Knowledge beyond colour lines

Towards repurposing
knowledge generation in
South African Higher Education

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STORIES FROM THE MARGINS

Working-class graduates' narrative accounts of completion in South African higher education

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Introduction

Post-apartheid South Africa entrusted higher education with its historical task: to break the cycle of poverty and redress the socio-economic apartheid legacy that has polarised South Africa into one of the most unequal nations in the world (RSA DPME, 2013; RSA NPC, 2011). In response, the democratic government established the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), a national loan and grant scheme to transform and widen participation for students from historically marginalised communities (RSA DPME, 2013). Over two decades, since the fall of apartheid, the composition of the university student population in South Africa has changed significantly with increased access of working-class students to higher education (Kapp & Bangeni, 2017).

Regrettably, the rise in access by NSFAS-funded working-class students has coincided with high dropout and low completion rates amongst such students. The 2013 report of the Department of Higher Education and Training's Ministerial Committee on the review of NSFAS revealed that by 2010:

- 67% of 656,000 NSFAS-funded students were no longer in higher education;
- 72% of this 67% dropped out without completing their studies; and
- only 28% graduated (RSA DPME, 2013).

More recent data in the South African Presidency's *Towards a 25 Year Review: 1994-2019* (RSA, 2019) suggest that the picture has become worse.

South Africa's *National Development Plan 2030* (RSA NPC, 2012), *the National Student Financial Aid Scheme Act* (RSA, 1999) and the *Green Paper for Post-School Education and Training of 2012* (RSA DHET, 2012) prioritise improving access and success for working-class students. Indeed, the level of student attrition calls for deeper understandings of these unequal patterns of educational attainment.

Due to the dominant deficit framing of working-class students in higher education, existing research has largely focussed on what such students lack and how to help them assimilate into higher education, with little regard for what they offer to aid transformation in higher

education (Crozier & Reay, 2011). Specifically, in much of Bordieuan work, the effect of working-class students' social and cultural origins is mostly theorised as a constraint to their overall higher education experience and outcomes. Working-class graduates are largely considered an exception to the dropout norm (Arbouin, 2018). These perceptions have, in turn, contributed to feelings of inadequacy and illegitimacy, leading such students to view their failure as inevitable (Mallman, 2017). Mallman (2017:325) adopts the legal term 'inherent vice' to describe a process in which individuals and institutions are disposed to viewing lower cultural capital levels in working-class students as an indication of their 'natural' inferiority, rather than as "disadvantages of inheritable, symbolic resources".

Secondly, not enough attention is paid to the voice from the working-class margins and the value it offers to efforts seeking to deepen our understanding of high dropout and low completion rates. The predominately reproductive outlook on working-class students has perpetuated a trend in higher education studies to treat working-class students as a group that has little to offer, obliged somehow to be supported, and 'cured' of the working-class attributes that hinder their educational experiences and odds of success (Mallman, 2017: Yosso, 2005).

Although they remain a minority (RSA DHET, 2018/19), working-class graduates' experiences remain an interesting and potentially transformative inquiry area (Mills, 2008). The relatively small body of work on successful working-class experiences in education by Yosso (2005), Crozier and Reay (2011), Mills (2008), Arbouin (2018) and others, draws our attention to the potentially resourceful and transformative side of working-class students in higher education. We contribute to such studies by analysing how working-class graduates narrate their completion experiences at different South African universities and show how such narrative accounts deepen our understanding of working-class student completion and non-completion in higher education.

The lack of a universally accepted definition of 'working-class' presents challenges for educational researchers.

The term commonly used in South Africa is "poor and working-class students", designating a student category based on annual household income (RSA DPME, 2013). Since December 2017, undergraduate students from households earning a combined annual income below R350,000 per annum (accounting for over 90% of South African households) are considered poor and working-class (StatsSA, 2019); with NSFAS funding their undergraduate studies at a public South African university.

This chapter reports on narrative accounts of five purposefully selected, NSFAS-funded, working-class graduates from what we have called 'Ivory Tower University', 'Merger University' and 'Rural University'. Ivory Tower University is an elite, well-endowed,

former whites-only English university located in Johannesburg's central business district. Merger University is a well-endowed former whites-only Afrikaans university that merged with a predominately black Technikon in post-apartheid South Africa, also located in Johannesburg. Rural University is a grossly under-resourced, former blacks-only university located in the rural Limpopo Province. Ivory Tower University is racially diverse but predominantly middle and upper class, with its top ten feeder schools located mainly in the Northern Johannesburg suburbs. Merger University follows a similar demographic profile with a slightly larger component of working-class students. Rural University is predominantly black and working-class, with over two-thirds of its student population coming from poor and working-class households (RSA DHET, 2018/19).

The five graduates involved in this study were:

- Thabang (27), in the final stages of his master's degree at Ivory Tower University, has completed his undergraduate degree in Psychology at the same university. Born in Alexandra township, Thabang was orphaned as a toddler and raised by his grandmother and a nearby orphanage.
- Rendani (24) graduated from Ivory Tower University with a BSc in Geography and Geology. With an absent father, Rendani was raised by her mother, elder sisters and grandmother. They lived on her mother's salary as a cleaner and her grandmother's old-age state pension.
- Lerato (24) graduated from Rural University with a BSc in Urban and Regional Planning. Lerato was born in a rural village in Limpopo. With his father absent, he was raised at his grandparents' house, where he and his stepsister lived.
- Ranzu (21) graduated from Rural University with a BSc in Environmental Sciences.
- Risuna (25) graduated from Merger University with a National Diploma in Mechanical Engineering. He currently works for Eskom, South Africa's national energy utility, as a coding technician.

Theoretical framework: Reproduction theory

Bourdieu's reproduction theory is particularly relevant to our study (Bourdieu, 1993; Naidoo, 2004) as it presents an alternative to theories of educational meritocracy (Li, 2018) in studying, analysing and explaining persistent social disparities in educational attainment. Bourdieu and Passeron (1979) draw our attention to the relationship between students' social origins and their educational experiences and outcomes. In Bourdieu's theory, capital refers to field-specific resources that, when possessed, determine one's membership, status and position in certain fields of power (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital exists in three different forms: objectified, embodied and institutionalised (Bourdieu, 1986). In its objectified form, cultural capital is represented in material possessions such as artworks, galleries, museums, laboratories, and scientific instruments present throughout one's upbringing. These material objects' mere presence at home is said to wield an educative effect on middle- and upper-class children. In its embodied form, cultural capital is integrated physically within our consciousness and physical features, and it is said to be

represented by our knowledge and awareness. Our embodied cultural capital influences our body language skills, memory, postures and lifestyles (Grenfell, 2012). Bourdieu further breaks down cultural capital into its institutionalised form. An example of institutionalised capital can be seen in the prestige conferred from one's possession of academic qualification from an elite institution of higher learning (Naidoo, 2004).

Bourdieu (1986:248) defined social capital as

the aggregate of the actual and potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a credential which entitles them to credit, in various senses of the word.

Belonging to elite social networks is also linked to improved educational attainment, occupational and social advance. Through the concept of symbolic capital, Bourdieu highlights the significance of social recognition, illustrating that the value attached to any form of capital depends largely on social recognition. Simply put, some things are more valuable than others because we recognise them as such (Bourdieu, 1986).

Contrary to the educational meritocracy theory, reproduction theory posits that the educational success of middle- and upper-class children rest on the complementary relationship between the wealth of elite cultural endowments (in all their manifestations) that they acquire from home at an early age and education systems' rigged and biased judgements. These judgements shun children from marginalised social classes who lack idealised and rewarded dominant cultural capital attributes (Moore, 2012; Naidoo, 2004). In this way, fairness is actively prevented as the working classes are disregarded and penalised for not possessing the same capitals and dispositions as the upper class (Polikoff, Lucido & Posselt, 2019). How and the extent to which disguised 'meritocratic' practices influence working-class students' completion and non-completion experiences in higher education is of paramount importance.

South Africa, with its mixture of success and failures, as reflected in the National Development Plan of 2012 (RSA NPC, 2012) and, more recently, the Presidency's *Towards a 25 Year Review: 1994-2019* (RSA, 2019), presents a particularly interesting context for reproduction theorists. Overall, we advance that, despite notable gaps, Bourdieu's theoretical framework offers a unique and helpful approach for understanding inequality of educational attainment in South Africa and, specifically, disparities within working-class students' completion and non-completion experiences at different higher education institutions.

Methodology

This study's main objective was to present participants' viewpoints whilst acknowledging our subjective positions as researchers. Souto-Manning (2014:177) posits that if "we are to engage in positive social change, we must start by listening to and analysing the everyday stories people tell". That is what we sought to achieve.

We embraced qualitative research methodology, given the suitability of the approach for those who seek to describe and illuminate key dimensions of participants' varied and shared experiences, beliefs and perspectives (Silverman, 2013). Although valuable insights can be drawn from quantitative studies, in this study, we chose to give voice and audience to narratives from the margins that often go unheard (Angu, 2018).

We adopted a narrative inquiry approach (Elliot, 2005; Silverman, 2013) to obtain in-depth and rich descriptions of participants' experiences and beliefs in relation to disparities in educational attainment patterns amongst financial-aid-funded, black working-class students at different South African universities. According to Elliot (2005), a narrative enquiry will enable the researcher to flesh out participants' micro-level lived experiences and events over time. In this way, a narrative enquiry approach becomes an ideal means by which we can study participants' stories, as told by them and in a manner that challenges traditional and positivist views of truth, reality and knowledge (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Thirdly, narrative inquiry enables a space for voices to be heard, voices often overlooked and unheard (Goodson & Sikes, 2001), thereby enabling the researcher to understand marginalised experiences through voices from the margins (Angu, 2018).

Clandinin (2006) lists key features of narrative inquiry that distinguish the approach from other qualitative methodologies:

- Firstly, the emphasis is placed more on the individual story than commonalities across interviews.
- Secondly, narratives illuminate temporal features or phases in participants' unique life stories.
- Thirdly, in narrative inquiry, the uniqueness of individual stories is celebrated, not downplayed.

Narrative analysis falls within the bounds of a narrative inquiry paradigm, and the researcher's report is, therefore, a story about storied experiences (Clandinin, 2006). This study's primary focus is not so much on recurrent themes across interviews but rather on specific insights in participants' narratives that elucidate and illuminate key dimensions of working-class students' completion experiences at different South African higher education institutions. To achieve this, we include illustrative excerpts from participants' interviews to foreground the depth and wealth of insights that emerge in their stories.

Without losing each story's significance, we organised graduates' narrative accounts according to three pre-determined phases in their journeys to and through higher education:

- origins and family background;
- their pathways en route to higher education; and
- their overall higher education experience.

This enabled us to highlight key dimensions of working-class students' journeys to and experiences of higher education across the three higher education institutions under study through their own eyes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Riessman, 2008).

We followed the Braun and Clarke (2006) guide to thematic analysis, including:

- reading and re-reading transcripts multiple times to familiarise oneself with the data;
- generating initial codes;
- collating the data and searching for themes;
- reviewing themes;
- defining and naming themes; and
- then producing a report.

Results and discussion

In this section, we present an analysis of the life stories of five working-class graduates who completed their undergraduate studies at three different South African universities: Thabang and Rendani from the well-resourced, elite and former whites-only Ivory Tower University; Lerato and Ranzu from the under-resourced, predominantly working-class and former blacks-only Rural University; and Risuna from the comprehensive Merger University. The graduates' life stories analysis sequentially followed key dimensions of participants' origin and family background, higher education pathways, experience and outcomes. Guided by the research questions, we selected narrative accounts in which participants' voices elucidate key dimensions of a working-class graduate's completion experiences at different South African universities. We looked for thematic patterns and relationships between and within participants' narrative accounts, with particular attention given to narratives that diverge from the established deficit framing of working-class students' higher education experiences and outcomes. We divide our analysis of the narrative accounts into temporal phases. We begin with experiences in the early formative phase and then move into the higher education pathways phase before concluding with experiences within higher education.

Formative phase

Social reproduction theorists place great importance on attributes of student's communities of origin and family background (for example, race, class, gender, language group, family

income, geographic location, parents educational and occupational status) in their quest to deepen our understanding of unequal patterns of educational experiences and attainment (Arbouin, 2018; Reay, 2017; Yosso, 2005). The theory holds that, based on their level of education, occupational and social status, elite parents and family backgrounds impart to their children (amongst other privileges) cultural resources such as dominant societal values, language skills, knowledge, attitudes, skills, abilities and dispositions, whose effective transmission leads to successful educational experiences and outcomes (Reay, 2004a). Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) identified this elite intergenerational parent-to-child transfer of family-based endowments and abilities as the primary means through which structured social inequalities are reproduced in educational experiences and outcomes.

This section, therefore, focusses on narrative accounts of their formative years. The following themes were revealed. First, participants' rural and township communities of origins are a microcosm of South Africa's broader socio-economic and spatial inequalities. Due to its apartheid past, South Africa remains segregated along class, gender, racial and spatial lines (StatsSA, 2019). Class and racial domination intersect as poor, and working-class students remain predominately black, while middle- and upper-class elites remain overwhelmingly white (StatsSA, 2019). The consequences of this segregated and exploitative society continue to reproduce one of the world's most unequal societies (Orthofer, 2016; RSA NPC, 2011; StatsSA, 2017). Despite pockets of a rising black middle class in urban areas, persistent racial disparities remain (StatsSA, 2019). For example, the township of Tembisa, where Risuna lived whilst studying at Merger University, is characterised by high population density and growth, high unemployment, an age profile skewed towards youth and low monthly incomes and levels of education. Risuna grew up alongside persistent socio-economic disparities as the township borders the opulence of northern Johannesburg suburbs. Despite these humble beginnings, participants in this study drew from an existing social and cultural capital portfolio to access and enable higher education success.

Second, participants' life stories reveal significantly weakened parental involvement in their upbringing and schooling experiences, a reality that has had an overall negative impact on their student identities and experience of journeys to and through higher education. None of the graduates in this study grew up with a complete set of parents. In all cases, their father was either absent or deceased. Thabang had experienced a particularly traumatic start to his life story when his mother was stabbed to death when he was one-and-a-half years old :

My story starts there in like a very traumatic way. It starts with me on my mom's back and I falling off after she was stabbed. My mother died when I was one year six months old, I don't know my father (Thabang, Graduate, Ivory Tower University).

To compensate for weakened parental involvement in their educational journeys, participants like Thabang built new social networks on campus while maintaining support from extended family members who took the role of stepping-stones.

Third, graduates' narratives illuminate the enabling role of a community's cultural wealth in working-class students' educational journeys. Despite experiencing traumatic and disrupted formative years, graduates' life stories shed light on the enabling role played by what Yosso (2005) referred to as 'community cultural wealth'. Yosso (2005) conceptualises the working class as communities endowed with community cultural wealth: "[Cultural] knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged". She advances that marginalised communities nurture cultural wealth through numerous forms of capital that enable their members to navigate seemingly unbearable conditions. These forms of capital include, but are not limited to, aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant capital.

With his father absent and his mother deceased, Thabang's journey to graduation was aided by his grandmother and a retired teacher (whom he refers to as his mother) who ran an orphanage in his village. Thabang's journey was aided by what Yosso (2005) called 'familial capital': a form of cultural wealth that challenges traditional understandings of a 'family', because it is cultivated by 'extended family' of significant others, including grandparents, uncles, aunts, priests, traditional leaders, and extends to the whole community. Similarly, Lerato, a graduate at Rural University, states early in his narrative that, "... where we stay and where we call home is my grandmother's house, where my mother's parents stay. So, almost all of us, my uncles, my aunts, we all stay in one house". Following disrupted formative years and family circumstances, all graduates were aided by such significant others. Participants' life stories not only support the view of working-class communities being endowed with community cultural wealth, as advanced by Yosso (2005) but further elucidate its transformative and enabling effect on their educational journeys.

Pathways to higher education

Beyond their formative years, participants' narrative accounts illuminated key dimensions of their pathways en route to higher education. We reconstructed this section of their narrative accounts into three categories:

- schooling experiences;
- higher education aspirations; and
- the higher education choice process.

Firstly, participants' narrative accounts of schooling experiences reveal realities characteristic of most public schools in South Africa: under-resourced, understaffed, crowded classrooms with inadequate infrastructure and mainly located in rural and township communities.

Secondly, all working-class graduates in this study were top achievers at under-resourced schools. Rendani was ranked second in the maths and science stream at school, earning several top achievers' certificates. Thabang excelled so much that he "was one of the kids in class that was very loved by teachers". Ranzu excelled to the extent that she was made to skip Grade 9. It is these early academic achievements that enabled them to meet universities' steep and ever-rising admission requirements.

In all five cases, graduates identified resourceful and improvising teachers that went beyond the call of duty to help them navigate under-resourced schooling experiences. When they encountered difficulties at school, graduates recalled one or two teachers whom they credited for motivating them, having high expectations of them, and fuelling their aspirations. After outlining her family background, Ranzu proudly declared, "I was the bright student at school, so I always came out number one and then I had teachers who always encouraged me".

Risuna's schooling experience was, however, divergent from the rest. He recalled experiences of discouraging negative stereotyping and low expectations from some of his teachers. Although he turned his grades around, he identified his schooling experience as an early *nadir* moment in his educational journey.

Despite the evident disparities in their levels of higher education awareness and aspirations, participants managed to enrol at university with the help of stepping-stones, agents of transformation and serendipities (Arbouin, 2018). A career guidance instructor at an exhibition paved Risuna's path to Merger University; a motivational teacher helped clear Ranzu's path to higher education; and a retired teacher who runs an orphanage, his grandmother and a caring admissions officer were Thabang's stepping-stones en route to Ivory Tower University.

Thabang's grandmother, Mrs Sue from the orphanage, and the student enrolment officer at Ivory Tower University were key stepping-stones on Thabang's path to higher education. In many ways, they defined his life story and their role in guiding Thabang's aspirations and transition to higher education, fits the profile of people, Mills (2008:80) refers to as "agents of transformation", who "can draw upon a variety of cultural capitals" to disrupt the reproductive cycle in working-class students' journey to and through higher education.

Thabang's narration of the influence and role played by these key characters in his journey to Ivory Tower University casts light on the transformative potential of working-class people's "community cultural wealth" and, specifically, the transformative role of aspirational and familial capital (Yosso, 2005) found in working-class communities. The participants felt that such transformative agents also changed how students viewed themselves. Bourdieu (1982:12) explains *habitus* as a set of dispositions that incline agents to act and react in

certain ways. The dispositions generate practices, perceptions and attitudes. Thabang narrates how Mrs Sue's enduring belief in him and the orphanage environment she provided enabled him to nurture himself "into the person I've become". This account sheds important light on the shaping, evolution and transformation of his habitus en route to higher education (Crozier & Reay, 2011).

We now turn to their higher education aspirations, where participants' experiences are varied. At one end of the spectrum, Lerato considered going to university a natural post-schooling destination. He identified three key features of his origins and family background that propelled his higher education aspirations:

- "being born to a family of college and university graduates";
- his "desire to uplift his family from poverty"; and
- the "influential role of the church".

His grandparents particularly made it clear "that there is no way we are going to have a family member who is not educated and who will not go to university"; and, for as long as he could remember, Lerato "always knew that at some point I will have to go to university". This belief was cemented when his older sister qualified to enrol for an extended BCom degree at Rural University. Lerato's desire to lift the poverty "weight out of my mother's shoulders" was one of the key motivations behind his pursuit of academic excellence at school to qualify to go to university.

On the other hand, for Thabang, higher education was not within the realm of reality. He was firstly in a family for whom the idea of going to university was unreal: "University for them [his family], me to go to any University was out of reality for my family". Markedly, Thabang states that the notion of going to university being a distant reality is consistent with the very low higher education participation rate in his community where "university students are so rare they are like something that comes out of a lucky packet". He grew up with two sisters, neither of whom went to university.

These students' higher education choice process was undermined by a general lack of career awareness and universities' selective admission requirements. Although Rendani enrolled for a BSc in geography and geology, she confessed that, upon enrolment, she "didn't know what geology was". Ranzu "always wanted to be a scientist when still at primary", but unfortunately, she failed to meet the admission requirements for her first choice (BSc in plant pathology) and had to settle for her second choice (environmental sciences). Similarly, regarding his choice of a study field, Thabang initially "wanted to study architecture[,] but the marks [grades] didn't allow me". He settled for his second choice, a BA in psychology.

In contrast, due to early career awareness, Risuna and Lerato succeeded in entering their chosen field of study. Lerato's career choice of urban and regional planning was well thought

through. He considered his “passion” for technical drawing, his “strengths”, alignment with the subjects he was good at in high school and consideration for “scarce skills in our country”. He appeared particularly well informed about his career prospects and options. He targeted a degree that majored in subjects in which he had excelled in high school and avoided degrees that majored in maths and science.

Similarly, Risuna experienced early career awareness and was always clear about his chosen career path. He states that mechanical engineering was his only choice, and he credited this to watching his father repair his car, from which grew his love for “fixing things”.

Concerning participants’ choice of institution, the following dimensions are apparent: first, for virtually every one of the students, Rural University, a historically black only, grossly under-resourced and rural-based institution, was not their ‘first choice’. When rejected by Ivory Tower Institution for failing to meet their financial or academic admission requirements, they resorted to it. Ranzu had the comprehensive Merger University as her first choice, the elite University of Pretoria as her second choice and Rural University as her third choice. Ranzu narrated: “I wasn’t planning to come to Rural University. My dream was to go to Merger University or the University of Pretoria. Merger University [...] I couldn’t qualify due to my lower marks in maths and physics.” Similarly, when choosing the institution, Lerato chose Rural university because he felt it was “the only option”.

Overall, participants’ institutional destination was underpinned more by external considerations and not so much by the institution itself. These considerations included the university’s geographic location and proximity to family, in the case of Thabang, and failure to meet the preferred institution’s academic and financial requirements in the case of Ranzu. An alumnus of Merger University influenced Risuna’s choice of that university during a secondary school career exhibition. He explains:

Okay, like I remember this guy I met at home, he was working at Ford, so he did mechanical engineering ... and during those career exhibitions and stuff ... I went and asked him what did you do? Mechanical? And he said he did it at Merger University. That was it ... I decided I will also try Merger University (Risuna, Graduate, Merger University).

Lerato ended up at Rural University owing to financial considerations. Tuition fees at Rural University are relatively affordable when compared to those of other higher education institutions. Additionally, the university’s rural location meant the cost of living would be lower, making it easier to commute daily from home and avoid student housing costs. Lerato explained:

[In] terms of choice of choosing a university that I have to go to, it was also limited because of the background that I come from. So, the only option for university was Rural University because of my financial background and my mother’s employment status (Lerato, Rural University).

Overall, there is clear evidence of social class reproduction in students' higher education choice process. Its influence is ever-present, to the extent of rendering the existence of choice an illusion, due to participants' class position (for example, where they were born, whom they were born to, their community's higher education awareness and participation rate, the presence or absence of role models). Some options were simply not available to this group of students. So, although the university application form offers a first, second and even third choice, some options' inaccessibility makes the existence of choice for participants questionable.

Experiences within higher education

This section synthesises graduates' narrative accounts of completion at three different South African universities. Key themes are categorised into negative (hindering) and positive (enabling) dimensions of their experience in higher education institutions. The objective is by no means to achieve generalisability of experience but rather to highlight key dimensions or themes that, for us, stand out from how the five graduates narrated their journeys to completion.

The first category of themes highlights the negative dimensions of participants' experience in higher education. In this category of themes, graduates' life stories reveal patterns of hindrance experienced upon arrival and during their university time. We begin with the negative dimensions of participants' higher education experience before turning to positive and enabling experiences.

The graduates reported a turbulent transition and 'hard landings' on arrival in higher education. Upon arrival at Ivory Tower University at the beginning of the academic year, Thabang lacked the required financial capital to pay for registration. For him and his family, it was a case of "become a registered student, we'll figure out the rest along the way". Limited command of the English language did not only derail Rendani's first year of study but further weakened her ability to acquire much needed social capital. She recalled a "very tormenting first day" at Ivory Tower University, and that was "because of English, I couldn't communicate with people ... it was so difficult for me to make friends because people thought maybe I didn't speak or something".

Further difficulties were related to financial difficulties and homelessness. At Rural University, a significant hindrance to Lerato's higher education experience came from the 'top-slicing' practice at NSFAS: NSFAS partially funded students because the funding demand was outstripping the funds that NSFAS allocated to each university. Lerato's NSFAS funding package did not cover accommodation and some of his study material, such as "technical instruments which were very expensive". Unable to afford these, he "went for a few months without that equipment, I could only borrow from my classmates". Without

accommodation, Lerato joined the long list of students unofficially sharing with friends in Rural University' dormitories. Barely two months into his first academic year at Ivory Tower University, pushed by lack of transport money and an overcrowded home, Thabang "moved to the library". His narration of living conditions that led to him sleeping in the university's library illustrates how his humble origins followed him into higher education and further highlighted the severity with which the student housing shortages affect the most vulnerable students during the critical transition phase into higher education.

Distrust and toxic student-faculty relations were highlighted. Thabang and Rendani perceived members of the academic staff at Ivory Tower University as out of touch with their working-class reality. At Ivory Tower University, Thabang's interaction with one of his professors only widened the trust deficit between him and the academic staff. To him, the professor appeared aloof and detached from working-class realities. "I tell him my situation and I'm struggling ... he said 'you know what, you're doing well, just keep on pushing' ... this time I'm telling you that I've not eaten, I don't have a place to stay, I'm failing. My fees are not paid ... I was very angry after this session because it didn't make sense to me".

In addition, a poorly administered and mismanaged financial aid programme was highlighted as having a negative impact. Upon arrival at Rural University, Ranzu "didn't know anything about NSFAS". At the time, Rural University, unlike the entirely digitised elite institutions, was still predominantly reliant on manual, paper-based applications for both academic admission and NSFAS funding applications. This system at Rural University led to stampedes of thousands of students fighting for the limited available spaces. Additionally, the paper-based system's vulnerability to manipulation led to reported corruption and inconsistency in allocating funds. Ranzu added, "it was a very[,] very[,] very bad ... We would wake up around 04:00 AM just to join the queue ... they would even close while we are still queuing".

We now turn to enabling conditions. Despite evident hindrances experienced in their journeys to and through higher education, the five graduates' narrative accounts reveal enabling and transformative dimensions of their experiences across the different universities. Our most important finding was the importance of durable community cultural wealth in the success of the graduates. Their accounts reveal that they did not arrive empty-handed: they brought durable community cultural wealth to higher education. Through the concepts of 'aspirational capital' and 'navigational capital', Yosso (2005:80) explains how working-class students bring to higher education a combination of "hope and dreams for the future in the face of real and perceived barriers" and tools necessary to manoeuvre through hostile social institutions that were "not created with communities of colour in mind". The presence of aspirational capital and navigational capital is particularly reflected in Risuna's story at Merger University. Despite experiencing a difficult arrival at

that university, Risuna managed to adjust and complete his first year of study. Key enablers of adjustment emerge from his narrative. He describes how his academic performance significantly improved when he reverted to the learning approach he had adopted during his secondary school days. In his narrative, he identified the accumulation of social capital by forming study groups with his classmates and developing the courage to consult his lecturers as the key turning points and enablers of his improved higher education experience. He recounted:

We formed a study group, I think that's where things changed ... So, you know, even the people that you're with, even the respect that they give you, they even give you courage okay, now I am at the right gear. There was this guy that was my classmate, so he at least has a light when it comes to computers. Then the other one I think, consulting, it helped me (Risuna, Merger University).

Additionally, Risuna identified his ability to learn and understand the course content independently of the teachers to have contributed to his adjustment into the new learning environment. This is the same approach he had employed in secondary school when teachers went on strike. He added that, at times, he would skip classes and go to the library because an hour spent there was, for him, a lot more productive than sitting in the lecture theatre through a lecture where “he didn't hear anything”. “I think I'm good at that, to just prepare myself on my own ... So, sometimes I will just go to class just to check where they are in the syllabus.”

The graduates' accounts also revealed elements of a transformative habitus that aided them over the finish line. Contrary to the deficit framing of working-class students in higher education, participants perceived disabling conditions at university as less of an obstacle for success and more of a challenge worth taking on. In this case, their dispositions matched what Mills (2008:83) terms a ‘transformative habitus’ which enables them to “recognize possibilities for improvisation” and approach their studies in ways that transform their conditions and improve their chances of success. At Rural University, Lerato contradicts the often deficit expectations that working-class students will likely feel like a “fish out of water” upon arrival in higher education. He narrated: “[When] I went to university ... I always looked forward to every day, that I am going to take on university with all that I have. I'm going to give it my all, I'm going to give it my best. Similarly, for Thabang at Ivory Tower University, “giving up was not an option”. Despite a particularly turbulent first year of study, he held onto the “belief” that education “was the only way out” of his humble beginnings.

A further important enabling factor was agents of transformation who facilitate the accumulation of idealised forms of capital, which multiplies their chances of success. Despite a challenging first semester of homelessness, poor academic performance and aloof academic staff, Thabang persisted in “looking for someone to speak to” during his second semester until he found someone who fits Mills' (2008) description of an

agent of transformation: Mrs Ingrid, a lecturer at Ivory Tower University, offered him accommodation at her own home. Thabang's encounter with Mrs Ingrid was a turning point in his life story: it enabled him to accumulate additional capitals and navigate the field of higher education in a manner that multiplied his chances of success. For example, while at Mrs Ingrid's house, Thabang improved his English proficiency and pronunciation by listening and observing lip movement during conversations. The improvement in his English proficiency improved his academic engagement in the classroom and further earned him access to new social circles, thereby adding to his social capital portfolio. Additionally, improved English proficiency boosted Thabang's confidence in and outside the classroom and, according to him, improved his academic engagement. He explains how this process occurred:

So, that environment also, which is also one of the things that led to me doing so well, English was not a threat to me anymore. English now was just a language that people use. I was able to learn the language a lot more because now I didn't have a choice, I couldn't use Pedi [his home language], I can't run away and talk Pedi, the whole family speaks English, there's nothing I can do.... So, that [improved command of English] also kind of encouraged me and developed me to be more confident in myself, to be more confident in the things that I want to do, to be more confident in my studies most importantly ... through that I got to engage with people from a different context. By the end of the year[,] I was able to pass all my modules (Thabang, Ivory Tower University).

Conclusion

This chapter locates the prevalence of low completion rates amongst working-class students as an ever-present dimension of persistent inequalities in higher education and one that undermines the very idea of higher education as a vehicle to achieve a more equitable and socially just society. With much of the research that draws on Bourdieu's theories of cultural and social capital tending to project students from a working-class background as lacking the necessary capitals required to succeed in higher education, efforts to improve their odds of success have sought to support them by filling them up with idealised and celebrated forms of cultural and social capital (O'Shea, 2016). Narratives from working-class graduates in this study suggest that such an outlook may be narrow and flawed. Not only does it miss the wealth in the portfolio of capital and dispositions that such students bring to higher education, but it also overlooks the transformative value embedded in the narratives of their educational journeys. Countering research that theorises working-class students through reproductive and deficit lenses, this chapter presents narrative accounts of working-class graduates revealing how insights from their experiences offer opportunities to deepen and enrich efforts to transform participation in South African higher education and worldwide. This way, we contribute to a relatively small but growing body of research that employs Bourdieu's concepts of capital and habitus in a way that foregrounds the

transformative dimensions in working-class students' educational experiences and outcomes in understanding and explaining prevalent disparities in higher education and informing transformation policy and practice (Yosso, 2005; Mills, 2008; O'Shea, 2016; Crul, Schneider, Keskiner & Lelie, 2017; Arbouin, 2018).

Overall, the five working-class graduates drew on various overlooked resources (capital) and dispositions (*habitus*) to aspire to, navigate through and persist in higher education. They accumulated and converted (or translated) their largely disregarded wealth of community cultural capital (Yosso, 2005) into idealised or rewarded forms (or currencies) of capital. They accumulated additional capital forms when institutional conditions allowed while trading in a manner that multiplied their chances of successful completion in an often hostile and violent field of higher education (Crozier & Reay, 2011; Crul et al., 2017). Forced to become adult at a young age, the decisions they took under unfavourable conditions point to the presence of an enduring, adaptive and transformative *habitus* (Mills, 2008). For them, giving up was not an option; while feeling like “fish out of water” and unfamiliar with written and unwritten rules of the higher education game, the aided transition period and a rare encounter with agents of transformation (Mills, 2008) seemed enough to propel them over the finish line. Participants' narratives suggest that theorising working-class students as inherently deficient in possessing dominant cultural capital identifies limitations in Bourdieu's reproduction theory (Bourdieu, 1993) and points to how Bourdieu's theory may be extended to inspire the transformation of higher education.

The findings in this study suggest that it is not the lack of idealised capitals and dispositions that hinders working-class completion in higher education but, rather, “the challenge is whether or not we are willing to recognise what they bring as knowledge in itself and then to work with that knowledge” (Prof Kigali, Ivory Tower University). Working-class students bring capital portfolios and dispositions into higher education in a currency different from those their counterparts possess and higher education rewards. Working-class students in this study brought a wealth of knowledge that is accessible only if universities are willing, first, to transform and diversify the number of currencies of capital and dispositions they are willing to recognise and reward as knowledge; and, second, to invest in efforts to assist struggling students to convert their portfolio of capital and dispositions into the ‘right currency’.

These findings are highly relevant to this book's focus: curriculum transformation and pedagogical renewal. In South Africa, while much was gained concerning institutional culture and the Africanisation of the curriculum, elements of apartheid remain embedded in institutional cultures and in the curriculum, which alienates black students. It is important that the call for the decolonisation of the curriculum not only Africanises the curriculum but also draws upon the wealth of knowledge in the experience of working-class

students' lives and that pedagogical initiatives draw upon the important forms of capital and dispositions that students possess.

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