



**Experience of honours students at a rural-based university in South Africa regarding
diversity and their academic self-concept**

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Mini-dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Masters degree in
Clinical Psychology at the North-West University

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Graduation: July 2019

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DECLARATION

I, Mndawe Dumisile Miranda, declare that the mini-dissertation entitled “Experiences of Honours students at a rural-based University, South Africa regarding diversity and their academic self-concept”, hereby submitted for the degree of Master of Health Science in Clinical Psychology at the North-West University has not previously been submitted by me for a degree at this or any other institution. I further declare this is my own work in design and execution and that all materials contained herein have been duly acknowledged by means of complete references.

Signature: 

Date: 26/07/2019..

DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to:

- Mndawe Dumisile Miranda (myself), as indication of the hard-work, motivation, effort, and dedication in completing this research project; and
- My family, for their support and encouragement throughout my studies, and for being the pillars of my strength.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to give credit to the following people:

- The Almighty Lord, for all I have achieved, for He has been a way-maker;
- Ms Ngomane Grace (mother) and Mr France Mndawe, for their love and support during my studies;
- My supervisor, Professor Choja Oduaran, for her assistance, supervision, guidance and time that towards the completion of this study;
- My aunts, Ms Ngomane Doris and Mrs Mashile Suzan, for their financial and emotional support during my studies;
- My sister, Temosho Mndawe and brothers, Tebogo and Tumelo Mndawe, for all their love and support;
- My extended family, for their love, support and the impact they had in my academics and social life;
- My mentor Mrs M. Mokobane, for her support and encouragement;
- Leeroy Scott, for his assistance and support; and
- All participants who took time out to voluntarily participate in this study.

ABSTRACT

With transformation occurring in Higher Education Institution (HEIs), students are exposed to an advancing curriculum as well as a multicultural and diverse environment. The aim of this study was to understand how changes in self-concept resulting from intercultural contact between students may lead to changes in their academic self-concept and, subsequently, influence academic achievement. A qualitative research approach and an interpretive research design were used in conducting this study. Semi-structured individual interviews were used to collect data. The study involved purposely selecting 9 participants currently enrolled for an Honours Programme (Postgraduate qualification) in the Faculty of Humanities, North-West University. Thematic analysis was used in analysing the data. The major themes that emerged in this study included the following: students' academic self-concept; academic self-concept in secondary school and changes thereof; university environment and academic self-concept; psychosocial factors; and cultural influences. It was revealed that the academic-self-concept constructed by a student, is largely based on their academic achievement, with multiple factors experienced as contributory to the academic success of students. These factors include family and peer support as playing a major role towards students' persistence and academic success. Additionally, religion and family background were highlighted by participants as contributory factors towards their resilience and academic success. It was further revealed that peer interaction, diversity within the university, group participation, academic demands as well as the influence of lecturers play a major role in students' academic success.

Key words: University environment, academic self-concept, diversity, academic achievement

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

CHE: Council on Higher Education

EI: Education Innovation

HEIs: Higher Education Institutions

OED: Origins, Education and Destiny model

MAP: Model of Academic Performance

NSC: National Senior Certificate

NSFAS: National Student Financial Aid Scheme

SAT: Scholastic Aptitude Test

SA: South Africa

SES: Socio-Economic Status

CHAPTER 1

1. Introduction

The university context has significantly transformed and is now more diverse in terms of its structure and student population. This diversity is a contributory factor to students' individual growth, with some of them constantly exposed to different ideas and ways of knowing, especially from other students. Individual differences underlie a student's self-concept, from which they define who they are and construct a sense of self. Students who lack self-knowledge, often depend on external directives from other individuals, thus failing to establish a sense of self (Schreiber & Yu, 2016). The alterations to self-concept are reported to result in changes in behaviour. South Africa's higher education system is accessible and responsive to students from diverse contexts with different preparedness profiles. The system is progressively acknowledging the significance of the intersectionality in institutional, organisational, academic and psychosocial contexts.

Acknowledgement by the Higher Education system provides a platform for evaluating the complex interplay of factors, which have an impact on the academic success of students (Schreiber & Yu, 2016). Pym and Kapp (2013) explain that the crisis often experienced by students, is associated with academic and linguistic difficulties, which can be related to personal issues. These occur when students are not yet prepared for the demands of higher education that requires independent learning or critical engagement at cognitively demanding levels. Furthermore, these students experience discouragement and loss of self-acceptance when they encounter academic challenges that their schooling system has not prepared them for. Pym and Kapp (2013) found that majority of students entering university, face challenges of successful academic adjustment, thus resulting in high dropout rates and delayed completion of qualifications. Pym and Kapp (2013) document that during the 2000 admissions into South Africa's Higher Education Institutions, only 38% of first entering students graduated within a

five years period. Factors considered to have delayed students from completing their studies in record time included the following: poor teaching at the secondary school level; difficulty of articulation with the medium of instruction within the university; and lack of funding.

The aim of this study is to understand how changes in self-concept, resulting from intercultural contact between students may lead to changes in their academic self-concept and, subsequently, contribute to academic achievement. The researcher was also interested in understanding students' experiences of diversity as contributing to their academic self-concept within the context of the university setting. As observed in the Ecological systems theory, Bronfenbrenner (1994) argues that to understand how an individual develops, the whole ecological system in which that individual exists should be taken into consideration. The subsystems that make up the overall ecological system help guide and maintain individual growth. Thus, the role of the university as a system involved in individual growth was also explored in this study.

The Ecological systems theory views individual growth as occurring in the form of active involvement in gradually complex, shared interactions with other individuals, objects, and symbols in the individual's immediate environment. The university environment is considered to be one of those settings where students are actively interacting with other individuals with diverse backgrounds, different languages, and ways of life. In the process of actively interacting within the context of their environment, individuals' cognitive processes are modified; thus, self-concept is considered to be a cultural process. It is beneficial to explore how the university, as a system that encompasses diversity, contributes to academic self-concept and the academic growth of students.

1.1 Background of the study

The background of the study focuses on the problem statement, the aim and objectives of the study, the research questions, significance of the study, as well as an operational definition of terms.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Schreiber and Yu (2016) point out that academic achievement in higher education remains an intractable challenge. Students' persistence in university is attributed to various collaborating factors, such as students' experiences prior university enrolment, teaching and learning pedagogies (e.g. lecture halls and curriculum structures, peer and academic relations), in addition to students' individual experiences of the university environment and organisational contexts. Fenning and May (2013) found that self-concept and self-efficacy, commonly have an impact on academic achievement, and thus, documented that additional factors such as classroom settings and interaction with others within the university, also contribute to the development of self-concept.

Wilson-Strydom (2014) maintains there is a need for studies aimed at analysing diversity within the university context, taking into account the fact that university settings play a major role in students' open-mindedness, and them developing into constructively critical individuals. Similarly, Yilmaz (2014) found that a positive self-concept is one of the most significant elements of student success. Self-concept refers to the image individuals have of themselves and the value they attach to themselves (Meyer, Moore, & Viljoen, 2008). Self-concept functions as both a subjective and motivational factor; its impact on the variance of academic achievement is significant. Thus, students became more confident and encouraged to achieve in a manner which is consistent with their self-concept. In this regard, a student's positive self-concept is associated with higher academic achievement. Although studies

on self-concept and academic success have been documented, despite this fact, academic success rates continue to decrease in South African universities. The decrease in academic success rate may be a result of multiple factors. The 2013 report by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) demonstrates that only one out of four students complete their studies in record time, leaving 33 % of students enrolled for a four-year degree completing their studies within five years. Furthermore, it is reported that 55% of students who were previously excluded from the university and are re-admitted into the university, dropped out before completion of their studies. The average percentage of Black and Coloured students completing their studies within record time at university is 5% (Sibanyoni & Pillay, 2014). Thus, the increasing dropout rates, accompanied by a low success rate, have led to a graduate output that compromises the transformation process of higher education and the country altogether (Sibanyoni & Pillay, 2014).

Pym and Kapp (2013) found that students' initial encounter with the university environment is accompanied by various academic, linguistic and social challenges; thus affecting their self-esteem and confidence. Additionally, Human-Vogel and Rabe (2015) found that in the South African Higher Education system, most students dropped out due to poor previous schooling, limited fluency in the common language of teaching, poor financial support and poor student support services. In their study, DeFreitas and Rinn (2013) found that first-generation students (those who are first in their family to attend Higher Education) are likely to experience difficulty in the university environment and completion of their studies. Furthermore, the authors highlight a lower academic self-concept as a result of students' difficulties. Human-Vogel and Rabe (2015) explain that the high dropout rates relatively result from students' transition to the university environment. Thus, most students who achieve a stable sense of self and with existing family support, are effectively adjust to the stresses

resulting from their studies. Self-concept and family support are considered to be predictors of the extent to which students persist with their studies in the university context.

Schreiber and Yu (2016) conclude that factors influencing academic success of students are complex and, as such, require a comprehensive approach to reviewing their contributions thereof. In their study, they found peer interactions, individual experience, student culture on campus and the broader university environment to be contributory factors towards academic success. Thus, highlighting that more research should seek to explore the intersection of academic, personal, social and institutional factors as impacting on students' academic success. The main aim of this study was to assess how diversity within the classroom environment contributes to students' academic self-concept. Based on the above recommendation by Schreiber and Yu (2016), the purpose of this study is, therefore, to add more knowledge in the intersectionality of academic, personal, social and institutional factors affecting/ hindering students' academic success. In order to achieve this objective, the researcher explored the role of diversity as a contributory factor in the formation of an academic self-concept within the university environment.

Schreiber and Yu (2016) found that students who lack self-knowledge often depend on external directives from other individuals within their immediate environments, and thus, they fail to establish a sense of self. It can, therefore, be said that students who fail to distinguish themselves and form a unique sense of self may experience difficulties in forming other self-concepts (and academic self-concept). The alterations to self-concept are reported to result in changes in behaviour. Rogers' theory of the self (1960) maintains that an individual's actions is linked to their self-concept, and as such, plays a significant role in determining their behaviour. Based on this, alterations to an individual's sense of self may lead to incongruence in their experiences of the world and self (Wilson-Strydom, 2014). Using Rogers' theory of the self, from a clinical psychology vantage point, such incongruences in self-concept may have a

bearing on changes in personality and behaviour that may negatively affect an individual's functioning in society and interpersonally. Individuals are observed to function optimally when there is congruence in their self-concept and experience, which in turn corresponds with their behaviour. The construction of a self-concept underlies the process of personality development.

In the university context, experiences of diversity may require students to reflect on and negotiate their existing sense of self, thus leading to incongruences in their experiences of the social environment and their self-concept (Wilson-Strydom, 2014). Academic self-concept is considered to be part of the broader construct of self-concept related specifically to learning. Thus, incongruence in academic self-concept may interfere with the learning process.

1.3 Research questions

The following research questions were asked:

- How does students' cultural background contribute or influence their academic self-concept?
- How are language differences within the university campus influential in students' academic self-concept?
- What is the significance of previous schooling in preparing students for enrolment in university? And;
- How are peer interactions influential in students' academic self-concept?

1.4 Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study were:

- To examine the way in which culture has contributed to students' academic self-concept;
- To explore the experience of students with regards to language differences as affecting their academic self-concept;

- To explore the influence of previous schooling on preparing students for enrolment in Higher Education; and
- To investigate the role of peer interaction as influencing students' academic self-concept.

1.5 Aim of the study

The aim of the study was to explore students' experiences of diversity as contributing to their academic self-concept within the university.

1.6 Significance of the study

This study may assist in shedding some light on the issue of diversity from students' experiences, thus contributing to a better understanding of its contribution to their academic self-concept. Taking into account the continued social changes experienced in the university context, documenting these changes and the experiences of diversity and self-concept may offer new insights in understanding how these factors contribute to different aspects of students' academic life and the university as an educational institution. Such knowledge may be utilised as a basis for improving the academic curriculum of universities, which may be suitable for all students with diverse educational backgrounds, in addition to advancing student support services by health practitioners within the university campus. The purpose of this study is to identify some of those factors and how they may be experienced negatively by students or their function as positive contributors to students' learning in the university.

The high dropout rates do not only have negative effects on students who cannot continue with their studies, however, the government (in terms of finance, by paying out fees for students) and the university as a whole, are affected as resources are wasted due to the rates of dropout. Thus, it is necessary to conduct research in order to understand possible factors that may be the cause of the high dropout rate in the country. The findings of this study could be

used to improve intervention measures to assist students currently facing difficulties with regard to adjusting to the university environment and the academic curriculum, thus promoting greater academic achievement. Such interventions could be in the form of psychological services offered within the university by trained and qualified psychologists and student engagement programmes designed to assist students with academic difficulties (through tutors). The findings of this study may also be used by student support services within the university, aimed at improving academic achievement and persistence of students, communication with students and general support for the overall functioning of students. This study is also significant as it could assist in ensuring that student support services at the university meet the needs of students.

The current study will also contribute to existing literature on the broader concept of diversity, thus providing additional information on the potential contribution of diversity in social and individual growth. It is important to understand factors that affect students' academic self-concept, which may aid in developing interventions aimed at improving methods of teaching and learning and also give direction to student support services that could assist them with achieving a sense of self and academic success. Such interventions could assist in reducing the increasing dropout rates within universities, thus university and government resources could be effectively used by students without any financial loss resulting from their dropout from university. The university can utilise the study to find ways to effectively communicate with students in order to address their needs and offer support necessary for such needs. This study may also be beneficial to Psychologists within the university, as the findings document the experiences of students from an academic perspective, in addition to the personal, institutional and social vantage point. Furthermore, this study could be used as a tool for identifying major factors affecting students, which may be overlooked or unidentified in psychotherapy. Thus, the findings could be beneficial in the structure of psychotherapy.

1.7 Operational definition of terms

- Academic self-concept refers to individuals' knowledge and perceptions about themselves concerning their abilities to achieve and complete certain tasks (Marsh & Seaton, 2013). For the purpose of this study, academic self-concept is defined in terms of students' perceptions of themselves in relation to their academic success as influenced by culture, language, previous schooling, as well as peer interaction.
- Academic achievement refers to the clear depiction of students' academic performance, and represents students' academic ability (York *et al.*, 2015). For the purpose of this study, academic achievement refers to students' ability to complete academic tasks and their degree programme.
- Diversity is defined as the difference between individuals and groups in terms of ethnicity, language and culture (Silverman, 2010). For the purpose of this study, diversity is defined in terms of students' cultural background, ethnicity and language.
- Rurality is mostly defined as a geographical concept, particularly social classification, denoting either 'rural settlements' or 'urban areas', as well as a community of interest, culture and way of life (Laldaparsad, 2012). In this study, urban and rural areas are defined in terms of infrastructure and facilities such as educational systems and resources (roads, medical facilities, electricity and libraries).

1.8 Summary

In summary this study aimed to explore the concept of diversity as an influential aspect in establishing an academic self-concept. The focus was to understand students' experience of diversity within the university in relation to their academic lives. These diversities include social backgrounds, previous schooling, culture and religion, family and peer interactions.

Exploring these factors provides a platform for evaluating the way in which these aspects have an impact on the other factors.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL FORMULATIONS

2. Introduction

This chapter aims to outline theoretical formulations that may have a bearing in understanding the research problem as well as the gathered data. The theoretical formulations in this study entail reviewing various perspectives or theories within the different fields of the Social Sciences. Theoretical formulations are used to make sense of the different perspectives that entail detailed explanations of self-concept and individual development.

2.1 Theoretical framework

A theoretical framework serves as a model for understanding and making sense of the development of self-concept in various environments. It highlights factors that contribute to establishing a sense of self within diverse environments. The framework that is particularly suitable for understanding such factors is the Ecology Systems Theory, discussed below.

2.1.1 Ecology Systems Theory

The theoretical framework used in understanding how individuals come to form a self-concept in the context of their environment is Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecology Systems Theory. Bronfenbrenner (1994) argues that to understand how an individual develops, the whole ecological system in which that individual exists should be taken into consideration. The subsystems that make up the overall ecological system help guide and maintain individual growth. The effectiveness of these interactions occurs over extended periods of time, during which the individual actively participates. The ecological model is a distinguished reconceptualisation of the environment from the view of the evolving individual; with the ecological environment perceived as a set of integrated structures (each inside of the other) that

move from the innermost level to the outside. These structures divide cultural settings into four levels, namely, the micro-system, exo-system, meso-system and macro-system (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

Individual growth occurs in the form of active involvement in gradually complex, shared interactions with other individuals, objects and symbols in the individual's immediate environment, which is seen as the microsystem influenced by other systems (exosystem, mesosystem and macrosystem). In the process of actively interacting with the context of their environment, individuals' cognitive processes are modified; thus, self-concept is observed to be a cultural process. The microsystem is the environment in which an individual exists such as with family and peers, educational settings, the society and membership within the community. In this system, individuals develop different roles, which are assumed in such specific settings, form a relationship with others and actively engage in these environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The microsystems involve direct experiences by the developing individual such as activities, social roles and interpersonal relations occurring in settings with particular physical, social and symbolic features that allow active engagement and interaction in that immediate environment. These settings can be observed in the family context, the school environment, or in peer groups. Students are active participants in the university environment; entering the university with pre-existing social roles that continue to influence them. The microsystem is a clear demonstration of how pre-existing roles influence students as academics.

The mesosystems involve the connections and processes occurring between two or more settings in which the developing individual exists; these connections can be observed between the homes and school settings. Thus, the mesosystem is seen as a system of the microsystems. The exosystems involve the connections and processes occurring between two or more settings, with one of these connecting settings not involving the developing individual

(Bronfenbrenner, 1994). However, with the events occurring in this setting indirectly impacting on the processes within the immediate setting in which the individual exists through their influence on the family, the school and the peer group (such as family's social networks, the parents' workplace, community contexts). The macrosystems involve the primary pattern of the micro-, meso- and exo-systems features of a particular culture or subculture; comprising of the belief systems, forms of knowledge, material resources, customs, standard of living, opportunity organisations, hazards and life course opportunities that are rooted in each of these larger systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

The macrosystem is perceived as the larger cultural context immediate to the individual, which indirectly has an impact on the developing person. The macrosystems are not static, thus they change with time and history (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). It encompasses the larger systems such as political and economic systems. The ecological systems theory applies to the current study as it allows understanding of students within their immediate environment, which is the university, thus assisting in evaluating how the systems within the university and those outside the university campus may have an impact on students' individual development and academic functioning. The university is seen as an ecological context within the systems, and thus, the theory aids in understanding how students establish a sense of self in diverse settings.

2.2 Theoretical perspectives

The theoretical perspectives highlight different theories that apply to this study in understanding self-concept and the academic self. The theories reviewed include Carl Roger's Self-concept Theory as well as Vivien Burr's Social Constructionism.

2.2.1 Self-concept Theory by Carl Rogers

Rogers viewed the individual person as the driving force in the actualisation of his or her own potential, however, with the environment playing a contributory role in either facilitating or inhibiting actualisation. This actualisation occurs in an environment in which an individual is unconditionally accepted as they are and are free to develop without restrictions (Meyer, Moore & Viljoen, 2008). The theory also stresses an individual's subjective experience of their world, particularly on their view of themselves. Rogers viewed an environment which is created by circumstance as ideal since it allows individuals to see themselves as they are, and realise their potential. Rogers considers self-concept as perceptions of the characteristics of the self and perceptions of the relationships the self to others and various aspects of life; as well as values attached to these perceptions (Meyer, Moore, & Viljoen, 2008).

Rogers (1960) viewed self-concept as fluid and changing process, which can be a specific entity in a given environment. Thus, self-concept is seen as representing an individual's conscious experience of themselves. Self-perceptions are seen to be structured as a whole; as a result, a change in a single part of the self-concept, influences the entire self-image. According to Rogers, individuals function ideally when their self-concepts are congruent with their needs and feelings. Thus, he believed that the significant areas in functioning are constituted by the interaction of individual experiences and self-concept and the role of the self-concept in determining behaviour. Rogers (1960) maintains an individual's actions correspond with their self-concept, thus it plays a major role in determining behaviour and, as such, alterations to an individual's sense of self can lead to incongruence in their experiences of the world and self. Furthermore, individuals are considered to function optimally when there is congruence in their self-concept and experience, which in turn, corresponds with their behaviour.

2.2.2 Social Support Theory

The central notion of the Social Support Theory, as explained by Irwin Sarason and Barbra Sarason, is that, close interpersonal relationships reduce the negative impact of stressful life events on individuals. Social support can be broadly characterised in a number of areas, such as instrumental support, validation support and emotional support (Sarason & Sarason, 1985). Shortfalls in these areas may result in, or at least, contribute to the negative health consequences observed in the psychological, emotional and physiological wellbeing of individuals. Sarason and Sarason (1985) explained the concepts of social support as follows:

Instrumental support entails providing support in the form of giving advice. In social support, significant others assume specialised roles that are dependent of the form of support required by an individual. When an individual is confronted with a substantial loss of material and task support, the effects of the experience may be drastic (Sarason & Sarason, 1985).

Validation support entails assistance by others in individual self-introspection, in addition to supporting the individual in assessing and structuring their environment. Based on this notion, for an individual to meet the standards of society, an assessment of reality and of one's own abilities is a requirement. This assessment may take place in conflictual circumstances as such evaluations are mainly dependent on social comparison processes. Poor support in this area may lead to great instability of such judgements (Sarason and Sarason, 1985). Validation support may be judged to play a major role in an individual's sense of self, as without the support of others to validate their experiences as temporary strains of social stressors, an individual may perceive their shortfalls as an interpretation of the reality of failure. Based on this theory and within the university environment, without the validation and support of peers, students may experience difficulties in establishing positive academic self-concept.

Emotional support is often viewed as the "unconditional positive regard" of the supporter, as individuals are able to show their true self without having to hide their weaknesses or put on an act due of fear of judgement. Emotional support is considered to be a contributory factor to an individual's wellbeing and more positive than for the other forms of support. From this perspective, it is concluded that the psychological, behavioural and emotional consequences of stressors or incongruences experienced should be moderated by the availability of alternative sources of social support.

2.2.3 Social constructionism

The social constructionist theoretical perspective by Vivien Burr (1995) maintains that there is no definite description of what social constructionism entails, thus it can be thought of as based on the foundation of what aspects one has to believe in to be a social constructionist. Social constructionism focuses on critically reflecting on the taken-for-granted manner of understanding the social world and the individuals in it. Furthermore, it brings to the fore, awareness of assumptions which people attribute to the way the world appears to be; thus, such assumptions attributed to the world do not as much essentially refer to real divisions. Historical and cultural specifics have a bearing on how people commonly understand the world, as well as the categories and concepts they utilise in this understanding. The terms in which one understands the world is dependent upon the place and era in which one lives in the world. Such understandings are not only specific to a given culture and time of history; they are viewed as products of that particular culture and history, thus depending also on the predominant socio-economic provisions in that culture at that time (Burr, 1995). Thus, the forms of understanding that thrive in diverse cultures are products of that particular culture.

Social constructionism holds that individuals construct knowledge of the world in the interactions between them. Through these interactions, in the course of social life, the forms of individual knowledge are developed (Burr, 1995). Social constructionism is interested in all forms of social interactions, particularly language. Furthermore, the historical and cross-cultural understanding of the world is an artefact of the social processes and interactions that individuals are continually engaged with others. Social constructionism holds that individual forms of reality are constructed in socio-cultural interactions between people.

2.2.4 Summary

In summary, academic self-concept may be understood from different perspectives, apart from those mentioned in this study. However, diversity as a focus in this study has a bearing the theoretical frameworks applied in this study, which has a bearing in understanding the research results.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

3. Introduction

This chapter entails reviewing studies previously compiled in relation to the topic for the purpose of determining previous findings, new knowledge and identifying gaps that can be covered in this study. This chapter provides the literature review on the finding and conclusions of other researchers with regard to academic self-concept, factors that influence such concept as well as its role in academic success. The literature reviewed in this chapter focuses mainly on studies conducted within university settings.

3.1. Academic self-concept in higher education

The university context in South Africa, particularly offers students an environment in which their academic self-concept is continually constructed. Students' participation in the more diverse setting of the university leads to different self-concepts (Schreiber & Yu, 2016). An individual's subjective experience of their social environment impacts on their view of themselves and, as such, contributes to their personality. The personality of an individual is influenced by the individual's subjective perception of their surroundings and the meanings they attach to this. The university context provides a platform in which individuals from diverse areas come into contact and share the same environment, thus students from diverse backgrounds interact with one another (Wilson-Strydom, 2014). Self-concept is seen as fluid, thus it is continually negotiated when an individual changes environments. The change in self-concept influences an individual's entire view of him or herself.

In his theory of the self, Rogers (1960) highlights that an individual's actions correspond with his or her self-concept, thus playing a major role in determining behaviour

and, as such, alterations to an individual's sense of self can lead to incongruence in their experiences of the world and self. Furthermore, individuals are considered to function optimally when there is congruence in their self-concept and experience, which in turn, corresponds with their behaviour. The construction of a self-concept underlies the process of personality development. In the university context, experiences of diversity may require students to reflect on and negotiate their existing sense of self, thus leading to incongruences in their experiences of the social environment and their self-concept (Wilson-Strydom, 2014). Academic self-concept is considered to be part of the broader construct of self-concept related specifically to learning. The significance of these aspects has ignited interest in understanding its basic structure and the process through which academic self-concepts could be raised or lowered.

Fenning and May (2013) found that self-concept and self-efficacy similarly impact academic achievement. The authors describe self-concept as an individual's judgement of how he or she perceives him or herself; thus self-efficacy is considered a judgment of an individuals' confidence in his or her capabilities. Thus, an individual's experiences of success and failure, based on his or her perception in terms of competence or incompetence, contributes to the development of one's self-concept. In this regard, self-efficacy is considered to be an essential result in the formation of self-concept. Self-concept comprises several components such as academic and social context. In terms of the academic component, an individual forms an academic component, which is based on his or her performance in educational institutions. According to Fenning and May (2013), an individual's self-concept can function in different forms depending on the different areas in which he or she functions, thus the self-concept individuals establish in that particular environment, influences their behaviour in that setting.

The influence of self-concept on academic achievement is considered to change with the level of education and the student's age. Yilmaz (2014) posit that a positive self-concept is

one of the most significant elements of student success. With self-concept functioning as both a subjective and motivational factor, its impact on the variance of academic achievement is significant, thus students become more confident and encouraged to achieve in a manner which is consistent with their self-concept. Thus, a student's positive self-concept is associated with greater academic achievement. Pym and Kapp (2013) identified that students come to university with academic self-concepts that have been affirmed by their previous success and competence in their schooling contexts; thus, they enter the university with an academic self-concept that revolves around being an academic achiever. The question here is 'what happens when students interact with their peers from diverse schooling systems from those of theirs?' Sikhwari (2014) explains that academic self-concept is based on students' perceptions of their academic competence in a specific curricular area, in addition to their positioning of academic achievement with reference to their peers. Sikhwari (2014) found a causal relationship between self-concept and academic achievement in university students. Thus, the findings of his study validate the significance of self-concept in facilitating academic achievement and persistence in university students.

Fenning and May (2013) state that among university students, self-concept strongly impacts on their academic achievement as it is associated with their motivation and beliefs of competence in academic tasks, such as learning information and progressing through the complex university curriculum. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that scholastic competence and social acceptance are predictive of academic achievement. From these findings, it is evident that the educational environment and acceptance by peers can impact the construction of a self-concept and academic achievement. Fenning and May (2013) concluded that the impact of social acceptance plays a role in significantly decreasing or increasing academic achievement. In addition, individuals with high self-efficacy and positive self-

concept, perform competently on academic tasks, which in turn, increase their sense of self-worth and competence.

Sikhwari (2014) argues that additional research is needed on evaluating the impact of self-concept on academic achievement in specific academic subjects. Fenning and May (2013) maintain novel research should seek to assess the extent to which social acceptance impacts on academic achievement. Furthermore, the authors state that previous research (e.g. Dickhäuser & Reinhard, 2006; Flook *et al.*, 2005; Vuong, Brown-Welty, & Tracz, 2010) has documented that self-concept plays a role in academic achievement, however, additional factors such as classroom settings and interaction with others within the university are also contributory factors towards the development of self-concept. The authors further maintain more research is needed to provide details on how self-concept may impact academic achievement.

3.2. Diversity within the university environment

Successfully adjusting to the diverse university setting is observed to play a major role in students' academic success. Thus adjustment takes place in the form of an interactive and active process between the individual and the environment, which is focused towards achievement (Sibanyoni & Pillay, 2014). The active interaction of students means observing university practices and interacting with other stakeholders at the university such as lectures and students. These interactions allow them to reflect on and negotiate their pre-existing knowledge and their values, beliefs and meanings to those that correspond with the university environment as well as their fields of study. Badenhorst and Kapp (2013) explain that the classroom environment in universities is designed to facilitate a learning context in which students from diverse backgrounds, come into contact, interact and learn from one another. The authors found that students enter the university with a pre-existing identity based on their cultural background, with an additional identity of being a high academic achiever (as they perceive themselves as

top students from their previous schooling). When students from diverse backgrounds come into contact, they learn that the student culture within the university encompasses different practices.

Participants in Badenhorst and Kapp's (2013) identified a wide range of activities that define student cultures within the university as follows: exposure to alcohol or drug use by other students within the campus; different life styles and dress-codes; different religious views; and lack of enforced codes of behaviour. Wilson-Strydom (2014) identified two dimensions from which diversity can be approached. The first dimension is connected to encounters with different kinds of people, which are often referred to as encounters with the 'other'; and the second dimension is related to encounters with different types of philosophies and ways of knowing. In this regard, Wilson-Strydom (2014) states that analysing these dimensions is necessary within the university context, taking into account the fact that the university setting plays a major role in students' open-mindedness and their development into constructively critical individuals. Pym and Kapp (2013) explain that students' transition to university is marked by agency and autonomy, with many students establishing more sophisticated coping mechanisms in negotiating the different circumstances within the academic sphere and existing familial circumstances.

Sibanyoni and Pillay (2014) found that students' social experiences, which occur in the form of beliefs, feelings and ideas, are used as mediational tools that continue to shape their engagement and response to the context of the learning process. Jackson, Vijver and Biela (2013) explain that the traditional approach to studying the concept of diversity involves the classification of observables such as age, gender and ethnic background; and those that are underlying such as educational factors, practical capabilities and functional background. Wilson-Strydom (2014) found that majority of students experienced diversity as negative in the university setting, while others had positive encounters with diversity. The encounters of

diversity by students focused on both encounters with diverse peers and the diverse ideas of students. Furthermore, the negative encounters were also in terms of experiencing difficulties with the multilingual environment on campus. According to Wilson-Strydom (2014), embracing diversity still remains a major challenge in South African universities. Thus, there is need for studies that seek to understand the complex factors that influence the manner in which university students experience and respond to diversity encounters.

3.3.Students' background and academic success

Pym and Kapp (2013) highlight that upon entering university; students often experience a crisis of confidence and self-esteem in the new environment, regardless of their social background. The higher education environment presents students with various academic, linguistic and social challenges that they have to deal with. Thus, higher education institutions are required to address different factors that may be of disadvantage in these educational environments. Human-Vogel and Rabe (2015) highlight that in South Africa's Higher Education system; most students leave the university before completing their studies. They identified poor schooling, lack of fluency in the language of instruction, poor financial support and poor student support services as causes of the high rates of student drop out in higher education. Astin's framework considers academic success as a function of three sets of elements (York *et al.*, 2015). These elements are: (1) inputs, demographic characteristics, family backgrounds, academic, and social experiences that students bring with them into the university environment; (2) the environment, the variety of people, programmes, policies, cultures and experiences that students encounter in university, whether on or off campus; and (3) outcomes, students' characteristics, knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, beliefs and behaviours as they exist after university.

DeFreitas and Rinn (2013) maintain university students who are the first in their family to attend higher education, often referred to as first generation students, experience great difficulty in university settings and are likely to experience difficulty with completing their studies. They further maintain this could be due to students' lower academic self-concept. In their study, Human-Vogel and Rabe (2015) found that students' level of commitment can be determined by the extent to which they have established a clear and stable sense of self (evident in their self-differentiation in which students perceive themselves as distinct from others) and are satisfied with their studies. The high dropout rates are seen as relatively resulting from students' transition to the university environment, thus most students who achieve a stable sense of self and with existing family support, are considered to effectively adjust to stresses resulting from their studies. This is because self-concept and family support can predict the extent to which students persist with their studies in the university context (Human-Vogel & Rabe, 2015).

Pym and Kapp (2013) state that students negotiate who they are and who they want to be with reference to past and current interactions. Within the diverse settings of the classrooms, students negotiate norms, attitudes, values and beliefs different from home discourses, both within the institution and within their disciplines. The authors suggest that university learning programmes should encompass academic structures that are accommodating for students who are from diverse schooling systems, thus taking into consideration those who are from under-resourced schools and are academically under-prepared. One of the most vital future pathways includes enrolling for a degree in higher institutions of learning for any learner. However, selecting for oneself a degree and being admitted into an intended degree programme is a very difficult process to go through. The transition for many school leavers is rather very complex, frustrating and stressful to handle, especially with regard to school leavers who come from rural areas (Maxwell & Mudhovozi, 2014).

Many matriculates in South Africa usually come from poor backgrounds and mostly fail to access higher education, with poverty, poor elementary and intermediate education backgrounds, lack of information, distance from urban centres or educational hubs credited as the main stumbling block, while historical apartheid discrimination tendencies still present in some tertiary institutions also have contributed a role. Some researchers have found that black students coming from rural, poor communities are unable to access Higher Education because of poverty in particular, lack of financial resources, lack of information, poor education, weak support systems and low motivational backgrounds (Maxwell & Mudhovozi, 2014).

To make matters worse, rural youth tend to be less academically prepared for college than urban youth. To make matters worse, rural youth are usually ill-prepared for college compared to those residing in urban areas. They generally have poor SAT scores and have less access to advanced preparatory courses, which prevents them from getting into competitive colleges (Maxwell & Mudhovozi, 2014). It was found that not every student who managed to overcome grade 12, will make it straight to higher institutions of learning immediately after completing. Four of the participants reported to have spent at least a year or two at home before getting into university, at most, some had spent as much as three years prior to being admitted to a degree programme. The authors concluded that rural school-leavers face more adversity when trying to get into a degree programme. It was also revealed in the study that some of the participants spent more years idling at home before being accepted at an institution of higher learning. As a result, such learners end up enrolling for unplanned, unsearched degree programmes just for the sake of at least doing something at the university (Maxwell & Mudhovozi, 2014).

In most universities, learning space is limited for many programmes, thus making it difficult for many rural high school leavers to be accepted. Some of the challenges faced by most students include the following: not being able to meet the minimum academic admission

requirements for the degrees of their choice, which sees most getting admitted for degrees which were not of their choice; and financial constraints also play a major role in impeding rural school leavers from attaining enough information about university processes. Good financial status would assist school-leavers in terms of travelling to institutions closer to them in order to seek more information about their choice of study. Lack of access to more developed communication information technology, such as smart cell phones and computers play a vital role in hindering the use of the Internet in order to access more information about their preferred career pathways and institutions of higher learning (Maxwell & Mudhovozi, 2014).

The provision of these learning programmes should then take into account, the students' learning needs and strengths, and should encourage students' investment in their learning and sense of belonging within the institution. Pym and Kapp (2013) found that students often compared themselves to their peers from diverse schooling backgrounds, which affected their academic self-concept as they experienced feelings of inadequacy and incompetence. The authors found that academic and psychological issues experienced by students are intertwined, and thus, concluded that students' establishment of social connectedness, identity and agency greatly influence academic success, while also contributing to their development of social responsibility and social responsiveness. Schreiber and Yu (2016) conclude that factors that influence academic success of students are complex and, as such, require a comprehensive approach. Their findings revealed that peer interactions, individual experience, student culture on campus and the broader university environment contribute towards academic success. The authors maintained there is need for more research that seeks to explore the intersection of academic, personal, social and institutional factors, which have an impact on student success.

3.4. Academic self and academic achievement

National statistics for a three year degree at contact universities revealed that only 41% of black students from the 2005 cohort had graduated after six years, and that about 59% had dropped out (HESA, 2014). Many Education Innovation (EI) students were able to easily adjust to the university environment compared to other students, especially those who came from disadvantaged educational backgrounds. Cross and Carpenter (2009, as cited in Hobden & Hobden, 2015), noted that this is justifiable as the learning environment in the privileged schools from which EI students came from, aligned with the teachings and learning culture of a university. It can be concluded that qualities such as feelings of self-worth and a positive attitude, coupled with adequate English language skills, allows EI students to easily affiliate with the academic life of tertiary education.

Additionally, it is worth noting that the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) review found that regardless of NSFAS students receiving financial support from NSFAS, 72% still did not manage to finish their studies. This is an indication that even though finances are important in guaranteeing acceptance into a study path, other resources still have a significant contribution for students to stay in that study path. Initially, the transition from secondary to tertiary studies appears to be simple but delays show that it becomes difficult as the study years go by, resulting in about a quarter of students changing their path. The alumni stresses the importance of financial factors as the cause of change, and this creates a continuous problem for the tertiary sector, and for those sponsoring learners at school. For low socio-economic status (SES) students, it is obvious to gain the most value from the investment in scholarship, for these students require the same financial support at tertiary level. Personal skills and characteristics that allowed them to negotiate a successful pathway to tertiary studies have been pointed out by the alumni (Hobden & Hobden, 2015).

A great conviction is that most of these are legacy benefits of the EI, over and beyond the academic results obtained in the National Senior Certificate (NSC) examinations, which gave them access to tertiary studies. The tracked alumni identified their English language proficiency and their academic skills and work ethics as giving them an academic edge over their peers. In terms of personal development, it is clear from their responses that they had developed confidence and self-esteem to cope in more privileged environments, deep gratitude for opportunities that come their way, and the resilience and grit to capitalise on these opportunities. Regardless of results of the study on small self-selected sample of respondents, such results enhance the idea that exposing low SES of students to effective schooling for even few years has qualities that exceed their improvement in academic achievement (Hobden & Hobden, 2015).

Human-Vogel and Rabe (2015) explain that the findings of their study also demonstrate the fact that the high rates of dropout at universities countrywide are indicative of students leaving the university before completing their studies largely due to other external factors such as a lack of resources. The authors found that students' level of commitment in their studies mirrored their determination to complete their studies. Thus, it is important to understand whether determination to complete one's studies is predictive of academic success. The authors also suggested that future studies should seek to evaluate how different levels of academic commitment predict academic achievement, however, also, in view of how other external and environmental factors associated with the university environment, university funding, and availability of resources for studying may distinguish between predicting academic achievement and predicting the probability to complete one's studies.

Van den Berg and Coetzee (2014) point out that although research has been done on self-concept, there are limited studies that focus on the evaluation of academic self-concept in relation to academic achievement. Van den Berg and Coetzee (2014) found that the academic

achievement and motivation of first time and fourth year students was not a result of their academic self-concept. However, a positive causal relationship was evident among the academic self-concept and academic achievement of second and third year students. Based on the findings, Van den Berg and Coetzee (2014) explain that the higher a third- and second-year students' academic self-concept was, the higher academic achievement there would be. They further recommend that additional quantitative and qualitative research be conducted in order to identify and clarify inconsistencies found in the relationship between motivation and academic achievement. Schreiber and Yu (2016) point out that academic achievement in higher education still remains an intractable challenge. Students' persistence in university is attributed to various collaborating factors, such as students' experiences prior university enrolment, teaching and learning pedagogies (e.g. lecture halls and curriculum structures, peer and academic relations), in addition to students' individual experiences of the university environment and organisational contexts.

3.5. Academic stress, adjustment and coping

The pressure that accompanies the need to achieve positive academic results within the realm of schooling and tertiary education is referred to as academic stress. Academic stress may emerge as a result of the expectations and pressures that students place on themselves and the expectations that others place on that particular student. Beiter *et al.* (2015) points out that one of the first major challenges faced by first year students is having to transit from secondary school to tertiary life, and this particular stressor is widely seen in students who have had to relocate from home to the university and are likely to suffer from home-sickness, closely linked to depression and loneliness. In South Africa (SA), many students have to relocate from rural-based areas and small hometowns to attend major tertiary institutions found in the few select major city centres (Bernstein & Chemaly, 2017).

The relocation sees these prospective students move away far from the family support they used to receive, to an environment which is new to them and makes the first year transition rough and hard to get used to. Failure to be prolific in different languages is another extreme source of stress that South African students may encounter. In SA, there are eleven official languages (English, Afrikaans and nine other Black African languages), however, the medium of instruction at established tertiary institutions remains English or Afrikaans (Bernstein & Chemaly, 2017). Black students make up the majority of student bodies at these institutions, with at least 50% representation, and many lack the sufficient language skills in the medium of instruction, which further serves to compound the level of stress they may experience.

The expectations and pressures from family placed on students to succeed also serves as another form of academic stressors, including scholarship requirements and competitions within the class (Beiter *et al.*, 2015). In South Africa, the three mentioned factors even have deeper implications for many students, especially Black students, who value education greatly due to the view that it is a major way of elevating oneself and one's own family to greater socio-economic status. Majority of students come from poor families and are usually the first individuals in their family to set foot in a university. For such students, the pressure to succeed is extremely high as acquisition of education could be viewed as a way of uplifting the family out of poverty and the family's future upward social mobility.

Irrespective of the racial group one may come from, stressors that university students are exposed to as the following: striving to meet deadlines for term work; examination stressors; and being faced with a vastly increased workload (compared to school) with work overload being both quantitative and qualitative. With the stressors, comes anxiety and fear that is related to possible academic failure and may serve to intensify and add to what may be at times a crippling degree of stress for students (Bernstein and Chemaly, 2017). Consequently, within these categories of possible student stressors, compounded by severe financial and

language constraints, many students within South African universities are under immense pressure. High levels of academic stress are apparent in lower throughput rates in South Africa. Research has shown that 55% of first year students are failing to complete their degree programmes in South Africa. The aforementioned stressors (struggling with finances, lack of linguistic capital, loss of family and community social support and lack of food security) all serve to compound low throughput rate; it is usually credited for the under preparedness of students regarding the academic rigour of university life (Bernstein & Chemaly, 2017).

Future research studies need to focus on developing more targeted interventions for students with negative dispositional traits in order to provide them with better resources and to assist in developing skills that will enhance more effective coping (Bernstein & Chemaly, 2017). Additionally, more research is required to determine positive dispositional traits and the how and why of their efficacy in dealing with academic stress, enhancing student wellbeing and thereby, facilitating greater retention and throughput of students through-out their academic careers. Sense of coherence has been shown to act as a buffer against stress. Sense of coherence is definable as the degree to which people perceive data and stimuli from the environment to be understandable and predictable (comprehensibility); the degree to which they believe they have the resources to cope with challenges (manageability); and the degree to which they regard it worthwhile to cope with their challenges them (meaningfulness) (Van der Westhuizen, 2013).

Students with a higher sense of coherence were found to be better able to deal with problems associated with university life and, therefore, also had higher levels of achievement. Antonovsky (1993, as cited in Van der Westhuizen, 2013) emphasises that a sense of coherence can act as a buffer against stress. The way individuals perceive information and stimuli from the environment to be predictable and understandable (comprehensibility) is defined as a sense of coherence; the degree to which individuals believe they have resources to deal with

challenges (manageability); and the degree to which they regard it worthwhile to deal with their challenges (meaningfulness).

When individuals have beliefs in their capabilities to successfully finish a task or reach a specific goal, it is referred to as self-efficacy (Van der Westhuizen, 2013). It involves a willingness to put in the required effort and persist until the goal is achieved or the target is reached. Locus of control is the extent to which individuals ascribe what happens to them either as a result of their own doing (these individuals display an internal locus of control) or as a result of luck, fate or powerful others (these individuals display an external locus of control). A significant indicator of general psychological wellbeing is the amount of hope an individual possesses.

3.6. Previous schooling and preparing for higher education

Many areas in South Africa have learners who are faced with educational dysfunction. This is an indication that school achievement is often not a reliable indicator of learners' potential to succeed at university (Vincent & Idahosa, 2014). Regardless of the student being part of a well-functioning school system, there may be a range of personal and contextual factors that explain poor school performance and which lead to school performance being a poor predictor of later academic potential. It was revealed in this study that the issue of identity was an important feature with regard to the participants' experiences of becoming successful at university. Once individuals enter the university, existing identity constructions such as the motivation to study, cultural values, beliefs and school experiences are confronted and imposed by other students and, sometimes, lecturers (Vincent & Idahosa, 2014).

First time university students with low academic points; those who happen to come from disadvantaged social and educational backgrounds, compound their sense of an imposed negative identity in a milieu where majority are economically, socially and educationally

advantaged. In these particular accounts, participants find ways of rejecting this imposed identity, and developing an academic identity for themselves as legitimately belonging in the academy, their alienation from its dominant culture notwithstanding. Upon realisation that their prior schooling has not adequately prepared them for university, many students become disconsolate (Pym & Kapp, 2013). With regard to participants in this study, those who were motivated to succeed from the beginning, often, their source of motivation was initially derived externally.

In many occasions, it was necessary to have someone who embodied both the identity of an 'academic' and identity characteristics with whom they could identify. For instance, an individual from a similar background created the possibility of seeing him or herself as an academic identity for the first time (Vincent & Idahosa, 2014). Equally, having friends with similar backgrounds and goals provided participants with resources in an environment where they experienced themselves as having the identity of a minority. Universities tend to place greater importance on formal support structures and facilities. However, for many of the participants in the present study, their informal networks were what really counted. Soudien (2009, as cited in Vincent & Idahosa, 2014) points out that peers play a significant role in the process of students' identities formation because they offer a comfortable space in which young people can experiment with new identities.

Greater involvement with peers in study groups was an opportunity for participants to have a different view of themselves, asking them for assistance with academic tasks, and looking to them as people in possession of credible items of academic 'capital'. The cause of poor academic performance is often credited on educational and social disadvantage, including South Africa's high failure and dropout rate at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Vincent & Idahosa, 2014). The study participants pointed out social disadvantage as a motivating factor that pushed them to attain success, an indication that poverty could be a resource that people

draw on if they are given the chance to do so. Thus, the central focus of HEIs should be the short falls in their own institutional contexts, which stigmatise and disparage other people in ways that are endured rather than voiced or publicly contested rather than placing much focus on the deficits that students bring into tertiary education with them.

An emergent focus in the literature on student success at university suggests that students experience after entering university may be much more influential than this focus on background allows (Vincent & Idahosa, 2014). In particular, the literature suggests that aspects of institutional culture, approaches taken in the curricula, to academic-student interactions, and peer interactions may play a significant role in the difference between success and failure. This inconveniently leads to the conclusion that there will be no holy grail of easy formulae on offer to South Africa's HEIs, which will tell them, on the basis of prior experience, who will or will not succeed at university (Vincent & Idahosa, 2014). Rather, it places significant responsibility at the door of universities themselves, and academic staff in particular, to interact with students in such a way that will nurture their emergent academic identities; counteract their perceptions of non-belonging; and foreground recognition in particular for those who are in one way or another, regarded as marginal or marginalised in the academic setting.

According to Naidoo, Flack, Naidoo and Essack (2014), the responsibility of secondary schools in South Africa is to ensure that learners have access to the best education. Unfortunately, South Africa's past of having under-resourced schools and under-qualified teachers is still Omni-present even in the present South Africa. The most affected parts of the country are historically disadvantaged rural communities as well governmental (public) schools. Attending under-resourced schools with under-qualified teachers negatively affects the competency of learners and their readiness for university studies (Naidoo *et al.*, 2014). In many countries, including South Africa, issues relating to student academic failure and attrition have proved to be a concern. The inequitable schooling system in South Africa is one of the

concerning areas in the country, with noticeable inequalities in resources and infrastructure, which started in the fractured and racially segregated education system in the apartheid era and is still present nearly two decades after all systems were integrated.

3.7. Student engagement within the university

One avenue used to explore the experiences within and beyond the classroom impact on student persistence behaviours is student engagement. Influences on persistence and academic success are complex and require a comprehensive approach, which embraces the entire context into which student persistence behaviours are embedded (Schreiber & Yu, 2016). In order to examine higher education's promotion of student persistence and retention in South Africa, student engagement is crucial in providing such framework. Student engagement is generally accepted as a useful proxy for academic success, persistence and retention. Student persistence is credited to a widespread variability of interacting factors, including those prior to enrolment, teaching and learning pedagogies, classroom and curricular designs, experiences beyond the classroom, peer and academic relationships, as well as campus climate and organisational contexts (Schreiber & Yu, 2016).

Student persistence is not the result of 'discreet conditions, interventions and reforms'. Student engagement offers actionable data on student behaviours and institutional conditions, which in turn, encourage student persistence and retention, meaning it acts as a dependable correlate of student success. The CHE (2014) reported that higher education in South Africa is widely recognising the significance of the connection of the institutional-organisational with the academic and the personal-social. The recognition allows broadening of the lens to permit the illumination of the complex interplay of factors which impact student persistence and retention. Schreiber and Yu (2016) identified the importance and positive relationship between

students' engagement and academic performance, which highlights the validity of the student engagement framework.)

Tertiary institutions are encouraged to pay attention to these conclusions, which are in favour of the argument that integration and engagement are vital ingredients in improving academic performance. It can, therefore, be concluded that in general, the study highlights the fact that influences on student persistence are complex and need a comprehensive approach. Factors beyond the classroom and the academic challenge, which include peer environment and individual experience, the campus culture and climate as well as the organisational context, contribute towards student persistence. Gerber, Mans-Kemp and Schlechter (2013) found that academic performance and success are of great importance to both students and Higher Education Institutions. Thus, universities have developed student engagement programmes that have been identified as key factors to academic success.

Gerber *et al.*, (2013) identified (from the literature) four types of student engagement as follows: cognitive; psychological; academic; and behavioural engagement. Cognitive engagement focuses on student's evaluation of the quality of their association with the academic institution. Psychological engagement, which encompasses the emotional or affective experiences of the student, refers to the student's relationship with peers and their response to the academic material (e.g. their enthusiasm, interest or tediousness). Academic engagement focuses on the amount of time spent on specific academic tasks, such as the completion of assignments or studying for a test or examination. Behavioural engagement focuses on students' active participation in learning activities, such as attending classes and/or tutorial classes.

Gerber *et al.*, (2013) investigated student engagement in terms of academic and behavioural engagement, measured by assessing academic activities (class attendance and weekly take-home assignments). Gerber *et al.*, (2013) found evidence that students' submission

of assignments that were of a high standard and compliance to class attendance, as well as fully engaging with the academic requirements of a particular module; contributed to greater academic performance compared to if they were not academically engaged. In their study, it was concluded that higher levels of student engagement enhanced the learning experience and later performance of students in their academics. In short, higher levels of student engagement may lead to higher academic performance of university students. Gerber et al., (2013) suggest that future research could include assessing whether there is a significant difference between students' perception of their own engagement and their actual engagement.

Lack of finances is the main disruption of direct pathway through tertiary studies. It was reported by the alumni that many of the enabling factors for tertiary success were the legacy benefits of the school-level intervention (Hobden & Hobden, 2015). The two main benefits include a sound preparation for life and academic studies, while the researchers categorised other benefits as developing resilience and grit. A host of educational interventions projects have been introduced in the South African educational system. The focus of these projects is clearly on the last schooling years, and its objective is on affording previously disadvantaged black learners with more opportunities to attend historically well-resourced fee paying schools (Hobden & Hobden, 2015). The goal is to produce learners who have a good enough English background and mathematics NSC marks, which can enable them to meet tertiary entry level requirements and successfully complete tertiary education studies.

Taking into consideration the high level of dropout and slow completion rates experienced at universities (CHE, 2013), sponsors and service providers have recently expressed increased interests in knowing whether or not their interventions have elevated the opportunities and success rates of learners at universities. Additionally, learners who enrol at tertiary institutions, often struggle to bridge the gap between school and tertiary studies. CHE noted that in South Africa, the importance of this systematic fault has heightened and not only

as a result of enrolment growth but also due to a major increase in the diversity of the student body regarding educational, social and linguistic background (CHE, 2013). CHE investigated the poor academic performance of students at universities and, although not discounting the effects of financial and effective factors in student learning, determined that academic factors are at the centre of the systematic obstacles to student success. It is overly accepted that student under-preparedness is the dominant learning-related cause of the poor performance patterns in higher education (CHE, 2013). However, there are those who argue that academic factors are less significant than anticipated in forecasting student success at tertiary institutions.

Financial difficulties and the demands of university administration were pointed as the main causal factors of stress on students. The manner in which university education programmes are structured, involving independent studying, strict submission deadlines of projects, large impersonal lectures, and demands for fluency in reading and writing in the second language of many students, is a potential obstacle to students' progression (Hobden & Hobden, 2015). In these studies on stress-inducing, academic demand factors were not identified. Alternatively, Truebridge and Benard (2013) consider resilience as a process of maintaining a "positive trajectory of success and health while in the middle of hardships, trauma and everyday stress", and not as a trait. The adverse circumstances faced by students could include financial difficulties, struggles with both academic work and administrative procedures of universities, and social problems, all of which are common at first.

Current research has recommended Four ways have been recommended on the role of schools in the development on grit as follows: (a) encouraging self-regulation in early childhood programmes; b) identifying steps to achieving goals and strategies to overcome challenges that might be encountered, and teach learners about them; (c) clearly teaching growth mind-sets; and (d) using sport and drama and other outdoor activities to teach learners endurance and how to succeed (Goodwin and Muller, 2013). Goodwin and Muller (2013: 75)

further emphasise that grit can be developed using an emerging battery of evidence-based techniques, which together give educators a powerful new set of materials to enhance student success. Jackson, Luijckx, Vallet and Van de Werfhorst (2008, as cited in Hobden & Hobden, 2015) argue that the first was the Origins, Education and Destiny model (OED), which emerged from research into the role of education on social mobility. The model suggests that E (educational attainment) is strongly connected with O (social origins), while D (social destination) is largely linked with E. The contribution of individual educational attainment in influencing their chances of social mobility has been the subject of rigorous research. Through the model, the researcher can question the relative impact of education in relation to family origins and other factors involved.

The Model of Academic Performance (MAP) focuses on factors that influence success at university. In collaboration with low SES students at the University of Cape Town, the authors discovered the most important indicators of academic performance at the end of first year of a student's degree were sense of belonging and adjustment to emotional demands. A similar study was conducted at the University of Fort Hare by Sommer and Dumont (2011), and similar findings established with regard to adjustment, however, it also showed extrinsic motivation to be linked with achievement in the first year. Thus, it was concluded that this was largely due to the fact that most students came from rural backgrounds, where economic success was of paramount importance to these poor communities. MAP focuses on university studies (its focal point is on the university studies) while OED addresses the bigger picture (Hobden & Hobden, 2015).

3.8. Culture, language and religion in the academic context

Academic literature pursues a transformative agenda that includes exploring different ways of meaning making in academia, not least considering the resources that student writers bring to

the academy as legitimate materials for meaning making. Academic literacy scholars often ask, under the guidance of the transformative agenda, questions on ways through which these document epistemologies and ideologies, supported by dominant surface literacy practices, and how they could be widened and contribute to by those who bring different epistemologies, ideologies and semiotic material to the academy (Smith & Baratta, 2016). The central models still favour students from certain cultural and language groups while being exclusive of other cultural and language groups. These students bring along their own faith inspired meaning making resources. Additionally, religious identities will include other aspects of identity and become significant in alternating ways and with different magnitudes. Smith and Baratta (2016) posit that old sociological ideas have most recently been incarnated in the notion of intersectionality.

More than any other, religious identity primes people to think about the role it can play in the modern university. This is because recent controversies that have been well-documented in universities, involve religious faith and identity politics in a more general sense. Neil (2016) argues that young people in South Africa have a high level of religiosity, including Christianity and a broader range of other traditional African religion. Recently, it has been reported that South Africa's education literature conveys a definite message of the continuous significance and relevance of religion as a motivating and coping tool for the not so well represented groups. Badenhorsts and Kapp (2013) argued that religion has so far played a role in managing to stand in for lack of cultural capital. University campuses often serve as contested locations regarding their role in shaping the production of knowledge, students' life course trajectories and politics and power relations. Smith and Baratta (2016) emphasise that in relation to religion, this contestation can question whether it 'should be recognised as a 'legitimate' presence on the secular campus' – let alone, we might say, as a legitimate way of coming to terms with the academy's symbolic forms.

Ethnic identity is a form of identity based on an individual's affiliation to a certain group of people. In the context of the study, an ethnic group refers to a set of individuals who belong to a particular social group that stands out from other groups due to a combination of race, similar language and a shared past, among others (Thomas & Wagner, 2013). Individuals in the same large, racial group, are further distinguished on the basis of their mother tongue. In the context of this study, in schools and tertiary institutions, identities are fastened, unfastened and refastened in cultural spaces. When individuals partake in activities for the purpose of being recognised as insiders, it is regarded as identity fastening. The school learner academic identity that students enter university with incorporates the practices expected and rewarded at school (McMillan, 2015). Unfastening takes place when individuals are needed to take on and show the practices of a different cultural context. People would have to be competent in practices that are unique from those engaged in at school, in order to achieve success at universities. Identity refastening includes the combination of new practices into current practices or when they substitute established practices.

The more academically successful students credited their performance to internal factors and viewed the source of their performance to being within their control. The results are in line with growing calls to research the contributions of the human agency in social phenomena, such as academic success (McMillan, 2015). It may, therefore, be argued that decisions regarding student support cannot be based only on assumptions about social class, race and academic preparation. These factors alone do not explain academic performance. A claim can be made that decisions relating to student support cannot be grounded only on assumptions about social class, race and academic preparation, hence these factors alone cannot be used to reach a conclusion nor explain academic performance (McMillan, 2015). In order for students to take personal control over their performance, it is suggested in the study that more support is required for this purpose. The necessity for this support seems to surpass the

extent to which a student has been prepared for university. When discussing their academic competence, some students from university-oriented backgrounds, expressed having feelings of powerlessness.

It is recommended that future studies should also include actual academic achievement in order to determine its correlation with perceived academic self-efficacy and whether, similar to the latter, it is influenced by ethnic identity and collective self-esteem (Thomas & Wagner, 2013). Future studies could also include actual academic achievement in order to determine its relation with perceived academic self-efficacy and whether it is also influenced by ethnic identity and collective self-esteem.

3.9. Summary

The literature review documented in this study has shown limited qualitative research on the concept of academic self-concept. This is an important area of focus in this study and allows for generating more knowledge in this field of study. It is evident in the literature reviewed that more studies have been conducted quantitatively, with limited qualitative studies.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4. Introduction

This chapter highlights all methods and procedures to be employed in answering the research topic and generating or contributing knowledge. Furthermore, it entails all steps to be followed and adhered to in conducting the research study. A qualitative research approach was used in conducting this study. Thus, this chapter focuses on the techniques and procedures used in collecting and analysing data for the study.

4.1 Research approach

A qualitative research approach was adopted in this study (in which qualitative methods were employed in answering the research questions). Creswell (2014) describes qualitative approach as a way of exploring and understanding the meaning individuals ascribe to social or interpersonal circumstances. A qualitative research process involves generating questions and procedures, data gathered in the participants' setting, data analysis that is built from raw data into general themes, and the researcher producing interpretations of the meaning of the data. Maree (2007) explains that qualitative research is employed to gather information from individuals and it allows for researchers to completely understand and construct meaning based on participants' experience. Moreover, this type of research examines and understands participants from their own social and cultural backgrounds, that also have a bearing on their behavioural tendencies aimed at the meaning and understanding they attribute to these contexts. Although a quantitative approach may be beneficial to the study, it is more in line with the focus of this study (to explore students' experiences of diversity within the university context as a contributing factor to a change in their academic self-concept and academic achievement).

A qualitative approach enabled the researcher to obtain detailed accounts of students' experiences with regard to diversity within the university setting. This is, in itself, a social phenomenon that warrants detailed explanations that could serve as insights in understanding the complexity of diversity and how it has changed over time. The focus was on understanding students' experiences of diversity with regard to the formation of an academic self-concept. Qualitative methods provide a platform through which phenomena can be described and presented in detail as experienced by the individual population and as understood in their own terms. It gives researchers the prospect to analyse social issues, understand what they entail, and explore how they are understood by those associated with them (Ritchie, 2003). This approach was considered appropriate for the study as it gives insights into people's individual perspectives on and understanding of their beliefs and behaviours, thus presenting an understanding of the meaning that they attach to them. In employing a qualitative research approach, the researcher was able to address questions on the notion of diversity and aspects related to the phenomenon (such as understanding individual experiences of diversity with regard to an individual's sense of self and academic success).

4.2 Research design

Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2013) define a research design as a structure of a research project which entails an outline of the plan for conducting an investigation. The focus of investigation is based on the research question that is fundamental to the concerns of a particular epistemic community. In addition, they state that a research design may assist the researcher prepare more systematically for the research. An interpretive research design was employed in this study. Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2013) explain that in interpretive research, the researcher's focus when studying a particular concept is on developing an understanding of how the concept has been discussed in established relevant literature. Interpretive research focuses on understanding

the way in which concepts are used in a particular field of study. The purpose of interpretive research is to capture the discrepancy between the researcher and the theoretical literature that is compiled before the field research begins; as well as definitions of concepts that are shaped by their use and by the lived experience of those participating in the study. Through this research design, the researcher was able to obtain detailed accounts of students' experiences with regard to diversity and in establishing an academic self-concept and interaction with peers from diverse backgrounds. Rowlands (2005) states that interpretive research views knowledge of a particular phenomenon as being derived from an individual's social structures such as mindfulness, semantic and shared experiences with those around them. The research design was considered appropriate for the current study, since the research sought to explore students' experiences of diversity with regard to academic self-concept development and the academic success of students. Rowlands (2005) explains that interpretive research sees an individual's experiences of their immediate environment to be a subjective process, which is better understood through the interpretations and meanings the individual attaches to it. In this regard, the experiences of diversity within the campus may be experienced differently by each student, with them forming diverse academic self-concepts within the university in relation to their perceptions of their academic competence. Thus, this approach allowed for the provision of descriptions of the diverse experiences of students in university lecture halls.

4.3 Sampling method

A non-probability sampling technique was used to select participants for the study. Participants were purposefully selected to reflect specific characteristics of a group within the selected population. Maree (2007) describes purposive sampling as a method in which the researcher opts to use specific participants in their study based on how suitable the individuals are for the study to provide the relevant information. The inclusion criteria entailed selecting participants

who were enrolled for an Honours Degree in Psychology at a rural-based university in Mafikeng, North-West Province, South Africa. Students within the Faculty of the Humanities were selected, thus those who were not enrolled for this qualification, were excluded from the study. These characteristics of the population made potential participants suitable for selection and participation in the study.

Participants were purposefully selected to ensure their suitability in responding to the research questions. The sample size was 9 participants (2 males and 7 females). Participants were selected until saturation was reached. The selection criteria utilised in selecting Psychology Honours students were as follows: the students could better answer the research questions as they had long-term exposure to factors within the university; they understand psychosocial processes through the knowledge acquired during their studies; and they could provide insights that had a bearing on the research problem.

4.4 Participants

Participants were selected based on their experiences of university life, and also for their belonging to the Faculty of Humanities. Students were selected from the Department of Psychology, particularly those registered for Honours programme. Participants comprised both male and female students from rural and urban areas. Individual interviews were conducted with 9 students.

4.5 Scope of the study

The study was limited to students at a rural university in South Africa, enrolled for an Honours programme in the Department of Psychology, Faculty of Humanities. The study focused on exploring students' experiences of diversity with regard to their academic self-concept.

4.6 Data collection method and procedure

Individual interviews were used to collect data from participants. Individual interviews focus solely on the individual, thus providing an opportunity for detailed exploration of people's personal views, for comprehensive understanding of the subjective context within which the investigated phenomena are positioned. De Vos et al. (2011) explains that semi-structured interviews are used to produce rich information from individuals' perceptions on a situation. One can base interviews on the premise of individual views or accounts of a particular occurrence. Methods like this provide an adjustable platform in which during the interview the researcher can follow-up on an interesting aspect participants touch on to gain a more clear and descriptive picture of such an account (De Vos et al., 2011). The interview schedule consisted of open-ended questions that assisted in probing for detailed descriptions of the experiences and views of participant. The individual interviews were conducted by the researcher and the sessions were audio-recorded for future transcription. All interviews were conducted in English.

4.7 Data analysis

Thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyse data collected from participants. Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as an analytic method used to classify and categorise themes occurring within the data, in order to define patterns of meaning across the data. Braun and Clarke (2012) reports that an analysis process provides answers to questions. Furthermore, they state that in research it's during data analysis that an answer to a specific question becomes possible. Thematic analysis assisted the researcher in making links between the experiences and views of students with regard to diversity within the

university context. Braun and Clarke (2006) outline six phases that can be utilised as guidelines in conducting a thematic analysis as discussed below.

4.7.1 Steps for doing thematic analysis

Phase 1: Familiarisation

This phase involves continually reading and re-reading the data in order to familiarise one's self with the texts. This is done for the purpose of identifying segments of the data that are most significant in making sense out of the data. The process of familiarisation can be done through evaluating the manner in which individuals make sense of their experiences and how they identify such experiences in relation to the contexts of their immediate environment. In the process of reading and re-reading the data, the researcher took note of parts of the data that were of relevance to answering the research questions.

Phase 2: Generating initial codes

This phase involves identifying codes from the data by labelling the content of the data. These codes can be in the form of the meanings that participants use to make sense of their experiences and use these meanings to interpret them. Initial codes were generated to inform the research findings.

Phase 3: Searching for themes

This phase involves changing the codes into themes that can be utilised in answering the research questions. The themes can also emerge from the data itself, which requires the researcher to actively engage with the data during this process. Themes were developed from the generated codes and additionally reviewed from the raw data.

Phase 4: Reviewing potential themes

The researcher reviews themes identified from the data to check and verify for quality and relevance. This is done to evaluate whether the themes identified, capture the essence and

meaning of the data, thus removing those that are not relevant in this regard. This step entailed checking and rechecking the codes for potential themes that have a bearing on the research questions.

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

In defining themes, the researcher reviews differences between themes and defines the focus of each formulated theme to provide a meaningful narration of the data set. The broader categorical themes were broken down to develop relevant subthemes that inform the discussion of findings.

Phase 6: Producing the report

The final step of producing a report is to provide a detailed narration of the analysis from the data. In this phase, the themes are presented in a coherent and logical manner, to provide a clear demonstration of how each identified theme builds on the next to give meaning to the data. The themes discussed were organised in a coherent and structural manner, which highlights the link between the chapters discussed in the current study and conclusions drawn.

4.8 Ethical considerations

In addressing ethical considerations in the current research study, the researcher addressed issues of informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality, and protecting participants from harm. Ethical clearance was requested obtained as well permission to conduct the study from the North-West University (Mafikeng Campus) (see Appendix C - Letter of Acceptance by the University).

4.8.1 Informed consent

De Vos et al. (2011) describes having informed consent as providing participants with options to choose whether to be involved in the research project or not. Researchers need to consider

to provide participants with accurate information to avoid misleading and manipulating them in to getting involved in the study. Any information of importance should not be kept from the participants and details concerning the research study should be well stated. Information containing participants' identity should not be disclosed to third parties and the research outcomes should be presented in a private and confidential manner. The researcher requested and obtained the written informed consent of potential participants willing to participate in the study. Participants were given provided with detailed, relevant information pertaining to the purpose, procedures to be followed and their participation in the study. This entails providing potential participants with the adequate, relevant information concerning the purpose of the research project, the procedures that will be followed and the techniques that will be utilised in collecting data, and also clarifying any potential advantage or disadvantage resulting from the study. This means that the information offered to potential participants is accurate and not misleading as a way of coercing participants into participation. The written informed consent of participants was requested and obtained, and they agreed to participate voluntarily. Participants were informed about the study and procedures to be followed, in a language that they best understood. Participants were also allowed to ask questions for clarity prior before giving their consent to participate in the study.

4.8.2 Anonymity and confidentiality

Conditions regarding issues of anonymity and confidentiality were made clear to participants. Ritchie (2003) defines ensuring anonymity as protecting the identity of those participating in the research study and ensuring that identifying details of their personal information are not disclosed to third parties not entitled to such information. Furthermore, he highlights that absolute guarantees of anonymity cannot be given, thus participants should be made aware who will know of their participation. In this regard, taking into account that the research project was

a supervised study, the researcher informed participants on the limits to anonymity and confidentiality, and also measures taken in ensuring this. According to Ritchie (2003), confidentiality means avoiding the attribution of information in reports or presentations through direct attribution (remarks linked to a name or a specific role) and indirect attribution (by reference to a collection of features that might identify an individual or small group). Thus, these issues also have inferences for data storage; meaning that the audio-tapes and transcripts containing the data were be categorised in ways that could compromise anonymity and identification of participants.

4.8.3 Protecting participants from harm

In any study, it is important to give consideration to ways in which taking part may be harmful to participants, and to take aversive action. This arises most clearly in studies on sensitive topics, which might uncover painful experiences and lead people to disclose information which they have rarely or never previously shared. But any study topic can raise sensitive issues for people - such as family relationships, health or sexuality – however remote from the subject matter these may seem. Ritchie (2003) highlights that interviews can have a certain alluring quality, in which participants often appear comfortable and may divulge information willingly during an interview, however may later regret having been so open. The interview session has the potential of leaving participants with unwanted feelings and thoughts long after the research participation has passed. The researcher ensured that participation in the study does not lead to any harm of participants, and in the case of sensitive topics that uncover painful experiences and require attention; appropriate referrals were to be made. Participants were informed about the sensitivity of the topic and possible discomfort that may arise as a result of the topic discussed. Information was offered with regard to possible assistance in the likelihood that the study may result in emotional distress.

4.9 Trustworthiness

In ensuring trustworthiness, the researcher ensured that the quality of the study, particularly the literature review and data were authentic and credible with regard to the research findings; representative of the perspectives of research participants. Cope (2014) employs four criteria presented by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to illustrate how this can be achieved; namely, credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability as discussed below.

4.9.1 Credibility

This term refers to the degree of truth in the data presented based on what participants have said and the interpretation and representation of this by the researcher (Cope, 2014). In maintaining the credibility of the research project, data analysis should be accurate and representative of the descriptions made by participants themselves. Thus, the data presented is not the result of the researcher's own personal bias and influence. Credibility, applicable to this study, refers to the authenticity and truthfulness in the presentation of the research findings and the accuracy of the literature review. The research findings presented in chapter 5 are replicable and valid, and are the detailed accounts of participants in this study.

4.9.2 Dependability

Dependability refers to the reliability and replicable nature of research findings in other studies of a similar nature (Cope, 2014). In ensuring dependability, the procedures and processes undertaken in the study are highlighted in detail, demonstrating the techniques employed, and steps followed during the research project, which also allowing for future research to replicate the findings of the study. Dependability, applicable to this study, allowed for other researchers to build on the research problem and generate new information, as well as add on existing data.

Thus, the current study documents all the procedures and techniques used in conducting this study. Recommendations are also provided to allow for future studies to replicate the current study. The research findings presented in this study are valid and practical.

4.9.3 Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the researcher's ability to provide an analysis that shows evidence of the data presented directly represents and is related to the responses of participants and not the researcher's own biases or viewpoints (Cope, 2014). This can be done by providing a detailed description of how interpretations and conclusions were reached, and demonstrating that the findings have been derived from the data. This was done through highlighting direct quotes from participants to illustrate a developing theme. Confirmability of the study provides evidence that the conclusions that are made in this study are trustworthy. Direct quotes from participants' responses are provided in discussing the research findings as evidence of the conclusions drawn. The discussions and conclusions highlighted in this study are directly linked to the research findings.

4.9.4 Transferability

Transferability means that the findings of the research allow for the application of the conclusions to other contexts (Cope, 2014). The results of a study are considered to be transferable if individuals outside the study or the audience readers are able to relate the results of the study to their own experience. Transferability is possible when the researcher has provided thick descriptions of the findings, which allow the readers to understand how these findings are applicable to other contexts. Since the current study focuses on university students, other students in different universities may also benefit from the research findings. Transferability in this study was ensured by making sure that the aim and objectives of the

study are beneficial and contribute to the society, as well as add new knowledge in the field of Psychology. Transferability allows for the audience and readers to benefit from the findings of research.

4.10 Summary of chapter

A qualitative research approach was used conducting this study, while an interpretive research design was employed in order to inform the data collection and analysis processes. Data was collected through semi-structured individual interviews. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data. 9 participants were purposefully selected to participate in the study and were students enrolled for the Honours Degrees programme in the Faculty of Humanities, North-West University. Participation of students was voluntary and they were informed of the purpose and procedures involved in the study. Trustworthiness was adhered to during data collection and analysis stages. The next chapter focuses on the findings of the study and discussion.

CHAPTER 5

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5. Introduction

This chapter provides detailed explanations and discussion of the research findings and themes that emerged from the data. The major themes emerged from the data were as follows: students' academic self-concept; academic self-concept in secondary school and changes; university environment and academic self-concept; psychosocial factors; and cultural influences. Direct quotes from research participants have been provided to the themes.

5.1 Presentation of results

5.1.1 Students' academic self-concept

It was observed that the higher the students' performance, the higher their academic self-concept as captured in the following excerpts from participants:

I see myself as hardworking. I know that there are some modules that are difficult to me but I never let that get to me. I always strive to work hard and try to do my best. (Participant 5)

I believe that I am person who strives to do my level best in everything that I do, especially with my studies. (Participant 2)

I really think my self-concept and academic performance are congruent in a way. I see myself as a competent person and my marks show that. (Participant 3)

I feel like this year Honours has been challenging, studying extra hard, maybe I am an intelligent person with everything like the difficulties of doing research, too much assignment and I still manage to perform well academically. (Participant 4)

Most students maintained they got admitted into the university as average performing students. Upon their admission into higher education, they excelled in their studies, which have built their positive academic self-concept as evident in the following excerpts:

I realised that just because you were not an A student in Matric, you are not going to do better in varsity as well. With regard to my Matric results I did not get distinctions but when I came to varsity, I started getting distinctions. (Participant 1)

5.1.2 Secondary school environment: academic self-concept and changes

Participants, who previously saw themselves as average performers, revealed that their academic performance improved, thus they were able to obtain distinctions at university level as captured in the following excerpts:

I think I was hard working but not as now. Initially, I thought Honours was not meant for me until I started pushing myself harder, so compared to when I was in high school, I can safely say I have grown academically. (Participant 8)

The dreams that I had in high school are not the same. When I am busy climbing the ladder, my dreams changed, they grew bigger. (Participant 6)

I did not see myself as an A student but I knew that I am a hard worker and I was going to make it into varsity. (Participant 1)

When I was in Matric, I did not really view myself as someone who really worked hard but being in varsity, being here, I think I learned to sort of grow independently, to sort of encourage, and motivate myself. (Participant 7)

Looking at the journey from high school till now, I have had an opportunity to gain new experiences. So, as you grow up, you become self-aware. I know myself better now than I did in high school. (Participant 3)

5.1.3 University environment and academic self-concept

In this study, it was found that peer interaction, diversity within the university, group participation, academic demands, as well as the influence of lecturers play a major role in students' academic success.

5.1.3.1 Academic demands and/or pressure

It is evident that with students progression in their studies, academic demands increase at all levels they progress through, with much academic pressure experienced at post-graduate level. Such students experienced this level as cognitively and physically demanding and, at times, emotionally draining as they had to adjust to working under pressure and in a short period of time (simultaneously completing academic tasks) as captured in the excerpts below:

Every year, there is a lot of work load, things that want you to work hard than the previous year. So, every year, the work load increases, so you have to be able to change in order to fit in. (Participant 9)

Honours was the most challenging compared to first year, but I feel that this year alone has really helped me to grow as a person. (Participant 1)

I feel like when I was an undergraduate I was sort of able to maintain the pressure, but now, as an Honours student, I procrastinate a lot, sometimes, I feel like the pressure gets to me ... so, I feel like it is both sides. Sometimes, it motivates me, sometimes, it gets to me. (Participant 5)

For me, the level of hard work, I think being in Honours has actually pushed me or encouraged me to work harder. (Participant 7)

I am aware that I work more under pressure than when I have more time in my hands. (Participant 2)

In the previous years, there was not a lot of work. It was easier to get a distinction and now, it is actually a challenge because you need to study and work harder or else. (Participant 4)

5.1.3.2 Group participation

It is evident that engaging with the academic curriculum often involves interaction with other students in terms of group participation, in which students collectively work on academic tasks. Participating in groups fostered new knowledge and learning from their peers as well as contributing knowledge to the group as captured in the following statements by participants:

I saw myself as being me, because everyone is different so it makes me see myself as an individual who is able to do things differently but interact with those people who are different from me, the way they were taught on how to go about with their academic lives, I mean although I had my own way of doing things and they had their own way of doing things. I was able to learn some things from them that I did not know from where I come from. (Participant 9)

I have realised that I cannot only work in a group but then, I am able to accept people the way they are and understand them and how they want to be understood...It is all about teamwork. (Participant 1)

From undergraduate, they use the method of allowing us to work in groups; I think I really learned a lot from that. That people are different and I had to accept them the way they are. So, I really think that from this level of Honours, I was very mature, looking at my undergraduate experience. (Participant 2)

I would say that the number that we are in class, it is about thirteen of us, so it is like thirteen of the best. So knowing that everyone there is like in your league, you have to push harder. Almost all of us are hard workers, you need to improve yourself and be extra hard working. (Participant 4)

5.1.3.3 Interactions with peers

The university environment allows students to interact with other students they meet within the social contexts of the university environment. The current findings show that students place more significance on peer support and find motivation from each other as captured in the following statements:

I have learned that as a person, you cannot live in isolation without others. For instance, now, I have been doing Honours and because I need previous question papers, I have to go out and ask those who are doing Master's; so if it was not for socialisation, I would not be able to get assistance. I was going to probably fail. (Participant 1)

Because my other friend is in final year, she is a hardworking person since I knew her. So, being in final year level, you just say I need to give it that extra push that everything I do I just put in extra effort; so, like whenever she is doing her school work, she would encourage me like 'dude are you resting or are you going to join me at the library and do school work?' So, that is the role she has played and the influence she has had on me. (Participant 7)

I'll say that sometimes, I will just say I am going to fail and they would be like just study, try hard, you know you have done this before and you know you can do it again, that, the saying that they push me towards working hard. (Participant 9)

However, participant 2 maintained peer interaction interfered with their academic progress as captured to the following statement:

With regard to this year, I have friends whom I really think were a distraction. I have spent a lot of time with my friends this year...I think my social life this year came first and my academics came second.

5.1.3.4 Experiences with regard to diversity

Participants in this study maintained their encounter with regard to diversity within the university environment had always been positive, which is evident in the excerpts below:

It was an interesting experience, although at times, there were misunderstandings here and there. And because we had different beliefs and traditions, which would at times, stop us from interacting. Most of us were just open to experience other people's cultures while others felt bothered by it. (Participant 8)

Varsity gave me that platform to interact with different people and, at the same time, maintain my individuality. In my first year, I never really interacted with white people but it was just here and there but apart from that, I was interacting with Zulu and Swati-speaking people. It was actually nice because varsity allows you to see different cultures. (Participant 5)

I have realised that we are different and we have different beliefs and cultures. I chose to be an individual who accepts people the way they are and I do not allow other people to diffuse what they believe onto me. (Participant 1)

What I have learned throughout the years that I have been in varsity is that people are very different, people have their own beliefs and worldviews; and being exposed to such difference, I am aware that they have different views and beliefs; so I just blend in with the community and accept them the way they are. (Participant 2)

When it comes to differences, you learn about other people and how they live. But if you have to share a space, it sometimes becomes difficult because, at times, the things you do won't be the same. (Participant 3)

From the above excerpts, it can be understood that diversity plays a major role within the university campus.

5.1.3.5 The influence of lecturers

Participants indicated that university staff, particularly lecturers, played a major role in their academic achievement. The role played by academics in the university curriculum and their approach in teaching is significant in students' academic success as captured in the excerpts below:

I will say that lecturers also contribute to a person's academic life because they push you to successfully complete your academics and also give insights on things that you did not know. (Participant 9)

Coming to varsity, the teaching method is different from high school. I felt that the one in university is much easier than the one in high school...They use projectors and visualisations

during presentations...It was easier, that is why I really did well in my undergraduate performance. (Participant 2)

5.1.4 Psychosocial factors that influence academic self-concept and success

Psychosocial factors were found to contribute to academic and personal lives of students. Social factors identified include the following: social roles of student; previous schooling and transitioning into the university; and social support.

5.1.4.1 Social roles of students

Participants revealed they assumed multiple roles in both their academic and social lives. This supports the findings that students' social background continually influences them within the university environment as captured in the statements below:

Now that I have grown up, whenever there is a decision pending, my opinion is also valuable in the family and I also manage to shed light on other issues and how they can be better handled...whenever I feel lazy to study or do school work, the inner me would push me to do it right away. I am also a mediator within myself. (Participant 8)

I am a very responsible person with regard to my academic work, even when I have to do academic-related tasks; I have to think about my character, where I come from, and how I am perceived by my family. So, that brought in responsibility that whenever we needed to submit an assignment, I had to do it. (Participant 2)

When you are disciplined, like everything is possible, so I did not have any challenges because of discipline and knowing what I want and where I come from and where I want to go. (Participant 6)

5.1.4.2 Previous schooling and transitioning into the university

Students in this study also considered the roles of their previous teachers as having prepared them in their studies, as well as improved their self-efficacy and academic self-concept as captured in the following statements:

I would say in my high school, particularly, my grade 12 teachers always advised us...So, I think just always thinking about that it has helped with my Matric exams. (Participant 1)

We had this programme called ‘last push’, which was meant for matriculants. So, we would remain behind just to study, we also had two camps in the year. So, Matric did prepare me for varsity in every way. Participant 8)

We even had teachers from outside who were referred to our school to come and help with the academics...From my side, it was effective and it really pushed us. (Participant 2)

In a way, yes it has, I would not say it was the high school but that really encouraged us to work hard and I had a few teachers that would say when you get to varsity, no one will be motivating you to go to class, it will all be up to you. So, when I got those words that they said, they just keep coming back and I know what I have to do this. (Participant 7)

I had these two teachers (English and Life Sciences) in high school, they motivated and encouraged me and that built on my self-concept and self-esteem and that helped me believe in myself and that I was capable of achieving something greater. (Participant 3)

5.1.4.3 Student support

The support received by students outside the university environment, particularly from family and acquaintances, seems to play a major role in their resilience and in dealing with the demands and pressures in their studies. This was evident in the current study, as participants accounted their resilience towards social support and the motivation to achieve as captured in the following statements:

The support, at times, was very challenging. They would always encourage me to look back at why I started and also remember what I am here for, so that pushed me. The emotional support was also crucial, but also, the financial support was a priority so to be where I am today, my family played a vital role. (Participant 8)

I was raised by a single mother, so think the kind of relationship that we have; I decide what I want to do and she supports me in my decisions. (Participant 3)

Their support really does play a role in my academic performance. Sometimes, I feel that I am just tired but when I think about the sacrifices they have made for me, at home and their support, I do not wish to disappoint them by playing here at school. (Participant 5)

My family has played a big role, especially looking at my cousins has contributed to the things that I am doing now. Currently, I am the only child at home who is in varsity and all my younger cousins have children. So, I wanted to be an example. (Participant 1)

In addition to support, one of the participants expressed concern about the support within the university campus, which she deemed as ‘not enough’ as captured in the following statement:

I believe my family gives me social support; I am not saying everywhere I go there should be social support but in institutions like varsity, there should be people or some groups of people who help students with pressure because I feel like if students suffer, it is going to affect their academics. Participant 7

The participant further highlighted the need for more advanced student academic support to assist with adjusting to the academic curriculum.

5.1.5 Cultural influences on academic self-concept and success

Cultural factors were found to play a contributory role in students’ academic self-concept and achievement. This is highlighted in the different roles adopted by students, which emanate from

their communities, family culture, and within the university. These environments come to intersect and continually influence individual growth.

5.1.5.1 Family background/ culture

The findings of the study show that involvement of family and their support in the academic lives of students fosters resilience and persistence, especially when the students encounter difficulties in their studies as well as in their personal lives as captured in the following excerpts:

You have to respect your elders, irrespective of who they are and that every elder is a parent to you. So, we were taught to respect and be obedient. (Participant 1)

I will say that what I am to my lecturers and classmates contributed to how I am and how I perform academically because you need to be respectful of others and value other people and their in outs. So, my culture contributes in how I relate with other people. (Participant 4)

I think that my family has influenced me so much in reaching my academic goals, coming from a poor family background; one would really study hard when they come to varsity, so that is when I pushed myself hard to study. (Participant 2)

At home, they instilled discipline in me from a young age, and as an academic, you have to be disciplined in what you want, especially in relation to participation marks, you have to get a certain percentage. So, I think that discipline has helped to achieve what I want to achieve in the academic world. (Participant 3)

5.1.5.2 The influence of religion

Participants also revealed that their religiousness was a source of strength during difficult times in their studies as captured in the following excerpts:

They interlink a lot because; I do not think I would have come this far academically if it was not for my beliefs. I approach my academics with God's faith; so, I feel like I can achieve it all through Him. (Participant 8)

Off course, yes, a lot, even if it was not my religion, I would not be here. Yeah, it has played a role in terms of discipline, not going to the parties and not doing stuff that other students are doing, just focusing on your studies. (Participant 6)

It has played a big role because I have realised that I would go write a test without praying and I do not if it is my belief, but I feel that I would not perform the same as when I did pray...the challenges of not performing well and getting lower marks; I would pray about it and then feel relieved. This year has been difficult, if it was not for God, I do not. (Participant 1)

I do have a relationship with God; I think apart from having a family that supports me and they are like my source of strength, I think I need to have a relationship with God; actually, it is the most important relationship to have and maintain. (Participant 7)

I am still adapting to Christianity and it is all about good values it has in the way it builds me up. (Participant 4)

5.1.5.3 Language experience in a diverse environment

Participants also revealed that although their home languages were different, the language of preference or the language used to communicate with others was not voted on. It was found that, since English is the medium of instruction in higher education, participants essentially communicated with each other in English as captured in the following statements:

When we wanted to communicate, as much as we come from different cultures with different languages, we did not discuss which language of communication to use. It sort of came naturally and we communicated in English. (Participant 1)

I can say that since I am a Venda from Limpopo, I think there is less than five percent of us here, so most of them are Setswana-speaking people and, at first, it was hard because you have

a new language you do not know very well and you need to learn it because everyone is communicating in that language. (Participant 4)

It is just a few differences in languages, but some of the languages I can understand...I think it has, for as much as I might not be as fluent as would like to be in English, I believe I have a good understanding and knowledge that enables me to learn. (Participant 3)

It has been an interesting part of my stay here, having to learn about different languages and the contradictions within our cultures. I enjoy that a lot because I am more interested in languages than anything else. It was also about getting to know each other better because the closer we would get, the easier it became for us to approach one another in terms of school work. (Participant 8)

However, participant 2 maintained having encountered challenges with adjusting to the dominant language in the university campus (Setswana) as captured in the following excerpt:

I really had a difficult time adapting to the language, some people could not understand what I was saying or hear what I was saying, so I had to repeat again and make it easier for them to understand what I am saying.

5.2 Discussion of results

5.2.1 Students' academic self-concept

Majority of participants maintained high and positive academic self-concepts, largely based on their academic achievements (from undergraduate postgraduate studies). These students experienced challenges inherent in increasing levels of higher education as a contributory factor to their academic self-concept. This is due to academic pressure and demands encountered during their studies, which propelled them to strive towards achieving and completing their studies. Participants consider themselves to be academically hard working, which in turn, contributed in them achieving highly in their studies. Despite encountering challenges and obstacles in their studies, these students have maintained positive academic

self-concept. Their resilience and striving towards achievement appears to have positively contributed in their academic self-concept. It is evident that students' academic self-concept is constructed based on academic performance. The findings of this study are similar to those of Van der Westhuizen (2013), who found that students with a higher sense of coherence were found to be better able to deal with problems associated with university life, thus experienced higher levels of achievement. Students in this study maintained a positive academic self-concept despite encountering challenges in their studies. With regard to their academic self-concept, participants demonstrated high self-efficacy in their capabilities to successfully finish a task or reach a specific goal.

5.2.2 Secondary school environment: academic self-concept and changes

The research findings showed a variation in the experiences and academic self-concept of participants in secondary school compared to higher education. This was evident in their responses with regard to how they perceived themselves in relation to their scholastic performance during their secondary school days. Some participants entered the university as high achievers, while others considered themselves as average performers (as they did not obtain distinctions in their end of year examination). Students experienced changes upon entering university during their undergraduate studies. Changes in academic performance was considered to have built on their academic self-concept as they began to see themselves as high achievers, who had the capacity to achieve greatly. In addition, those who entered the university with an academic self-concept of being a high achiever maintained this identity. According to McMillan (2015), the school learner academic identity that students enter university with, incorporates practices expected and rewarded at school. It is evident that students enter the university with different academic self-concepts; being a high achiever and an average performer. However, it is evident that this identity is negotiated as students interact with the

academic curriculum. With regard to this study, students who initially entered the university with an academic self-concept of an average performer reconstructed this identity based on their performance at the university. Students experienced changes upon entering higher education during their undergraduate studies. Participants who previously saw themselves as average performers, revealed that their academic performance improved, thus they were able to obtain distinctions in their studies.

5.2.3 University environment and academic self-concept

The university environment exposes students to factors that may contribute positively or negatively to students' academic performance.

5.2.3.1 Academic demands and/or pressure

Participants in the current study experienced such pressure and increasing demands as an advantage in their studies, as it compelled them to work even harder. It could be said that this was considered a motivation towards greater academic achievement as well as maintaining a positive self-concept fostered by such progress. It is evident that during challenging periods in higher education, students also develop resilience that contributes to their persistence in their highly cognitively, physically and emotionally demanding academic studies. Majority of participants in this study considered post-graduate studies as particularly the most challenging in their academic years.

Participants in the current study experienced such pressure and increasing demands as an advantage in their studies, as it compelled them to work even harder. It could be said that this was considered a motivation towards greater academic achievement as well as maintaining a positive self-concept fostered by such progress. It is evident that during challenging periods in higher education, students also develop resilience that contributes to their persistence in their

highly cognitively, physically and emotionally demanding academic studies. Majority of participants in this study considered post-graduate studies as particularly the most challenging in their academic years. Participants revealed that despite the pressure and strain, this experience allowed them to work harder in order to achieve during that academic year. It was highlighted by some participants that during post-graduate studies, their performance dropped compared to their under graduate performance. Participants also revealed that the drop in academic performance was evident as they did not obtain distinctions, which were previously attained at under graduate level. However, it is evident that despite the drop in academic performance, these students maintained a positive self-concept as they still perceived themselves as high achieving individuals.

Participants viewed these changes as a learning experience from which they could improve and advance in their academics. Hobden and Hobden (2015) state that the manner in which university education programmes are structured; involving independent study, strict submission deadlines of projects, large impersonal lectures, and demands fluency in reading and writing in the second language of many students, is a potential obstacle to student's progression. However, participants in the current study indicated academic demands and pressure as a force that propelled them towards hard work and the need to strive for greater achievement. Truebridge and Benard's (2013) view of resilience as a process of maintaining a "positive trajectory of success and health while in the middle of hardships, trauma and everyday stress", is a reflection of what was found in this study, as student persistence and coping with academic demands or obstacles faced by students.

5.2.3.2 Group participation

Group participation emerged in this study as positively contributing to students' academic development and personal growth. Vincent and Idahosa (2014) found that greater involvement

with peers in study groups was as an opportunity for participants to have a different view of themselves, asking them for assistance with academic tasks, and looking to them as people in possession of credible items of academic ‘capital’. Participants in the current study also revealed that group participation built on their personal growth as well as their studies. Group participation was described by students as a platform where they have the opportunity to learn from others and build each other, both in their studies and in their personal lives. It is evident that during group participation, students focus more on their academic tasks at hand and, as such, their differences are viewed as not having negatively affecting the group. It could be concluded that this is key in students’ open-mindedness to learn from each other and grow academically and personally with such experience.

5.2.3.3 Interactions with peers

The university environment allows students to interact with other students they meet within the social contexts of the university environment. Within this environment, students are exposed to a platform in which they establish new relationships with other individual students who possess different characteristics from them. Vincent and Idahosa (2014) found that equally having friends with similar backgrounds and goals provides students with resources in an environment where they experience themselves as having the identity of a minority. Participants maintained peer interactions had an influenced in their lives as such interactions significantly impacted on their academic resilience, thus positively contributing to their academic self-concept; participants continually influencing one another in their studies. Peer interaction appears to be a way of offering and receiving academic and emotional support among students. Soudien (2009, as cited in Vincent and Idahosa, 2014), point out that peers play a significant role in the process of students’ identities formation because they provide a comfortable space in which young people can experiment with new identities. Similarly, it was

revealed in this study that peer interaction influences students' academic self-concept and success.

5.2.3.4 Experiences with regard to diversity

Students did not experience differences with other students as threatening or negatively impacting their personal and academic lives. Diversity was experienced by students as an opportunity for growth with regard to knowledge about the different ways of life, different cultures and languages; as well as personal growth that leads to openness to diversity. The findings revealed that students were able to establish a student culture in which differences in culture, social background, language and character positively build on them.

Wilson-Strydom (2014) found that majority of students experienced diversity as negative in the university setting, while other students had positive encounters with diversity. However, in the current study, participants experienced diversity as a positive factor that contributed in their growth and knowledge. Similarly, Sibanyoni and Pillay (2014) found that the active interaction of students means observing university practices and interacting with other stakeholders at the university, such as lectures and students. Such interactions allow students to reflect on and negotiate their pre-existing knowledge and their values, beliefs and meanings to those that correspond with the university environment as well as their fields of study. Students openly and unconditionally accept each other's differences without losing a sense of their own identities.

Diversity in this study was considered to positively contribute towards academic self-concept as well as individual self-concept. It is evident that the university environment allows for students' responsiveness to diversity and academic growth. It is evident that while these students positively responded to diversity and were accepting the existence of diverse cultures within the university, their interaction with other students fostered their awareness and open-

mindfulness towards diversity within the university setting. It seems that students' openness to diversity within the university environment does not result in them deviating from or questioning their own views and principles. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological systems theory considers individual growth as occurring over extended periods of time as the individual actively participates in interactions with others and the environment. Peer interactions were found to play a contributory role towards individual growth and diversity experiences as a factor in self-differentiation. The systems outlined in this theory are in support of this finding as students revealed the environment and interactions with others contributed to their academic self-concept.

5.2.3.5 The influence of lecturers

Considering the fact that teaching at higher education is different from what obtains in secondary schools, students indicated that the efforts of their lecturers with regard to simplifying the academic curriculum played a major role in their academic success and assisted in their adjustment to the university curriculum. Gerber et al., (2013) found that higher levels of student engagement enhance the learning experience and later performance of students in their studies. Students perceive the teaching style of lecturers as allowing them to learn more independently as opposed to fully relying on teachers in the manner they did in secondary school. It was revealed that this experience not only fosters academic independence, however, personal growth occurs as well.

5.2.4 Psychosocial factors that influence academic self-concept and success

Psychosocial factors were found to contribute to academic and personal lives of students. These social factors appear to intersect with the academic context, with students bringing these social aspects with them as they enter the university environment.

5.2.4.1 Social roles of students

It is evident that students' social contexts intersect with the academic context, thus playing a significant role in their approach towards the academic material and their interactions within the university environment. The social roles revealed by students were those they assumed in the family as children; being part of the community and a member of the family, equal to their peers, as well as an academic being. Participants revealed these roles instilled in them, discipline, resilience, and persistence in their studies, thus assisting in their coping with difficulties and challenges encountered at university. Pyma and Kapp (2013) state that students negotiate who they are and who they want to be with reference to past and current interactions. From these finding, it is evident that the different roles students adopt outside the university environment fit with their roles as students.

Participants revealed that this community participation has played a role in their academic success. This finding is evident of the role of social contributions on students in the university environment. Pyma and Kapp (2013) explain that students' transition to university is marked by agency and autonomy, with many students establishing more sophisticated coping mechanisms in negotiating the different academic circumstances. The social roles of students have continued to be a contributory factor in their transition into higher education and in their approach towards the academic curriculum. It is evident that the roles they adopt interlink with their individual characteristics; which were found to assist them in coping within the university.

Human-Vogel and Rabe (2015) also found that students' level of commitment can be determined by the extent to which they have established a clear and stable sense of self and are satisfied with their studies. Bronfenbrenner (1994) considers the construction of self-concept as a cultural process such as in the process of actively interacting within the context of their environment, individuals' cognitive processes are modified. Students actively participate in

different aspects of their environments. The findings of this study revealed that students are usually actively involved in their studies, religious affiliations, and social roles; which are perceived by them as playing a major role in the individuals they have grown to become. This finding is a clear indication of the microsystem and its influence in the Ecological systems theory. Direct experiences within the university were found in this study to contribute towards establishing a positive academic self-concept.

5.2.4.2 Previous schooling and transitioning into the university

Majority of students in this study considered secondary school experience as having prepared them for higher education. This preparedness was a result of the involvement of school teachers who played the role of motivators and in equipping them with knowledge and information. Most students revealed that as much as their schools were under-resourced, some of their teachers ensured that learners were not disadvantaged in their learning in order to achieve in their scholastic endeavours with the little resources available. However, some students considered previous schooling as not playing a role in their transition and adjustment to the university environment. These students highlighted that the schools they had attended at secondary level, were under-resourced; thus upon entering university, they independently learned to adjust to the higher education system and its resources. Naidoo *et al.*, (2014) found that the most affected parts of the country are historically disadvantaged rural communities as well governmental (public) schools. Students in the current study came from diverse schooling backgrounds, with some schools under-resourced. However, they considered their secondary level teachers as having prepared them for higher education by ensuring that they become aware of their potential and in achieving the minimum requirements for entry into higher education.

5.2.4.3 Student support

Student support has fostered persistence and contributed in their academic achievement as well as academic self-concept. Participants revealed the support received from members of their respective families assisted them in withstanding challenges that come with being a student in higher education. McMillan (2015) points out that decisions regarding student support cannot be based only on assumptions about social class, race, and academic preparation; as these factors alone do not explain academic performance. This was found to be relevant in the current study, as student support is significant in students' persistence and retention. The necessity for this support seems to surpass the extent to which a student has been prepared for university.

Human-Vogel and Rabe (2015) found that most students, who achieve a stable sense of self, and with existing family support, effectively adjust to stresses resulting from their studies. This is because self-concept and family support can predict the extent to which students persist with their studies in the university context. The concern highlighted by the participant about student support raises what was discussed by Gerber *et al.*, (2013) in relation to the four types of student engagement (cognitive, psychological, academic and behavioural engagement). It was revealed that support services available within the university for students were largely inadequate, thus the need for their modification.

Gerber *et al.*, (2013) discussed cognitive engagement as focusing on student's evaluation of the quality of their association with the academic institution. Psychological engagement, which encompasses the emotional or affective experiences of the student, refers to the student's relationship with peers and their response to the academic material. Academic engagement focuses on the amount of time spent on specific academic tasks, such as the completion of assignments or studying for a test or examination. Behavioural engagement focuses on students' active participation in learning activities, such as attending classes and/or tutorial classes. This finding highlights the importance of student engagement within the

university. The findings of this study are in line with the social support theory of Sarason and Sarason (1985) which maintains students credit the support of members of their families and peers in their resilience and coping difficulties and experiences in the university environment. Students receive validational and emotional support from support structures through the unconditional acceptance of their differences and providing support in crisis situations. Through this support, students are able to establish a positive academic self-concept.

5.2.5 Cultural influences on academic self-concept and success

Culture is often defined in various ways, however, in this study; it is understood in relation to family practices, religious aspects and linguistic factors. These factors were found to play a contributory role in students' academic self-concept and achievement. The findings of this study are in line with the mesosystem and macrosystem in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological system theory, which considers the interaction between students' background, way of life and their participation as members of the university. The knowledge acquired by these students in their lifetime as observed in the current study, largely contributed to their academic and personal difficulties. Religious affiliation is viewed by students as a support structure.

5.2.5.1 Family background/ culture

Family background was found to be contributory factor towards students' adaptation within the university as well as the manner in which they carry themselves or lifestyles they adopt within the university environment. It is also evident that these students' family background has a bearing on the meaning they attach to their academic success. Majority of students in this current study considered their family upbringing and family culture as influential in their individual development and their academic self-concept. Students also revealed that their family teachings and ways of life contributed to their success, by instilling discipline and

encouraging them to strive towards academic success. Parenting styles are observed to play a contributory role in students' academic achievement; academic self-concept as well as the individuals they grow up to be. This has contributed to their discipline as students; adjustment in the university environment; and has instilled determination in them. The background from which a student comes from was found to be a positive factor in students' academic success, particularly those with low socio-economic statuses, who are determined to change their circumstances.

Low socio-economic status was found to be a motivational factor for students to maintain focus and achieve academically. Beiter *et al.*, (2015) found that students value education greatly due to the fact that it is a major way of elevating oneself and one's own family to greater socio-economic status. Students in the current study saw academic success as a way of improving their family situations and forming a path for their siblings, who idolise them.

5.2.5.2 The influence of religion

Majority of participants revealed that their religion and beliefs in Christianity continually contributed to their academic success. Religiousness was found to vary between participants; however, it is evident that they all believed it played a significant role in their studies and in their lives. Majority of participants referred to religion in terms of affiliation with a certain religious group and other participants relating religion to their beliefs in the existence of God. However, there is some similarity in the contribution of religion on academic self-concept and academic success of students. Some participants also revealed that they had previously reached a point when they wanted to give up in their studies; however, the connection they have with their religion was a way of coping with their challenges.

Religion in this study was found to be linked to students' resilience and positive academic self-concept. Smith and Baratta (2016) discussed how religious identity leads

individuals to think about the role it can play in the modern university. It was found in this study that religion is incorporated in students' academic identities and academic success. Students' maintained religion plays a significant role in personal growth and academic achievement. Thus, their religious conviction was found to be highly regarded as important. Similarly, Neil (2016) found that young people in South Africa have a high level of religiosity, including Christianity and a broader range of other traditional African religions.

5.2.5.3 Language experience in a diverse environment

Diversity with regard to language was found among participants, and it was revealed that students interact with one another on a daily basis. In their daily interactions with one another, it is evident that language differences were not experienced as a negative factor by students. The findings revealed that students from diverse areas interact in English even outside the confines of the classroom. It was also found that majority of students are multilingual and have continued to learn different languages from their peers. Exposure to diversity with regard to language was found to positively play a role in students' learning and in advancing their knowledge. Students also revealed that this has also built on their understanding of the university curriculum. Bernstein and Chemaly (2017) argue that failure to be prolific in different languages is another extreme source of stress that South African students may encounter in higher education. However, it is likely that in the transformation of higher education, university students are becoming more multilingual. Participants further revealed that they could speak more than two languages, which they have continuously acquired within the diverse nature of the university environment. Students in the current study experienced diversity as a platform for learning different languages.

5.3 Summary of chapter

The study revealed there are multiple factors that contribute to university students' academic self-concept. Social factors were found to contribute to students' adjustment to the university curriculum and the curriculum, as well as their approach to the university curriculum. Students' persistence, resilience and academic success are also linked to the social support they receive outside the university, their social background and individual characteristics. Academic self-concept is constantly negotiated as students move from secondary school into higher education; and to continuously change as these students progress in their studies. Academic self-concept contributes to academic achievement; which is an indication that individuals' view of themselves in relation to their academics is dependent on their academic performance. The next chapter is the conclusion, recommendations and implications for future research.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

6 Introduction

This chapter serves to bring into context what has been discussed in the previous chapters by integrating the findings and discussions. This also informs the recommendations to be made for future studies seeking to contribute in this field of study.

6.1 Conclusion

The study revealed that contributes towards students' learning experiences and individual growth, thus playing a significant role in their formation of an academic self-concept. The different knowledge backgrounds that these students bring with them into the university, informs how they adapt and respond to the learning environment, as well as the manner in which other students respond to the diversity of these perspectives. Schreiber and Yu (2016) note that individual differences underlie a student's self-concept, thus students define who they are and construct as sense of self based on these individual differences. The study also revealed that as students develop in their studies; they experience individual growth as well, which is a result of the process and progress in their studies. It is evident that students' persistence in higher education is a result of their resilience, capacity to adaptively and effectively cope with difficulties and challenges that come with the university environment. In addition, support from family and peers also play a role in their academic success.

Cultural and family background, including language was found to contribute to students' academic self-concept and success. The findings of the current study revealed that students' academic self-concept is linked to greater academic success. Thus, it can be concluded in the current study that academic self-concept is significant to academic success.

Thus, higher achievement leads to a positive academic self-concept. One may thus, ask “What happens to students’ academic self-concept when they do not achieve academically?” Several factors were identified as contributing to students’ academic self-concept and success as follows: influence of lecturers and teachers; socio-cultural factors; individual characteristics; peer interactions; and the university environment itself.

6.2 Recommendations

The North-West University provides student support services that are accessible to students when they require academic assistance and health care services. However, students may be reluctant to utilise such facilities, especially with regard to psychological assistance. It is recommended that the University should establish programmes or screening tools that will assist in identifying such students and provide early interventions in order to reduce the likelihood of students dropping out. The University should consider modifying existing interventional programmes within the institution to address the under-preparedness of students who come into the university from rural-based educational systems. Based on the research findings, it is recommended that the results of this study be utilised in the development of screening tools to identify psychological and individual difficulties experienced by students at different levels of studies and in establishing programmes that address students’ under-preparedness as well as adjustment difficulties.

6.3 Limitations of the study

Data for this study was limited to nine participants (7 females and 2 males); and gender and age were not considered as a factor. In addition, this study involved only Honours students registered in the Psychology programme, thus the findings were limited to this population. Thus, it is recommended that future studies should focus on the entire student population of the

University. The findings cannot be generalised to the entire student population due to individual differences, as factors identified as positively contributing to academic success and academic self-concept may be experienced negatively by other students.

6.4 Implications for future research

More studies on academic self-concept in higher education are necessary, thus, it is recommended that:

- Future studies should seek to investigate the causal relationship between academic self-concept and poor academic success.
- Additional research that seeks to explore the role of age, gender and level of study in the construction of an academic self-concept may be beneficial in understanding individual differences.
- Future studies should also seek to investigate the effectiveness of academic support programmes on academic success within the university.

6.5 Summary of chapter

In summary, it has been concluded in the current study that diversity is evidenced to be contributory in the development of academic self-concept. Recommendations that are guided by the limitations of the current study have been highlighted for future studies seeking to research on the topic.

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LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview guide

1. How do you see yourself in relation to your academic performance?
2. What do you think may have influenced the way you see yourself as an academic?
3. What do you think of the differences between students within the university?
4. What are your experiences of language differences within the university environment?
5. Do you think exposure to different languages in the classrooms has an influence on the way you see yourself as an academic?
6. Can you tell me about your family culture?
7. Do you think the culture you form part of and your family background has had an influence on how you see yourself as a student?
8. Do you think your religion has an influence on how you see yourself as a student?
9. Can you tell me about the previous school you attended before university, what type of school was it?
10. Do you think it has an influence on how you see yourself as a student?
11. How has it contributed to the way you see yourself in relation to your academic performance?
12. Do you have anything to add?

Appendix B: Consent form for participation and audio recording

I _____ confirm that information pertaining to the research study was provided to me in a language that I understood. I am aware that the interview session will be audio-recorded and have been informed of the measures for safeguarding the audio tapes. I, hereby, give consent for participation and audio-recording of the interview session. I understand the researcher and the supervisor will have access to the original audio-taped material. I understand the audiotapes will be deleted after completion of the study. Miss Dumisile Miranda Mndawe has briefed me about the purpose of the research study, thus:

- I am aware of what my contribution to this research study entails ☐
- I am informed that participation in the research study is voluntary; and that I can choose to withdraw from the study at any period without consequences ☐
- I am informed that in case I feel uncomfortable to respond to certain questions, I may choose to not respond to them ☐
- I am informed of the measures that will be taken to ensure confidentiality and privacy of my identifying information ☐

Signed at: _____ Date: _____

Signature of participant:

Appendix C: Letter of approval

22590110@nwu.ac.za
Per e-mail



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Dear **DR CHOJA AKPOVIRE ODUARAN**

02-Nov-2017

APPROVAL OF ETHICS APPLICATION: NWU-HS-2017-0179

The following application has been reviewed by the Human Resource Research Ethics Committee (HRREC) on 11-Sep-2017.

Name of student: DM MNDawe - 29402794.

Name of supervisor/promoter: DR CHOJA AKPOVIRE ODUARAN.

Title of study: The influence of diversity on the academic self-concept of honours students at the North-West University (Mafikeng Campus).

Application Risk Level: No risk (No contact with human participants).

This letter serves to inform you that your application has been approved from **11-Sep-2017** to **10-Sep-2020**.

Special conditions of the approval (if applicable):

Yours Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'B. Tchereni', with a small asterisk (*) below it.

Prof B. Tchereni

Chairperson: Human Resource Research Ethics Committee (HRREC)