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Against all odds: The role of 'community cultural wealth' in overcoming challenges as a black African woman

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Abstract

Academic challenges for students from 'previously disadvantaged backgrounds' do not necessarily begin at university, but start during their school years, as was the case for the author. This article is in three parts. Firstly, the author presents a brief narration of the challenges faced before she went to university, which influenced her undergraduate progress. Secondly, the author describes the key challenges she experienced as an undergraduate in particular courses and in a postgraduate education course. Thirdly, she focuses on the challenges she encountered during her first work experience as a black African PhD student and tutor on an education campus. In particular, the author focuses on key challenging incidents and how she approached and engaged with them to enable a successful journey through university as a student and young academic staff member. In the form of a first-person narration, the qualitative research method of 'testimony' is used to reflect critically on her academic and professional journeys as a black African woman in the post-apartheid era. Testimony was chosen because it provides an epistemic lens to support an analytical inquiry into experiences and intellectual understanding of self and community.

Keywords: community cultural wealth, challenges, black African woman, education, odds, overcome

INTRODUCTION

It is not a secret that in South Africa, black Africans experienced inferior education under the apartheid system (Kallaway 2002). The quality of education was different for each of the four different racially defined groups in the country (ie, whites, black Africans, coloureds and Indians) (Sennett, Finchilescu, Gibson and Strauss 2003). The 1994 democratically elected government implemented some improvements through the establishment of one education system and the attempt to allocate resources more fairly (Hlatshwayo 2000). Notwithstanding this, change has been slow and learners who attend 'previously disadvantaged'[1] schools are still educationally disadvantaged. This is illustrated by the continuing poor performance of Grade 12 learners, particularly those from these schools, resulting in various challenges for those who want to attend university (Gilmour and Soudien 1994;

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Soudien 2007). The challenges include adjustment to an academic culture (financial and life-style) and coping with new academic demands (reading, writing and manner of communication). The need for adjustment is attributed to under-preparedness of learners; the culture of teaching and learning in their schools, or lack thereof; and the overall quality of education. Despite the challenges faced at school, some black African learners, specifically from working-class rural areas, do manage to pass Grade 12 with a university entrance qualification. It is these students in particular who are considered 'underprepared' for the demands of tertiary education (McKenna 2010) because of their limited experience of independent study and technologies, and who thus need to work extra hard to prove that they can succeed against all odds. For these learners attending university already represents privilege because in South Africa attending university is believed to open doors of opportunity and to possible improved socio-economic status for their families.

I am the product of a former Department of Education and Training (DET) school, presently called a 'previously disadvantaged' school, and one which experienced regular uprisings as learners and teachers protested against inferior education. These disruptions negatively influenced the culture of teaching and learning and consequently my academic outcomes. Despite this experience, I managed to reach and pass Grade 12. However, I did not apply for university entrance on time because I was not sure whether I was going to pass. In addition, I was not sure whether my parents could afford to pay university fees; my father was a teacher and my mother was unemployed. Sennett et al (2003) argue that the adverse effects of financial strain and student housing-related difficulties are of serious concern for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The challenge for me was not only about securing money to pay tuition, but also to pay for accommodation, books, food and toiletries, just for one year. I knew that I would be at university for at least four years. All these issues were challenges for me as I completed Grade 12 and I thought about applying to one of the universities of my dreams; these challenges are likely to be among the reasons why black African students from the working-class and rural areas do not apply for university in numbers. When they consider their families' financial status and the university demands, the dream seems farfetched. In my case, and as may still be true in the previously disadvantaged schools, career guidance was never part of the curriculum in all my years of schooling; I did not know about the possibility of applying for and being granted a bursary. Not giving career guidance due recognition in the curriculum, resulted in inadequate pre-university preparation for students.

Considering the proportion of the population (41 million) (Census 2011) of black Africans in South Africa, a relatively low numbers of black African students manage to reach university (Soudien 2007), and those who do enter higher education have already achieved. McKenna (2010, 8) argues that 'we should celebrate every [black African] student who makes it to higher education in South Africa and appreciate their tenacity in reaching us'. This is the case particularly for students from rural areas who have to make the transition from an impoverished environment to an

urban environment, and who are required to adjust to the new institutional culture that is likely to be very different from their own culture (Bojuwoye 2002; Miller, Bradbury and Pedley 1998; Sennett et al 2003). It has been argued that black students enter higher education with various 'deficiencies' because of the continuing poor performance of the school system (Boughey 2010, 6). Although this statement seems to be generalised, students from rural areas are most likely to need special attention because the failure of national education policies is most pronounced in these areas (Harley and Wedekind 2004; Joseph 2007).

Taking into account the influx of previously disadvantaged students into institutions not originally created with them in mind, it is important for universities and their teaching staff to recognise these culturally diverse students and to restructure teaching and assessment to ensure that they are not further disadvantaged. Boughey (2010, 6) states that 'in many respects, critical orientations to knowing can involve "unthinking" and "undoing" things we have done for years'. Similarly, Bakhtin (1973, 167) notes that '…the word does not forget where it has been and can never wholly separate itself from the dominion of the contexts of which it has been part'. This suggests interrogating the way white staff members teach instead of 'continuing to teach as if the ways in which we construct knowledge in our disciplines are neutral ...' (McKenna 2010, 14), because knowledge is constructed from particular cultural practices. Prior to the 1994 democratic elections, at previously white universities the majority of students were white and staff may have overlooked cultural differences and become used to teaching in particular ways. Post-1994 lecturers are expected to take into account the diverse cultures in the lecture rooms and to ensure that no students are discriminated against or negatively stereotyped. The 2008 Report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions identifies the role of an institutional culture that remains white pervasive racism, as sources of immense unhappiness and frustration amongst black African students across institutions (Soudien et al 2008, 65). Thus, the experiences of black African students in previously liberal and conservative universities need to be researched and documented, to continuously improve higher education institutions in post-apartheid South Africa. This article hopes to contribute to the body of work on black African women's experiences in the education field by narrating my undergraduate, postgraduate and professional challenges using the framework of 'community cultural wealth', which is explained below.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Bourdieu's concepts of social and cultural capital have been used to explain why the academic and social outcomes of People of Colour and of the working class in general are significantly lower than the outcomes of whites and of the middle class in general (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). The assumption is that the former 'lack' the social and cultural capital required for social mobility. Consequently, education systems

work from this assumption in structuring ways to help 'disadvantaged' learners whose race and class background have left them lacking necessary knowledge, social skills, abilities and cultural capital. To expand Bourdieu's theoretical lens, Faulstich-Orellana (2003) focuses on the experiences of People of Colour (a term used in the United States (US)) to reveal an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilised by Communities of Colour to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression. Different authors have identified that Communities of Colour have access to cultural wealth through at least six forms of 'capital', namely: aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital (Auerbach 2001; Delgado-Bernal 1997, 2001; Faulstich-Orellana 2003 in Yosso 2005; Solórzano and Delgado-Bernal 2001; Stanton-Salazar 2001). Moeller and Bielfeldt (2011, 85) assert that the various forms of capital are neither mutually exclusive nor static, but are rather dynamic processes that build on one another as part of community cultural wealth.

1. Aspirational capital is the ability to hold onto hopes and dreams in the face of structured inequality, even in the face of real and perceived barriers. It is about the culture of possibilities beyond the experienced circumstances as they represent 'the creation of a history that would break the links between parents' current occupational status and their children's future academic attainment' (Gándara 1995, 55).

2. Resistant capital refers to the knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behaviour that challenges inequality (Yosso 2005, 80) or asserting oneself in the face of oppression. Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) reveal different forms of oppositional behaviour, such as self-defeating or conformist strategies that feed back into the system of subordination, and the Freirean (1970) critical consciousness or recognition of the structural nature of oppression aiming to work toward social and racial justice. For the latter, resistance capital takes on a transformative form (Solórzano and Yosso 2002b).

3. Social capital is understood as 'networks of people and community resources that can provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society's institutions' (Yosso 2005, 79).

4. Navigational capital involves skills of manoeuvring through social institutions that were not created with 'disadvantaged groups' in mind (Yosso 2005, 79). It is about using strategies to navigate through racially hostile university campuses despite the presence of stressful events and conditions (Burciaga and Erbstein 2010, 4).

5. Familial capital is described as the ways that 'family (kin) ... carry a sense of community history, memory' (Yosso 2005, 79). It expands the concept of family to include 'extended family', which may include immediate family (living or long passed on) as well as aunts, uncles, grandparents and friends who people

might consider part of their family. Isolation is minimised as families 'become connected with others around common issues' and realise they are 'not alone in dealing with their problems' (Yosso 2005, 79).

6. Linguistic capital includes the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style, including communication through music and visual arts (Yosso 2005, 79).

Only the types of capital that are relevant to the narration are used to analyse and make sense of all the experiences.

METHODOLOGY

In this article I use the method of testimony to document and reflect critically on my academic and first working experience as a black African woman. Testimony is a qualitative method developed in Latin America that incorporates the political, social and cultural histories that accompany a person's life experiences (Burciaga and Erbstein 2011, 5). According to Burciaga and Erbstein (2011, 5), testimony is similar to oral history, but involves critical theoretical reflection on personal, political, spiritual and intellectual understanding of self and community. Thus, testimony provides an epistemic lens to support an analytical inquiry into experiences within larger social contexts. The first phase of my testimony presents a brief narration of the socio-cultural challenges I faced as I was preparing for university entrance. The second phase focuses on the key challenges I experienced as an undergraduate and postgraduate student. The final, third, phase is about my first working experience as a tutor while a PhD student and also as a lecturer at a school of education at two different universities.

SOCIO-CULTURAL CHALLENGES

'What if she comes home in the middle of the year pregnant, who will pay my money back?'

As mentioned earlier, I did not apply for university admission the year I was in Grade 12, which meant I had to stay at home for a year. My father instructed me to go to Nelspruit for a self-application to a teachers college. I was unhappy with that instruction but I went anyway. I was fortunate because there was never a response from the college as to whether I was accepted or rejected, which kept my dream of attending university alive. My father quickly declared 'there's nothing I can do now, maybe you need to look for a job', without asking about my career plans. It seemed that the concept of university did not exist in his mind. Consequently, I applied to go to university without my father's consent as I decided not to inform him, and risked being disowned because of this act of disrespect. I informed him only after I was accepted and awarded a bursary.[2] Unfortunately, my father disapproved of me going

to university because 'university is expensive and I can't afford it and at the same time provide at home. What were you thinking applying there anyway?' This was irrespective of my being awarded a bursary, which meant that my father would have to pay only five per cent as the family contribution, while the university would pay 95 per cent of my tuition fees.

My father's disapproval did not make sense because he was prepared to pay the teachers college fees in full, considering that I did not have a bursary, but not five per cent of the university fees. Worse was the question he asked of my mother: 'What if she comes home in the middle of the year pregnant, who will pay my money back?' When my mother told me about my father's response, I was saddened because for me it meant that he questioned my respectful behaviour throughout my adolescence and young adulthood. I was shocked because it seemed that his statement was influenced by beliefs that young women come home from university in the middle of the year or end of the year, pregnant. Even if this was the case for some, it did not mean that he should make this generalisation about all young women and use it to restrict their access to university education. Although I was not really sure what informed this assumption, I was sure that coming home from university pregnant would shame the family.

The challenge for me was to convince my father to change his decision, and this in the context of a home where it was unacceptable for a child to challenge a father's decision openly. When I ran out of options and time after my mother declared herself powerless and voiceless, I requested my grandmother[3] to persuade my father to change his decision. To be allowed to attend the university, my father instructed my grandmother to 'promise to pay back my money when Mpumi[4] comes home pregnant, because I don't have money to play around with'. This meant my grandmother took the responsibility for ensuring that I would not only complete that year, but that I would complete my undergraduate degree and prove my father wrong. When I finally left home, I was disappointed and angry at my father because I could not make sense of his behaviour. Notwithstanding these experiences, I decided that day to work hard, to try to convince my father to have confidence in his children, and to show that sending a girl to university would not 'automatically' result in her coming home pregnant.

My father continued to be a challenge to my academic career as he disapproved when I wanted to pursue postgraduate studies. He clearly stated, 'I am finished with my job [paying for undergraduate degree], I am not responsible for anything else you decide to do.' This statement resulted in a serious conflict between us and we stopped talking for three years, because I went back to the university without his consent and was considered disrespectful. Consequently, I stopped going home during holidays and instead I stayed with my friends,[5] while continuing with my honours and master's degrees. What follows are some of the challenges I experienced at home before I went to university and after completing my undergraduate studies.

UNDERGRADUATE AND POSTGRADUATE EXPERIENCES

'Are you sure you want to do psychology, considering your school background?'

After the battle with my father, the last thing I expected in my first psychology tutorial was a patronising statement from the young white female tutor: 'My experience is that students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds struggle with psychology.[6] Are you sure you want to do psychology, considering your school background?' This statement was uttered after I tried to express myself in my poor township English, and was used to position me as a student who would experience challenges with the course. Within this learning context and with this stereotypical statement at my first tutorial, I could have developed a negative attitude towards the course and the tutor. I have to add that this statement confirmed rumours I had heard when I arrived at the university that there were many racist practices in the lecture halls and tutorial classes. Thus, considering that it was unclear for me what influenced this statement and whether it was intentionally or unintentionally made, it made me question my ability to succeed at university. In particular I had to quickly adapt to a different culture of teaching and learning, such as note taking in a lecture and preparing for tutorials; adapting to unfamiliar uses of English; the fast pace and accent of the lecturers; reading thick psychology textbooks with understanding; and often going to the library to do individual studying. This was challenging for me because I was used to code-mixing and a teacher-centred teaching approach at school, and had not been prepared for this way of teaching and learning. It became clear to me that students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds were expected to assimilate to this university culture and it was taken for granted that all students understood the university's ways of doing things.

With this experience in mind, instead of colluding with discriminatory positioning, it became important to quickly adapt by developing learning and studying strategies to pass the course. For me, this was an example of the system trying to 'push' students out instead of trying to accommodate the diverse cultures they brought to the institution. This incident signified the start of a difficult year for me and 'proved' that I was attending one of the distinguished universities in South Africa, but at the same time it was eye opening. I managed to pass psychology and all my first-year courses, and proved that it is not what someone says about you or to you, but how you think of yourself and your goals that count.

'English is a difficult course, are you sure you want to major in it, you can major in Xhosa?'

When I thought I had managed to either manoeuvre around or resist departmental messages that tried to devalue and belittle my studying abilities, little did I know that more were coming as I progressed with my undergraduate studies. This time the demeaning statement was made in an English One tutorial,[7] by an old white male tutor, during one-on-one consultation time. I got my first assignment back and every

sentence was underlined and corrected in red, and I decided to consult the tutor to find out how to improve my writing. He took my assignment and unexpectedly said, 'English is a difficult course. You need to have good English language background to pass it. You are from a township school and you need to think seriously if you want English to be your major.' I have to admit that there was nothing new about this statement, as I knew when I chose English as one of my majors that it would be a difficult course. This was particularly true as I had come from a school where English was taught as a second language into an English 'first language' course taught by an English professor. It was worrying that township students seemed to be considered 'deficient' and in one way or another 'problematic' in 'exclusive' courses. I considered the English course exclusive because, for at least some white academics, it seemed unimaginable as a major for black African students.

As my tutor continued to describe my poor writing skills, without suggesting how I could improve them, he finally said, 'Are you sure you want to major in English. You can have Xhosa as your only major.' When I left the tutor's office, the conversations I had had with other students that I would not pass English One because of racist practices towards black African students became real for me. As disturbing as the tutor's statement was, it also encouraged me because I really wanted to major in English, to prove the point that black African students could do it. I went to my room very concerned and later I called my cousin[8] who had majored in English and continued to study Linguistics at one of the top universities. My cousin reminded me that I was attending one of the best universities and I should not listen to what lecturers said but rather focus on what I wanted to achieve. Again, I worked extra hard to pass English One, Two and Three, and confirmed that even if a student is not an English first-language speaker, it does not automatically mean that he/she will fail such courses.

My experiences suggested that the behaviour of the white male lecturer and white female tutor indicated that they were still underprepared to engage with students from diverse cultural backgrounds, which resulted in them making belittling statements. With this kind of experience, proving a point to the system became the name of the game, and I did this by passing all the courses in my degree programme. However, I have to admit that proving a point is a tedious process and I first asked myself: When are black African students going to do things for their own sake rather than to always have to prove a point that we can do it against all odds?

'Students from disadvantaged backgrounds usually have problems with research because of language.'

By the time I started postgraduate studies I had successfully mastered strategies to navigate and manoeuvre through various challenges in the university. The challenges also strengthened my academic journey and this was proved when I passed my Higher Diploma in Education (HDE) and Bachelor of Education (BEd) Honours with high marks. I had enjoyed doing research since I was first introduced to it while doing

a small study in first-year psychology, and I looked forward to doing a master's degree because it would be research focused. I was also aware that this degree was different because I would engage with research language, read and think differently, and write differently. I therefore looked forward to learning new research skills and enhancing my reading and writing skills. While I was doing master's course work, I experienced writing challenges and felt that the standard of English was high. Given the writing challenges I had experienced during the first semester, my ability to pass the research component the following year was questioned. My white male lecturer said: 'You know Thabi, I know you attended a disadvantaged school, students from the previously disadvantaged background struggle with research because of language and writing skills. I don't know whether you will succeed, maybe you should only focus on the diploma at Masters level.' After meeting with this lecturer, I asked myself how other black African researchers had made it and whether they had also experienced discrimination and stereotyping on their journey. Then, I could not think of this comment in any other way than as being a racist statement. Particularly as my whole academic career has been dominated by this kind of statement from white male lecturers.

At this stage I interrogated the assumption that reading and writing challenges in English language are associated with black African students, which meant white, Indian, and coloured students did not experience challenges. In this situation I refused to think of myself as a problem, instead, it seemed to me that the university had been trying to 'push' me out because I did not match their cultural practices. This notwithstanding, a statement like this was a challenge for me because it meant proving a point that I could do better than the system expected me to do. I passed the course work and research proposal with high marks. For my research I chose to be supervised by the only coloured supervisor in the department because I was really tired of being undermined and judged. My research went well and I was awarded a scholarship to do another master's degree in Norway because of my excellent performance. It felt like recognition for hard work and more so for stubbornly resisting the system's attempt to define and determine my academic journey.

All the challenges I had experienced since I left home taught me that within struggles there are opportunities to succeed. It is eventually how you respond to the challenges, by not allowing racial and belittling stereotypes to have a negative effect on you, but using them to gain strength and to triumph to achieve your own goals. I am aware that not all black African students are the same, but I have made it a point to use what I learnt at this institution to empower other students. When I started working I considered myself prepared for any challenges because I had learnt that the previously white liberal university seemed sceptical of black African academics' abilities.

WORK EXPERIENCE IN THE EDUCATION FIELD AT UNIVERSITY

Racial discrimination against black African academics in lecture halls and tutorial classrooms is not a popular topic of discussion in post-apartheid South African universities, and it has not been well researched. I started working as a tutor at a school of education while I was a part-time PhD student. I was a role model to some students and questionable to others, because I looked almost their age and I was thus perceived as an inappropriate tutor. The latter group, unsurprisingly composed of white and Indian students, tended to undermine my presence in class and challenged my knowledge. I did not have a problem with them challenging my knowledge; the problem was racial stereotyping and undermining of my knowledge. I was tutoring first years in an academic literacy course when some white male students whispered and said, 'We are not going to listen to her because she does not know what she's talking about.' I heard about this when students were laughing and a black African student told me what they had said. In this situation it was unsurprising that a black African student felt 'obliged' to tell me what was happening, as this behaviour could possibly be assumed as unfair treatment. Calmly I asked the students to come to the front and said, 'Okay, because I don't know the content of the course and you know it, why don't you ask me questions to see if I really don't know the content.' When they started apologising, I just said, 'Knowledge does not have colour or race, it might be difficult for some students to come to terms with seeing young black African academics teaching them. It is real, and it is better to recognise that quickly and get used to it because we are here to stay.' After that I continued teaching as if nothing had happened. However, for me this meant the knowledge of black African academics may be questioned in previously white universities, just like the knowledge of black African students who want to major in English.

In the second year of my PhD studies I was asked to lecture on academic literacy to honours students, which meant my academic knowledge had finally been recognised and trusted. One afternoon a group of students came to my office with a shocking statement. 'Mam, we have a problem, white tutors asked us to change our English major to isiZulu because we are not going to pass it', which resulted in students de-registering from English. I am not sure why they came to me, but possibly they chose me because I always made sure that I talked to students and narrated my experiences as a student, irrespective of whether they were students whom I taught in class or not, as a way to give them hope. I was furious and I refused to let this go because it meant that black African students were being undermined in this department. I approached the tutors together with the students to ask the former to explain what they meant by the statement. They were quick to say 'oh no students did not understand us, we did not mean that they should leave English'. Sometimes students feel those to speak out, and I felt that I had nothing to lose and I had to be a voice for powerless students. One white female lecturer said: 'You always speak on behalf of others', and I responded by saying that 'it's because the system taught me that it's not about me but about others who might be voiceless because of the system'. I left this institution

with my head held high because I had learnt to stand up not only for myself but for others who were being undermined. I made it a point to teach all students not to do things to prove a point to others, because by being admitted to a university they had already proven a point to the system. They needed only to prove a point to themselves that they too could make it to the top.

For me, it is disturbing that black African students who want to major in English continue to be questioned and demeaned in previously white liberal universities, especially as the expertise of white lecturers who teach African languages is not questioned. It seems to be acceptable for them to be specialists in African languages but not acceptable for black African scholars to be specialists in the English language. This cannot be accepted because it could mean 'protecting' English departments at universities from an influx of black African students and scholars. I think it is important for lecturers to be aware of what they say and how they say it, because what is unintentionally said could be interpreted differently by black African students. McGregor (2004, 11) warns that 'unless we (disadvantaged) begin to debunk words, we can be misled and duped into embracing the dominant worldview at our expense and their gain'. This is exactly what black African students begin to do, as they interrogate statements that white lecturers make in the lecture halls.

DISCUSSION

The aim of the article has been for me to narrate some of the specific challenges I experienced before I went to university, then as a black African undergraduate and postgraduate student, and during my first working experiences. To overcome some of the challenges and at the same time learn from them as a way of empowering myself, I used some of the 'capitals' that have been identified as representing a community's cultural wealth as People of Colour in the US (Yosso 2005). The argument has been that students of colour bring assets with them from their homes and communities into university which can assist them to survive challenging circumstances and at the same time allow them to hold onto their hopes and dreams in the face of structured inequalities (Gándara 1995, 55). I was able to overcome the challenges I faced at home with my father by involving my grandmother. She provided both instrumental and emotional support, representing familial capital (Yosso 2005), to ensure that I left home and went to university where I worked hard to succeed. At the time I was emotionally drained and had run out of ideas because I could not confront my father; my grandmother was my only hope for achieving my academic dream. It was the vision of seeing myself attending that university that raised my hopes high and inspired me to think of any possible ways to persuade my father. In describing aspirational culture, Yosso (2005, 79) asserts that 'is the ability to hold onto hope and dreams ... even in the face of real and perceived barriers. It is about the culture of possibilities beyond the experienced circumstances ...'. I refused to allow circumstances to limit and define my future goals and dreams but decided to challenge my father's decisions through my grandmother.

The challenges I experienced as a student at university were not easy to confront and address alone, in a system that was both racially stereotyping and discriminatory. I had to be careful not to conform to the expectations of subordination but rather to recognise the structural nature of racial stereotypes (Solórzano and Yosso 2002b), and think beyond them to succeed. This meant overlooking the belittling comments and consulting with the same lecturers and tutors to gain clarity and more information to improve my marks. It was the only strategy I could use to 'manoeuvre through an institution that was not created with "disadvantaged groups" in mind' (Yosso 2005, 79). I suppose I quickly realised that fighting the system would possibly not help, so instead I turned the challenges to my advantage and passed my undergraduate and postgraduate degrees with excellent marks. Coming from a previously disadvantaged school, I knew that understanding English at first language level at university was going to be a challenge because of 'insufficient familiarity with key concepts, codes and conventions of knowledge construction' (Warren 1997, 1). It was disappointing that my schooling background was used by lecturers and tutors to discredit my ability to succeed at university, instead of them helping me to adapt to and become familiar with the university's codes and conventions. If experiences such as mine are not addressed by universities, they are capable of causing anxiety and undermining the self-confidence of students from previously disadvantaged schools. It is a fact that students who attend university are not a homogenous group because of South Africa's unequal educational background, but sometimes the university seems to treat students as if they have had the same 'quality' of school education. Thus, sometimes it is the lecturers at university who 'push' students from previously disadvantaged schools out of the system through the use of demeaning discourses, even if a student is willing to work hard to succeed.

CONCLUSION

The article has aimed to provide insights into the challenges I experienced before embarking on my academic journey and during my undergraduate and postgraduate studies. It has also presented my early work experiences as a PhD student, particularly those that indicated that the knowledge of black African students may be undermined in lectures and tutorials. In addition, the challenges, stereotypes and prejudices that black African students majoring in English continue to experience have been particularly significant for me. I suggest that more research needs to be done to gain insight into previously disadvantaged students' experiences in different university departments, because some students de-register from courses without anyone interrogating the reason. It seems that some departments are still considered exclusive to a particular racial group; such that when students from other groups enter they feel isolated. In addition to that, female students, particularly from working-class rural areas, experience traditional and cultural bias when they attempt to pursue their dreams, because of patriarchal attitudes (both at home and at the university). It is therefore important for universities to create spaces for them to narrate their

experiences, and to learn from such narrations in order to improve the learning and teaching environment.

NOTES

1. The 'previously disadvantaged background' refers to students who attended historically 'black' high schools and are regarded as relatively educationally disadvantaged due to the inequalities in their schooling which can be attributed to the legacy of apartheid (De Villiers 1999; Huysamen 2000).
2. The bursary paid 95 per cent of my fees, which included accommodation, food and books at one of the top universities in South Africa.
3. My grandmother (Nelly) was my grandfather's sister, and was my last hope as she was respected by my father because she represented my father's father. I knew that my father would listen to her.
4. Mpumi is a short version of my full name Nompumelelo, given to me by my aunt after I was born. Unfortunately, this name was not included in my identity document, but is used by everyone at home.
5. During the three years, I stayed with either Dorothy Marakalala and her family or Nkanyezi Luthuli [Sithole], who were unconditionally supportive throughout my academic journey.
6. Psychology was a whole year course and it meant that I would remain in this tutorial group for a year, which was difficult. But I decided not to personalise this statement from a person who knew nothing about me.
7. Because I was from a 'previously disadvantaged' school and passed English Second Language with a B symbol, I had to do English for Academic Purposes before I was accepted to do English as one of my majors. This also meant I would complete a three year degree in four years, because of the extended programme.
8. Mandla is my cousin and the first member of the family to attend university. He always supported my academic journey.

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