

African Students who Excel in South African Higher Education: Retro(Pro)Spectivity and Co-Regulation of Learning

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Abstract

In addition to being more likely to fail and dropout, African students are also less likely to succeed academically, let alone excel while doing so. In a critical move against a dominant deficit, failure, and drop-out discourse that surrounds African students in South African higher education, this paper reports on a study that explored exceptional academic achievement in African students. Specifically, using the data production strategies of auto-photography and photo-elicitation, eight academically exceptional undergraduate African students in a South African university explored the (academic) activities that were associated with their academically exceptional outcomes. Interpretative thematic analyses of the auto-photographical accounts highlighted not only how the participants excelled academically, but also who they were becoming in the process. Data from three of the eight participants is drawn upon in this paper to introduce the notion of retro(pro)spectivity, and to show how co-regulation of learning can be centralised when explaining an exceptional academic achievement trajectory for African students in South African higher education.

Keywords: African students, co-regulation of learning, throughput and exceptional academic achievement

Introduction

A major objective for the post-apartheid South African higher education system has been on concurrently increasing access to the system and on

attending to matters of throughput and success of its enrolled students (Department of Education (DOE) 1997; National Planning Commission 2012; Lewin & Mawoyo 2014). This objective resonates not only with wider international trends in massification of higher education systems, but also the increasing social justice transformation goals of an expanding system (Dawson *et al.* 2013). Specifically, the objective has facilitated the increased access of African¹, Coloured, and Indian² students in South African higher education (Council on Higher Education (CHE) 2010), with the proportion of African students enrolled in higher education growing from 49% in 1995 to 68% in 2011. Despite these gains in access, current South African higher education is characterised as a system of low throughput, poor academic achievement, and high levels of student failure (Department of Higher Education and Training (DOHET) 2013). Of most concern are findings that poor academic achievement and failure are more pronounced for African students. In 2011 for example, higher education course success rates³ were lowest for African students at 73%, and these rates peaked for White students at 83% (CHE 2013b). In explaining the relative disparities in course success rates, the CHE reasons that educational disadvantage and underpreparedness for higher education are ‘commonly associated with African students, given the poor quality of schooling experienced in most African communities’ (CHE 2013a: 58). Although some students may indeed be educationally disadvantaged and underprepared for higher education, the terms have become conflated with notions of race and academic underachievement, and

¹ In this paper, the term ‘African’ is used to refer to black African students who are South Africa. This terminology is consistent with that used in current policies and publications from the Department of Higher Education and Training, the Council on Higher Education, and Statistics South Africa. The authors acknowledge that the term ‘black’ is sometimes used to denote all population groups other than white (Council on Higher Education 2010).

² Although the authors of this paper do not necessarily endorse the use of racial categorisation, it is recognised that these categories have utility when conceptualising socio-economic and educational redress and transformation in the South African context.

³ Course success rates reflect a pass to enrolment ratio for courses in a specific academic year (CHE 2013a).

this has contributed to a deficient positioning of African students as being less likely to excel academically (Smit 2012). Race, educational disadvantage, and educational underpreparedness are potentially problematic, nuanced, and political constructs which feature regularly in higher education transformation discourses.

In this paper, the authors reject a deficit mode of conceptualising African students, which foregrounds an underpreparedness for the demands associated with excelling in higher education (Marshall & Case 2010; Smit 2012). The paper signals a critical turn towards exploring exceptional academic achievement alongside academic failure and drop-out, and a more specific turn towards exploring how African students may negotiate exceptional academic achievement outcomes in higher education. This paper explores the ways in which academically exceptional⁴ African students (from relatively disadvantaged and underprepared educational backgrounds) access, succeed, and excel in the South African higher education environment. Importantly, we recognise that not all African students are educationally underprepared or disadvantaged by virtue of their racial classification. However, as identified earlier, patterns of racial educational (under)achievement exist, and notwithstanding the systemic dynamics that contribute to these patterns, this paper provides a perspective on how exceptional academic achievement can be activated and sustained in spite of these patterns.

Evolving Conceptions of Exceptional Academic Achievement: A Shift from Self-regulated Learning to Co-regulated Learning?

Self-regulated learning (SRL) (Bandura 1986; Zimmerman 1989) has been

⁴ The term academically exceptional (and exceptional academic achievement) is used in this paper to refer to academic achievement outcomes that are higher than average, and may result in various merit awards. These awards may include module distinctions, certificates of merit for individual modules, Dean's commendation for a semester performance, high credit weighted averages across modules in a semester, and a degree being conferred *cum laude/summa cum laude*).

hailed in recent research on how higher education students can achieve and excel academically (Torenbeek *et al.* 2013; Rosário *et al.* 2015). When students are engaged in the process of SRL, they can be described as *wilfully* directing their thoughts, emotions and behaviours towards the attainment of specific learning outcomes (Schunk & Zimmerman 2008). Therefore, SRL involves a student motivating him/herself by activating and maintaining both intrapsychological (i.e., thoughts and emotions) and inter-psychological (e.g., behaviours) processes. It is the relationships between the intra- and inter-psychological processes that have become central in explaining the path towards exceptional academic achievement in (higher) education. For example, in her study on successful South African dentistry students, McMillan (2010) showed how positive motivation mediated the use of SRL techniques and subsequent academic attainment. If students experience positive internal states or feelings (e.g., high self-efficacy and high outcome expectancy) they are more likely to initiate and maintain a series of persistent learning actions, positive learning outcomes, and subsequent academic achievement outcomes (Nausheen & Richardson 2013). Self-regulation has also been associated with the positive psychological notion of flourishing, which when combined are likely to yield favourable academic achievement outcomes (Van Zyl & Rothmann 2012).

Although SRL involves interpersonal interaction, it relies on the assumption that there is indeed a distinguishable ‘self’, and that one can ‘... intentionally make things happen by one’s actions’ (Bandura 2001: 2). In contrast, monistic world views such as those frequently recognised in African cultures, blur notions of self and culture, and prioritise collective identities and action (Mkhize 2004). Moreover, McCaslin and Hickey (2001) critique the primary purpose of SRL, identifying that it functions to enable self-control, personal freedom and *individual* (academic) achievement. In the current South African higher environment, encouraging SRL in students (i.e., individual goals and individual achievement) could be conceptualised as being incongruent with collective goals of transformation (Munro 2014).

The term ‘co-regulated learning’ appears to have first been used by McCaslin (1996: 14) to describe the dynamic *relationship* between teacher, student, and opportunity. Positioned with a sociocultural theoretical framework, McCaslin (1996) initially highlighted the role that the abovementioned relationship plays as eventually assisting students to self-regulate, and at the same time to develop an emergent academic identity of

achievement. Co-regulated learning prioritises and enables social and cultural participation, and alludes to ‘an evolving integration of self and other through engagement of activities that inform personal meanings’ (McCaslin 2009: 137). This perspective on learning brings to the fore questions pertaining to *who* a student is becoming in their academic achievement trajectory, and how this is culturally situated. In effect, a co-regulatory conception of learning signals the primacy of collaborative (and therefore social, cultural, and historical) processes and emergent academic identity in learning activity. Whereas SRL was earlier proposed to enable self-control for the purposes of individual academic achievement, co-regulated learning is proposed to enable self-control, for the purposes of ‘socially meaningful activity’ (McCaslin & Hickey 2001: 235). Along similar lines, Nell (2014: 82) recently identified that the most important sources of life meaning for South African university students tended to be ‘relationships, hope, education, achievement and religion’. It is suggested that a co-regulated learning perspective (as socially meaningful activity) has value in a diverse higher education environment where equity and transformation aims co-occur with those of high academic achievement and success.

Methodology

The data used in this paper was drawn from the qualitative part of the first author’s mixed-method doctoral study. The quantitative part of the doctoral study identified how African students were significantly less likely to excel academically when compared to students from other race and socio-economic groups (Munro 2014). In addition to national success indicators, the findings from the quantitative phase of the doctoral study informed the purposive recruitment of academically exceptional African students into the second qualitative part of the study.

Sampling and Data Production Methods

A group of academically exceptional African students nearing completion of their bachelors’ degrees at a South African university participated in focus group discussions, an auto-photography exercise, and photo-elicitation interviews with the first author. After ethical clearance to conduct the larger

study was granted by the university Human and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, a list of 782 potential undergraduate university scholarship recipients was purposively used to identify academically exceptional African students. Email invites to participate in the study were sent to the 60 academically exceptional African students on the scholarship list, and of these, 18 responded and took part in focus group discussions on the topic of exceptional academic achievement. Of these 18 participants, eight then expressed an interest to continue with the auto-photography and photo-elicitation interview phases of the research study. A data set derived from three participants who produced particularly rich accounts was drawn upon for this paper.

Visual research methods feature in previous sociocultural research (Pearson & Ralph 2007; Van der Riet 2008; O'Brien *et al.* 2012), and have certain theoretical and epistemological roots. Specifically, visual methods (especially Photovoice) can be linked to Paulo Freire's critical and emancipatory education philosophy (Wang & Redwood-Jones 2001), and were therefore identified as congruent with this study's positioning in a transforming higher education environment. In addition, the research participants were identified as being underrepresented within the phenomenon of interest (i.e., exceptional academic achievement), and a methodology that was participant-driven and potentially empowering was therefore deemed suitable. In auto-photography, a research participant takes photographs in response to a research prompt (Noland 2006), and then leads a photo-elicitation interview with the researcher about his/her auto-photography collection (Meo 2010). In this study, participants were provided with digital cameras and prompted to take at least ten photographs that reflected their current academic activity, as well as ten photographs that reflected their historical academic activity. The current and historical focus of the auto-photography prompt was intentional as it facilitated methodological congruency with the sociocultural (and therefore historical) theoretical framework.

Consent to participate in this study was continually negotiated throughout the research process. Moreover, in visual research methods, research participants may sometimes take photographs that reflect other people (i.e., human subjects of a photograph). Following Wang and Redwood-Jones' (2001) guidelines, all research participants were inducted into the ethics of visual research methodologies, and were required to obtain

the written informed consent of any potential human subjects of a photograph prior to taking the photograph. This consent also included a photographic release and reproduction permission clause, allowing the use of the photographs for research dissemination and publication purposes. To protect the identities of the participants who feature in this paper, pseudonyms have been used. In addition, key parts of the photographs used in this paper have been blurred to protect the identities of the subjects of the photographs.

Data Analysis

The data set used for this paper was comprised of transcripts from two 90-minute focus group discussions, 31 photographs, and transcripts from the individual photo-elicitation interviews that the three selected participants engaged in with the first author. A data-driven interpretative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006) was firstly undertaken. This was then complemented by an analysis driven by overarching theoretical constructs of SRL, socioculturalism, and co-regulated learning. Initial analytic steps involved immersion in the data, this being constituted through the transcription process, organisation of digital photographs in folders within NVIVO, reading and re-reading of transcripts, and setting up and viewing digital versions of the photographs. Coding and inducing themes from the data were assisted via a line-by-line reading of the transcripts, with a concurrent focus on words, parts of words, and extended statements (Chenail 2012). The same principle was applied to the photographs, where photographs were analysed as units, with an awareness of potential sub-units within photographs, and relationships between photographs. Given the sociocultural framing of the study, it was important to ensure that the photographs were analysed within their contexts (Mitchell & de Lange 2011), and that analytical questions were asked around ‘what we think they (photographs) show us ... but also what they don’t (can’t) show us’ (Spence 1988: 92). Relationships between themes and codes were identified and elaborated, and photographic-infused accounts of the participants were generated by the researchers. Descriptive validity (Maxwell 2002) of the study was enhanced through participant verification and editing (i.e., member checking) of the photographic-infused accounts.

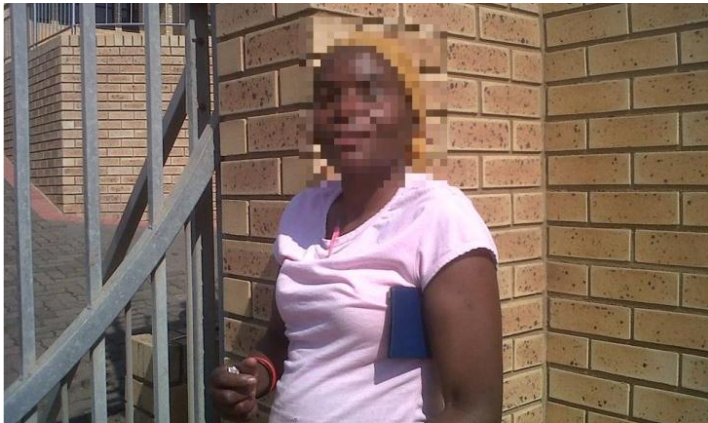
Findings and Discussion

The following findings and discussion section first describes three high achieving African students. In addition to revealing how the students excelled academically through several task-oriented strategies, the descriptions also highlight a concurrent retrospective and prospective orientation – which we came to refer to as *retro(pro)spectivity*. Therefore, in this paper, retro(pro)spectivity refers to a student’s capacity to maintain a concurrent retrospective (i.e., past) and prospective (i.e., future) awareness and focus. It is this concurrent retro(pro)spectivity that is theorised to contribute to a student’s high academic achievement outcomes. Furthermore, what became as compelling during the data analysis was *who* the students depicted themselves becoming, how this was co-regulated, and how this was located socio-historically. The following section highlights how and why retro(pro)spectivity and co-regulation of learning may be central in an exceptional academic achievement trajectory. Raw data is provided to characterise the nature and dynamics of retro(pro)spectivity and co-regulation of learning, while a theoretical discussion and integration of the data intensifies towards the end of the section.

Sihle - Foundations from the Past and Future Freedoms

At the time of data production, Sihle was a 29-year-old Bachelor of Science

Photograph 1. Awaiting freedom (taken by Sihle, and reproduced with Sihle’s permission, and the permission of the subject of the photograph).



student, specialising in Mathematics and Statistics. Although he succeeded in his final school examinations, economic circumstances necessitated that he seek employment directly thereafter. It was only ten years after completing his secondary schooling that Sihle was awarded government funding and a place to study in higher education. Sihle was a resident student at the university where this study took place, and his family members lived in various towns in South Africa. Sihle presented a photograph of his mother (Photograph 1) for discussion at the start of his photo-elicitation interview.

... this is where she is working (as a domestic worker). So (she is) ... just outside. She was waiting for them to actually open up for her and so, when I came, I found her outside. I didn't even go in. So I feel like she is not free, you know? She is not free. This is not what I want for her (Sihle PEI 8: 775). And she has to wait. You can see that (.) that she is begging for (.) she needs this work to survive, you know. I want her to be free. I want her to work if she wants to. But for me, if I finish, I do everything correctly, I want her to stay with me. I want her to be free. I want her to say finally, 'I am happy' (Sihle PEI 8: 805).

Although Photograph 1 prompted discussion around his mother's future 'freedom' as being dependent on his academic achievements ('if I finish, I do everything correctly'), Sihle classified the photograph as part of his historical academic activity. He explained how his mother was 'someone who has been through a lot her entire life' (Sihle PEI 9: 329), this including the death of her partner (Sihle's father) as well as some other difficult life and family circumstances. These circumstances led to Sihle being raised by his paternal grandmother (his 'foundation' (Sihle PEI 8: 409)), who provided him with principles to live his life by. When further discussing the historical 'foundations' in his life, Sihle also identified an academic mentor from his school years. Ironically, the academic mentor was not a school teacher because 'I was teaching myself in matric (.) I didn't have any (school) teacher' (Sihle PEI 8: 120). Sihle's academic mentor apparently taught him 'the foundation of approaching (mathematical) things' (Sihle PEI 8: 965), which became particularly important during his final school year, and which he continued to find useful during his university studies. It was perhaps the roles of his grandmother (his foundation) and self-selected mathematics

mentor who enabled Sihle to overcome the adverse educational circumstances he found himself in.

Sihle's repeated instances to future freedoms (for himself and his mother), past foundations (from his grandmother and mentor), and the academic and personal roles that key people played in Sihle's life reinforced that he was both thoughtful about the future, and acutely aware of what grounded him in the past. Moreover, he seemed especially attuned to the way in which role-players from his past depended on, had influence over, and mediated between his past and future academic achievements. Sihle's academic identity was high-achievement oriented, integrated with conceptions of others, and primarily oriented towards setting his mother free.

Sanele - Hungry for Improvements

When he participated in the study, Sanele was a 22 year-old university resident student in the final year of a four-year Bachelor of Pharmacy degree. He initially started his university studies in a Bachelor of Science degree. Sanele's older sister and younger brother resided in a remote town in South Africa, and his parents had passed away while he was still at school.

... you know where you are coming from and you are hungry for improvements ... from the very first year I knew myself that I was disadvantaged. So, I just changed my mind-set to give myself the positive drive (Sanele PEI 6: 932, 983).

Sanele relayed a particularly resilient account of disadvantage, positioning his disadvantage as part of the force behind his drive and academic achievement. Although he acknowledged the resource constraints that impacted on him and other university students (e.g., limited funds to buy prescribed textbooks), he also identified the ways in which the university study environment surpassed the environment he studied in when at school. For example, he emphasised the number of textbooks available in the university library; how he made use of these textbooks in his studies, and he asserted that 'there is no excuse to say 'I don't have a textbook ... that's why my marks are dropping'' (Sanele PEI 6: 919). Two complementary photographs from Sanele's auto-photography collection also reflected a

tension between his past study environment (Photograph 2) and present study environment (Photograph 3).

Photograph 2. (Left) Workplace; Photograph 3. (Right) Daily routine (taken by Sanele, and reproduced with his permission).



Sanele produced a photograph of the space where he used to study when he was at school (i.e. Photograph 2, a photograph of the kitchen table), and of the space where he studies at university (i.e. Photograph 3). In drawing comparisons between the two photographs, Sanele remarked that the space depicted in Photograph 3 is ‘...advanced, the environment is a little bit enhanced ... It’s a quiet environment, curtains, it’s just the height, the chair height, and everything. It’s conducive to studying’ (Sanele PEI 6: 845). Sanele did not describe the space where he studied when at school (i.e. Photograph 2) as not conducive to studying. He titled the photograph ‘Workplace’, and characterised it as a convenient table in the kitchen, the warmest part of the house, and a place where his younger brother and older sister would also work. However, the photograph and space was also a painful reminder of who was missing from the ‘Workplace’ (i.e., his parents). Sanele described it as ‘... sort of like salt in a wound’ (PEI 6: 466), highlighting how his historical study space was imbued with an experience of parental loss, and the presence of an absence.

In addition to an awareness of the practical role and emotional significance of physical space in his studies, Sanele also identified how important parts of his academic efforts and achievements were mediated through ‘socialising’.

We sometimes tend to discuss things just as a social gathering when we're chilling in the quad. We maybe sometimes raise important points. We're not always taking academically but now and then we talk about those very important academic things of which most people benefit (Sanele FGD 2: 330).

Photograph 4. Socialising (taken by Sanele, and reproduced with the permission of the photograph subjects)



(Photograph 4) is ... us hanging out it was just before the lecture started so we just hang out, we were waiting for the lecturer. So, just hang out, talk, get to know each other, break the ice and stuff like that. Break the ice, you know. It's a way of bonding and when we bond we are able to help each like achieve more (Sanele PEI 6: 1043).

In addition to describing how his disadvantage motivated him to work hard in his studies, Sanele also emphasised the co-regulatory role that his peers (and socialising) played in his and their academic achievements. He explained how for him, socialising enabled important academic conversations to take place 'of which most people benefit' (Sanele FGD 2: 330).

Jabu - Past Educational Migration and Future Flight

When she participated in the study, Jabu was 26 years old and studying towards a Bachelor of Social Work degree. After completing her secondary education, Jabu started a Bachelor of Science degree at another South African university, however she did not complete this qualification. She then ‘stayed at home’ for three years before restarting her higher education studies at the institution where this study took place. Similar to Sihle and Sanele, Jabu was a university resident student, and her family resided in a different town.

Jabu first tabled Photograph 5 for discussion during her interview. Photograph 5 is a meta-photograph (i.e., a present day photograph of a photograph from the past) of Jabu during her Grade 9 year, and she entitled the photograph ‘Model C school’⁵ because it signalled ‘the year my parents decided to take me to a better school’ (Jabu PEI 3: 181).

Photograph 5. Model C school (taken by Jabu, and reproduced with her permission)



Technically, ‘Model C schools’ no longer exist in South Africa; however they continue to be relatively well resourced, largely due to existing infrastructure, higher school fees, and their capacity to attract funding from

⁵ During the Apartheid era, Model C schools were reserved for white learners and were better resourced and funded by the government (Cross *et al.* 2010).

parent-governing bodies. In the past two decades, ex-Model C schools have experienced increasing enrolment by African learners whose parents have been able to afford the school fees (Msila 2005). Jabu initially presented her past educational migration positively, highlighting the facilities and services she did not have access to in the ‘black⁶ schools’ (PEI 2: 185) that she attended in her foundation and primary school years.

... it did a lot for my education. Cos, in black schools ... corporal punishment was still coming out ... In Model C school, you go there, you don’t get hiding. It was nice. You get support if you are struggling. You get tutors. You got extra activities like culture or sport (Jabu PEI 2: 186).

Although Jabu was aware of the educational opportunities that the migration to a former Model C school offered her, she also revealed some of the personal and social difficulties associated with the migration. ‘It was a huge transformation ... cos I remember when I first went there, I struggled academically, cos I couldn’t adjust. Everything seemed so hard’ (Jabu PEI 3: 189). She also added that –

... when you go to a white school ... some of the friends back away because you are now in a Model C school, and they start calling you a coconut (black on the outside, but white on the inside) and stuff (Jabu PEI: 248).

Although there was a high interpersonal and emotional cost for Jabu during her past educational migration, she acknowledged ‘that when I look back now it was the pathway of having a better life ... (that gave me) the strength to go to university twice’ (Jabu PEI 3: 250). Although Jabu’s first university enrolment led to early drop-out, her more recent university achievements resulted in her being selected to participate in an international study exchange programme. This selection required a passport photograph (see Photograph 6), which Jabu chose to position within her current auto-

⁶ Although inconsistent with the official documented terminology used in South African public institutions (e.g., government, education), Jabu and the other research participants denoted their race group as ‘black’.

photography collection (i.e., reflective of her current academic activity at university).

Photograph 6. Best student (Taken by Jabu, and reproduced with her permission as owner and subject of the photograph).



Jabu asserted that the passport photograph (and selection for the exchange programme) symbolised ‘that the sky is the limit (. . .) I can do anything I want to do, I can be anything I want to be, and I can go anywhere I want to’ (Jabu PEI 3: 396). Jabu’s positive outcome expectancy for a future was grounded in a strong personal drive.

I always push myself. I always compete with myself ... I think it also goes with my drive to like always be doing something cos I’m always doing something. I’m always studying. Now I can’t get a 50 (percent) when I’m always on my books ... I always say this, ‘If you’re an eagle you don’t need to go down and eat with the chickens’ (Jabu FGD 3: 469).

Although Jabu was clearly self-regulated as a learner (always pushing and competing with herself), her high academic aspirations and

achievement (flying high like an eagle) were not solitary activities, but seemed to depend on studying with a group of peers.

And we study together for exams ... since first year ... I don't know if I can say I owe them, but in a way I do because I do study by myself but when I'm with them ... (I) explain some concepts ... (and) they will show me other things I haven't noticed ... I don't know if its karma or what, but most of the things we do together comes out in exams! (Jabu PEI 3: 653)

Amidst a strong future orientation of what her exceptional academic achievement could yield ('the sky is the limit'), Jabu was also acutely aware of how this future was grounded in her past, and spiritually connected to her peer group's study and co-regulatory processes. Jabu's past educational migration had significant interpersonal and cultural meaning (and loss) for her, and also has larger socio-political meaning. For Jabu, achieving academically involved some cultural alienation and loss, however it also signalled a powerful opportunity for her to engage and excel in an academic struggle. Similar to Sihle and Sanele, her academic struggle was distinctly interpersonal, and involved an integration of self and other as she formed an academic identity.

Cross Case Analyses and Integration

A self-regulatory perspective has featured prominently in explanations of learning and (exceptional) academic achievement in higher education. However, the 'self-dependence' of this perspective may offer limited explanatory potential in contexts where learning opportunities to develop and express self-dependence are not equally distributed. In contrast, McCaslin's (2009) sociocultural model of co-regulation and emergent academic identity highlights the tensions between personal, social, and cultural sources of influence in learning and academic achievement. The model proposes that the abovementioned tensions bring about struggle, opportunity, and negotiation, and that these interpersonal activities are what facilitate learning and learning outcomes. The sociocultural theoretical lenses described in this paper contributed to how the researchers came to articulate the role of retro(pro)spectivity and co-regulation of learning in the exceptional academic achievement trajectories for Sihle, Sanele, and Jabu.

Retro(pro)spectivity

The research participants' own and others' historical and sociocultural struggles (i.e., retrospective awareness) appeared inextricably linked to a concurrent future (prospective) orientation. Sihle integrated his mother's persistent life and employment struggles in his photographic representations, seeing these as his to resolve through his current academic achievements and future career prospects. He foresaw his future as setting his mother free from her historical and present day life circumstances, with the purpose of eventually making her happy. Sanele's past and present study spaces were reflective of a practical environmental structuring strategy, as well as an emotional loss. The photographs of these spaces brought to the fore how a concurrent retrospective and prospective orientation can be useful in understanding the drive towards exceptional academic achievement. Jabu's historical struggle of educational and cultural migration (reflected in the past-present meta-photograph she produced) was indeed her own individual struggle, however, it is also reflective of a larger socio-political struggle of unequal race-based education in South Africa. Importantly, although this inequality is grounded in the past, it persists in the present and future, and is possibly reflective of Jabu's retro(pro)spectivity. Similarly, for Sihle, although the absence of a Mathematics teacher at his school may have been coincidental, it is also reflective of a larger socio-political history and struggle. Unlike Jabu who migrated to a 'Model C School' during her secondary education, Sihle attended a 'black school' until completion, many of which are still beset with poorly qualified mathematics teachers and high levels of teacher absenteeism (Bush *et al.* 2010; Ndimande 2013).

Although there are likely to be a range of other interrelated factors which influenced Sihle's, Sanele's, and Jabu's exceptional academic achievement, they seemed to communicate a retro(pro)spectivity in their interactions with the primary researcher, and this was reiterated across the multiple forms of data they produced (Braun & Clarke 2006).

Co-regulation of Learning

In addition, the central and co-regulatory roles of other people in the research participants' emerging (and exceptional) academic identities were resonant within the data set. From a social cognitive self-regulatory perspective, it is likely that Sihle, Sanele, and Jabu displayed high levels of self-efficacy and

outcome expectancy, which in turn would have driven their academic activities and outcomes. However, these internalised forms of motivation seemed secondary to the interpersonal motivational drivers that became apparent in the participants' historical opportunities to struggle academically and emotionally, and opportunities to negotiate this struggle. Seemingly unable to rely on the teaching and educational resources within his school, Sihle sought out his own academic mentor and co-regulated learning opportunities. This opportunity would have in turn enabled Sihle to negotiate and struggle with foundational mathematical principles. Sanele identified how informal socialising could incorporate an important co-regulatory academic function, while Jabu recognised the opportunity (and cost) of her own educational migration, and the varying co-regulated learning opportunities that this would have afforded her.

The present study facilitated a conceptualisation of exceptional academic achievement in African students, primarily from a sociocultural perspective of co-regulated learning and emergent academic identity. The conceptualisation reminds us how academic exceptionality, learning, and the completion of higher education studies, cannot be separated from who students are, who they were in the past, and who they are in the process of becoming in the future. However, our collective pasts also cannot be categorically deterministic in establishing our successes and failures within the higher education environment. The paper has illustrated how it is possible to be other than what is expected or produced in the higher education environment. Moreover, an academic identity is necessarily shared with and for others from multiple cultural-historical contexts. It is an identity that is in dialogue with the challenges of the past, the immediacy of present academic interactions, and perhaps most importantly with how the potential for future success could re-direct one's life. It is the socially meaningful activity that is rooted in a sociocultural past, present, and future that may help African students excel in South African higher education.

Concluding Remarks

In contrast to prevailing higher education discourses of academic underachievement and conflated notions of race, educational disadvantage, and academic achievement, this paper signals a critical turn towards the exploration of exceptional academic achievement, and specifically to this

level of achievement in African students. The findings and discussion illustrate how exceptional academic achievement can be conceptualised as residing both inside and outside the individual, and located across a non-linear past and future interpersonal activity. Massified higher education environments are likely to benefit from conceptions of (exceptional) academic achievement that extend beyond how individuals excel academically. Insights into who high-achieving students are becoming, and for what purposes, are likely to reflect the kind of socially and culturally transformed spaces that higher education institutions should be becoming. In this way, future research could explore the role of collective and emotional past struggles in current and future academic achievement. At a microanalytic level, an investigation into culture specific forms of co-regulated learning in South African higher education could provide insight into the moment-by-moment processes that become manifest in collaborative learning tasks and exceptional academic achievement outcomes.

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