

Despite the odds, they succeed



Mathakga Botha

is a lecturer at the Wits School of Education while also completing her PhD. She initially taught in primary schools, and later joined the NGO sector to work with farm school teachers. She went back to university after teaching for 16 years. After completing her first degree, she worked with a publishing company for a year, but realised her place was in the classroom. She has been teaching since 1995 and enjoys sharing her experiences in making a difference in other's lives.

Students at university experience feelings of isolation and exclusion based on, among other factors, disadvantage in ability to attain success in their studies as a result of a variety of culturally and linguistically different social capital.¹

Despite the odds, for many first year students at university, the key to succeed is a combination of hard work, determination and perseverance. It is common experience to notice that many students from poor socio-economic background are likely to be challenged by various factors.² The socio-economic divide of students at university is but one of the factors that determines who will succeed in higher education. However, there are some students from dire socio-economic situations who succeed through sheer determination in spite of the financial challenges, and inferior standards entrenched by South Africa's past.

My encounter with the realities of different standards of living and the experiences of many, including myself, coming to university with little social capital and even less financial capital, shows the students' inner determination and ability to succeed. Even students who have bursaries, and access to a residence, live with anxiety and stress. For them it is never a sure case that the bursary money will be in their accounts to cover daily costs. They have no reserves or support structure to bridge all-too-frequent bursary payments that are late.

Some students are admitted to university, but receive no financial support. The struggle to travel from home to university and home again, using various types of transport, is a challenge to reckon with on a daily basis. Some do not have the luxury of a meal to sustain them through the day. The question is what motivates these students to persevere and become what others can only envy? Where do they derive the energy to hop from one lecture theatre to another and have time to attend tutorial classes where they have to concentrate and absorb knowledge, participate and share what they may have had to prepare prior to coming to class? Only those who are determined to realise their dream will not be deterred by these challenges. All they desire is to achieve a dream and to start a new life with better rewards.

This article presents incidents that illustrate some of what I consider challenges that students overcome during the time they spend at university. These students study for the B. Ed. with the intention of securing jobs as teachers after their studies. I have made it my responsibility to have friendly chats, on a regular basis, with students at first year level in order to encourage them to understand the demands and expectations of university life. This is also to help them to manage their time to avoid finding it difficult to cope with their studies. When all goes well, I have observed them grow and mature into responsible individuals who enjoy making a contribution to the development of others.

For most of these students, their stories end well when I see them walk onto the stage at their graduation ceremonies. Some may take longer than the four years to complete a B. Ed. degree, but what is to be celebrated is that they succeed, in the end, through hard work, and perseverance.

One of my favourite stories is that of three friends from the same township school who passed their National Certificate and chose teaching as their future career. They were accepted by a prestigious university, and they intended to do their best to pass their degrees and become alumni of the University of the Witwatersrand (Witsies). However, on a weekly basis, these three friends have to find money to travel from their township to campus to attend lectures and tutorials. The lack of finance is one of their biggest challenges. Over weekends they offer their services to the taxi owners and wash taxis in their township to earn their travel money. However, this employment is never guaranteed, as there are many others seeking the same jobs.

On days that they have not managed to secure enough money to cover the travelling costs for all three of them, they make arrangements as to alternate who will attend the lectures and tutorials. In the weeks that they face serious financial constraints, then only one of them attends for the week, takes notes, collects any material issued and then attempts to share the knowledge with the others.

On days that they have not managed to secure enough money to cover the travelling costs for all three of them, they make arrangements as to alternate who will attend the lectures and tutorials. In the weeks that they face serious financial constraints, then only one of them attends for the week, takes notes, collects any material issued and then attempts to share the knowledge with the others.

How these students decide how often each gets a chance to attend lectures, and how effectively that person is able to engage the others with the knowledge he has gathered, is unimaginable. These friends have developed a familial bond that has kept them together since early in their schooling life. As I write this article, they have all passed their second year B. Ed. studies in Secondary School teaching. This, despite the almost insurmountable odds they faced.

The second story is that of a student who is not deterred from his studies by the fact that he does not have money. He is on campus daily attending lectures and tutorials, yet at night he does not rest, as he takes one of the lousiest jobs in order to be able to raise funds to enable him to cope. This is one of the students with absolute dedication and passion for the teaching profession. Such students remind us of what each one of us can achieve through hard work, dedication and perseverance.

The last story I want to share is based on my own observation, and comments made by students coming to university with little learning culture and linguistic capital. South African schools have very diverse learning cultures. In particular, the choice of Language of Learning in schools creates serious barriers for students at tertiary level. Some students who come to university make claims that although the medium of instruction or Language of Learning, Teaching, and support³ (LOLTs) is English, in most schools in South Africa, not all subject teachers have the language proficiency to teach their subjects in English. As a result, many students will not have been exposed to the effective use of English. Somehow these students pass well enough to gain entry into university, perhaps because they come from schools where teachers drilled them to succeed. It is only when they encounter a new culture of teaching and learning at university, whereby they have

to do extensive reading on their own, interpret knowledge and develop skills such as writing academic essays that these students start to realise the challenges ahead of them. For some, adjustment is quicker, depending on their exposure to other resources such as English-language television, radio programmes and newspapers. For the unlucky ones, English remains a problem, despite encouragement to work in groups, in order to build confidence.

Unlike school, university teaching does not offer the luxury of student dependency. Habits of self and time management are for most students a big challenge as they are used to being followed and forced to do what they have to do. The relationship between students and lecturers also takes time to establish unlike the case at school. However, there are students who, after their first assignments, when they realise that they did not perform as expected, confront such challenges and use all available opportunities to improve themselves in areas they lack. This only happens to those with determination to overcome their challenges. There are still those among them who will take time to acknowledge their weaknesses and, as a result, they delay seeking help until it is too late to make significant changes. To those who acknowledge weakness and attend to it, improvement in reading and writing ability becomes significant. They also make good efforts to improve spoken efficiency, which they will need if they are to cope when they do their teaching practice.

I had students reporting after their first teaching practice that it was the first time they had been required to speak in English in front of learners. For some it was worse when they had to do teaching practice in former Model C schools with a majority of learners from white communities. The issue of language emerged as a problem that almost prevented them from imparting the knowledge they had, but could not communicate verbally. The best of the students derived courage from experiences that could easily have caused them to lose hope. Sharing their teaching practice experiences motivated others to take courage, knowing they were not the only ones struggling. They shared how terrified they were, how much they realised that the way they had been taught in school hampered their own good teaching practices. After sharing these experiences, they were determined to get it right on their next teaching practice. It takes determination and motivation for these students to make it at the end, despite all the odds. They accept that they were not well prepared for challenges of learning at a university, but through hard work, they pull through and become better at what they do. Although not all students succeed at first, those who do are a symbol that determination and hard work pays.

They shared how terrified they were, how much they realised that the way they had been taught in school hampered their own good teaching practices. After sharing these experiences, they were determined to get it right on their next teaching practice.

It is through these cases that we can hope that once these students do become teachers, they will not repeat the kind of teaching they may have gone through, but that they will have pride in their achievement and plant back in society a good learning culture. They will teach good habits that prepare young upcoming generations, and expose them to necessary knowledge and skills they will need in their own higher education studies in future. Using their own experiences as students at university they have to make their teaching focus on what they know may create barriers to effective learning. It is skills such as reading, writing, and note-taking that are not given priority in most schools and impact negatively on students who get admitted to university. It can be expected that these students will

share their experiences with their learners to motivate them that they can make it, only if they have the will and determination to overcome obstacles in life.

Experiences related to financial challenges cannot be escaped. But if students who overcome these odds can tell their stories, maybe these can inspire others to understand that to achieve in life does not always come easy. Achieving students from poor social backgrounds prove that it is not only the wealthy who may succeed, and that making the right choices can lead to high achievement. There are many stories such as these that can be shared to inspire young people not to feel pity for themselves, but to take courage and overcome the odds.

NOTES

- 1 Omeri, Malcolm, Ahern & Wellington, 2003:5
- 2 See Omeri, et al. 2003
- 3 Additional Support covers interventions such as writing centres

REFERENCES

Omeri, A., Malcolm, P., Ahern, M. & Wellington, B. (2003). 'Meeting the challenges of cultural diversity in the academic setting'. *Nurse Education in Practice* 3 (pp.5–22).