Highs, Lows and Turning Points in Marginalised Transitions and Experiences of Noncompletion amongst Pushed Dropouts in South African Higher Education

Mukovhe Masutha [ID]

Ali Mazrui Centre for Higher Education Studies, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg 2006, South Africa; mukovhem@uj.ac.za; Tel.: +27-079-1898-717

Abstract: Against a backdrop of dominant deficit, victim-blaming and class/colourblind theories of unequal educational transitions and higher education outcomes, this article analyses thematically in-depth narrative interviews with Black working class "dropouts" in South African higher education to explore how this group of former students narrate and make sense of their educational journeys and how their accounts could strengthen efforts to achieve just and equitable experiences and outcomes for students from all walks of life. Their narrative accounts reveal that, (a) in their marginalised educational transitions, despite disrupted and sometimes traumatic formative years (lows), their transformative habitus and community cultural wealth enables them to find highs in nadir moments; (b) their educational pathways are paved with unlikely steppingstones and improvising agents of transformation who overcome the odds of under-resourced schooling experiences; (c) despite policymakers' best intentions, student financial aid moderates but does not ameliorate the perils of being Black and working class in higher education; (d) as pushed dropouts, they are victims of a class and colourblind criminalisation of failure that naturalises injustice in already unjust educational contexts. This study illuminates the transformative and social justice potential in analysing narrative accounts of those who often disappear from higher education without a trace.

Keywords: black working class students; marginalised transitions; pushed dropouts; noncompletion; social justice; South Africa

1. Introduction

Transforming and widening participation in higher education (HE) to youth from traditionally marginalised communities remains prominent in HE research and policy agendas, often carrying the promise of more equitable and socially just societies. This article is concerned with experiences of marginalised transitions and high rates of noncompletion amongst financial aid-funded Black working class students in South African HE and related contexts. Despite the proliferation of diversity and inclusion policies and initiatives, the strong global and national level policy commitments have yet to translate to equitable and just educational realities for traditionally marginalised communities [1,2]. Even as working class students gain increased access to HE, social inequality in patterns of access and attainment has been "maximally and effectively maintained" [3]. As race, class and gender-based disparities remain prominent in student transitions, the type of university and field of study accessible, institutional experiences and the odds of successful completion persist in the UK, in the US, in Australia, in Zimbabwe and elsewhere; efforts to better understand the educational journeys and stories of the marginalised remains crucial to the dream of just educational futures [4–7].

The motivation behind this study has been the author's interest in Black working class students (BWS), their experiences of completion and noncompletion in HE and how such experiences are often misunderstood and misrepresented in scholarship and policymaking circles. As a Black working class graduate, the author is intrigued by how dominant forces

in these circles, mainly relying on the wisdom of theories with colourblind meritocracy, construct grand narratives that often do not align with this group's lived experiences and instead serve to account and ultimately justify persistent intersectional disparities [8].

As marginalised transitions and experiences of HE continue to facilitate a revolving door of exclusion for the working class [9], dominant narratives and representations that inform teaching, learning and assessment practices remain anchored to flawed notions of HE institutions as progressively transforming, fair, equal opportunity, colourblind and generally well-meaning spaces [10]. Many amongst us remain reluctant to recognise "race as a legitimate object of scrutiny, either in scholarship or policy" and universities' role in reproducing and legitimating racial inequity [1]. In downplaying the exclusionary intersection of race and class in students' educational transitions, advocates of meritocratic theories of the achievement gap, in settler colonial states like South Africa, stand to preserve "a legacy of racial privilege" [8] and serve to "dismiss and mute the realities of people of colour" in educational institutions [10]. As regressive tenets of marketisation, narrow meritocracy, credentialism and related neoliberal conceptions of education and society remain dominant and the welfare university continues to wither [11,12], the task of presenting a counter story and imagining a different and more just university has become urgent. This article heeds this call.

The author joins scholars [13–17] who are continuously challenging the myths of educational institutions as colour and class-blind meritocracies and the extent to which such myths are deployed to explain unequal HE transitions and attainment rates. As Lucido et al. [15] and others point out, the myth of meritocracy in higher education is as a key factor behind the persistent inequality of access and outcomes to higher education. Indeed, 'this myth is often used as a weapon against policies like affirmative action that offer minor admissions advantages to low-income students and racial and ethnic minorities. The deck is stacked in favour of affluent parents who use their privilege and exploit these institutional needs to find their children a way into elite colleges' [15].

Additionally, this article responds to calls for research that examine persisting marginalisation in educational experiences and outcomes from the perspectives and through the voices of the traditionally and presently marginalised [18–20]. The author draws on participants' narrative accounts to illuminate what the deficient framing of this group of students fails to recognise—working class people's community cultural wealth [21]. By community cultural wealth, Yosso [21] is referring to, i.e., "cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed by socially marginalised groups that often go unrecognised and unacknowledged", thereby missing out on what these communities, through their students, bring to the field of university education [22].

The South African HE experience is inextricably linked to the country's history of colonialism and apartheid [23], a history of English and Afrikaans-speaking White minority domination and the subjugation of an African and mainly working class majority that speaks nine indigenous languages. Due to this apartheid and colonial past, South Africa remains sharply segregated by class, gender, racial, linguistic and spatial lines. After 300 years of colonialism and 45 years of apartheid, a policy of legally enforced racial segregation and exploitation, South Africa's 1994 democratic dispensation inherited a fundamentally hierarchical nation resembling two societies in one. Importantly, class and racial domination continue to resemble two sides of the same coin, as the poor and working classes remain almost exclusively Black African, while the middle- and upper-class elite remain the English and Afrikaans-speaking White [6]. The legacy of this segregated and exploitative past continues to reproduce one of the most unequal societies in the world today [23].

Colonial and apartheid's spatial laws concentrated the Black working class majority in peripheral rural homelands from which they can be temporarily drawn into cities and small towns in the form of cheap labour [24]. These rural communities were and remain grossly underdeveloped and overwhelmingly dependent on social welfare and subsistence farming. Alongside opulent cities and towns reside Black migrant workers in overcrowded

and under-resourced informal settlements known as townships. They are a legacy of enforced segregation and the resultant inequality of access to education, health, welfare, transport and employment opportunities [23].

Post-apartheid South Africa, the author's research context, established the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), a national loan and grant scheme aimed at powering HE access and success for students from marginalised communities. As a result, two decades since the fall of apartheid, the composition of the university student population in South Africa has changed significantly, with increased access of working class students to HE [25]. Regrettably, the rise in access by financial aid-funded working class students has occurred alongside high dropout and low completion rates amongst this group of students.

Indeed, as a result of the student financial aid budget rising from R400 million in 1999 to over R44 billion by 2022 [26], Black students have gone from constituting less than 25% of university students in the 1980s to exceeding 80% of the university student population in 2018 [27]. Such progress has been derailed by low student retention and completion rates amongst financial aid-funded students [21,28]. Post-apartheid South Africa's first Report of the Ministerial Review of the NSFAS scheme revealed that, between the years 2000 and 2010, '67% of 656,000 financial aid-funded students were no longer in higher education; 72% of this 67% dropped out without completing their studies; and only 28% graduated' [22]. Consequently, despite the government's bold policy targets to achieve equity in HE, by the year 2020, only 5.9% of South Africans between the ages of 25 and 64 had achieved a bachelor's degree from a university (Statistics South Africa Quarterly Labour Force Survey 2010–2020). Moreover, demographically, the South African picture remains firmly unequal, with the HE participation rate amongst African youths at 18% compared to 56% amongst their White counterparts [27].

In their 2018 study on factors affecting the success of first-generation students at a South African university, Kelly-Laubscher et al [28] observed how South Africa's patterns of access, retention and success in higher education persistently reflect the country's class and race-based disparities. They found that:

> *. . . even for those participating in higher education, the throughput of African and Coloured students is lower than their White counterparts, with only 20 and 24 per cent of African and coloured students, respectively, graduating within the regulation time for their diplomas/degrees, compared to 44 percent of White students . . . It is clear from these statistics that increased participation by these groups has not resulted in a corresponding increase in graduation rates and throughput.* [28]

A cohort study released by the South African Department of Higher Education and Training in 2019 invites researchers to critically examine the challenge of noncompletion amongst Black working class students, with a view to deepen and enrich our understanding of the challenge and ways of responding to it.

> *Transformation imperatives in the system are also challenged by the differential success according to population groups, with African and Coloured students fairing very poorly when compared to their Indian and White counterparts. While all students need to improve their throughput rates in minimum time, support for African and Coloured students to improve their performance is a critical equity issue. All institutions need to invest in data analytics to better understand their student dropout and throughput rates by population group and gender.*

Against this backdrop, the present study responds to the need to gain in-depth insights into the currently understudied marginalised transitions and experiences of noncompletion amongst financial aid-funded Black working class students in South African HE. The article fulfils this task by shining the research spotlight on alternative understandings and explanations of the prevalence of high noncompletion amounts of Black working class students through first person accounts [29]. The author posits that our ongoing pursuit for justice in education and society requires that we move beyond the veneer of diversity and inclusion policies by carefully examining and making explicit the micro-level lived realities

of marginalised students—in this case, Black working class students—and the educational contexts in which they are expected to aspire, transition and succeed. This is an important exercise in disrupting unjust and often taken-for-granted practices that continue to exclude those from the margins of society.

In exploring financial aid-funded Black working class students' narratives and accounts of marginalised transitions and experiences of noncompletion at two South African universities with different statuses, this article seeks to contribute to and further develop a growing body of research that foregrounds the voice, counternarratives and lived experiences of the "unheard" in the understanding and theorising of persistent race, class and gender disparities in universities [30]. To this end, the research questions that this article addresses are (a) How do financial aid-funded Black working class students narrate their experiences of marginalised transitions and noncompletion South African universities? How do such narratives deepen our understanding of the challenge of high rates of noncompletion amongst financial aid-funded students in South African higher education (HE)? Within the context of efforts to transform and widen participation in HE to communities in the margins of society, answers to these questions should present opportunities for transformation and further deepen our understanding of the challenge of attrition amongst working class students in higher education. Answers to these questions also enable us to get to know students who disappear without a trace (the so-called dropouts); their life stories and the gaps in our knowledge of their aspirations, transitions and experience of HE.

Why Financial Aid-Funded Black Working Class Students?

> *'Class matters because it creates unequal possibilities for flourishing and suffering'.* [31]

In Miseducation, Reay stresses the importance of reflecting on the history and role of class in education in order to gain an appreciation of "historical processes whereby working class educational failure has become legitimised and institutionalised" [32]. Reflecting on her personal journey and evolving understanding of being working class Reay [33] discourages generalising the working class and reminds us that there are "very many different ways of being working class". The term commonly used in South Africa is "poor and working class students" and it is designated to a category of the student population on the basis of their families' annual household incomes. The concept of working class students in this study is employed to refer to students from South African households earning below a combined annual income of up to R122,000 whose undergraduate studies were funded by NSFAS at a public South African university.

Why examine the marginalised transitions to and experiences of noncompletion amongst financial aid-funded working class students in South Africa? First, there is a deep personal, family and community-wide cost that accompanies high rates of noncompletion amongst students from traditionally excluded communities. The educational transitions and experiences of high noncompletion amongst financial aid-funded students require an ongoing inquiry, as this group is often perceived as more insulated from the perils of being Black and working class in largely untransformed and often violent HE systems [34]. Thirdly, financial aid beneficiaries represent children of the most vulnerable and marginalised households and communities in South Africa. Improving their HE experience is pivotal to redressing the extent to which the South African HE experience reproduces the legacy of colonialism and apartheid.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants and Procedure

This research is based on data from the author's doctoral study that examined narrative accounts of financial aid-funded Black working class students' experiences of completion and noncompletion in South African HE and how insights from such experiences can help move understandings of (under)achievement rates amongst this group of students beyond the majoritarian narrative. After a combination of purposeful sampling, the maximum

variation sampling and snow-balling techniques were employed, and a total of forty-six in-depth narrative interviews with twenty-four financial aid-funded Black working class students and twenty-two academic and support staff were conducted from across faculties at three different status universities. As shows in Table 1, this article reports on a section of the broader study that specifically focused on the narrative accounts of five (5) pushed dropouts (i.e., financial aid-funded Black working class students who got excluded from their studies prior to completion, despite their desires to persist). Linda (25), Wadzi (19) and Naledi (18) are from Merger University, a well-resourced former Whites-only Afrikaans-speaking urban university that merged with a predominately Black Technikon in post-apartheid South Africa. Tali (27) and Martin (26) are from Rural University, an under-resourced, predominantly working class and former Blacks-only university located in Rural Province. Participants are referred to by their pseudonyms throughout this article.

Table 1. Participants' demographic profile.

Participant	Gender	Institution	Description
Linda	Male	Merger University	First-generation Black working class university student
Naledi	Female	Merger University	First-generation Black working class university student
Wadzi	Female	Merger University	First-generation Black working class university student
Martin	Male	Rural University	First-generation Black working class university student
Tali	Female	Rural University	Second-generation Black working class university student

2.2. Data Analysis

While being an insider researcher can bring challenges, it did enhance the establishing of a rapport and trust between the author and participants narrating about deeply personal experiences and understandings [35]. Following the Braun and Clarke (2006) guide to doing thematic analysis, the author, as part of their doctoral work, read and reread transcripts multiple times, generated initial codes, collated the data and searched for themes, reviewed themes and defined and named themes.

In this article, narratives of Black working class dropouts who often disappear without a trace are treated as valid, valuable and critical in the theorising of persistent inequality in education [19]. The narrative analysis approach was employed with a view to advance an important body of research in education that foregrounds the voices and lived experiences of those in the margins of society who often go unheard. As such, much of the story of this article is written through illustrative excerpts from participants' narrative accounts.

Crucially, it is through storytelling that our students make sense of their lives whilst providing educational researchers with valuable insight into their journeys to and through educational institutions [2]. Indeed, the narrative approach adopted in this study enabled the author to capture the complexities, multidimensionality and richness of participants' educational experiences. Connelly and Clandinin explained the main claim for the use of narrative in educational research [35]:

> *"The main claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world. This general notion translates into the view that education is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; teachers and learners are storytellers and characters in their own and other's stories"*

The narratives included in this article are not representative of the entire dataset, and the author seeks not to generalise participants' experiences but, rather, to illuminate the key dimensions of their narrative accounts as they relate to noncompletion amongst financial aid-funded Black working class students at two different status universities in South Africa. The author lifted their stories to highlight the many sides of dropouts that are not captured and, in many ways, silenced by dominant conceptions of students who dropout prior to completing their studies in university.

3. Results

Participants narrated a range of positive and negative experiences from their formative years, transitions to HE and their experience of the first year of study at university. Their narrative accounts offer a glimpse into Black working class students' largely understudied transitions to and experiences of noncompletion in South African universities. Common across their narrative accounts was their mostly disrupted formative and sometimes traumatic years (lows/nadir experiences); their HE transitions were mostly paved with unlikely steppingstones and agents of transformation [22] (highs), they experienced turbulent and hard landings on campus during their first year of study (Lows) and turning points that all resulted in unhappy endings to their HE experiences (i.e., noncompletion). From a turbulent transition and hard landing on campus, they were not given an opportunity to recover and persist. They were all dropouts who were pushed out of the university despite their willingness to continue studying. They faced a double-edged sword of academic/financial exclusion. All but one (Tali) dropped out of university in their first year of study. The trauma of being a dropout has not derailed their intention to one day continue with their university studies.

3.1. Lows: Disrupted and often Traumatic Formative Years

Students' communities of origin and family backgrounds (i.e., race, class, gender, language group, family income, geographic location, parents educational and occupational status) are crucial in efforts to deepen our understanding of the patterns of inequality of transitions, experiences and outcomes in HE [30,36,37]. Sociologists of education [29,33,38,39] have shown how, based on their level of education, occupational and social status, elite parents and family backgrounds impart to their children (amongst other privileges) cultural resources such as dominant societal values, language skills, knowledge, attitudes, skills, abilities and dispositions, whose effective transmission leads to successful educational experiences and outcomes. Social reproduction theorists consider the elite intergenerational parent-to-child transfer of family-based endowments and abilities as the primary means through which structured social inequalities are reproduced in educational experiences and outcomes [40].

First, the participants in this study came from South Africa's rural and township communities. These communities have been described as the face of persistent and cyclical poverty, unemployment and general economic stagnation. They are characterised by high levels of unemployment and low HE participation rates, and the vast majority of families remain dependent on subsistence farming, government social security grants for pensioners and children under the age of 18 and proceeds from informal trading activities [34,41]. Research has shown the significance of formative educational milestones as important indicators of lifelong educational achievement and the ability to adapt to uncertain life experiences [42]. All participants in this study experienced disrupted family circumstances and, sometimes, traumatic phases during their formative years, with materially adverse implications on their educational transitions.

Linda, who was excluded from Merger University, was orphaned during his first year of study. Similarly, Tali and Martin, who were both excluded from Rural University, were raised by single mothers who dropped out of high school to work as domestic workers. Naledi's mother toiled as a hawker in an informal settlement, and her father worked as a security guard about 500 kilometres from home. Due to their history as reserves for cheap labour, Naledi's informal settlement community embodies the precarious social, economic,

cultural and political past of urban informal settlements that served labour reserves in and around Johannesburg. Wadzi narrated experiences of having to endure traumatic formative years. She was born and raised in a largely degenerated and working class section of the City of Johannesburg. Her parents separated when she was in grade 1, and her mother passed away gruesomely when she was in grade 3. Before her passing, Wadzi's mother worked as a security guard. Her father sold food to manual labourers for a living in order to pay rent and send Wadzi to school.

Implicit in the participants' narrative accounts are experiences of having endured social origins that lack idealised forms of cultural capital operational at HE institutions [25].

Finding Highs in Nadir Moments (Lows)

Whereas disrupted formative years represent lows in participants' journeys to HE, participants' narrative accounts reveal how this group of students still managed to find highs in nadir moments or experiences (lows). Participants' narratives particularly illuminate their possession of crucial community cultural wealth that often goes unnoticed in studies of marginalised communities of colour [21]. Yosso [21] conceptualised marginalised communities of colour as endowed with community cultural wealth: "cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed by socially marginalised groups that often go unrecognised and unacknowledged" (p. 69). She advances that marginalised communities nurture cultural wealth through numerous forms of capital that enables its members to navigate seemingly unbearable conditions. These forms of capitals include, but are not limited to, aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant capital [21].

With her late mother, Wadzi's father established a small business to sell food to manual labourers in order to pay rent and send her to her school of choice. This was a turning point in her journey to HE. When his mother left the village for the city to work as a domestic worker, Linda was adopted by their neighbour who sought to lend a helping hand. He attributed the experience of being adopted with initially killing his "confidence" and "self-belief" but later forming "some sort of a foundation" for the person he grew up to become.

> *LINDA: Once you know that you don't belong there, no matter how nice you are treated, no matter how good you are treated, there's always the thing that tells you "but I don't belong here", and it kills your confidence . . . So, it was a struggle, but then again, I would say that formed some sort of a foundation, that's what made me who I am today.*

The above excerpt from Linda's interview captures Yosso's notion of the presence in marginalised Black communities of aspirational capital, 'the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers' [21], which becomes particularly evident in how these communities 'allow themselves and their children to dream of possibilities beyond their present circumstances, often without the objective means to attain those goals' [21]. The presence of aspirational capital was also reflected in Tali and Martin's narrative accounts. Whilst acknowledging her disrupted formative years, Tali immediately shrugs off their significance to her educational journey while projecting firm confidence in her academic ability.

> *TALI: Even in primary school, I'm that person who grew up with my own mother, she was struggling, I could see whatever she was going through, you see . . . but that actually didn't affect me in my education because I was very much clever, if I can say. I was one of the students who was actually clever. Even in my primary school, I never failed. From A to Grade 7 I never failed. I was a good learner, if I can say that.*

With his father absent, and to supplement his mother's income, Martin juggled schooling with part-time work.

> *MARTIN: We had our ups and downs, but it made us stick together as a family. Sometimes you come back home and there is no food, you have to go out and find some food. I took up some part time work so that I can assist my siblings and for them to go to school.*

The negative impact of weakened parental involvement on educational transitions in the educational journeys of all five participants is consistent with the work of Arbouin [18] on Black British students in UK HE. Indeed, consistent with what Arbouin [18] found, the weakened parental involvement was not due to a lack of trying on the part of participants' parents. Despite seeking their children's success, working parents in this study were not in a social, economic or cultural position to facilitate their children's educational success. The parents' desire to disrupt the intergenerational transfer of disadvantage to their children was, however, not in question. By highlighting the presence and operationalising of community cultural wealth in participants' educational journeys, the author seeks neither to downplay nor invalidate Black-working class students' struggles but rather to illuminate, amidst nadir experiences, opportunities for researchers, policymakers and practitioners involved in transforming unequal educational transitions.

3.2. Highs: HE Transitions Paved with Unlikely Steppingstones and Agents of Transformation

The second theme has to do with how this group of underprivileged students transition to HE on the back of unlikely steppingstones [18] and agents of transformation [22]. Despite their lack of HE qualifications, exposure and awareness, participants' mostly single parents found ways to become steppingstones for their children en route to HE. Moreover, in contrast to mainstream narratives of public schooling teachers as generally weak and lacking motivation, in all five cases, participants identified resourceful and improvising role model school teachers who went beyond the call of duty to help them navigate under-resourced schooling experiences. The roles played by these improvising teachers in shoring up students' aspirations and transitions into HE fits the profile of what Mills [22] referred to as "agents of transformation" who are able to "draw upon a variety of cultural capitals" to disrupt the reproductive cycle in working class students' journey to and through higher education. Mills [22] believes that "teachers can act as agents of transformation rather than reproduction . . . through their curriculum, pedagogy and assessment". Mills [22] asserts convincingly that:

> *teachers can either silence students by denying their voice, that is, by refusing to allow them to speak from their own histories, experiences, and social positions, or [they] can enable them to speak by being attentive to how different voices can be constituted within specific pedagogical relations so as to engage their histories and experiences in both an affirmative and critical way.*

Where they encountered difficulties at school, graduates recalled one or two teachers they credit for motivating them, having high expectations of them and, thus, fuelling their HE educational aspirations. Tali proudly remembers being "one of the top students" in secondary school, and this attracting the attention of teachers who saw potential in her. During her final year of high school, cognisant of Tali's potential, her under resourced family background and possible disruptions to her final examination preparations, one particular teacher left nothing to chance:

> *TALI: In Grade 12, one of my teachers stayed with me . . . he wanted to support me because he knew that I'm a serious person but due to my situation, he thought that it might affect me, you see. So he ended up taking me so I stayed with him at his place and then I studied there and did all the things. After that I passed my Grade 12 . . .*

She identified one of her teachers as a role model that enabled early career awareness and HE aspirations.

> *TALI: From primary school I used to say I want to be a doctor. Sometimes I would say, I want to be a teacher. There was this other teacher, she was like a mom to me, I admired her so I ended up saying I wish I was you. She was very much supportive.*

Similarly, despite her school being severely under-resourced, Wadzi "never saw it as a problem". She remembers being "a very smart student" at her school.

> *WADZI: It was a school, but then now that I know how a school should look like, I can recall that the environment was very bad. We'd have a hall and then it's divided by boards . . . you can actually hear what other people are actually also saying. So the environment was very poor, now that I know. But then I never saw a problem. I'm like, it's a school, it's a school.*

Despite his lack of involvement in her schooling, knowing that her father was hustling for her made Wadzi appreciate him the most. She proudly described her strong and positive relationship with her father. *"So my relationship with my dad, it's that relationship, he's my best friend. He's my mum, he's my whatever."* Naledi credited her mother's strict involvement in her schooling and her pursuit for *"independence"* from her parents' curfew propelling both her good grades and her higher education aspirations. The roles played by participants' working class parents in this study offers an alternative lens to the dominant deficit understanding of working class parents and their children's schooling experiences and HE aspirations. The parents' roles as unlikely steppingstones {18} in their children's pathways to HE offers potentially transformative ways of thinking about educational transitions in marginalised communities with low HE participation rates.

Linda's story illuminates the face of improvising and transformative habitus as another understudied steppingstone in Black working class students' transitions to HE. According to Mills [22], a 'transformative habitus' is a form of orientation or disposition in marginalised communities nurtured to "recognize possibilities for improvisation" in education. First was the accumulation of cultural capital in the form of computer skills and improving his command of the English language. Having grown up in a community where everybody sounds the same, Linda knew he would struggle with the English language upon arrival on campus. In his village, everybody speaks isiZulu, one of South Africa's eleven languages. Linda recounts how he improvised and improved his command of the English language by watching TV:

> *LINDA: I got to meet my mom's boss, and obviously it was a White person and they're speaking English. I knew nothing. I couldn't speak English at the time and I was bothered by the fact that, as they were talking to me, all I did was laugh because I couldn't understand a thing. And when I got to live with my family, there was a Black and White TV which helped me to learn English. I took it upon myself to say, let me learn this thing, let me have a vocabulary and try to learn this, and it helped.*

Secondly, upon completion of his secondary education, Linda decided to look for a job first, accumulate some economic capital and then pursue his higher education ambitions.

Even though Linda knew no one who had ever been to university and very little about what actually happens at the university, he always wanted to go to university. When asked why, his response points to the perception of HE as a vehicle to break the cycle of poverty in the family. He said *the only reason I worked so hard in school was because I wanted to go to varsity so that obviously the only picture you have in your head is to change your family situation, to change those houses that are made of mud and everything and just, you want a better life. You want a better job. You want to be that guy who changes the situation from home. You want to make your parents proud. And that was the main reason obviously (Linda).*

This phase of Linda's transition represents a disposition to perceive challenging family circumstances and disrupted formative years as both a hindrance and challenge to be taken on. His narratives thus reveal the double role played by challenging social origins and family backgrounds in transitions to HE.

3.3. Turbulent and Hard Landings on Campus

A major challenge (low) in this group of students' transitions into HE was their experiences of turbulent and hard landings on campus from which none of them ever recovered. Tali's transition university matched the experience of a fish out of water [39] and a general sense of isolation. She found everything about the university to be worlds apart

from her schooling experience. Apart from her struggle with the university teaching and learning methods being worlds apart from those in high school, as all other participants in this study, Tali's transition was further hindered by financial pressures. Her financial aid funding package only covered tuition fees, and she had to commute from home daily. Consequently, she struggled to afford basics such as toiletries. Being a commuting student also made her feel like an outsider inside the university. Martin's landing on campus was also chaotic. "It was very difficult to register . . . I used to gamble in order to raise money for transport so that I can go and join the registration line with another."

The poor administration and mismanagement of NSFAS resulted in Wadzi's particularly hard landing at Merger University from which she never recovered. Her first semester was the worst. Failure of the NSFAS to pay her fees on time meant she could not measure her academic progress, because the university, as part of their standard practice, withheld the grades of students whose tuition fee was outstanding.

> *WADZI: So first semester when we wrote our exams and then the marks came out and I never saw my marks cause I never paid. So now I'm still waiting for NSFAS. I went to the NSFAS offices, no-one seemed to be willing to explain to me what exactly is going on. They're telling me to come back next week, maybe you'll get your feedback . . .*

Her first year of study went from bad to worse when her father lost his trading licence as a hawker.

Turbulent and hard landings on campus were also related to the hindering effect of a lack of adequate student housing and resultant homelessness. At Rural University, students who live far from campus had to choose between the cost and inconvenience of having to commute daily or illegally squatting (subletting) from those who secured university accommodation. For those who choose to squat, subletting came with its own challenges. Given its informality, those who squat were always at the mercy of the legitimate tenant and at times had to endure abusive conditions. Students told the author about squatting students having to put up with financial extortion and sometimes sexual harassment.

According to Mulrenan et al. [43], student homelessness is a stain on the HE sector's prestigious image in society, so much so that many would rather look away than confront it, and thus, it remains mainly under-researched. It is often accompanied by food insecurity as students struggle with the rising costs of living in and around universities with far-reaching consequences for students. While the student housing crisis is a reality in all South African universities, the picture is worse at historically disadvantaged universities that remain disproportionately under-resourced today.

3.4. Turning Points and Unhappy Endings

3.4.1. Mental Health Challenges

Tali's transition into HE took a sudden turn for the worst when she experienced mental health challenges. She recalled experiencing an imponderable sudden loss of interest in her studies and missing most of her classes. She recounted the trauma of being laughed at by her classmates for failing to qualify for her exams:

> *TALI: It was challenging . . . when people were qualifying and you weren't qualifying to go to write exams. And you know they used to place names on the wall, you see your name is not there, you're not qualified. Everyone could see "she's not qualifying so she's not writing". Even those that I thought were my friends were busy laughing at me.*

Having failed more than 50% of her modules, in her second year of study, Tali's NSFAS funding was discontinued, and she was prevented from registering for her third year of study at Bush University. Tali's experience is consistent with revelations of a recent report that found that 30.6% of students had thoughts of suicide in the past 12 months, 16.6% had made a suicide plan and 2.4% had attempted suicide [44]. Mental health challenges amongst vulnerable students are thus a cause for concern and a rising hindrance to efforts to widen participation in HE.

3.4.2. Let down by Financial Aid

Collectively, participants' narrative accounts show that financial aid moderates, it does not eliminate the challenges of being Black and working class in South African higher education. For this group of students, a mismanaged and poorly administered financial aid scheme was central to their turbulent and hard landings on campus (as shown above) and the tragic and unhappy endings to their HE experiences. Their experiences stand in contrast to the perception that financial aid insulates the educational transitions for marginalised students.

For Linda, Wadzi and Martin, their HE journeys were cut short owing mainly to being mismanaged and poorly administered. Despite his funding constraints, Linda continued attending classes at Merger University under the hope that NSFAS would eventually come through. It did not. At the end of the academic year, Linda's academic records were withheld, and he was denied registration the following academic year due to "outstanding fees". That is how Linda was pushed out of higher education at the end of his first year of study. Similarly, Martin's HE experience was cut short when he was excluded from the university during his first year of study due to an oversubscribed financial aid system. This was a turning point for him. Wadzi attributed high rates of noncompletion amongst working class students to an inefficient, inadequate and poorly administered NSFAS system. She said "the first factor, finance, I think contributes quite a lot . . . I think NSFAS needs to plan their things . . . So I think they need to improve communication . . . So we need more branches of NSFAS because we've got quite a large number of students".

3.5. Pushed, Not Pulled; Failed, Not Finished

As illustrated in the narrative accounts above, participants' experiences of noncompletion in the present study shined a spotlight on a less talked about dimension of the dropout rate of HE, i.e., students who get "pushed" out of the university on academic and financial grounds and against their desire to continue with their studies. This form of academic exclusion, in turn, triggers financial exclusion. A student excluded on the basis of "poor academic performance" loses their financial aid package from NSFAS. In South Africa, this double-edged sword is often referred to as "financial exclusion" and "academic exclusion".

All five "dropouts" in this study were either "academically excluded" because they were "financially excluded", i.e., denied registration because they were dropped by the NSFAS's financial aid programme and have outstanding debt or "financially excluded" because they were "academically excluded", i.e., dropped out of the NSFAS financial aid programme because of their "poor academic record" at the university. All "dropouts" in this study were thus pushed out of their university against their desire to continue with their studies on either of these grounds. All, except Tali at Rural University, were pushed out of the university in their first year of study.

In the end, the author asked each of the students for their future plans in light of their experience of noncompletion in HE. The theme that emerged at this phase of their narratives was that they may have been failed by the HE system but they ewere not finished. Tali explained her future plan to one day return to complete her degree and one day be called "Dr". She acknowledges her failure but insists that this is not the end of her educational journey. She insists on one day earning a degree in order to make her "hero" mother proud.

By the end of the academic year, Martin owed the university a year's worth of tuition fee that he has yet to pay back. He has since been job hunting in order to pay his debt and return to university.

The author asked Linda to look back at his higher education experience and identify what he wishes he'd known about university prior to admission. He wished he knew about the significance of "orientation week" in aiding transition into higher education, he wished he had made friends earlier and he wished he had known about the help offered by university tutors.

> LINDA: I wish I managed to attend the orientation whereby I was going to be able to understand the campus better. But I couldn't be there because I was from far and

obviously, I had to find a place to stay, which I failed to get, and I missed out on the orientation. But I wish I had understood the campus better, I wish I had known most of the things about the campus life and what was expected of me as a student. And I wish I was able to make friends earlier and I wish I had a tutor.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Against the backdrop of persisting disparities in who gets to go to university, the varied pathways traversed by different groups of students [18], the type of universities and degree programmes that remain inaccessible to some [45] and the stratified HE experiences and odds of completion that remain stacked against Black and working class students in South Africa [25,46] and elsewhere [47–49] and amidst calls for research that deepens and enriches our understanding of student dropout and throughput rates by population group and gender, and that this is done to ensure equal opportunities for success regardless of race, class, gender, language, disability and cultural background [34], this article analyses thematically in-depth narrative interviews with a group of financial aid-funded Black working class students who were excluded from the South African universities prior to completing their studies to explore (a) how this group of former students narrate and make sense of their transitions to and experiences of noncompletion at different status universities in South Africa and (b) how their narratives can deepen and enrich theories of the student achievement gap in HE and efforts to achieve more just and equitable HE experiences and outcomes. A close-up analysis of participants' stories highlights lows (restrictions or hindrances), highs and turning points as encountered in this group's transitions to and experiences of noncompletion in HE. Further research into these phases in student's transitions offer enriched understandings of the challenges marginalised students encounter on their way to and during their first year of study in HE and also shine the spotlight on opportunities for transformation access and participation in HE.

There are four key insights that can be drawn from participants' composite narratives of their transitions to and experiences of noncompletion at the two universities:

First, in their transitions to HE, despite experiences of severely disrupted and often traumatic formative years (lows), participants in this study found highs (inspiration to aspire to HE) in nadir experiences. This way, participants' dispositions matched the Mills's idea of a transformative habitus, a form of orientation that enables marginalised students to "recognize possibilities for improvisation" and approach their studies in ways that transform their conditions and improve their chances of success [22]. Adopting this angle in understanding marginalised students' journeys to HE offers a window of opportunities for researchers, policymakers and practitioners working on socially just and inclusive pedagogies. Participants' narratives affirm the idea of marginalised communities as places that nurtures aspirational and navigational capitals, the ability to aspire and manoeuvre through institutions that were not created with marginalised people in mind [21].

Contrary to deficit theories of working class students, marginalised students that develop a transformative habitus, an embodied form of cultural capital are poised to conduct themselves in a manner that makes things happen in HE as opposed to sitting back and accepting defeat. Indeed, Crozier and Reay [50], Mills [22], and Arbouin [18] have all suggested that, with the help of transformation-oriented teachers and educational institutions with a transformative institutional habitus, working class students carry in them the ability to adapt and thrive.

Secondly, participants' pathways to HE were paved with unlikely steppingstones (in the form of improvising single working class parents) and agents of transformation (in the form of inspirational teachers) who defied the odds of under-resourced rural and township schools to aid participants' HE aspirations and transitions. Mills [22] referred to "agents of transformation" as individuals who "draw upon a variety of cultural capitals" to disrupt the reproductive cycle in working class students' journeys to and through HE. This finding strengthens the case that widening access initiatives would benefit greatly from relating to marginalised students and the communities they come from as epistemic contributors in our

theories of unequal transitions to and experiences of HE. This research thus support the call by Mathebula [36], Walker [37], and others for those involved in education research, policy and practice to recognise Black working class youths from marginalised communities as both givers and takes of knowledge or "epistemic contributors" and that doing so constitutes an ethical response to the structural inequalities that limit equitable university access and participation.

Thirdly, the participants' narrative accounts revealed that, despite policymakers' best intentions, financial aid moderates but does not ameliorate the challenges of being Black and working in HE, and when mismanaged, it worsens the working class students' already turbulent transitions into HE and weakens their odds of successfully completing their studies. All participants experienced turbulent and hard landings on campus in their first year of study mainly linked to an inefficient and poorly administered financial aid scheme. Their experience is consistent with the findings of a decade old Balintulo Report a South African government commissioned report that drew a direct line between the inadequate funding of tertiary education and lower throughput rates at HEIs [51]. The Balintulo Report [51] further found NSFAS' means testing approach to be flawed, inefficient, costly and vulnerable to abuse.

Consistent with Wadzi, Linda and Martin's stories, in recent years, NSFAS' administrative deficiencies have resulted in the scheme approving funding for more students than it had funding available, and the three participants became victim to this ineptitude. More recently, the Auditor General of South Africa has been probing cases of possible corruption and maladministration within the scheme [52].

Lastly, for all participants in this study, "dropping out" was an imposed institutional decision, not an individual call. All participants were pushed out of the university despite their willingness and determination to persist. This finding shows the limitations in the literature's disproportionate focus on working class students who "choose" to leave HE prior to completion [53] and the implied sense of agency on the part of the student. By foregrounding student noncompletion in HE as an individual student's choice, mainstream narratives are devoid of the power dynamics involved in cases where students are forced out of HE against their will [54]. This form of exclusion is consistent with what Drake [55] referred to as *academic apartheid* and the *criminalisation of failure* under questionable and often flawed meritocratic grounds [15,28] and further exonerate the university's complicity to unequal HE experiences and outcomes. The practice of "pushed dropouts" exemplifies a double standard in framings of marginalised students HE, whereby the success of marginalised students is hailed as evidence of a fair and equal opportunity field of HE, while the failure of the same group of students reduces their individual flaws with punitive consequences (pushed dropout).

While they failed to keep their HE dream going, all participants expressed their intention to return to university to complete their studies at some point. All participants perceived their experience of noncompletion not as individual failures but as failures of the field of HE to serve students from the margins of society. Participants' narrative accounts also support the Allen's [56] call for research in teaching and learning to disrupt narrow conceptions of students that are often out of touch with students' lived experiences and their own personal perceptions of success. Consistent with the call [56], further research is needed to explore the broadening definitions and conceptions of student access and success as one of the initiatives that would serve as a reparative policy that addresses the educational harms that practices such as forced dropouts have inflicted on students from traditionally excluded and currently underserved communities [57].

This is an important exercise given the deep personal, family and community-wide cost of high rates of noncompletion amongst students from traditionally excluded communities. The educational transitions and experiences of high noncompletion amongst financial aid-funded Black working class students require ongoing research, as this group is often falsely perceived as more insulated from the perils of being Black and working class in largely untransformed and often violent HE systems [34]. There is a need for research that

broadens the boundaries of what constitutes meaningful access beyond the mere presence of traditionally excluded students on campus. In addition to recognizing this group students and their communities as epistemic contributors, future studies need to move from measuring access according to input based key performance indicators (KPIs) (e.g., number of financial aid students enrolled) and move towards output KPIs (e.g., number of financial aid graduating in degrees and institutions that traditionally excluded them).

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