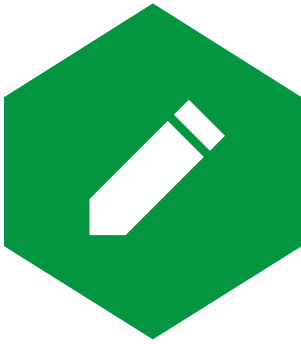




VOLUME 28 ISSUE 1

The International Journal of

Learning in Higher Education

Family Support for First-Year Students during the Transition to University

NOSISANA MKONTO



THELEARNER.COM

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

<https://thelearner.com>
ISSN: 2327-7955 (Print)
ISSN: 2327-8749 (Online)
<https://doi.org/10.18848/2327-7955/CGP> (Journal)

First published by Common Ground Research Networks in 2021
University of Illinois Research Park
60 Hazelwood Drive
Champaign, IL 61820 USA
Ph: +1-217-328-0405
<https://cgnetworks.org>

The International Journal of Learning in Higher Education is a peer-reviewed, scholarly journal.

COPYRIGHT

© 2021 (individual papers), the author(s)
© 2021 (selection and editorial matter),
Common Ground Research Networks

All rights reserved. Apart from fair dealing for the purposes of study, research, criticism, or review, as permitted under the applicable copyright legislation, no part of this work may be reproduced by any process without written permission from the publisher. For permissions and other inquiries, please contact cg scholar.com/cg_support.



Common Ground Research Networks, a member of Crossref

EDITOR

Bill Cope, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA
Mary Kalantzis, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA

ACTING DIRECTOR OF PUBLISHING

Jeremy Boehme, Common Ground Research Networks, USA

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT

Kortney Sutherland, Common Ground Research Networks, USA

ADVISORY BOARD

The Advisory Board of The Learner Research Network recognizes the contribution of many in the evolution of the Research Network. The principal role of the Advisory Board has been, and is, to drive the overall intellectual direction of the Research Network. A full list of members can be found at <https://thelearner.com/about/advisory-board>.

PEER REVIEW

Articles published in *The International Journal of Learning in Higher Education* are peer reviewed using a two-way anonymous peer review model. Reviewers are active participants of The Learner Research Network or a thematically related Research Network. The publisher, editors, reviewers, and authors all agree upon the following standards of expected ethical behavior, which are based on the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) Core Practices. More information can be found at <https://cgnetworks.org/journals/publication-ethics>.

ARTICLE SUBMISSION

The International Journal of Learning in Higher Education publishes biannually (June, December). To find out more about the submission process, please visit <https://thelearner.com/journals/call-for-papers>.

ABSTRACTING AND INDEXING

For a full list of databases in which this journal is indexed, please visit <https://thelearner.com/journals/collection>.

RESEARCH NETWORK MEMBERSHIP

Authors in *The International Journal of Learning in Higher Education* are members of The Learner Research Network or a thematically related Research Network. Members receive access to journal content. To find out more, visit <https://thelearner.com/about/become-a-member>.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

The International Journal of Learning in Higher Education is available in electronic and print formats. Subscribe to gain access to content from the current year and the entire backlist. Contact us at cg scholar.com/cg_support.

ORDERING

Single articles and issues are available from the journal bookstore at <https://cg scholar.com/bookstore>.

OPEN RESEARCH

The International Journal of Learning in Higher Education is Hybrid Open Access, meaning authors can choose to make their articles open access. This allows their work to reach an even wider audience, broadening the dissemination of their research. To find out more, please visit <https://cgnetworks.org/journals/open-research>.

DISCLAIMER

The authors, editors, and publisher will not accept any legal responsibility for any errors or omissions that may have been made in this publication. The publisher makes no warranty, express or implied, with respect to the material contained herein.

Family Support for First-Year Students during the Transition to University

Nosisana Mkonto,¹ Cape Peninsula University of Technology, South Africa

Abstract: Widening access and participation in higher education institutions opened access to a more diverse student population from varying upbringings and educational proficiencies. The majority of students gaining from widening access are either from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, the first in their family to attend university, or both. The transition from high school to university is perceived as stressful for first-year first-generation students, and first-year students from disadvantaged backgrounds are generally perceived to be lacking with regard to their levels of preparedness and awareness of the university, financial support, and expectations for their courses. The scenario described above highlights the urgent need to increase focus on family support to first-year students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This study aims to explore the role of family support in enabling or constraining first-year first-generation students from disadvantaged backgrounds as they transition from high school to university using both Bourdieu and Tinto as the theoretical framework to address a gap in the literature. The study adopted the qualitative phenomenological interpretive approach to explore the role of family support in enabling or constraining the transition of first-year first-generation students from disadvantaged backgrounds into university. Data was collected through focus group discussions with fifty first-year students. The findings of this study revealed that students' family support or lack thereof does not deter students from transitioning into university. This study highlights the resilience and agency that first-generation students from disadvantaged backgrounds bring with them to the university as the key principles that universities should consider.

Keywords: First-Year Experience, Transition, Higher Education, Family, Parental Background

Introduction

First-year students are seen as the most susceptible to transition challenges (Spiegler and Bednarek 2013; Smit 2012; McMillan 2014; Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco 2005). While they have to respond to a competitive university environment with limited resources available to them, many also have to contend with the lack of appropriate and relevant support structures from their homes (Manzoni 2018). Family background (economic, social, intellectual, or cultural) can act as either a resource or hindrance to student transitions into the university (Kim et al. 2010).

Awareness of students' family backgrounds can also help academics gain a deeper understanding of who their students are and how best to support them (Norodien-Fataar 2016). More specifically, taking a look at lifestyles and activities that are molded and constrained by family backgrounds can be beneficial. The claim made here is that greater awareness and understanding of students' family backgrounds can assist universities in identifying students' risk factors and strengths in order to develop the necessary interventions that will facilitate a smoother transition into the university.

South Africa's higher education institutions have emerged from a racially divided education system in which the majority of the population was excluded from accessing universities (Council on Higher Education (CHE) 2013). After the demolition of apartheid and due to the government's concerted efforts, student populations at universities have increased to allow for the participation of students who come from low or disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds (CHE 2013). This resulted in universities admitting students from diverse cultures, educational backgrounds, diverse academic prospects, and diverse university expectations (O'Shea 2016). Despite these noble attempts by all stakeholders (government and universities) to redress the inequalities of the past through education (CHE 2013), it seems that most of what

¹ Corresponding Author: Nosisana Mkonto, Fundani Centre for Higher Education Development, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, PO Box 652, Cape Town, South Africa, 8000. email: MkontoN@cput.ac.za

has been provided is access to higher education without sufficient support for the most vulnerable students to stay in the university and succeed (Van Zyl 2016; McGhie 2017). Both the government and universities have sought to provide funding to ensure that students from disadvantaged economic and social backgrounds gain access to higher education (Cloete 2014; Letseka and Maile 2008). However, there has not been a sustained attempt by all stakeholders to ensure holistic support for such students by exploring students' family backgrounds to determine to what extent it contributes to how the students would fare in the university. This article, therefore, seeks to explore the role of family support for first-year first-generation students from disadvantaged backgrounds as they transition from high school to university in the South African context. The research asks an overarching question: To what extent does family support enable or constrain transition into the university for first-year first-generation students from disadvantaged backgrounds? Consideration is given to variables such as students' family's highest qualification, their role in the application and admission process, and the support the students receive from their families in an attempt to answer this question.

This article is set at a university in South Africa, and the majority of students that are admitted are first-generation students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Dumais and Ward (2010) define first-generation students as students whose parents have no education at all, students whose parents have no further education after high school, or students of parents who have not graduated from a tertiary institution. First-generation students often lack information on how to navigate university systems. The majority of first-generation students come from under-resourced schools, which is representative of their impoverished socioeconomic backgrounds. As such, their ascribed status as 'disadvantaged' and underprivileged' for tertiary learning stands out (McGhie 2017). In the United Kingdom and the United States, the terms used are 'non-traditional students' and 'minority students,' respectively.

South Africa is a country with a wide economic gap between the wealthy and the poor (Spaull 2015). Inequality in South Africa has added to uneven educational prospects among students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds (Graven 2013; Letseka and Maile 2008). Public schools in South Africa are ranked according to the socioeconomic status of the school and are determined by processes such as average income, unemployment rates, and general literacy level of the people living around the school, as well as infrastructural factors (Ogbonnaya and Awuah 2019). These rankings are called quintiles and divided into five groups; quintiles 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 are used for purposes of allocation of financial resources. The schools in the poorest of the poor geographical areas are characterized as quintile 1 schools, and those in the wealthy geographical areas are quintile 5 (Ogbonnaya and Awuah 2019). Students in quintiles 1 to 3 schools do not pay school fees and receive more funding per learner from the government than schools in quintiles 4 and 5. Based on the assumption that parents can afford to pay fees and do not require much funding from the government than quintile 1 to 3 schools, students in quintile 4 and 5 schools do pay fees. Gale (2015) also cautions against viewing first-generation students from disadvantaged backgrounds as a homogenous group. In exploring the role of family support in enabling or constraining first-year first-generation students' transition to the university, this article uses theoretical concepts from Tinto (1993) and Bourdieu (1986) to show how family support enables or constrains the transitions of first-year first-generation students into university from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Theoretical Framework

This study aims to determine to what extent family support accounts for the university transition of first-year first-generation students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Variables such as first-year students' demographics, parental attributes, and the nature of first-year student support provided by the university come to focus. Even though it is generally noted that first-generation students from disadvantaged backgrounds face some challenges that constrain how they

transition to the university and ultimately affect retention and rates of these students, the focus should not be on the deficit framing of students from such backgrounds but should rather be on the attributes these students bring to the university that enable them to successfully transition and persist at the university (Devlin 2013; Bozalek and Boughey 2012; Boughey 2007).

Bourdieu's (1986) theory of habitus challenges notions of deficit thinking. Bourdieu (1986) argues that agents in any field, when faced with challenges, develop coping strategies that enable them to survive in such fields. Bourdieu (1986) further developed this to what he later called "capital" and "disposition." For Bourdieu (1984, 1986), capital refers to sums of human assets that are put to productive use. These concepts have a major influence on sociology. Four categories of capital are common in Bourdieu's (1984, 1986) theory: cultural capital, social capital, economic capital, and symbolic capital. Cultural, social, and economic capital are straightforward to understand and relate to how people tap from cultural reservoirs, social events, or financial resources to cope with challenges; however, symbolic capital looks back at the three other forms of capital and engages with the consequences when people do not perceive them as such (Bourdieu 1984, 1986). The role of the family in a child's education is crucial. At the heart of any child's academic success is a demonstration of the extent to which the family intervenes to provide cultural, social, and economic capital, which contributes to the child's academic success. Bourdieu's (1984, 1986) cultural capital has been used in various fields but has gained momentum in higher education research. Ovink and Veazey (2011) used Bourdieu to investigate minority students' participation in sciences. Pather and Chetty (2015) used Bourdieu to investigate pre-entry factors influencing the first-year experience. McMillan (2014) also used Bourdieu to investigate emotions in the transition to university. Norodien-Fataar (2016) used Bourdieu to explore pre-university pathways of disadvantaged students for gaining entry to university study.

Bourdieu's cultural capital has been used to explain how the environment in which individuals are raised and their conditions of cultural and material existence shape their attitudes, means of interpreting the world, and capacity to engage with higher education discourse (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). Yosso (2005) proposes that the different forms of capital that are cultivated within families and communities need to be acknowledged by lecturers in institutions of higher education to obtain a better understanding of how such capital influences the nature of first-year students' access and engagement within higher education.

Tinto's (1993) model of student transition proposes student integration into academic and social systems. According to Tinto (1993), for students to persist and graduate in the university, they need integration into formal (academic) and informal (student-staff interaction) academic systems, as well as integration into formal (extracurricular activities) and informal (peer/group interaction) social systems. When first-year students enter university, they experience new ideas, behaviors, and values that are different from home (Pather et al. 2017). Tinto (1993) asserts that students entering university separate themselves from the norms of their family to a certain extent. Tinto (1993) further argues that transition occurs after the effective mediation of separation. Milem and Berger (1997) explain that during the transition, students are separated from the norms and patterns of their family but have not yet adopted norms and behavior of the new environment. The first-year student's transition into university can be influenced by factors both within and outside of them (Tinto 1975). These factors include their socioeconomic status; lack of competency in the language of teaching and learning; and poorly developed literacy, numeracy, and academic skills that are vital to university success. Tinto's (1993) theory extends the arguments made by Bourdieu (1984, 1986) regarding how cultural, social, and economic variables within the university affect student retention and success. In the case of this study, these concepts play an important role as they allow the exploration of the role of family support in enabling or constraining the transition of first-year first-generation students from challenging backgrounds into the university.

Research Methodology

This research aims to explore the role of family support in the transition to the university of first-year first-generation students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The article, therefore, engages with variables such as parents' qualifications, parents' roles in the application and admission process, and how the students experience support from their families as they transition to university. Experience is a concept that is often difficult to measure, and it is contentious in terms of how different people appreciate it. In this regard, this study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach. Qualitative data was collected using focus group discussions with fifty first-year students. The rationale for using focus group discussion is that focus groups could provide information about a variety of ideas and feelings that the first-year first-generation students have about the role of family support in enabling or constraining their transition into the university and also reveal the different views that the individuals in the group have (Dilshad and Latif 2013; Rabiee 2004). Focus groups can produce a large quantity of data in a short space of time from different individuals (Dilshad and Latif 2013). The intentionally selected first-year students from quintile 1, 2, and 3 schools provided a good rapport with the research focus and allowed for a deeper understanding of the role of family support in enabling or constraining first-year first-generation students' transition to the university. The focus group discussions are comprised of first-generation students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Focus Group Discussion

The focus group discussions were facilitated with five groups of ten first-year students and lasted between forty-five minutes to one hour over three days. The focus group discussions were audiotaped and then transcribed verbatim. The focus group discussion and student responses were guided by the following topics:

- Family's highest qualification
- Family support
- Family role in the application and admission process

Students in the focus group voiced their views about family support during university transition. The researcher facilitated the discussions to manage the relationship so that no individual participant may dominate others in the group discussion and to ensure that all participants' views are accommodated in a relaxed and comfortable environment. Throughout the discussion, students' guesses, interpretations, and ideas were steered around the topics indicated above. Focus-group analysis took place concomitantly with data collection. When more clarity was required, students were asked to explain further.

A thematic approach was used in data analysis with the topics as themes. Narrative summaries were put together with the actual quotes that clarify the participants' ideas in their own words under the topics.

Informed consent was obtained from the participants before the study commenced. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study without any repercussions. Participants permitted the use of an audiotape during the discussions. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process to ensure participants' protection and privacy. Pseudonyms were used to conceal the identity of the students in the focus groups.

Findings

The findings are presented according to the focus group discussion topics. The student responses in the focus group discussion are indicated.

Highest Qualification in the Family

The data in this study depicts the highest number of parents of students who do not possess a qualification. There were those parents who only attended primary school or did not go to school at all:

My mother dropped out in Standard 5 at primary school, and my father had to go and work when he was doing Standard 8 to help the family. (Sabata)

My mother never went to school because her father did not believe in educating a girl child. (Jack)

My father dropped out in Standard 3 because he had to look after the cows. (Lindy)

My mother went as far as Grade 7 and could not go to high school because there was no secondary/high in the village where she stayed. (Lumka)

Other parents went as far as secondary/high school:

My father had to drop out of school in Grade 11 because he was the eldest male in the family and had to take care of the family. (Melissa)

My mother passed grade 12, but there was no money for her to go to university. (Musa)

Family Support

The data indicates that, to a larger extent, students did receive support from their parents. This is indicated by the students in the focus group discussions:

Even though I live only with my father, he is very interested in my studies. He tries to make sure that my fees are paid on time and provides me with a school allowance. We don't discuss my school work because he didn't study up to university. So, he is not concerned about that part; all he wants to know is whether I am passing my course. (Jerome)

A lack of understanding sometimes meant that the student and families clash over university attendance, as is the case with Thabo:

My father does not see why I must study. He says that he can organize for me a job as security, and I will then be able to help him build a family home in Idutywa in the Eastern Cape. He feels that the university is a waste of time and a waste of money, and as a man, I must provide. (Thabo)

In instances where there is a lack of family support, it is the students who find the kind of motivation and support that their parents would have ideally provided to them from within themselves. Below is an excerpt from a focus group discussion with the first-year students:

My dream is to graduate, and I believe that I can do it. It is difficult, but I can do it. I am living alone, renting a shack in Khayelitsha, while my family lives in rural areas. They cannot afford to send me any money because they also rely on my grandmother's pension. This is why I work at a restaurant as a waitress over weekends, and I would send money home for food. (Nomsa)

Role of the Family during the Application and Admission Process

The parents who never attended university find it very difficult to provide informed advice and guidance to their children who are going to be first-year university students. This was echoed by students in the focus group discussions:

No one knows anything about university at home. I took the courses that still had available spaces when I arrived at the university in January after knowing that I passed Grade 12. (Zikwe)

The guidance teacher at high school assisted us in completing the university application forms. (Sam)

In choosing a career, some students counted on the resources of people outside their family. This was shown by the following students:

When I started grade 10, my neighbor's son, who was at university, advised me to do pure maths and not maths literacy so that I will be admitted into engineering. This was great advice because some of my classmates in high school who did not take maths were not accepted in engineering. (Zola)

Some students took the initiative to find out about the courses they wanted to take at university:

I went to the university's open day to learn more about the courses offered at the university. (Thina)

I looked through the internet to find out about the Biomedical Technology course and the marks needed to be able to be accepted in the course. (Chad)

I went to the city library and asked the librarian to help me search for information about Food Technology. (Seth)

Although some parents never attended university, they invest time and resources in the education of the children. This is confirmed by this student:

My mother has never attended university. She wanted me to go to university, and she has even saved some money for me by joining a stokvel. The money was not a lot to cover all my fees, but I could pay for my registration at the university. (Zikwe)

Discussion

Several factors, such as socioeconomic backgrounds, prior schooling conditions, and psychological or emotional states, account for the challenges which first-generation students from disadvantaged backgrounds experience in the university (Kapp et al. 2014; Devlin 2013; Mkonto 2018). Accessing the university is just the first obstacle for first-generation students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Bell and Santamaría 2018; Mkonto 2018). A study conducted by O'Shea (2016) reveals how starting university evokes fear and doubt for new students as they acculturate into a new and rather unfamiliar environment. Given these diverse challenges that are faced by first-generation students from disadvantaged backgrounds, significant family support at home for these students is greatly needed. Kapp et al. (2014) attest to community and family contexts that facilitate students' access to university. Research conducted by Pather and Chetty (2015), Van Zyl, Gravett, and De Bruin (2012), and Norodien-Fataar (2016) recognize

the diverse family backgrounds that first-year students come from. Yosso (2005) contends that the majority of students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds present notable resilience. In the South African context, first-generation students are disadvantaged with regard to the basic understanding of the university because a large number of the previously disadvantaged population, who are now parents to the first-year students entering university, did not have access to the university during apartheid.

Highest Qualification in the Family

Parents' highest qualifications determine students' first-generation status. Students from families where parents have low levels of education and did not attend university tend to be deprived of parental support and encouragement in their studies (Fike and Fike 2008; Pascarella et al. 2004). These students experience more challenges in being prepared for and adapting to the university environment and tend to lack adequate family support (Pascarella et al. 2004). Students from a family background where no one attended university seem to possess low levels of the kinds of experiences that are privileged in the university. Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) attest to the fact that uneducated parents are not engaged in their children's studies due to their lack of university experience. Despite this, these parents place high value and invest resources in their children's education. In South Africa, students have to pay for education, and parents tend to be responsible for the payment of university fees. Families tend to make big sacrifices so that their children can access university; some parents would work two or three jobs and take out loans, while others would sell their livestock to ensure that their children go to university (Mdepa and Tshiwula 2012). The families' expectations are that when the student finishes studying at university, they will find a job and contribute to the family income and help the family derail the cycle of poverty (Mdepa and Tshiwula 2012).

Studies show that some parents wanted to get an education but, due to a variety of factors, could not, and they have now realized the value of education with regard to having a better life and the possibility of being paid a steady income; they, therefore, invest in the education of the children (Gofen 2009). The parents who do not possess university experience can still provide encouragement and financial and emotional support (Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco 2005). Zikwe's mother in this study places a high value on education, with the belief that Zikwe could become a role model for their younger siblings, thereby instilling family values which Gofen (2009) refers to as family capital. In this case, the parents' efforts inform intergenerational change that would benefit the family in the long run. Gofen (2009) recognizes family capital as being created by non-material resources that include familial habits, priorities, belief systems, and values.

Family Support

The majority of students in this study come from disadvantaged backgrounds that have low parental engagements in their studies because the parents lack the relevant university capital. McGhie (2017) attested that first-year students from disadvantaged backgrounds receive emotional and moral support from their families but not academic and financial support; therefore, they enter university with an inadequate university experience that would facilitate a smooth transition into the university. Because of the parents' lack of relevant university capital, the students from such families are therefore compelled to rely on people outside their family and on their intuition—as was the case with Zola and Thina. Van Zyl (2016) attested to the importance of resources and reiterated that students whose parents are their main basis of financial support experience less anxiety and focus more on their studies than students who do not receive parental financial support. In this study, Jerome's father provided support (financial and emotional) which greatly assist Jerome in taking away stress regarding finances that most students from disadvantaged backgrounds experience.

Thabo's father has no desire for his child to attend university. For Thabo's father, money that the student can generate for the family now is more important than a university qualification, which could provide long-term security. This shows that Thabo's father is only concerned about satisfying immediate needs and does not see the long-term benefits of education. However, Thabo persists at university despite his father not providing financial and emotional support. Thabo could not get National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) as he applied very late, and to survive at the university, he worked on people's gardens to get money. NSFAS is a loan in which 40 percent can be converted into a bursary when a student passes all the courses each year. However, the loan does not cover living expenses, and students themselves have to cover these expenses through part-time employment or their families. Thabo saved some of his money to pay for registration at the beginning of the following year. Lack of family support did not deter Thabo from pursuing their studies. A study conducted by Van Zyl, Gravett, and De Bruin (2012) confirmed that the majority of students at university are anxious about finances, food, and accommodation during the university term. The anxiety tends to remove students' efforts from campus and the academic requirements of being a student.

Nomsa showed some resilience and belief in her abilities to achieve her dream. She is not discouraged by her family's inability to send her money. Instead, she finds ways to survive. As much as a lack of money was a disadvantage for Nomsa, she did not let it stand in her way with regard to her studies. Yee (2016) study found that first-generation students tend to rely on themselves. The money Nomsa earned from the restaurant was not enough to pay for her university; it was only to buy toiletries and basic foodstuff for her to survive. She then applied and received NSFAS for the payment of fees. NSFAS is means-tested, and Nomsa was classified as financially poor and, therefore, qualified for NSFAS funding; however, since NSFAS does not fund living expenses, she had to supplement it by working at the restaurant. Nomsa would also send money home when she received tips at the restaurant. Kapp et al. (2014) revealed how students from disadvantaged backgrounds are overburdened with the weight they carry in negotiating their way through the home and university. This is the case with Nomsa, who determinedly put herself as an agent. As a result, Nomsa became resilient, motivated, and extremely tactical, making adult resolutions about her life and taking care of her family. Students' journeys through university have often been marred by a substantial agency, which involves making mature decisions at a young age (Pym and Kapp 2013). Some students developed coping mechanisms by finding a middle ground between family and university conditions and have often worked single-handedly to realize their outcomes (Pym and Kapp 2013), which Nomsa is evidence thereof. Nomsa exhibits a sense of resilience that seems to be her motivation for staying in the university despite the challenges of insignificant parental support.

Family Role during the Application and Admission Process

Some first-generation first-year students often struggle in choosing a course to study since they lack adequate information or guidance from a more experienced person (Lubben et al. 2010). Students from disadvantaged backgrounds experience challenges in choosing courses at university because their families could not provide appropriate guidance (McGhie 2017). Due to a lack of adequate information about the university from the family, several students chose courses that had available space at the time. This was a recipe for disaster. Voigt (2007) attested that a lack of information about the university is related to academic failure.

Zola obtained advice from a neighbor on how to maximize his chances of being accepted in a particular course. In the absence of family support, the student utilized the resources within their environment. Several students in this study mentioned that teachers (especially guidance teachers) at their schools assisted them with the university application process. This is an indication that the teachers do whatever is within their means to support students.

Some students took the initiative to obtain information about the courses they wanted to do at university by attending university open days, searching on the internet, and going to the library to get information. Contrary to the study by Lubben et al. (2010), which found that the participants whose parents were not involved in their children's decisions to apply to university struggled to cope at university, students that took the initiative to find information about their courses and sought assistance from people outside their families before entering university are less likely to struggle at university. They could use the same drive to ask for assistance or use their initiatives to cope at the university.

An interesting finding in this study was the social cohesion formed between the group of students because they know each other's struggles, opportunities, strengths, and weaknesses and learned to accept and support one another. Collegiality and friendship developed among the students. They looked out for each other; shared resources and information about their courses, such as where to buy affordable books and how to apply for funding for their studies; and even advised those who were struggling with their studies and personal issues to go to the relevant support services at the university.

Conclusion

This study revealed how students exercise significant personal resources and resilience when transitioning into university. The students in this study made mature decisions at a very early age—all in the name of a better future for themselves and their families, even having to go against their families' wishes. On the financial front, the students found ways to finance their education and living expenses. Students' families in this study either provided financial support, emotional support, or no support at all, and students ended up taking ownership of their lives and hustled through university.

The findings of this study highlighted resilience and agency that first-generation students from disadvantaged backgrounds possess. Although these students' families could not prepare them for university, they are determined and possess a high level of purpose and drive. The students have shown a high level of resilience and imagination for their future selves.

REFERENCES

- Bell, Amani, and Lorri J. Santamaria, eds. 2018. *Understanding Experiences of First Generation University Students: Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Methodologies*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Boughey, Chrissie. 2007. "Educational Development in South Africa: From Social Reproduction to Capitalist Expansion?" *Higher Education Policy* 20:5–18. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.hep.8300140>.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- . 1986. "The Forms of Capital." In *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by John G. Richardson, 241–258. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre, and Jean-Claude Passeron. 1990. *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, vol. 4. Beverley Hills: Sage.
- Bozalek, Vivienne, and Chrissie Boughey. 2012. "(Mis) Framing Higher Education in South Africa." *Social Policy & Administration* 46 (6): 688–703. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9515.2012.00863.x>.
- Cloete, Nico. 2014. "The South African Higher Education System: Performance and Policy." *Studies in Higher Education* 39 (8): 1355–1368. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2014.949533>.
- CHE (Council on Higher Education). 2013. *Vital Stats 2011. Public Higher Education 2011*. Pretoria, SA: Council on Higher Education.

- Dennis, Jessica M., Jean S. Phinney, and Lizette Ivy Chuateco. 2005. "The Role of Motivation, Parental Support, and Peer Support in the Academic Success of Ethnic Minority First-Generation College Students." *Journal of College Student Development* 46 (3): 223–236. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2005.0023>.
- Devlin, Marcia. 2013. "Bridging Socio-Cultural Incongruity: Conceptualising the Success of Students from Low Socio-Economic Status Backgrounds in Australian Higher Education." *Studies in Higher Education* 38 (6): 939–949. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.613991>.
- Dilshad, Rana M., and Muhammad I. Latif. 2013. "Focus Group Interview as a Tool for Qualitative Research: An Analysis." *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences* 33 (1): 191–198.
- Dumais, Susan A., and Aaryn Ward. 2010. "Cultural Capital and First-Generation College Success." *Poetics* 38 (3): 245–265. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2009.11.011>.
- Fike, David S., and Renea Fike. 2008. "Predictors of First-Year Student Retention in the Community College." *Community College Review* 36 (2): 68–88. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0091552108320222>.
- Gale, Trevor. 2015. "Widening and Expanding Participation in Australian Higher Education: In the Absence of Sociological Imagination." *Australian Educational Researcher* 42 (2): 257–271. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-014-0167-7>.
- Gofen, Anat. 2009. "Family Capital: How First-Generation Higher Education Students Break the Intergenerational Cycle." *Family Relations* 58 (1): 104–120. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2008.00538.x>.
- Graven, Mellony Holm. 2013. "Poverty, Inequality, and Mathematics Performance: The Case of South Africa's Post-Apartheid Context." *ZDM Mathematics Education* 46 (7): 1039–1049. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11858-013-0566-7>.
- Kapp, Rochelle, Tracy S. Craig, Robert Prince, Elmi Badenhorst, Viki Janse van Rensburg, June Pym, Bongzi Bangeni, Kate le Roux, and Ermien van Pletzen. 2014. "Successful Students' Negotiation of Township Schooling in Contemporary South Africa." *Perspectives in Education* 32 (3): 50–61. <https://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/pie/article/view/1871>.
- Kim, Eunhee, Fred B. Newton, Ronald G. Downey, and Stephen L. Benton. 2010. "Personal Factors Impacting College Student Success: Constructing College Learning Effectiveness Inventory (CLEI)." *College Student Journal* 44 (1): 112–126. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ917205>.
- Letseka, Moeketsi, and Simeon Maile. 2008. "High University Drop-out Rates: A Threat to South Africa's Future." *Human Sciences Research Council*. <http://www.docs.hsrf.ac.za/uploads/pageContent/1088/Dropout%20rates.pdf>.
- Lubben, Fred, Bette Davidowitz, Andy Buffler, Saalih Allie, and Ian Scott. 2010. "Factors Influencing Access Students' Persistence in an Undergraduate Science Programme: A South African Case Study." *International Journal of Educational Development* 30 (4): 351–358. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2009.11.009>.
- Manzoni, Anna. 2018. "Parental Support and Youth Occupational Attainment: Help or Hindrance?" *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 47 (8): 1580–1594. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-018-0856-z>.
- McGhie, Venicia. 2017. "Entering University Studies: Identifying Enabling Factors for a Successful Transition from School to University." *Higher Education* 73 (3): 407–422. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-016-0100-2>.
- McMillan, Wendy. 2014. "They Have Different Information about What Is Going On: Emotion in the Transition to University." *Higher Education Research & Development* 33 (6): 1123–1135. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2014.911250>.
- Mdepa, Wandisile, and Lullu Tshiwula. 2012. "Student Diversity in South African Higher Education." *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning* 13 (1): 19–33. <https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.13.S.19>.

- Milem, Jeffrey F., and Joseph B. Berger. 1997. "A Modified Model of College Student Persistence: Exploring the Relationship between Astin's Theory of Involvement and Tinto's Theory of Student Departure." *Journal of College Student Development* 38 (4): 387–400. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/32438027.pdf>.
- Mkonto, Nosisana. 2018. "Monitoring Student (Dis)engagement: Retention Officers' Experiences at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology." *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* 6 (1): 65–76. <https://doi.org/10.24085/jsaa.v6i1.3066>.
- Norodien-Fataar, Najwa. 2016. "The Pre-University Pathways of Disadvantaged Students for Gaining Entry to University Study." *Education as Change* 20 (1): 85–103. <https://doi.org/10.17159/1947-9417/2016/568>.
- Ogbonnaya, Ugorji Iheanachor, and Francis K. Awuah. 2019. "Quintile Ranking of Schools in South Africa and Learners' Achievement in Probability." *Statistics Education Research Journal* 18 (1): 106–119. <http://hdl.handle.net/2263/72837>.
- O'Shea, Sarah. 2016. "Avoiding the Manufacture of 'Sameness': First-in-Family Students, Cultural Capital, and the Higher Education Environment." *Higher Education* 72 (1): 59–78. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-015-9938-y>.
- Ovink, Sarah M., and Brian D. Veazey. 2011. "More than 'Getting us Through': A Case Study in Cultural Capital Enrichment of Underrepresented Minority Undergraduates." *Research in Higher Education* 52 (4): 370–394. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-010-9198-8>.
- Pascarella, Ernest T., Christopher T. Pierson, Gregory C. Wolniak, and Patrick T. Terenzini. 2004. "First-Generation College Students: Additional Evidence on College Experiences and Outcomes." *Journal of Higher Education* 75 (3): 249–284. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jhe.2004.0016>.
- Pather, Subethra, and Rajendra Chetty. 2015. "The Habitus and Social Capital of First-Year Students: A Case Study." *Alternation Special Edition* 17:54–76. <http://digitalknowledge.cput.ac.za/handle/11189/4574>.
- Pather, Subethra, Najwa Norodien-Fataar, Xena Cupido, and Nosisana Mkonto. 2017. "First-Year Students' Experience of Access and Engagement at a University of Technology." *Journal of Education* 69:161–184. <http://hdl.handle.net/10566/3895>.
- Pym, June, and Rochelle Kapp. 2013. "Harnessing Agency: Towards a Learning Model for Undergraduate Students." *Studies in Higher Education* 38 (2): 272–284. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.582096>.
- Rabiee, Fatemeh. 2004. "Focus-Group Interview and Data Analysis." *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society* 63 (4): 655–660. <https://doi.org/10.1079/PNS2004399>.
- Smit, Renee. 2012. "Towards a Clearer Understanding of Student Disadvantage in Higher Education: Problematising Deficit Thinking." *Higher Education Research & Development* 31 (3): 369–380. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2011.634383>.
- Spaull, Nic. 2015. "Schooling in South Africa: How Low-Quality Education Becomes a Poverty Trap." *South African Child Gauge* 12:34–41. http://ci.org.za/depts/ci/pubs/pdf/general/gauge2015/Child_Gauge_2015-Schooling.pdf.
- Spiegler, Thomas, and Antje Bednarek. 2013. "First-Generation Students: What We Ask, What We Know and What It Means: An International Review of the State of Research." *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 23 (4): 318–337. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2013.815441>.
- Tinto, Vincent. 1975. "Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research." *Review of Educational Research* 45 (1): 89–125. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543045001089>.
- . 1993. *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*, 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Van Zyl, André. 2016. "The Contours of Inequality: The Links between Socio-Economic Status of Students and Other Variables at the University of Johannesburg." *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* 4 (1): 1–16. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1127375.pdf>.
- Van Zyl, André, Sarah Gravett, and Gideon De Bruin. 2012. "To What Extent Do Pre-Entry Attributes Predict First-Year Student Academic Performance in the South African Context?" *South African Journal of Higher Education* 26 (5): 1095–1111. <https://doi.org/10.20853/26-5-210>.
- Voigt, Kristin. 2007. "Individual Choice and Unequal Participation in Higher Education." *Theory and Research in Education* 5 (1): 87–112. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878507073617>.
- Yee, April. 2016. "The Unwritten Rules of Engagement: Social Class Differences in Undergraduates' Academic Strategies." *Journal of Higher Education* 87 (6): 831–858. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2016.11780889>.
- Yosso, Tara J. 2005. "Whose Culture has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth." *Race Ethnicity and Education* 8 (1): 69–91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006>.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Nosisana Mkonto: Department Head: Student Learning Unit, Coordinator: First Year Experience (FYE) Project, Fundani Centre for Higher Education Development, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Cape Town, South Africa

The International Journal of Learning in Higher

Education is one of ten thematically focused journals in the collection of journals that support The Learner Research Network—its journals, book series, conference, and online community.

The journal offers studies of learning at college and university levels, including teacher education.

As well as articles of a traditional scholarly type, this journal invites presentations of practice—including documentation of higher education practices and exegeses of the effects of those practices.

The International Journal of Learning in Higher Education is a peer-reviewed, scholarly journal.