Academic identities of black female first-year students

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Since 1994 South Africa has been in the process of transformation and redress. People are taking up their right to education and are also taking full advantage of the fact that all institutions of higher learning are open to all citizens of the country. Research shows that black students who attend predominantly black institutions benefit from a supportive social, cultural, and racial environment that enhances their successful adaptation to the academic demands of undergraduate study. This kind of support may be lacking in the new dispensation. It was therefore important to find out whether this applies to current black female students in predominantly white institutions, and specifically at the University of Port Elizabeth. It has been argued that adolescents, who have the universal task of stabilizing their identity, might be influenced by recent transformation. This process of transformation includes the paradigm shift of restricting females to a few stereotyped roles. Late-adolescents often find themselves studying at a university, which consequently leads to the question whether new academic identities are emerging among black female students and, if so, what they are. The primary purpose of the research was therefore to determine how these students see themselves academically in a transforming academic environment. A qualitative method of research was used for the investigation. Analysis of the transcribed interviews was done and trustworthiness was ensured. Ethical measures were also adhered to. This article provides a detailed reflection on the results of the research, namely that the academic identities of black female adolescents are directed by their life goals, charged by specific feelings and characterised by their experiences. General guidelines are also presented in this regard.

Introduction

Past experiences have a major influence on our lives at present (Gibson, Swartz & Sandenbergh, 2002:45). As educators we need to understand that past experiences form the roots of a person's beliefs, sense of security, confidence, self-esteem and identity. South Africa is known for its kaleidoscope of diversity. With regard to diversity the era before 1994 was characterised by a plea for equality and access to educational institutions.

However, since the general elections in South Africa in 1994 a new page has been turned in history for this country. The new political dispensation brought with it radical changes in all spheres of life (Mokoena, 1999:1). The process of transformation has led to redress also with regard to stereotyped roles of women. For that reason the focus in this research is on women. They are now taking up their right to education, and are taking full advantage of the fact that universities are now open to all citizens of the country. Consequently more and more black adolescents are now enrolling for education at previously predominantly white institutions.

Adolescents have the universal task of acquiring their own identity (Mokoena, 1999:4), according to Erickson's model of psychosocial development (Gouws, Kruger & Burger, 2000:76; Kruger & Adams, 1998:22; Mwamwenda, 1995:353). This is described as "the most important task of this period of life" (Ackermann & Adams, 2001:1). The adolescent has to come to terms with the primary and crucial issue of conflict between acquiring an own identity and identity confusion, which means that they sometimes find it difficult to take decisions about themselves and their roles or integrate their roles (Gouws, Kruger & Burger, 2000:92).

Adolescence in itself is a challenging transitional time (Ackermann & Adams, 2001:1), during which the person has to cope with numerous physical, emotional, intellectual and social changes that are taking place. Complicating matters for the adolescent further (De Wet & Ackermann, 2001:2) are factors such as the complexity and dynamics of society (Pretorius, 1998:232), transformational changes in South Africa over the past few years (De Wet & Ackermann, 2001:1; Viljoen, 2001:2).

Adolescents' identity is of significant importance for their psychological maturity and positive personality functioning (De Wet & Ackermann, 2001:1) and is mainly acquired through identification with role models (Mokoena, 1999:2; Pretorius, 1998:23). This implies that the social environment, including the school and university, shapes the identity development of the late-adolescent. Fortunately she (for the

purposes of this research the female form is used, seeing participants were females) is not a passive partner in the education process. She attributes meaning and makes sense of her own environment in her own personal manner (De Wet & Ackermann:2001:2).

When looking at adolescents in an academic environment, it was found that black adolescents who attend predominantly black institutions usually benefit from a supportive social, cultural, and racial environment at these institutions and that usually enhances their successful adaptation to the academic demands they have to face (De Sousa & Kuh 1996:257). It was therefore important to find out whether this is also happening in the case of current black female students at a predominantly white institution, since more and more females are now taking up their right to education.

De Wet and Ackermann (2001:1) also refer to the fact that a change of academic environment may have implications for the development of identity. In this regard Viljoen (2001:1) refers to researchers who speculate about whether a new South African identity is developing in the New South Africa and he calls it "the paramount question of identity in South Africa today". In the past, each diverse group in the country claimed to have its own, unique identity. However, in the new South Africa, the focus is more on equality and similarities than on differences. It should be interesting to determine what influence this may have on identities.

First-year students usually find themselves in the late adolescence phase of life, when their own identity should generally be fairly certain. However, this group was in their early and middle adolescent phase during the years of major change in this country. Consequently the question arose whether this new reality that the adolescent had to deal with in recent years, and is still dealing with, has had implications for her identity development (Viljoen, 2001:2).

Against this background the argument of this article is that transformation in South Africa may have had implications for the identity acquisition of the adolescent, with special reference to the academic identity of black female first-year students. In terms of the recent and current transformation in South Africa this research is considered to be relevant and can be seen as making an innovative contribution to the present intellectual discourse on identity.

Problem statement

As more and more women are taking up their constitutional right of receiving education, especially black women who were marginalized in the past, it has become imperative to investigate constructed aca-

demic identities of late adolescent females during their first year of tertiary education.

Taking the above into consideration, the following question was posed:

How do black first-year females perceive themselves as students at a previously white university?

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to reflect on black first-year females' academic identity and their perceptions of how the environment influences their construction of meaning with regard to their studies and the university environment at large.

Working definitions
Identity

Identity refers to the cognitive meaning a person attributes to herself (Gouws *et al.*, 2000:90; Pretorius, 1998:19). The answer she provides to the question "Who am I?" will give an indication of the distinction she makes between herself and others (Mokoena, 1999:5). Identity therefore gives an indication of a person's self, the group she belongs to and the values and ideals she has, and her uniqueness and unrepeatability as a person (Kruger & Adams, 1998:22). For the purpose of this article identity refers to the meaning that is given by first-year female adolescents to themselves with regard to all academic endeavours, inside and outside the lecture hall.

Academic identity

The term academic is defined as something of a "scholarly" nature, of no practical relevance, but theoretical interest, relating to a place of learning and intellectual matters, and an aptitude for study (Hanks, 1990:5). A person 's identity consists of various dimensions, e.g. physical, social, material and academic. One can therefore refer to a person's "multiple" identities (Hamachek, 1995:328). For the purposes of this study, academic identity refers to all factors that directly form part of a student's perceptions of herself in an academic environment.

Black student

For the purposes of this study, the term black refers to native South Africans or the indigenous people of South Africa. Nowadays, coloureds and Indians are seen as forming part of the black population, but in this case these groups are excluded as they form part of another section of the umbrella research topic on emerging identities in the new South Africa. The focus in this article is on black students studying at a previously predominantly white university, specifically the University of Port Elizabeth.

Adolescence

The term 'adolescence' refers to the transition from or threshold between childhood to adulthood and is derived from the Latin word *adolescere*, which means 'to grow towards adulthood' (Gouws & Kruger, 1994:3). Some authors (Vrey, 1979:167) make a distinction between early adolescence, including puberty (12–15 years); middle adolescence (15–18 years), and late adolescence (18–22 years). For the purposes of this research the first-year student in the age range 18–22 will be considered a late adolescent.

Research design

A qualitative, explorative, descriptive and inductive research design was used for this research (Mouton, 1996:103-169), because it enabled the researcher to investigate the deeper meaning of experiences of participants through their personal expressions. The research was open and was not directed by a conceptual framework (apart from an understanding of what the main concepts meant), preconceived notions, or hypotheses. The participants were met in their own world, in an attempt to look at the research problem holistically.

Research method

The research was conducted in two phases:

Phase 1:   Perceptions of black females of themselves as students at a previously white university

In order to explore and describe the perceptions of the students, the following steps were taken:

Sampling

A research sample of a "homogenous group" (De Vos, 1998) of 40 black first-year female students of between 18 and 22 years of age, who seemed likely to supply valuable information based on their first-hand experiences, were involved in the research. All the participants were registered students at the University of Port Elizabeth and contacted via the list of registered students to ask if they would participate.

Participants were included in the research through purposive sampling and according to specific criteria (Cresswell, 1994), regarding their age, year of study, gender, and race. Participants were selected to ensure that the information to be gathered would be "rich in description and information" (Cresswell, 1994; De Vos, 1998).

Data collection

Data were collected by means of six focus group interviews (Kvale, 1996; Kingry, Tiedje & Friedman, 1990; Krueger, 1994), which took place in the participant's own context, namely, a small round-table lecture room at the University. Each of the six focus groups consisted of 6–7 students. According to Shurink and Poggenpoel (in De Vos, 1998) focus group interviews may be described as "a purposive discussion of a specific topic or related topics taking place between individuals with a similar background and common interests". For this reason this method of data gathering was deemed to be an appropriate means to gain information on this topic.

Two researchers were involved in the interviews, referred to as the moderator (being the facilitator of the discussion) and the observer (taking field notes in order to accomplish triangulation (De Vos, 1998; Krefting, 1991). The role of the researcher was that of a "research instrument" with no preconceived expectations (De Vos, 1998).

One open-ended interview question was put to the participants to allow the relevant information on the topic to emerge from the participants themselves, namely:

> *What meaning do you give to yourself as a black female first-year student in an academic context*? (Rephrased: *What do you think about and how do you see yourself in this academic institution*?)

A context was created where participants could speak freely and openly in English or Xhosa. This was realized by making use of the following techniques: clarification, paraphrasing, summarizing, and minimal verbal, as well as non-verbal, responses. During the interviews bracketing (putting preconceived ideas aside) was done. The interviewing continued until definite patterns or themes became evident and the information became saturated (De Vos, 1998).

Data analysis and description

The audio-tapes of the interviews were transcribed, after which the information was analysed by means of the descriptive analysis of Tesch (see Cresswell, 1994, for details). A Xhosa linguist at the university translated the Xhosa transcriptions into English. Coding by means of bracketing (putting preconceived notions aside) took place until prominent themes could be identified and described. Categories (sub-themes) and sub-categories within the major themes were also identified.

At the same time an independent re-coding of the data was done by a competent qualitative researcher from another Department, in order to determine if the same themes became evident and could be confirmed (Cresswell, 1994; Krefting, 1991). Consensus discussions between the researchers and this independent expert took place, in order to determine the final results of the research. Subsequently the results were also confirmed by a literature study where possible.

Literature study

A literature study was undertaken to substantiate and verify the scien-

tific nature of the article and to compare the results of this research study with the results of other research studies previously undertaken, in order to determine differences, similarities, gaps and unique contributions (Poggenpoel, 1993). The search for literature was steered by the key concepts of the study, as well as the results obtained and the related guidelines presented.

Phase 2:   Guidelines to universities to provide a climate in which a positive academic identity could be constructed
In order to describe such guidelines, the following steps were taken:

Data gathering and analysis
The data of Phase1 (the results in the form of pertinent themes and categories) were used as a basis from which guidelines for assistance to students could be derived.

Literature study
A literature study was once again undertaken by the researchers to substantiate the findings from which the guidelines to assist students were derived and developed.

Measures to ensure trustworthiness
Guba's model for qualitative research (Krefting, 1991; Lincoln & Guba,1985) was applied in order to assure the trustworthiness of the findings. Attention was given to the following principles:
•   credibility (checking the truth value of the findings) was ensured by means of the field notes (taken during the interviews by the research observer), triangulation, peer examination and independent coding;
•   transferability (ensuring applicability of the findings) was attained through comparison of sufficient descriptive data, as well as dense description of the data;
•   dependability (ensuring consistency of the findings), was achieved by means of an audit, keeping of the raw material, giving a full description of the research method, applying the same procedure throughout, triangulation, peer examination, and the code-re-code procedure;
•   conformability (using the criterion of neutrality or freedom from bias) was accomplished by keeping an appropriate distance in order not to influence the research, as well as triangulation and the code-re-code procedure.

Ethical measures
Miles and Huberman (1996) refer to various ethical considerations to take into account during qualitative research. Care was taken to adhere to ethical measures during the research of this sensitive topic. In order to secure the safety and rights of the participants, they were informed of the prevailing ethical considerations (Brink, 1991; South African Nursing Association, 1998), e.g. informed consent of the participants, voluntary participation, anonymity, confidentiality, and providing feedback.

Results of the research
Phase 1:   Perceptions of black females of themselves as students at a previously white university
The following themes and categories (sub-themes) became apparent from the coding done of the transcribed interviews:

Theme 1
The academic identities of black female first-year students are clearly directed by their goals in life, be it their original goals or those formed at the university.

The participants made it clear that they enrolled at the university with a definite purpose in mind. Through a career path they wanted to prove to themselves and others that it was possible for black women to embark on and be successful in their academic endeavours, as

literature had revealed that black students in the past did not perform well in predominantly white institutions. Tema (1985) as cited by MacKenzie (1994:70) asserts that "most black students are not at the same level of academic and intellectual development as most white students at the university".
•   They are preparing themselves for a career path and are determined to be successful
        ... we are all here because of a purpose ...
        ... as blacks we have to show them that we can do something ...
•   They want to personally develop
        ... to develop our uhm ... different, it's not the skills as such, personality would be a way to classify it ... the main word being develop.
•   They want to be able to care for themselves
        ... it's more just like for survival, just like we here [sic] *for food, clothing and shelter ... ja, to get a job ...*
        I can learn to do things for myself.

Theme 2
The academic identities of black female first-year students are charged with specific feelings.
        The participants expressed their specific feelings regarding their privilege to be part of the 'academic world'.
        The negative feelings, such as despair, could be attributed to the challenges of adapting to a new and unfamiliar environment. The unfamiliar environment also had a positive effect on others, as they felt privileged to be part of it and wanted to make the best out of it.
        Literature confirms that the environment in most predominantly white universities is perceived by some black students as hostile and unwelcoming (Douglas, 1998; Hatter & Ottens, 1998; Henderson, 1998). Sedlacek (1999:539) mentions the fact that research on undergraduate black students in predominantly white universities in Tennessee showed that they had not achieved a feeling of belonging.
        The participants in this investigation expressed mixed feelings, i.e. both negative and positive. This is supported by the following quotations:
•   They feel proud, privileged and excited
        I just feel proud ... there are few people, especially black, who have managed to make it to this point ...
        ... is such a privilege in itself being part of UPE — it is something great
•   They feel positive and luminous
        ... white people here ... you can communicate with them, even the lecturers are here to help us.
        I feel luminated [sic]*.*
•   They feel confused, discouraged and stupid
        I don't feel fine here ...
        ... and you can't exactly tell him what is it, because you don't know, you don't understand anything.
•   They feel that some modules are senseless and irrelevant
        I am much quite bored in the courses — what I'm going to do with that I don't know.
        I am not gaining anything from what I am doing here.
The negative feelings of black students regarding some of the modules can perhaps be attributed to the type of curricula that are taught in previously white universities. The literature reveals that curricula in tertiary institutions are heavily based on the european tradition, and expectations of students are based on the years of experience of the professors. According to Goduka (1996:29) the experience of these professors is predominantly that of white males who are not prepared to address diversity in the curriculum.
        Mncwabe (1987:7) appeals to curriculum planners to take into account issues such as social, economic and cultural backgrounds of learners when designing the curriculum. Starfield (1996:155) acknowledges the fact that teaching and learning in multicultural classrooms can be a challenge to both learners/students and teachers/lecturers. He says

changing the contents of the curriculum to present different ethnic and cultural perspectives as a response to multiculturalism, is not sufficient to promote the educationally disadvantaged students.

Theme 3
The academic identities of black female first-year students are clearly characterized by their experiences.

The participants mentioned various experiences they had in the academic context. They were also still experiencing prejudice against them because they were black. They complained that their needs were not cared for. Furthermore, they were experiencing much more freedom at the university, whilst in other cases they admitted that they did not always spend their free time wisely.

- They experience that they have to adapt to a new academic context at the university
  ... it was different for me academically ... in high school we were spoon-feed [sic] — here it's not easy.
  I think every course is very demanding.
  ... don't really get your work to the standard you want.
  It's just a lot of work ... the first term was difficult.
- They still experience racial discrimination
  The lecturer is tending to pay more attention to white students ...
  Most of the lecturers are white and most of the students are afraid if they don't understand.
  ... white people they judge us by our names ...
  And the music they play in the radio station ... it's for white people.
  I don't think the university is quite right for disabled black people, because you know the white people have these chairs, but some places I can't go, like the Library ...

With regard to racial discrimination, Sedlacek (1999:541) differentiates between two forms of racism, i.e. institutional racism and individual racism. Institutional racism involves policies and procedures, either formal or informal, which result in negative outcomes for blacks. He claims that institutional racism is often more of a problem than individual racism. In another article, the same author (Sedlacek, 1995:135) states that racism can also be defined as policies or procedures in an organization that result in negative outcomes for members of a certain group just because they are members of that group.

Feagin (1996:2) cites Shelby Steels with regard to racial discrimination, who says that most black students have

> an unconscious need to exaggerate the level of racism on campus — to make it a matter of the system, not just a handful of students.

In other words, instead of referring to specific incidents carried out by a few individuals, the blame is most of the time on the institution, or the institution is accused of racism. This is an example of individual racism that is interpreted as institutional racism. The attitude described above results in a predominating anti-racist ethos on campuses. Feagin (1996:3) further claims that universities and lecturers are eager to calm down the anger of the minority students. Henry and Tator (1994:81) agree with the above statement by saying that administrators in universities often take a "neutral" or "objective" stance when dealing with complaints of racism from blacks. This implies that they distance themselves from the issue, as if they are not personally part of the problem.

- They experience that their needs are not catered for
  It has been historically a white institution. I feel that my needs have not been catered for ...
  ... now I don't know what the Media centre looks like inside, but I'm doing Media studies. We have never been taken into it ...
- They experience difficulties with regard to language
  You had to get used in [sic] talking English. You need to consult a dictionary.
  The library for instance, I don't find books that are in my language.

The lecturer was explaining in Afrikaans and I was lost, they [lecturers] are cruel.

According to the literature the language problem goes back a long way. Jardine (1986:59) sees the South African black student as a victim of the education system which forces her to study in a language that is foreign to her. In most cases this student is penalized for her inability to effectively utilize the language in her academic endeavours. This student is not only at a disadvantage because of not being able to use the language effectively, but is also discriminated against because the language used in schools and in institutions of higher learning favours those of the middle class (Mabena, 1994:31).

This problem does not concern only South African educational institutions, but it is a worldwide problem. Henderson (1988:350) alerts us to the fact that black speech patterns in American educational institutions are still seen as educationally deficient, and blacks entering predominantly white environments are expected to conform quickly to white standards and traditions. Ogbu (1978), as cited by Mabena (1994:31), differentiates "black" and "white" English in America and perceives the English of the working class (black English) as deficient. He does not promote the incorporation of black English in the school curriculum, as he believes that it is not in keeping with the social and economic roles in the American society.

They experience more freedom in their lives than before and spend it in various ways
  ... and you think about university, you think of the freedom ...
  ... some of us tend to forget why we are here and too many parties [sic].

Phase 2: General guidelines to universities to provide a climate in which a positive academic identity can be constructed

The following section does not attempt to impose personal ideas on what needs to be done to assist students in constructing a realistic picture of their academic identities. These general guidelines are directly derived from the different facets of their identities, as discussed under results of Phase 1 of the research. Suggestions are offered that could bring about improvement in their academic identity and performance.

The following list by Richardson (2001:3) serves to highlight avenues that can be explored in addressing diversity more effectively: curriculum; teaching and learning styles; caring structures; good relationships within and across the community; an ethos of respect for diversity.

With this theoretical list and the results in mind, practical guidelines to assist students include the following:

1. Curriculum considerations. The concept curriculum refers to more than the syllabus. It includes all planned learning activities and subject courses which take place inside and outside the classroom. Our interpretation of the concept is derived from the definition of Marks *et al.* as cited by Carl (2002:35), which includes "the sum total of the means by which a student is guided in attaining the intellectual and moral requisite of an intelligent citizen".

   An appeal was made by, among others, Mncwabe (1987) and Goduka (1996) to curriculum planners to take into consideration issues like social, economic and cultural backgrounds of students when designing and revising the curriculum. Again, a shift is to be made from only emphasizing or using the european approach to inclusive curricula. Darling-Hammond in Hargreaves *et al.* (2000:644) asserts that if institutions are to be responsive to the different needs and talents of diverse learners, they must be organized to allow for variability rather than assuming uniformity. Lecturers must diversify their practice so that they can engage each of their students in whatever ways necessary to encourage their learning. By extension, this will be applicable to institutions of higher learning. White Paper 6 on inclusive education advocates a flexible curriculum and assessment policy that is accessible to all learners.

Relevant everyday issues and approaches that students can relate to easily could ease some of the tensions felt by black students. The Faculty of Education at the University of Port Elizabeth has made humble beginnings in this regard, but more still needs to be done to try and accommodate black students through a relevant curriculum.

2. Innovative teaching. Innovative teaching refers to an original, creative or fresh approach to facilitation, instruction and tutoring in the classroom, in order to attract the interest and attention of the students. However, not all lecturers are innovative and supportive in nature.

   Some lecturers still need to be trained how to vary their approach to teaching and assessment in order to meet the diverse needs of their students and to select the most appropriate and effective strategies. To address the concerns of students regarding marks they obtain, lecturers need to be transparent about the procedures they follow when marking tasks handed in by students. Students must be told in advance of applicable assessment criteria: what is going to be looked at in their tasks and they must be familiar with the assessment tool. Assessment must not be used to punish students, but to develop their potential and boost their self-confidence.

3. Sufficient support. Sufficient support refers to adequate and enough provision of what is needed by students in terms of aid, encouragement, approval and strengthening. This could include individual encounters for explanation of unclear concepts or content, the allocation of peer tutors, or membership of tutor groups.

   Support groups, which they can consult when encountering problems, whether academic or personal, are to be identified as early as possible. These diverse groups need to be well established and available at regular times and venues to assist students at the university, e.g. their confident and experienced peers who represent diversity, university professional counsellors, medical staff, technical assistants, and members of the academic staff.

   Language problems of the student need not be addressed in isolation, but form part of the support the student needs. The problem of understanding the English language as medium of instruction can be alleviated through additional courses of language enrichment when they enter the university, as well as innovative techniques in the class.

4. An orientation programme. An orientation programme refers to a schedule, or list of arranged events and things to be done to brief, introduce, and familiarize the students with the procedures and experiences they will be exposed to at university. Such a programme will give students a better understanding of what to expect, as well as operational matters at the university.

   The perceptions of students dealt with in the preceding section call for a comprehensive orientation programme for first-year students. This programme could address issues pertaining to what university studies entail, starting from registration through to the realities of the lecture hall. They also need to be introduced to all services and facilities the university offers.

   Through this orientation students should be informed about what the different programmes and modules they register for entail, the admission requirements for those programmes and modules, as well as what they need to do to be able to succeed in those programmes and modules. This could somewhat eliminate the feelings of confusion and the lack of understanding of why certain modules form part of their curricula. Eventually it can prevent discouragement and feelings of inferiority and stupidity.

5. Empowerment of students. Empowerment involves equipment with techniques and capabilities that grant students the ability to cope better in life situations. Students need training in life skills and competencies, such as academic writing skills and computer skills, to sustain and enrich their lives and to be empowered for the academic environment. They also need life skills such as knowing themselves (self-concept), good interpersonal relation-

ships, adaptability, critical thinking, proper study methods, choosing a career, coping with stress, communication skills, making responsible choices, survival strategies, cultural orientation, problem solving, handling of peer pressure, conflict resolution, certainty about their identity, a healthy life-style and time management. This is a form of support that can be put into the orientation programme suggested earlier.

6. Strategies to cope with diversity. Diversity refers to the variety and differences that exist between people in terms of variables, such as gender, age, socio-economic status, race, language, culture, and religion. The perceptions of students about the different kinds of discrimination they experience come as result of tensions brought about by diversity and the lack of knowledge of how to deal with diversity effectively. In our context it goes beyond that diversity to the sad history of our past. We can therefore not afford to put the blame on past occurrences, we need to come up with strategies to improve the *status quo.*

   Richardson (2001:1) suggests a strategy of learning to live with our differences in a spirit of trust, fairness and mutual respect. He claims that developing a sense of human interdependence and recognizing how we differ can actualize this as we all affect and contribute to each other's lives. Understanding and valuing our own cultural identities and respecting those of others can also foster the spirit of trust and mutual understanding. In the UPE context this can alleviate the suspicions that are associated with misinterpreting the actions of white people by black people and *vice versa*. This requires the development of a culture of acceptance and respect for diversity (with regard to students, lecturers and the university system).

7. The role of lecturers. Lecturers should take responsibility for providing the student with an inviting climate in the lecture hall, by accommodating the diversity of students effectively. They should be open-minded and supportive of the students who experience difficulties and be available and willing to assist the student. They should build a trust relationship with the student, use effective communication skills, expect realistic instead of rigid dogmatic outputs from the student (Hamachek, 1995:122) and display sensitivity and understanding for the student with a problem.

   The limited number of black lecturers at the UPE does not match the increasing numbers of black students enrolled in this institution. Noel and Smith (1996:93) assert that it is of great necessity for previously white universities to recruit more qualified and capable black lecturers in order to match the increasing number of black students with lecturers of their own race. The black lecturers in the university can play a significant role in motivating and helping black students to adapt and succeed in their studies.

   Black lecturers should not only be seen by students as people who are there only because they have the ability to explain things by also using the language that is spoken by black students. They are also to be seen by black students as role models and as people who can assist them in dealing with their fears and frustrations. Although these lecturers are not trained to be student counsellors, they are nevertheless in a better position to understand these black students. As these lecturers have similar backgrounds to those of the students, they can share the strategies and coping mechanisms, they used themselves, to succeed with these students. They could also inspire these students to perform at their optimal level.

Conclusion

Some black first-year students involved in this investigation reported that their goals in life directed their academic identities, that they are committed to preparing themselves for a successful career path, personal development and self-care, and that they feel positive, proud, privileged and excited as students at an academic institution. However, many of the participants reported that they felt confused, discouraged

and stupid, that their modules are senseless and irrelevant, that they find it difficult to adapt to the university environment, that they still experience racial discrimination, that their needs are not catered for, and that they experience language difficulties.

For this reason this article offers some guidelines to universities in order to develop a climate in which black students can construct positive academic identities. Hopefully this can contribute to the successful functioning of a diverse student population in an academic environment in future. The challenge remains to recognize the diversity in South Africa and to have respect for others who differ from us, without losing sight of our own identity (Gibson, Swartz & Sandenbergh, 2002:73).

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