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## Perceptions of disadvantaged rural matriculants regarding factors facilitating and constraining their transition to tertiary education

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While education has been recognised as a route out of poverty, for many black South Africans, equality of opportunity and access to quality post-school education are often hampered by lack of resources and the lingering legacy of apartheid. The main focus of this study is on learners' perceptions in the disadvantaged rural community of Siyabuswa, Mpumalanga regarding tertiary education and factors affecting their pursuit of such an education. A qualitative research design was adopted and data collection occurred through the use of semi-structured interview schedules administered via face-to-face interviews. The analysis of the data took the form of thematic content analysis, and was framed within a discussion of Paulo Freire's theory of conscientisation. Findings from the research suggest that respondents perceived education to be important. However, linguistic constraints, under-resourced schools, and a lack of career guidance appear to hinder their aspirations to successfully transition from secondary to tertiary education. Facilitating factors included parental expectations, and academic support, while hindering factors included peer pressure, lack of funding, and the inability to apply themselves to their studies. The study has implications for the enhancement of linguistic skills during primary schooling and the provision of career guidance to secondary school learners to help bridge the gap between school and post-school education.

**Keywords:** career guidance; disadvantaged matriculants; Paulo Freire's theory of conscientisation; rural schools; South Africa; tertiary education

### Introduction

Access to higher education is an economic and social justice topic discussed in the global educational literature across a broad range of countries (Hobden & Hobden, 2015). The discussion usually hinges on the problem of racial inequality and differential socio-economic status regarding participation rates in tertiary education, with the lower socio-economic strata usually associated with a decreased probability of making a successful transition from secondary to tertiary education (Pazich & Teranishi, 2012). Goldberger (2007, cited in Hobden & Hobden, 2015) conducted research on students in the United States (US) that found a disparity of 30% between low-income and high-income students in terms of preparation, enrolment and persistence in post-school educational programmes. Making the transition from secondary school to tertiary education can also evoke high levels of stress and anxiety (Pietarinen, Pyhälö & Soini, 2010). Hence, it is critical to provide career development support and guidance to learners as they endeavour to negotiate career-related transition (Lapan, Tucker, Se-Kang & Kosciulek, 2003). However, there would seem to be a paucity of research on career guidance for disadvantaged rural students, and their views on factors that impede or facilitate access to and success in post-secondary education.

Against the stated background, the White Paper for post-school education and training (Department of Higher Education and Training, Republic of South Africa, 2013:5) asserts that "Education has been recognised as proving a route out of poverty for individuals, and as a way of promoting equality of opportunity. The achievement of greater social justice is closely dependent on equitable access by all sections of the population to quality education." However, for many black South Africans, equality of opportunity and access to quality post-school education is often hampered by the lingering legacy of apartheid. The 2015 #FeesMustFall campaign placed the spotlight on persistent inequality in educational access within South African society. The high cost of university education is not unique to South Africa, however, but also features in many other developing as well as developed countries, such as Britain and America (Li, 2013; Washington & Salmon, 2014).

### The South African Educational Context

Apartheid policies deliberately sought to perpetuate the indignities of poverty by disempowering citizens and undermining their potential to advance themselves by, for example, denying access to quality education. Through a rigorously implemented segregation policy, individuals were classified as white, black, Indian or coloured, which influenced their access to the socio-political, economic and educational landscape. Thobejane notes that "Blacks were to be relegated to the rigidly segregated occupational structures and excluded from all job categories, except that of unskilled labourers and from access to an educational system that would enable them to compete with their White counterparts" (2013:2). Through the policies of Bantu Education, black people were provided with an inferior education in order to maintain their subordinate and marginal status in the country, which resulted in a "literacy crisis" for many black adults, who might experience difficulties in reading and writing English (Navsaria, Pascoe & Kathard, 2011). Persistence of the aforementioned difficulties was evident in the Progress in

International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), which reported that South Africans showed the lowest reading literacy levels of all 40 countries investigated (Mullis, Martin, Kennedy & Foy, 2007, cited in Navsaria et al., 2011). The education crisis and the lack of proficiency in the dominant language of English exacerbated poverty and unemployment, as many adults were excluded from more lucrative job opportunities (Posel & Casale, 2011).

With the advent of the new democratic dispensation, new channels and opportunities were open to everyone. However, despite a raft of progressive laws and policies designed to redress past injustices and the inequitable distribution of services, these policies did not render better access for every learner (Imenda, Kongolo & Grewal, 2002), since they failed to take into account the issue of territorial inclusivity by means of which the apartheid government had secured its legacy in marginalised communities (Rohleder, Swartz, Carolissen, Bozalek & Leibowitz, 2008). Moreover, although the socio-economic state and skills development of young people have improved over the past five years, the quality of education and educational outcomes remains a challenge (The Presidency, Republic of South Africa, 2015).

An analysis of the available literature indicates that one of the greatest achievements of the post-1994 democratic government has been the increased participation rates of the various black race groups (i.e. Africans, coloureds and Indians). However, many of the school leavers who seek admission to universities are from “disadvantaged” rural and township communities characterised by poverty, under-resourced and dysfunctional schools, poor education, lack of information, distance from urban educational institutions, and exposure to unqualified teachers, who lack the competence in the English language needed for success at university (Jones, Coetzee, Bailey & Wickham, 2008). Many disadvantaged schools lack textbooks and laboratory facilities, resources for teaching subjects such as Mathematics and Science, and extramural facilities, which are deemed vital for the overall development of learners; especially the development of self-confidence, which can influence an individual’s aspirations regarding tertiary education. Development tends to occur in urban suburbs, while disadvantaged/rural communities are often left with inadequate and limited services (Rohleder et al., 2008).

In addition, there are other factors such as financial constraints, which tangibly influence how an individual perceives the possibility of university education (Jones et al., 2008). For example, the pressure on students from low-income families to leave school and contribute financially to the family budget is an important consideration. Pre-entry to university depends not only on financial resources,

but also on prior schooling, family background, and skills and competences (Jones et al., 2008).

#### Career Guidance and Admission Procedures

Access to university education also depends on school leavers’ attitudes towards education, as well as on career guidance relating to subject choices for different fields of study, the availability of various career fields, admission procedures and requirements at different educational institutions, as well as ways of accessing funding and other resources. Thus, in order for learners to follow their preferred field of study at university, they need to have taken the correct subjects at school. These aspects are articulated by Jones et al. (2008:11) as follows:

The challenge is that young people are forced to make course decisions when they may have very little information about, or experience of, different fields or careers. This is intensified for the rural student, who often has even less access to resources and information. While a few students reported that the career guidance offered at their schools had been good, a repeated refrain from many others was that there had been no, or very inadequate, career guidance at their schools.

Many learners in high schools receive neither career guidance from teachers, nor advice regarding post-secondary education (Department of Higher Education and Training, Republic of South Africa, 2013). In addition, some tertiary institutions fail to adequately target rural schools when marketing the various courses and resources that they offer, and this lack of information can create anxiety and evoke ungrounded fears among learners who need to make career decisions (Oreopoulos, 2009). The post-school educational sector also does not appear to spend sufficient time marketing the new online Central Admission Procedure (CAP), as well as the different post-secondary education options, including other higher learning institutions such as community colleges, Further Education and Training (FET) colleges, and vocational training. Consequently, many learners do not know how to apply, when to apply, and how to access financial aid. These factors could therefore also influence how learners perceive tertiary education. Furthermore, although additional funds have been allocated to poor students to access fee-free university education, budget constraints prevent many needy students from accessing post-school education and training. Tertiary learning then becomes insurmountable and beyond the realm of the disadvantaged learner.

#### Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Paulo Freire’s (1972, 1979, 1996) theory of conscientisation provided the theoretical lens for the study. Freire was against, to use his metaphor, the “banking” system of education, where the teacher is the depositor of information and the learners are passive depositories. Instead, he argued that the task

of the dialogical teacher was to represent themes, not as a lecture, but as problems to be critically reflected and acted upon by both teacher and learner, so that both are simultaneously teachers and learners. In other words, the liberating power of education needed to be based on the actual experiences of students, as well as on ongoing shared interaction between teachers and learners, which forms the basis of experiential learning. According to Freire, conscientisation is the active process of developing a critical awareness of one's reality through reflection on the social, political, and economic contradictions, and taking action against the oppressive elements of reality in order to transform it. As such, the perception was that this type of education was the only way to break the 'culture of silence' inhabited by the oppressed and underprivileged of every nation. The application of this theory to the study was premised on the understanding that learners at schools need to be actively engaged in voicing their views and experiences regarding tertiary education as well as their perceptions regarding facilitating and constraining factors.

Against this literature review and theoretical backdrop, the main aim of the research was to explore the perceptions of learners in the Siyabuswa, Mpumalanga community regarding tertiary education. The objectives were: (1) to establish a profile of the participants and their access to educational resources; (2) to understand the views of learners regarding education in general and tertiary education in particular; (3) to ascertain their knowledge and understanding of the requirements involved in attending university and other post-school tertiary options; (4) to explore their perceptions regarding the factors facilitating and constraining their choices regarding attending university and other tertiary level educational institutions; and (5) to elicit information regarding their resource needs and needs in terms of further information regarding attendance at tertiary level educational institutions.

It was felt that the research could potentially yield insight into school leavers' awareness and understanding of the requirements for admission to university education, as well as whether they were receiving sufficient information and career guidance to be able to make informed choices regarding post-secondary education and training, and whether they were being linked to available resources. In line with Paulo Freire's belief in the power of dialogue, Ebrahim (2009) suggests that for any change and democratic development to happen, answers, explanations and solutions to problems must come from the voices of the very communities affected, through engaging in dialogues that are helpful. It was anticipated that the study would also be of interest to other developing countries with limited economic resources to address educational needs.

## Method

### Research Approach and Design

The study was located within an interpretive, qualitative paradigm. According to Terre Blanche, Kelly and Durrheim (2006:273–274), "the interpretive paradigm involves taking people's subjective experiences seriously as the essence of what is real for them (ontology), making sense of people's experiences by interacting with them and listening carefully to what they tell us (epistemology), and making use of qualitative research techniques to collect and analyse information (methodology)."

### Population and Sample

The target population was the matriculant learners within the disadvantaged community of Siyabuswa in Mpumalanga Province. Matriculation is the equivalent of the Grade 12 senior certificate required to complete secondary education in South Africa. Siyabuswa is also known as KwaNdebele and is a rural tribal community in Mpumalanga. The community is regarded as disadvantaged because the majority of schools are under-resourced, lacking in facilities such as computers and science laboratories (Jones et al., 2008). Mpumalanga is considered rural and poor, because this province is situated in a remote area and has poor service infrastructure, high unemployment, limited job opportunities, a high reliance of households on state cash transfers, and a sizeable proportion of the population engaged in subsistence farming (Watermeyer & Barratt, 2013).

The sample was recruited through the use of snowball sampling until a sample of 15 learners was reached. The sample included both male and female learners from the ages of 17 to 23 years as the majority of matriculants are in this age group. It is acknowledged that the limitation of this sampling strategy is that it may be biased since the participants may be from the same social group and the representativeness may be questionable (Royse, 2008).

### Research Instrumentation

The research instrument took the form of an interview schedule, which was constructed to meet the aims of the study. It was structured in such a way that it included demographic details and allowed participants to comment on the issue of education in general, and tertiary education in particular; their understanding of admission requirements; factors facilitating and constraining their choices regarding attending tertiary educational institutions; and further information needed. The schedule included both closed-ended questions such as a tick box section to ascertain the existence of resources such as libraries, computer laboratories, career guidance, sufficient furniture (e.g. desks and chairs etc.), as well as open-ended items such as: what are your views on tertiary education i.e. education after leaving school; how important do you think tertiary

education is; and what factors do you think could help you to succeed in tertiary education?

The research tool was pre-tested on two school learners who were not included in the final administration. The two participants interviewed were able to answer the questions without any difficulty, and in detail. For this reason, the interview schedule was not amended, and none of the questions were changed.

#### Data Collection

The data were collected through individual face-to-face interviews with the participants at dates and times convenient for them. Prior to each interview, potential participants were given Participant Information Sheets explaining the purpose and procedures of the study and their rights as research participants. Learners were asked to complete a Consent Form for Participation in the Study and a Consent Form for Audio-taping. Learners below the age of 18 years signed Assent Forms and their parents provided Parental Consent.

#### Data Analysis

Interview schedules and audio-tape transcriptions were coded numerically to protect the identities of participants. Closed-ended items were analysed using descriptive statistics, while open-ended items were subjected to thematic analysis, involving the steps recommended by Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Painter (2006), namely: (1) familiarisation and immersion; (2) inducing themes; (3) coding; (4) elaboration; and (5) interpretation and checking.

#### Trustworthiness of the Qualitative Data

In terms of enhancing trustworthiness, Lincoln and Guba's (2000) four criteria were addressed. Firstly *credibility* was enhanced through the provision of a detailed account of the research design and methodology as well as the theoretical framework for the study. Secondly, *transferability* was achieved through producing rich descriptions of the context of the fieldwork for a reader to be able to decide whether the prevailing environment is similar to another situation and whether the findings can justifiably be transferred (Shenton, 2004). Thirdly, *dependability* was enhanced through pre-testing the interview schedule, and use of the same researcher to conduct all the interviews using the same questions. Correspondence checking, as recommended by Pretorius and De la Rey (2004), was used in order to enhance *confirmability*, whereby the second researcher checked to ensure that her categorisation of themes corresponded with those of the first researcher.

#### Ethical Considerations

The study was submitted to the University's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) and ethics clearance was granted. In order to uphold the principle of voluntary participation, potential

participants were provided with detailed information about the study, the procedures to be followed, the estimated time that would be required, and that participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty. This information allowed them to give informed consent. All responses were kept confidential, and no identifying details were included. In order to adhere to the principle of non-maleficence, efforts were therefore made to avoid insensitive questions and to allow participants the option of declining to answer items that they felt uncomfortable with answering.

#### Limitations of the Study

Despite the pre-test revealing no language issues, it was found that even though some participants were comfortable with English as the medium of communication, and perceived themselves as competent in spoken English, nevertheless, despite these self-perceptions, language barriers contributed to a lack of clear understanding and interpretation of questions, which prevented some participants from furnishing in-depth responses. In order to mitigate this limitation, the researcher attempted to use participants' home languages during the interviews, and subsequently translated their responses into English. A further weakness was that the second author was not fluent in the languages spoken by the participants, and therefore based her confirmation of themes on the English translations. Moreover, in hindsight, the interview schedule should have included questions regarding the language of teaching and learning in the schools they attended. In addition, interviews were mostly conducted outside and the noise level from the surroundings was sometimes distracting for both the researcher and participants. Moreover, given the small, non-probability sample, the responses from participants may not be fully representative of learners challenged by disadvantage.

#### Results

Findings are presented and discussed in accordance with the objectives of the study.

#### Profile of Participants and their Access to Educational Resources

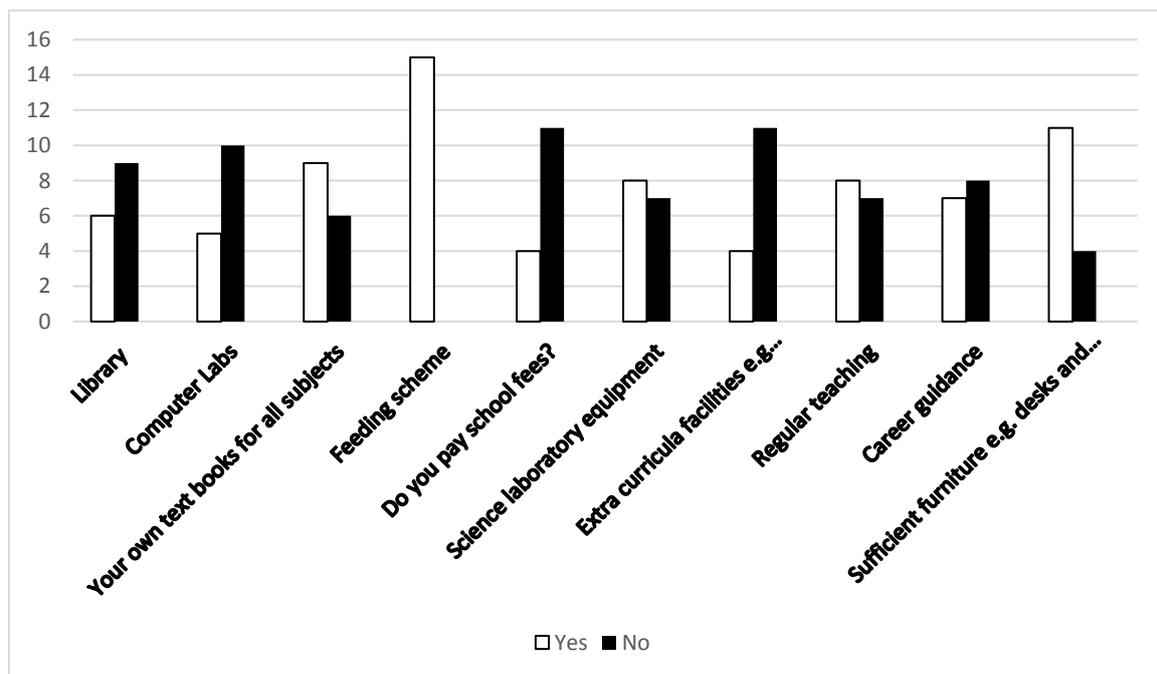
Table 1 shows that participants' ages ranged from 18 to 23 years of age. While in developed countries such as the US and Britain, this age group is usually applicable to persons in tertiary/postsecondary education, in South Africa, particularly in rural areas, many children do not start school at the formal age of seven, but sometimes only attend primary school from ages eight or nine onwards. Moreover, if it becomes apparent to teachers that a learner is unlikely to be able to cope with the requirements of matriculation, they are kept back for a further year so that the school's matric pass rate is not adversely affected. All participants were in matric and were black. The fact that all participants were black was

not surprising, given that Siyabuswa is a traditionally black area, established during apartheid when racial groups were separated into segregated residential areas. There were seven males and eight females. The main languages spoken were Sepedi and isiNdebele, which are the dominant languages of this area, with one participant reporting that she spoke Tsonga. The learners were from three different local government schools.

In order to confirm that students were educationally disadvantaged, they were asked about the availability of resources within their schools. This information is displayed in Figure 1. Although the majority (8) had access to regular teaching, a substantial number (7) did not have exposure to this essential service.

**Table 1** Demographic profile of participants (*N* = 15)

Category	Sub-category	Number
Age in years	17	1
	18	6
	19	3
	20	4
	23	1
Gender	Male	7
	Female	8
Grade	12 (Matric)	15
Ethnic group	Black African	15
Languages spoken	Sepedi	8
	isiNdebele	6
	Tsonga	1



**Figure 1** Resources within the schools (*N* = 15)

A substantial number of participants had no access to technology in the form of computers (10) and science laboratories (7). More than half of the learners (8) who participated in the study reported that their respective schools had no resources to offer comprehensive career guidance. There were a few students who reported that the career guidance offered at their schools had been good; however, a repeated refrain from others (8) was that there had been no career guidance at their schools. However, a positive finding was that most of the participants

(11) had access to adequate furniture in the form of desks and chairs, and all the learners had access to a feeding scheme as government has successfully introduced feeding schemes for learners in disadvantaged communities.

Views of Learners regarding Education in General and Tertiary Education in Particular  
 All the participants had strongly positive attitudes towards both general and tertiary education, and their responses showed an awareness of the sig-

nificance of education. The following verbatim responses encapsulated this theme:

*“Education is important because without education you cannot ... if you don't have education things will not work out for you, because if you have studied, have grade 12 you can find a job”* (P5).

*“Tertiary education is important because in this world we live in the world where when you have completed matric you can't get any job which it can pay you very well, so you need to have a tertiary qualification so that you can get a job which can pay you better salary, and have a brighter future. It is so important, because now days with matric only it is not easy to get a job”* (P7).

*“Education is important, because without education there is no way you will go in life, and education is the only thing that can give dignity to be respected in your community”* (P12).

However, one participant appeared to have ambivalent views on education in general as reflected in the following comment in relation to general education:

*“It's not important because nowadays we don't learn at school, we just play”* (P4).

#### Knowledge and Understanding of the Requirements involved in Attending University and other Tertiary Options

Participants' responses when asked about whether they knew about the admission requirements suggested that some were aware of the requirements, while others had little insight or understanding regarding these aspects, as reflected in the following responses:

*“No”* (P3, P5, P9, P11 and P15).

*“Admission requirements you have to have pass your mathematics, physical science with level 6 and have to have a minimum score points of 38”* (P 7).

*“Maths and Science”* (P8).

*“Most basic is English, and character”* (P13).

*“In most subjects require 50% and above, and the score point starts from 26 points”* (P14).

While there were amongst those interviewed those who had made informed subject choices aligned with their career aspirations, three of the learners did not seem to have made informed and planned career choices. For example, one participant wanted to be an engineer, while another aspired to be a doctor; however, their school subjects were not aligned with these careers. There seemed to be little insight into the need for school subjects such as mathematics and science in careers such as medicine and engineering. However, one needs to bear in mind the fact that in Siyabuswa, most of the schools offer only two subject streams i.e., either Science or Commerce, (IT), Journalism and Agriculture, with a few schools offering Computer/Information Technology as options. The learners are compelled to choose either one or the other with very little or no information provided on subjects involved. Consequently, a lack of career guidance can mean that they do not make informed decisions in terms of choosing subjects. Therefore, learners are likely to choose

subjects according to peer pressure or parental preference, which may not be in line with the individual learner's aptitude and abilities (Boshielo, 2002).

Only two out of 13 participants indicated that they were not aware of the career choices offered by the different training institutions, and felt that they still needed more information regarding the institutions and careers they wished to pursue.

All the participants were asked about the careers that they would like to enter into after matriculating. Findings showed that these learners had dreams and ambitions, but it seemed that the economic conditions of most of the participants were preventing them from realising their aspirations.

In the present study, it was evident that learners who were not offered guidance in their career choices at their schools were confident about their choices, despite the lack of alignment with their school subjects. Hence, these young people needed career guidance much earlier than at the point at which they were leaving school; preferably before Grade 10, when they have to make subject choices for the senior certificate. Although it is usually assumed that students have already made choices and inquiries regarding post-school education during their matric year, five of the participants revealed very little or no information, despite the fact that the study was conducted only five months prior to their matric examinations. However, one participant understood the need to achieve good marks in order to qualify for a bursary or loan.

*“Like to get high marks, to get a bursary, or study loan”* (P8).

#### Perceptions regarding the Factors Facilitating and Constraining Participants' Choices regarding Attending University and other Tertiary Educational Institutions

Participants were asked about factors that would facilitate or hinder their anticipated success at tertiary educational institutions.

##### *Facilitating factors*

Facilitating factors included expectations of parents, motivation and academic support. Responses suggested that parents seem to have an important role, as they can help their children in decision-making, and educated parents are more likely to place a high priority on education. This theme was conveyed in the following quotes:

*“Eish ... I think they take education serious and most of the time they encourage us to go to school every day and pass with high level, so that we can get bursaries”* (P 8).

*“Well my family and culture feel as if education is a key to success, and they motivate us to study hard so that we can complete our matrics with distinctions, so that we can get minimum requirements for the admission in the universities to have a brighter future”* (P 7).

Most learners viewed their own motivation and ability to work hard as facilitating factors. This theme was conveyed in the following responses:

*"I think motivation is the most basic factor"* (P13).  
*"Spend more time studying and less connected to social media, I have to be addicted to my books"* (P 15).

These results suggested that these learners viewed their ability to succeed in tertiary institutions as dependent on their own efforts and not any other factors.

One of the participants also mentioned the need for support in terms of relying on others:

*"Working hard obviously, being cooperative with other students, seeking help here and there and try not work alone in most cases"* (P 14).

**Hindering factors**

While some students appeared to lack insight and awareness regarding possible hindering factors, others mentioned peer pressure, lack of application, substance abuse and lack of funding.

Students reported that peer pressure was one of the challenges that might hinder them from succeeding with their education and related to peer pressure, was the importance of choosing the right friends. The following verbatim responses encapsulated this theme:

*"Peer pressure, like listening to friends"* (P 8).  
*"If when I arrive to university I meet bad friends, if I follow wrong ways I live abnormal life I won't succeed"* (P 9).

*"Friends, if you are not studying, obvious you can't be, friends say to you let's go somewhere and if you refuse they will turn against you"* (P 10).

Other hindering factors that the learners mentioned included not applying themselves diligently to their studies; failing their exams and abusing drugs as reflected in the following responses:

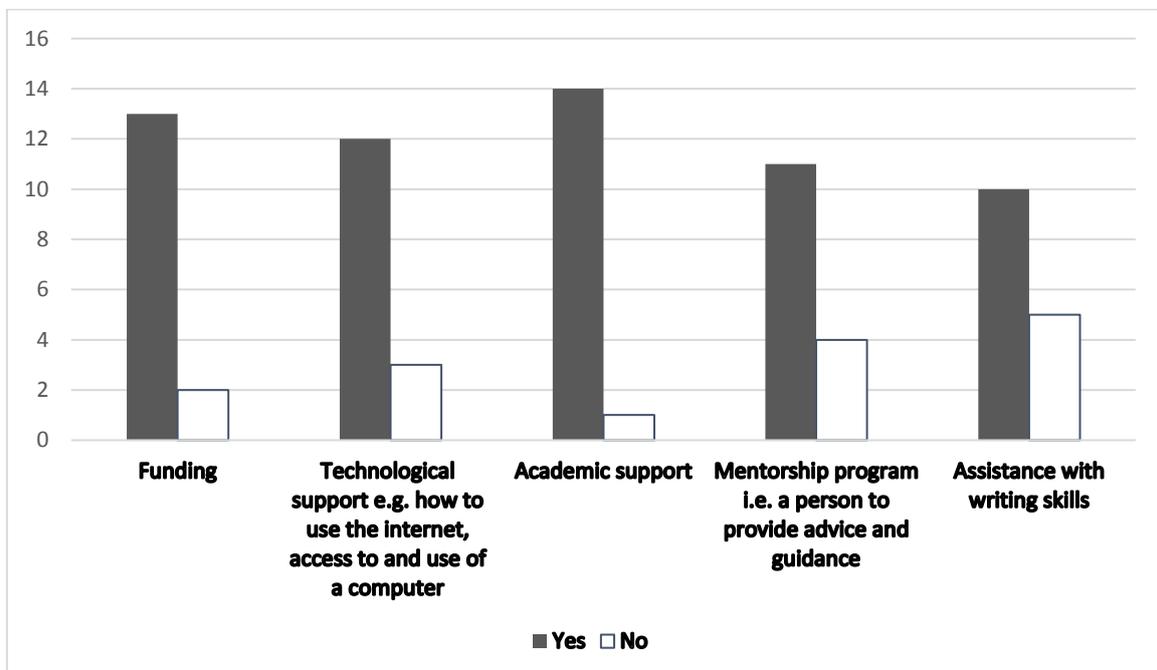
*"Not studying"* (P 1).  
*"Failure"* (P 2).  
*"Smoke and drink alcohol"* (P 5).  
*"Being lazy"* (P 11).

In response to the question what factors might hinder or prevent them from succeeding in their chosen career, two participants answered as follows:

*"I think what can prevent me financial"* (P 6).  
*"Finding space to the universities and financial situations"* (P 14).

**Resources needed**

According to Freire, investigators and those they investigate ought to act as co-investigators, so that people can be enabled to create their own guidelines for action. Moreover, the programme content of education ought to be based on "the things about which they want to know more" (Freire, 1972:66). Hence, participants were asked about the resources they would require in order to succeed at university, and other tertiary level institutions. Figure 2 shows that the majority of participants acknowledged that they needed funding, technological support, academic support, mentorship, and assistance with writing skills.



**Figure 2** Resources needed to succeed at tertiary institutions (N = 15)

The finding that 13 out of the 15 participants indicated a need for funding assistance highlights the need for more financial support to be made

available for learners at high school who do well academically, but who are unable to further their studies due to financial difficulties. In this regard,

the Department of Higher Education needs to provide full funding assistance covering tuition, books, accommodation and living allowances to students from poor families at colleges and universities. This need was asserted in the recent #FeesMustFall campaign conducted by students at various South African universities, and was reflected in the following response:

*“Well I think if maybe after I have completed my matric, if my family would not afford to pay for my tertiary fees, if the government will help me to find my tertiary funds, I think I would be able to succeed”* (P 7).

Eleven out of 15 learners in the study felt that they could benefit from having a mentor to provide advice and guidance and help them navigate tertiary education. For example, one participant stated:

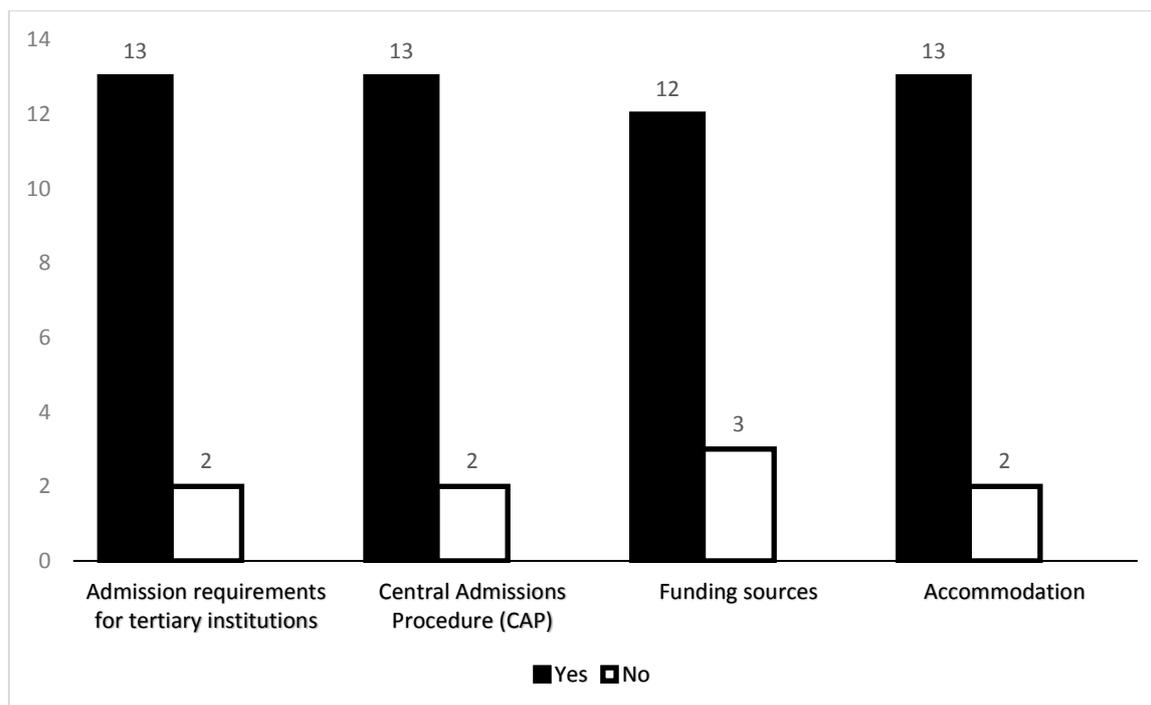
*“If I have money, ja [...] my text book, ja [...] and people who will tell me what must I do, who will guide me who will give me rules to follow”* (P 9).

Two-thirds i.e., 10 out of the 15 participants, felt that there would be a need for assistance with improving their writing skills.

Participants 2, 5 and 6 struggled to understand and answer questions as language posed a barrier,

despite the fact that the researcher used the home languages of these participants. This finding suggested that these disadvantaged students were likely to experience difficulties related to having to study in a second or third language, to which rural students in particular may have had little exposure, and being the first generation in their families, and perhaps even in their communities, to enter higher education. In this scenario, their families are unlikely to have the educational resources to assist with their integration into tertiary education or provide support for their academic studies. They are also likely to struggle if their English is poor, especially since most of the work is carried out in English.

Needs in Terms of Further Information regarding Attendance at Tertiary Level Educational Institutions  
Figure 3 shows that in order to facilitate admission to a tertiary institution, participants articulated a need for career guidance, including subject choices, information on admission requirements for tertiary institutions, the Central Admissions Procedure (CAP), funding sources, and accommodation.



**Figure 3** Information needed by learners ( $N = 15$ )

### Discussion

Results indicated that the participants were indeed from educationally disadvantaged schools. Although most had access to regular teaching, a sizeable number (7) did not have exposure to this essential service. Moreover, a substantial number did not have access to libraries (9), computer laboratories (10), extra curricula facilities (11), and career guidance (8). For students to be adequately

prepared for their respective courses, they need a basic level of competence in using a computer and, in the sciences, to have had practical, hands-on exposure to laboratory work. Most of the learners in the study simply did not have the required resources, and according to Nyuswa (2003), there has been little support for rural (under-resourced) schools from the education department in terms of improving their resource capacity.

Furthermore, many schools lack basic furniture, a school library, laboratories, and even recreational facilities. The Department of Education has not yet provided schools with enough teaching resources. It spends a considerable amount on salaries, maintenance, and materials, and this approach keeps under-resourced schools as they are, rather than changing them (Nyuswa, 2003). Nyuswa (2003) points out that the absence of the necessary infrastructure, particularly flush toilets, libraries, laboratories, books, stationery, overhead projectors, and computers, needs to be addressed. Other more recent writers who have focused on the poor state of South African schools, particularly those in the rural areas, include Gardiner (2008), Modisaotsile (2012), Seroto (2012), and Wiebesiek (2015). These resource constraints, which affect many resource-poor countries, could potentially prevent learners from achieving their full educational potential and obtaining good matric results.

Factors perceived to facilitate learners' transition to tertiary education included expectations of parents, motivation, and academic support. According to Lynch and O'riordan (1998), parents' expectations strongly affect the educational achievement of their children; hence the lower the expectation of educational achievement of parents, the lower the educational level the learners are likely to achieve at Matric level. Fraser and Killen (2005, cited in Hobden & Hobden, 2015) found that both lecturers and students identified self-motivation, hard work, and the ability to learn independently as key factors in facilitating success in tertiary settings. In line with the finding regarding the need for support, Thomas, Quinn, Slack and Casey (2002) emphasise the value of personal tutors, who adopt a structured and proactive stance in supporting students academically. Thomas et al. (2002) noted various forms of academic support linked to peers or mentors at the educational institutions they visited, and students who were able to make use of such assistance reported being better able to cope with academic demands. Mentorship programmes could help to facilitate the transition from secondary to tertiary education by addressing academic competencies of how to study, manage their time, and become independent learners (Jones et al., 2008). Peer support could also be particularly effective, as students can usually relate more easily to peers. Tutorials could provide additional support for students who may be experiencing challenges in meeting the expectations of tertiary institutions.

Factors perceived to hinder their transition to tertiary education included peer pressure, lack of application, substance abuse and lack of funding. In terms of peer pressure, Erikson's psychosocial theory considers the stage of development that adolescents face, namely: identity versus role confusion. This developmental crisis impacts on the person's self-esteem, which is the overall sense of

worth we use to appraise our traits and abilities (Coon & Mitterer, 2012). Self-esteem in adolescence is closely linked to a need to be accepted by one's peer group. In terms of funding, the South African government has endeavoured to make more funds available for needy students in response to the 2015 #FeesMustFall protests ignited in partial response to the exorbitant university fee structures. However, there is still a shortfall to cover the needs of all financially disadvantaged students.

Closely related to hindering factors were the needs articulated by participants in the study, including the need for language assistance and information on career choices and subjects. The need for assistance with improving writing skills was consistent with the views of Du Plessis and Gerber (2012), who maintain that the combination of a lack of English proficiency, and as well as the challenges of studying in a second language may influence students' academic performance. However, responses from the participants suggested that they not only needed assistance with writing skills, but had difficulty in verbally articulating their thoughts and ideas, which raises questions about their ability to cope in tertiary educational settings where the language of teaching and learning is predominantly English. As Du Plessis and Gerber (2012) emphasise, poor English proficiency makes the absorption of academic or discipline-specific ideas that much more difficult. In this regard, one needs to bear in mind the fact that in many rural South African schools, learners in the same class are drawn from a wide range of language groups, and the teachers are often compelled to use a combination of English and the vernacular African languages to facilitate understanding. Although there are also other spoken languages, Ndebele is the dominant language used by teachers in Syabuswa, which results in linguistic constraints, as English is rarely used in class, especially in the early grades. Moreover, many teachers are themselves not proficient in English (Jones et al., 2008). In emphasising the importance of literacy skills, Freire (1972:61) states that "to exist humanly is to name the world, to change it." Participants' poor linguistic abilities suggests that they were likely to have received poor quality pedagogical input from teachers in line with Freire's notion on "pedagogy of the oppressed," and that these poor pedagogical practices may have disempowered learners from reaching their potential.

Findings regarding lack of information highlighted a lack of proper career guidance and development programmes in the high schools they attended. For instance, many of the learners were unaware and uninformed about admission requirements, with only a few months left before they completed their matriculation examinations. The implication of a lack of career guidance is that information on the need to take specific subjects at

school in order to be admitted to certain fields of study at university may not be conveyed. Consequently, some learners may not be able to register for the course of their choice because they had not taken the required subjects in Grade 12. Paulo Freire views liberating education as able to affirm a freedom and capacity of learners to decide their own destinies (Nyirenda, 1996). Hence, if some learners are unable to register for the course of their choice because they have not taken the required subjects in Grade 12 (matric), this exclusion could be regarded as a form of oppression from Freire's perspective.

Lynch and O'riordan (1998) found that a lack of information can create great anxiety, as higher education is a foreign, sometimes scary world for learners who are unable to even afford a taxi to the local library. Lack of information can result in learners not knowing when or how to apply to universities, and especially how to access financial aid. This lack of information can then create an impression that tertiary education is unattainable and beyond the realms of their experience. It is argued that some form of career counselling would not only improve their chances of choosing a correct course and increase pass rates, but also prevent the unnecessary distress and loss of self-esteem that students experience when they make the wrong choice (Jones et al., 2008). The challenge is that learners are forced to make course decisions when they may have very little information about, or experience of, different fields or careers. This challenge is intensified for many learners in disadvantaged rural communities such as Siyabuswa, who often have even less access to resources and information, as indicated in Fig. 1. It is therefore recommended that the Department of Basic Education develop and implement an educational policy to ensure that all learners have access to quality career guidance from an early stage, as outlined in the National Youth Policy (The Presidency, Republic of South Africa, 2015). Career counsellors can potentially help learners to define their priorities, identify supports, harness resources and make suitable career choices (Cook & Maree, 2016; Savickas, 2011). It is crucial for universities to engage with schools, particularly those in disadvantaged rural areas, to disseminate information to these learners on course options and content, financial costs and funding opportunities.

The verbatim quotes indicate that eight of the 15 participants reported that although they did not receive any career guidance, it did not seem to influence how they viewed tertiary education. Most of the participants had highly positive attitudes towards both education in general and tertiary education in particular, and their responses showed an awareness of the significance of education. Their verbatim quotes bring to mind the words of the poet

Donato Mattera (n.d., cited in Advertorial, 2015), who, in visioning a new and learned South Africa, wrote: "Yes, your child, my child, our child is God's child, yearning for life and learning. That must be the mantra of the new liberated, changed and ready nation ... ." However, the ambivalent comment on general education articulated by one respondent could possibly be attributed to the fact that in South Africa, teacher dissatisfaction within the government sector results in teachers taking regular breaks, changing schools, and moving into private schools, resulting in the disruption of learners' progress (Chisholm, 2005).

### Conclusion

The findings from the study suggested that the disadvantaged students from Siyabuswa community who were interviewed for the current study faced a particular set of financial, educational and information challenges. These challenges stem firstly, from their geographic location in an under-resourced, rural area in a country where "the relationship between geography and racialised privilege endures" (Cele, 2016:20); secondly, from socio-economic circumstances which adversely impact on access to educational facilities and infrastructure, as well as high quality linguistic input; and thirdly, from lack of career guidance provided to learners in respect of subject choices, career options, funding sources and admission requirements. Given these circumstances, the learners from Siyabuswa community who participated in the study could be regarded as educationally oppressed in the Freirean sense. However, a key conclusion reached was that even if learners are provided with high quality career guidance, educational facilities and equipment, this strategy is unlikely to facilitate academic success at tertiary level if attention is not paid to the development of critical language and literacy skills in the early years. The urgent need to improve the quality of rural education in South Africa is reflected in the words of Sikhakhane and Matshiqi (2015:21), which mirror the views of Paulo Freire, where they state:

We must understand the complexity of our society, the uniqueness of historical moments that require urgent attention and the danger of perpetuating the agony of the historically colonised, exploited, subjugated and dehumanised.

These comments would appear to be applicable to educationally disadvantaged rural learners in under-resourced communities like Siyabuswa in Mpumalanga, but are also of relevance to educationally disadvantaged learners in other resource-poor countries. While the present study focused on the views of students, it would also be fruitful to research the perceptions of teachers regarding factors likely to facilitate or hinder the transition of learners from secondary schools to tertiary education.

**Note**

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