enabling them to obtain entry into higher education. The limited pool of black, working-class students who do gain access to higher education comprise the top achievers in township schools and are generally the first generation at university. We need to ask ourselves how it is that these students persist and succeed at school *despite* coming from social backgrounds that do not seem to be conducive to learning. We need to understand how young people interpret their social worlds by trying to understand the subject positions in which they have invested, as well as how they negotiate their way through social networks and how they use "socially and discursively available resources" (Thomson, 2009: 160).

We make this argument based on data from a study of the school to university transition at a relatively elite South African university. In doing so, we are continuing a conversation started by Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2009) and Marshall and Case (2010) who argue that the coping strategies developed in a "disadvantaged" social background could form useful resources for succeeding in higher education. We do not wish to romanticise working-class experience; our research attempts to look beyond a documentation of *what* resources are available to students from working-class backgrounds. We argue that a focus on *how* successful students negotiate their environments challenges the pathologising paradigm of disadvantage and failure. It also offers an additional lens for analysing potential in admissions processes and for providing appropriate intervention strategies in the tertiary setting.

Methodology

This article draws on data from a larger longitudinal qualitative case study which is tracking the progress of 100 students over the course of their undergraduate degrees. For this article, we analysed background questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with 62 first-year students who were registered for Extended Degree Programmes[2] in the faculties of Commerce, Engineering and the Built Environment, Health Sciences, Humanities and Science. The data were collected in students' first semester of study in 2009. Although our data include students who have attended well-resourced schools outside of working-class townships, for the purposes of this paper, we have focused on students who were raised and schooled in township

schools. They formed part of the first cohort of Grade 12 learners who wrote the new National Senior Certificate (NSC) based on the principles of outcomes-based education. Importantly, they form part of a generation who have grown up and been educated in post-apartheid South Africa. This is significant in terms of how they constructed their learning identities.

The data on which this article is based were collected in the participants' first year of university. Students were asked to describe their home, neighbourhood and school backgrounds, how they used resources and how they positioned themselves within these contexts. Although the students' trajectories are individual, nuanced and sometimes contradictory, for the purpose of this paper, we have focused on content analysis of general patterns, and have signalled instances where we discuss exceptional or extreme cases.

Analytical induction was used to uncover categories and themes within the set of interview data. We assigned categories by clustering similar ideas and then assigning themes to the data. Themes can be described as unifying concepts that emerge from the data to provide general insights (Boyatzis, 1998; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The background questionnaires were used to compare and crosscheck information in the interviews.

Our research does not assume that we can read off participants' identities from the interviews or establish an essential truth. Alongside other post-structuralist theorists, we are mindful of the positions from which students construct their pasts in the interviews: Their present contexts as first-year students exist because they have had successful pasts (see Herrington & Curtis, 2000; Sfard & Prusak, 2005). The students were recognised by others as successful within the discourse of schooling in a particular time and place. They were also accepted into a relatively elite university. Their acceptance turned out to be conditional, however, in that they were placed on Extended Degree Programmes. One expects that in the interview process they would be engaged in composing and narrating as they reviewed their pasts in the light of their present contexts and their projection of their possible futures.

We are interested in the meanings that the participants attributed to their contexts; how they conceptualise their negotiation of structural constraints; how they wished to be viewed and how they positioned themselves. In the words of Holland *et al.* (1998: 3): "People tell others who they are, but even more importantly, they tell themselves..." We are interested in the "activity of identifying [within participants' narratives] rather than its end product" (Sfard & Prusak, 2005: 17).

Students' perceptions of their home, neighbourhood and school contexts

The participants in our study were generally raised in single-income, single-parent contexts by women (63%), usually their mothers and/or their grandmothers. There is a pattern of fluidity as participants moved between a parent and a relative's home as family circumstances changed, often resulting in a change of schools and neighbourhood. Interestingly, students seldom foregrounded their family situations as unusual. Michela,[3] whose father passed away when she was five years old, said: "I had a normal childhood, happy, no problems really". Indeed, in the national context, nuclear family households are not the norm. A study by Holborn and Eddy (2011) reports that, in 2008, 40% of children were living with their mother only; 2.8% with their father only, and 22.6% with neither of their biological parents. Bray et al. (2010) describe the ways in which the children in their study of two working-class communities are made vulnerable by domestic fluidity and living without parents for extended periods.

The implication of their household circumstances meant that parents and caregivers were relatively uninvolved in the participants' schooling, and the decision to apply to university was often serendipitous, taken independently from their parents (see also Lubben, Davidowitz, Buffler, Allie & Scott, 2010). Roshni, who grew up 23 km from the university, had never heard of the place until Grade 12 when a friend invited her to visit on an Open Day for prospective students. Like most participants, there was no expectation that she would do more than obtain a high school education:

> *… the norm is after school you go work in a factory, after school you go work in a shop.*

Participants tended to describe their neighbourhood environments as violent and frequently mentioned that they were glad to be in the relatively safe environment of the university. For example, Luvuyo said:

> *… you will find that there are taverns around and … people are passing by the streets, they are drunk … so the environment is not actually quiet to study … you have to switch the lights off because you may hear a gunshot and then you will never know what will happen.*

While many participants articulated the fear associated with their neighbourhoods, they also expressed a strong sense of affinity and belonging in relation to their home environments, often compared to their feelings of alienation within the university and its neighbourhood. This is expressed in the "us" and "they" pronouns in Mark's description of his neighbourhood:

> *Ja, it's one of the roughest townships, there is a lot of violence in there, but it depends on how you look at it. For example, if you take someone from a suburb and you put them in Umlazi, they will feel like they are in hell but for us who*

> *grew up in Umlazi, we got used to it ... but besides the violence and crime, it's a good place to be because like you interact with most people there, you know almost all your neighbours and you have a lot of friends there, so it's quite a good place and a bad place at the same time.*

Schools varied quite widely in terms of physical resources. Students frequently reported that basic resources had been allocated, but were subsequently broken or stolen.[4] Resources such as libraries and computers were under- or not utilised and, in one case, textbooks and resources were allocated based on teachers' assessment of students' abilities. Vuyokazi's description of his school was typical:

> *... we would go [to computer class] once a month because there were few computers ... we had to share the textbook and the classes were so over-crowded that sometimes if you come in late in class, you don't have a desk and a chair to sit on ... the windows were broken ... some classes did not have doors and sometimes there were no boards ... In like 2007 ... there was a break-in, so ... when we came in the following day there were no computers in our school.*

Students' descriptions of their teachers were complex and contradictory. Their repeated refrain was that their teachers had "tried". Teachers were often positioned as victims of their circumstances, who had worked in solidarity with their students to enable them to overcome the barriers to learning in the environment, as in the following examples:

> *Teachers, ja, teachers, ja, they were trying, some of them they were trying but ... there was nothing that they can do because there were no facilities (Phila).*

> *They were good, they were good, they were trying to support, giving us work, allowing us to think critically, ja, by giving us researches and programmes ... (Zinhle)*

While her descriptions of her teachers indicated that she had felt supported by them in the school setting, Zinhle also described how her teachers had actively discouraged her from applying to the university: "They just told me that you are not going to make it". Like most other participants, her descriptions of the differences between how she was taught at school compared to university suggested significant problems that go well beyond a lack of resources. It seemed that whole sections of curricula were not taught or taught very partially (in the case of Chemistry, mostly without laboratories). Students such as Zinhle, who spoke of teachers' attempts to teach critical engagement, also spoke of the impossibility of applying outcomes-based education in a context with large classes and without appropriate resources such as access to the internet. In two cases, students took on the role of teachers – one student tutored his fellow students in Mathematics on Saturdays and another taught Chemistry for four months at his high school (while in Grade 12) as there was no qualified person in that post.

Despite outcomes-based curricula, for the most part, teaching and learning still seemed to centre on rote learning. Tebogo provided a telling characterisation of school Mathematics as selecting and substituting into a formula:

> *In school you just put in the formula, you just choose the right formula and put*
> *in the values, you got the answer ... so I was used to that school mentality, that*
> *if I study, if I memorise most of the things then I'll pass ...*

All participants described how they learnt in a test-driven, superficial manner which focused on getting the gist. Fuad spoke of how "you didn't really have to understand what you are reading because they didn't expect that of you actually".

It is significant that participants' descriptions of learning at school were nearly always framed in terms of "passing". Students often made a distinction between learning to understand at university and high school where "I was learning to pass" (Zinhle). In Tebogo's words, "I was used to that school mentality, that if I study, if I memorise most of the things then I'll pass". This notion of a school culture which emphasised surface learning and "passing" contrasted to students' own expressions of passion and excitement about their subject areas. For example, a number of students spoke of their "love" for Mathematics or their enjoyment of literature and drama.

Students' negotiation of schooling

One of the most striking features in the data is the extent to which participants described their learning environments as dysfunctional, in Isaac's words "out of order" and in Luvuyo's "negative". Luvuyo described how many students would drop out of school because of pregnancy or because of involvement in crime. He painted a vivid picture of the apathy, insecurity, ill-discipline and violence that characterised his school experiences:

> *They [fellow students] want to finish Grade 12, it doesn't matter if they fail or*
> *pass as long as they are done with high school. Ja, so the majority is ... just*
> *going to school for the sake of going to school, so it is actually negative in some*
> *way because you will find out they are not well disciplined ... They doubt their*
> *abilities in terms of passing, for example, when I used to ask ... fellow learners*
> *"how do you think you are going to pass this year?", in March, and then they*
> *will say "No, I don't know, we'll see". With that kind of an attitude it's more or*
> *less certain that you won't pass because you are not sure about yourself ...*

The meta-level discourse about self-efficiency and personal growth in this quotation is evident in many students' narratives. The "can do" attitude it reflects has been described in a number of recent studies on youth identity (Thompson, 2009: 1; see also Herrington & Curtis, 2000; Marshall & Case, 2010). It is significant that, throughout his interview, Luvuyo made a clear distinction between the general mind-set ("they") and his own sense of the value of self-belief and the need to be an agent of one's success. In the South African context, Bray et al. (2010: 252) write that:

> *... in contexts where education is highly venerated, there is considerable*
> *symbolic, social and emotional value in adolescents maintaining a discourse*
> *that divides the world between those who are 'on the right track' and those*
> *who are not.*

They argue that young people can often achieve a sense of fulfilment and bolstering of self-esteem by investing in such discourses.

While a number of participants described themselves as "popular" at school, there are many examples where students appeared to distance themselves from their peers. In Senzo's words:

> *I didn't mind whatever people were saying about me as long as I know who I am ... I just forget everything they are saying and focus on my life.*

Philile was covert in his approach:

> *... when they are disruptive, ja, I may just laugh there in the background but I know that what I'm being taught is in my brain, I'm going to learn it ...*

The participants generally constructed themselves as hard workers, as people who do not give up. Sibabalwe said: "I'm a fighter, I can say I'm a fighter, fighting student". Some students seemed to have worked to the exclusion of a social life, sport and dating.

Participants deliberately sought out peers who were similarly serious students and often formed study groups. Some spoke of placing themselves near the front of the classroom, where, in the words of Josephine, other students would not be "in your face" and where it would be quieter and easier to connect to teachers who would otherwise not notice them. In Phiwe's words:

> *... in my school it was like if you determined, if you have courage, teachers were like helping you to like pass, pass and you would pass with flying colours ... If you were like discouraged and de-motivated and not feeling like studying and you were not understanding the work and like you were failing your subjects you would go down the drain, it was like they moving with the movers. If you left behind, then you left behind, no one is going to care for you, no one is going to come and ask.*

This notion of teachers "moving with the movers" is a common refrain in the townships alongside the refrain that "teachers go with the students who are going". Kapp (2004) describes how the township teachers in her study coped with large, undisciplined classes by connecting to the students who were willing to learn, usually situated at the front of the classrooms. The notion seems to be that teachers will work with students who are self-driven and/or talented and have the potential for mobility beyond the confines of the township. This approach meant that many participants achieved validation from their teachers. Walker (2006: 7) writes, "processes of learning and agentic identity formation are intrinsically connected with the process of recognition. By receiving recognition from (significant) others, one achieves a confident and positive identity". At the same time, participants such as Mdudusi had worked out at an early stage that they could not rely on teachers:

> *I never depended on the teacher or what the teacher does because sometimes our teachers never came to classes so at the end of the day they are not the ones going to write the exams ...*

The overwhelming trope in the data is that the classroom was not a place for joint construction of knowledge. Serious learning took place outside of the classroom. The students consciously sought out safe spaces to concentrate, in one case, by staying at home during school time to study (with the knowledge of teachers), in another, by regularly staying at a friend's house overnight.

Participants' strong sense of taking control and directing their own futures was often fostered by a source outside of schooling. In the wake of difficulty, many students had turned to religion as an enabling framework that allowed them to "stay positive". Religion seemed to act as a "sponsor" for their actions by offering a social identity which facilitated security, connection and agency, as well as a discourse of personal growth (Herrington & Curtis, 2000: 369; see also Swartz, 2009; Fataar, 2010; Bray *et al.*, 2010). Students also found community organisations with specialised programmes; extra classes at other schools and fellow students from "multi-racial" schools. These sources provided them with alternative, generative ways of "saying-doing-being-valuing-believing" (Gee, 1990: 142) that countered the "negative" discourses that often characterised their schooling. Together with the fact that they had achieved at school, these discourses seemed to be the source of their sense of constructing future roles, careers and identities for themselves outside of the township. Luvuyo's case illustrates this point very well. Despite being a leader figure (President of the Student Representative Council) at his school, Luvuyo described how he had to distance himself (both mentally and physically) from school and from township culture in order to succeed. His particular coping mechanism was to seek "positive" stimulation and to find resources outside of the township through a range of workshops organised by community organisations:

> *...I didn't consider myself as a person who was living in this environment, although physically I was living there but my mind was not in that level of that environment because I related to outside things, to outside environments, so that's why I coped, because I didn't associate myself with the certain people that had this kind of behaviour and I always associated myself with people who would think positive ... I will go to school, then maybe go to a workshop or go to a meeting in some place, so my attitude was always, even though I lived there physically but mentally I'm not there, I don't live in that environment.*

Even though Luvuyo was struggling within Media Studies at university, he expressed confidence in a future career as a film maker and attributed his confidence to the skills, connections and meta-knowledge he had built up in these organisations:

It helped me a lot because when you are living in a place and then you go out, you meet new people, then your mind will be opened with a lot of things ... your mind will absorb more things that you can apply in your subjects because ... it helped me in terms of my English, which is the English that I didn't actually learn from school, but I learnt it from the outside, how to speak it by networking with the different people ...

Conclusion

This article has attempted to illustrate the ways in which a group of successful students from working-class backgrounds made sense of their environments, positioned themselves and used resources. Our data illustrate the ways in which students consciously positioned themselves as agents. The students had to carry the burden of negotiating their way through spaces that were not necessarily conducive to learning. They were resilient, took strategic adult decisions and were excited about their learning. They (literally) placed themselves in learning positions, invested in subject positions as hard workers and overtly and covertly distanced themselves from places and people that they perceived to be "out of order". Their interview comments reflect perspicuity and insight into their contexts and relatively high degrees of self-awareness and reflection. Despite the harshness of their living and learning environments, growing up in the "new" South Africa with its promise of opportunity, together with their local status as high achievers, gave them a confident sense of their futures. They were critical of dominant discourses and when their environments did not provide appropriate support and resources, they sought "sponsoring" discourses which would provide enabling frameworks. These are all qualities and dispositions which are valued within the higher education context.

Nevertheless, as many studies have shown, the superficial learning practices (e.g. rote learning or reading superficially) within such contexts are inappropriate for the higher education context (see for example Slonimsky & Shalem, 2004; Van Schalkwyk, 2007). Rather than constructing students in pathologising, deficit terms, the challenge for higher education institutions is to work out how to harness students' agency, reflexivity and motivation in appropriate ways. Understanding students' explanations of experiences and self provides a starting point for facilitating situated academic practices and providing alternative learning models in order to facilitate the academic, linguistic and social transition from school to university in appropriate ways.

Endnotes

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(Endnotes)
1   In this paper we use the category "black" inclusively to refer to "African", "coloured" and "Indian" students.
2   These are specialised, disciplinary-based degree programmes designed for students who do not qualify for admission to mainstream degrees. The programmes typically take one year longer than mainstream programmes.
3   All names used are pseudonyms.
4   In a minority of cases, female students had attended relatively well-resourced church schools with computers, laboratories and libraries, but those resources were hardly utilised because of a lack of expertise among the teachers, or they were locked away, putatively, for safety reasons. In two cases, the internet and cellphones were forbidden which, ironically, restricted students' ability to fulfil the research requirements of the new outcomes-based curriculum.