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'Indlela ibuzwa kwabaphambili': Using indigenous knowledge practices to support first-year first-generation African students in their career transition to higher education

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Background: The study explored indigenous knowledge systems' role in tutoring first-year first-generation African students (FYFGAS) transitioning from high school to higher education. During this process, tutors and students implicitly engage in indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) that allow for enculturation and holistic support for FYFGAS.

Objectives: Drawing on Schlossberg's Career Transitioning Theory as an underpinning framework, the researcher explored how FYFGAS experienced tutoring sessions as a positive conduit towards their successful transition into their first year at university, embedded in the tutor's use of IKS processes.

Method: This article adopted a phenomenological qualitative design within an interpretive paradigm. Data were collected using a semi-structured individual interview schedule with six participants who were first years and the first generation to attend universities in their families. These included four females and two males between the ages of 19 and 21 years. Five of the participants were black South Africans, and one was originally from Zimbabwe but a naturalised resident of South Africa. Data were analysed through inductive thematic analysis.

Results: The findings revealed that tutors were role models to FYFGAS as they transitioned. Tutors further acted as agents of empowerment, thus fulfilling the role of change agents. Students believed that tutoring sessions promoted active learning. Through their active engagement, students developed problem-solving and knowledge-acquisition skills.

Conclusion: There is a need for higher education institutions (HEIs) to build systems that embrace the diverse IKS in supporting the FYFGAS. Developing a holistic understanding of IKS and using these practices during the tutor sessions of FYFGAS will help transform HEI spaces and fully embrace diversity. This will allow these students' career transitioning to be inclusive.

Contribution: The study contributes towards guiding higher education institutions on how to embrace and support students who are the first generation in their families to attend university. It brings further insight to the university leadership on the lived experiences of these students and h ow universities can adapt their first year experience programs to be more inclusive of these students

Keywords: Indigenous knowledge systems; tutoring; higher education; first year; first-generation students; career transition.

Introduction

Transitioning from high school to higher education institutions (HEIs) is challenging for some youth. However, since the dawn of democracy, most youth entering HEIs in the South African context are from previously disadvantaged contexts and thus find themselves underprepared in their transitioning because of socio-economic, historical, political and community circumstances (Council on Higher Education, 2013). Research has shown that most South African students need additional support when entering HEIs to persist through their first year of study (Lombard, 2020; Motsabi, Diale, & Van Zyl, 2020b).

There is literature on career transitioning from high school to higher education (Lombard, 2020; Meehan & Howells, 2018) first-generation students' persistence in higher education (Engestrom & Tinto, 2008; Motsabi, Diale, & Van Zyl, 2020a; O'Shea, 2016) the use of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) and tutoring in higher education (Pidgeon, 2016; Stahl, McDonald, & Stokes, 2020)

and the value of tutoring programmes in higher education (Carnow et al., 2020; Rodríguez & Ossola, 2019). However, there is a scarcity of research focusing on the use of indigenous knowledge practices supporting first-year first-generation African students (FYFGAS) in their career transition to higher education within the South African context.

This study explores indigenous knowledge practices used during tutoring sessions to support FYFGAS as they transition to higher education. In this study, FYFGAS are black South African students, as classified in the South African population registry (Mda, 2011), whose parents have no higher education qualifications (Mehta, Newbold, & O'Rourke, 2011) and who are the first in their family to attend university (Bangeni & Kapp, 2005). They come from families where the understanding of academic norms, expectations and demands differs from families where at least one parent attended higher education (Heymann & Carolissen, 2011). First-year first-generation African students are more likely to come from low-income families, poor socio-economic backgrounds, under-resourced basic education and schooling systems and poor communities. Some of these students grow up in families where the grandmother is the main breadwinner, and all grandchildren look out for each other (Mtshali, 2015). For these students, the family system, including parents, siblings, aunts, uncles and cousins, becomes an important source of support; thus, they never become fully break up from the rules of the family and learn to become independent from these systems (Covarrubias, Valle, Laiduc, & Azmitia, 2019; Motsabi et al., 2020b), affirming the African proverbs that *'ubuntu ngumuntu ngabantu'* [*a person is a person through other people*] and that 'it takes a village to raise a child'. The combination of the act of *Ubuntu* and the indigenous practice of a 'village' is needed in their first year of study as they transition to higher education, which can be embedded into the tutoring system.

Background

Compared to international, first-generation students from minority groups, FYFGAS in this context come from the black South Africans that are the majority of the population. They are from diverse contexts ranging from families where parents have no education or only primary or secondary education and come from townships or rural contexts; others are caregivers in child-headed households, thus facing multiple psychosocial adversities during their first year of study in HEIs, yet are able to succeed (Naidoo & Van Schalkwyk, 2021; Van Breda, 2017; Wills & Hofmeyer, 2018). For these students to persist in higher education, academic, economic and social support are important. The first year is a transitional year from basic to higher education. It is generally the most difficult year for most students and a year where students find it easy to drop out. According to the Council on Higher Education in 2013, the attrition rate of first-year students was 33%. Most of these students were African and most probably the first generation. First-year first-generation African students need all forms of academic and social support for them to be able to navigate higher education and persevere through the challenging first year.

Tutoring programmes have proven effective in transitioning from high school to university. The intensity of the interactions during these sessions and the relationships between tutors and students lead to academic knowledge acquisition (Rodríguez & Ossola, 2019). Integrating indigenous African ways of learning during the tutoring sessions further enhances academic development as it draws from the ways of being that they are familiar with. They provide access, participation and support for first-year students to manage their transition into university life. Given the changing demographics in South African HEIs, universities must develop systems that consider students' identities in becoming socially integrated and attaining learning and generic skills and qualities such as critical thinking and intellectual rigour (Tinto, 1993). This process has far-reaching implications for educational thought and practice. To cater for this adjustment, HEIs must set clear transformational goals to redress past inequalities, serve a new social order, meet pressing national needs and respond to new realities and opportunities (Chipunza & Gwarinda, 2010). Higgs (2008) further argues for a need for a philosophical framework that respects diversity, acknowledges lived experiences and challenges Western forms of universal knowledge. Before an institution can take steps to enhance student success, it must first understand who they are, what they have been prepared to do academically and what they expect from the institution and themselves. It further needs to take into consideration the current student profile within the institution. In the case of the institution under investigation, the students' profile is mostly African, with first-generation students from predominantly poor socio-economic backgrounds who have not been adequately prepared for higher education as expected and are faced with adjusting to cultural capital and institutional habitus that are alien to them.

Higher education institutions must take into consideration that the first years of a degree allow for an opportunity for both students and academic institutions to create learning opportunities (Leibowitz, Van der Merwe, & Van Schalkwyk, 2009). According to Tinto (1993), the first year of university is the most likely year that a student will leave. For students to persist, institutional conditions should encourage a smooth transition. Tinto (2012) believes that students persist when conditions within an institution are conducive to success; therefore, HEIs should create environments that enable students to succeed.

Against this background, this article argues that in an institution where first-year students are predominantly African, indigenous ways of tutoring should be integrated into the current Western tutoring systems to support and enhance the programmes implemented by the institution, thus creating an inviting experience (Siegel, 2010) for FYFGAS and assisting them in adjusting to the complexities of higher education. The tutoring programme can be empowering, nurturing and supportive if managed correctly. It can

consider the students' knowledge, positively impacting first-year students' personal, social and academic outcomes (McGowan, Saintas, & Gill, 2009; O'Shea, Harwood, Kervin, & Humphry, 2013; Rogers, 2011). The tutors provide academic and personal support to students by encouraging participation and allowing for guidance. Conditions are set to promote a reciprocal relationship, a learning relationship and a nurturing relationship. This enables the students to adapt, acquire the required competencies and learn from their experiences. This relationship becomes mutually beneficial as both tutor and the tutee learn from each other.

Literature review

Indigenous ways of tutoring

Owuor (2007) states that indigenous knowledge includes the society's means of learning and knowledge accumulation. Furthermore, Demssie, Biemans, Wesselink and Mulder (2020, p. 4) define indigenous knowledge as 'a comprehensive system of a particular society that encompasses its worldviews, practices, laws, holistic know-how and guidelines regarding interrelationships within the society'. It is largely communitarian as the discovery, experimentation, transmission and knowledge sharing are collective rather than individualistic endeavour within a community (Emeagwali, 2003, Higgs & Van Niekerk, 2002).

According to Pidgeon (2016), to reconcile systemic and societal inequalities, it is the responsibility of HEIs to decolonise education, leading to the meaningful inclusion of indigenous knowledge as an integral part of the institution's tutoring programmes. Carnow et al. (2020) define tutoring as an intervention to improve students' academic performance. This intervention is facilitated by high-achieving senior students appointed to guide and support novice students to be actively involved in their learning and development and gain cognitive skills that will lead to their success (Carnow et al., 2020). Tutoring typically happens as experienced people recognise and develop new beginners who seek to explore their talents through the counsel of knowledgeable elders. In the African culture, the ancestors knew that if the family wants to survive, the children must learn the ways used by the tribe in order to survive. As they learn, they are tutored in the skills, the ceremonies and the ways of life of the tribe. Thus, tutoring ensured cultural survival for the people.

Tutoring is important in transmitting knowledge and skills (Azevedo, Moraes, & Lira, 2021), and learning how to learn is the key element in education. Tutoring in indigenous education promotes skills such as listening, observing, experiencing and intuition, all of which play an important role in learning. In transmitting knowledge, the emphasis of learning is to allow for the uniqueness of the individual learning style and to encourage the development of self-reliance and self-determination (Cajete, 1994). The tutors are found in the various developmental stages of young people, and the relationship promotes learning through the emulation of an experienced practitioner and supervised guidance. These wondrous relationships mirror the processes of the wisdom of indigenous knowledge and tutoring, such as preparing, asking, making, understanding, sharing and celebrating between the mentor and the mentee.

It is important to acknowledge that in the South African context, where we have nine official languages with different cultural practices, there are general common practices across these cultures, one of them being the role of mentors in the developmental stages and the coming to age of children and youth. Whilst the author acknowledges that participants are from different cultural backgrounds, it is beyond the scope of this article to use examples from all cultural groups. Thus, the author chose to use the AmaZulu cultural processes as an example of relating the role of IKS in the tutoring of FYFGAS. However, in the data analysis section, the terms used for mentees or mentors in the participants' cultures will be mentioned where possible.

The AmaZulu culture places a lot of emphasis on tutoring, hence the proverb *Indlela ibuzwa kwabaphambili* [*you can only ask directions from those who have travelled the path before you*]. Learning takes place in a group situation, and sharing opinions is valued. For example, in the AmaZulu culture girls who have gone through teenage hood and are presumed to still be virgins are called *amatshitshi* and are placed under the mentorship of older, matured female called *iqhikiza*. The role of iqhikiza is that of a guiding mentor who will help amatshitshi negotiate this transition period. During this period, the young girls are taught how to navigate the robes of becoming young adults, including lessons on what to expect, what to do and how to behave. Iqhikiza prepares them for adulthood and acts in place of parents (in loco-parentis) (Vilakazi, 1965). She must lead by example, as the young women will emulate her behaviour. She allows them to question and freely discuss their experiences, and she engages their curiosity in a way that allows them to feel part of their development. A major role played by the mentor '*iqhikiza*' is that of a nurturing, supportive and protective leader to her protégés.

In the Isizulu culture, the practice of mentoring is used not only with girls but also with boys during their developmental stages. The male mentor, *Igoso Lezinsizwa* [*a leader of young men*], is a grown-up mature male who is a leader of the younger group of boys said to be *ibutho.* The role of the leader is to teach his protégés how to use sticks for fighting, approach girls and deal with rejection. In this way, he helps them gain insight into their subculture and develop. During the tutorship period, the men are taught skills of hunting, raising a family and general manhood ways. This helps clear misunderstandings and conflicts, especially amongst boys in the same group. Idiomatic expressions such as *Injobo ithungelwa ebandla* [*a problem is solved by a community*] (Nxumalo, 2021) encourage sharing information and joint problem-solving. Therefore, according to indigenous culture, learning occurs through interaction, transference and emulation. This leans more on the tutoring system as a favoured methodology. This study capitalises on using indigenous systems during tutoring sessions with FYFGAS.

To this end, the study sought to answer the following main research question: How are IKS utilised to support the FYFGAS during the tutoring sessions in an HEI in South Africa?

Theoretical framework

This study is underpinned by Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1995), which focuses on the transitions that individuals experience throughout life and how they cope and adjust (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). Schlossberg describes the transition as 'any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles' (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006, p. 33). To understand the meaning of transition for FYFGAS, the transition type, context and impact must be considered carefully (Killam & Degges-White, 2017). According to Chickering and Schlossberg (1995), transitioning can be anticipated, unanticipated or non-event. In this article, FYFGAS transitioning from high school to HEI can be considered an anticipated transition (Bailey-Taylor, 2009). Thus, the student should be able to prepare for a successful transition adequately. However, for most FYFGAS, this transition is not smooth as they face myriad challenges that threaten their success in higher education. For those who can break through the first hurdle of challenges and make it to HEIs, they are likely to face unanticipated events when they get to HEIs, such as under-preparedness, socio-cultural shock, lack of financial support or realising that the HEI context is completely different from their experiences – thus finding themselves not able to adjust to the transition. Finally, a non-event for FYFGAS can relate to a situation where they are ready to transition but, because of various contextual reasons, the transition to higher education does not occur.

This Transition Theory further posits that four factors affect an individual's capacity to cope with a transition, situation, self, support and strategies (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Killam and Degges-White (2017) explain the situation factor in Schlossberg's Transition Theory as encompassing precipitation, timing, control, role modification, duration, experience in similar transition, concurrent stress and evaluation. The self encompasses the FYFGASs' personal (age, gender and ethnicity) demographic and psychological (ego-development, commitment and values, coping aids and self-efficacy) resources that are important enablers in the transitioning phase. The support factor of Schlossberg's Transition Theory stresses the importance of FYFGAS social relationships as support structures constructed by family members, peers, community members and support services from HEI. This factor plays an important role in the indigenous tutoring systems of many FYFGAS as an institutional support mechanism. The final factor focuses on strategies that can be used in HEIs to modify their situations through various institutional strategies such as tutoring and on-boarding of FYFGAS (Killam & Degges-White, 2017). The diagram (Figure 1) explains four major sets of factors that influence an individual and are likely to determine FYFGAS ability to cope with a transition (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

FYFGAS, first-year first-generation African students; HEI, higher education institutions.

FIGURE 1: Schlossberg's four 'S' factors of transitioning concerning first-year first-generation African students in higher education institutions in South Africa.

Through Schlossberg's four 'S' factors (situation, self, support and strategies), the researcher hoped to understand better how using indigenous knowledge and practices in the tutoring sessions could enable a smooth transition to higher education.

Methodology

Research design

This study adopted a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design focused on the essence of a lived experience or phenomenon open to observation or perception by diverse individuals with diverse viewpoints (Tomaszewski, Zarestky, & Gonzalez, 2020). It also focuses on the depth and complexity of phenomena (Guest, Namey, & McKenna, 2017), which is the role of IKS in the tutoring of FYFGAS in higher education. The researcher aimed to yield a systematic reflection of the participants' lived experiences (Guest et al., 2017) of the tutoring system as FYFGAS. Hence, information about the use of indigenous systems during the career transition into higher education and their deeper understanding and meaningful indigenous learning during the tutor sessions were sourced from students as participants.

Participants and sampling

Using purposive sampling, participants were sourced from a class of 35 students from racially diverse backgrounds registered for an elective support module at the Bachelor of Education undergraduate degree level. From this diverse group, 16 identified as African students. Although all 16 were willing participants, 10 students did not meet the inclusion criteria as either their parents or elder siblings had previously attended HEIs. Only six participants were involved as they met the criteria of being FYFGAS. All six

TABLE 1: Biographical information of participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnic group	Highest education in the family (excluding participants)	
				Mother	Father
Thato	19	Female	Batswana	Dressmaking certificate	Grade 10
Mpho	19	Female	Batswana	Matric	Politician
Sizwe	18	Male	AmaZulu	Both parents are in the family business but chose not to disclose their educational levels.	
Tsakani	21	Female	Matsonga	Orphaned when she was 5 years so uncertain and brought up by a grandmother who never went to school.	
Mfundo	20	Male	VaShona	Mother – nursing assistant.	Unknown
Refiloe	19	Female	Basotho	Mother has a secretarial certificate.	Father deceased and had Grade 10

came from previously disadvantaged family backgrounds and were the first to attend any form of higher education beyond Grade 12 in their family systems. Table 1 describes the participants and their parents' educational backgrounds. Pseudonyms were used to conceal their identities.

Tutors are seen as senior matured students in their second, third or fourth year of study at university, and tutors are appointed by academics in different modules based on their excellence in performance. Their role is to tutor these year students and assist them in transitioning into higher education and also mentoring and coaching them outside the formal academic sessions.

Data collection and analysis

For this study, data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews with six participants to allow them an opportunity to express themselves in a 'safe' space. The interview schedule covered the students' experiences and therefore covered the following: (1) Describe your experiences of the tutoring sessions as facilitated by your tutors; (2) How do these sessions relate or identify with your indigenous knowledge practices as an FYFGAS? (3) As an FYFGAS, what benefits did you experience from the tutoring sessions? (4) What skills have you found that relate to your indigenous skills and values during the tutoring sessions?

All data were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Maree's (2017) process of cross-checking and comparing the transcribed data with the audio recordings was followed to ensure trustworthiness. Creswell's (2014) guidelines of reading through the data, dividing data into segments of information with codes, reducing and overlapping the redundancy of codes and collapsing the codes into themes were followed to analyse data. To ensure the study's trustworthiness, the transcribed data were cross-checked with the recordings (Yin, 2017).

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Johannesburg, Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee and permission to conduct the study was granted by the faculty in which the participants were registered as first-year students, and participants also signed consent forms. The research is part of a larger project on career transitioning (Ethics Clearance Sem 2-2020-055). The researcher asked to address students in one of the colleague's classes where they did not teach to avoid biases and students feeling coerced to participate. All ethical protocols were adhered to, and participants were informed of the right to withdraw at any stage without repercussions should they feel uncomfortable continuing.

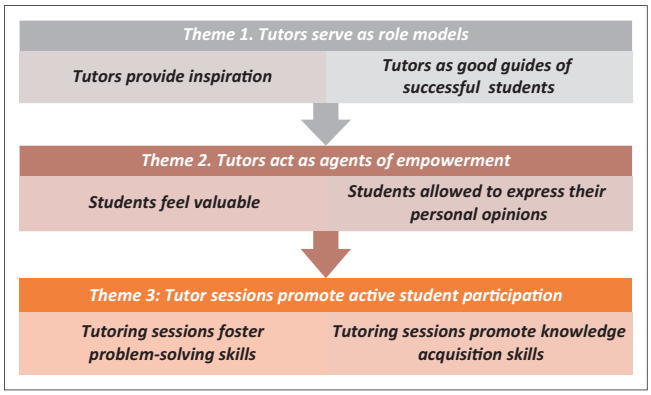

FIGURE 2: Themes and subthemes derived from data.

Results

Presentation of findings

The findings yielded three main themes from the individual interview discussions. Each theme yielded subthemes. The overarching themes and subthemes are presented in Figure 2. All these themes contributed to the benefits experienced by FYFGAS during tutoring sessions as they transitioned to higher education. Verbatim quotes are used as evidence of the presented results. The following section discusses each theme and the subthemes with supporting quotes from the FYFGAS.

Theme 1: Tutors serve as role models

Participants in this study attested to how their tutors were role models for them, and this inspired them as they became self-aware of their potential to succeed in higher education despite being first-generation university students. A male participant from KwaZulu-Natal commented:

> 'For someone like me who comes from the deep rural Natal and being the third of four children in the family to come to uni[*versity*], my tutors acted as my mentors and role models for me. They reminded me back home of my elder brothers who guided me through manhood when I went to the mountain to become a man, and although they did not go further in schooling, I can relate to their lessons in some of my tutors' sessions.' (Sizwe, 18-year-old, male, from the AmaZulu ethnic group)

When probed further about the guidance through manhood, he explained:

> 'You know Ma'am, in my culture, as teenagers, we go to the mountain to transition into manhood. During this period, we have young men [*igosolezinsizwa*], similar to my tutors, and older men, similar to my lecturers, who teach us ways of being. The young men become our mentors as they had gone through this path before and were taught by the older men. This prepares us better for manhood and practices such as ukushela [*proposing love to a girl*]; *ukulahlwa* [*rejection*] and nokulwa ngezinduku [*stick fighting*]. These lessons made me preserve, and I will still use them here [*smiling*]. I, therefore, relate tutoring to this as my tutors prepare me better for university studies.' (Sizwe, 18-year-old, male, from the AmaZulu ethnic group)

This comment indicates that tutoring sessions allowed the participant to relate to his indigenous practices of transitioning from one stage of life to the next with the help of those who had gone through the path before him; thus the idiom '*Indlela ibuzwa kwabaphambili*,' loosely translated as, 'You can only ask for direction from those who have travelled the path before you.'

Alluding to the experience of tutors providing inspiration and corroborating Sizwe's experience, a female participant who is an orphan and was brought up by her grandmother said:

> 'For me, my Education Studies tutor has been my inspiration to do my best. I spent two years at home after my matric as my granny could not afford registration fees. So, I find myself a bit older than my classmates, who are between 17 and 19 years. This initially made me feel awkward and out of place, but when my tutor, who is much older and from Zimbabwe, told us her story in the tutor session, I felt inspired and belonged.' (Tsakani, 21-year-old, female, from the Matsonga ethnic group)

Tsakani's experience can be related to the indigenous ways of mentoring where she sees her tutor as *Mudyondzisi* [*a female mentor*] in the Matsonga culture similar to *iqhikiza* [*older female mentor*] who is nurturing, supportive and protective of *izintombi* [*younger females*], her protégés. These experiences are similar to the indigenous practices the FYFGAS know and can relate to, which helps them transition better into higher education, increasing their persistence and decreasing the possibility of high attrition rates and dropout.

Similarly, a 19 yeard old female from the Batswana ethnic group, Mpho, said, 'most of my tutors inspire me to do my best' whilst Mfundo added that,

> 'They make this seem all possible and doable, they are a true inspiration and remind us of our African way of being, that is to look after each other and learn from those who have gone before us, that is the way of being Ma'm, they show true *Ubuntu*.' (Mfundo, 20 year old, male, from the VaShona ethnic group)

According to the participants, tutors provided them with the support they needed to manage their first year successfully. They also helped them understand the material taught in class by their lecturers and made it simple and *'digestible'* [*Tsakani*]. Tutors played the role of being their guides. A participant explained their experience as follows:

> 'My tutors [*in Setswana called Bakaedi*] remind me of back home, where my elder cousin was my inspiration and guide to success. Even though she did not finish school, she was a successful businesswoman and was the reason I was inspired to finish school and come to university. My tutors' support reminds me of the support I got from her as she was a good example for me that I can succeed as a black girl.' (Thato, 19-year-old, female, from the Batswana ethnic group)

The above experiences can be related to Schlossberg's transitioning process of the FYFGAS's ability to control and manage their transition because of the support they receive from their tutors. It further alludes to aspects of the self as some are self-conscious of the personal characteristics they bring into the situation, such as age, gender and ethnicity.

Theme 2: Tutors act as agents of empowerment

When participants were asked about their understanding of the benefits of tutor sessions and the role tutors played in their transitioning, their responses alluded to the role of their tutors as agents of empowerment. In her response, Tsakani explained her experience with her history tutor as follows:

> 'She allows us to question freely and share our stories and experiences, something I am scared to do in class with my lecturers. When she validated my opinions and allowed me to express myself in my home language even though she did not know it and asked others to help interpret, I knew there and then that she has my back and it's possible to make it.' (Tsakani, 21-year-old, female, from the Matsonga ethnic group)

Refiloe supported Tsakani's statement and indicated that 'I can express my personal views in the mentor session' and said, 'As students, we feel valuable.' (Refiloe, 19 year old, female, from the Basotho ethic group) Her opinion was further supported by Thato, who stated, 'I feel that I have valuable contributions to make in the mentor session.' (Thato, 19-year-old, female, from the Batswana ethnic group)

Participants felt that they were allowed to express their opinions even if they did not agree with the others. This thought was passionately shared by Mfundo, who explained that there was a debate around the former President of Zimbabwe in the session, and his personal opinions differed from the class as a Zimbabwean. He felt whilst the rest of the group was talking from a third-person perspective, he had a first-hand lived experience from his home country. His experience of how the tutor handled the 'hot debate' was 'My opinions are considered important in the mentor session, and I feel validated by my tutor. For me, he is a true agent of empowerment.' (Mfundo, 20 year old, male, from the VaShona ethnic group)

The experiences shared by participants allowed them to transition without feeling insecure, as their tutors assisted in building their self-confidence. Because of this positive experience, participants were willing to go the extra mile to succeed in their studies. This relates to Schlossberg's second

'S' of self. Through the mentor sessions, they were enabled to develop their egos, coping aids, values and self-efficacy and be fully committed to their holistic development. Moreover, the fourth 'S' of strategies was used by FYFGAS to adapt to higher education through peer engagement, debates and critical discussions. This process can only occur in smaller tutor sessions versus the big lecture classes.

Theme 3: Mentor sessions promote active student participation

The tutoring sessions enabled participants to participate in their learning and development actively. The active participation was indicated by three participants who said:

> 'The mentor session promotes participation which boosts my self-confidence.' (Mpho, 19 year old, female, from the Batswana ethnic group)
>
> 'I enjoy taking part in discussions during the mentor session because I can express myself without fear or favour as a Zulu boy.' [*with a smile*] (Sizwe, 18 year old, male, from the AmaZullu ethnic group)
>
> 'The mentor encourages all of us as students to participate actively.' (Refiloe, 19 year old, female, from the Basotho ethic group)

When asked about skills, they found that related to their indigenous skills and values during the tutoring sessions, participants' responses indicated two major skills: problem-solving and knowledge acquisition. They indicated that they had been taught these skills as children by their grandparents, parents and other elders in their villages and communities. In explaining problem-solving skills, Tsakani explained:

> 'The mentor session teaches me to think critically not only about my studies but about life in general. This reminds me of my granny who used to say to me as a little girl, "Tsakani," [*and I knew when she calls me by name, there is something wrong I have done as she called me Makhadzi, meaning Aunt as I was named after her Aunt*], you don't just do things, you think first. Otherwise, you will always be in trouble and will never succeed.' (Tsakani, 21-year-old, female, from the Matsonga ethnic group)

Tsakani alluded to this indigenous knowledge by her grandmother as a lesson she has taken throughout her whole life. Mfundo alluded that the mentor session 'promotes problem-solving.' When asked to explain further, as school is thought to be the place where problem-solving is taught, he argued and said:

> 'You see, Ma'am, Doc, school is supposed to do this, but it doesn't; all you guys do with your Western knowledge is to make us do "CPF," and that does not teach us to problem solve; it actually makes us forget the skills we learned from the home of problem-solving, and the tutor sessions at least try to bring this skill back.' (Mfundo, 20 year old, male, from the VaShona ethnic group)

As I was uncertain what CPF means, I asked Mfundo to explain, but he rolled his eyes and laughed out loud, and said: 'Serious, Doc,' to which I nodded my head. Mfundo's response was:

> 'Teachers and lecturers make us "C"- cram, "P"-pass and "F"-forget. They don't engage us in those big classes thus, we are unable to critically think, but if you focus during the tutor sessions, you learn a lot as these sessions provide the opportunity to critically think and problem solve.' (Mfundo, 20 year old, male, from the VaShona ethnic group)

Mfundo further explained that as a boy back in Zimbabwe, he and his siblings and cousins were raised by his grandfather as he did not know his father. His grandfather would give them challenging tasks when they took his stock out for grazing, and the one who came up with solutions would receive incentives and privileges over the others. As he puts it: 'This continuously kept us on our toes to find solutions; thus, I found my own solution of coming to South Africa to study, with no one's help [*smiling*].' (Mfundo, 20 year old, male, from the VaShona ethnic group)

One could tell from his facial expression how proud he was about the lessons learned from his grandfather, and Mfundo was one of the top students, not only in my module but in the programme. Thato corroborated Mfundo's narration in saying: 'The mentor session teaches me to look at things from a different point of view.' (Thato, 19-year-old, female, from the Batswana ethnic group)

Given the challenges students who are FYFGAS and from disadvantaged contexts face, HEIs need to provide a conducive and student-friendly context that will allow students to develop knowledge-acquisition skills and provide the support that will bridge the gap that emanates from the poor schooling system they come from. It was evident from the data provided that FYFGAS found tutor sessions provided them with the opportunity to develop knowledge-acquisition skills that they needed to cope with learning at a university. To support this assertion, participants stated that:

> 'I learn new skills in every mentor session.' (Mpho, 19 year old, female, from the Batswana ethnic group)
>
> 'The mentor session gives me the ability to achieve set outcomes.' (Refiloe, 19 year old, female, from the Basotho ethic group)
>
> 'The mentor session teaches me to apply the theory I have learned.' (Tsakani, 21-year-old, female, from the Matsonga ethnic group)

Discussion

According to Karcher (2008), students require good role models to guide them to navigate the new school environment successfully. Coyne-Foresi, Crooks, Chiodo, Nowicki and Dare (2019) also indicate that tutors can serve as role models for individual mentees in tutoring programmes. In previous research, tutoring was shown to promote a strong relationship between students and tutors (Tolbert, 2015). Klinck et al. (2005) note that in the indigenous tutoring system, it is important for mentees to have good role models that will guide and support them in their journey towards personal growth. Karcher (2005) shows that a mentor's (tutor) behaviour, such

as attendance rate, can directly affect mentees' self-management of behaviour, skills and self-esteem, thus agreeing with the four 'S's of Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Karcher (2009) suggests that having tutors with positive attitudes and connectedness that foster student achievement is essential to a tutoring programme's success.

Indigenous tutoring holds many benefits for students. The indigenous tutoring system is useful for improving educational aspirations and reducing educational disparity amongst students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Bodkin-Andrews, Harwood, McMahon, & Priestly, 2013). Previous studies indicate that the indigenous tutoring system can foster student learning outcomes and is a mechanism for student empowerment, knowledge acquisition and skill improvement (O'Shea, McMahon, Priestly, Bodkin-Andrews, & Harwood, 2016; Priestly, Lynch, Wallace, & Harwood, 2015; Reano, 2020). O'Shea et al. (2013) observe that tutoring can foster imaginative thinking about university education amongst students and serve as a tool for improving students' access to and participation in university education. Also, Burgess and Dyer (2009) observe that tutoring provides students with the opportunity to rise above their disadvantaged situation. Windchief and Brown (2017) suggest that indigenous tutoring programmes can help to address the educational gap and enable students to succeed in pursuing higher education without losing their cultural identity and values.

Mangan and Trendle (2019) show that tutoring can increase student programme completion rates. Also, another study suggests that learners who have been tutored are less likely to drop out of a training programme than those without tutors (Trendle, 2013). Karcher (2009) observes that a tutoring programme can enable students to gain knowledge, skills and attitudes that could assist them in comprehending better and respecting themselves and others. Researchers like Peralta, Cinelli and Bennie (2018) show that tutoring can be used to increase the engagement of indigenous students. Hackett et al. (2016) recorded improvements in students' confidence, knowledge and skills after participating in a tutoring programme. Tutoring fosters connectedness amongst students by providing them with the opportunity to bond socially and experience belongingness (Karcher, 2005). According to Karcher (2008), tutoring is a mechanism for transmitting values to students, instilling in them hope for the future as well as improving their academic skills. This is further supported by Carnow et al. (2020) who assert that the cooperative nature of tutoring allows students to engage with peers and exchange learning experiences and success strategies. These values, experiences and strategies support the FYFGAS to transition easily, taking cognisance of their personal characteristics, psychological resources and support structures as outlined in the Transition Theory (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Tutoring greatly benefits disadvantaged youths by providing them with a forum for developing competence and school bonding (Zand et al., 2009). Coyne-Foresi et al. (2019) show that tutoring contributes positively to students' self-development, cultural connectedness and interpersonal relationships. Kram and Bragar (1992) emphasise that tutoring helps in skills development amongst mentees. Indigenous tutoring programmes can help increase mentees' skill levels (Vujcich, Thomas, Crawford, & Ward, 2018). Furthermore, tutoring enhances students' experience in the university; it enables them to develop confidence, create a group identity, appropriately navigate the school environment, develop good communication abilities and support one another in difficult times (Mills et al., 2014).

Tutoring is an effective learning and teaching tool for improving student retention in the university environment (Shields et al., 2012), allowing students to develop and sustain beneficial relationships and engage in reflective thinking (Mills et al., 2014). It allows mentees to collaborate, solve problems and share ideas with others (Mills et al., 2014; Palermo, Hughes, & McCall, 2011). Tutoring is a practical approach to mastering essential life skills and ensuring positive changes in youth's academic, behavioural and vocational outcomes (Du Bois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011; Ware, 2013). However, Paasse and Adams (2011) note that for the indigenous tutoring programme to be successful, its structure must be flexible and informal and should be able to adapt to the skills and knowledge of the local community and their services.

The most profound finding of the study is that all participants acknowledged the indigenous lessons they learned from their homes and communities that they could overtly or covertly observe and experience during the tutor sessions, which helped them persist through the first semester of the year. All six participants experienced tutor sessions positively. This indicates that if we are to truly transform higher education and decolonise its curriculum, embedding IKS should not be a tick box exercise only. The transitioning of FYFGAS should be an intentional and institutionalised priority in all programmes, and tutors must be empowered to play this role. However, it also talks to academic staff about being prepared to transform their ways of being and doing, as they are the mentors of the tutors in their programmes.

Limitations of the study

There are some limitations to be considered in this study. The study focused on students from one of the small modules in the faculty as it is perceived by many as a methodology-related module that is not a school curriculum subject but more of a support role subject. Thus, getting a teaching post in most township schools is difficult. There were only six participants who met the inclusion criteria as the subject is perceived to be difficult by most African students as it is neurodiversity. Because of the small number of participants, the study results cannot be generalised. A future study based on a mixed-methods approach and

taking large samples of students from different modules could be undertaken.

Recommendations

A future study based on a mixed-methods approach and taking large samples of students from different modules could be undertaken.

Conclusion

Failure by academia to embrace indigenous ways of knowing and doing for FYFGAS will continue to deepen existing inequalities in HEIs. To address issues of equality, decolonisation of education, social justice and embracing the diverse student population, HEIs need to ensure that they not only mark the box of policies in their spaces but are actively engaging to ensure that FYFGAS are fully integrated into their institutions as they transition. This integration goes beyond equity statistics. It also includes fully embracing the socio-cultural, historical and IKS and practices diverse African students bring into the classroom, including preparing their tutors to engage in practices that validate and acknowledge these knowledge systems. Only then can we begin to talk about transforming the higher education system that prepares students for the world of work where they can fully be adaptable without losing their sense of identity and the rich knowledge they bring from their contexts. Although this was a small group of participants, this study acknowledges the role played by the tutors who practice indigenous ways of mentoring in the tutoring processes that validated the FYFGAS and thus allowed them to engage in their learning, leading to their active persistence. Developing a holistic understanding of IKS and using these practices during the tutor sessions of FYFGAS will help transform HEI spaces and fully embrace diversity. This will allow these students' career transitioning to be inclusive.

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Data availability

The author is willing to make data that supports this study available upon request taking into account issues of privacy or ethical restrictions.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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