
Agency, access and barriers to post-school education: The TVET college pathway to further and higher learning

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ABSTRACT

Student access to technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges and pathways into higher education are critical issues in South Africa. Powell and McGrath (2014) draw on theories of agency to explain why students access TVET colleges. Using sociological and social-psychological theories of agency, our study explores a theoretical perspective on student access to TVET colleges, their barriers, success, and aspirations to study at university. We selected a TVET college in the Western Cape as our research site and interviewed 30 students who had completed the National Certificate in Educare. Our analysis of the data shows that the students had enrolled at the TVET college as an alternative pathway when barriers prevented their access to universities. Evidence shows that they also encountered barriers during the course of their studies but that, despite these barriers, their desire to study at university persisted. Theoretical insights derived from the empirical evidence suggest that student success at TVET colleges may provide them with prior learning and practical work experience in order to gain access to universities.

KEYWORDS

*Post-school education; technical and vocational education and training (TVET);
further education and training; non-traditional students; adult learners; agency and structure;
barriers to participation; access and success*

Introduction

The White Paper on Post-School Education and Training (DHET, 2013) acknowledges as critical issues the need to increase access to post-school education and reduce the barriers that affect access and success.

This article reports on a study conducted at a TVET college in the Western Cape. The study focused on full-time students who had registered in January 2017 and who, by June 2018, had completed each of the six-month N4, N5 and N6 certificate programmes in Educare. The completion of these certificate programmes is generally followed by an internship of 18 months, after which candidates are awarded the N6 Diploma in Educare.

The aim of the study was to explore a theoretical perspective on the ways in which TVET students exercise agency and overcome barriers to gaining access to post-school education institutions, complete their TVET programmes successfully, and sustain their dream of studying at a university. The purpose of the study was to influence thinking among TVET college lecturers, university academics and government officials about strategies that could facilitate the expansion of access to post-school education and reduce the barriers in ways that enable students to navigate their course of study through TVET colleges as an entry point to higher education.

There is no direct access route between the National Accredited Technical Education Diploma (NATED) programmes that TVET colleges offer and higher education programmes. Notwithstanding that, the findings of this study suggest that the TVET college educare students in the study, as agents, became creative by taking a detour: they built their academic capacities in an alternative space that could make their access to university possible through recognition-of-prior-learning (RPL) policies and practices that recognise mature age, prior learning and work experience.

New theoretical insights reveal that students' agentic actions to overcome barriers in pursuit of post-school education opportunities confirm Archer's (2003:7) sociological supposition that 'humans have degrees of freedom in determining their own courses of action'. Insights also indicate that students' 'social-psychological capacities' (Hitlin & Elder, 2006), which evolved while studying at the TVET college, equipped them to overcome barriers and continue plotting their own course of action. Such complementarity between sociological and social-psychological theories creates an aperture for further exploration, a new theoretical perspective on access, barriers to participation and success in which sociological theories of agency and social-psychological theories of agency could feature as complementary building blocks. This could give further meaning to Hitlin and Elder's (2006:34) identification of 'sociological social psychology'.

Reviewing conceptions of agency

Sociological theories of agency are a central concern in social theory. Over the past 20 years, social-psychological theoretical perspectives on agency have emerged, including

Bandura's (2001) 'Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective' and Hitlin and Elder's (2006:33) 'empirical model of agency'. Hitlin and Elder's (2006:56) point of departure is that 'agency is a vaguely defined, yet frequently employed, term within sociology'. Taking Giddens as their starting point, Hitlin and Elder explain:

We follow Giddens' (1984) conception of agency as a capability, though, unlike Giddens, we find analytic possibilities to disentangle individual agency from social structure (Hitlin & Elder, 2006:39).

Characterising TVET college students as agents necessitates an introduction of some conceptualisations of agent. Sewell (1992:20) portrays agents as having an innate capacity for agency, stating that 'humans are born with only a highly generalized capacity for agency'. Archer's (2003:2) description of agents as 'possessing properties ... such as thinking, deliberating, believing, intending, loving and so forth', seems to converge with Sewell's (1992) portrayal, as these could be characterised as instinctive attributes. Giddens' (1984:3) definition conveys an element of existentialism: 'To be a human being is to be a purposive agent.' In his description of an agent, Bandura (2006:164) asserts:

People are self-organizing, self-regulating, and self-reflecting. They are not simply onlookers of their behaviour. They are contributors to their life circumstances, not just products of them.

These attributes are instructive for understanding how TVET college students as agents project their life course at particular moments.

Attributes such as 'deliberating' (Archer, 2003:2), 'purposive' (Giddens, 1984:3) and 'self-organising' (Bandura, 2006:164) can shape the intentions and intentionality that are embedded in acts of agency which direct a human agent's life course. Sewell (1992:20) conveys agency as a primary 'capacity that is essential for ... for forming intentions'. Giddens (1984:8), however, contends that 'it has frequently been supposed that human agency can be defined only in terms of intentions', arguing that 'agency refers not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their capability of doing things in the first place' (Giddens, 1984:9). Implying a different perspective, Archer (2003:6) maintains that intentionality is a dimension of agency, asserting that 'people possess the intentionality to define and design courses of action in order to achieve their own ends'. These theorisations are pertinent to analysing the intentions and intentionality of TVET students as they mediate their way through post-school education.

Bandura's (2001:2) description of an agent draws attention to intentionality:

To be an agent is to intentionally make things happen by one's actions. Agency embodies the endowments, belief systems, self-regulatory capabilities and distributed structures and functions through which personal influence is exercised, rather than residing as a discrete entity in a particular place.

By framing it within social cognitive theory, Bandura (2006:164–165) conceptualises intentionality as a core feature of agency, along with forethought, self-regulation and self-reflectiveness. Intentionality in agency occurs when ‘people form intentions that include action plans and strategies for realizing them’ and forethought in agency is evident when ‘people set themselves goals and anticipate likely outcomes of prospective actions to guide and motivate their efforts’. Such intentions could be evident when agents consider choices, hatch a plan and plot a course of action.

Giving expression to ‘intentionality’ is evident in acts that Giddens (1984:10) describes as follows: ‘agency refers to doing’. ‘Doing’ can refer to various acts of intervention as described by Giddens (1979:54–55): ‘The concept of agency as I advocate it here, involving intervention in a potentially malleable object-world, relates directly to the generalised notion of *Praxis*.’ Giddens’ description implies intervention as doing, acting upon, changing the direction of one’s life course, and creating change. In the case of students at a TVET college who were denied access to a university, examples of such interventions – as purported by Giddens – are changing direction by seeking access to alternative institutions and taking concrete action to overcome barriers and achieve successful completion of their studies.

While human beings may have intentions to meet life-course expectations such as achieving a university education, they require particular kinds of capacity to take concrete action and to intervene. As discussed earlier, Giddens (1984), Sewell (1992) and Archer (2003) suggest that human beings are born with an inherent or even an instinctive capacity for agency. Hitlin and Elder (2006:39) acknowledge Giddens’ conception of agency as a capability but conceptualise agency as a capacity through the lenses of social psychological theories. Social–psychological theories focus on ‘individual agency’ and the social–psychological development of capacities that constitutes such agency. Hitlin and Elder (2006) conceptualise agency in life-course theory, which is pertinent in understanding how agents steer the course of their lives. They view ‘agency as an individual capacity for meaningful and sustained action, both within situations and across the life course’ (Hitlin & Elder, 2006:38). They also describe agency as ‘a human capacity to influence one’s own life within socially structured opportunities’ (Hitlin & Elder, 2006:57). Although they distinguish individual agency from social structure, their research is significant to understanding agency as an individual capacity that can have an impact on structural conditions through ‘meaningful and sustained action’ (Hitlin & Elder, 2006:38).

According to Hitlin and Elder (2006:37), ‘studies that empirically attempt to assess agency most often refer to social psychological capacities for self-efficacy or planfulness’. Social psychology scholars identify constituents such as self-efficacy that comprise agency as a capacity for action which, Hitlin and Elder (2006:58) argue, could include steering one’s life in a particular direction. For the exploration of an empirical model of agency, they adopt as their starting point previous empirical research on self-efficacy and planfulness. Gecas derives from Bandura (1997) his definition of self-efficacy as

the perception of oneself as a causal agent in one's environment, as having control over one's circumstances, and being capable of carrying out actions to produce intended effects (Gecas, 2003:370).

Premised on the findings of their investigation into an empirical model of agency, Hitlin and Elder (2006:60) conclude that

agency, in this model, represents an individual capacity, one that is both the result of individual differences (planfulness) as well as achieved successes (self-efficacy) and a sense of temporal, self-reflective understanding about one's life chances (optimism).

Hitlin and Elder (2006:42), assert that 'planful competence involves three dimensions: intellectual investment, dependability, and self-confidence'. However, their empirical research explains planfulness as a catalyst for agency.

Their empirical research validates 'self-efficacy as constitutive of agency' (Hitlin & Elder, 2006:57). This means that, in the context of our study, self-efficacy could be interpreted as a constituent of TVET college students' agency viewed as a capacity that enables them to navigate the course of their direction in post-school education. Instructive are also their conceptualisations of 'temporality – optimism' (Hitlin & Elder, 2006:43) as the capacity for agency that includes the element of optimism in projecting future courses of action. However, they acknowledge that this requires further research. Therefore, Hitlin and Johnson (2015:1453) conducted further investigations into optimism and 'optimistic life-course expectations' and found that their respondents' 'optimistic expectations function to improve life-course outcomes' (Hitlin & Johnson, 2015:1463–1464). Such planfulness, self-efficacy and optimism are instructive in understanding the kinds of capacity that TVET college students as agents may require to direct their life journeys across the post-school education landscape, and how they potentially transform conditions to make success possible.

Agents have intentionality to plot their course or direction and capacities to exercise agency in order to navigate their life's journeys. But they could encounter obstacles and, as is the case of TVET students who were confronted with barriers, could 'act strategically to try to discover ways around [them] or to define a second-best outcome where constraints are concerned' (Archer, 2003:6). Seeking an alternative course of action requires an element of projectivity which, according to Emirbayer and Mische (1998:971),

encompasses the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors' hopes, fears, and desires for the future.

Social-psychological capacities of agency are pertinent to understanding how students influence their life's journeys. However, these do not explain the kinds of capacity which are

required to change structural conditions that enable or constrain their agency. Although this article focuses on agency, conceptualisations of it in relation to transformation expose relationships between agency and structure. It is therefore important to consider this concept in relation to structure; this is because some theorists propose that reciprocal influences between these phenomena shape the capacities of agents and the nature of agency. Theorising transformation in relation to agency and structure opens up possibilities for exploring the ways in which agents can exercise agency to transform structural conditions that limit agency.

Illuminating the relationships between agents, agency and structure, Sewell (1992:20) advocates that 'agents are empowered to act with and against others by structure'. The role of agents in social change is conveyed in Sewell's (1992:20) statement that 'to be an agent means to be capable of exerting some degree of control over the social relations in which one is enmeshed'.

Drawing attention to the capacities for agency relating to structural transformation, Sewell (1992:20) declares:

As I see it, agents are empowered to act with and against others by structures: they have knowledge of the schemas that inform social life and have access to some measure of human and nonhuman resources. Agency arises from the actor's knowledge of schemas, which means the ability to apply them to new contexts.

Structural transformation, as implied by the interrelationships between agency and structure, is well illustrated by Emirbayer and Mische's (1998:970) comprehensive theorisation of the concept of agency, which they define

as the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal – relational contexts of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgement, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations.

Although agents possess capacities to effect social and structural transformation, it is significant to acknowledge that they do not have limitless powers, because 'humans have degrees of freedom in determining their own courses of action' (Archer, 2003:6–7). Hitlin and Elder (2006:34, 39) assert that the marginal subfield of sociological–social psychology is 'the most amenable for offering an empirical basis for understanding agency' – they explored their analysis of agency within 'an empirical model of agency' framed within social psychology.

Methodology

The research was conducted at a TVET college in the Western Cape at which the respondents were registered as full-time students for the N6 in Educare. Non-probability purposive sampling was used to select 30 respondents from the 129 students who completed the N6

Certificate in Educare and had passed their final external examinations in June 2018. As some of the selected respondents were reluctant to participate in the research, ‘snowball sampling’ was used to secure 30 respondents.

Table 1: Profile of respondents

Age group	Number of respondents
19 years	2
20–29	25
30–39	1
40+	2
Total	30
Marital status and dependants	Number of respondents
Single with no dependants	23
Single with dependants	5
Married with dependants	2
Total	30
Gender	Number of respondents
Women	29
Men	1
Total	30

Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews by using an interview guide. We were interested in exploring the respondents’ experiences of exercising agency in order to gain access to post-school educational institutions, overcome barriers, achieve success, and sustain their dream of studying at a university. The flexibility of the semi-structured interviews allowed for in-depth responses, as additional questions facilitated clarification. The interviews took place between June and July 2018 at locations convenient to the respondents.

Findings

Interviews with the respondents provided a glimpse into students' journeys as agents, that is, how they:

- Exercised agency in their attempts to access university after completing high school;
- Enrolled at a TVET college as an alternative; and
- Mobilised their agentic capacities to overcome adversity and succeeded, still holding on to the aspiration to attend university in the future.

As the study included only 30 respondents drawn from one programme offered by a single TVET college, the findings do not claim to be generalisable and are merely illustrative.

Agency, intentionality and the TVET college as an alternative

After receiving their matriculation results, the respondents, as agents, pursued access to university and experienced 'below minimum qualifications' as a structural barrier to access, attesting that:

I couldn't get into university because I didn't have a bachelor's pass. (Respondent 4)

I was not accepted at the university because of my results [in] Grade 12. (Respondent 9)

I had too few credits to get into university. (Respondent 17)

I wanted to be a teacher but, because my matric results didn't allow me to go to university, I decided to do Educare. (Respondent 2)

When they were denied access by universities, the respondents conceded that they did not meet the university entry requirements and, therefore, as they explain, decided to apply to a TVET college:

I had another option – to get in at a TVET college. (Respondent 4)

I didn't achieve what the university required of me to study education; therefore, I went to a TVET college. (Respondent 7)

I chose this TVET college because UWC [the University of the Western Cape] was full and my parents said that I have to go study. (Respondent 13)

Their efforts displayed impressive agentic actions to steer their lives in a different direction by exploring access to the TVET college as an alternative. Being excluded from the university and seeking an alternative resonate with Archer's (2003:6) assertion that, 'when a project is

constrained or enabled during its execution, agents can act strategically to try to discover ways around it or define a second-best outcome’.

Apparent in their strategic agentic actions to counter the universities’ barriers to access was the ‘practical-evaluative element’ (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998:971) that was evident in the ways that they considered alternative pathways, weighed up the pros and cons, made decisions, and engaged in processes for gaining access to the TVET college.

Such agentic actions also expose an element of ‘intentionality to define and design courses of action in order to achieve their own ends’ (Archer, 2003:6). By choosing to enrol at a TVET college as a second choice after encountering a barrier to access, the respondents displayed agency that changed the direction of their lives. Giddens (1979:55–56) describes this as

a necessary feature of action that, at any point in time, the agent ‘could have acted otherwise’: either positively in terms of attempted intervention in the process of ‘events in the world’, or negatively in terms of forbearance.

Overcoming barriers

After overcoming the structural barrier that denied them access to a university and enrolling successfully for the National Certificate in Educare at the TVET college, the respondents encountered further structural barriers. According to Rubenson and Desjardins (2009), structural barriers are created by structural conditions and can have an impact on an individual’s capacity to exercise agency.

Limited transport services, finances and access to funding are among the structural institutional barriers that confronted the respondents. Structural conditions related to transport emerged as the most prominent institutional barrier among the majority of the respondents. This was acknowledged by the then Minister of Transport, Dr Blade Nzimande, who stated that ‘public transport in the Western Cape is one of the worst in the country’ (Petersen, 2018).

Agency, creative capacity, and overcoming infrequent and unreliable public transport as a structural institutional barrier

Respondents’ descriptions of infrequent and unreliable public transport corroborated the minister’s admission and exposed a public transport system which is not ideal for students who commute to the TVET college. Arriving late for classes was a common experience among the respondents. One respondent explained that the theft of cables in the railway infrastructure brought the trains to a halt, resulting in late arrival for classes:

Public transport wasn’t easy. Sometimes the people [were on] strike or the train got stuck because people [had stolen] the cables. Then I got ... to the college late. That wasn’t nice. (Respondent 17)

Bus strikes created further barriers to a timely start of classes, as a respondent lamented:

And with the bus strike, I didn't know what to do to get hold of transport. I travelled with another student during the bus strike. (Respondent 6)

Using the public transport system presented a learning curve for some respondents, who, as human agents', became 'knowledgeable and enabled which implies that those agents are capable of putting their structurally formed capacities to work in creative or innovative ways' (Sewell, 1992:4). Their responses revealed how they derived knowledge from their experiences of navigating the transport routes:

At first I walked to college. Then[, in] the second semester, I took the taxi. ...it was a problem because I had to take two taxis. And so the taxi driver that always gets us in front of the college made an arrangement with us that he will pick us up at the nearest point and drop us at college. So it was only one taxi and that helped us a lot. (Respondent 12)

My friend and I walked from Elsie's River. Some days it was difficult because we didn't feel like walking and we had to walk back. Sometimes my father gave me a lift, but, most of the time, we had to walk. (Respondent 2)

Their knowledge of the public transport system enabled respondents to mobilise their creative agentic capacities to seek the most suitable modes of public transport. When they exhausted the vehicular options, they displayed resilience by resorting to walking between home and college.

Agency, creative capacity, and overcoming unsafe public transport services and violence as structural institutional barriers

Although some respondents experienced public transport as infrequent and unreliable, one exposed the dangerous conditions which generated structural barriers and daily created fearful lived experiences resulting from such perilous public transport:

...[A]t first I was scared because I wasn't used to travelling and then I took [a] taxi ... I had a bad experience once but I had to continue taking [a] taxi. I was in the taxi and I told the driver that I must get off at Pick n Pay. But he drove past Pick n Pay ... he told me he was going to turn around but he drove past the stop and ... said I was going with him and all this stuff and there was [also] a girl ... with them. I was so scared. Then we got to Libertas. And there was ... a couple trying to get in, so I jumped out. (Respondent 18)

Overcoming the dangers of the public transport system was very similar to the perils that respondents experienced in their residential areas. A respondent pointed to the creative agentic capacities to dodge bullets in order to arrive timeously for the start of classes in the morning:

At first [I travelled by] train but I lost too much time. Sometimes I would only get [to college] at first break. And then there were times that they [were shooting] in our area. Our area is very dangerous. I had to go through [a] war zone. They call it ‘gangster’s paradise’. I had to walk through that area to get to the station. I live in the normal houses, but I had to go through the flats to get there. So there were a few times that I couldn’t get to college because of that. (Respondent 15)

Confronting the dangers, and despite their obvious fears, the respondents displayed creative capacities for agency that featured resilience and resistance. This empirical evidence points to the necessity for such agentic actions in contexts of violence.

Agency, creative capacity, and overcoming limited government funding for student travel allowances as a structural institutional barrier

Compounding their vulnerabilities was the respondents’ lack of personal finances to travel to the TVET college. Many students received a bursary to cover their tuition fees and a travel allowance from the government’s National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). However, some respondents did not qualify for the NSFAS travel allowance, as they lived within a radius of less than 10 km from the college. With little money in their pockets, respondents’ responses revealed their creative and innovative agentic responses as they became knowledgeable and scouted for the cheapest possible routes to and from the college:

I used [the] bus, but, [mostly,] I took a train...; sometimes, if there [was] no other way, ... I had to take a taxi. ... [Although] the train is cheaper, ... it’s a struggle. It’s a real struggle. I think the taxi is so nice, but the ... taxi fare is expensive. The train is cheaper, [but] the bus ... is ... much better, [and] cheaper. (Respondent 10)

It wasn’t nice, because our train doesn’t run the whole day. It only runs once in the morning and once at night, and, if we had to take a taxi, it was expensive to travel because you had to take about three taxis. My mom gave me R100 per week and from that I could pay my train fare, which was R60, and on a Friday I could come home [by] taxi. (Respondent 5)

Respondents who received a NSFAS-funded travel allowance explained how this changed their agentic actions:

So, in N6, when I got a travel allowance, I decided to travel [by] taxi – two taxis home. Then my Boeta (brother) dropped me in the morning and I travelled with the taxis in the afternoon. (Respondent 8)

[A] fellow student suggested that she pick me up and [that I] then ... pay her from my NSFAS travel allowance. ... I didn’t like the train but the car was fine. (Respondent 15)

One of the stipulations of the NSFAS bursary was that students had to attend classes 80 per cent of the time. Students were required to sign this agreement at the beginning of each semester. Their attendance determined the amount that was paid as their travel allowance. Fortunately, this restriction was lifted from the beginning of 2019 – six months after we conducted our interviews with the respondents.

The empirical evidence suggests that creative agentic capacity is necessary to overcome barriers and succeed at a TVET college when confronted with violence and poverty.

Academic dispositional capacities for agency to achieve success

The respondents were asked the question, ‘What advice would you give to students who show an interest in this course?’ Their responses revealed the social–psychological capacities for agency that they had developed in order to make a success of their studies. Here we extend Hitlin and Elder’s (2006) dimensions of capacity for agency to interpret the data and infer the findings in relation to an academic context. In addition, as the evidence suggests, we derive from the data a new academic capacity for agency, namely ‘academic disposition’.

Academic planfulness

Citing Clausen’s definition of planful competence as an individual-level construct that dictates a person’s facility for making (and sticking to) advantageous, long-range plans, Hitlin and Elder (2006:41) suggest that being planful is a prerequisite for successful agentic actions. Reflecting the latter, it is evident that the respondents came to the realisation that they had to become planful and manage their time in order to complete their studies successfully. The advice they offered to interested students affirms this:

Plan your time [and] personal life, and prioritise your different tasks. (Respondent 17)

I [would] tell them to do their tasks and plan before the time so that [they] don’t lag behind, because, once you lag behind, everything just accumulates – and that makes it more difficult. Do your tasks and do [them] before the time or on time so that you don’t fall behind. (Respondent 5)

We deduce from the respondents’ responses, in the context of post-school education, that, as agents, they had developed academic planful competence predominantly related to time management, which they now recommended to interested students.

Academic self-efficacy

During the course of any academic study, students acquire various academic dispositional agentic capacities to succeed. Self-efficacy is defined by Gecas (2003:370) as ‘the perception of oneself as a causal agent in one’s environment, as having control over one’s circumstances,

and being capable of carrying out actions to produce intended effects'. Evident in the students' responses were elements of self-efficacy:

Stay positive. Give your full cooperation. Don't [become] negative. Just do it. Don't let your work fall behind, because then you are going to struggle. (Respondent 8)

Actually a girl already came to me about that. She applied here and she asked me, 'Do you think this course is worth doing?' [I told her] the basic things like: just ... work hard; don't think because it sounds easy, you don't have to work hard; don't think because it is only four subjects, you don't have to work hard. Work hard at each subject and do your best every day, and, if your marks are good, then people will recognise that. (Respondent 18)

We derive from the respondents' responses, in the context of the TVET college, that they had developed academic self-efficacy and perceived themselves as agents who were capable of success. For this reason, they advised interested students to develop such agentic capacities in order to execute actions that might contribute to their future success.

Resilient academic self-efficacy

According to Bandura (1989:1177), 'it takes a resilient sense of efficacy to override the numerous dissuading impediments to significant accomplishments'. Some respondents identified resilient self-efficacy (Bandura, 1989) as an important capacity for academic success. Their perceptions of resilient self-efficacy were revealed most prominently as perseverance, endurance and tenacity:

I would say that, if you don't get into university, don't give up; try the Educare course and you can get into a diploma course afterwards ... you will [have] ups and downs but you must just persevere. (Respondent 4)

[I'd] tell them to persevere no matter how hard it gets. [For example,] when we started in N4, ... we didn't know what to expect. But, in N5, I got used to it and then it became easy. (Respondent 11)

We infer that perseverance and tenacity emerge as significant indicators of resilient academic self-efficacy. This suggests that resilience, which is embedded in the concept of resilient self-efficacy, is a significant element of agency.

Academic disposition

A few respondents drew attention to an academic disposition towards attending classes, engaging with lecturers, studying, and applying their academic capacities fully as a requisite for success:

[Don't be] absent, especially if you have to hand in an assignment, because that is where you lose marks – and you never know if you can make up those marks for your year mark. (Respondent 3)

Come to college. Don't [be] absent. Don't bunk, [and] don't follow friends. Study, [really] study. Go through your work every day. [E]ven though [everything] seems ... fine, just read over it once. Just do it, [for] it helps at the end of the day. [When] studying at the end of the semester, it will benefit you. ... [T]hen you can just read over the work and you will remember [it] from [earlier on]. If you read over something, it actually sticks in your [mind] and you remember it. So it helps. (Respondent 13)

This empirical evidence points to a new concept, that is, 'academic dispositional agentic capacities' that can subsume academic self-efficacy, academic planfulness, resilient academic self-efficacy, and academic disposition.

Future aspirations, intentionality and projectivity – keeping the dream of access to higher education alive

According to Bandura (2001:8),

[a]n agent has to be not only a planner and forethinker, but a motivator and self-regulator as well. ... Agency thus involves not only the deliberative ability to make choices and action plans, but the ability to give shape to appropriate courses of action and to motivate and regulate their execution.

In the respondents' responses about their future in educate, they portrayed themselves as agents who are planners and forethinkers:

I want to be a teacher, but, actually, I'm thinking about being a principal of a small crèche on one of the farms where all the farm children get together. This is actually what I want, but, if that doesn't pan out, then definitely a teacher. (Respondent 5)

I see myself as a good educarer [who] really takes children further, but I really hope that I will be able to help children in need, especially disabled children. I learnt a lot in the N5 Psychology [course] about learners with special needs – how to handle them, and [so on]. (Respondent 6)

Similarly to Bandura, Archer (2003:2) describes individuals as agents who 'possess properties ... such as thinking, deliberating, believing, intending, loving and so forth'. These are conveyed by the respondents about their future beyond the educate sector:

As a successful teacher, I will do my BEd; and then I want to go [into a] school and ... be a teacher for a Grade 3 class or [similar]. (Respondent 8)

Hopefully, I will be finished with my degree and in my own class – Grade R to Grade 3; not higher. Those children will be taller than me. I prefer them small. (Respondent 11)

I want my BEd and then I want to study even further. (Respondent 16)

I want to do the 18 months [of] practical [work], and then I want to do my foundation phase [in order] to teach. In five years, I want to finish my BEd degree. (Respondent 17)

It was clear that the respondents had not lost their ambition to pursue a degree. It was evident that they were agents thinking about their future studies, intending to attend a university, and believing that they would be successful.

In plotting their futures beyond education, the element of ‘projectivity’ emerges which, according to Emirbayer and Mische (1998:971),

encompasses the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors’ hopes, fears, and desires for the future.

The following serves as an example of how respondents expressed their hopes and dreams:

I see myself ... not only [as] a teacher, but also a community worker and ... a student. I want to do so much stuff ... [that] I can’t even keep it in [my head] anymore. I want to study Grade R [and] also child psychology. But I see myself as someone serving the community, because, ... during this holiday, [I was] involved with a lot of people. Actually, I’m going on a camp now. I was on a camp three weeks back as a camp leader focusing on the community – children [who] don’t want to go to school anymore [and have] left school. So I was working with them. (Respondent 18)

Illustrating the social–psychological capacity for optimism (Hitlin & Elder, 2006:42) are the respondents’ perceptions of themselves as agents who can direct their future prospects and life course.

Agentic capacities for transforming social relations

It is clear from the evidence that the respondents exercised agency to overcome barriers and achieve success in their academic studies. By confronting the initial barrier to higher

education, the respondents mediated the social relations in the post-school education context. However, as events unfolded, the respondents later exhibited agency that could enable them to transform these social relations. These insights corroborate Sewell's declaration that

[t]o be an agent means to be capable of exerting some degree of control over the social relations in which one is enmeshed, which in turn implies the ability to transform those social relations to some degree' (Sewell, 1992:20).

Gaining access to higher education would, however, present evidence that they had transformed the social relations – that they had succeeded in accumulating prior learning and work experience to facilitate their access into higher education.

Conclusion

The exploration of a new theoretical perspective on TVET students' agency in respect of their access, barriers and success drew on sociological and social–psychological theories, and on empirical data.

For the research described in this article, agency was a useful concept to explain the relationships between students overcoming initial barriers, gaining access to a TVET college, confronting subsequent barriers to complete the N6 Certificate in Educare, and sustaining the dream of access to a university.

The sociological theories of agency served to analyse the generalised capacity of students as agents and their agency to overcome barriers. Sociological conceptualisations best describe the relationships between agency and structure.

Social–psychological concepts were instructive for analysing the relationships between constituents of students' agency and explaining how they overcame barriers and carved their paths towards success. Their agency, which comprised self-efficacy (Hitlin & Elder, 2006:40–41) and resilient self-efficacy (Bandura, 1989:1177) and was driven by planfulness (Hitlin & Elder, 2006:41), enabled them to succeed. By drawing inferences in relation to the context of post-school education through these concepts, new interpretations emerged. 'Academic planfulness', 'academic self-efficacy', and 'resilient academic self-efficacy' as social–psychological capacities for student agency enabled them to complete their studies at the TVET college successfully and project future studies at university.

Further inferences suggest a new social–psychological capacity for agency as 'academic disposition'. In addition, we derive a new construct – that is, 'academic dispositional agentic capacities' – as an overarching concept which encompasses 'academic planfulness', 'academic self-efficacy', 'resilient academic self-efficacy' and 'academic disposition'.

Theoretical insights derived from this article signify a new theoretical perspective which suggests that sociological theories and the social–psychological theories of agency are distinctive. New theoretical insights also point to some complementarity between the sociological theories and social–psychological theories of agency. Social–psychological theories of agency were useful for analysing and interpreting the relationships between students’ social–psychological capacities and their exercising agency to overcome barriers. Among Bandura’s (2001:6) core features of agency, intentionality best described the deliberate and intentional ways through which students sought access to a TVET college as an alternative after encountering their initial barrier, ‘below minimum requirement’. Archer’s sociological conceptualisation (2003:6) illuminates intentionality as a dimension of agency, asserting that ‘people possess the intentionality to define and design courses of action in order to achieve their own ends’.

Implicit in the agency that students exercised in their strategies to overcome barriers is a capacity of ‘empowerment’, which converges with Sewell’s (1992:20) proposition that ‘agents are empowered to act with and against others by structures’. Coupled with this proposition, Sewell’s (1992:20) theorisation that, ‘to be an agent ... implies the ability to transform those social relations to some degree’, gives meaning to the suggestion that, by overcoming barriers, students transformed social relations in a rudimentary way. Empowerment has not been explored as a potential constituent of agency as a capacity to transform social relations. A question prompted by this article, and which requires further exploration, is: What capacities for agency could enable students as agents to transform the social relations and the structural conditions that bound agency?’

Despite Hitlin and Elder’s (2006:34) identification of ‘sociological–social psychology’ as the most appropriate empirical frame through which to investigate agency, the findings in this study cannot offer verification of this. However, the theoretical insights gleaned from the study could enable TVET college lecturers, university academics and government officials to understand students’ journeys across the post-school education landscape and prompt them to reflect on strategies to expand access to post-school education as well as address structural and situational barriers that undermine success.

While we have explored a new theoretical perspective, we acknowledge that further research is required to generate deeper theoretical analyses of the issues of access, barriers to participation and success experienced by TVET college students.

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