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Students experience stories as lenses for sense-making of the transition to higher education

Abstract

This study explored the experiences of seven first-year university students in Johannesburg, South Africa. Recognising storytelling as a lens to reveal identity, this study focused on student experience narratives as a tool to better understand their transition from school to university. It examined the narrated experiences of these students as a means to reveal their student identities. The qualitative study utilised a case study design type to address the research question: "What do first-year students' transition narratives reveal about their emerging student identities?" This paper focuses on a thematic analysis that was used as a tool to analyse participants' narrated experiences. The analysis resulted in five broad themes, namely that student identities in their first-year journeys were formed and influenced by interpersonal experiences, intrapersonal experiences, pre-commencement institutional experiences, experiences of formal learning, and learning experiences beyond the classroom. Despite encountering multiple challenges in their new environment, the students derived benefit through capitalising on their personal strengths as tools to adjust to the demands of their new institution. These tools were crucial resources used by participants to adjust to and ultimately flourish in their first year.

Keywords: *first-year students, identity development, narrative, student experience, student transition, thematic analysis, university*

1. Introduction

Students enter university with unique backgrounds and multiple prior life experiences that shape their experiences of their first year at university. Precursors to success in such a context include academic and social integration (Tinto, 2009). For first-time entering students, the transition is particularly complex and requires of them to successfully navigate unchartered territory from academic, social, and emotional perspectives (Davids, 2019). These deep and diverse student needs require careful noting and appropriate action by universities to enable a successful transition (Pather & Chetty, 2016).

Over time, the opportunities to study at university have widened, and the likelihood of success for students in South African higher education has improved. For example, the

DHET (2022) states that the national first- to second-year dropout rate fell from 31,5% in 2000 to 12,3% by 2019. Van Zyl (2017) infers that despite this improved statistic, one out of five (now one in eight) students will drop out during their first year of university study. Dropout and student success are affected by multiple variables, including factors such as an absence of motivation, feelings of apprehension, alienation, insufficient readiness for university, and the articulation gap (CHE, 2013).

Considering the current political and social landscape in South Africa, it has become even more crucial to hear their voices and views so that institutions can meet them where they are in their personal and academic journeys. Understanding and sharing narratives of young people "becoming" students during their first year through narrative interviews is one way to help practitioners in the field to understand them better through the stories they tell of their personal experiences. This article provides insights from such a study undertaken to acquire a richer understanding of students' cognition and behaviour in academic and personal contexts, including the factors that shape them and the strategies that they employ when problem-solving (Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006).

Local authors have explored first-year university students and their adaptation to their new academic and social lives (see Carolissen & Kiguwa, 2018; Chinyamurundi, 2016; 2018; Pather & Chetty, 2016). This paper builds on this work by providing an example of student voices on this topic. The findings of this study provide one view of the granular, personal details of what first-year students experience in their own words. It confirms that listening and responding appropriately to the views of the student is imperative in offering quality student support services in higher education. It may facilitate students' social growth and development, foster inclusivity and a sense of belonging, facilitate an improvement in behaviour and institutional values, and facilitate the acquisition of skills and knowledge better (Bowden, Tickle & Naumann, 2019).

This article reports the results of a thematic analysis of seven student "becoming" stories. The research was driven by the following research question: "What are the common identity formation themes of first-year students based on their narratives of first-year higher education experience?"

1.1 Student transition

Transition can be described as "a period between two periods of stability" (Goodman, Schlossberg & Anderson, 2006:24) and involves moving out of one environment into another where adjustment to the new environment is required (Goodman *et al*., 2006). Hussey and Smith (2010) suggest the idea that transition is an ongoing process that extends throughout the student lifecycle, encompassing varying and evolving identities. MacFarlane (2018) and Huon and Sankey (2002) posit that transitions into and within higher education entail notable changes in learner identity. This study revealed that there were an ongoing series of transitions that unfolded as the participants navigated their first year. Additionally, first-year students encounter both positive and negative personal experiences within and beyond the classroom, significantly influencing their academic and personal success (Cole, 2017; Yao, 2016).

1.2 The new student and the institution

A considerable number of first-year students experience a dissonance between their expectations and the reality of higher education (Wilson-Strydom, 2010: 313), which often leads to a bewildering experience for them. Boughey (2013) calls university a "whole different ball

game". Wilson-Strydom (2010: 313) stresses the significance of understanding how students negotiate their new environments morally to shape their behaviours and routines. Unfamiliar aspects for new students to negotiate at university include physical spaces and forms, verbal ambiguity, new behavioural codes, and unexpectedly established institutional norms and values (CHE, 2012).

Further, universities frequently overlook new students' low levels of academic literacy (Boughey & McKenna, 2016). These types of literacies are valued by institutions and assumed to be "common sense and natural" by academic staff, but they are often deceptively difficult to learn (Boughey & McKenna, 2016: 1).

University staff members need to avoid general assumptions about students and rather listen to their real needs and views (Bitzer, 2009). Often, the complex aspects that make up the life of a first-year student at university are ignored, resulting in interactions with staff members that do not address these complexities (Van Zyl, Dampier & Ngwenya, 2020). Dealings with students therefore tend rather to address isolated aspects of the world of the student instead of what is really required (Van Breda, 2017).

A sense of belonging for students is also influenced by personal vulnerabilities, as well as difficulties encountered during the transition from school to university, such as financial constraints, accommodation issues, leaving behind a familiar home environment, and entering into a new environment (Bozalek, Garraway & McKenna, 2011). Universities should purposefully establish and promote a sense of belonging for all students (Gyamera, 2018). However, this sense of belonging is often difficult to establish and remains elusive for some students (Bharuthram, 2018). Emotional experiences shape the essence of "being" for many students, leading to some feeling stressed and scared, exhausted, overwhelmed by the workload, having scant time for themselves, and feeling that the required changes inherent in moving from school to university were too great (Bharuthram, 2018: 34).

The transition to university may be described by students as a "loss experience", which may be linked to a discontinuity in their student identity as their preconceived idea of what their experience would look like versus their actual experiences may be incongruent (Scanlon, Rowling & Weber, 2007: 223; Crafford *et al*., 2024). This discontinuity links to students often mostly having "knowledge about" rather than conclusive "knowledge of" the new institutional practices and the learning environments. The transition has also been described as a "transfer shock" for beginner students (Rhine, Milligan & Nelson, 2000). This "transfer shock" incorporates academic and social transition factors leading to feelings of being "held back, blocked, inhibited, estranged or isolated from what it is they are learning" (Mann, 2005: 43).

1.3 Identity

Identity is a contentious term (Gee, 2001), because it is often used in an under-specified, ambiguous, or unfocused manner in educational contexts. In this study, the developing identities of becoming students were investigated in a multifaceted way, encompassing cultural, historical, social and personal constructions. Sfard and Prusak (2005) argue that people's identities are revealed through the stories they tell. Aligning with Sfard and Prusak (2005), the authors contend that the narratives of new university students tell, reflect and represent their identities. Bruner (1990), Kim (2016), and Lave and Wenger (1991) also state that self-narratives express and actually constitute identity, because telling stories is how people make sense of their experiences (Bruner, 2009; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

1.4 Moving away from a deficit view of students

First-year students are often described as "disadvantaged" or "academically unprepared", which represents a focus on the shortcomings of students, requiring remediation (Mostert & Du Toit, 2024; Smit, 2012). Marshall and Case (2010:491) argue that these strengths "could form useful resources for succeeding in higher education and that the construction of identity could be crucial for mobilising these resources". Yosso (2005) unpacks students' strengths in the form of multiple types of cultural capital that they bring to classrooms. This study explored and drew on the strengths or 'capital' that participants narrated about their first-year experiences.

2. Research methodology

A qualitative research approach was used for the study. Qualitative research comprehends and investigates individuals' interpretations of social or human dilemmas (Cresswell, 2014). The interpretative paradigm was employed, which aims to "produce descriptive analyses that emphasise a deep, interpretive understanding of social phenomena" (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004: 21). The various participants were the cases under investigation in this study. Each of their narratives was drawn up as a case summary, which captured how each individual told the story of their experiences as a student during their first year of study. These provided the basis for a cross-case analysis by seeking patterns through a thematic analysis (McAlpine, 2016), as reflected in this article.

2.1 Selection of participants

The participants included four South African students and three international students. Purposeful sampling was chosen to select and focus on typical students to explore common identity formation themes based on their first-year narratives, allowing an increase in the number of perspectives for the study rather than any form of singular true representation. A matrix of criteria was used to ensure a spread of demographics, such as nationality, study discipline, race, and gender. Table 1 below summarises the participant demographics. Individual stories of first-year experiences were then solicited from the selected participants.

Table 1:   Participant demographics

Participant Pseudonym	Nationality	Study Discipline	Race	Gender
Kondwani	Zambian	Business	Black	Female
Kholwa	South African	Social Sciences	Black	Female
Michael	South African	Business	White	Male
Tammy	South African	Business	White	Female
John	South African	Social Sciences	White	Male
Abikanile	Neighbouring SA country	Social Sciences	Black	Female
Kumba	Liberian	Public Health	White	Female

2.2 Data collection

Ethical clearance was granted for the study, and students were informed about all known potential risks and benefits of the study. In addition to this, an explanatory statement was provided in which all participants were also assured of their anonymity and provided informed consent to the research. Recorded semi-structured narrative interviews with open-ended

questions were used for data collection, allowing rich narrations of first-year experiences by participants to emerge. Interview durations ranged between forty-five minutes and one-and-a-half hours.

2.3 Data analysis and trustworthiness

Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework was employed for the thematic analysis across the seven participants. An inductive process was employed to identify themes that often bore little relation to guiding questions or prompts used in the interviews. To ensure methodological rigour, credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, trustworthiness criteria were applied (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To achieve this, prolonged engagement with participants, peer debriefing, and member checks were employed.

3. Findings

Five themes emerged through thematic analysis: first-year student identities are formed by interpersonal, intrapersonal, institutional, formal learning experiences, and learning outside the classroom. These themes are expounded below with quotes by the participants.

3.1 First-year student identities are formed by interpersonal experiences.

3.1.1 Friendships

Friendships emerged as a recurrent theme across participants' narrations of their first-year experiences.

Tammy encountered difficulties in establishing friendships and faced instances of snobbery from peers,

> … people are sometimes a bit snobbish towards you. Especially on my first day, you could see how groups were starting to form. You get like shunned out of one group … that was a bit nerve-wracking …

Kondwani expressed that the university should actively promote the forming of friendships:

> … when a new student comes here, it's hard for them to blend in and become friends with others… if we had a wide range of activities, people would learn to know each other. They would get to know each other on a personal level … that's how friendships are created.

3.1.2 Faith

Most participants drew on their religious faith, which guided them through their first-year journeys. For example, Kondwani leaned on her faith to navigate challenging circumstances,

> It's been hard … in certain situations that you can't control ... I talk to God about it … I leave everything in God's hands.

Kholwa reasoned,

> … in university, we go through many challenges...finding friends, there's parties, there's everything that goes on. The Bible, it's the light to direct me or to keep me.

3.1.3 *Family*

Family influences shaped the participants' identities: Tammy, John and Kondwani resided at home, while the others moved into on-campus or off-campus housing. Aspects of family influences encompassed being homesick, honouring their responsibilities to families, managing familial tensions, and applying lessons learned from families to cope during first-year studies.

Kumba experienced being homesick soon after commencing university,

> *I thought that maybe this wasn't the place for me … I missed being with my family and friends. I almost broke down at a certain point …*

She experienced a burden of responsibility to her family and wanted to make her parents proud,

> *My parents bringing me here is … it's a lot … I'm not only doing this for myself but for my family back home. Being the first-born brings many challenges with it … you're going to make your parents proud …*

3.1.4 *Finances*

Most participants struggled to manage their finances. Two participants experienced specific issues due to financial pressures experienced by families.

For example, Abikanile voiced her need to manage her financial affairs,

> *I need to learn to manage my finances ... Getting used to the prices and the costs of travelling to places is new. I need to get a grip on these things so that my mind is not overburdened with these kinds of thoughts while I am in class.*

3.2 First-year student identities are formed by intrapersonal experiences

Different personal situations deemed to be stressful by the participants triggered various emotional states for them over the course of their first year. Despite this, each participant accomplished personal transformation during the year. By leveraging their personal strengths, each of them grew personally in unique ways. Reflecting on their initial year at university was a validating experience for participants.

3.2.1 *Personal experiences and emotions*

Tammy recollected her sense of feeling bewildered at first,

> *Everything was just thrown at us, and everyone was just … oh my gosh ... I probably cried a couple of times and panicked a few times.*

Juggling her academic and extra-mural commitments evolved into an insurmountable, relentless cycle for Abikanile, resulting in a deterioration of her health,

> *… there was even more responsibility to deal with and less time to finish everything … It got to a point where I just hated everything because everything was just becoming too much … I developed ulcers. I had to go to hospital for a bit … I was breaking … I think I fell because there were also some personal issues that happened at that time.*

3.2.2 Harnessing personal strengths

Kondwani's personal attributes were an instrumental part in successfully traversing her first-year journey: navigating her first year. She could *"… relate to almost everyone"*. She was able to rise above challenges, *"… when I am challenged by something, I rise above the situation. I don't let the challenge defeat me"*.

Kholwa's personal strengths propelled her through the year,

> *I'm not easily influenced. When I make decisions, I usually think about things before I make them. I think my strength is not wanting to be like everyone else. I always want to stand out. I don't want to look like everyone or dress like everyone else.*

Tammy's extroverted nature proved to be an asset as she navigated the year,

> *... I'm a very bubbly person … I just carry on … I've got a lot of determination in me.*

3.2.3 Personal growth

Kondwani recognised her personal development,

> *I was in this comfort zone … but now I'm learning to do things on my own … I don't really have to depend on anyone – I am learning to be a risk-taker …*

Michael healed from the emotional wounds of being bullied at school by establishing fresh and significant friendships,

> *… there are greener pastures for me and good things to come.*

3.3 First-year student identities are formed by initial institutional experiences.

Initial interactions before enrolling at the university had enduring impacts on each participant. Their initial interactions with university staff members, or 'word-of-mouth' accounts from others about their prospective choice of university influenced their enrolment decisions. Others found the communication from their selected institution unclear, which in turn had a negative impact on their first-year studies.

As a prospective student, Kholwa faced personal criticism from admissions staff members when she visited different universities accompanied by her parents,

> *Why are your parents still treating you as a baby by coming with you to find out about university?*

Legislation required that Kondwani, an international student, acquire a study permit to study in South Africa. Only leaving her a week to arrange this in her home country proved stressful for her,

> *There was so much involved and there was so much up and down movement, and the expenses. I had come to South Africa, I had to fly back to Zambia and then do all those things. It was so intense … I almost lost hope.*

3.4 First-year identities are formed by formal learning experiences

Participants' student identities were influenced by the challenges of their formal learning experiences at university. They narrated the academic expectations they felt were much elevated when compared to those they experienced at school. Their academic experiences included the orientation week, coping with the academic demands of their courses, including tests and examinations, experiences with lecturers, and academic support.

Kondwani's university learning experiences were vastly different to those she experienced in high school,

> *… it's so different from the way it is in high school. At university you are your own person, you are your own parent. But at school, you've got someone who's imposing so much on you. At university, the decision is all up to you.*

Adapting to writing for academic purposes was significant for Kholwa,

> *At university you must get proper facts. You don't just take the first thing you see on the internet … your work, the way you write, the way you present your work, everything ... it must be up to standard.*

The mathematical demands of Tammy's business degree caused anxiety for her,

> *Statistics threw me off! I panicked! I straight panicked because I thought, 'I don't know this!' I dropped mathematics core in Grade 11 to pursue mathematical literacy because I thought I wouldn't need it … that was a bad decision …*

Examinations caused Tammy further stress,

> *… this exam stress, it's this panic, chaos, trying to figure out what was going on".*

John's experiences of his lecturers were mixed. He described some as *"absolutely phenomenal …",* but described another by saying, "*And then there's one, that c*cks it all up* …"

3.5 First-year identities are formed by experiences outside the classroom

3.5.1 Experiences of extra-curricular activities

All participants communicated their involvement in extra-mural activities and how this had a positive impact on them. For example, Kumba was a volunteer in a community engagement programme,

> *It was so nice because I got to go out there and interact with children. It feels nice to interact and to inspire kids. I wanted them to realise that even though their lives were like this, they could change their lives.*

3.5.2 Experiences of culture and cultural diversity

Participants noted the myriad cultures that made up the student population. Kondwani and Kholwa communicated the stereotypical perceptions they held of students of other nationalities. Michael, Kumba and Tammy did not perceive themselves as being any different from students with different nationalities. Conversely, Abikanile faced challenges with cultural norms and perceived prejudice,

> *… here are a lot of splits between groups or those from a certain country who stick together. I am not used to that …*

4. Discussion

While most participants initially experienced feelings of loss at university, they tended to make new friends relatively quickly. Friendships were crucial to their identity development as students, facilitating their growing autonomy and confidence as they acquired an understanding of university expectations through their newly acquired networks. Developing, nurturing, and managing friendships aided their identity development within their new setting. Friends seemed to be enablers, disablers, or distractors in shaping their student identities. This aligns with Chinyamurundi's (2018) study, which reveals that international students often encounter feelings of alienation within new university settings. Kondwani and Abikanile, both international students, found it challenging to establish authentic friendships as they adjusted to university.

Peer influences shaped the identity development of the participants. Kumba confessed to giving in to peer pressure (McGhie, 2017). However, she overcame this, and the wider university community became like family to her. In making her institution her "true home" she was able to build a sense of identity (CHE, 2013).

Applying social capital (Yosso, 2005), the participants wielded the strength of human networks around them, ensuring that they had support as they journeyed through their first year. Despite various stressors having a different impact on participants' identity development, they all utilised pre-existing forms of capital – aspirational, navigational, social and familial (Yosso, 2005) – to cope and succeed along their first-year journeys.

The participants' familial backgrounds were prominent in shaping their identities, as they all had deep-rooted, palpable connections to their families. Their familial capital (Yosso, 2005) reduced their sense of isolation, allowing them to rely on their families for support and guidance.

Applying navigational capital, as described by Yosso (2005), facilitated participants' harnessing of their inner resources to navigate their new university settings, which they had learned from their families. Students frequently fear disappointing their families (Bharuthram, 2018) as was noted in comments by Kondwani, who alluded to the sense of duty that she felt towards her family. She and John were the first in their families to pursue further study, which placed extra pressure on them to excel in their studies and bring pride to their parents.

Handling their personal finances on a daily basis shaped their identities as first-year students for Michael, Abikanile and Kumba. Kholwa encountered difficulties that arose from her parents' financial constraints, as did Kondwani, whose parents struggled to cover her food expenses. This strongly confirmed the previously expressed reality that families play a significant role in shaping a sense of belonging and achievement in students' first-year university studies (Bozalek *et al*., 2011).

Making use of their personal strengths proved to be a crucial tool in students' toolkits for their student identity development, highlighting the need to challenge the deficit discourse often used when referring to students who are new to university (see Leibowitz, 2009; Marshall & Case, 2010; Smit, 2012). Personal growth was an outcome of the participants harnessing their personal strengths, which resulted in participant narratives explaining a commitment to their studies with favourable academic outcomes (McGhie, 2017). Their personal growth had a beneficial impact on the formation of their student identities.

For some participants, the period between leaving school and commencing higher education was marked by turmoil and difficulty, influencing their feeling of belonging to the university negatively (Yao, 2016). Assuming personal responsibility, some participants successfully moved towards independence, positively influencing their student identity development as they moved into a new phase of becoming adults, despite some feelings of loss (Prevett & Williams, 2017).

Conversely, participants also highlighted that making the transition from school to university was sometimes bewildering and difficult. They initially only had access to "knowledge about" instead of "knowledge of" their new university and its expectations (Scanlon *et al*., 2007). High school had not prepared them adequately for being a university student, and the identities that they would need to develop – they had arrived at university with inexperience and naivety about what it would mean to be a university student (Scanlon *et al*., 2007; Boughey, 2013).

Participating in the university's orientation week facilitated the participants' ability to establish new relationships with students and lecturers and gave them an opportunity to glean important information that would assist them with the transition to university (Smith, 2019). It afforded the participants an opportunity to forge new connections with peers, collaborate in group settings and acclimatise to the new social dynamics around them (Trautwein & Bosse, 2017) while they learned to navigate their new physical surroundings and interpret new information, expectations, and unfamiliar institutionalised norms and values (CHE, 2012).

The need to adjust to scholarly thinking and learning new academic skills to succeed academically at university is an important part of succeeding in higher education (Trautwein & Bosse, 2017). Adapting to the expected academic literacy standards at university was also a challenge for participants. They reported their experiences and stress in negative terms during tests and examinations. Their accounts of learning new academic practices were arduous, often adversely affecting their developing identities. Boughey and McKenna (2016) clarify that students need to make this shift in their identities successfully to meet the demands of reading, writing, and critical analysis at university.

The findings of this study require further investigation into how staff work with new university students to explore how collaborative approaches may enhance students' transition experiences in order to promote students' identity development. Re-examining institutional practices, policies, procedures and guidelines to facilitate the walk of the first-year student to enhance support for them better is recommended.

Further research into how universities communicate their shared norms, values, and practices is needed (Wolgemuth & Agosto, 2019) as these discrete aspects of university life are often hard to understand. This could facilitate a better alignment between institutional expectations and new student expectations. Individual support is required to keep first-year students engaged and to facilitate the development of their identities. This, in turn, is required for their academic and personal success at university.

The study gave a 'voice' to participants, revealing how their individual first-year student identities were developed. The participants held various roles and identities – as students, children, brothers or sisters, peers, or as members of groups. They forged their student identities through their daily activities within their new setting. The participants learned how to 'be students' through self-correction and by complying with explicit and implicit requirements to succeed within the established norms of their new institution. In different ways, each

participant overcame adverse experiences as they harnessed personal strengths to persevere and ultimately succeed. Their personal resilience, strengths, efforts, and their ability to adapt to the expectations of their new institution were vital tools that they used to adapt to and succeed in their first-year studies.

This study did not set out to study exhaustively how students experience their first year in higher education. Instead, it gave an authentic voice to a small group of students to tell their own unique stories to highlight numerous influences and experiences that contributed to their student identity development.

5. Conclusion

This study was designed to explore the common identity-formation themes based on participants' first-year higher education experiences. The study revealed five major themes that emerged from the thematic analysis, which addressed the research question: "What are the common identity formation themes of first-year students based on their narratives of first-year higher education experience?"

First-year students' identities are formed by:

- Interpersonal experiences that are characterised by their friendships, faith, family and finances.
- Intrapersonal experiences that are characterised by their personal experiences, their emotions, and their personal strengths and growth.
- Initial institutional experiences.
- Experiences of formal learning along their institutional journeys, characterised by the changes that they experience between school and higher education and their academic experiences.
- Learning experiences beyond the classroom that are characterised by extra-curricular activities and their experiences of culture and cultural diversity.

As students are the ones who have actual first-year experiences at university, their voices and experiences should be a central consideration for universities. More open, collaborative relationships with students are a vital step towards authentically involving them in improving their own success and personal outcomes. Universities are responsible for creating the environment to which these newly arriving students are trying to adapt and integrate. Although the students are those who have to make the transition, a truly holistic consideration of what they are required to adapt to (the environment, curriculum, teaching staff, institutional culture, and practices and facilities) as well as how they can be assisted to adapt (make friends, find their feet in the new environment and access the assistance they require in a non-prejudicial environment) are institutional responsibilities. By taking these responsibilities upon themselves, institutions can create academic spaces that are welcoming, challenging and stimulating, whilst simultaneously facilitating social and epistemological access for the students they accept.

Acknowledgement:

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