Towards understanding the influence of rurality
on students' access to and participation in higher education

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Abstract

This study examines the experiences of students from rural backgrounds in higher education in South Africa in order to foster more equitable access and participation. Edward Soja's notion of spatial justice provides a platform for thinking about rurality and its impact on access and success in HE. Soja's trialectical account means understanding rurality historically, spatially, and socially, and enables exploration of spatial inequalities based on the interplay between rurality and HE. Data was collected within an interpretive, qualitative, case study design through document analysis, interviews, and focus groups. The findings reveal the inequalities that students experience in HE due to their rural backgrounds and the fact that their experiences, abilities, and knowledges are neither acknowledged nor valued in the university, often by the students themselves. This study contributes to understandings of the historical, social, and spatial foundations of inequality in HE and charts future directions for policy and practice.

Introduction

Universities are considered developmental spaces of becoming. This means that access to university education may provide a step-wise change in circumstances especially for students from rural and less privileged backgrounds (Hall, 2012; Leibowitz, 2012). Sociologists and economists of education have examined a variety of factors related to family background, race, gender, social class, and income as main predictors of university access across developed and developing countries. However, spatial factors have received less attention and are often placed in a residual category with other unexplained factors. Foster (1977) is considered among the first scholars to argue that geographical disparities should be considered among key educational inequalities in developing countries. Other scholars such as Kanbur and Venable (2005) have

provided seminal accounts by compiling empirical evidence on spatial inequalities in more than fifty developing countries. In recent years, a volume of research in South Africa has attempted to understand the complexities of the problems of rural communities and schooling (see Naidoo, et al., 2020; Timmis, et al., 2019; Walker & Mathebula, 2019; Walker, 2019). Given the attention to spatial inequalities in the scholarly literature, rurality may be an important stratifier of educational outcomes that requires further investigation.

Rurality is a complex phenomenon that can be understood as both a demographic and social category that intersects with other categories, such as race, gender, and social class. In the South African context, inequality and rural poverty is exceptional because of the impact of both colonialism and apartheid as characterised by institutionalised racism and brutal exploitation of black people who were denied equal access to educational opportunities, including HE. With the advent of democracy, several policies in government as well as in HEIs were drafted with the aim of redressing educational inequalities and affirming the principle of equity. Despite efforts made by government and HEIs to redress who gets access to academia, many students continue to be disadvantaged by virtue of their identities and economic, social, and geographic backgrounds, as most initiatives fail to address the deeply entrenched and systemic inequalities that affect students from rural communities. This is in part because limited literature exists surrounding the experiences of rural students in accessing and succeeding at university in South Africa.

This paper attempts to contextualise rurality and HE especially in the South African setting where disparities have to do with apartheid and continuing economic and social disparities. Against this backdrop, this study underscores the need to explore rural students' experiences in accessing and participating at university, by answering the following research questions: How does rurality influence students' access to university in South Africa? And how do students from rural areas in South Africa experience learning and participation at university? In this study, we argue that background plays a vital role in influencing student success. Rural students come from backgrounds underpinned by values and socio-cultural systems that are very different from that of urban students and those who come from economically privileged backgrounds. As such, the ways in which students from rural contexts experience HE cannot be the same as those of urban students. Our assumption is affirmed by several studies (see Li, 2010; Yang, 2010), including in Canada, (Lehmann, 2012; Looker & Andres, 2001), in the United States of America (Ast, 2014; Holmes & Dalton, 2008; Jack, 2019), and in Australia (Roberts & Green, 2013). What these studies show is that there are glaring gaps that exist between rural and urban areas in terms of standards of living, and occupational, cultural, and educational opportunities. More specifically, for rural students, these studies show that urban students have an apparent advantage over rural students mainly because of the subtle but significant differences in their formative school achievement, and the psychological support available to support them in accessing and succeeding in HE.

Contextualising South African HE

In the South African context, social inequalities are entrenched in all aspects of social life, as a product of the systemic exclusion of black people under colonialism and apartheid (Badat, 2010).

Colonialism and apartheid are racially based systems of inequality in which black people were denied equal access to educational opportunities including HE. With the advent of democracy, a higher education White Paper was drafted that set out the task of transforming a racially segregated system into one that responds to the demands of the new democracy in a new global era (Department of Education (DoE), 1997). The policy directed the state to 'redress educational inequalities among those sections of our people who have suffered particular disadvantages' and affirm the principle of equity so that all citizens have 'the same quality of learning opportunities' (DoE, 1995: 16–17). However, the advent of democracy was not sufficient for the elimination of historic and structural inequalities.

While institutions of higher learning are reimagining and reframing their structures and practices to address these deeply embedded inequalities, several concerns have been raised about the preparedness of South African students to undertake university studies. Lecturers and university systems continue to frame students and their background as "lacking" essential academic and cultural resources; this denotes a deficit view which fails to addres inadequacies and unpreparedness on the part of HEIs to meet the needs of students from rural backgrounds (Agumba, 2022).

It is worth noting that the origin of inequalities in HE access and success often lies outside the HE sector itself, namely in the earlier stages of education (McCowan, 2007). A study by Leibowitz (2012) on students' prior learning experiences revealed that for a majority of students, rurality (in combination with race) co-produces the repertoires, in terms of practices, literacies, and values, that the students use as they transition into and through HE. After 1994, the South African government eliminated explicit policies that were aimed at keeping black students out of certain universities, and sought to expand access and establish a socially just and equitable HE system. While an increase in the number of black students in the university may signify inclusion of those previously excluded, physical access alone does not guarantee epistemological access, inclusion and success especially for black students from rural provinces in South Africa (Morrow, 2009).

Despite these efforts, some barriers, such as unfair admission processes, unequal funding arrangements, and financial constraints provide inequitable university opportunities for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (especially those from poor-rural areas). For example, even though the South African government adopted "fee-free" HE in 2018 to lessen the access burden, students from rural areas and those from low-income families still have to find funds for general upkeep including accommodation, food, transport, books and so on. Therefore, for these students, accessing and succeeding in the South African HE context becomes even more challenging (Martinez-Vargas, et al., 2020).

The need for transformation in South African universities was foregrounded by student protests, beginning with the #RhodesMustFall movement in 2015-2016, which lead to major upheaval in the university system. These protests called for decolonisation of curricula that they argued were framed with reference to race and social class (Naidoo, et al., 2020). Research conducted by the University of Cape Town working group set up in 2016 after the protests

revealed that curriculum content at the University of Cape Town was still imbued with colonialism. This is because black, working-class students felt that their knowledges and practices were not acknowledged and/or valued. For example, music students claimed that certain subjects and repertoires were more highly valued in that western classics and jazz (American genres) enjoyed more prestige than African music. The report also indicated that English, which is not the first language of most students, was seen as a measure of intelligence and ability to communicate, in that certain English accents were deemed "not professional enough" in oral examination (Macupe, 2018). While acknowledging current interventions and policy directives to make universities inclusive, such interventions have not responded adequately to the intersections and complexities of rurality and access to HE.

Barriers to and support for university enrolment and persistence

To understand the challenges experienced by students from rural backgrounds in accessing and succeeding in HE, we first need to unpack the complexities of rurality and how this affects access and success in HEIs. According to Sauvageot and da Graća (2007), rurality continues to be a highly contested concept, and no universal definition has been adopted as yet. In the South African context, the complexity of defining the construct of rurality includes a powerful historical element (Gwanya, 2010; Halfacree, 2006). In this study, rurality is defined as a real and imagined geographical space and human condition which is characterised by marginalisation but also encompassing unrecognised and unacknowledged potential that can contribute to the development of humanity. This definition attempts to understand rurality as a composite construct with many interrelated dimensions and not just as limited to a geographical location. This understanding brings together educational, socio-economic, and cultural particularities of different types of localities and the cumulative rural disadvantage and opportunities that it affords (Ndofirepi & Maringe, 2020).

The spatial nature of the education sector continues to exacerbate and perpetuate inequalities as policies that have been formulated continue to mask the deeply entrenched patterns of spatial inequalities including the influence of rurality in education provision and achievement (Christie, 2013). For example, even though students from rural backgrounds may have high educational aspiration, they are academically disadvantaged in matriculation[1] examinations due to the sometimes-lower quality of their secondary education characterised by under-resourced schools and under-qualified teachers. As a result, particular competencies related to academic practice, are often not sufficiently addressed in schools (Jones, et al., 2008). Although studies reveal that rural students can negotiate their way to success at university (Mgqwashu, et al., 2020; Walker, 2020; Walker & Mathebula, 2019), they face considerable challenges, since there is a gap between their sociocultural practices and those of the institution.

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[1] At the end of secondary or high school, learners write a final set of examinations which are known by the term matric – and learners who pass are said to have matriculated.

Even though students from rural background show remarkable resilience, affordability lies at the heart of rural disadvantage in HE access. In South Africa, there are extreme rural-urban disparities in wealth and income (World Bank, 2022), which exacerbate inequalities in accessing and meaningfully participating in HEIs. The World Bank report (2022) shows that people living in rural areas in South Africa experience significantly higher levels of poverty, lower levels of income and wealth and higher levels of socio-economic deprivation than urban residents. Given that most universities are in urban areas, students from rural areas need to make special transport and living arrangements away from their family home to pursue their studies. This means their living cost will be significantly higher for students from rural communities than their urban counterparts who may easily commute from their family home.

Access to information about university admission as well as financial aid processes remains a challenge for students from rural communities (Li & Qiu, 2018). The scarcity of information and advice about university access opportunities and financial aid knowledge often results in these students being excluded from this benefit. In addition, access to HEI in South Africa is directly linked to the family's ability to afford the tuition fees and other related costs. In choosing a HEI, families have to consider application costs, registration costs, tuition costs, accommodation costs, travelling costs etc. For some, even though the tuition, registration and accommodation cost may be covered by some financial aid schemes, these students still encounter other financial constraints such as travelling costs, accommodation costs, upkeep costs etc. (Jones, et al., 2008). These challenges can be overwhelming and may potentially result in poor performance; more often than not, lecturers are unaware that students from rural areas experience these challenges that may affect their optimal participation in teaching and learning.

Educational inequality is also associated with cumulative generational effects of overall lower levels of educational attainment in the family (Li & Qui, 2018). Students who have parents with HE credentials and who are in high-status occupations, tend to have more information about the HE system and are better able to decode this information and can make informed choices about the fields of study and institutions to apply to (Ayalon, 2007; Pfeffer, 2008). This means that more selective disciplines such as law and medicine are mainly composed of students from backgrounds with high socioeconomic status while many students from disadvantaged groups tend to choose less selective disciplines such as education and the social sciences (Reimer & Pollak, 2005).

Theoretical framework: spatial justice

While many studies have examined a variety of factors related to family background and how these impact on university access and success, spatial factors have received less attention as they are usually placed within other unexplained residual categories. By using Edward Soja's (1996) notion of realandimagined spaces, this study hopes to confront issues of social, historical, and spatial disparities and their impact on educational opportunity and access in relation to each other. Isolating, ignoring, omitting, or suppressing one element may lead to distorted and systemically flawed understandings of social practices. Inspired by Foucault's (1997) notion of

heterotopia and Lefebvre's monumentality, Soja extended their views to include alternative spatiality (Soja, 1989, 1993, 1996). Drawing heavily on Lefebvre as well as studies of marginalised groupings, Soja attempts to embrace the unvoiced whose spatiality is persistently ignored.

To understand how social spatiality is produced through social practice, Soja proposes a trialectic of spatiality each with its own epistemology. The Firstspace epistemologies represent the perceived space. It is the space that privileges literal physical perception of spatial, social, and historical awareness of objectivity and materiality that can be empirically tested. Firstspace epistemologies are concerned with description of the physical, material, and other social conditions of the world (Soja, 1996). Nevertheless, Soja (1996) argues that this space alone is incomplete and partial with a blurred boundary separating it from the Secondspace.

Secondspace epistemologies are conceived rather than perceived. Spatial knowledge is thus produced and reproduced through imagination and conceptual thinking, of the mind, metaphor, and belief. Knowledge of this material reality is essentially ideational, reflexive, and individualised (Soja, 1996: 78-81). Soja (1996) suggests that if representations of Secondspaces are to be seriously considered, then Firstspace would collapse into the Secondspace.

The Thirdspace domain represents a strategic place of political choice, of rethinking new possibilities and resistance. The Thirdspace is labelled "realandimagined" (all as one word), indicating that the binaries that structure conceptions and perceptions are mutually informing and if separated would destroy the lived connections between the two. For Soja, this is the space where people's conceptions, perceptions and lived experiences are often contested and continuously constructed and reconstructed. It is the place where the real and imagined intertwine with other social indicators of capitalism, race, patriarchy and other material-spatial practices of reproduction, exploitation, and domination. Therefore, according to Soja (1996), these are the spaces of the marginalised. However, as Soja (1996) notes, the Thirdspaces have been lost or suppressed and they need to be restored. The Thirdspace represents a site for struggle, liberation, and emancipation; as such, its spatiality needs to be examined in relation to the historical and social dimension of a social practice.

Methodology

As noted earlier, the aim of this research was to explore situated personal experiences and, in particular, to investigate the trajectories of students from rural areas in accessing and transitioning through university. As such, an interpretivist perspective was deemed useful as it enables researchers to explore the personal experiences and perceptions of students from rural background and to understand how they interpret their access to and success in university. The philosophical underpinnings of interpretivism were used to foreground the explanatory as well as analytical tools for the study; thus, an inductive approach was followed to ensure that individuals' experiential accounts are understood (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013). The study adopted a qualitative design. This approach enables us to adopt different lenses, filters, and angles of viewing rurality to discover new perceptions and cognitions about students from rural areas and their experiences in HE.

A case study was found to be suitable as it facilitated the collection of detailed, in-depth information through document analysis, interviews, and focus groups of the meanings (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) that rural students assign to their experiences as they transition through university. In this study, a holistic single case study with embedded units was undertaken. Figure 1 illustrate this case study design. Using purposive sampling techniques, 24 participants from the University of Johannesburg undergraduate degree programs were selected. Sixteen participants from the faculty of education, and eight from the faculties of science and engineering. A matrix was used with the following criteria: race/ethnicity, gender, geographical origin and first generation at university.

Only 18 participants agreed to be interviewed. Semi-structured interviews afforded participants the opportunity to reflect on their learning trajectories through university and how their rural background impacted on their academic journey at university. In addition, homogenous focus group interviews were conducted. Participants from each faculty were interviewed separately in order to encourage the participants as a group to reflect and share their views and experiences of their rural backgrounds and the impact this has on their university experience and, more specifically, on the courses that they pursued. Both one-on-one and focus groups interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Interview and focus group schedules were used to facilitate the discussion.
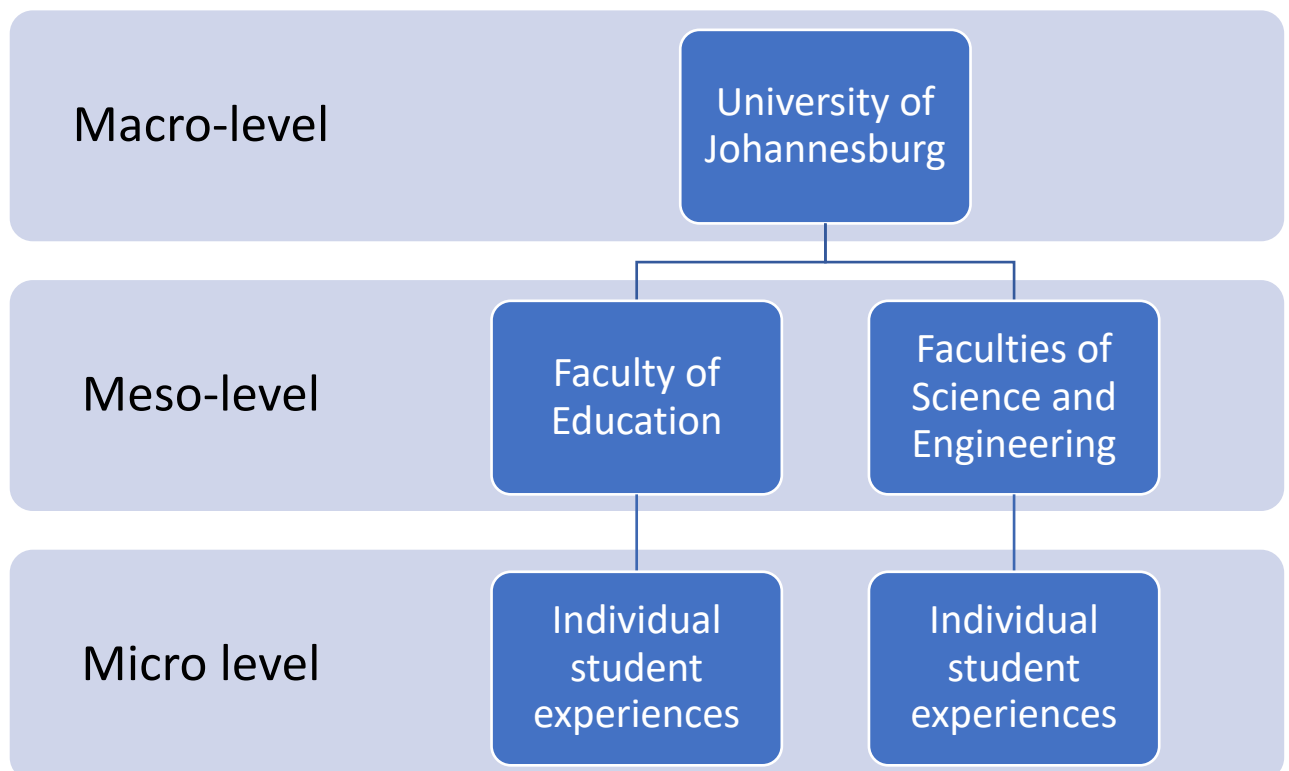
Macro-level — University of Johannesburg

Meso-level — Faculty of Education | Faculties of Science and Engineering

Micro level — Individual student experiences | Individual student experiences

Figure 1: Holistic case study with embedded units (Agumba, 2022)

A computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), ATLAS.ti, was used to help with the management and organisation of data for analysis. ATLAS.ti allows easy access to

quotations upon which codes and themes from a variety of sources are developed. This facilitated continuous, context-based categorisation, grouping, and interlinking. Examining meaning that respondents assigned to concepts at the same time helped to avoid 'reifying concepts not contextually grounded in actual respondent quotations' (Beaulaurier, et al., 2008). Data analysis in this study is based on interpretivism. The underlying assumption in an interpretive approach is that 'reality is socially constructed and that researchers do not find knowledge, they construct it' (Merriam, 2009: 9-10).

The study employs thematic content analysis. Hence the explanations in this study are based on a selection of critical incidents and triangulation across data sources. Excerpts of verbatim expressions from the data are used as a way of offering rich narrative descriptions to present student's life experiences and actions. The overall objective is to identify patterns or themes in the data and to make sense of the data (Patton, 2015). The different data sets used (semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews) function together to address the research questions thus contributing to understanding of the case as a whole. In this way, the researcher's role can be equated to that of an archaeologist piecing together student's trajectories.

Thematic content analysis involved reading each transcript thoroughly to identify provisional categories. After identification of provisional categories, the transcripts were coded. Creswell (2007) defines coding as a process of segmenting data (text or images) obtained during data collection into categories and placing labels on those categories with a term derived from the language of the participants. Patterns are established from the recurrent use of specific words and phrases. The more repetition, the more stable the patterns that serve as meaningful representations of participants' ways of living (Saldaña, 2015). An extended phrase (theme) is derived from a holistic and continuous review of the data corpus. Where no new codes are generated, the data is said to have reached saturation. It is at this point of saturation that the analysis process ceases. Figure 2 demonstrates a typical progression of the data analysis process.
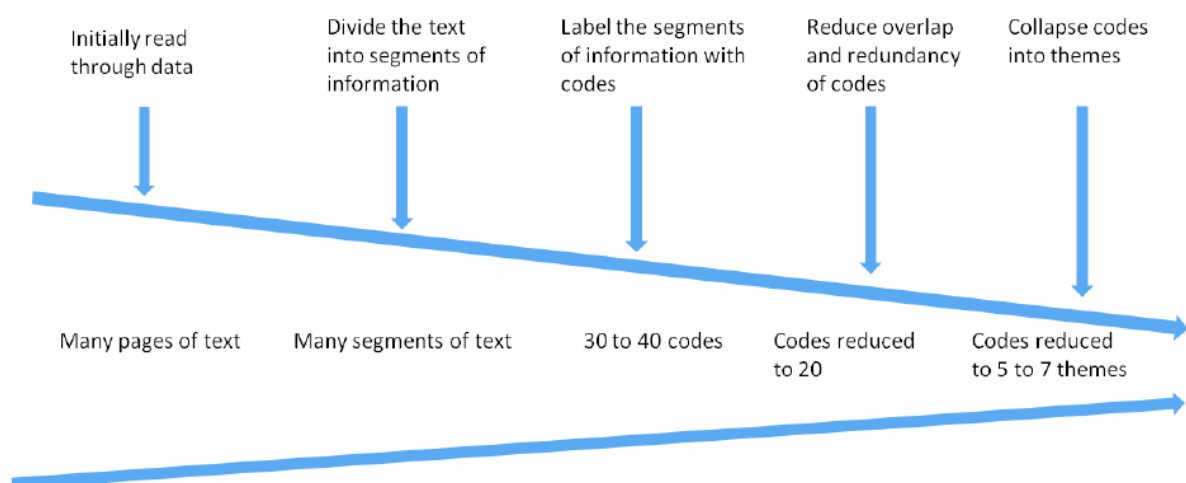

Figure 2: A visual model of the coding process in qualitative research (Creswell, 2005: 238)

The theoretical concepts from Edward Soja's (1989) theory of spatiality were used to analyse how rurality influences students' trajectories in accessing and succeeding at university. Comparing and cross-checking the consistency of the information derived from the different data sets enhanced the credibility of the findings (Patton, 2015). Transferability was embedded in purposive sampling; it ensured that only participants with rich information about the phenomena took part in the study. Dependability was enhanced by providing an extensive description of the research methodology. To achieve confirmability, an in-depth description of the method of research has been provided.

Prior to conducting the research, ethical clearance was obtained from the Faculty of Education Ethics Committee of the university where the research was conducted (ethical clearance number: 2017-127). Participants gave written informed consent in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. This ensured that their participation was voluntary; their right to privacy, anonymity and confidentiality was guaranteed, excised, and respected.

Findings and discussion

Confronting an urban institutional milieu

The findings in this study reveal that students from rural backgrounds experienced difficulty in adapting to the university environment. As most universities are located in big cities, part of accessing HE, for student from rural backgrounds, involves encountering the urban milieu. Most of the participants felt confused, lost, anxious and scared. This is due to having spent most of their lives in rural settings and now being confronted with a strikingly new space. Jabali (an engineering student) felt scared and worried when he found himself in this different environment '*because now it's no longer home, it's no longer one-story houses, its skyscrapers and all those*'. Ann was surprised and felt isolated. She says:

> *Nobody cares. So, I think ja … and even the environment, I grew up in rural areas in Eastern Cape, so the only people that I have always had contact and association with are the people of, Xhosa people my tribe. So, excuse me, getting here higher institution you get to know people from other tribes, people from other races. Get relate to them as much as you are different, some of things they do you don't understand, some of the things you do they don't understand.*

The experiences of Jabali and Ann, of living in a rural world, and now faced with a totally different space, created 'a sense of self-consciousness' (Crossley, 2001: 158) of their rural identity, generating "ambivalence, insecurity and uncertainty" in addition to 'change and transformation' (Reay, et al., 2009: 1105).

These students experience both geographic as well as cultural alienation. Language barriers also caused some of these students to be too embarrassed to participate in class. Philip stated:

> *I think if someone from urban area … you know they have been taught by people from other races, so they would not have a problem with expressing themselves. You know sometimes even now in lectures, I would want to participate in the lesson I would want to say something, or I would want to ask but eish!*[2] *English you know I'm not confident enough because what if I say something wrong, you know.*

These students struggle to adjust to the university environment. Philip argued:

> *If you come from a rural village there is a lot, you still have to learn than someone who is always been here. …. for us we have a lot of things to learn and the route, the transport, the language … especially English …. Ja, so that's some of the things that are hindering people from the villages to adjust here compared to someone who always been here.*

Access to information about university

Choosing a university is a critical stage in gaining access to HEI. Few universities from urban settings visit schools in rural areas, and while universities hold open days, rural students often do not hear about them. Even if they do know about university open days, it may be too costly for them to attend these events. The experiences of these students are characterised by lack of information, as reflected in the following example:

> *If you can see the open days here for grade 12 learners, so they [urban students] can manage to come and see how it like way of learning is. They have different options to choose from for different universities but as for me I just chose UJ … I didn't know anything about UJ, I haven't set my eyes at UJ once but then I chose UJ, so that's kind of different because they have the experience beforehand, rather than us who are from rural areas.*

Terry adds:

> *During open day for UJ, normally what happens I have seen when high school [students] come, when I look at them it's mostly model C schools. I have never seen someone from rural background. In those things they are providing access to people who already have access to this machinery, of which those who don't have access will remain without access which is a problem on its own.*

Applicants and families from rural contexts have to consider several factors when making HEI choices including distance from home, affordability and quality of the HEI. With limited access

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[2] An informal South African exclamation used to express a range of emotions, such as surprise, annoyance, or resignation.

to information regarding HE, students from rural contexts struggle to choose which career path to follow. For some, they end up making distorted career choices, as in the case of Kate:

> *You know back at home … we are not really exposed to a lot of career choices. The ones that we are exposed to you'd find that you don't even enjoy them, some of them you don't even qualify for them … So, I'm doing Human Physiology and Psychology so those are my majors … I had to find out about them here once I was doing my research you know during that gap year.*

For Sef, lack of information about courses offered at the university affected her so much that she had to drop out of her initial course before settling for Civil Engineering. She describes:

> *I didn't know anything about the courses offered at the university. I only know Teaching and these professions that you see in the village like Nursing, Teaching and Doctors. My aunty wanted me to be a doctor. I did general BSC. So, in Biology I saw that I cannot manage like. So, I went to my second year I did Physics and Computer Science, and I was not, … comfortable in … Physics and I don't understand Computer Science. So, I had to drop out and stay at home for a year … until this other time when she [my aunt] went to her friend … her son is doing Civil Engineering and [it] involves Maths and all that the calculations which I'm good at … after a year I went to [do] Civil Engineering course. I think if my sister or my aunty knew about with these other fields that I could have like finished long time ago, ja.*

Access to information about funding is also essential but difficult for many students from rural contexts. Lack of information limited their understanding of how and where to apply for funding. Nancy explains:

> *The funds … I struggle because especially my grandmother is the supportive one, she couldn't financially support me so it's that thing of as much as I wanna go further with my education … it was a struggle and … But then the first year … I didn't apply for NSFAS I didn't know about it because I thought I couldn't get … I had to take loans which I'm still owing.*

Since most of these students are the first generation in their family to access university education, their parents and guardians may have limited knowledge on application processes in order to help and prepare their children for university life.

Funding

In this study, it was observed that financial hardships affected most of the participants, which in turn affected their academic achievement. While funding through scholarships and bursaries can

have positive outcomes for rural students and their families, these are often short-term, ameliorative solutions, as funding is often not sufficient to cover all needs. As Max puts it:

So, my fees were R37/R38 000 so I had a R16 000 difference I remember. So, I couldn't pay the R16 000 because I only had R19 000 in my student account. So, I couldn't afford the R16 000 to pay it off so that's where it affected and then that's why it was my last year in university in 2014. So couldn't pay off I couldn't register the next year ... blocked everything. So, 2015 I stayed home the whole year doing nothing. ... It was hectic; it was very hectic; it was very stressful.

However, most of the participants said that they were able to piece together the necessary funds for university through high school scholarships, odd jobs, student loans, family contributions, and financial aid packages offered. Willy recounts:

I finished matric on 2014 then on 2015 I took a gap year and then I was working then like somewhere in Mpumalanga because like I had family in Mpumalanga so I used to stay there I was working as a security (guard) ... Ja, the money helped me in my first year. Then almost like half of the fees from my cash that I made.

This excerpt shows the long path that many rural students have to take, as they are forced to defer their studies in order to raise enough money. This reflects the lack of systemic support that impedes the progress of rural students in accessing and succeeding in HE (Timmis, et al., 2019).

In addition, lack of funding causes anxiety, impedes concentration and, for many, generates shame. Ann (an education student) illustrates:

now the FUNZA [financial aid scheme] is not out yet, so I ... Since January we're still waiting. I'm depending on her my sister, so for transport money I have to call her, for rent. Normally, when I have FUNZA. I move towards closer accommodation but now I stay with my family there, I have to travel. Sometimes I don't have money to come to school I have to miss lectures understand so I'd say it affects me in a negative way.

Accommodation

Residence accommodation, especially for students from rural areas, plays a major role in students' academic and social integration. Given that most universities in South Africa are located in urban settings, students from rural areas are forced to make special accommodation arrangements away from their family home in order to pursue their studies. Jane explains:

Your application form states how much you have to pay for residence and then I think it's also the thing because we don't have it [money] we are relying on the bursary. So, we

will come and look for an accommodation at February because I can't come here [the city] before to look for a place and then go back and then come back again when the university opens. So, when we get there, we find that the res[idence] it's already full so the only option is off campus accommodation because they still have space.

The university criteria for allocating accommodation does not favour rural students. This is because the allocation first depends on availability of funds. However, since most students depend on bursaries, which often take time to be dispatched, they often miss the first criteria. The second criteria relate to the student's matric performance. Priority is given to students who score highly in matric. This means that those with insufficient grades are forced to stay in private accommodation of varying quality outside the University. Jabali explains:

They accommodate international students first. And then they come to those who pass first, and then they look at the money, the actual deposits first. So, it's hard to get to this thing. I have been trying years and years to get to the res[idence].

In private accommodation, a majority of rural students often find it difficult to cope with the ensuing challenges such as those related to transport. Travelling is often unsafe and has an impact on one's time and physical and mental health. Kate explains a terrible ordeal that she endured as a first-year student:

I struggled a lot, you know … I'm gonna cry you know … So, after registering I stayed with my cousin, I didn't have accommodation, I didn't have books. So, ja, it was very stressful. At one point I even got mugged on my way back from school. So, on my way to the taxi rank because I had practicals in the afternoon [Pause …. She broke down in tears] … Ja, so I got mugged around that area, ja so, like that on its own had a setback for me because I was struggling to adjust and now this happened.

This incident affected Kate academically and psychologically. She did not attain the required marks to secure a bursary for the following year, which resulted in her dropping out. She narrates:

so, after that mugging thing I had to go for therapy for about six months because you know it was really difficult and being away from home also contributed. So, at the end of the year, I didn't pass that well and as a result I lost my sponsor.

Like Kate, most rural students live off campus and are forced to commute, which is often dangerous, exhausting, time-consuming and costly. This situation is directly linked to financial accessibility which limits the student's options regarding where they live and how they move.

So, the students are forced to make strategic choices about when to be on campus which affects their studies.

Engaging with the curriculum

Poor proficiency in the language of instruction presented a significant challenge for most students from rural contexts. Most of these students are expected to adopt English as a medium of instruction upon entry into HE. Yet, in their secondary schooling, all subjects, including English, were taught in their mother tongue. For example, Ken explains:

> *English is the language that is used you know when you go to lecture is English, when you ask a question to ask in English but in high school you know we are from the same area we speak the same language the teacher also speaks the same language. So, you can just ask the question in your home language then the teacher explain in home language … here [university] we take time to actually get the concept.*

Crucial to note is that lack of confidence in one's ability to contribute eventually also hinders one's ' ability to properly participate in epistemic activities' (Hookaway, 2010: 160). Philip recounts how he felt alienated because he could not take part in classroom engagements because of the language barrier:

> *The language is a barrier especially English. Sometimes you have ideas, but you can't like put them together and build an essay or express yourself the way you would have expressed yourself in your own language. Ja, so that's some of the things that are hindering people from the villages to adjust here.*

It is not only English as a medium of instruction that hinders epistemic access, but also the fact that instructional materials such as textbooks, learning guides and other study materials are in English as well. Max continues to explain:

> *We were taught Maths in Sepedi and then here everything is English. So, if you don't have a clear English background, the system automatically kicks you out because language as it is a barrier. First you need to know the language before the content, so you have twice the job. You have the language to understand and the content in books, and study material, to understand.*

Enhancement of epistemic access to all forms of knowledge is underpinned by language and literacy skills. The examples above show how lack of confidence and competence in the use of English may limit one's ability to meaningfully participate in class. As indicated by the participants, being unable to speak in class prevented them from having a voice. This highlights the challenges faced by rural students because of the dominance of English as a medium of

instruction (Naidoo, et al., 2020). In support of this, Dastile and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) also argue that the continued use of colonial languages perpetuates the marginalisation of subjugated groups.

The value and relevance of rural students' realities is often not connected to formal education (Odora Hoppers, 2009). As a result, as this study reveals, most rural students felt unprepared in terms of content. One way in which students engage with academic discourse in their respective courses is by grappling with key terminologies of the discipline. The extract below denotes the challenge that these students face to acquire academic literacies and disciplinary discourses:

> *For me science is mostly its derived from Latin … everything seems foreign. Some of the words you can't even translate them into your own language. So that thing of linking what I know from home and what I am learning here it's not that easy. We constantly have to go and research.*

Lack of contextualisation by lecturers made these students feel disengaged and alienated (Wacquant, 2015). Another lucid illustration came from Terry, an engineering student:

> *Sometimes they teach about some events you have never heard of, they teach you about casinos … but you have to imagine them. Sometimes they give you examples you do not relate … in rural areas, we are not exposed to a lot of stuff…and they expect us to have experienced such things. So, when it come to the examples they give, that's where they kill us.*

Often, lecturers are unaware that students from rural areas may not necessarily share their knowledge of foreign terms and the examples that they use in their teaching. The possibility of bridging the gap between teaching and the lived experiences of students lies in the opportunities that are created for students to relate to what is being taught while building strong theoretical understandings. Therefore, the curriculum should take into consideration the importance of the lived experiences of students. Rural backgrounds are in fact imbued with powerful sociocultural knowledge systems that are often ignored in HEIs. The role of HE should be to open possibilities for all students to achieve success and become full participants in university learning. Although universities have extended curriculum programs (ECPs), also referred to as foundation programs, that attempt to address under-preparedness for university study, this does not address the key challenges that face rural students.

Discussion and conclusion

Rurality is a spatial issue which should be understood in relation to other factors including its impact on educational access and outcome. Although rurality is not determined by geography alone, geography still remains an important factor to consider in relation to opportunities of

access and outcome. Spatial disparities in educational outcomes emanate from the intricate interplay of various socio-economic, cultural, and educational variables (Chankseliani, et al., 2020). Drawing from Soja's ideas, we draw connections between the material, the social and the peripheral. In this way, we attempt to reinsert geography into the social-historical relations that Soja argues is a process always filled with politics, ideology and other forces that shape our lives (Soja, 2010: 19). Determinants of inequalities in accessing and succeeding at university are multiple, nuanced and context dependent. They include broader economic, political, social, school, family, as well as individual characteristics.

This study used an interpretivist perspective to explore the personal experiences and perceptions of students from rural background and to understand how they interpret their access to and success in university. The qualitative design adopted, and case study with embedded units provided the lens to examine spatial inequalities in the university. Using different data sources and literature, the study demonstrates that rurality creates a serious impediment for university access and success in South Africa. While there is no magic bullet for fixing these challenges, a promising direction lies in the creation of a Thirdspace. In such a space, rural students' spatial experiences can be considered to enhance their access to and success in HE. Creation of a Thirdspace for rural students involves opening spaces for dialogue, listening and acting as they negotiate the curriculum. Placing their understandings, questions, and intentions at the centre of curriculum development enhances social justice for rural students and their communities.

The findings indicate that rural students face barriers when engaging with HE. They find the new environment of academia not only foreign but also hostile in terms of academic language, concepts, work demands, technology and structures. With the realisation that knowledge is socially constructed, this means that what a student knows is directly influenced by the kinds of social practices and social relations that he or she engages in. This means that those who engage in the Thirdspace should continually open spaces for constant review and development in the face of forces of conservation of institutional structure and history. Failing to recognise or value students' ways of knowing and being may lead to marginalisation. To alleviate this challenge, HEIs need to recognise the socially constructed nature of academic literacies and work toward developing student capabilities, competencies as well as their confidence to enhance their educational well-being and allow them to flourish in HE. HEIs need to emphasise the need to mobilise new tools that expose ongoing difficulties as a result of rurality. On the part of academics, they need to be more conscious of who is in their lecture rooms and how Eurocentric supremacy continues to inform what legitimate knowledge is. Such understanding is critical in creating spaces for openness and critical dialogue more especially where existing institutional culture serves to erase or ignore the experiences of students, especially those from working class and rural backgrounds.

Scarcity of information about HE access opportunities continues to be a challenge in rural communities as established in the interviews. It is crucial to provide full and accurate information to applicants from rural areas and marginalised communities. However, improving university preparedness among rural youth is unlikely to be successful in isolation from primary and

secondary schooling levels. Therefore, a major objective for national policy, should be cooperation with schools in rural communities to expand their information campaigns and ensure that they provide information to these communities. Also, most South African universities have adopted a more centralised online admission, with no room for 'walk-in' admissions. Adoption of this kind of admission systems which offers an allegedly level playing field for applicants, is limited only by effort and ability which works to privilege urban students. In contrast, Bennett (2001) suggests consideration of student diversity and promoting different treatment according to relevant differences. This will include for example introduction of a more nuanced selection criteria which includes but is not limited to applicants' geographic background. By adopting this kind of contextual admission approach, it will enable control for educational opportunities by geographic location when selecting successful applicants for university admission.

One major way of promoting equity in access and success at university is in the financial aid schemes that financially assist disadvantaged students to meet their needs while being enrolled at an HEI. The South African government through the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) initiated a financial aid program – the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) – to undergraduate students to help pay for the cost of their tertiary education. However, NSFAS has been marred with irregularities and inconsistencies as regards allocation of funds with students having to wait for over 6 months before funding is allocated to them. This has put immeasurable pressure on the students and their families especially those from rural background with some having to rely on family who are already financially constrained for support. There is need for NSFAS to undergo a significant restructuring and reorganisation, otherwise it will continue to exacerbate the existing patterns of inequalities in HE.

To conclude, this study examined rural students' pathways with reference to their experiences of entering and participating in HE in South Africa. Edward Soja's theory of spatial justice provided a lens for reflecting on the impact of rurality in accessing and succeeding in HE. The findings reveal the barriers that students from rural communities' experience in their quest to access and participate in HE. Nevertheless, being that Thirdspace is utopian work, HEIs should commit to constant action and reflection on how to incorporate students' socio-cultural backgrounds to get close to providing opportunities for authentic learning that are empowering, equitable, diverse, and just.

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