

STUDENT VOICES: AN EXPLORATION OF AFRICAN-STUDENT AGENCY TO INFORM TEACHING AND LEARNING PRACTICES

Desiree Pearl Larey

School of Professional Studies in Education, North-West University, Mahikeng (South Africa)

Abstract

At national universities in South Africa, various events during the past years indicate that students are encumbered by their disposition of being poor and historically disadvantaged. It is widely acknowledged that students from rural geographical areas experience the university space as alienating and not resonating with their life worlds. In this qualitative paper, I respond to Fataar's (2019) idea of the 'misrecognised' university student in the South African context. My focus on students coming from historically disadvantaged communities aims to contribute to ongoing debates about decoloniality in the university sector. The problem to be addressed in this paper is the misalignment between the critical horizontal knowledge of historically disadvantaged students and the knowledge codes of the university relating to learning, curriculum, and pedagogical practices. Therefore, I argue that if universities reframe their institutional practices they could possibly engage students in their intellectual growth. In this paper, I am guided by the aim to explore how students from historically disadvantaged communities use their critical horizontal knowledge to connect with the disciplinary and transdisciplinary knowledge of the university to enhance critical specialized consciousness in becoming of ethical humans. In response to the aim, I locate my arguments in African student agency theory, which argues for a dialectical acknowledgement of historically disadvantaged students living in the shadows of the university. The study used nine participants chosen through purposeful sampling and snowballing from two campuses of one university. All the selected participants came from historically disadvantaged areas from different provinces in South Africa. I used the analysis of two survey instruments: an autobiographical reflection/writing and a semi-structured interview. The data collected were analysed through the model suggested by Henning (2004). Students used their critical horizontal knowledge as a stepping stone to access the cultural capital embodied in the formal structures of the university. Reframing the core institutional function of the university to align better with diverse student bodies can lead to academic success of university students.

Keywords: *African student agency, critical horizontal knowledges, historically disadvantaged, South Africa, teaching and learning practices.*

1. Introduction

During the apartheid era (1948 to 1994), South Africa was a highly divided country. Different racial groups were developed separately, and the white minority possessed the political, economic, and symbolic capital to rule the country (Christie & Collins, 1984). The university establishment, as was the case with the schooling establishment, mostly catered for the white minority to advance in life. Other racial groups such as blacks, coloureds and Indians were subjected to inferior forms of education and, consequently, lower-paying jobs (Adhikari, 1994). Although racialised concepts such as black, white, coloured, and Indian were used historically to define different communities in South African, the same categorisations are still used by the government today.

After 1994, when South Africa became a democracy, its higher education sector has witnessed an explosion of different racial groups entering higher education. Jansen (2018) maintains that because of the processes of democratisation and deracialisation, physical access to higher education institutions was made possible, and diverse student groups entered the university space.

At the same time, higher education was to be transformed by numerous policies such as the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 (Department of Education, 1997b), the Education White Paper 3 of 1997 (Department of Education, 1997a), and the National Plan for Higher Education (Department of Education, 2001). The new student bodies entering the university sphere complicated the transformation of universities. Students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds were academically weak because of the weak schooling system inherited from the apartheid regime. Chiramba and Ndofirepi (2023) claim that students coming from rural environments faced challenges of low socio-economic family backgrounds, attending schools of lower quality compared to wealthier formal white schools and limited opportunities for academic preparation in under-resourced schools. While students were able to access the university space, when arriving at the university, they experienced the environment as alienating and not resonating with their life worlds. In a study, Fataar (2019) engages the concept of the 'misrecognised' university student in the South African context. This study intended to contribute to the historical, structural, and post-human complexity of these 'misrecognised' students in the context of a selected South African university.

The problem addressed in this paper concerns the misalignment between the critical horizontal knowledge of historically disadvantaged students and the knowledge codes of the university relating to learning, curriculum, and pedagogy. Therefore, I argue that if universities reframe their institutional practices, they could possibly engage students in their intellectual growth. In this paper, I am guided by the aim to explore how students from historically disadvantaged communities use their critical horizontal knowledges to connect with the disciplinary and transdisciplinary knowledge of the university to enhance critical specialised consciousness in the growth of ethical humans.

2. Literature review

Boliver (2017) notes that despite well-intentioned strategic policy intentions and the idea of higher education that acts as a just and equitable catalyst, issues of geography, race and class-based inequalities that evade access and success for historically disadvantaged students consistently hamper South African higher education. Universities were compelled to devise strategies to improve the high dropout rates and low academic performance of diverse groups of students. While South African universities responded with academic development programmes to support students academically, the support was found to be insufficient because of the assumption that diverse students entered the university with deficiencies that ultimately contributed to their experiences of marginality (Fataar, 2019). Motala et al. (2023) comment that students' discontent at South African national universities resulted in the nationwide student protests of 2015 – 2017. Black students demanded a decolonised curriculum and knowledge that would align with their dispositions/standpoints in Africa.

Historically disadvantaged students from poor working-class backgrounds have critical horizontal knowledge or Africanised knowledge that they have cultivated in their home environments and use in their new environments to achieve success (Larey, 2023). The university curriculum must be designed in a way that offers students the opportunity to engage critically with the pre-existent natural and social structures. Students in South Africa and on the continent of Africa should have the opportunity to make sense of their structural location. This includes a critical involvement in their natural and social world, as well as the social, political, and historical dimensions of structures that pre-exist them. A reflexive consciousness of the partiality of social structures (our salient reality) and our embodied location, in this case, Africa, should inform curriculum development at universities. In this case, students must be exposed to knowledge produced by Westernised scientific communities as well as by African particularized thinkers to inform teaching and learning practices.

The integration of students' critical horizontal knowledge or Africanised knowledge with formal scientific knowledge could support students to tap into the disciplinary and transdisciplinary knowledge of the university. Acknowledging the views and experiences of these students not only places the human as a racially oppressed being at the centre but enables an understanding of the oppressive practices that have forced students from historically disadvantaged places to the margins of society. Acknowledging the knowledge that diverse students bring with them to the university has the potential to lead the university to reframe its core institutional function.

3. Theoretical framework

The study used the lens of African student agency in higher education and focused on the interplay between agency and learning, and between agency and structure, in which agency is positioned as an individual's freedom to act when faced with structural constraints in the learning environment (Jääskelä et al., 2020).

The study refers to agency as ‘a student’s experience of access to/having (and using of) personal, relational (i.e., interactional), and context-specific participatory resources’ (Jääskelä et al., 2020:793). Reeve (2013) claims that agency encompasses the actions that students at universities take to take part in their learning environment proactively and intentionally with the intention to transform and pay attention to their needs in their strive to realise academic success. The study used student agency: To understand student agency is to grasp university structures at work hindering students to adapt fully to their learning environments. Aluko (2025) maintains that these realisations can lead institutional policies and structures to reframe their core institutional functions to accommodate diverse students.

4. Methodology

This qualitative study interrogated the subjective nature of how nine students navigated their lives at one university. A case study design was used in the study. Creswell and Creswell (2023) claim that case studies allow a researcher to develop a comprehensive analysis of a case that is tied to time and place. The case study involved one university, and the researcher generated data from two campuses of this university to provide insights into the issue of placing students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds at the epistemic centre of the university.

Nine participants were selected purposively and by snowballing to participate in the study. Furthermore, all the participants were African students (black and coloured) from historically disadvantaged communities in small towns from different provinces in South Africa. Third-year education students were specifically selected to take part in the study because they were more mature and already had established their own ways of learning and living at the university. Pseudonyms were used to safeguard the participants from identification in the study. The researcher relied on colleagues on both campuses to connect with participants to conduct the interviews and autobiographical writings. The study used autobiographical questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to obtain data for analysing the experiences of historically disadvantaged students at the university.

First, the participants engaged in autobiographical questionnaires to write about various stages in their lives, which was followed up by semi-structured interviews to probe for more interpersonal information on their life experiences. The study used thematic, interpretive content analysis, which enabled the researcher to sift through the large volumes of data systematically (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Henning’s (2004) model of data analysis was employed in the study.

5. Results

The findings of this study are presented as two main themes that emerged from the questionnaires and interviews, namely the distinctive nature of the student’s context, and navigating ways to achieve academic success.

5.1. Distinctive nature of the student’s context

Owing to the apartheid education system, Africans were prepared to take up lower paying jobs and consequently step into the lower stratum of society. Students from the contexts of poor, rural environments entered the university space. Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 all mentioned their distinctive ways of living. Participant 1 shared his upbringing: *‘My father was not around when I grew up, but when I turned sixteen, my father, who was a Xhosa, took me to initiation school where I became a man (Indoda).’* He further explained, *‘Then I finished my matric in 2015 and passed with a bachelor [pass with university entrance]. I then started to work, and I worked for about five years for different companies. Within those five years I applied to study Law at the University of Cape Town but unfortunately, I failed the NBT [National Benchmark Test] and was rejected. In 2018, I applied to my current university to do the extended programme in Education and started to do it in 2019.’*

Participant 5 shared the following: *‘When I first came this side, it was very hard for me to adjust. Firstly, because of the language, I am from KZA [KwaZulu Natal] and the spoken language in KZN is IsiZulu and when I got this side, I found that the spoken language is Sesotho. Having to deal with the dislike that most Sothos have for Zulus was hard at the beginning, but I told myself that I need to learn this language. I asked my friends to speak her language (Sotho) whenever we are talking so that I can learn it.’*

Usually, the context from which students originated was challenging. However, in most cases when they reached university life, it did not become easier. Historically disadvantaged students narrated their life obstacles and expressed their desires to improve the lives of their families and communities. For this reason, they needed to overcome challenges at the university; they were exhibiting agency by acting when faced with structural constraints in the learning environment (cf. Jääskelä et al., 2020).

5.2. Navigating ways to achieve academic success

All the participants mentioned that they needed to work individually and in groups to accomplish academic success. They needed ‘personal, relational (i.e., interactional), and context-specific participatory resources’ (cf. Jääskelä et al., 2020:793). Three of the participants mentioned these as follows: ‘*I am not one to study in groups. I prefer to study on my own, not with friends. I am more mature, past my young years. I also take care that my lecturers know me*’ (Participant 7). Another participant noted the following: ‘*Last when I consulted an official, I took a form that was not correct. She sent me back all over the whole campus whereas she could just pick the phone up to request the correct form from the relevant people in the admin building. I have experience working with clients. I also know when to keep quiet to get the issue solved. I mean, a younger, inexperienced student will give up easier. My goal is to complete my studies – this is not for me.*’ (Participant 3).

Another participant reflected on the matter as follows: ‘*Attending tutorials since they are normally in smaller groups, EDUB3714 [a Comparative Education module] is difficult. Not finding the right group which matches my academic work ethics is a problem. Student advising services are also not fully utilized because they make decisions for us without knowing in-depth students’ personal ethics. I find them not helping and do not make use of their services*’ (Participant 9).

The participants engaged in several issues that concerned them; however, they used their agency to access higher education after working in various jobs and attending a previous university or local college, which prepared them for university studies. Students were willing to learn other national languages to adapt to their new life circumstances. Students learnt via personal, relational ways and confronted university structures to enhance their critical, specialised consciousness.

6. Discussion

Students at one university in South Africa, on the continent of Africa, viewed themselves capable of completing their studies successfully. Some students preferred to work independently and others in collaboration with others. Others were peers, older students with more experience, tutors, and lecturers. They acted purposefully and communally (as it is done in Africa) to get the support and resources they needed to obtain academic understanding. Regarding curriculum concerns - curriculum selection, methodologies in teaching and learning, and assessment practices, it must align with the socio-economic, political, and historical contexts of the African continent to resonate with the lives of historically disadvantaged students. Fataar (2019: 29) claims that ‘students’ institutional and intellectual practices ought to become the epistemic ground upon which the university’s knowledge and curriculum message systems should be reframed’.

To align more with the needs of students, universities need to invest more in the training of administrative staff and academic advisory services to support students, especially in registration processes and funding application processes. The university must be prepared to reframe its core institutional function to fully allow these students in its midst.

7. Conclusion

Reframing the core function of the university to align better with historically disadvantaged students in higher education can lead to a more just society.

References

- Adhikari, M. (1994). Coloured identity and the politics of Coloured education: The origin of the Teachers’ League of South Africa. *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 27(1), 101-126.
- Aluko, O. O. (2025). *Exploring student agency towards academic success in a South African University* (Master’s thesis, University of the Free State).
- Boliver, V. (2017). Misplaced optimism: How higher education reproduces rather than reduces social inequality. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 38(3), 423–432. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2017.1281648>
- Christie, P. & Collins, C. (1984). Bantu education: apartheid ideology and labour reproduction In P. Kallaway (Ed.). *Apartheid and Education: The Education of Black South Africans* (pp. 160-183). Braamfontein: Ravan Press.

- Chiramba, O. & Ndofirepi, E. S. (2023). Access and success in higher education: Disadvantaged students' lived experiences beyond funding hurdles at a metropolitan South African university. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 37(6), 56-75.
- Creswell, J. W. & Creswell, J. D. (2023). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods*. SAGE Publications.
- Department of Education (DoE). (1997a). *Education White Paper 3: A programme for the transformation of higher education*. Available at: https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201409/18207gen11960.pdf
- Department of Education (DoE). (1997b). *Higher Education Act 101 of 1997*. Available at: <https://www.gov.za/documents/higher-education-act>
- Department of Education (DoE). (2001). *National plan for higher education in South Africa*. Available at: <https://www.justice.gov.za/commissions/FeesHET/docs/2001-NationalPlanForHigherEducation.pdf>
- Fataar, A. (2019). Academic conversation: From the shadows of the university's epistemic centre: Engaging the (mis)recognition struggles of students at the post-apartheid university. *Southern African Review of Education*, 25(2), 22–23. <https://hdl.handle.net/10520/ejc-sare-v25-n2-a3>
- Henning, E. (2004). *Finding your way in qualitative research*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- Jääskelä, P., Heilala, V., Karkkainen, T., & Hakkinen P. (2020). Student Agency Analytics: Learning Analytics as a Tool for Analysing Student Agency in Higher Education. *Behaviour & Information Technology*, 40(8), 790–808.
- Jansen, J. (2018). *As by fire: The end of the South African university*. Tafelberg.
- Larey, D. P. (2023). An exploration of African-student agency: Placing students from historically disadvantaged communities at the centre. *Perspectives in Education*, 41(4), 356–370. <https://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/pie/article/view/6891>
- Motala, S., Oketch, M., Wangenge Ouma, G., & Masutha, M. (2023). Higher education funding, justice and equity – critical perspectives. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 37(6). <https://doi.org/10.20853/37-6-6199>
- Reeve, J. (2013). How students create motivationally supportive learning environments for themselves: The concept of agentic engagement. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 105(3), 579–595. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0032690>