

# Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

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## **Negotiating Learning and Identity in Higher Education: Access, Persistence and Retention**

by Bongi Bangeni and Rochelle Kapp (Eds.)

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Participation in higher education continues to increase globally. According to the OECD (2017), the highest education level achieved by a majority of young adults in 2000 was upper secondary education. Today the largest share of 25- to 34-year-olds holds a post-secondary degree. Further, it is forecast that higher education enrolments world-wide will almost double to reach 160 million by 2025 (Klemencic & Fried, 2007). However, there continue to be inequalities in patterns of access for traditionally under-represented groups (Burke, 2012; Hall, 2012; Chowdry, Crawford, & Dearden, 2013). This book examines the various learning experiences of black, working-class students at the University of Cape Town in South Africa from a range of academic disciplines in order to better understand the challenges faced by black, working-class students.

Chapter 1 provides the book's conceptual framework for approaching access, persistence, and retention and understanding students' learning journeys in context. Chapters 2 through 8 describe how students, as they create their own identities, negotiate various

barriers and support networks within their disciplines, at home, and in the community. The final chapter explores the implications of students' learning journeys for educational policy and practice.

Based on two qualitative, longitudinal case studies conducted within the Academic Development Programme in the Centre for Higher Education Development at the University of Cape Town from 2002 to 2005 and from 2009 to 2012, *Negotiating Learning and Identity in Higher Education* discusses both the supports and barriers faced by first-generation, black students as they transition into and traverse through their university student experience at an elite, English-medium, historically white South African university. Students who participated in the case studies were part of a generation of young black people who grew up in the new post-Apartheid South African and are mostly bilingual or multilingual and for whom English is an additional language. Bangeni, Kapp, and contributors focused on how this group negotiates new ways of "saying-doing-being-valuing-believing" (Gee 1990, p. 12).

The authors conceptualize learning as a journey that involves navigating many places over time. Each place holds a set of expectations about what constitutes appropriate ways of learning and ways of being. The students speak about how they negotiated the intersections between race, class, gender, and religions and the impact of the institution-provided normative-based (white, middle-class, and English) roadmap. Each chapter emphasizes the experiences of a small number of participants in order to provide an in-depth qualitative analysis of one characteristic of the students' journeys.

Based on their research, learning and identity are closely related and connected to each other. The authors suggest that "Negotiating meaningful access to learning is inextricably connected to negotiating an intersection of race, class, linguistic, gendered and religious subject positions in relation to home, school and university" (Bangeni & Kapp, 2017, p. 181). They further conclude that the students' journeys are not linear; that success often comes following various stops, detours, or adaptations. A key finding of the research is the centrality of the role of individuals or community organizations outside of the institution who played a significant role in motivating and guiding students and providing intellectual, linguistic, or spiritual support.

Findings related to institutional behaviour suggest that in order to enhance success of black, first-generation students, institutions should continue their focus on

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psycho-social support beyond the first year and throughout the student experience. They should also explore how academic programs are structured and pedagogies used to advance student learning. Specifically, the researchers call for creating flexible degree pathways, sustained support across the student experience that is tailored to suit students' needs at various transition points, and greater clarity and alignment between teaching and assessment approached both within and across the curricula. A key challenge is for institutions "to provide enabling environments within the classroom and formative tasks where students can reflect and engage critically with content which they may find unsettling" (Bangeni & Kapp, 2017, pp. 185-186).

Much of the research literature on student retention and success focuses on individual attributes separate from context (Haggis, 2004; Tinto, 2006; Boughey, 2009). A growing body of literature has emphasized how identity is central to learning and how students are often marginalized, stereotyped, and alienated by the forms of "cultural capital" we use in academia (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 230). This book takes a different approach. It focuses on the ways in which students evaluate their past and future plans by examining their contextual experiences in the institution and at home. It then draws on the developing meanings students attribute to their learning journeys over time and in the different spaces they occupy to explore how students' motivations are enabled and/or constrained by institutional structures at different times throughout the student experience.

For post-secondary educational faculty members, professional educators, and administrators, *Negotiating Learning and Identity in Higher Education* points us in a new and exciting direction. It calls on us to identify the unique characteristics of each student group and to offer a blend of instruction, mentoring, and support to enhance their individual educational development; all within a learning environment that provides continuous support across the student experience. While this book focuses on the learning journeys of black, first-generation, South African students, much of what the authors uncover could easily be applied to other student populations and in other contexts. It opens the door for further research on how we can learn more about student retention and success by applying the Bangeni and Kapp research methodology to other student groups.

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