Understanding the experiences of educationally disadvantaged students in higher education.

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Abstract

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Throughout the world educationally disadvantaged students gain access to higher education but struggle to succeed. This study reports on a narrative ethnographic study of the experiences of seven such students at a university in South Africa. Data was collected through interviews while journals and social media were used as additional sources. Data analysis was done from an ecosystemic perspective and revealed that the students faced academic, financial, linguistic, social and administrative system challenges which led to very high stress levels. They struggled to become part of the academic practice and responded by functioning on the periphery of the university system.
Presentation

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Introduction

The term ‘student experience’ refers not only to the academic aspects of teaching, learning and curriculum. It also includes student lifestyle and extracurricular activities, academic advice, support and mentoring, and work experiences (Harvey 2013). The undergraduate student experience is widely being researched as researchers realise that the student experience is linked to a range of important outcomes. These outcomes include student engagement, satisfaction, quality of education, growth in knowledge and personal development, academic success and persistence, retention and employment (Benckendorff Ruhanen & Scott 2009; Dey & Hurtado 1995; Terenzini & Reason 2005). Despite all this research and efforts in higher education (HE) to improve the student experience little improvement has been noted in graduation rates, especially for historically underrepresented, low-income, and first-generation students (Rollnick 2010; Terenzini & Reason 2005). The question therefore remains, “what happens during the undergraduate years?” In this investigation we adopted Bronfenbrenner’s (1993) ecosystemic perspective to help us answer the question.

Bronfenbrenner’s (1993) ecological theory takes into consideration the background and history of a person as well as his/her personal characteristics. The model acknowledges the environment as well as societal systems a person functions within and accounts for the reciprocal interactions between the person and his/her environment (Bronfenbrenner 2005). The student experience is shaped by regular mutual interaction with people, objects and symbols within his/her environment over extended periods of time. This model therefore provides a suitable framework within which student experiences can be analysed.

Bronfenbrenner’s (1993, p.10) ecological model focuses on four main elements namely person, process, context and time (PPCT). The model assumes that “development is an evolving function of person-environment interaction” and that “interaction must take place in the immediate, face-to-face setting in which the person exists.” At the heart of the model is the student, the person, whose actions and choices are determined by his/her developmentally instigative characteristics which determine his/her choices. The close, face-to-face, sustained interactions are proximal processes and influenced by the person elements of the student as well as the instigative elements of the ecological environment the student functions in.

These processes occur in the students’ ecological context which comprises of micro-, meso-, exo- and macrosystems. The microsystems are the closest system where the students interact, for example their classrooms or residences, while the mesosystems represent a set of microsystems that interact. The exosystems are systems that do not contain the student but still influence his development (Bronfenbrenner 1993). The macrosystem is a combination of ideological and institutional systems that shape a culture (Killian 2004). The time element is indicative of the sociohistorical time the student lives in as well as the specific time in his/her life (Bronfenbrenner 1993). Both the person elements of educationally disadvantaged students in this study and the instigative elements of the institutional environment in which they functioned had very specific characteristics.

Background to the problem

The need to increase accessibility to HE for disadvantaged, non-traditional or minority students has been recognised throughout the world. In South Africa, underpinned by the Constitution of the country, a strong drive exists to provide access to a majority of students who were previously excluded from higher education because of apartheid. Efforts in this regard are, however, not necessarily fruitful. Many previously disadvantaged schools still lack infrastructure and resources to produce students sufficiently prepared for HE (Essack and Quale 2007; Taylor Fleisch and Shindler 2007), and students from these schools remain educationally disadvantaged. Educationally disadvantaged is defined as “the net effect of those
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characteristics of a student’s environment” – socio-economic, educational, and personal – “that provides less than normal exposure to factors that motivate and facilitate educational growth” (Novick 1978, p. 42). Even though some of these students eventually gain access to higher education, they struggle to succeed, thus making access with success a priority in South African HE student experience investigations. The purpose of this study was therefore to investigate the challenges educationally disadvantaged students face during their undergraduate years and how they function at a historically advantaged ‘white’ university (HWU) in South Africa. Although this study was conducted in a very specific South African context, research indicates that internationally non-traditional or minority students experience similar challenges. Understanding these students’ experiences may highlight adjustments needed at institutional level internationally in order to improve their success rate in HE.

Methodology

Research approach
The study was a narrative ethnography with the focus on the experiences of seven educationally disadvantaged students at a HWU. Narrative ethnography incorporates social patterns and contexts while focusing on the narrative process to produce socially situated narratives (Gubrium and Holstein 2008). The combination of narrative analysis and ethnography allowed for the contextualising of student experiences while describing their social contexts. The students (four females and three males), were purposively selected to represent a broad range of perspectives on experiences on the campus (Polkinghorne 2005) and included first years and senior students, colours and black students of different languages, ages and cultures.

Data collection procedures
Individual unstructured interviews with students were conducted by the first author over a four month period. The students also kept reflective journals which enriched the interview data (Hayman Wilkes & Jackson 2012). The journals enabled triangulation in terms of clarification, reinterpretation and reshaping of the data (Janesick 1998). During the research process the students started communicating with the first author via Facebook and text messages which provided quick updates on the students’ day-to-day experiences.

Data analysis
Narratives about the students’ experiences on campus were compiled and analysed within the framework of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model. The analysis of the data consisted of two parts. The first part was analysis of students’ stories. The transcribed interviews were uploaded into ATLAS.ti, which is Computer Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), and were coded according to the topics addressed during the interviews. Relevant sections of the interviews were identified to produce narratives which could explicate the students’ experiences on campus. Each completed narrative was read by the corresponding participant to ensure that it was a valid representation of his/her experiences (Connelly & Candinin 1990). Recurring themes were identified in the narratives, and the second part of the analysis entailed a thematic analysis. By identifying themes in the narratives meanings behind the stories, justification of choices and reasons for actions emerged (Bold 2012). The two parts did not occur linearly but rather cyclically.

Results

The first section of the results presents the students’ ecology at the HWU which explicates the recurring themes discussed in the second section. Excerpts from the students’ narratives are used to illustrate the person, process, context and time (PPCT) elements of Bronfenbrenner’s model.

The ecology of the students
Person
Key elements in the ‘person’ component included exposure to different races and racial group status, background and socio-economic status (SES), being a first-generation student, language proficiency and
academic preparedness. These elements shaped the students’ interactions with other people, as well as physical and social environments.

Owing to the South African apartheid history, race remains a critical issue in the South African society and still affects social relations (Thaver 2006). Since 65.5% of the total student population at this university was white the participants in the study were part of minority groups:

“I never knew that it was possible to be the only black person. Like we were 93 if I’m not mistaken and I was the only black person.” (Male, third year)

The socio-economic status of the students was equally challenging as their parents were either unemployed or sole breadwinners:

“There were days when we would go to bed without food.” (Female, fifth year)

The students perceived themselves as being less well-prepared for HE than other students due to their schooling and had to communicate in their second or third language:

“Where I grew up you worry this kind of kids are smarter than us, because they come from expensive schools.” (Male, first year)

“It wasn’t my second language, it was my third language; actually my fourth language, so, yeah.” (Female, fifth year)

These key person elements shaped the students’ experiences on campus, determining whether they would engage in reciprocal interpersonal interactions and persist in progressively complex activities in the campus microsystems.

Process
The students entered the university feeling inferior and underprepared. The campus microsystems did not encourage increasingly complex interactions between the students and their peer groups. In the academic microsystems they felt uncertain about themselves and were afraid of being humiliated:

“I think educational wise, maybe being afraid to make a comment or asking a question or something like that.” (Female, first year)

They experienced the academic contexts as inhibiting and although they were struggling academically, they chose to function on their own instead of seeking assistance from mentors, lecturers or peers:

“No, academically I just did it in my room; all by myself, all the time. That’s what I did. I didn’t really have a study group.” (Male, third year)

The language barrier limited some students’ interactions in the academic microsystems and negatively influenced their student experiences:

“I just hate the language policy here, seriously! I get that they’re Afrikaans-speaking but would it really hurt to at least put the slides in both languages. I find Microbiology very interesting but the lecturer just makes me dislikes it.” (Female, third year)

The students in institutional residences did not participate in residence activities and brushed the fact aside by saying that they “were not socially inclined” or “did not care” about any of “it”. Two students lived in private accommodation they purposefully chose. Their residential microsystems formed ecological niches favourable for interactions of their choice and led to more positive experiences:
“It’s private and I can cook my own food. ... In res it’s noisy and people are in and out of your room and I don’t like that kind of stuff.” (Female, first year)

The interactions in the social microsystems were as limited as those in the academic context:

People will speak to you in class today, then when he sees you on campus, he simply ignores you.” (Female, first year)

The pattern of activities and interpersonal relations in the above-mentioned face-to-face settings were mostly unfavourable experiences, and did not result in ecological niches for the students. Few strong, positive connections between the on-campus microsystems existed to offset the negative interactions and as a result the students felt marginalised and disengaged from university activities. Owing to these negative interactions the students experienced high stress levels:

“Sometimes it feels like I get some kind of attack and then it goes away and comes back again. I usually am very stressed ...” (Female, second year)

Context
The micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems of the educationally disadvantaged students’ environments provided the settings for their student experiences.

Microsystems
Academic microsystems: Classrooms/Laboratories
In the academic microsystems, the students formed part of a diverse group of students of different races and languages, who had attended schools ranging from privileged private and former white-only schools to township schools. The socio-economic circumstances of their peer group varied from affluent to poor. Educationally disadvantaged students were in the minority:

“Sometimes when I looked around me I would be the only black person and then I felt like an outsider.” (Male, third year)

“I was thinking … I’m attending the same classes as advantaged students and that was a challenge for me.” (Female, fifth year)

Residential microsystems: Institutional residences/Private room or house
The university residences in which five of the students resided had unique traditions and practices that were unfamiliar and strange to them. During the orientation period, they had to participate in practices such as sokkies (informal dances) and skakels (socials) which left them feeling alienated. In their respective residences, these five students were part of a peer group of whom many were top achievers from former white-only schools, leaders in their schools and/or exceptional sport people. The level of inequality between the students was evident:

“A lot of the kids were head girls, or they excelled in sport or class. So many of them get into that res with strong personalities.” (Female, first year)

The residential microsystems of the two students who resided in private accommodation comprised small groups of black and/or coloured students. The houses provided privacy and there were no expectations of them being “part” of a house culture. The latter two students responded selectively, a developmentally instigative characteristic, by deliberately choosing not to enter an institutional residence but rather a residential microsystem similar to what they were used to in their communities.

Social microsystems: Peer groups/Sports field/Co-curricular activities
The students’ perceptions about the “white, Afrikaans university” shaped their interactions in the social microsystems:
“You already know you’re the minority, but it’s like they rub it in your face kind of thing. So, for that reason I don’t feel comfortable ...” (Female, fifth year)

The physical, social and symbolic features of the students’ campus microsystems inhibited their interpersonal interactions which in turn shaped their campus mesosystems. Instead of engaging in progressively more complex activities and tasks the students chose to disengage and function on the periphery of these microsystems.

Mesosystem
Mesosystems are all about being in relationships in ever-expanding circles described by some as relationships within the local community (Donald Lazarus and Lolwana 2007; Swick & Williams 2006). The additive and interactive effects in the students’ campus mesosystems reinforced their perceptions of being “different” and confirmed their choices of non-participation.

Exosystem
The social and political contexts in the students’ exosystems, namely the communities they come from, the workplaces of their families, and university policies, influenced their student experiences.

The communities
The students came from communities that are very different to the university community. Although the town where the university is situated has become deracialised and has amalgamated with historically black and coloured nodes since 1994 (Swilling Sebitosi and Loots 2012), the town centre is still mainly white and racism is still evident. The students previously lived amongst people of their own race and were not as often exposed to white people as they were at the university. Most of the students’ friends had different aspirations than they did and few entered HE:

“I hate that about my culture. People drop out at grade seven, grade nine, grade ten. Like of my friends, only three of us have passed matric; out of like more than 20 guys, I think. Yeah, they just dropped out along the way and some of them failed matric!” (Male, fourth year)

Often the communities were not supportive of those who took the road less travelled:

“When you see that someone else is doing well in the community, instead of supporting or asking for advice, we always want to bring that person down.” (Female, fifth year)

Although the students were no longer residing in these communities permanently, they were still influenced by the social and political forces of these communities.

The families’ workplaces
The workplaces of the students’ families were influenced by the economic situation in SA, which in turn influenced the students’ decisions and choices. Many parents were unemployed, or they worked occasionally or were dependent on pension money and were often supported by one family member:

“My brother usually sends me money at the end of each month for toiletries and other small stuff. It’s usually R300. When I need clothes, I will maybe sacrifice R200 to buy something I want to wear. That means I will be broke for the whole month. I guess I’m used to it now.” (Female, third year)

University policies and initiatives
Universities in SA attempt to redress the exclusionary practices and injustices of the apartheid past (Essack and Quale 2007) and have policies and initiatives in place to provide access and residence, as well as academic, financial, and language support to educationally disadvantaged students (Stellenbosch University 2013). Policies also focus on the transformation of an institutional culture that welcomes “a diversity of
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Macrosystem
The South African society forms the macrosystem of educationally disadvantaged students in SA and includes the political philosophy, demographics, the economic environment, the health system and the education system.

The political philosophy
The 1994 national elections ended formal apartheid in SA. At that time, the age of participants in this study ranged from two to six years old. Although they were not born into a free and democratic South Africa, they grew up in a society where reform and equal rights were foregrounded. However, the legacy of apartheid was profound and influenced them in every system in which they functioned.

Demographics
Four of the students formed part of the 79.2% of black people in SA, two were part of the 8.9% of coloured people, and one student was part of the 3% of Indian people. Yet, on campus they were in the minority.

The economic environment
As a result of the unequal post-apartheid society in SA many black and coloured people still struggle financially or are unemployed. The students’ parents were also influenced by this reality.

The health system
The poor health system in SA affects the students who are dependent on public health facilities. One student, who had to visit a public hospital once a month due to an eye virus, described his experience with the public health system:

“Then you get there at seven and the whole world is there before you. And then you have to wait. It’s a very long wait. It’s not something you wish upon anyone. Waiting ... it’s just, you just sit there ... Only at four o’ clock you are done. When I get home, I’m exhausted, I just sleep!” (Male, first year)

The education system
The current education system is failing the majority of South African youth, most of whom cannot read, write or compute at grade-appropriate levels. Large proportions of the youth are functionally illiterate and innumerate (Spaull 2013). Coming from disadvantaged educational backgrounds was one of the major concerns of the students:

“I am conscious that I know less because of my educational background.” (Female, first year)

The unique South African macrosystem confirmed the students’ perceptions of being outsiders and their choices of functioning on the periphery of the university systems.

Time
Chronosystems
Time-related events shaped the students’ experiences. One student’s sister died during the orientation period in her (the student’s) first year:

“I came back the day before the classes started. It was difficult. It was really, really difficult for me. I was just so sad and heartbroken most of the time. ... I couldn’t cope and was constantly in my room crying or sleeping, ...” (Female, third year)

The reciprocal and dynamic processes between the students and the campus environment revealed the
challenges they faced and recurring themes in their experiences were evident.

Themes
Five recurring themes that related to the challenges the students experienced were identified in the narratives namely academic, financial, social and linguistic and system challenges.

Academic challenges
Virtually all the seven students experienced the academic workload as overwhelming and struggled to cope with the pressure as indicated by their descriptions of their academic experiences as: ‘hectic’, ‘unsure’, ‘challenging’, ‘stressful’, ‘frustration’, ‘chaos’ and ‘quitting’. These descriptions confirm what is found in literature about the academic experiences of educationally disadvantaged students (Petersen Louw & Dumont 2009). They feel underprepared and struggle with the academic workload. Despite these emotions, the students maintained that they had everything under control and were shocked when they failed.

Financial challenges
The reality of being financially constrained limited the students’ interactions and directed the way they functioned on campus.

Social challenges
The social context at the HWU is still directed by the norms and values of the dominant culture and as a result institutional and cultural racism exist (Steyn & Kamper 2011). The absence of associational life emphasised the degree of misfit the students experienced. The students’ perceptions of this degree of misfit influenced their functioning on campus.

Linguistic challenges
Lack of linguistic resources frustrated the students as they struggled academically to express themselves and to communicate with their peers and lecturers (Badenhorst & Kapp 2013; Steyn & Kamper 2011). These struggles led to limited interactions and consequently limited integration into the academic practice (Soudien 2008).

University systems
The students struggled to negotiate the administrative systems of the university and their experiences often intensified their perceptions of ‘not belonging’ to the HWU.

The challenges - academic, financial, social, linguistic, and university systems - the students faced on campus on a daily basis led to limited face-to-face interactions in the various on-campus contexts. Their experiences in these contexts repeated confirmed their perception of being ‘outsiders’ and contributed to intense emotional stress. In reaction to their perceptions, the students chose to disengage in the different contexts (Petersen et al. 2009). They did not participate in organised or impromptu activities on campus but rather “chilled” in their rooms, or “withdrew”.

Reflection on findings
The seven students in this study entered the University at a time in South Africa’s history that offered them ‘the-sky-is-the-limit’ opportunities in HE due to redress and transformation. However, their experiences portrayed different stories. The challenges they faced caused them to suffer high levels of stress and directed them to function on the periphery of university life. They were struggling to succeed in HE and three of the seven participants dropped out from the University in 2013 without graduating. Two of these students succeeded in re-entering the University in 2014 against all odds. These findings support research worldwide that has found that educationally disadvantaged students struggle to succeed in HE due to the many challenges they have to overcome (Badenhorst & Kapp 2013; Bryan & Simmons 2009; Jones Castellanos & Cole 2002; Petersen et al. 2009; Steyn & Kamper 2011).
Conclusions

The notion of student experience is comprehensive and includes the academic, psychological and social aspects of student life as well as support and monitoring of students. In understanding the experiences of educationally disadvantaged students at a predominantly white, Afrikaans speaking university, it is crucial to recognize that students in general belong to different ecological subsystems, which affect their student experiences (Porter Snelgart & Cartwright 2006). The cultural and physical contexts within which students are required to manage their academic demands influence their student experiences (Council on Higher Education 2010) and to understand these experiences implies understanding the systems and subsystems of each student and his/her interactions within these systems (Poch 2005). Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model succeeded in revealing why the students chose to disengage and function on the periphery of the university. The model however did not reveal which interventions would have supported the students effectively. The implications of the study are theoretical, substantive and practical.

On a theoretical level further research is needed to understand which types and levels of support and/or monitoring processes are necessary for these students to succeed. Theory or expansion of existing theory that could start to propose ways of filling the gaps in current approaches is needed. On a substantive level, a disjuncture became apparent between university policies and initiatives and the real-life experiences of the students and systemic changes in the academic, social and residential contexts are imperative. It seems that institutional culture at the HWU, like elsewhere in the world (Jones et al. 2002) has a tendency of changing slower than policy. Finally, on a practical level, the narratives of these students provided insight into their experiences and highlighted the need for the reconsideration of current practices around teaching and learning, language, admission, re-admission, financial support, tutoring and mentoring, and social life, particularly in residences.

This study portrays the experiences of seven students representing a minority group at a HWU. The context is quite different to the majority of HE sites in SA where the imbalance between races is not so extreme. Although the environments at these other sites are more engaging and inclusive, many educationally disadvantaged students still have marginalising experiences. The drive to increase the level of participation in HE throughout the world, especially for disadvantaged, non-traditional or minority students started as early as the Second World War (Ndlovu 2011; Rollnick 2010). Some of these students are successful but many struggle. Asserted efforts are needed to make these students part of the academic practice and to offer them fair opportunities to be successful.
References


Endnotes

1. Due to the apartheid legacy it remains important to use racial classifications. In this study ‘black’ refers to African black people.

2. Townships are defined as areas that were designated under apartheid legislation for exclusive occupation by people classified as black, coloured and Indian. Even though this is no longer regulated by legislation, these areas are still called townships (Lester Menule Karuri-Sebina & Kruger 2009).