Epistemic access for university students from disadvantaged (mainly rural) backgrounds: South Africa's Miratho Project

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Inclusive higher education learning outcomes for rural and township youth in South Africa: developing a multi-dimensional capabilities-based Higher Education Index

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- Partnership with Thusanani Foundation (youth-led NGO)

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- Why the 'Miratho' project? (www.miratho.com).

Project Overview

- Four-year project (2016-2020) (ESRC-DFiD and NRF funded)
- Capabilities Approach framework: 'Ultimately, the focus has to be on what life we lead and what we can or cannot do, can or cannot be' (Sen, 1999)
- Focus on access, participation and outcomes for rural and (some) township youth – 5 universities- City (comprehensive), Country (HDI), Metropolitan (elite), Provincial (mid-ranking traditional), Rural (HDI)
- Multi-method, longitudinal study: 65 life histories (over 4 years); statistical analysis; student engagement survey; participatory photovoice project.
- Construction of an 'Inclusive capabilities-based HE learning outcomes Index' for one university' (the capabilities for a successful university education)

A Statistical Picture

- South Africa is a highly unequal society.
- Participation of 18-24 years at 23 public universities is 18. 4% overall. Proportion of 18-24 from different backgrounds: Coloured (14.2%), Black African (15.4%), Indian/Asian (48.9%) and white (53.1%).
- 'Against the odds': 37.1% of the population in rural areas (suffering multiple deprivations) but under 15% of a given cohort of undergraduate university students come from rural backgrounds.
- Completion rates:

	by Y3	by Y6	by Y10
Black African	9.3%	34.7%	41%
White	29%	59%	65%

- Higher education seen both as reproducing inequalities and as disrupting them *if* they can complete (graduate unemployment is 4.2 %, youth unemployment 68%).

Two central capabilities

- The capability for sufficient and secure financial resources
- The capability for epistemic contribution (being a 'knower')

The capability for sufficient and secure financial resources

- Our data is showing that the capability for financial (material) resources is neither sufficient nor secure.

- Too few and insecure resources persistently affects learning capabilities, even though learning cannot be reduced only to material capabilities.

- Lotter (2011, 23): 'To describe someone as poor is the result of normative judgment that a specific human being has inadequate resources available to live a life that conforms to minimum standards a group of humans have implicitly agreed upon as minimally adequate for themselves'. Their situation is unacceptable (for example as an HE student)

Poverty index and categorisation

- **Absolute poverty** or '**extreme poverty**' the inability to achieve and sustain biological wholeness, i.e., health, due to lack of economic capacities. Decline may be gradual and thus hard to spot. In South Africa: living on less than R441 pm (5 students)

- **Intermediate poverty** 'Although people have adequate economic capacities to [...]maintain their physical health, they cannot participate in activities regarded as indicative of being human in that society....People who are intermediately poor are excluded from living lives expressing their humanity in socially defined ways' (Lotter 2011, pp. 161–162). Living on more than R991 pm (53 students)

- **Emerging middle class** Those students who are better off. Their emerging middle-classness is likely to be relatively recent, and hold on middle-classness is likely to be tenuous (Burger at al). (7 students)

The capability for epistemic contribution

- Miranda Fricker (2015): People have a right to contribute on an equal basis to the shared stock of society's meanings, ideas, arguments.

- The capability for epistemic contribution is to have the freedom and the capacity to choose to make a contribution as knower, enquirer and teller in society .

- Equality of access to university knowledge or 'epistemological access' is a condition for developing this capabililty.

- Therefore, coming to understand specific bodies of knowledge at university has a special role in expanding what people value being and doing- known as their achieved functionings (McLean et al, 2017).

- In Fricker's view, the capability for epistemic contribution is a fundamental right which can be denied in two ways: by way of distributive injustice when people do not have access to epistemic goods, such as education; and, discriminatory injustice whereby people's knowledge is not taken as credible or is not understood.

- Our empirical aim is to explore epistemic access, that is, what enables or hinders students to engage with university bodies of knowledge and therefore to gain the freedom to choose to make epistemic contributions to society .

Methodology

- First round interviews with 64 second-year students.
- Codes for initial analysis: teaching; hard work; fitting in; influential/ aspirational others; ontology; language; future aspirations and technology.
- 64 synopses produced, 1 for each interviewee
- First analysis: Biographical and socio-economic factors; agents positioning themselves for epistemic access; evidence of epistemic access; struggle & failure/success; perceptions of quality of teaching
- Selection of four 'epistemic access' student cases for this paper. Here we focus on one of these participants

Sonto

- BA ordinary degree in Politics at City University (a comprehensive university – these were formed in 2002 through the merger of a technikon and a university)

- 20 years old, female

- Born in a rural area, moved to a township at the age of 8 with brother and mother

- Lives with mother, stepfather and brother in the township. City University is within commuting distance (but takes a lot of time)

Family, Schooling, Community

- Families with almost no formal education; communities in which no-one has been to university, many or most are unemployed and there is little chance of escaping poverty; poor quality, severely under-resourced school education, which is a legacy of apartheid.

- A conversion trilogy of family, school and community can structure expectation encouraging the academic effort necessary for passing on variety of information necessary to apply for university and gaining access

- Influential people from the trilogy support students to believe they have the right to and capacity for a university education (epistemic access)

Conversion trilogy: Sonto's family

- Mother works for a feeding scheme. She has always encouraged Sonto's education

- Stepfather calls City University a 'fake' university

- Biological father, who had discouraged her, is now proud.

Conversion trilogy: Sonto's schooling

- Attended a township secondary school
  under-resourced: no computer or book access
  Class sizes of over 50
- Teachers discouraged students from going to university, and only 5 from her class progressed to HE
- But Sonto says English teacher was intelligent and open-minded and taught her that 'there was no one right answer'.
- Matric grades*: English (65); maths literacy (having dropped pure maths) (78); isiZulu (90); accounting (42); economics (60); business (70); life orientation (80); commerce (?).

* Matric is the final examination at the end of upper secondary school, and is the examination that determines university entrance

Conversion trilogy: Sonto's community

- The township Sonto lives in is 'rough' and unsafe, high crime rate, including rape, about which police do little.

- Community beginning to help itself:
  At weekends Sonto collects donations for families to have funerals and clears rubbish.

- Sonto has left the church because she disagrees with ministers preaching that 'suffering is the norm' and because they are judgemental.

Students' Experience of Poverty at University

The capability for sufficient and secure financial resources

- 73% of the 64 students that we have categorised as experiencing 'intermediate poverty' are unable -
  to have a bed to themselves; to have enough to eat everyday; to buy adequate toiletries or clothing; to buy a laptop or books; to pay their accommodation, travel, registration and fees regularly.

- Precarity: students usually have some form of loan to support their studies, but its arrival is extremely uncertain. They might have to suspend studies at any time or vacate accommodation until they pay fees and registration charges.

- Their debts are growing.

Poverty at university: Sonto's experience

- The Thusanani Foundation is funding Sonto's fees (R35,000 pa)

  She has no other source of money

- She lives at home

  It takes up to 4 hours to travel to and back from campus to home on buses, for which she can wait 3 hours. She often walks.

- She hasn't got her overall mark from last year because her fees were not paid (marks are not released by the university if you are in debt)

Students as agents positioned for epistemic access

- Narrative of self as persistent, determined, resilient, goal-driven, aspirational to ensure success in forging better, 'brighter' futures and make their families and communities proud.

- Hard-working.

- Desire to broaden horizons and to engage with disciplinary knowledge.

- But also narratives of struggle and failure.

- (Perceptions of pedagogic quality: quality of explanation; access to technology and books; knowing how to improve; relationships with tutors.)

Forging a better, brighter future: Sonto

Education means a lot, man. If it wasn't for this, and people fought for this education and they died for it, so [...] it might be seen as a privilege but education is a right and everyone must be exposed to this education. Everyone must be, you know, given, and must be encouraged to be educated, because I was looking at the structure now and this area we're living in, education is everything, without education you're not going to go anywhere.

Students as agents: Sonto

Narrative of self as determined, resilient, goal-driven, aspirational to ensure success in forging better, 'brighter' futures

When she arrived at City, Sonto was 'overwhelmed' with happiness, and continues to feel extremely fortunate:

'I'm very, very lucky to be in this situation right now, because not many of us could make it'.

She says she belongs at City because she has as much 'right' to be at university as anyone - looks and possessions don't matter, everyone is pursuing 'academic excellence'.

Evidence of Epistemic Access: Desire to engage with knowledge - Sonto

I think it's important that they not only teach students how to cram but also teach students how to think, how to come up with your own ideas, tell you what your view is about this, not just, what, according to who, who, who, who, who.

Evidence of Epistemic Access: Discipline-specific engagement - Sonto

Less evidence of this in first round interviews, but there are some examples such as here:

I love sociology because [...] sociology is the study of individuals and how they interact with the society or the communities and vice versa, and personally I think that our society or community has a large impact on who we turn out to be at the end because had I grown up in XX I'd be different from who I am right now compared to, you know, the person that I am, so, yes, I think... So I love sociology very much, it has exposed me to lot of things, I'm starting to question why is what like this, why do you have certain things and, yes, I love sociology.

Struggles and success/failures with studying: Sonto

- 6 ½ hours contact time
- A lot of self-study: between classes and from 22.00 to 1.00 in the morning at home
- Difficult to understand white lecturers' accents
- Goes for 'consultations' (lecturers' office hours), but lecturers are often not there despite 'office hours'. She has no relationship with them.
- struggles with typing 10-page assignments because she doesn't have a computer
- gets no feedback on work, so she doesn't know how to improve.
- Nevertheless, never gets marks below 70% in class tests and for individual module exams.

Concluding observations

The threads in Sonto's narrative are repeated across the participants in the project:

➢ Students such as Sonto do not have the capability of 'sufficiency of economic resources', and run the risks of drop out and debt accumulation.

➢ Nevertheless, as in the case study outlined here, they are highly dedicated to gaining epistemic access which is strongly related to their imaginings about a better life for themselves and others.

➢ Hard work and resilience are necessary but not sufficient.

➢ Pedagogical framings/arrangements can guide the direction of effort and open up epistemic access.

➢ As conversion factors, the arrangements for curriculum and pedagogy do not sufficiently or often enough mobilise and harness the students' will, passion and hard work in ways which secure epistemic access and the capability for epistemic contribution.

➢ This is not distributive justice. It is distributive *injustice*.

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Further examples from our 4 case studies

Conversion trilogy: family

DUMASANI (City University BA Language Practice)
Since his father had a stroke and could no longer work, income in the house is very thin. His older brothers help where they can but they too have families to support. Nevertheless, his father has always been determined to support his education:

"I can wear shoes, my father stayed almost five years without having proper shoes as a little boy. If I said, I don't have a school shirt, even though he was earning little, he would make sure that I get a school shirt, he makes sure that I am like each and every other kid in school."

Conversion trilogy: schooling

DUMISANI: The secondary school was poor before he started there:

"there were a lot of other people and they were doing like, all that stuff like vandalising the school, being disrespectful and everything. So, the school was known for its misbehaving and everything."

The new headteacher turned it around:

"The teacher was interactive between them and our parents and everything in order to make the school right, he involved the police, just to keep out those things because people used to carry weapons to school."

OLWETHU (BSc Biological Sciences):

Class sizes at high school were 90+. The principal was extremely supportive and encouraging, but there was an unequipped science lab and no computers (he first used a microscope at university). The principal did not allow extra-mural activities so that students could concentrate on academic work.

Conversion trilogy: agency and school teachers

OLWETHU:

In his village, most boys aspired to be policemen or soldiers. But when Olwethu was 14, his mother got a smartphone. He played with it and found the internet by chance and became 'obsessed' with famous people's lives, discovering that 'education is just the base of everything'. His passion for science led him to question an uncle who was a staff nurse about health-related science (pathogens and blood types) and found that his uncle didn't know. He decided that because he is 'very curious' he must go to university, although his family discouraged him because they thought it would be too difficult. So, he told his teachers and his principal gave him extra more difficult mathematics to prepare him, Olwethu liked and was top at mathematics and sciences, for which he got distinctions in Matric.

Poverty at university

LWAZI: Until he turned 18, living costs were covered by money that paid out from his father's life insurance policy (father was a teacher; mother was unemployed). However, the money has since run out. When he got to the point of applying for university, two of Lwazi's teachers offered to help him raise funds to enter university; family members also pitched in. The money raised was enough to cover registration fees. He had no idea where tuition fees would come from, his guardian said he should just focus on what he *can* do: 'just study'.

Evidence of Epistemic Access: Desire to engage with knowledge and determination to succeed

DUMASANI: love of learning from an early age as part of 'how things were' in his family:

"my brothers were in school already so that made me to be curious. When they were speaking between themselves, I'd get curious and ask questions, when we used to do homework in one place with our neighbours, that's when we tried to engage, write things, try to rap here and there. So, the love for learning …."

"my start wasn't like the best of them all but I'm not one to give up with my start, my finish should be the strongest one yet, to come. […] And when I'm rolling, everybody knows, when I'm rolling I'm like a tumbling rock from a mountain, I gain momentum as I go."

Evidence of Epistemic Access: Discipline-specific engagement

DUMASANI

"we basically analyse everything, when we're saying this is language in power, we're displaying it as this and that if somebody is shouting at you, doing this and that, that's how they use language to show power in politics, referencing to everything that we know or have seen in our daily lives, so it wasn't more technical but it was more of an analysis and an analogy of an idea and how that idea represents a certain entity that we find in our classes."