MESSIAHS OR MARTYRS: SOUTH AFRICAN UNDERGRADUATE FIRST-GENERATION UNIVERSITY STUDENTS BREAKING GENERATIONAL CYCLES TO SUCCEED AT UNIVERSITY

L. Kajee
Faculty of Education
University of Johannesburg
Johannesburg, South Africa
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9039-4186

H. Mitoumba-Tindy
Academic Development Centre
University of Johannesburg
Johannesburg, South Africa
https://orcid.org/0009-0002-0169-3403

ABSTRACT

First-generation university students (FGSs) may lack the academic literacy (AL) proficiency necessary for their university success and socio-economic progression. In South Africa, this situation is strongly linked to the country's apartheid history. Using a critical epistemological stance, this article explores the internal and external strategies and resources used by South African undergraduate FGSs. Those assets help them to transcend their lack of AL capital and persist at university. This article is underpinned by Bourdieu's (1986) capital theory, particularly its central tenets of capital inheritance and acquisition. The research adopted a qualitative approach, and the study was based on a single case-study design. The methodology consisted of using pre- and post-module semi-structured individual interviews. Interviews with 36 South African first-year FGSs constituted the data collection method. The thematic analysis of the interview transcripts was the data examination technique. The research revealed that because their families lack relevant socio-cultural capital, FGSs enter university without the necessary academic and disciplinary literacies. Thus, they encounter several AL challenges. Their impetus to change the plight of their families prompts FGSs to deploy internal and external stratagems and assets that enable them to avoid dropout. Their desire and determination to succeed academically and change the socio-economic circumstances of their families entail significant emotional and psychological tensions. The resolve to succeed and related challenges imply that FGSs assume the dual status of messiahs and martyrs. Thus, it is recommended that academic development and support, as well as psychological counselling services, work closely with academics to support FGSs.

Keywords: socio-economic and cultural capital; capital inheritance/transmission; capital acquisition; first-generation students; academic literacy; messiahs; martyrs; emotional and psychological pressure

INTRODUCTION

Academic literacy (AL) is an essential aspect of teaching and learning that strongly influences students' epistemological access and academic success. AL acquisition and development are thus crucial to students' academic journey. Literature has generally heightened first-generation university students' (FGSs) lack of or limited capital and the associated challenges that may lead to failure. This research article seeks to answer three questions: What are the socio-cultural capital implications of the low socio-economic background of FGSs' families? What are the internal and external strategies and resources that FGSs use to create their capital? What are the emotional and psychological effects of FGSs' resolve to improve their families' socio-economic statuses? Thus, this article aims to first determine the implications of FGSs' low socio-economic circumstances for socio-cultural capital. Second, the research seeks to highlight the intrinsic and extrinsic strategies and assets that FGSs deploy to build their socio-cultural capital. Lastly, the study outlines the emotional and psychological pressures engendered by FGSs' endeavour to change the socio-economic plights of their families.

Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) capital theory underpins this research study. Through a critical epistemological perspective, this article challenges Bourdieu's (1986) attribution of academic achievement to children's socio-cultural capital inheritance. This is done by foregrounding the generally underexplored or overlooked notion of capital acquisition. The article focuses on South African undergraduate FGSs' use of their intrinsic and extrinsic AL strategies and resources to overcome their challenges and succeed academically. Using the notions of capital transmission and capital acquisition, this article characterises the plight of South African undergraduate FGSs and emphasises how they prevent failure by creating their own AL capital under intense emotional and psychological pressures. This endeavour to improve the socio-economic outlook of their families propels them to the dual status of messiahs and martyrs for their families. The data for this study were collected through semi-structured individual interviews with FGSs. Thematic analysis was used to make sense of the gathered data. In the sections that follow, we provide a brief literature review, outline the research methodology, present and discuss the research findings, and conclude the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review includes discussions of first-generation students' (FGSs) lack of capital inheritance, their commitment to capital acquisition and creation to succeed and change the socio-economic situation of their families, and the emotional and psychological pressures that FGSs endure in the process. Generally, literature has emphasised FGSs' lack of capital and its implications for dropout. Moodley and Singh (2015), for instance, consider the FG status of several South African undergraduate students as a substantial influencer of their campus experience and accomplishment. Dropout is linked to an assortment of personal, social, economic, accommodation, emotional, psychological, institutional, contextual, and academic reasons (Tello and Lonn 2017; Garriott 2020).

Bourdieu's (1986) capital theory is essential to understanding South African undergraduate FGSs' socio-economic and cultural background as well as their ability to overcome their initial capital deprivation. This theory outlines the intersection and interchangeability of economic capital, social capital, and cultural capital. These three forms of capital are amalgamated under the concept of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1986). Economic capital entails concrete and nonphysical resources and properties with a monetary value that grants acquiring capability to their owners. This type of capital can be accessed through family bestowal and or accrual, by grabbing available financial prospects. Economic capital not only establishes its bearer's social rank but also simplifies this individual's access to societal and educational capital (Bourdieu 1986). Social capital concerns a person's potentially helpful connections, interactions, alliances, and networks. These are established with other people who hold kinds of capital that could numerically and or experientially bolster this person's social position. Social capital gives the person access to vast social resources and knowledge of possibly beneficial transactions (Bourdieu 1986). Cultural capital encompasses collective assets and protocols, linguistic proficiency, and effects of instruction, such as understanding, capabilities, and skills. Cultural capital influences a person's social status and capability to use existing societal conditions to accomplish the anticipated, positive results (Bourdieu 1986). Together, economic, social, and cultural types of capital form a person's symbolic capital. This explains the theoretical disparities between children from dissimilar socio-economic and cultural circumstances (Bourdieu 1986). These inequalities also manifest in the domain of education, which is characterised by low academic literacy (AL).

The current low AL among the South African Black majority population results from the country's past apartheid regime that fostered discriminatory education. The significance of Bantu education for this research lies in its position as the source of the related phenomena of intergenerational low AL and first-generation university students among most Black South

African people. Intergenerational low AL can be attributed to the inferior-quality education provided to most of the Black population through "Native" instruction syllabi, or to the inauspicious socio-economic circumstances created by Bantu education, employment legislation, and social attitudes. These considerations hampered most Black people's ability to afford quality instruction for their offspring. Their only possibility for post-school instruction was entering occupational or technical institutions (Tanga and Maphosa 2018) whose AL levels were inferior to those of inclusive universities reserved for whites. This is important because it partly explains, using the intergenerational low-literacy consideration, the difficulties encountered by Blacks who are currently in schools, colleges, and universities reproducing European prototypes (Tanga and Maphosa 2018). Because grandparents and parents of current pupils and scholars received Bantu instruction emphasising less academically related programmes (Tomlin 2016), all these cohorts lack the required cultural capital.

Research by the likes of Adams and McBrayer (2020) highlights that governments' endeavours to boost HE entrance for formerly barred people have successfully qualified many to enter university as first-generation students (FGSs). Rectifying the educational inequalities of the apartheid government has entailed augmented infrastructural capability, the fostering of ethnic or societal unity, the quest for excellence in ensuing HEIs (Soudien and Chisholm 2021; Schneider 2016), and curricular restructurings that aim to generate a comprehensive instruction system (Nel 2018). Other redress stratagems involve financial schemes (Wangenge-Ouma and Kupe 2020) and amended admission policies (Crouch and Hoadley 2018). These stratagems have considerably boosted the intake of FGSs who are largely from low-income backgrounds (Vincent and Hlatshwayo 2018). These students face exceptional socio-economic, psychological, emotional, individual, institutional, ecological, and academic difficulties (Tello and Lonn 2017; Garriott 2020) that can hamper their integration, epistemic access, and academic accomplishment. Beattie and Thiele (2016) advocate for the promotion and intensification of the collaboration between continuing-generation students (CGSs) and FGSs, as well as between FGSs and members of staff. These scholars believe that the cooperation between FGSs and these two groups fosters the exchange of capital that would help reduce FGSs' dropout rates. Phillips et al. (2020) found that FGSs, who are deprived of the essential sociocultural capital, value affinity. This is supported by Bourdieu's (1986) notion of capital acquisition through interaction with its possessors.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research adopted a case-study design foregrounding an interpretive paradigm, a constructivist ontological perspective, and a critical epistemological stance. A qualitative research approach involving a single, descriptive case study was adopted. The population of this study comprised all South African FGSs from the Faculty of Law enrolled in EFL. The research site was a South African public, comprehensive university located in Johannesburg, named, for ethical reasons, University X. The research focused on first-year students because their AL expectations and experiences can best illustrate the gap between high school and university. Moreover, first-year students who constitute the largest student population also contribute the highest dropout rate. Semi-structured, individual interviews served as data collection tools. Purposive sampling was used to choose participants with varied and relevant data on the topic. A sample size of 30 percent, constituting 36 South African FGSs from the EFL, was deemed sufficient. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2012; Braun and Clarke 2022) was used for interview transcripts. Three themes emerged from this research: one in the pre-module phase and two in the post-module phase. The findings of the research are presented below.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

The low socio-economic circumstances of the participating South African undergraduate FGSs shape their intricate perception of their FGS position. In their determination to succeed academically and change the plight of their families, FGSs undertake a role that amalgamates messianism and martyrdom. This article begins by characterising the research participants' state of socio-cultural and academic literacy capital limitations. Subsequently, the article emphasises South African FGSs' endeavour to acquire socio-cultural and academic literacy capital to attain socio-economic mobility. Finally, the article highlights the toll of such an undertaking and the AL demands on FGSs.

Family background and FGSs' Lack of socio-cultural capital inheritance

The socio-economic context plays a pivotal role in students' education (Bourdieu 1986). In the semi-structured individual interviews, the socio-economic circumstances of the FGSs were recognised as significant influencers of their educational experiences. Reflecting on the view of education in low socio-economic groups, FGS20 explained that *"*...it's because we come from a poor or disadvantaged community. Many children, they don't focus more on education things" (Pre-module interview 2022). This extract powerfully demonstrates the implications of underprivileged socio-economic situations on the educational involvement and prospects of

children from such environments. In South Africa, this educational disadvantage has a generational dimension, linked to the country's apartheid past, that needs to be explored.

Low socio-economic context as well as (grand)parents' exclusion from quality instruction and university are the root cause of inadequate literacy among FGSs. Coming from families with no or inadequate formal instruction predisposes FGSs to encounter academic challenges because of non-existent family support. FGS20 observed that "At home, I had no one to help me. But I will ask for help from my principal, every day. After school, I'll go to him and ask him for extra homework so that I can catch up" (Pre-module interview 2022). This lack of academic assistance at home is corroborated by FGS22, who disclosed that "…no one was helping me with my work. I just did my work at school" (Pre-module interview 2022). The centrality of the home in students' access to and success at university is highlighted by van Zyl (2016) and Alcock and Belluigi (2018). FGSs' context of practical academic support destitution is linked back to their (grand)parents' disenfranchising educational circumstances. Reflecting on the variance between his mother's and his schooling situation, FGS12 noted that "I grew up having that mindset that I am very blessed and privileged in some way. Because my mother grew up in farms or a village, so I could say she didn't have a good educational system" (Pre-module interview 2022). This excerpt aligns with Gallo's (2020) contention that poor literacy among many Black pupils and students originated from the substandard-quality education that they were offered in destitute and overcrowded schools. The extract also confirms his view that previous generations' educational standing influences that of succeeding generations, in the Black populaces of South Africa. FGS12 is one of the recipients of the post-apartheid instructional transformation that seeks to rectify the inequalities engendered by South Africa's past apartheid system (Soudien and Chisholm 2021; Schneider 2016).

Having uneducated or inadequately instructed (grand)parents implies that FGSs would exhibit substandard literacy. The interviews with FGSs revealed that many of the participants were raised by unschooled or poorly educated (grand)parents. These could not assume an active, hands-on position in the didactic journey of these South African undergraduate FGSs. FGS28 confided that "[m]y mother did not finish school" (Pre-module interview 2022). This situation is prevalent among the interview participants. The present context of poor AL among the Black majority population reflects the effects of South Africa's apartheid system that fostered a racially differentiated education. This separated education approach, which disempowered the grandparents and parents of Black children, has created intergenerational low literacy – from grandparents and parents to the present Black pupils or students and afar (Tanga and Maphosa 2018). All these findings are consistent with the economic, social, cultural, and symbolic dimensions of Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital. This theory does not

relate children's educational outcomes to their inborn abilities. Instead, children's educational achievement is connected to the economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital they receive from their parents or families. This capital is bestowed through the mechanism of capital transmission (Bourdieu 1986). At face value, this principle implies that children whose parents did not achieve academically will experience serious challenges and may drop out of university. However, this article foregrounds Bourdieu's (1986) alternative principle of capital acquisition through social networks and education.

Messianism: Imperative to succeed and FGSs' creation of their own socio-cultural and AL capital

The previous section described participating FGSs' social context accounting for their capital destitution. This presages that these students' chances of success at university are slim. It also presupposes that FGSs display low morale, lack of determination, and substandard academic results. However, most of the FGSs involved in this research displayed the overlooked dimension of Bourdieu's (1986) capital theory. This is the notion of capital acquisition linked to social institutions and networks. Bourdieu's (1986) capital theory stipulates that capital can be acquired through social networking, commitment, and active involvement in one's education. Participating FGSs demonstrate high levels of these alternative success attributes and actions.

South African undergraduate FGSs partly reflect their social context, based on the notion of capital transmission or the absence of capital bequeathment (Bourdieu 1986). In the South African context, the intergenerational low AL engendered by apartheid explains FGSs' lack of capital inheritance and academic orientation, their inadequate literacy, their subsequent university challenges, and their elevated dropout rates. Coming from families without a strong educational background, FGSs seem set for a tumultuous academic journey. FGS1 notes that *"...*our families are not academically equipped*...*" (Pre-module interview 2022). The collective "our families" shows that the situation is general. The implication is that our *"...*level of education was very low. We struggled. We had to fight for ourselves" (FGS20 Pre-module interview 2022). The pronouns "We", "we", and "ourselves" not only reinforce the collective literacy plight of FGSs but also their shared self-determination. The use of collective pronouns is also evocative of FGSs' communal perspective linked to their penchant for collaboration. Indeed, FGSs, who do not possess the requisite sociocultural capital, value mutuality (Phillips et al. 2020). This valuing of collaboration is essential to FGSs' endeavour to succeed, despite their unfavourable educational backgrounds. This is congruent with Beattie and Thiele's (2016)

perception of collaboration among students and between students and staff as one means of closing the gap between FGSs and continuing-generation students (CGSs).

Faced with the prospect of a lack of assistance from their mostly uneducated parents, FGSs had to create alternative forms of support. They mainly resorted to siblings, neighbours, community structures, friends, and autodidactic strategies. The older siblings of FGSs became the next possible sources of academic support. This is because of their accessibility in the household. FGS15 shared that she received brief assistance from "[m]y older sister. But then I chose subjects that were different from what she was doing" (Pre-module interviews 2022). A similar experience of unsustainable support is related by FGS18 thus: *"*...my older sister used to help me. But since I moved from the village, I tried to do everything on my own..." (FGS18 Pre-module interview 2022). The unsustainability of the assistance received promotes FGSs' independent learning capacity. FGSs receiving no assistance from siblings turned to community members. Being technology-unsavvy until she entered university, FGS19 requested assistance from his neighbour. FGS19 confided that "I only learned how to use a computer when I came to university because at school there was not that system. But luckily, there was this girl where I lived. She went to college in Polokwane and so she taught me everything that I know..." (Pre-module interview 2022). FGS19 only acquired some basic computer skills when she had to work with computers at university. Some FGSs receive literacy support from community organisations. FGS8 noted that *"*I had to visit a home-based care…. They assisted me until I understood the base of doing things myself and being independent in education (Pre-module interview 2022). The Home-based Care Centre helped FGS8 develop the confidence to work independently. For other FGSs, friends became sources of literacy support. They combined their little literacy capital to tackle work collaboratively. FGS4 confided that "I was not getting help from anyone. And so, I held a study group with my friends back at home…So, all my homework, I would do it with my friends..." (Pre-module interview 2022). Creating a study group for mutual support shows FGS4's endeavour to constitute an academically useful social network. FGSs also had to develop internal literacy coping strategies. Checkoway (2018) found a significant link between FGSs' academic achievement and the support they receive from their social networks.

All FGSs also tapped into their internal resources to ensure their success. FGS20 illustrated these essential capital acquisition values and behaviours. She observed that *"*...my background. I check that we are suffering, and I have to make something out of my life. That's when I started to study hard because I've been failing. But when I realised where I came from, I started studying hard. That's how I ended up here" (Pre-module interview 2022). This excerpt shows that FGS20 had previously been disinterested in her education because of her family's

uninspiring educational background. Secondly, the extract emphasises FGS20's awareness of the importance of education and the imperative of self-commitment in improving her situation. Hence, she involved herself actively in her education, studied hard, reversed her inadequate past performance, and entered university.

Many FGSs turned their unfavourable family backgrounds into their drive for success. Most of these backgrounds entail being raised by uneducated grandparents, for various reasons. FGS8 shared that *"*...my parents passed away when I was still young…. I was raised by my grandmother. When it comes to education, my uncles and aunts never competed matric. So, things were hard, and I decided to pull up myself and motivate myself since my background is not good. I said, let me take this opportunity in terms of education*"* (Pre-module interview 2022). The deprived background, which is commonly a hindrance, becomes a stimulus for FGS8. Education promises a better socio-economic prospect for FGS8. He undertook what was necessary to improve his condition, despite growing in an unconducive environment. Here, educational support was unavailable due to family members' limited attainment. Riswanto and Aryani (2017) emphasise the connection between motivation and student success.

FGSs' determination to achieve academically, despite their various challenges, was pervasive. These students did not just aspire to pass; they aimed to excel and achieve their dreams. FGS1 elaborated that: "I'm not from a good environment…. But today I'm sitting here because of hard work. I'm sitting here because of knowing who I am and knowing what I want to achieve in life. So, I worked hard and strove for perfection, and I can say I excelled because in my matric I was a top learner" (Pre-module interview 2022). This excerpt emphasises determination, self-encouragement, and hard work as potential success attributes for FGS1, FGS8, and other FGSs. This confirms research by Motsabi (2018), Motsabi, Diale and van Zyl (2020a; 2020b), and Lewis (2022) on FGSs' success factors. These scholars found that FGSs possess unique traits and assets that help them to achieve academically, despite the pressure of the elevated university requirements.

FGSs did not consider the low socio-economic, cultural, and symbolic status of their families as an intractable obstacle to their academic success. They viewed it as a challenge to overcome through deliberate endeavour and active participation in their education. FGS16, for instance, indicated that "… just because I'm the first to go to university, it's automatic that I really have to succeed…" (Pre-module interview 2022). This imperative to succeed is reinforced by FGS22, who stated that *"*I should pass and then improve everything and take my family to the next level. And, as a first-generation, it's a bit difficult" (Pre-module interview 2022). Thus, FGSs must develop persistence methods that enable them to succeed academically (Hlatshwayo and Fomunyam 2019; Lewis 2022). We contend that FGSs' academic capabilities

have largely been misjudged. However, most research participants' appraisals of their success outlooks were mainly linked to their outstanding matric achievements. These FGSs' educational success is fueled by their resolve and yearning to enhance their families' socio-economic circumstances.

FGSs regarded themselves as saviours of their families. They believed that it was their duty to surmount their AL challenges and achieve academic success. They had a high sense of responsibility towards their families, who had placed all hope on them. FGS3 confides that "[t]here is a lot of expectations from the whole family for me to do well in university" (Pre-module interview 2022). Hence, FGSs strive to break the "generational spell" and transform their families' socio-economic conditions and future. The surreal feeling created by university admission is described by FGS32, who mused, "I thought, what if it is a generational curse? So, me making it to varsity and being a first-generation student makes me feel proud because I broke the generational curse, paved the way for my siblings, and inspired girls from our community, which is very rural, and many people don't make it to varsity" (FGS32 Pre-module interview 2022). Entering university for these FGSs constitutes a dispelling of the high school benchmark and the disruption of the minimum-wage cycle.

However, FGSs' access to the university becomes a double-edged sword. University can change the status of their families, but it can also engender extreme emotional and psychological pressures. FGS32 boasted, "I'm very proud because we are moving in some sort of direction in my family" (FGS32 Pre-module interview 2022). Overcoming their literacy difficulties and entering university is a source of pride and a sense of accomplishment for FGSs. However, entering university has a greater financial magnitude than an educational meaning for FGSs and their families. It symbolises their hope for better financial prospects. This is consistent with the interchangeability of capitals (Bourdieu 1986). FGSs' families count on them for liberation from current inauspicious economic circumstances. FGS3 affirms that "[t]here is a lot of expectations from the whole family…" (Pre-module interview 2022). The family expectations alluded to are not ones of wanting to see FGS3 succeed for the sake of academic honour. They hide the families' longing for financial returns.

FGSs' academic success carries a strong economic mobility outlook influenced by their families. Proof that FGSs' academic success symbolises their families' financial enfranchisement is provided by FGS14, who explained: "So, they [her parents] couldn't have enough money to care for my needs in high school. But I did well in high school, just because I wanted to fix my situation at home…. So, I want to be the person who cares for them…" (Pre-module interview 2022). This is a dramatic reversal of responsibility where parents and siblings become symbolic dependents of FGSs. These emerge as economic liberators or messiahs for

their destitute families. FGS14's drive to alter the socio-economic context of her family is conveyed by her unequivocal resolution, "I want to fix my situation at home" (Pre-module interview 2022). This undertaking, which could be interpreted as a hero complex, was pervasive among the interviewed FGSs.

Martyrdom: Price of FGSs' resolve to Improve their families' socio-economic statuses

South African FGSs endeavour to succeed in a highly pressurised academic context (Siyengo 2015), to foster their families' socio-economic mobility. This severely strains several of these students emotionally and psychologically. FGSs' lives and ambitions have become intertwined with those of their families. These students have become their families' last chance to attain that which the country's apartheid system denied them. FGS10 confessed, "I feel a lot of weight on my shoulders because they're expecting me to be just as helpful as possible. But they don't know what I'm going through. But I just wish they knew what I'm going through" (Pre-module interview 2022). FGSs' families are oblivious to the emotional, psychological, and intellectual impact of university demands and intensity on these students. The imperative to achieve academically, to meet the economic expectations of the whole family, places a heavy burden on FGSs. FGS22 confided, "I feel like I have a lot of pressure because my family members expect a lot from me. They expect maybe everything, maybe I should improve everything and take my family to the next level" (Pre-module interview 2022). Lacking family assistance, FGSs such as FGS22 and FGS16 must strive to overcome their academic (literacy) challenges, succeed, and enhance their families' social and financial circumstances.

FGSs carry the burden of this responsibility in silence because they lack guides, role models, and confidants in their families. FGS32 confides, *"*...it puts me under a lot of pressure…. And there's no one to ask for advice from or to look up to. I didn't know how varsity is. And even when I'm struggling with the environment, socially and academically, I have no one to speak with and nobody knows about it" (Pre-module interview 2022). Suffering in isolation, FGSs are expected to shape the future of their families, which cannot assist them with direction, academic success tips, and practical AL support. Coming from families lacking (adequate) socio-cultural capital, FGSs must endeavour to progress without the necessary university roadmap and AL toolkit. They must deal with their academic, emotional, and psychological confusion on their own. Thus, striving to change the destinies of their families is a very onerous responsibility for these ill-prepared FGSs. This is consistent with Moodley and Singh's (2015) view that the FG status of many South African undergraduate students constitutes a significant hindrance to their university experience and achievement.

The family pressure, coupled with the intensity of the academic requirements and the possibility of failure, spirals into worry. Fear of failure leads some FGSs to consider extreme, life-threatening options. FGS6 confirms, "Yes, and that [pressure] creates a lot of anxiety and a lot of fear of failure" (Pre-module interview 2022). This is corroborated by FGS30, who described his experience of hopelessness regarding his substandard performance in EFL and the related probability of dropout. Anxiety and depression engendered by the possibility of failing caused two FGSs to consider committing suicide. FGS36 distinguished, "I did not consider dropping out because I know that I have no other choice but to be here at varsity… But I did have suicidal thoughts, and I know that's wild, but I did seek help from PsyCaD [Psychological Counselling and Career Development Services], and I was helped" (Post-module interview 2022). AL challenges occasion more serious issues for these fragile FGSs. FGS36 does not realise that committing suicide is but an eternal way of dropping out of both the EFL and life. Similarly, FGS35 visited the University's Psychological Counselling and Career Development Services (PsyCaD) to seek assistance with the pressure caused by his academic difficulties (Pre-module interview 2022). These accounts of FGSs' anxiety and depression highlight the intertwinement of academic, emotional, and psychological issues as well as the importance of non-academic support services. The above allusions to and excerpts about angst, despair, and self-destruction emphasise the far-reaching effects of the literacy divide among the home, the school, and the university situations of FGSs. The abovementioned instances validate the remarks of Tello and Lonn (2017) as well as Garriot (2020) that FGSs encounter unique socio-economic, psychological, emotional, private, institutional, ecological, and academic difficulties that may hinder their adjustment, epistemic access, and academic accomplishment.

Nevertheless, FGSs were ready to lay their lives, symbolically, in the endeavour to ensure better prospects for their families. This demonstrates the extent to which poor socio-economic circumstances, individual challenges, and families' high hopes apply excessive pressure (Tello and Lonn 2017; Garriott 2020) on the frail minds of South African undergraduate FGSs. These students' academic careers are henceforward driven by the longing to rescue their families from deprivation. Their only options are academic success or self-inflicted death. This is because disappointment would be unendurable, given its implication of collective failure. Success or symbolic death is tightly connected to FGSs' habitus (Bourdieu 1986). This habitus entails socially inspired behaviours, abilities, and skills that provide a socio-cultural and economic foundation to the offspring. However, the habitus of South African FGSs appears to be unhelpful and, in some cases, disempowering. This problematises the responsibility of the

family, the community, and the school in FGSs' literacy development, their access to university, and their academic success or failure.

CONCLUSION

First-generation university students (FGSs) are generally perceived as predestined to fail because of their lack of conventional socio-cultural capital inheritance and their subsequent limited AL. Using the notions of capital inheritance and capital acquisition that form the core of Bourdieu's (1986) capital theory, this article explored South African FGSs' response to their academic disadvantage caused by the apartheid system that negatively affected their economic, social, and cultural backgrounds. The interviews with participating South African undergraduate FGSs generated interesting findings. The study confirmed FGSs' lack of or limited capital bequest, due to grandparents' lack of or poor AL proficiency, and the ensuing AL challenges that FGSs encounter. The research also unveiled FGSs' determination to succeed, their rejection of the idea of dropout, and their subsequent creation of AL capital through networking and the use of technological and other resources to persevere and succeed. South African undergraduate FGSs demonstrate strong willpower to achieve academically and change the socio-economic status of their families. This was achieved by developing personal strategies that enabled them to persist in a context of economic, social, cultural, psychological, and emotional tensions. This has given them the double status of messiahs and martyrs. The FGS-related support collaboration among academics, academic development practitioners, and counselling services must be intensified. This would assist in boosting FGSs' achievement while minimising the severity of their academic, emotional, and psychological challenges.

REFERENCES

Adams, T. L., and J. S. McBrayer. 2020. "The lived experiences of first-generation college students of colour integrating into the institutional culture of a predominantly white institution". *The Qualitative Report* 25 (3): 733. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2020.4224.

Alcock, A., and D. Z. Belluigi. 2018. "Positioning home for resilience on campus: First-generation students negotiate powerless/full conditions in South African higher education". *Education as change* 22 (1): 1–28. http://dx.doi.org/10.25159/1947-9417/3206.

Beattie, I. R., and M. Thiele. 2016. "Connecting in class? College class size and inequality in academic social capital". *The Journal of Higher Education* 87 (3): 332–362. https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2016.11777405.

Bourdieu, P. 1986. "The Forms of Capital". In *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by J. Richardson, 241–258. Westport, CT: Greenwood.

Braun, V., and V. Clarke. 2012. "Thematic analysis". In *APA handbook of research methods in psychology, Vol. 2. Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological*, edited by H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, and K. J. Sher, 57–71). American Psychological Association. https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-004.

Braun, V., and V. Clarke. 2022. “Conceptual and design thinking for thematic Analysis”. *Qualitative Psychology* 9 (1): 3–26. https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000196.

Checkoway, B. 2018. “Inside The Gates: First-Generation Students Finding Their Way”. *Higher Education Studies* 8 (3): 72–84. https://doi.org/10.5539/hes.v8n3p72.

Crouch, L., and U. Hoadley. 2018. “The transformation of South Africa’s system of Basic Education”. In *The Politics and Governance of Basic Education: A Tale of Two South African Provinces’,* edited by B. Levy, R. Cameron, U. Hoadley, and V. Naidoo. London: Oxford University Press.

Gallo, M. A. 2020. "Bantu Education, and its Living Educational and Socioeconomic Legacy in Apartheid and Post-Apartheid South Africa”. Bachelor of Arts Dissertation. Fordham University. https://research.library.fordham.edu/international_senior/43.

Garriott, P. O. 2020. “A Critical Cultural Wealth Model of First-Generation and Economically Marginalized College Students’ Academic and Career Development”. *Journal of Career Development* 47 (1): 80– 95. https://doi.org/10.1177/0894845319826266.

Hlatshwayo, M., and K. Fomunyam. 2019. “Theorising First-generation Students’ Successes at a Historically White South African University”. *Alternation* Special Edition 28: 84–115. DOI:10.29086/2519-5476/2019/sp28.4a4.

Lewis, C. E. 2022. “First-Generation College Students: Persistence and Adaptability in Post-Secondary Institutions”. Doctoral Dissertation 5873. Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College. https://repository.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations/5873.

Moodley, P., and R. J. Singh. 2015. “Addressing student dropout rates at South African Universities”. *Alternation* Special Edition 17: 91–115. http://hdl.handle.net/10321/1648.

Motsabi, S. B. 2018. “The Academic Persistence of First-Year First-Generation African Students (FYFGAS): A Framework for Higher Education in South Africa”. PhD thesis. University of Johannesburg. https://hdl.handle.net/10210/291928.

Motsabi, S., B. Diale, and A. van Zyl. 2020a. “The Academic Persistence of First-Year First-Generation African Students (FYFGAS): A Framework for Higher Education in South Africa”. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* 8 (2): 73–85. https://doi.org/10.24085/jsaa.v8i2.4449.

Motsabi, S., B. Diale, and A. van Zyl. 2020b. “The role of social support in the persistence of first-year first-generation African students in a higher education institution in South Africa”. *South African Journal of Higher Education* 34 (4): 189–210. https://doi.org/10.20853/34-4-3486.

Nel, M. 2018. “Inclusive education: the Global movement”. In *Educational Psychology*, edited by I. Eloff and E. Swart, 256–262. Cape Town: Juta.

Phillips, L. T., N. M. Stephens, S. S. Townsend, and S. Goudeau. 2020. “Access is not enough: Cultural mismatch persists to limit first-generation students’ opportunities for achievement throughout college”. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 119 (5): 1112–1131. https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000234.

Riswanto, A., and S. Aryani. 2017. “Learning motivation and student achievement: descriptive analysis and relationships both”. *Couns-Edu: International Journal of Counseling and Education* 2 (1): 42–47. https://doi.org/10.23916/002017026010.

Schneider, P. 2016. “Exploring Social Cohesion in South Africa Within the Context of Post-Apartheid Racial-Disparity”. Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection 2329. https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/2329.

Siyengo, N. 2015. “The educational and psychosocial experiences of first-generation students” Master dissertation. Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University. http://hdl.handle.net/10019.1/98119.

Soudien, C., and L. Chisholm. 2021. *A Re-examination of key curriculum debates and directions in South Africa*. Published online. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/ 9780190264093.013. 1142.

Tanga, M, and C. Maphosa. 2018. “Academic hurdles facing undergraduate students at one South African University”. *Research in Higher Education Journal* 35: 1–15.

Tello, A. M., and M. R. Lonn. 2017. "The Role of High School and College Counselors in Supporting the Psychosocial and Emotional Needs of Latinx First-Generation College Students". *The Professional Counselor* 7 (4): 349–359. https://doi.org/10.15241/amt.7.4.349.

Tomlin, H. 2016. "Contesting ideologies and the struggle for equality: Reconsidering the politics of education in South Africa". *Policy Futures in Education*, 14: 846–863. https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210316658163.

Van Zyl, A. 2016. "The contours of inequality: The links between the socio-economic status of students and other variables at the University of Johannesburg". *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* 4 (1): 1–16. https://doi.org/10.14426/jsaa.v4i1.141.

Vincent, L., and M. Hlatshwayo. 2018. "Ties that bind: The ambiguous role played by social capital in black working class first-generation South African students' negotiation of university life". *South African Journal of Higher Education* 32 (3): 118–138. https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC-1004965748.

Wangenge-Ouma, G., and T. Kupe. 2020. *Uncertain Times: Re-imagining universities for new, sustainable futures*. Presentation at a Special Meeting of the USAf Board, Pretoria, 24 July, Universities South Africa.