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Realizing potential: retrospective narratives of successful black female university students from disadvantaged backgrounds

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2016

http://hdl.handle.net/10539/21820

Fish, Tebogo (2016) Realizing potential: retrospective narratives of successful black female university students from disadvantaged backgrounds, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, <http://hdl.handle.net/10539/21820>

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Abstract

Transformation initiatives in South African higher education institutions are informed by literature which has thus far explicated the high failure and attrition rates amongst Black university students with discourses asserting that the major contributing factors are disadvantage and language of origin. The current study endeavoured to investigate the learning histories of a group of high achieving Black female university students from socio- economically or educationally disadvantaged backgrounds in order to inform current transformation initiatives at South African higher education institutions. Seven female students who had previously participated in an academic development programme in the faculty of humanities at the University of the Witwatersrand, the Reaching for Excellent Achievement Programme (REAP), volunteered to participate in this study. Despite being second language students and coming from less advantaged backgrounds, these students achieved excellent academic marks and acceptance into various post- graduate programmes. Semi- structured interviews with an episodic narrative style were conducted. The method of data analysis found to be most appropriate for this study was thematic content analysis. The results revealed the importance of the influence of high school teachers on students' perceptions of school and school subjects; the pace of adjusting to university; the significance of effective lecturing styles; the formation of an academic identity; acquiring academic literacy; and the importance of having social support (especially from university lecturers) for the successful academic performance of the participants in this study. This study suggests that perhaps there is more than individual effort that is required for academic success at university level. Further, it suggests that higher education institutions need to improve the lecturing styles of their lecturers, should ensure that all students are able to successfully adjust to the university environment early in their first year of study, should offer compulsory academic literacy courses to all first year students, and should consider providing all students with mentors who are university personnel.