

CRITICAL SOCIAL WORK STUDIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

Prospects and Challenges

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DEBUNKING MYTHS

Capabilities of South African second year
social work students from low
socio-economic backgrounds

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ABSTRACT

There is a myth that students from lower socio-economic status (SES) groups are often seen to have a reduced chance of success in higher education (HE) as they do not embody the appropriate cultural and social capital necessary for progression in higher education institutions (HEIs). This myth has contributed to a deficit-oriented conceptualisation of this student group, undermining their capacity for resilience, agency and self-determination. This chapter suggests that HEIs need to intentionally create thoughtful ways of acknowledging student diversity to maximise every student's capacity for academic success. In this qualitative study, data from eight participants recruited through purposive non-probability sampling were analysed using thematic content analysis based on a semi-structured guide. This chapter debunks deficit conceptualisations held about students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, such as poor work ethic, not being intelligent enough and having lower aspirations for academic success due to their poor economic, social and educational background. Finally, the chapter ponders whether South African HEIs are responsive to the capabilities of diverse students in universities.

KEYWORDS

academic success, higher education, low socio-economic background, social work students

INTRODUCTION

Huge inequalities exist within the education system in post-apartheid South Africa (SA), which led Spaull (2013:3) to conclude that “there is an ongoing crisis in South African education, and that the current system is failing the majority of South Africa's youth”. There are two systems of education identified by the Select Committee on Education and Recreation (2017), where about 79% of all learners in SA attend public ‘no-fee paying’ schools, suggesting that only 21% of the South African

learner population attends private and fee-paying schools. The report highlights injustice in the South African education system, where learners belonging to middle and upper-class groups get access to good quality primary education. Conversely, most learners receive free and often low-quality educational training in resource-scarce environments (Branson & Zuze, 2012). Moreover, the Select Committee on Education and Recreation's (2017) report confirms the unequal distribution of wealth in South Africa and how the poor are at a disadvantage.

Jeynes (2016) notes that most no-fee schools in South Africa cannot adequately equip learners with the skills necessary for progression and success in HE. Compared to the quality of education provided in the middle to upper-class citizens' schools, only a minority of South African learners can access it. Some of the structural deficits include the lack of technology-enhanced learning, poor sanitation, overcrowded classrooms and long walking distances to school, which results in exhaustion, illness and difficulty to thrive in such environments (Spaull, 2013).

Thus, public HEIs in SA include students with differing educational backgrounds due to their various social and economic statuses. Often, the HE sector views students from lower socio-economic backgrounds through a deficit-oriented lens – a lens positing that students from low socio-economic backgrounds struggle to attain academic success as a result of their supposed poor educational background, as opposed to a consideration of the fact that HEIs are public institutions that were traditionally not created to accommodate students from severely poor socio-economic and educational backgrounds (Craft, 2019; Heleta, 2016).

These processes are evident through the academy's insufficient appreciation and affirmation of students' rich lived experiences, poor enforcement of multilingual practices and the continued implementation of alienating institutional cultures such as English as the primary medium of instruction (Booi, Vincent & Liccardo, 2017). Consequently, students from low SES backgrounds are solely blamed for the challenges they encounter in universities. This deficit view results in insufficient attention given to the structural factors embedded in universities that may hinder students from lower socio-economic families from achieving academic success.

Moreover, a continuous perpetuation of hostile generalisations about these students' capabilities is realised instead of recognising, acknowledging and focusing on their capacity for agency, resilience and self-determination (Smit, 2012). In addition, the creation of bridging programmes at some universities to accommodate mainly Black students is a method to modify the students. These programmes play down the need for more significant changes at the institution, the course content or even revision of the teaching methods (Hay & Morals, 2004).

This chapter provides the often-neglected student voice by providing empirical evidence pertaining to the experiences of social work students from low SES backgrounds in HEIs. These students' experiences support the call for greater acknowledgement and restructuring of structural factors that oppress their academic capabilities while encouraging, recognising and enhancing their sense of agency, resilience and self-determination in their quest for academic success. In this chapter, the authors challenge the deficit-views held about students from low SES backgrounds within HEIs by means of acknowledging and understanding various factors that hinder academic success for these students. These factors include the use of English as a medium of instruction in HEIs, alienation of low SES students based on their social and economic status, as well as the students' poor educational background prior to university enrolment.

The chapter further argues the othering effect propelled by the deficit-view of students from low SES backgrounds and the way it negates their inherent capacity for academic success which they achieve through attributes of resilience, agency and self-determination fostered by supportive structures such as supportive academic staff, family and peer support. Moreover, the chapter argues for a shift in how students from low SES backgrounds are perceived within the HE space and advocates for a more nuanced response to student diversity in order to maximise students' capacity for academic success. Finally, some tangible student-centred recommendations are provided for the social work department.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Experiences of social work students in universities

Most students who enrol for a social work degree come from low SES backgrounds. Studies by Berkowitz, Moore, Astor and Benbenishty (2017) and Dykes (2011) confirmed that there is a strong correlation between low SES background and poor academic success. This correlation is based on a proposition that people from low SES backgrounds are likely to receive a lower standard of "public and social services, and [attended] schools that lack sufficient funds to provide a high-quality education thus any one of these factors may place low socio-economic youth at risk for academic failure" (Gonzalez & Padilla, 1997:302).

A plethora of literature suggests that most social workers and social work students in SA have encountered adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) (Lee, Pang, Lee & Melby, 2017). By definition, ACEs refer to traumatic events that occur "within the first 18 years of a person's life" (Dykes, 2011:2). These events include, but are not limited to, the death of a parent, growing up in a poverty-stricken household with no

food or adequate shelter, the experience of financial difficulty, dysfunctional family relationships and depression (Ness, 2009; Rompf & Royse, 1994). International and local studies on ACEs of social work students confirm that traumatic psychological experiences in childhood encourage social work students to choose social work as a professional career to better understand and work through their trauma (Dykes & Green, 2015).

Further compounding the problems, these students experience additional challenges when transitioning from school to university (Thawabieh & Qaisy, 2012). These challenges include the shock of new academic, social and psychological experiences at university. This shock is compounded by adjustment to the vast differences in the educational design of secondary schools and tertiary education and separation anxiety from having to move far away from home.

Further contributing to student anxiety is economic uncertainty regarding how they will pay fees and accommodation costs. Suggestions include introducing new students to ways of being and becoming and assimilating understanding regarding the “new type of relations between students and faculties and even new relations among students themselves” (Thawabieh & Qaisy, 2012:110). These challenges result from structural factors such as students’ SES, educational background and tertiary education design, which is foreign to students from low SES. Therefore, these structural barriers can potentially hinder students’ capacity for optimal academic performance.

Annual social work graduates from low SES families provide evidence that the social work profession requires resilience and determination. Therefore, failure to acknowledge their capacity for progress in HE solely based on their educational, social and economic background perpetuates deficit discourse and undermines the ability of low SES students to achieve even greater academic success. Therefore, HEIs need to acknowledge and affirm these students as assets and support their academic success.

Deficit discourse around students from low socio-economic backgrounds

It is wrong to frame students and their families from low socio-economic backgrounds as lacking in the cultural and academic resources necessary for progression and success in HE (Smit, 2012). This notion has led to a deficit-oriented discourse around students from low socio-economic backgrounds (McKay & Devlin, 2016). As a result, students from low socio-economic backgrounds are often referred to as underprepared, having no aspirations, lacking the appropriate intellectual capacity necessary for HE and not embodying the proper privilege and advantage needed for them to get through HE (Council on Higher Education, 2016). Consequently, students from low socio-economic backgrounds are deemed not to belong at

universities because of the misinformed notion that they lack the intellectual capacity and level of aspiration needed to foster academic success in HEIs (Clycq, Ward-Nouwen & Vandenbroucke, 2014).

Smit (2012) further writes about how within the university space, students from low SES backgrounds are often 'othered' compared to students from middle and upper-class SES backgrounds. The othering of students from low SES backgrounds is a consequence of the deficit-oriented discourse directed towards these students. They are seen as the 'other' compared to students who come from middle to upper-class families.

According to Baleria (2021), the othering of students from low SES backgrounds often perpetuates a norm whereby the 'others' often find themselves judged and viewed as wanting that which is not for people in their socio-economic status. In return, students from low SES backgrounds often feel alienated when entering HEIs (Smit, 2012).

This deficit conceptualisation of students from low SES background turns them into 'victims' of discrimination. It informs teachers to lower their expectations regarding the performance of low SES students and encourages a minimal willingness to critically tackle complexities surrounding students' difficulties (Heleta, 2016; Smit, 2012). Such arguments bring the following question to the fore: are universities willing to transform archaic practices to respond to student diversity, or are they designed in a way that is more welcoming to middle-class to upper-class English-speaking students?

As an attempt to debunk the deficit conceptualisation of students from low SES backgrounds, findings from McKay and Devlin's (2016:347) paper confirm that "contrary to the conception of students from low socio-economic backgrounds as a 'problem', students from low socio-economic backgrounds demonstrate high levels of determination, and academic skills and they actively seek high standards in their studies" hence the need to dismantle structural barriers that keep the deficient notion alive.

Students' academic resilience

Resilience is a concept that seeks to understand processes involved in explaining why there are individuals who fare well in adverse situations while others struggle to adapt in the same difficult circumstances (Yates, Tyrell & Masten, 2015). It is a concept that focuses on individuals' competencies regardless of their exposure to adversity through "shifting the emphasis away from deficit-focused orientations toward models centred on positive aims, promotive and protective factors, and adaptive capacities" (Yates, et al., 2015:773).

Gonzalez and Padilla (1997) describe resilient students as those at risk for academic failure due to psychological distress stemming from their minority social status, difficulty understanding the English language, discrimination, financial hardship and enrolling in educational institutions unwelcoming – but who still are successful. Most successful social work students from disadvantaged backgrounds displayed determination, self-regulation and an internal locus of control drive (McKay & Devlin, 2016). These students may come from financially challenged backgrounds, which serves as motivation for them to seek high academic standards and develop high aspirations in life with the hope of escaping the poverty trap (McKay & Devlin, 2016). The capability of students from low socio-economic backgrounds to successfully progress from one year of study to the next, irrespective of the challenges they encounter as they strive for academic success, depicts their capacity for academic resilience (McKay & Devlin, 2016).

Overview of student dropouts in higher education

Ramrathan (2016:1) pointed to the issue of high drop-out rates in HE by proposing that “issues of under-preparedness, low throughput, and high drop out from higher education are a global phenomenon with, for example, the USA context engaging with this problem for nearly a century”. In SA, 50% of students who dropped out of HE expressed the challenges of insufficient funding (Breier, 2010). This high drop-out rate occurs as the university bureaucracy attaches severe consequences to the non-payment of fees.

In light of the issue of funding, Tinto (2003) proposed that there is a need to expand the conception of poverty in the HE context. There has to be a shift from conceptualising students’ poverty solely concerning a student’s economic background. HEIs should recognise the student’s family financial stance, the number of dependents and the students’ well-being. In addition, the type of accommodation occupied by the student and socio-cultural resources are other considerations (Tinto, 2003).

Failure to sustain the factors mentioned above can lead to students experiencing psychological distress, which affects their academic performance or ability to cope with academic pressure. As a result, students may opt to leave or become systematically excluded from the institution (Cvetkovski, Jorm & Mackinnon, 2018; Tinto, 2003).

Therefore, HEIs need to understand the various factors contributing to academic achievement in universities by students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Understanding the student as a ‘whole’ in terms of what drives the student’s success or failure and designing the academic enterprise in ways that centre the student can ensure that the interests of low SES students are foremost and includes all facets of university life, as opposed to exclusion.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative approach and a case study design. A purposive, non-probability sampling technique was used to select eight participants as a sample for the study. The criteria used to select participants were that they had to be university students enrolled for the second year in social work. They should have gone to either quintile one, two or three non-fee-paying ordinary schools [in both primary and secondary] pre-enrolment to university. In addition, they also had to be beneficiaries of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) or the Department of Social Development (DSD). All racial categories fitting into the criteria as mentioned earlier were considered. One-on-one interviews using a semi-structured interview guide was used to gather data for the study. Thematic content analysis was used to make sense of the data collected, and frequency counting was used as a means to support more evidence-based analysis.

The primary aim of the study was to explore the perceptions of second-year social work students regarding factors that contribute towards the academic achievement of students from low socio-economic backgrounds in university. The study's objectives were to explore various adversities encountered by low SES students, as well as the coping mechanisms they utilised to attain academic success. Ethical issues such as voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity and the principle to do no harm were considered. Participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity when writing up this chapter. The university's Non-medical Ethics Committee granted an ethics clearance certificate.

The following ethical considerations were considered during the process of data collection:

Voluntary participation and informed consent: Participants were provided with participant information sheets and consent forms for participation before the process of data collection began. During this process, participants were also provided with an opportunity to ask any relevant questions regarding the study before participating in any of the interviews. This was to ensure that there is transparency in relation to the study and that participants were made aware of the nature of the study, its purpose, and what participation would entail. As a result, participants were also afforded the right to provide voluntary consent to participate in the study, having been informed of every detail concerning the study beforehand.

Confidentiality: The researcher had assured participants verbally and in writing that the dissemination of any information provided by the participants will not be divulged to any other person but only those for whom it was necessary such as the researcher's supervisor. Participants were made aware of this ethical principle before making a final decision to participate.

Anonymity: Due to the nature of the study and the sensitivity of the information that was revealed by participants, the researcher ensured that the data from the study was reported anonymously by using pseudonyms.

The principle to do no harm: The researcher minimised any potential risks and stresses of harm that were likely to occur during the study based on the recognition that some participants revealed sensitive information about themselves which could have potentially evoked sad emotions. As an attempt to minimise psychological distress, the researcher provided participants with useful information, referring them to free psychological counselling at the University’s Counselling, Careers and Development Unit (CCDU). Contact details for CCDU were provided to participants in person and the information was also included in the information sheets that were handed to participants prior to participants in the study.

The theoretical framework underpinning the study

The study was underpinned by the person-in-environment (PIE) approach. This practice framework provides social work practitioners with a lens through which to view human behaviour and individuals across a broad spectrum of human conditions (Greene, 2017). The PIE framework helped challenge the deficit thinking explained in the literature review about students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Instead of conceptualising students as a ‘problem’ in HE (Smit, 2012), PIE proposes a holistic understanding of their entire transactional field (their social, familial, intellectual, economic, emotional and communal factors) and how these interrelated human aspects shape their experiences and performance in university.

Table 10.1 Description of participants (N=8)

Demographic factor	Sub-Category	Number
Race	Black	8
Gender	Female	8
Age	19-22	8
Year of study	Second year	8
Source of funding	NSFAS	8
Place of origin	Urban	6
	Rural	2
Family structure	Single parent	6
	Both parents	2

Table 10.1 indicates that all the students in the study were Black South African women in the second year of study towards a bachelor’s degree in social work. The participants received funding from NSFAS. Six of the eight participants were raised by single parents. A discussion of some of the study’s findings follows.

The literature reviewed points to a need to confront structural factors that challenge and inhibit these students' capacity for optimal academic performance. Some of the difficulties encountered by low SES students as revealed in the findings of this study include but are not limited to difficulties in the transition from a public school to university; adaptation to the university environment; overcoming alienation; the use of English as a language barrier and issues of funding.

The transition from public school into university

The transition from a public school to a university was a challenging experience for students from low SES backgrounds. The transition process also depicted students' determination to break out of the poverty trap. Next, reasons for the difficulty of the transition are offered.

Determination to break out of poverty

Most participants said their poor background was a motivation for them to pursue academic success. Their experience propelled them to strive towards obtaining good grades from the time they were still in secondary school, and the goal was to ensure that they were admitted to a university. Participants shared that even though they were university students, their poor background motivated them to seek high performing academic standards to attain their university qualifications. In the analysis, pseudonyms were used to describe participants' responses. In the quotation below, Lerato explains how she saw the attainment of academic success as a possible way to escape poverty while she was still in secondary school:

... the thing which motivated me [to apply for university] ... I come from a poor background so I was like; I must study so that I can escape this poverty. So even though it was hard; I kept going like, one day I want to get there, I want to be somewhere [successful] in life ... [Lerato]

Below is a quotation that shows the continuous motivation drawn from the poor background and the desire to break the poverty cycle in the family:

For me it is my background, it keeps me motivated. Like every time I think of quitting, I will be like no ... at home they rely on me, they need me to get this degree so that I can go back and help ... [Lerato]

These quotations show that, contrary to the belief that students from low socio-economic backgrounds have low aspirations, such students have high aspirations coupled with unique and innovative survival instincts. Aspirations are motivated by their desire to break the poverty trap of their families thus keeping them motivated to continue working hard at university so that they could be successful someday.

Large class sizes

Most participants said the schools that they attended before university had scarce resources. This included a lack of classrooms, textbooks, and science and computer laboratories. Additionally, there was insufficient individual attention and learning support from teachers because of overcrowding in classrooms. In the quotation below, Lerato described the overcrowding in classrooms at the school she attended before university:

There were classes, but not enough because in each class ... there would be like eighty [80] learners in a mobile class ... some learners would have to sit on the floor. [Lerato]

Lerato's quote aligns with Spaull (2013), stating that public schools are usually overcrowded, making it almost impossible for all the learners to grasp the information provided to them by their teachers. As a result of the overcrowding, teachers struggle to give the learners individual attention, which then places the burden on the learner to draw on their capabilities to ensure that they pass all subjects. The PIE also posits that the person is not just a passive recipient of what their environment has to offer but that individuals can also be active agents in determining how they come out of their environmental situations (Hutchison, 2018). The PIE approach accounts for how participants faced unconducive learning environments but still managed to push themselves, passed their matric (Grade 12) and achieved their goal of enrolment at a university, thereby displaying some resiliency.

Resilience

Some participants said that to ensure university enrolment, they had to work hard and put extra effort into their studies. Rakgadi shared her journey to ensure that she passed her matric and had access to the information needed for examinations:

Me and my friends had a study group, so each day when school was out, we would go home to rest and then come back to school later [to study]. Sometimes we would sleep at school [studying] by ourselves ... [Rakgadi]

This quotation from Rakgadi shows the resilience and determination that she had displayed, the hard work, dedication and intrinsic motivation to obtain academic achievement at her high school in preparation to get into university. Rakgadi's quote contradicts the views by Smit (2012) that students from low socio-economic backgrounds have lower aspirations for academic success, as participants said they had developed a solid work ethic before enrolling at university. Participants' aspirations and resiliency explain a comment made by Hlayisani when she spoke about how she had always dreamt of going to university regardless of her poor background:

... I had dreams; I was a child of dreams ... I never put myself down and say I am a child from a rural area therefore, going to varsity is not possible for me. I have always dreamed of going to varsity since grade eight [Hlayisani]

Hlayisani's quotation also points to her vision of escaping poverty and shaping her future through education. The passage describes how the experience of living in a rural area that includes a scarcity of resources motivates her to strive for a better life. Jansen (2009) confirmed that growing up in an impoverished home can have detrimental effects on a child's brain development. Conversely, due to the brain's fluidity and adaptability, it is also possible for the brain to change for the better, implying that children from poor socio-economic backgrounds are capable of experiencing social, emotional and academic success (Jansen, 2009; Williams, Bryan, Morrison & Scott, 2017). Hence, as displayed by Hlayisani's dreams, students from low SES backgrounds aspire for extraordinary achievements in life, including academic success. Therefore, to say these participants have low aspirations due to their resource-scarce location is a misconception.

Self-learning of the use of technology

Five of the eight participants said they had no computer laboratories at their schools. One participant explained that there were computers in the school, but they could not use them. In the quotation below, Qaqamba expanded on this lack of computers and her experience as a first-time computer user when she got to the university:

... at first yeah it affected me [not having acquired computer skills in secondary school] especially in the beginning of my first year, it was quite difficult for me to use a computer because I was not used to it so ... it was my first time having ... like a computer in front of me ... I was slow at typing and some of the things I did not know, in the computer like where to search for word applications and all that stuff, I taught myself. I would also ask other people [for assistance] ... [Qaqamba]

Qaqamba's experience of using a computer for the first time in university required teaching herself and relying on other people to show her how to operate a computer. This quote illustrates some of the multifaceted challenges that students from low socio-economic backgrounds experience when they enter university spaces. Structural factors such as the quality of education received in the previous schools must be considered. The PIE framework agrees, stating that a person should not be viewed in isolation but rather in constant interaction with their environment (Greene, 2017). In this instance, the environment of the public schools without computers and the transition students had to face when coming to the university environment where computers were required for learning.

From the foregoing, it is evident that deficit discourse minimises the impact of structural issues on students' performance (Smit, 2012). These structural issues include inequalities such as: large class sizes, high teacher-learner ratios and insufficient learning materials. These factors contribute to the poor-quality education received in public schools by low SES learners compared to that received by middle to upper SES learners, underlining how these structural factors may explain the differences in how these subgroups of students experience universities. Hence, the proposed need to move away from deficit thinking and to attentively consider whether HEIs are ready to respond to differences in the student body. Students' willingness to learn must be embraced, rather than discriminating against students who have worked very hard, despite their living and learning challenges, to get into university.

Adapting to the university environment

A study by Thawabieh and Qaisy (2012) highlighted the pressures that students in higher education face through the need to adapt to a new environment that is very different from the one in secondary school. Some of these adaptations on the part of participants are explained below.

Sense of alienation vs sense of belonging based on social class

Six of the eight participants reported having had an uneasy transition into the university. Two participants explained how coming into the university environment made them notice differences in social class between themselves and other students. In the quotations below, Tshego and Qaqamba share their experience regarding how they felt when they first arrived at university:

... the environment was very hard to adapt to, because everything was different, ... from having to worry about what you must wear, to uhm ... worrying about you know, your friends ... what kind of a bag you are carrying, you know, you get to worry about the little things that you did not have to worry about in high school. [Tshego]

I felt different (laughs) ... when I first got here, everyone had laptops, expensive phones ... like even the books were different ... but then that did not affect me much ... I am not planning to be like others. [Qaqamba]

From Tshego's quotation, it can be deduced that for some participants entering the university space led to a sense of 'othering', as explained in research by Smit (2012), and a feeling of alienation for students who identified as 'other' in comparison to traditional students. Participants said they felt like they were different from other students, that maybe they needed to look, dress and speak a certain way for them to fit in, almost as if feeling that to identify as a university student one had to come from a high social class, that was foreign to them.

Apropos of the ‘othering’ of low SES students, when these students get into universities, they are often told that they have a limited chance of succeeding and that they needed to ‘catch up’ as they are deemed as lacking (Baleria, 2021; Smit, 2012:373). In the process, low SES students get “separated from the ‘mainstream’ by virtue of their background and their ‘otherness’ becomes reinforced”. Consequently, students from low SES backgrounds become alienated from a system that they had to work hard to get into (Baleria, 2021; Smit, 2012:373). Moreover, the use of English in universities was also identified as an aspect of difference, alienation and a barrier as participants tried to adapt to the university environment.

English as a barrier to adapting and learning

Five participants identified English as having been a barrier to learning and as an area for improvement. Explaining her difficulty in adapting to the use of English as a medium of instruction, Rakgadi shared the following:

Uhm ... it was also a challenging experience for me to adapt, [the use of English as a medium of instruction] like here at this university we speak English ... I personally struggled a lot with speaking English, even now I am still struggling but then I try ... so at high school we did not like ... we did not learn to speak English properly and everything that was taught, was taught in our home language even math and other subjects were taught in our language; so I had a challenge there. [Rakgadi]

Rakgadi’s words support the proposition by McKay and Devlin (2016) that viewing students from low SES backgrounds as not having the appropriate intellectual capacity necessary for higher education might not be the absolute truth. The above quotation illustrates that participants from low SES backgrounds are constantly faced with structural challenges in universities, with language being one of them. However, despite all the challenges, low SES students continue to strive for and attain academic success, hence the participants’ progression from their first year of study to the second.

Besides the challenges encountered by students from low SES backgrounds in universities, participants also identified factors that help support academic success for such students. These factors are discussed below, and they include but are not limited to the availability of funding, support from academic staff, family and peer support, and self-determination.

ENABLING FACTORS TO ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Sufficient funding as a need for low SES students

All eight participants said funding availability was an important factor in helping students from low SES backgrounds achieve academically. A lack of funding, they said, could lead to constant worry and the inability to concentrate on academic work. In the quotation below, Hlayisani talks about how she spent the first few months of her first year trying to get funding:

It affects you academically [not having the assurance of funding] because ... when you are in class you are thinking about who is going to pay for your fees, you are thinking of travelling [from a place where the participant stays to the university] ... like, your problems ... immediately when you try to focus; that is when your problems come. You start to overthink rather than paying attention to what the lecturer is saying. [Hlayisani]

This quote illustrates the PIE's proposition that it is essential to recognise and understand a whole field of transactions and events present in an individual's life, be they familial, financial, social, intellectual or emotional well-being, and understand how these interrelated factors may have an impact on the individual's experience. Here it is essential to know the factors at play in students' lives [such as the experience of financial difficulty] that may have an impact on students' performance in HE. It is a fallacy to think that they are not committed to their studies, as suggested in the literature. There are many other factors, external to academic work and the individual's attributes, that influence how students from low SES backgrounds experience and perform in HE. Undoubtedly, stress and the consistent worry about fees are factors that may get in the way of a student's academic performance.

Supportive academic staff

Five participants said that having supportive lecturers could help enhance students' potential for academic success. Rakgadi said:

I would say that in first year I was struggling but then uhm, sometimes when lecturers actually tell you that you are welcome to consult, it helps when they also tell you nicely and show you that they care. [Rakgadi]

Similarly, a study by Krause (2005) proposed that academic staff play a crucial role in contributing to students' engagement with their studies and the university environment. The study also confirmed that it was important for academic staff to make it known to students that the lecturers themselves, the department and the institution in which they were enrolled are aware of and understand the various pressures students face daily concerning their personal and academic lives (Krause, 2005).

Rakgadi's comment shows how support and care from lecturers means a lot to students from low socio-economic backgrounds. According to Smit (2012), these are students needing care, who are already discriminated against and stigmatised as having the highest failure rate and deemed as being a 'problem' to HE. Deficit conceptualisations of these students result in "a pathologising practice engendering the continued marginalisation of a group not treated as equal partners, capable of agency or self-determination" (Shields, Bishop & Mazawi, 2005 as cited in McKay & Devlin, 2016:348). Hence, participants saw lecturer care and support as necessary in fostering students' academic achievement. Knowing they are cared for and understood helps mitigate all the other pressures they encounter due to their poor backgrounds.

Family, peer support and resilience

All participants said that family support and resilience were a factor that helped facilitate their academic achievement as university students from low SES backgrounds. They said the constant encouragement(s) and emotional support from family members and friends fed into participants' resiliency. Participants also explained that the people students surround themselves with determines whether or not the student will do well in their academic work. Below are quotations on the significance of family and peer support:

... it also helps when your family keeps contacting you every day just checking if you are okay and giving you that encouragement and reminding you that they love and support you. [Rakgadi]

... When I am feeling down, I call home and they will encourage me and tell me to just keep pushing because I know the purpose of what I am here for ... [Lerato]

Hlayisani and Rakgadi share the significance of peer support below:

... Friends, they also help a lot and actually, if you have good friends, I think it also helps because if they are doing good things it also helps you want to do good. [Rakgadi]

... having the kind of friends that encourage you to do well. [Hlayisani]

These quotes indicate the importance of surrounding oneself with positive and like-minded people. Such company and peers can help save one from distraction or being swayed by activities that have nothing to do with academic work and which might impede students from doing well in their studies. The first two quotes also point to the value of emotional support from significant family members. As a low SES student, the first author of this paper has experienced the kind of pressure that university life can have on such students. Considering the challenges that students from low SES

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backgrounds face when they get into HEIs, having family members who encourage them to 'hang in there' reminds them of why they enrolled into university to begin with, and shows that care and support are necessary.

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion and foregrounding this study within the PIE framework, it is evident that academic success is not solely dependent on a student's intellectual capacity. Academic success is influenced by various socio-economic conditions and access to resources. For students from low SES backgrounds, academic success can also be reinforced by the provision of enabling responsive support structures in HEIs. It is critical to understand that deficit thinking perpetuates negative stereotypes about the capabilities of students from low SE backgrounds and undermines their inherent capacity to exercise their sense of agency and self-determination. Moreover, difficulties evident in students from low socio-economic backgrounds are never the fault of the individual student but can be traced back to the structural factors and inequalities prevalent in the South African basic education system and the unbalanced socio-economic status of South African citizens.

With reference to the PIE theory and the findings of the study, the significance of recognising the entire field of events and transactions present in an individual's life is realised. The PIE theory ensures recognition of possibilities by focusing away from a narrow view of individuals grounded in individual problems and pathology, adopting instead an approach that recognises both difficulties and resources, thereby leading to an acknowledgement of issues, resources and strengths of the individual in their transaction with their environment (Greene, 2017).

Findings discussed in the chapter show that low SES students have a strong work ethic, drive and willingness to achieve academic success irrespective of their adverse experiences. This chapter showed there is a need for HEIs to find better and more thoughtful ways of responding to the diversity of university students, and to adopt an approach that challenges deficit-thinking, confronts structural barriers to students' success, recognises and facilitates students' capacity for agency and determination to attain academic success. Considering these conclusions, the following recommendations are made:

Recommendations to the department of basic education

It is recommended that the Department of Basic Education engage in a complete overhaul of the basic education provisions for pupils in low SES groups. There should be equity and inclusion criteria developed in favour of quintile one to three schools, specifically in terms of teaching capacity, class sizes, buildings and structures

and sanitation. This recommendation is made as most of the academic pressures encountered by students from low socio-economic backgrounds when they get to the HE sector can be traced back to their educational background prior to enrolment.

It is also recommended that necessary resources such as textbooks, computers and sufficient and well-trained teachers be made available in public non-fee-paying schools

It is recommended that the Department of Basic Education ensure that non-fee-paying public schools better prepare learners and equip them with skills useful for HE training such as training in academic writing skills, critical thinking and computer literacy skills.

Recommendations to universities and other HEIs

It is also recommended that HEIs advocate for sufficient funding for students from financially challenged backgrounds. Funders should ensure that funding covers fees in total and additional students' material needs such as accommodation, stationery and sustained living (such as sufficient meal stipends and toiletries).

Some students from low socio-economic backgrounds find engagement a battle, often leading to internal conflict and this makes it harder for them to engage during lectures. Therefore, it is recommended for HEIs to enforce multilingual practices and to create alternative learning spaces where students can engage more effectively with the content that is being taught without experiencing the fear of engaging in big lecture halls. Education is the key to intergenerational change in the SES of many South Africans, which is why just opening the doors to HE is not enough to support change. What is recommended is a structural dismantling of bureaucratic systems and methods, replacing them with ones that recognise all students' capabilities but especially those from low SES groups.

Recommendations to the Department of Social Work

The Department of Social Work may consider developing discipline-specific interventions for academic development on academic writing skills, computer literacy and coping mechanisms for adaptation in university. There are generic programmes offered in the First Year Experience (FYE) programme during orientation week and open to all students from various faculties. However, during the academic calendar, the times slots were reported to clash with lecture times thus prohibiting students from being able to participate in the programme(s).

The department can increase its internal library of recent academic textbooks and request that the general library keep more copies of textbooks so that there is greater access. Additionally, greater use of e-books and online resources will allow more student access as they can download these resources when on campus and use offline.

The educators in the department should consider familiarising themselves with the various attributes and strengths of students who enrol for social work programmes such as their socio-economic background, funding sources and support systems so that they are able to support students. This information should be used developmentally and not to label students.

Educators need to be mindful of all the social work values such as social justice, *ubuntu*, thoughtfulness and critical social work when engaged with teaching and learning. Efforts should be made to draw on student experiences and collaborative methods when teaching and assessing students.

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