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Self-agency and Academically High-performing Students' Success: Towards a Praxis for Academic Support in one South African University

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Self-agency and Academically High-performing Students' Success: Towards a Praxis for Academic Support in one South African University

Abstract

Globally, student support mechanisms focus almost exclusively on academically 'under-performing' students, especially as insofar as academic development practices are concerned. This article makes a case for a shift in approach. Using the context of one country, South Africa, we sought to better understand the strengths that academically high-performing students (AHSs) employ in order to succeed. We drew on a conceptual lens based on Bandura's theory of the self. Data was collected by means of document analysis, individual interviews and focus group interviews with ten (*n* = 10) purposively selected academically high-performing fourth-year undergraduate students in a school of education at one university. The findings show that beyond typical family and institutional factors, the students' capability of effecting change through intentional and cognitive agentic influences is critical to their success. Importantly though, in finding their self-agentic capabilities, some found mutual support with and for peers who shared in their passion for success. This asserts the relevance of Ubuntu as a concept that underpins the understanding of 'self' in this context. The findings are important for theory in problematising Bandura's self-agentic theory and expounding its application to peer learning support. It is also important for practice because understanding the AHSs' negotiation of self-agency brings refreshing insight to the student success conundrum.

Practitioner Notes

- Student success in university is complex and required multi-pronged approach to academic support for enhancing success
- Academically high-performing students also have academic support need to enhance their success
- Academically high-performing students assert self-agency in collective-self dynamic to meet their academic support need
- Student academic support experiences need to be inclusive and strength-based to benefit all students
- Ubuntu offers an epistemic frame to rethink student academic support praxis in the context of South Africa

Keywords

students' academic support, high-performing students, agentic capabilities, students experience student success, Ubuntu

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Introduction

In many South African public universities, student academic support programs operate in silos, and their focus is usually centred on remediation as a response to underperformance. Therefore, proactive support for achieving high performance does not occur, and academically high-performing students (AHSs) are excluded from structured student academic support experiences. Students' engagement with the learning project and their academic success are impacted by their learning experiences (Thies et al., 2014). Supporting successful student learning experiences includes enhancing the level and quality of academic support (Kuh et al., 2006). This process should also involve examining the context of the support to understand how best to harness the strengths of students, both as individuals and also collectively, that are useful in ensuring their academic success.

A lack of contextualized student academic support praxis in many South African universities is apparent in their myriad and disjointed programs of remedial intervention (Paideya & Bengesai, 2017). These programs emanate from pre-1994 academic development in the early 1990s that informed practices in the then universities (Boughey, 2007; Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014). Current programs are not adequately designed to serve the changing support needs of the student population but rather operate based on what Cleland et al. (2013, p. 247) describe as "the ethics of supporting students to progress to the next stage". While such an approach has the potential to improve the stage-by-stage progression of students, it can also compromise the development of important learning skills and attributes such as self-management, resilience, confidence and self-motivation, self-efficacy and self-esteem, and exercise of agency. As reactive strategies, underpinning paradigms of academic support as remedial interventions in the universities hardly promote students' active development of these skills and attributes. Typically, such interventions tend to ignore the influences of structure on students' academic development (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Smit, 2012).

Consequently, interventions in South African universities are susceptible to being Janus-faced. Whereas the aim is to support student learning, these remedial interventions rather tend to block the opportunities for the development of student agency that is important for fostering critical learning skills (Cleland et al., 2013) and enhancing their chances of achieving success. Even if inadvertently, such interventions could also inhibit students' active engagement in the support experiences that are meant to improve their overall performance. Accordingly, the students tend to associate academic support with failure rather than high performance. Fataar (2018a, p. 1) observes that "exclusionary institutional discourse and practices of the country's universities hinder many of their students from achieving success." Through interventions to enable them to draw on their social networks and strength-based peer collaboration, students can be supported by the universities to develop their self-agency and learn important skills and attributes to bolster their performance. Anders Ericsson et al. (2007) affirm that no known evidence constrains high performance by healthy individuals. Strengthening the student's agency to motivate performance at full potential could be one way of reducing the barriers to their success.

Student academic support in South African universities pays little attention to experiences of AHSs, prompting the present study's exploration of what self-agency such students bring to their success in the university. While universities neglect them, AHSs show that the traits they believe enable their success are learnable. In this study, AHS refers to students who have completed at least their first year of undergraduate study in a university school of education. A further criterion was that they should not have failed any examination or progression requirements and would have a cumulative aggregate of at least 75% in all the modules registered for the period of study. Although this was a limited definition of academically high performers, it served the purposes of the study.

The paper begins with a brief overview of the broader issues of student success in university and moves on to discuss the South African university context and student success. This is followed by an overview of Bandura's theory of the self, complemented with an account of the concept of *Ubuntu* to provide a lens to understand self-agency and what agentic capabilities (Bandura, 1999) mean for understanding AHSs' success. Ubuntu emphasises the African worldview of strength in communality and the centrality of the collective self in the African context as opposed to the individual self in Western perspectives. The following sections describe the methods employed for data collection and analysis, present and discuss the findings and implications, and provide a concluding thought.

Literature review

Student success in university

Student success is a complex issue affecting higher education globally (Yorke & Longden, 2004). Research interest in student success is wide-ranging and increasing (Alyahyan & Düştegör, 2020; Crisp et al., 2015; Gamlath, 2021; Mackney & Shields 2019; van Zyl et al., 2020). Islam and Tasnim's (2021) study is a recent attempt to understand factors influencing students' academic success in public universities. The factors influencing student success are various and multi-level (van den Berg & Hofman, 2005). Lewin and Mawoyo (2014) group such factors into the academic and the non-academic. Although student success literature covers a range of issues, gaps still exist in the understanding of AHSs' experiences of the academic factors influencing their university success. In South Africa, no known study on students' success explores the topic in relation to AHSs' accounts of self-agency and academic success experiences in university.

South Africa university context and challenges to student success

South Africa's public universities have significantly expanded numerically and comprise the following: universities of technology that provide vocationally oriented training; comprehensive universities offering a combination of vocational and academic education; and traditional universities that offer theoretically oriented degrees. All the public universities charge fees, and government funding through the National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) enables African students to gain access. There were 26 universities in 2022, with Africans composing 72% of total student population of over a million (Chawula, 2022). The national government proposes to increase this number by 500,000 more students by 2030 (Tjønneland, 2017). However, what continues to afflict the universities is not low student enrolment but rather the high attrition and low completion rates that combine to complicate the access-success conundrum (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014; Scott 2018; Strydom et al., 2010).

The growing costs of university funding, occasioned by neo-liberal market ideology (Boughey & McKenna, 2021), make improving student academic success a crucial matter for the South African public universities (Scott, 2018). In 2013, only 27% of all undergraduate students completed in minimum time (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014). The figure is higher for those in the public universities (Cloete, 2014). Similar trajectories in succeeding years, as indicated by Mabokela (2021), show attrition and low completion as intractable and worrying problems, and as having implications for academic development and support practices that can increase student success in the universities.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic added another layer to the challenge of promoting student success in South African universities (Dube, 2020). Structural barriers were exacerbated (Van Schalkwyk, 2021) and, coupled with the challenges occasioned by the swift shift to online and hybrid learning modes, disadvantaged many students (Du Preez & Le Grange, 2020). Prior to COVID-19 induced campus shutdowns (Landa et al., 2021), the universities had been experiencing student unrests related to a wide range of issues from #FeesMustFall (Cini, 2019; Mpofu, 2017), contestations around curriculum transformation (Higgs, 2016), and decolonisation (Le Grange, 2020; Fataar, 2018b; Muswede, 2017) to language policies (Mkhize & Balfour, 2017). Together, the issues pointed to students' experiences of alienation in the universities. Although widening access to universities in South Africa post-1994 expanded participation by the previously marginalized African student population, university experience continues to be alienating for many. Tinto (2014) posits that granting access without matching support is not empowering. This supports the notion that the South African universities have made progress in prioritizing redress of historical educational disadvantages but are still not transformative enough to enhance all students' success (Badat, 2010).

Factors affecting student success in the South African universities are formidable and multipronged (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014). Cumulative structural and access barriers persist, but it is the lack of context-informed and adequate academic support experiences that provides the major limitation to undergraduate students' equal participation and success in the universities. While there cannot be a one-size-fits-all solution to this limitation, what is important is that academic support approaches should centre on students' "being and becoming" (Barnett, 1996). In so doing, such approaches must recognize the students' agency and their capacity to enact it (Martin, 2004; Timmis et al., 2019). However, outcome-driven institutional support interventions in the universities are fixed, focusing on "what to do to students" to push progression and high success rate without acknowledging that students themselves mediate their experiences and enact agency. How students exert this agency in ways enabled by their context and reality (Annan, 2016) has not been meaningfully examined. Yet, knowledge of how these students mediate agency in their learning can be pivotal to installing approaches that support their active individual and collective participation, performance, and success.

Supporting AHSs' success

Current interventions aim at supporting student academic success but mainly focus on their underperformance. It is then easy to lose focus on students who are performing well. AHSs (also described as academically successful or academically gifted students) are talented, ambitious, and determined (Friedman-Nimz & Skyba, 2009). Nevertheless, Anders Ericsson et al. (2007) notes that abilities can be improved through training. There is, therefore, a gradual move towards a more developmental approach to giftedness and away from homogenic categories. The shift recognizes giftedness as diverse, dynamic, fluid, context-sensitive (Matthews & Dai, 2014) and, importantly, learnable.

Like their underperforming peers, AHSs require academic support and a stimulating environment to inspire their achievements (Watters & Diezmann, 2003). Alamer (2014) suggests that support for AHSs leads to higher academic achievement and positive attitudes. Benny and Blonder (2016) emphasize the importance of enabling AHSs to continually utilize their abilities and develop academic skills. Kanevsky and Clelland (2013) affirm the necessity to respond to the needs of AHSs to enhance their academic success.

It is also important to learn from AHSs through research that examines their lives and accounts of what enables success in their everyday educational experiences. Their own accounts of support and success should provide useful insights for refocusing the student academic success project in two ways. First, the insights would inform strategies for supporting students' high performance; second, they would inform mediating support experience for all students' success.

Improving student success in South African universities

Interventions to improve student academic success in South African universities include a variety of academic development practices and pedagogical strategies. Student support through academic development (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014) involves remedial tutorials, supplementary instruction, and mentoring. These are complemented by academic-psychosocial counselling. Other common practices include addressing the needs of students with disabilities (Ramaahlo et al., 2018) and researching the scholarship of teaching and learning. However, challenges remain. Core staff who manage academic support are usually externally sourced or on temporary contracts (Fataar, 2018a), which creates continuity problems in program planning and management. Student academic development support is often run as an ad hoc affair (Paideya & Bengesai, 2017). Support programs are often not mainstreamed into the structured curriculum and are usually not timely enough to achieve targeted results (Sosibo & Katiya, 2015). Students perceive their teaching and learning support as inadequate to meet their needs (Wickham et al., 2008). In addition, Manik (2014) identifies lack of knowledgeable and experienced academic support personnel as a challenge in the support programs. However, steps are being taken by ELESTA Academic Advising South Africa to deal with aspects of this challenge by offering training for academic advising professional development nationally.

Moreover, operationalising academic support underpinned by a deficit view of the student (Boughey, 2010) tends to place focus on student failure (Fataar, 2018a). This ignores the strengths students draw from their social networks to bolster self-agency and the possible influences they exert on each other. Although transformative spaces and opportunities exist for formalizing such strengths, the potential of the student body to contribute to reversing the worrying trend of low success rates in the universities does not appear to be constructively developed - at least, not adequately nor as part of strategy to improve their performance at full potential. Fataar (2018a, p. 1) argues that "students' educational becoming" should be properly "understood in respect of how they traverse their various daily lived environments of, for example, their family, school, neighbourhood, university, lecture rooms, tutorial spaces and peer learning groups." Thus, how the students understand experiences of learning "across various lived spaces" (Fataar, 2018a, p. 2) including in their mediation of peer bonding interactions, needs to be cognised by the university in order to improve their success.

Theoretical perspective

Students' access, retention, and success in university are mainly theorized using Tinto's (1993) student integration model, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) social ecological model, Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital, or more recently, Campa's (2010) critical resilience paradigm. Each has its strengths and limitations for understanding the complexities of student success in university. For example, Tinto's model has been critiqued for not considering that diverse experiences and contextual factors influence student success (Castillo et al., 2006). Collectively, these theories are also limited by their conception of the "self" because they tend to problematise the individual in singularity and subjectivity as "being without" the other. However, in various African perspectives (Nwoye, 2006), the self is not conceptualized in individualistic terms but in multi-plurality as being "with" and "for" the other. Existentially speaking, the "communal self" (Nwoye, 2006) or the "selfhood that emerges dialogically" (Mkhize, 2004, p. 24) can be encapsulated in the concept of *Ubuntu* (literally "'I am because you are") as articulated in Mbigi and Maree (1995, p. 7) and in the work of Venter (2004). Chen and DesJardins (2010) argue that researching student success in university calls for integrated, multiple theories and approaches. Therefore, *Ubuntu*, as a context-specific espousal of the concept of self, is utilized in this study to develop Bandura's (2006) theory of the self in order to understand self-agency in student success.

Bandura's theory of the self

The agentic theory of the self (Bandura, 2008) was developed from Bandura's (2006) theory of human agency. Influenced by social cognitive learning theory (Bandura, 1986), it asserts that behavioural factors affect human development, human adaptation, and change in the social environment (Bandura, 2012; 2006). An agentic theory of the self is a psycho-social theory that emphasizes the nature of the self from an agentic perspective. It conceptualizes people as the architects of their life circumstances rather than as passive products (Bandura, 2008). In other words, human behaviour and adaptation is analysable from an agentic perspective as a function of human agency (Code, 2020). Bandura further describes the self as an agent in terms of being able "to influence intentionally one's functioning and life circumstances" (Bandura, 2008, p. 16).

McLeod (2016) notes that Bandura's theory sees human behaviour as learned, which means that people see others around them behaving in certain ways (modelling behaviours) through the process of observational learning. Accordingly, Cauce and Gordon (2012) posit that humans are agents who can control their own behaviours. This can be intentional (deliberate), cognitive (conscious or mental), or through agentic influences rather than unconscious internal impulse, reward, or punishment. Bandura's (2006) four properties of human agency are useful for the conceptualization and enactment of student academic support in university, particularly in terms of understanding and fostering the student's active role in own performance.

Four properties of human agency

The four properties of human agency are intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflection. According to Bandura (2006), intentionality is about how intentions form and the actions and strategies to realize them. In this case, it refers to AHSs' capability for self-directed intention to succeed and to be aware of what success is for them. It also refers to the values, intrinsic and extrinsic, that underlie their intention. Bandura (2006) explains that forethought involves setting goals, giving direction, and ensuring coherence and meaning of life, also described as temporal extension of agency. Forethought in this case refers to the AHSs' capability of visualizing their target of success and following it through with coherent and consistent actions. Self-reactiveness involves self-management and self-motivation, bringing stability and supporting self-regulatory efforts against setbacks, difficulties, uncertainties, and emotional breakdowns (Bandura, 2006). In this case, self-reactiveness refers to the AHSs' capacity to persevere. It also refers to their resilience in pursuing well-defined intentions to achieve targeted success, despite challenges and barriers. The last property, self-reflection, involves the following: personal efficacy; the correctness of choices, thoughts, and actions; seeking meaning in decisions; and changing existing patterns where the need arises (Bandura, 2006). Self-reflection in this case refers to the AHSs' capability for reflectivity on their course of action and their criticality regarding the choices and decisions they must make along the course of the journey to success. The four properties together provide a perspective: first, to understand the AHSs' individual agency that they bring to their own performance; and second, to draw insight from understanding of their peer bonding, which for some shows in their enactment of collective agentic capabilities.

Human agency, Ubuntu, and collective agentic capabilities

Bandura (2008, p. 19) argues that personhood embodies the physical and psychosocial. This suggests that one's personal identity and agentic capabilities function in tandem. As the individual faces a choice between conflicting goals and courses of action, the eventual choices made and the sequential course of action at a given time involves all four properties of human agency in unison (Bandura, 2006). Thus, over and above the factors or agency that might act as a guide and motivator, the power to effect change essentially depends on a person's core belief that he or she is capable of human agency to influence the course of events (Bandura, 2006). Agentic capabilities are individual capacities to "proactively influence their functioning and external context" (Cenciotti et al., 2020, p. 196). Bandura (2000, p. 9) avers that "unless people believe they can produce desired effects and forestall undesired ones by their actions, they have little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties." However, Hitlin and Elder (2007, p. 180) remark that "agency does not stem from a blank slate; we have commitments – to ourselves and others – that we enact and recreate within interactions."

Human agency is achievable in a collective. Code (2020, p. 2) emphasizes that while "the regulation of personal processes is inherently an individual endeavour, however, the individual (self) does not operate in isolation and requires the mediative efforts of others…to develop and operate in a goal-directed manner." These are useful assertions that allow an understanding of what it means to exercise personal agency as a collective in the South African context. Ubuntu, as a concept, centres on a collective ethos. It draws from the African understanding of human-centred interdependence of the parts in a whole. Accordingly, its core values, as Mbigi (1997, p. 111) illustrates, are respect, dignity, solidarity, compassion, and survival. In line with Code's (2020) assertion above, Oviawe (2016, p. 3) explains Ubuntu as emphasizing "being that locates identity and meaning-making within a collective approach as opposed to an individualistic one." Finding strength to "produce desired effects" in the face of de facto exclusionary institutional support demonstrates the AHSs' human agency as, in part, actuated by 'mediative efforts of others' in their social networks as well as peers through Ubuntu.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to explore AHSs' accounts of their success in the university. The research question the study sought to answer was: "How do AHSs' experiences account for their self-agency as a success enabler?" Answering this question was deemed useful for informing context-relevant practices of student academic support in the university.

Methodology

A qualitative case study approach (Creswell & Poth, 2016) was used to collect data through individual interviews, focus group interviews, and document analysis (Flick, 2018). The participants were drawn from the population of 300 AHSs in the school, identified by means of their academic records as potential *cum laude* or *summa cum laude* students. The population included male and female students from different racial, social, and educational backgrounds as Table 1 below shows.

A nested sampling design strategy was used in line with Onwuegbuzie and Leech's (2007, p. 247) advice that care be taken to systematically decide on choices of key informants in qualitative research. The participants were from a cohort of 60 fourth-year students from this population in 2018. Using the already known attributes of this population from their pre-entry and demographic information, heterogeneous purposive sampling (Schreier, 2018) served as a useful technique to maximize the selection of a varied sample of the 10 participants from this cohort. To gain a better understanding from the participants of their experiences of self-agency as a success enabler, use of maximum variation sampling was justified, especially given their wide range of attributes in terms of demographic profiles and prior experiences. It permitted rich exploration of the perceptions of self-agency from an extensive view, representing a sufficient range of experiences across the cohort.

Table 1

Study Participants' Profile

Participant	Gender	Age	Race	Schooling/ Quintile	Rural/ Township/ Urban	Family Background	Matric Entry Point	Home Language	Funding	Disability
Jimmy	Male	26	White	4 - 5	Urban	Family attended	30	English	Self-Funded	No
Phindi	Female	23	African	1 - 3	Rural	First generation	29	isiZulu	NSFAS	No
Nancy	Female	24	Indian	4 - 5	Urban	Family attended	31	English	Self-Funded	No
Funeka	Female	22	African	1 - 3	Rural	First generation	28	isiZulu	NSFAS	No
Sihle	Male	24	African	1 - 3	Township	Family attended	29	isiZulu	FUNZA/Other	Yes
Nicole	Female	23	Coloured	1 - 3	Urban	Family attended	30	English	FUNZA/Other	No
Bonga	Male	22	African	1 - 3	Rural	First generation	31	isiZulu	NSFAS	No
Pearl	Female	24	African	1 - 3	Rural	First generation	32	isiZulu	FUNZA/Other	No
Zinhle	Female	24	African	1 - 3	Township	First generation	29	isiZulu	NSFAS	No
Ashraf	Male	22	Indian	4 - 5	Urban	Family attended	29	English	Self-Funded	No

The participants formed two focus groups, which, given their diverse educational and social backgrounds, were particularly effective. Group discussions explored nuances of the students' accounts of their experiences, that is, their enactment of self-agentic strategies for success, from their transition to and progression within the university. Each focus group comprised five participants and held three sessions. Individual interviews were used to further probe the salient information from the group discussions. Each focus group and each interview session lasted about 45 minutes, and they were held at venues convenient to the participants. Participation in the study was voluntary, and the confidentiality of discussions and anonymity of all participants were maintained by using pseudonyms. An inductive process and triangulation at methods levels were utilized to analyse data using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Below is a brief overview of the study site.

Study site

The study site was a school of education at one South African public university with a student population of about 6,000. The school provides initial and in-service teacher education, postgraduate degrees in education, higher education, and research degrees. Approximately 67% of students in 2018 were undergraduates. The majority of them came from historically disadvantaged backgrounds, resulting from the education system that operated prior to the dawn of democracy in 1994. Many of the students had evidently attended poorly resourced non-fee-paying schools (characterised as Quintiles 1, 2 and 3), which differed from well-resourced schools (e.g., Quintiles 4 and 5). Most of the student population in the school were within the socioeconomic bracket that requires funding for their university education. These also were likely to be the first in their families to attend university. Therefore, a sizable number struggled with learning and the requisite language and digital literacy proficiencies required by the university at the entry level of their studies.

Findings and discussion

The participants demonstrated a clear understanding of what their success entailed and made cognitive sense of it. They had individual conceptions of what success meant to them personally but also shared a common cognition of success as self-induced. This was evident in their being cognitively aware of, and asserting belief in, their self-agency in success. However, the intent was not to discover how they came by their beliefs but to use the human agency properties of intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflection espoused in Bandura's (2006) work as guiding themes to understand this self-agency.

Intentionality

The findings show that the AHSs intentionally set clear goals and targeted what they intended to achieve, from the commencement of their university studies. They pursued their studies like a career demanding self-motivation, self-discipline, and self-management of time and resources. This involved prioritisation of what they considered important to their success:

> *I think it is important that you must be prepared to see your study as your career, you know what you want to achieve. You set your goals first, and uhm, work toward it. You can't just set it and leave it out like that. You must work towards it. I mean you do your best in everything that you do… So, you're like always prepared in advance, and use your time and resources to work best… to succeed….* ***Phindi***

Another participant emphasized being self-organized and understanding what should be prioritised as part of what she described as "knowing your story".

> *I'd say, knowing your story, like making sure that you are up to date with the work… For instance, I'm doing Math, I know it's one in all my modules… it is also a priority to me. Uh, once you know that kind of thing, which I feel like matters to be organized… Being organized is something that you have to spend time learning. And because I was working on it… um, people who've… just left school, haven't had that experience.* ***Nancy***

The participants showed that they had a plan in place to ensure success and also had the intention to work on it and a clear sense of the course of action required. This suggests that they had the capability for self-directed intention to succeed. Bandura (2006) describes the agentic capability of the individual in terms of how they form intentions and realize them through self-agency as intentionality. The AHSs showed by their capability of intentionality or self-directed intention that they set clear goals for their success and how they intended it to be reached. They enacted their self-agentic actions through plans and strategies to accomplish it:

> *…you know what the deliverables were for each module, and sort of incorporated all of those into a mini project plan for each one of the semesters. With all the modules, all the activities, sort of timelines, uhm… resources. You know, ask yourself; where do I need to be, at what stage to get to where I must be, and so on….* ***Jimmy***

In viewing his study as a kind of project, Jimmy also understood success in its completion, and intentionally invested in it. His capability of intentionality enabled him to order his goals and set objectives and timelines for achievement of same in all the modules using his "mini project plan" for every semester of his study. These intentional self-motivated actions enabled his focus on a self-laid out course of action for success.

The AHSs further show that they enact intentionality in the resilience and discipline that they bring to their studies, which Nicole's comment aptly emphasizes as being 'prepared':

> *I'm mixed with a lot of people from different backgrounds - so now one thing for me is how do I keep my performance that I had in high school? …it is important that you must be prepared, you must know what you want to achieve.* ***Nicole***

Being prepared is one proactive step to forestall barriers to performance. Some previous research like that conducted by Friedman-Nimz and Skyba (2009) characterizes students who are academically gifted or high-performing like the AHSs as talented, ambitious, and determined. Other studies, including one by Ericsson et al. (2007), describe such students as being committed to their studies. These are also attributes that the AHSs in this study showed in their intentionality, which may be described as their self-agency to cognize the goal of high performance and to self-regulate to attain it.

Forethought

The participants showed that they were aware of their experiences as students from socially and educationally diverse backgrounds. However, they suggested that their prior experiences helped them to understand extra efforts needed to go beyond mere expectations and attain high performance:

> *My image in high school - I was a high performer. …in this big environment [meaning the university] … for me to do that, because I went to a school that was not very well resourced, so I must push myself beyond my expectations… know my abilities and know where I find help. So, I think that that's what pushed me to try and do more, to be a top performer.* ***Sihle***

AHSs showed tenacity and strove to co-exist with other students, regardless of differences in privilege and social status. Even where they lacked opportunities, like in not attending well-resourced schools, and/or being differently abled, they had the capability to visualise their success. They had clear goals and adopted a course of action required to succeed, including understanding their networks of support when there is need for finding help:

> *… when I'm like I have these difficulties, I seek help from my friends, we need each other to do well. Sometimes I speak to myself aloud, that's the only way, this is the only time… [the opportunity to study at university].* ***Sihle***

Given that backgrounds of rurality and disadvantage pose challenges in adapting to the multicultural and pluralistic environment of the university, the AHSs showed the importance of cultivating the sensibilities required to bond with peers and adjust to life on campus:

> *…it was a big change to me. I mean being from a religious dress code to come to a diverse environment. And according to our culture, boys and girls are separated. We are supposed to be that way. So here it was a completely big change.* ***Funeka***

Funeka understood that the university environment was different from her home culture. She expressed willingness to accept and embrace the differences and change, which implies responsiveness.

Funeka and Sihle's accounts showed that the capability to take cognisance of what they needed to adjust to was important to their success. The transitional challenges confronting students from religious (Sharma & Guest, 2013) and disadvantaged backgrounds (Millet, 2015) are documented in the literature. Pedagogical, social, psychological, and cultural changes resulted in pressure to blend into the new environment and its expectations as the new student grapples with the change between home and school cultures and university. Sun and Hagedorn (2016) explain how this occurs even before students can adjust to academic and student life on campus. Although the literature suggests transition to university as a challenging period in several ways (Cameron & Rideout, 2022) and that some students can negotiate the transition experience, while others struggle (Van der Zanden et al., 2018), the AHSs recognized the challenges of first year at university early on. They followed up such recognition with self-directed, coherent, and consistent efforts aimed at, not only overcoming the challenges of the first year, but seeing themselves make a success of their study in university. Furthermore, self-realization of who they are and what success would mean for them, and their home situation stimulated their enactment of purposive actions towards reaching it. This self-cognition, also seen in other peers like themselves, boosted their motivation and support to each other in making consistent effort to attain high performance so as to achieve that success:

> *…though I'm from a disadvantaged home, I became more interested in my books… so, I can change my home situation… At varsity [university] I met some guys who are dedicated… I could see that my friends were like me too, and together we pursue the goal to be our best. We formed a group called panellists. ... I think it's working for us because we support each of us to perform exceedingly. All of us are top performers academically.* ***Bonga***

This assertion, echoed by some other participants, shows the AHSs as having a vision of what their success would mean, and cognisant of the importance of their social networks, for example the support and expectations from family, towards attaining it:

> *…of course, it's like performing tops is one thing I can't compromise. You must know what you're doing here. I know my home background… Knowing the expectations, I just cannot fail. I must know what helps me, and like, to find support… So, I get back home with tops (meaning summa cum laude completion of degree), that's all for me.* ***Ashraf***

The study participants were from diverse backgrounds, but they tended to have a positive attitude to seeking help from others like family and peers to succeed, as Sihle, Phindi, Ashraf and Bonga, and others asserted. These AHSs' understanding of the need to seek help underscores their intrinsic motivation. It is known that students who perceive themselves at a disadvantage, relative to their peers, are lethargic in seeking help (Talebi et al., 2013), which restricts their agency for accessing support. There is, however, a dissonance between such constructs of students from disadvantaged background in university as passive and the positive attitude the AHSs in this present study showed toward seeking support. Thomas and Tagler (2019) affirm that help seeking is an adaptive self-regulation strategy to overcome academic difficulties and attain positive outcomes. Together, these findings revealed that AHSs' capability of visualizing self and success and of discovering self in others like themselves goes beyond aiming for academic performance. It connects their resolve to succeed, their background, and their image of successful future selves (Chan, 2014) as the important motivators of the consistent actions they took toward attaining their high performance.

Self-reactiveness

The participants' accounts of the emotional preparedness for self-dependence that came with being at university point to the importance they attached to emotive competences. While at school, validations from parents, teachers and peers can be sources of support, motivation, and stability; at university, lack of the expected validation from these sources often brings disappointment and emotional shock. Nevertheless, the participants showed that through self-reactiveness, they could overcome:

> *In my first year I couldn't get used to the life here. People were just cold and busy. … whether it was because they never noticed me, or they didn't like me. I was a bit nervous because I've tried to make some friends… then I found my study group.* ***Sihle***

Despite being cognitively prepared for life and studying at university, disruptions related to emotional well-being can be a hindrance to proper adjustment and academic performance:

> *I'm raised by a single parent - my mother. I wished my father were there. I never knew who my father was. I think [the] challenge I faced is not really being alone, as I and my friends find the support in each other to perform tops, but I will say not having the kind of support that I wanted from my dad was my pain…* ***Pearl***

Like any other students, the AHSs struggled with emotional challenges and with constructing an identity at university. They sought validation and acceptance from peers. The expectation of support from parents and the feeling that they belonged at university are important for emotional stability and adjustment (Friedlander et al., 2007). However, beyond a recognition of what they needed to do to adjust to the new environment, the AHSs also revealed that the transition changes could be positive experiences:

> *You know, schoolteachers are there to support you in school, you are not taught to take responsibility for your own… At university, you hit the ground [running] and meet challenges, and you grow very quickly because you must manage your life. And this was empowering for me.* ***Bonga***

The AHSs showed their capability of self-reactiveness to respond to the drastic changes during their transition in university. The literature suggests that students who are not exposed to different cultures at school level feel excluded and struggle to fit in at university (Swartz et al., 2018). However, it is significant that the participants experienced this transition positively. The AHSs' ability to focus success beyond unmet expectations and the challenges they faced and to take prompt self-initiated actions to overcome these was remarkable. This finding agrees with other studies that noted that the amount of time it takes for a new student to adjust to the university environment is critical for academic success (Mesidor & Sly, 2016).

> *During the scholarships award ceremony in 2015, that was in my first year, I received invite to come with my parents to the award ceremony. I only had one supportive parent. And that really challenged me. At times, I wish I could share all my achievements with both my parents…* ***Pearl***

Although Pearl did not get all the parental support she needed, she was able to look beyond the setback of unmet expectations and the lack of validation, which she valued. She perceives herself as capable of success and drew on her own self-validation for resilience:

> *You see, what I have learnt through the years is that it's enough to applaud myself... I've now learnt that I don't need to look for validation … So, I have moved from expecting validation… I realised that it's okay to affirm myself.* ***Pearl***

Resilience and intrinsic motivation are indicative of the self-agentic capability of self-reactiveness. A common attribute of the AHS is their affirmation of intrinsic motivation. They showed this in being motivated regardless of setbacks and their home environment:

> *…I don't really know that much about, um what it feels, I mean, both parents support side of things, but to be honest, I don't go looking for it either. … uh, no, no… I'm definitely not, not saying I don't need it, but it is probably more to do with me, as both going their separate ways affected how I see myself, and you know it. I resolve to see me succeed my own way, but I'm sure I could....* ***Nicole***

Emotional and social dependence on parent, teacher, and fellow students' validations can result in a positive self-construct (Wright-Scott 2018) for new students to bring with them to university. Experiences and transitioning from school to university can also disrupt this self-construct. However, the participants indicated that their intrinsic motivation, which underlies their high performance, was strong and enabled their persistence whether other expectations were met or not. Importantly, in their search for new identities, some of the AHS participants highlight the realisation that they are not entirely alone in their experiences as they found other peers like themselves.

Self-reflection

Students struggle to mediate the pressure of peer influences and acceptance. The AHSs showed their personal capacity to navigate independence and to make choices without parents or other adults weighing in and censoring:

> *In high school, I was with my grandmother. I was staying with my family, so now they were able to say do this, and you do so, in university you are alone.* ***Zinhle***

Independence equally implied that the student took responsibility for their learning and made their own decisions. Grappling with independence and the power to exercise one's own choices and take their own decisions can portend setbacks. Those poorly prepared for independence at university may find themselves unable to settle into studies (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). However, the study participants showed that they were capable of self-reflection on the course of action, and capable of correct choices and decisions. Lizzio (2006) affirms students' ability to self-reflect and make interactions and choices that balance study with other commitments as important to the quality of the university experience. The participants showed self-agency in their reflectivity. They showed a capability to self-regulate and balance studies with other commitments:

> *... now it is different, you own your choices and what you do… or you're strongly influenced by peers in doing the wrong things...* ***Nancy***

In exercising their capability for self-reflection, the AHSs show the self-agentic ability to manage their life on campus in the absence of family or parental guidance. Cauce and Gordon (2012, p. 3) observe that human agency entails "anticipating the effects of actions, estimating capabilities, regulating affect, and initiating effort." Absence of family or adult guidance can lead to self-doubt and pressure to succumb to negative peer influence:

> *There are times whereby now you are staying in a room and then your roommates maybe are going to a party. You will be like, oh my mother is not here, I'm making decisions on my own now. So that's very huge ...having some girls who'll say let's go do this. But you must look at yourself and say … why am I here? My study comes first...* ***Funeka***

The AHSs exercised self-reflection, which enabled them to look beyond immediate gratification and assess how the decisions they took advanced or subverted their goal of success:

> *…but here I was exposed to so many different aspects of life in uni [university]… It's a good thing that I'm exposed to these… I'm glad that I came here and didn't just stay, …at home you don't get these opportunities, to learn stuff and learn fast and deal with issues on your own...* ***Zinhle***

Cauce and Gordon (2012) note that Bandura's agentic theory positions humans as agents and controllers of their own behaviour. The AHSs' capability for self-reflection also means being proactive and self-regulating in utilizing their strengths whilst recognizing when to seek help:

> *With me, the thing is that if I see that I'm on the verge of getting these 70 marks, I'll tell myself I was the best I can, then I caution myself, even while I applaud myself that I can do better.* ***Nicole***

Bandura (2012) argues that human beings are intrinsically capable of being self-organizing, proactive, self-reflecting and self-regulating in their behaviours. The belief in oneself as a self-regulator (Bandura, 2012) that the participants in this study showed, attest to their self-agency and intrinsic capabilities, which they affirm as manifest in peers like them. Thus, it is a combination of their cognition of self-agency, negotiation of social networks of support, as well as peer bonding and support to each other, which some of the AHSs remarked as crucial, that furthered the individual and collective success of these high performing students.

Limitations

There are two main limitations to this study. First, it did not explore other influences of the AHSs' self-agency like structure, motivations induced by course or career choice and interests, and the university environment, among others. Second, a cross-sectional cohort comprising students at different levels from different schools and involving more than one university would have provided more robust findings. Nevertheless, this case study was designed with the aim of examining AHSs' experiences in the school so as to interpret their perceptions of self-agency. It sought to gain insight on the role of self-agency. How this role was interpreted by AHSs as enabling them to navigate the absence of structured academic support and attain their high performance was the key focus. Hence, the study centred on the perceived need to understand and inform practice, drawing on knowledge of how AHSs develop their agency and where it primarily emerges within the learning environment (Code, 2020).

Lessons from the findings and implications

The findings showed that AHSs did not attain their success by default. The AHSs showed robust strength and managed to achieve well. However, a simplistic view can underestimate the challenges to their success that they had to overcome, especially since some evidently needed the support of a peer group to sustain them. This need for support showed by the AHSs should provide important insight into how other students (particularly those who are underperforming) can be offered the means of developing their own self-efficacy (Bandura, 2000) while deriving help from their social networks and peers. Thus, even as the AHSs' experiences highlight their reliance on their individual strength, what is perhaps the most remarkable aspect of their stories is not simply finding strength in their belief in self-agency, but the agentic capabilities they exerted to self-regulate, influence, and encourage self and peers toward high performance. It is also important to recognise that the self-agentic capabilities, as the AHSs' experiences evidenced, emerged through their self-regulation amidst a sphere of both enabling and debilitating influences of their social networks of support. This included experiences of such influences from their friends, family, peers, and others.

There are two important lessons to draw from the findings. First, while not homogenous in aspects such as age, gender, social background, prior educational and work experience, prior schooling background, and family background, one aspect that homogenised the AHSs was their exercise of self-agency. Hitlin and Elder (2007, p. 173) suggest that researchers assume as "unexplained variance" such exercise of agency, which in this case, manifests as capability for enacting self-agency in pursuit of higher performance. The AHSs shared a common belief in the personal capability of human agency (Bandura 2006) and intentionally influenced their circumstances by their own actions to attain high performance. This affirms what we already know regarding the theory of self-efficacy (Pajares, 1997), as the foundation of human agency (Bandura, 1999) which is learnable (Artino, 2012). Second, AHSs had a clear goal right from the start of their university study, which is to succeed despite what they saw as barriers to success. They pursued this goal with purposeful and consistent, self-motivated decisions and actions. Importantly, some affirmed this goal with peers and together invested in the mutual peer bonding support experiences that contributed to their collective success. It is pertinent to focus on the important way that those AHSs connected to each other and exerted self-agency in mutual peer bonding experiences to encourage their high performance can be useful to support mechanisms for other students in this context.

These AHSs' experiences of collaborative peer bonding, which seem to be a source of academic support improvisation for them, worked well. They benefited from this way of pulling together and enabling their individual and collective attainment of high performance. Thriving together also reflects their collective agentic capabilities. Hence, a willingness to see peers as collaborators and not competitors partly explains the AHSs' success. This deviates from the more competitive and individualistic perspective to success (Sommet et al., 2015) that is dominant and permeates some cultures of higher education.

Again, while these AHSs have found their own support mechanism, there may be ways of helping others by drawing on useful insights from their experiences. Manik (2017) remarks that Ubuntu is a critical component to student support in the South African universities. Nevertheless, how students bring and embody Ubuntu, as collective self-agency that can be a key strength of students' support system at university, has not been adequately studied or harnessed to benefit them. Ubuntu is a missing concept or at least one that is not institutionally sufficiently explored in responding to challenges in South African higher education (Pitsoe & Letseka, 2020). Its usefulness in conceptualizing structured academic support practices for student success in the universities could be unlocked to devise strategies to develop their agency and enable their support to one another.

Accordingly, there are several key implications of the findings for student academic support policy, practice, and research. First, the challenge of a persistently low completion rate necessitates rethinking student academic development in terms of policy. To provide students with meaningful, dignifying support that values their prior knowledges and aspirations and to allow them an active stake in the academic support experience, it is important to make the support inclusive. AHSs have academic support needs that are not given attention in the institution's structured support programs, which makes them feel excluded and causes them to seek alternative support from within their own strengths. It is necessary to recognize that these students derived strength from mediation by themselves from the labyrinth of their social networks of support, some finding mutual peer bonding that bolstered their self-efficacy and goalsetting attributes. Likewise, it is necessary to find ways not only to acknowledge this strength but also to use it to further both AHSs' development and the development of other students. Reconceptualised and practicable augmentation of current student academic support mechanisms in the university are required. This could be by way of holistic and streamlined practices, such that support the students to enable their personal and collective strengths in fostering the self-efficacy skills and attributes that are essential for attaining high performance.

A second implication of the findings is that students' experiences of support practices need to be transformative to lead to collective academic success. Bandura (2006, p. 165) emphasises that "people do not live their lives in individual autonomy. Indeed, many of the outcomes they seek are achievable only through interdependent efforts." Support that is inclusive should target performing and underperforming students as a collective. Instilling a discourse of inclusive academic support practices in this context entails recognising Ubuntu in and through its processes and approach in order to leverage the students' collective agentic capabilities. The intersection of self-agency, social networks and peer influences, and peer mutual support as recounted by the participants could therefore be the key to transformative practice. Hence transformative strategies of inclusive support would require multiple approaches to emphasise success as learnable academic experiences that relate to student well-being and sense of belonging (Menkor et al, 2021; Strayhorn, 2018). Finding ways of supporting all students to develop their own self-agency by recognizing and utilizing support from their social networks and peers might be central to such strategies.

Thus, the AHSs' experiences could be useful to evolving a strengths-based student support practice in the university. Strengths-based interactions are powerful means for achieving impactful student academic experiences (Soria et al, 2017). As opposed to focusing on individual weaknesses in remedial approaches, this would imply that students participate proactively in mutual support groups underpinned by a collective sense of self that derives from Ubuntu. Furthermore, such could be pivoted using structured academic support programs that include all students whereby AHSs and their student peers are supported to connect and interact and learn to develop their own self-agency and self-regulation that the findings highlighted as enabling high performance. This might be one way to use Ubuntu to activate inclusive and strength-based transformative academic support experiences that enhance student success in the university.

Lastly, further research that explores the role of Ubuntu in students' enactment of their interdependent support in a 'collective-self-agency' towards enhancing their success in South African universities, is needed.

Concluding thought

Providing academic support to help undergraduate students to succeed in university is an effective strategy to use to benefit all students. But unfortunately, exclusionary and underperformance-centred academic support practices in the South African universities' context curtail this strategy. The failure to include AHSs in student academic support program of the university is problematic not only because it ignores high performing students' support needs, which are not given attention in the program, but also it limits scope of support opportunities for their underperforming peers. Again, such a program fails to offer all students opportunity to draw on their collective strengths to support each other to develop individual self-agency and cultivate important attributes and efficacy beliefs they needed for high performance. The findings of the present study align with the evidence that these efficacy beliefs for success are learnable (Artino, 2012) and affirm current emphasis that all students are potential high performers (Grosser & Nel, 2019), especially whereby they benefit from support of their social networks and learn from peers to develop self-agency.

Drawing on their expressed agentic capabilities of encouraging self and peers toward high performance, the AHSs participants in this study attest to the relevance of the concept - Ubuntu to student support discourse of the university, and in particular, the discourse of academic support and student success. While the AHSs, albeit without structured support, managed to overcome their challenges and to succeed, their recognition of need for support from their social networks and peers is notable. However, what is also important to stress is that these students mediated their self-agency to enable support to each other. Then again, in a context where some (Fataar, 2018) would argue that institutional discourse and practices are exclusionary in the way they hinder students from achieving, it becomes important to pay attention to how students themselves support their high performance and succeed. Hence student academic support cannot be viewed from the lens of common students' weaknesses alone, but also what constitutes and fosters their common strengths should matter. Furthermore, it would be cursory to ascribe the AHSs' academic support experiences to purely their in-university exclusion from support that led them to exploiting other avenues including finding help through peer bonding. The critical role of non-university based academic support or lack of same, for example from their social networks including family and friends, further underscores the relevance of Ubuntu in these students' overall success experiences.

Therefore, we reason that academic support in the university needs to be reconceptualized, drawing on an epistemic frame for understanding self-agency from the concept Ubuntu. Ubuntu, as a way that fosters contextualised grasp of the concept 'self' as being and becoming through, with and within a *collective-self dynamic,* is useful to academic support strategies to utilize the students' strengths to normalise high performance and success. As this study's findings suggest, such a dynamic would change the support experiences to be inclusive, reciprocal, proactive and enabling; permitting the student to perform at full potential.

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