Confronting contradiction: Diversity experiences at school and university

Merridy Wilson-Strydom

Transformation and the embracing of diversity remains a major challenge at South African universities. This article reflects on the contradictory nature of first-year university students' experiences of diversity and highlights the difficult terrain that students need to navigate, often with hardly any preparation for the university environment based on their schooling experiences. Using the capabilities approach as the guiding theoretical framework, the article interprets these contradictory diversity experiences in the first year in light of data on encounters with diversity at high school. It draws on the results of a large-scale mixed methods study. Qualitative data, using focus group and visual methodologies, was collected from 270 first-year students in 2009 and 2010. In addition, a total of 2.816 high school learners selected from a diverse sample of 20 local schools completed a mainly quantitative survey that included various items about interaction with diverse peers and the broader community as well as engagement with complex and diverse ideas. The school-level data provides important contextual background for understanding and interpreting students' experiences. Such understanding is critical if we are to confront and challenge the contradictory diversity experiences during the first year at university.

Keywords: capabilities approach, diversity, transformation, higher education, schooling

Introduction

Despite the fact that national and institutional policies address the importance of transformation and the embracing of diversity across the South African higher education sector, in practice on our campuses and within our classrooms, we still have a long way to go in the pursuit of a more equitable higher education environment. While existing research (for example, Ministry of Education, 2008; Soudien, 2010) has analysed and provided evidence of the lack of meaningful transformation within the sector, a great deal remains to be done, particularly in understanding the many

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and complex factors influencing the manner in which students respond to diversity encounters. In seeking to better understand diversity and transformation in practice, rather than policy, this article considers the manner in which first-year students experience diversity encounters when entering university. In addition, the research started from the assumption that, in order to understand diversity encounters at university, it is necessary to also understand the conditions that exist for students prior to university (i.e., at school). As such, the research design included both high school learners and first-year university students, thus enabling the construction of a rich account of the factors that impact on how students experience diversity.

In this article, I draw on the capabilities approach (CA), as developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, to theorise the complexities and contradictions that emerge from students' and learners' encounters with diversity. The paper thus contributes to the growing body of work on higher education and human development, a body of work firmly situated within a social justice agenda (Boni & Walker, 2013). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines diverse as being "of different kinds", and diversity as "variety".[1] Using these definitions as the starting point, I approach the topic of diversity encounters across two dimensions. The first is related to encounters with different kinds of people (commonly referred to as encounters with 'the other'), and the second is about encounters with different kinds of ideas and ways of knowing. Understanding both of these dimensions is critical in the case of higher education, particularly given the role of higher education in the "socialisation of enlightened, responsible and constructively critical citizens", as was articulated as one of the four purposes of higher education in the 1997 White Paper and reiterated in slightly different wording in the newly released White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (Ministry of Education, 1997: 7-8; Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013).

The article begins with a brief introduction to the key tenets of the CA, followed by an overview of the study methodology. Thereafter, I present the empirical data demonstrating how first-year students and high school learners experience diversity. The paper then shows how the CA provides a helpful lens for interpreting the various complexities and contradictions that emerge from the data, and so potentially opens up new avenues for interventions that seek to build diverse, democratic and socially equitable university spaces.

Agency, freedoms and capabilities

The CA is particularly useful for research focused on social justice, because it emphasises the role of education and higher education in developing "complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements" in addition to the more commonly noted instrumental purposes such as skills development and preparation for employment (Nussbaum, 2010: 2). The CA requires that we consider what people are able to be and to do, and what they value being and doing, or put

differently, their well-being (Nussbaum, 2012, 2000; Sen, 1992, 1999). Capabilities refer to the opportunities or freedoms available for a person to achieve what s/he values, irrespective of whether s/he chooses to make use of the opportunity or not. Agency and choice thus occupy a central position in the approach.

As used in the CA, the concept of agency refers to the ability of an individual to realise the goals that s/he has reason to value. Sen (1999: 19) defines an agent as "someone who acts and brings about change". He then notes that his "work is particularly concerned with the agency role of the individual as a member of the public and as a participant in economic, social and political actions" (Sen, 1999: 19). The CA emphasises and celebrates the basic heterogeneity or diversity of individuals, while providing a conceptual framework for connecting individual life histories with social and collective arrangements in order to create an evaluative framework for assessing equality and inequality (Nussbaum, 2012; Sen, 1992). It is important to note that social norms and structural arrangements can expand or diminish the agency of individuals. Disadvantages, inequalities and injustices result where social conditions diminish agency, opportunity and choice. The concept of conversion factors is used as a means of unpacking this relationship between agency and structural conditions. Since individuals are heterogeneous, they differ in terms of the extent to which they can convert available resources into opportunities/ capabilities and then these capabilities into achievements that they value. Robeyns (2005) draws our attention to three groups of conversion factors, namely personal conversion factors such as metabolism, physical condition, reading ability, intelligence, and health; social conversion factors such as policies, social and cultural norms, family relations, practices of discrimination, gender roles, patriarchy, and power relations, and environmental conversion factors such as geographical location and climate (Robeyns, 2005: 99). This article focuses on social conversion factors, in particular educational institutions and practices. We need to better understand the "institutional conditions of possibility" needed to foster the embrace of diversity for students entering university (Walker, 2006: 36).

This interplay of agency and social context can also lead to what has been termed 'adaptive preferences', where the choices individuals make are conditioned by their contexts. The concept of adaptive preference is particularly useful when analysing choice and opportunities (capabilities) as well as inequalities at the level of outcomes and achievements. The notion of adaptive preferences refers to "learning to desire what one is being socially constructed to want, rather than what one has reason to value" (Deprez & Wood, 2013: 146). In other words, one's personal history and broader context, or, as Nussbaum (2012: 83) describes it, "people's entire upbringing in society", impacts on preference formation and, hence, on the type of lives and societies individuals value. For example, Nussbaum (2003, 2000: 136) has shown how women "adjust their desires to the way of life they know" and sometimes "undervalue basic human capabilities that they later come to value, because of social habituation and social pressure" (Nussbaum, 2000: 140). Bridges (2006) further unpacked the notion of adaptive preferences based on his research on widening

participation in the United Kingdom. He identifies five different sets of constraints that have an impact on individual choice, thus potentially creating adaptive preferences. According to Bridges (2006: 18-22), choice or preference can be limited by natural constraints (for example, a human being is not able to fly like a bird can); social and economic opportunity and political constraints (for example, shortage of income, unemployment, or legislative frameworks); ignorance and/or failure of rationality (illiteracy, poor levels of education, biased education, ignorance of options available); socially embedded expectations (gender roles, for example), and the individual's own perception and construction of him-/herself – his/her identity (for example, as a liberal or conservative person, being religious, being a mother).

The concepts of agency and choice, opportunity and freedom, conversion factors and adaptive preferences will be used as lenses through which the empirical data presented in this article might be understood and interpreted. Using these concepts to guide the argument, the article reflects on the conditions of possibility for positive diversity encounters when entering university.

Methodology

This paper draws on empirical data collected during 2009 and 2010 when I worked with high school learners (Grades 10, 11 and 12) and first-year students at the University of the Free State (UFS). The focus of the full study was on the transition from school to university. In this paper, I draw specifically on the data related to experiences or encounters with diversity. The study made use of a parallel mixed methods design that included the completion of a mainly quantitative survey by 2.816 high school learners (from a sample of 20 UFS feeder schools), qualitative data collected from 33 high school learners during a summer programme focused on university preparation as well as focus groups with 128 students in 2009, and further qualitative data collected using visual methods with a sample of 142 first-year students in 2010. Table 1 presents a summary of the empirical data collected, as well as the sample demographics. Standard ethical procedures were followed. Permission for the research was granted by the Provincial Department of Education, each participating school and the UFS. Participation was voluntary, and no names of learners or students were recorded, thus ensuring confidentiality and anonymity.

Table 1: *Summary of empirical data*

Level of study	Type of data	Sample size	Sample demographics[2]
School level	Quantitative (Likert scale)	2.816 high school students	Grade 10 (37.8%); Grade 11 (32.8%); Grade 12 (29.4%)
			Female (54.3%); male (45.7%)
			Black (71.9%); White (24.5%); other/no response (3.6%)
	Qualitative	33 high school students (nested sampling)	Grade 11 (66.7%); Grade 12 (33.3%)
			Female (58.0%); male (4.2.0%)
			Black (97%); White (3%)
University level	Qualitative	128 first-year university students	Female (61.7%); male (38.3%)
			Black (75.8%); White (24.2%)
			Living in university housing (66.4%)
	Qualitative	142 first-year university students	Female (61.4%); male (38.6%)
			Black (58.4%); White (38.7%); other/no response (2.9%)
			Living in university housing (70.7%)

The 20 schools with which I worked were grouped according to a typology that was developed specifically for the study. In line with Kanjee and Chudgar's (2009) suggestion to focus on school resources as a basis for identifying school type and context, I used the geographic location of the schools and the annual school fees to create the following typology (see Table 2).

Table 2: *School types*

School type	Description	Number of schools
Suburban higher socio-economic context (Suburban HSC)	Suburban schools where annual school fees exceed R5.000. In most instances, these are ex-model C schools located in relatively affluent suburban areas.	9 (3 Afrikaans medium of instruction; 5 English medium of instruction; 1 parallel medium)
Suburban lower socio-economic context (Suburban LSC)	Suburban schools where annual school fees range from R1.500 to R5.000. In many instances, these are also ex-model C schools, but are located in less affluent areas. Many of these schools have large numbers of learners who travel by taxi from neighbouring township areas (for more on this phenomenon, see Bloch, 2009:143)	4 (English medium of instruction)

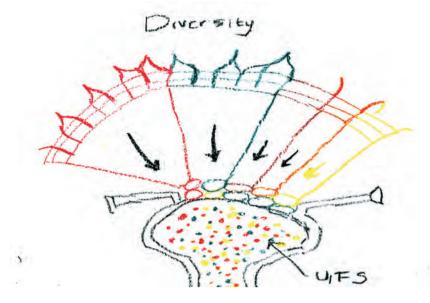| School type	Description	Number of schools
Township schools	Schools located in township areas and where annual school fees amount to less than R1.500.	7 (English medium of instruction)

Quantitative data was analysed using SPSS, with analyses being done across the entire sample, by school type, learner demographics and language of instruction. Descriptive statistics, analysis of variance (ANOVA), independent sample t-tests and *chi*-square tests were used depending on the type of data being analysed. The qualitative data was analysed using NVivo software. All qualitative data was open-coded initially to allow learner and student voices to emerge and guide the identification of themes. Thereafter, a second round of thematic coding was also done. This paper focuses on one of the emergent themes, that of diversity experiences. It is important to note that the line of questioning used during the qualitative data collection was open-ended and focused on asking students to describe their experiences of coming to university. No specific questions about diversity encounters were included. It is thus significant that out of the 11 themes that emerged from the students' descriptions of the transition to university, encounters with diversity was the third most commonly noted.

Diversity experiences of first-year students

It was common for students to refer to diversity experiences when describing their transition to university. For the majority of the students, encountering diversity at university was a negative experience, although there were some examples of students who found diversity encounters to be positive and enriching. This section presents the different and often contradictory responses of students to diversity of ideas and people. In doing so, I sought to present the actual words of students so that the reader is able to access and respond to the students' own experiences. Interpretation and theorisation follow in later sections.

Encounters with 'the other' at university

Consider the following three student drawings that highlight different and contradictory experiences of diversity.

(Student drawing 1)

(Student drawing 2)

(Student drawing 3)

Drawing 1 shows visually how this student experienced the concentration of diverse people within the relatively small space of the university. It is not clear from the drawing whether this was a positive or a negative experience for this student. Drawing 2 shows the experience of both Black and White students as clearly separate groups during the orientation week. This experience was also echoed by several students during the student focus groups (see the quotations below for two examples). Drawing 3 presents a very different experience, where the encounter with difference is presented by showing variously coloured students holding hands and with large smiles on their faces. Thus we see that for these three students, while diversity encounters were foremost in their minds when considering the transition to university, their experiences thereof were very different, and at times contradictory.

Where students experienced encounters with diversity in a negative light, there were two main reasons. The first was related to the fact that race differences had not been a problem at school, but on coming to university, these differences were highlighted (see Student drawing 2).

> *You would see white people all sitting in one row and then all the black people in different rows.*

> *I'm from Kimberley so there's not that much differentiation between black people and white people .... So when I came here and there's Rag and there's the opening of the new SRC is welcoming them in and you see the division. It's so distinct, like when a white person goes on stage, the other half of the Rag Farm starts screaming and shouting for him but when a black person gets on stage, the other half also starts. So for me, that was shocking and ... it really, I wasn't prepared for that when I came here.*

The second reason for negative encounters with diversity related to the difficulty experienced by several students when required to work and live with students who were different from them.

> *Socially it was worse because it was my first time meeting with different people with a different language. It was a terrible month in all.*

> *My classes were in English but all my hostel – I lived in the hostel – so all of my hostel friends were Afrikaans and I was the only English girl out of 85 first-years so it was rough.*

Although it was most common for students to describe their encounters with diversity in a negative light, a few examples of positive experiences were also noted. The following three quotations illustrate positive sentiments.

> *OUSTANDING! Made many new friends of different races and cultures.*

> *I was amazed to see many students with different backgrounds.*

> *Socially it uplifted me because you get to meet different kinds of people and you get to learn new language from that.*

The literature on diversity and social justice draws attention to the importance of considering intersectionalities of, for example, race, class and gender (Jackson, Van de Vijver & Biela, 2013; Lewis *et al.*, 2009; Vanderyar and Jansen, 2008). In this study,

intersectionalities of race and language emerged as particularly important and it was common for students to express their experiences of being in a diverse environment in relation to language. The following two examples are illustrative of students who found the multilingual environment on campus difficult to adapt to.

> *"I don't know, but for me it was a total social adjustment because I'm English so to come to a majority Afrikaans place umm, was very difficult at first, no one wanted to talk to me because I was English so that's also quite a massive culture-shock and that was for me the biggest adjustment, was the Afrikaans."*

> *"I also have this lecturer, she, she...she's like Afrikaans, nè, she speaks net a little bit of English. She reads everything, like she explains everything and then she just starts Afrikaans and ... /in English class/ ... (LAUGHTER)... and I'm sitting there and I'm thinking OK, that's a big Afrikaans word. I'm not good with Afrikaans, I understand just a bit and I just sit there and I think 'yessie, I'm in an Afrikaans class here'. So it would be better if they get like really good English ... / lecturers/ ... ja ... [SIMULTANEOUS SPEECH] ... because she just goes to Afrikaans and I'm thinking 'yessie, I came to the wrong class! ... (LAUGHTER).*

By contrast,

> *I think we should all learn another language, even the basics because really I think we have a multicultural nation and we have to, you have to speak Afrikaans, English and Sotho.*

The responses by several students emphasised just how difficult it is for students to confront their biases and learn to appreciate difference. Consider the following statement that clearly shows this student's difficulty in coming to terms with functioning in a diverse environment. The quotation illustrates the stereotypes she brings with her and is also a further example of how race and language become intertwined in discussions about diversity.

> *and I mean he, he's giving [an English class], it's a language and he can't even speak English. I mean for me in Afrikaans I really need someone to like help me with English because I want to improve my English but now this person's telling me you don't need to attend class and he's just, and then he's speaking about 'comfartable' ... (LAUGHTER) ... okaaaay, I'm sorry ... ja and the thing also, the guy that gives us [an English class], it's a black guy so no, but it's like OK, no, you, they speak umm, softer, but it's like he doesn't, like she said, he doesn't pronounce it correctly and he's like or he doesn't know how to pronounce it so he speaks softer so you don't hear it. You understand, so it's like you don't hear him half the time.*

Encounters with diversity of ideas at university

Although it was most common for students to refer to encounters with students – and, in some instances, lecturers – who are different from them ('the other'), it was also evident that students found encounters with diverse ideas and ways of knowing difficult. Consider the following examples:

> *I'm studying Drama so I think that Drama, the subject that they teach at school from Standard 8 till Matric, they should do it more based on the work we're*

doing now cos now I did Drama at school but it means like almost nothing to me cos it's not anything like we're doing now.

I think as well, ah, school to a certain extent it does give you that background knowledge of a specific subject but then you get, you know, when you go into some lectures and they say, they tell you what you had in high school was … was, you know, the wrong thing and this is how you do it.

Well, umm, since I'm from a rural school, they didn't quite prepare us well for varsity cos nothing that we did in school was related, related to what I'm doing now here in varsity.

At school you used, you read a poem, OK, there you go. They didn't expect any, any insight from you, they didn't expect you to go any deeper. At varsity they want you to go and read it and then to go question everything. Remember at school they tried to make you think critically but they don't always succeed all that well because they try to make you think critically within a rigid framework which doesn't work. Think critically means you throw all my ideas away. At varsity they want you to think critically – take this thing and examine every part of it. Do you agree with it, do you not?

At school you just write it, you just basically copy and paste. Here at varsity you must be critical.

We might argue that a willingness to confront and grapple with diverse ideas should be one of the central capabilities that higher education seeks to develop among its students, and that this capability is a precursor for positive diversity encounters within democratic societies (for a similar argument, see Nussbaum, 1997). The above quotations begin to point to the difficulty universities face in this regard, particularly by highlighting some of the differences between school and university with respect to engagement with diverse ideas. It is thus timely to move on to the following section where I consider evidence from high school learners related to encounters with diversity.

Diversity experiences of high school learners

The complex history of segregated schooling in South Africa, and the major challenges this history continues to have on schooling transformation has been well documented in the literature (Bloch, 2009; Chisholm, 2004; Christie, 2008; Johnson, 2007; McKay & Chick, 2001; Vanderyar & Jansen, 2008). It is not my intention to revisit this history in this article. Instead, my focus is on current educational practices within schools, and the implications of this practice for diversity encounters of students when entering university. Some of the quotations presented in the above section allude to the role of schooling as one of the social conversion factors that impact on transformation in universities. In this section, empirical data is presented to show how complex the links between school and university are, and to begin to unpack the contradictory experiences of students – some experience university to be less transformed than schools; some find encounters with 'the other' at university extremely difficult; others are enriched by the same experience, and still others struggle to come to terms with new ideas and ways of thinking.

    In working with the high school learner data, I was struck by the differences in the responses from learners who attended English-medium-of-instruction schools compared to those from Afrikaans-medium-of-instruction schools within the higher socio-economic context.[3] Although this difference is not unexpected (for example, Jansen (2009: 105) notes that "[T]his kind of predictability and orderliness [that characterises Afrikaans schools] is light years removed from ordinary township schools or from many of the English-medium schools"), it does raise important questions for the UFS to consider in the context of promoting positive diversity experiences of first-year students.

Encounters with 'the other' at school

High school learners were asked how often they had talked to a learner of a different race or culture. Just over one third, 38.7%, of the learners indicated that they often talked to a learner of a different race or cultural group, while 9.8% had never spoken to a learner from a different race or cultural group. Similarly, when asked if they had talked to, or worked with a learner who differed from them in terms of religion, political opinion, family income or personal values, only 39.3% of the respondents had done this often, while 7.7% had never done so. It is important to note that the results differed significantly in terms of school type, as shown in Figures 1 and 2. We notice that the results for Afrikaans higher socio-economic status and township schools are remarkably similar, with learners from these schools reporting engaging with peers who are different from themselves much less than learners from the other two school types.
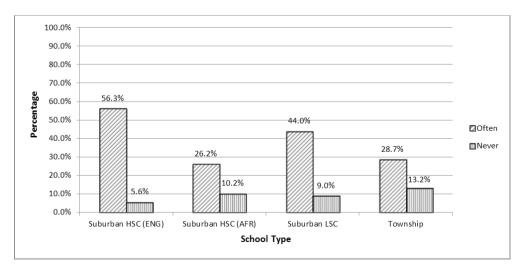

Figure 1: *"Talked to, or worked with a learner of a different race or culture" in terms of school type*
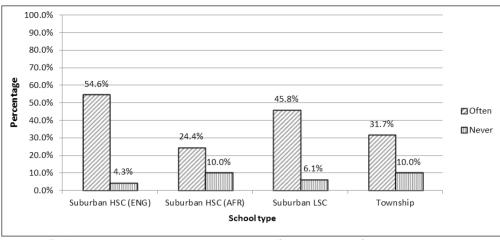
Figure 2: *"Talked to, or worked with a learner who is different in terms of religion, political opinion, family income or personal values" in terms of school type*

These differences across school type were statistically significant (*chi* square, p=0.000). Across the entire sample, less than one third of the learners reported that they often encountered diverse peers. Since the university draws large proportions of its students from township schools and Afrikaans higher socio-economic context schools, both of which seem to provide hardly any opportunity to engage with 'the other', it is perhaps not surprising that encounters with diversity, with 'the other', are a major challenge for first-year students.

Encounters with diverse ideas at school

Several items included in the survey focused on educational practices that facilitate engagement with diverse ideas and ways of knowing. Even more stark than for encounters with 'the other' were the differences across school type with respect to educational practices that encouraged diverse opinions and ideas, complex ideas, and problem-solving where there is no one simple correct answer. These differences across school type were statistically significant (*chi* square, p=0.000).
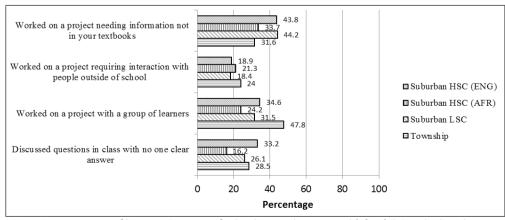

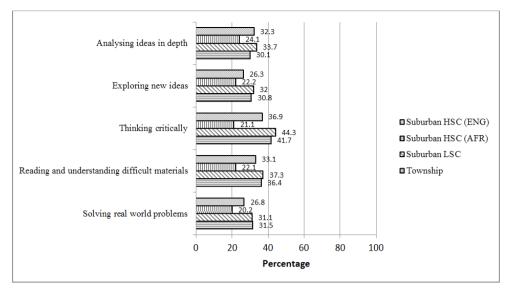**Figure 3: Percentage of learners in terms of school type who reported 'often' doing the listed learning activities**

Figure 4: *Percentage of learners in terms of school type who reported that their school emphasises the listed activities 'very much'*

Figures 3 and 4 present data regarding the extent to which schools are preparing learners to critically engage with diverse ideas. There is much room for improvement across all the schools included in this study. For example, Figure 4 shows that fewer than 50% of the learners across all school types reported that their school places a great deal of emphasis on engaged learning that requires critical thinking, exploring new ideas and complex materials (see also Soudien, 2012). Despite the challenges observed across all the schools, the differences across school types are striking and, particularly so, when we consider the vastly different results for learners attending Afrikaans schools compared to the other kinds of schools. Jansen (2009: 109) has documented these uncritical approaches to knowledge in Afrikaans schools, and describes the Afrikaans school environment as follows: "What students learn more than anything is that knowledge is neutral, scientific, instrumental, mechanical, measurable, certain, and racially distinctive. This is the epistemological bedrock of school and social knowledge that frames the young white child's knowledge of the past, present and future". The data presented in the above figures provides further empirical evidence to support this claim. On a more positive note, some of the Afrikaans-speaking students and learners who participated in this research recognised this unquestioning approach to knowledge. For example, in one of the student focus groups, a White female student from an Afrikaans home and school background noted that: "At school you were much more constrained and you thought in a little box".

It is also promising to note that students attending township and lower socio-economic-context schools tended to report relatively more emphasis on engaging with different ideas and perspectives compared to the other school types. Thus, it seems that, although these schools do not provide many opportunities for interacting

with diverse peers, in the realm of engagement with diverse ideas, township schools fare better.

Discussion: A capabilities interpretation of diversity experiences

Arguably, in the context of a country that purports to embrace democracy and equality, we would expect (or, perhaps, at least hope) that young people in South Africa – 20 years since the first democratic elections – would value diversity. Yet, the empirical data presented in this paper has shown that this is not the case for many students entering universities (see also Johnson, 2007). It is telling that, when asked to describe the transition to university, so many students spoke of diversity encounters. The data shows contradictory experiences and responses to diversity encounters, at the level of both diverse peers and diverse ideas, with some students having very negative encounters and others rather more positive ones, despite being in the same university context. For example, we observed how one student drew Black and White students completely separated during orientation, and another drew several multi-coloured students holding hands and smiling. Many students expressed personal difficulties with the multilingual environment, while others clearly had little comprehension of the complexities of the country's divided past and of the implications of this for fellow students. The empirical data gathered at the twenty local high schools provides an important perspective for understanding these issues. I now return to the CA and use the key concepts of agency, freedoms, conversion factors and adaptive preferences to show how students' experiences at school limit their capabilities to embrace diversity.

High school learners' experiences of diversity presented in this paper painted a somewhat bleak picture in which young people, on the whole, appear to have hardly any opportunity to interact with peers who are different from themselves (across multiple dimensions). Perhaps even more concerning was the lack of emphasis on contemplating complex problems and new ideas, engaging in classroom discussion and the formulation and respectful sharing of different opinions. Drawing on this data, it is thus reasonable to conclude that schools are playing the role of negative social conversion factors and, through their limited embracing of diversity (both of 'the other' and of ideas), are creating limits on the choices and agency freedoms of learners with respect to diversity. These findings were particularly pronounced in schools where Afrikaans was the language of instruction, further emphasising the role of institutional culture as a social conversion factor. What are the implications of these schooling conditions for the development of young people's agency, the lives they value, and the adaptive preferences they develop? In answering this question, it is useful to return to the five sets of limitations identified by Bridges (2006), three of which are of particular relevance in this instance. Due to the schools' lack of emphasis on diverse ideas and ways of knowing, as well as the limited opportunities to engage with 'the other', students' choices and preferences related to diversity encounters are limited by 'ignorance' as a result of their lack of exposure

to diversity. This first limitation is then compounded by the further constraint of socially embedded expectations related to language, culture, and socio-economic context, as emphasised by the differences across school types. It seems likely then that these limitations of ignorance and socially embedded expectations create fertile conditions for the development of constraints on choice as a result of students' own construction of themselves through "learning to desire what one is being socially constructed to want, rather than what one has reason to value" (Deprez *et al.*, 2013: 146). Ultimately, our students enter university being – as described by students' themselves – "constrained and [thinking] in a little box", rather than as "complete citizens who can think for themselves" (Nussbaum, 2010: 2). It is thus not surprising that diversity encounters are so pronounced in students' experiences of starting at university.

Conclusion: Implications for action

What then are the implications for action? Drawing on the work of the legal theorist Cass Suntein, Nussbaum (2000: 144) argues that "we should use institutions to create free preferences", thus creating opportunities and freedoms. If we are serious about creating universities where diversity is celebrated, we need to ask ourselves some searching questions about the role we can play in creating institutions that foster these freedoms. What role should we be playing at school level to encourage young people to value different kinds of people, different kinds of ideas and different ways of knowing? How should we be educating our teachers who teach in these schools? Given that schools (and arguably society at large) are not creating conditions for embracing diversity, what institutional conditions should universities put in place to counter the adaptive preferences with which our students enter higher education? How do we foster the development of students' agency and choice as engaged democratic citizens when they come from environments that have limited their capabilities to do this? In contemplating these difficult questions and the implications of the answers for our practice within the higher education sector, we would be wise to consider Bridges' (2006:25) cautionary advice: he reminds us that these issues need to be addressed "holistically, at a community level [schools and universities] rather than at the level of individuals [learners or students] who are expected to change against the norms of the people to whom they feel the strongest alliances". As such, policy and interventions that seek to foster diversity cannot focus only on changing the preferences of students through awareness-raising programmes for example, but must also be directed to the complex and deeply entrenched social arrangements within schools that currently limit young people's agency, freedoms, and choice with respect to diversity.

Acknowledgements

Endnotes

1. 1994. The Oxford Paper Dictionary. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 235.

2. The author does not subscribe to race-based classifications. None the less, in the context of South Africa, where socially constructed race groupings continue to have an impact on people's lives and opportunities, it remains important to ensure that research includes voices across these groupings. For this reason, the proportions of high school learners and first-year students by race have been included in this table.

3. There were no Afrikaans-medium-of-instruction schools in the township and lower socio-economic-context categories. For this reason, where results are presented in terms of language of instruction, this is only done for the higher socio-economic-context schools.

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