

INTRAPERSONAL FACTORS THAT SUPPORT HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENT DURING ACADEMIC PROBATION

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Abstract

Access to higher education institutions and success rates of students are high on the agenda of all higher education institutions in South Africa following the #FeesMustFall campaign that began in mid-October 2015 followed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This descriptive case study reports on the intrapersonal factors that supported three university students during their academic probation. Bean and Eaton's psychological model of college retention was used as the guiding theory in this research. The participants were purposively selected on the basis that they were academically excluded from their study programme, that they successfully appealed their exclusion and were subsequently placed on academic probation, and managed to complete their probation period. A qualitative research approach, anchored in interpretivism was used. Data were generated through a mini focus group interview that was guided by the strength-based principles of appreciative inquiry. The findings of this study indicated that intrapersonal factors such as coping behaviours, internal locus of control and high self-efficacy beliefs played an important role in the success the participants experienced. This study has implications for how student support services in future could utilise these psychological processes to support students.

Keywords: Academic Exclusion; Academic Probation; Self-Efficacy Beliefs; Strength-Based Approach; Intrapersonal Factors

Introduction

The retention of students and throughput rates at higher education institutions globally and in third world and developing countries such as South Africa has been a topic of much research and debate for several decades (Botha, 2018). Although there have been many advancements made by some higher education institutions to promote student access and throughput rates (van der Merwe, Groenewald, Venter, Scrimnger-Christian, & Bolofo, 2020) there is still much that needs to change especially in South African higher education institutions (Botha, 2018). This is evidenced by the uprising and violent protests of student groups across the country which started in October 2015 and which since then flares up yearly across campuses (Swartz, Ivancheva, Czerniewicz & Morris, 2019). In addition to this, the COVID-19 pandemic added to the struggles of students to achieve academic success (Schreiber, Luescher, Perozzii, & Moscaritolo, 2021). Van der Merwe et al. (2020) paint a dismal picture in terms of the number of undergraduate students who graduated between 2010 and 2017 in all fields of study at public universities in South Africa. The authors found that the graduate rate for this period never rose above 21%. Findings on student success post-COVID lockdown are still emergent which could greatly influence the importance of exploring solutions, such as academic probation, to improve the throughput and graduation rates at higher education institutions.

Each university has its own criteria for academic probation. At some universities, students are placed on academic probation when they fail to meet the minimum academic standards (Kamphoff, Hutson, Amundsen, & Atwood, 2007). The probation period can last over a semester (Cherry & Coleman, 2010) or two semesters (Royal & Tabor, 2008) where the students have to meet the expected standards to avoid academic dismissal (Cherry & Coleman, 2010; Kamphoff et al., 2007; Royal & Tabor, 2008). Furthermore, at some universities, students are encouraged or required to participate in structured activities that are aimed at improving their academic performance (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016; Bledsoe, 2018; Chan & Wang, 2018; Crisp & Taggart, 2013; Royal & Tabor, 2008; Young & Keup, 2016).

Many factors affect student throughput and extensive research has been done on this topic (Alsharari & Alshurideh, 2021; Kurdi, Alshurideh, Salloum, Obeidat, & Al-dweeri, 2020; Nazir et al., 2022). Reasons that have been cited for students' underachievement and subsequent academic probation are a lack of study skills and time management (Isaak, Graves, & Mayers, 2006); gaps in tutoring and mentorship (Tovar & Simon, 2006); readiness for university studies and poor academic adjustment (Wlazelek & Coulter, 1999); inadequate motivational levels (Kamphoff et al., 2007); an external locus of control (Demetriou, 2011; James & Graham, 2010; Tovar & Simon, 2006); a lack of social proficiency and uncertain academic goals (Isaak et al., 2006; Trombley, 2000) as well as non-academic and personal issues (Fowler & Boylan, 2010).

Research pertaining to students on academic probation largely centres on the value and outcomes of the intervention programmes that were designed to assist these students (James & Graham, 2010; Tovar & Simon, 2006). Furthermore, James and Graham (2010) also state that studies reporting on students on academic probation primarily focused on describing the factors that lead to student failure in order to "establish a profile of a typical academic probation student" (p. 72).

Despite the lack of reports on student successes in general (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera 2016; Garza & Bowden 2014) and specifically on academic probation student success, Berkovitz and O'Quin (2006) found that 47% of students who chose to return to their study programmes as probationary students managed to show persistence until they graduated. Similarly, research focused on students' success has recently moved away from "factors that merely allow a student to survive college to understanding those that assist students to thrive in college" (Shuster, 2018, p. 231). In accordance with this shift in research, this study emphasises the intrapersonal factors that supported students to be successful during their academic probation. The study was guided by the following research question: What intrapersonal factors supported three undergraduate students at a public higher education institution during their academic probation?

Intrapersonal Factors that Contribute to Academic Challenges

Intrapersonal or individual factors such as self-efficacy beliefs, self-concept, locus of control, emotional responses and motivation have been studied extensively in the context of student academic success and these factors have been found to have a direct impact on student academic adjustment and the ability to deal with academic stress and the demands of higher education programmes (Montgomery, 2013; Neff, Hsieh, & Dejitterat 2005). These factors will be discussed next.

Self-Efficacy Beliefs and Self-Confidence

Student self-efficacy is considered an essential part of academic success (Alhadabi, & Karpinski, 2020; Neff, Hsieh, & Dejitterat, 2005; Viviers, de Villiers, & van der Merwe, 2022). These authors described self-efficacy as a person's self-evaluation of their competence to successfully complete a task. Self-efficacy requires the individual to be self-confident in their ability to successfully execute a task (Neff et al., 2005). Self-confidence is important in academic achievement as it enables students to select activities out of interest (rather than fear) and to continue with those activities despite academic setbacks (Neff et al., 2005). Students who display low self-efficacy beliefs often lack the confidence that they can meet their own expectations as well as those of their teachers and family (Baslanti, 2008); this low confidence creates doubt in the students' beliefs that they are capable of academic achievement (Neff et al., 2005). Neff et al. (2005) found that students that have low self-efficacy tend to hide their lack of ability rather than strive for competence by developing and improving their skills.

Academic Underperformance and Self-Concept

Closely related to self-efficacy beliefs is the idea of the self-concept. This can be regarded as self-representation (how individuals perceive themselves), self-esteem (how individuals feel about themselves) and self-image (the idea one has of one's abilities) (Zhang, Wang, Li, Yu, & Bi, 2011). Baslanti (2008) and Zhang et al. (2011) postulate that underachievement is closely linked to the development of the self-concept. Underachieving students tend to perceive themselves in terms of failure and begin to place self-imposed limits on their potential, with the possible outcome being that real academic progress may be hindered as a result of underachievement (Baslanti, 2008; Strode, 2021).

According to Nance (2007) and Tovar and Simon (2006), students experiencing academic failure tend to become uncertain of their academic potential and may have a diminished self-concept. This self-concept could lead students to doubt their academic capabilities and, in some cases, employ negative coping mechanisms to deal with their negative self-perceptions. For example, Bartels and Herman (2011) found that students experiencing failure "are likely to utilize cognitive strategies such as self-handicapping that serves to perpetuate failure" (p. 2). According to de Castella, Byrne, and Covington (2013), self-handicapping is a defensive strategy used to change the meaning of failure by shifting the cause of failure away from the student's ability to deliberate excuses.

These self-handicapping mechanisms are used to protect one's self-esteem in the event of failure (Bartels & Herman, 2011; de Castella et al., 2013). Self-handicapping mechanisms include the use of self-imposed obstacles such as leaving studying to the last minute, which allows the individual to attribute failure to factors outside of their control, thus protecting their self-esteem. However, even though self-handicapping mechanisms may alleviate other negative emotions such as shame, for a short while they increase the odds of failure (Bartels & Herman, 2011).

Self-Efficacy and Locus of Control

Some researchers link self-efficacy to the attribute of locus of control (Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoresen, 2002; Micomonaco & Espinoza, 2022). A person who attributes success to internal, stable and controllable factors is more likely to feel in control of their circumstances and show self-confidence and high self-esteem (Demetriou, 2011). According to Demetriou (2011), students who believe in themselves and feel positive about their personal ability to perform a task are more likely to try in their academic-related situations. Judge et al. (2002) postulate that a clear connection exists between self-esteem and locus of control and that individuals who have an internal locus of control will resist the temptation to attribute success or failure to external causes. According to Demetriou (2011), students on academic probation tend to feel that they have lost control over their academic situations and, therefore, fail to take responsibility for their academic performance by displaying an external locus of control.

Emotional Responses to Academic Failure

According to Bartels and Herman (2011) and Neff et al. (2005), students who experience academic failure may develop a general fear of failure. McGregor and Elliot (2005) conceptualise fear of failure as "the self-evaluative framework that influences how the individual defines, orients to, and experiences failure in achieving situations" (p. 129). In their study which investigated the link between fear of failure and shame, McGregor and Elliot (2005) found that individuals who had high levels of fear of failure were more prone to generalise their underachievement in one aspect of their lives to their whole self. These individuals defined failure as an unacceptable event which led to negative implications for their self-worth (McGregor & Elliot, 2005).

Authors such as Bartels and Herman (2011), Neff et al. (2005), and Turner and Husman (2008), found that shame is an emotional response often associated with academic failure. De Castella et al. (2013) postulate that feelings of shame and humiliation are triggered by self-perceptions of incompetence. Shame is understood to be the reprimand individuals feel when they have fallen short of their standards and the failure is attributed to a lack of personal ability (McGregor & Elliot, 2005). According to McGregor and Elliot (2005, p. 227), "shame is the core emotion of fear of failure and it is a painful, persistent and cognitively disruptive emotion".

Turner and Husman (2008) found that students placed on academic probation may encounter feelings of shame and perceptions of being a failure, especially if the failure is attributed to personal factors such as their ability.

Students may experience shame because they have disappointed themselves as well as personal stakeholders such as parents, teachers and bursars, among others (McGregor & Elliot, 2005). Feelings of shame interfere with their motivation and eventually lead some students to abandon their studies and future goals (Turner & Husman, 2008). Furthermore, students who are confronted with academic failure and shame may develop a fear of failure (Neff et al., 2005). It seems that shame as a result of academic failure may have debilitating effects on student academic progress; students may be so overwhelmed by the shame that they may not be able to continue pursuing their academic studies (Turner & Husman, 2008).

The Interrelated Nature of Motivation and Academic Failure

Motivation has been found to be a strong predictor of academic success (Hsieh, Sullivan, & Guerra, 2007; Viviers, de Villiers, & van der Merwe, 2022). Balduf (2009) reports that underachieving students tend to show low levels of motivation during the semester. Nance (2007) found that students who are faced with academic failure demonstrate a decline in motivation. Therefore, low levels of motivation may lead to academic underperformance and may also be the result of academic failure. Turner and Husman (2008) established that when students renew their commitment to their future goals, their motivation levels may increase and that motivation was revitalised when students considered the importance of their future goals. Additionally, Neff et al. (2005) suggest that self-compassionate individuals have adaptive academic motivational patterns. These individuals are able to view failure as an opportunity to learn and pay attention to improving their academic activities (Neff et al., 2005).

Self-Compassion as a Buffer Against Academic Failure

Neff et al. (2005) investigated the relationship between self-compassion, academic achievement goals and coping with perceived academic failure among undergraduate students. In their study, they found that fear of failure may be overcome by individuals who show self-compassion. Self-compassion is described as the ability to be transparent about one's own suffering, being kind and understanding to oneself, wanting to be healthy, being non-judgmental about one's shortcomings and also possessing the ability to see one's own experiences as not unique (Neff et al., 2005). Individuals who have self-compassion have a positive attitude that allows them to engage in activities out of interest rather than as an effort to protect their self-esteem (Lee & Lee, 2020; Neff et al., 2005). Self-compassionate students will respond to failure with a sense of kindness and understanding about their own situations "rather than harsh self-condemnation, enabling failure to be seen as a learning opportunity rather than an indictment of self-worth" (Neff et al., 2005, p. 267).

This last study provided one perspective on how students who encountered academic failure may overcome experiences such as fear of failure. Through this study, we hoped to explore additional factors, means and processes that enabled students to overcome the affective, cognitive and psychological difficulties associated with academic probation.

Theoretical Framework

Bean and Eaton's psychological model of college retention was used as the guiding theory in this research. Bean and Eaton (2000, 2001) believe that it is psychological processes which determine the social and academic integration of students. They based this view on the premise that students are psychological beings who employ individual psychological processes to make decisions to continue with their studies. Bean and Eaton's (2000, 2001) psychological model of college retention suggests that an individual enters the institution with psychological attributes which have been shaped by their past behaviours and experiences, personality traits, self-efficacy beliefs, attribution styles, self-assessment as well as their skills and abilities (Bean & Eaton, 2000, 2001). These psychological attributes initially determine the way the student will interact with the environment (Bean & Eaton, 2000).

After entry into higher education, students begin to interact with the institution and its staff in two main realms: academic (e.g. administration, funding offices, faculty staff) and social (e.g. interactions with peers). During interaction with the academic and social realms, students develop new psychological traits with which to interpret and respond to the demands of the new environment. This development is facilitated by a student's personal self-assessments. Students assess their self-efficacy to achieve academic success and social integration, engage in coping behaviours to minimise stressful situations and evaluate how their own actions improve their academic or social situations (Bean & Eaton, 2000). These self-assessments and new psychological processes determine the general feeling that a student will have about the institution and their desire to persevere through their studies.

Research Methodology

A qualitative research approach was followed in this study. Through this approach, we intended to understand human experience, with emphasis on positive experiences, processes and personal meaning, which cannot easily be measured in terms of quantity (Babbie, 2005; Creswell, 2013; McAleese & Kilty, 2019). An instrumental case study is employed when a researcher seeks to gain insight into the participants' cases by engaging participants in their experiences (Silverman, 2005; Yin, 2012). According to Guest, Namey, and Mitchell (2013), the primary purpose of an instrumental case study is to understand the unique aspects of the case. Through an instrumental case study design, the researchers were able to gather sufficient subjective data to richly portray an understanding and description of the students' emotions, psychological processes and behaviours that allowed them to succeed in their studies.

Sampling

Purposive sampling, also called selection in qualitative studies, was used to select the participants for this case study. Purposive selection is often used when a researcher has a specific goal in mind and requires a group of participants who meet the relevant criteria and who can represent diverse perspectives on a particular issue. Purposive selection is well-suited to exploratory research as it allows for the selection of a case and participants that can provide rich information necessary for the aims of an in-depth case study.

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The purposive selection of cases or participants is non-random and allows for the selection of those who can potentially provide the best data in understanding the research problem (Campbell et al., 2020; Creswell, 2013).

A factor that limited the sample size was the relatively small number of students we were able to find who had successfully completed the academic probation. For this reason, we were only able to successfully recruit three participants who were interested in participating in this study. The three participants were purposively selected for this study with the goal of involving participants that could contribute valuable insight to fulfil the purpose of this study which was to explore the success stories of students who were placed on academic probation. For this reason, they had to meet the following criteria:

- Participants were academically excluded from studying in the faculty of choice and had appealed the exclusion in this same faculty and the same study course.
- Participants were subsequently placed on academic probation and managed to complete their probation period.
- Participants were available to participate in the face-to-face focus group.

Ethical Considerations

This research study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the institution and the faculty where the participants were registered as students. Informed and written consent was obtained from the participants prior to their participation in the focus group; they were also made aware of their right to withdraw from participating at any point in the discussion. The purpose was thoroughly articulated in the informed consent letter and all expectations with regard to participating were explained. As confidentiality is about protecting the dignity and rights of participants, and since confidentiality cannot be fully guaranteed in a focus group, it was negotiated between all the participants taking part in the group. As part of the group's ground rules participants were encouraged to respect each other and to keep what was shared as part of the focus group private. Codes were used in the dissemination of the findings when referring to participants. Participants were made aware that they could access free professional support from Student Support Services should they become distressed as a result of participating in this research study. At the end of the focus group meeting, participants were debriefed and given the opportunity to ask any questions concerning the study that may have arisen during the focus group. They were also made aware that they could retract or clarify statements that they had made during the focus group. The researchers provided them with their email addresses for that purpose. The participants were given the opportunity to review the final report and could change or withdraw from participating at this stage if they wished to do so.

Data Collection

Data were generated through a mini focus group interview (Guest et al., 2013; King & Horrocks, 2010) that consisted of three research participants.

A focus group is simply defined as an informal discussion by a selected group of individuals on a specified topic, with the primary aim to discuss and understand the meanings and interpretations of those individuals to gain an understanding of a specific issue from their perspective (Gundumogula, 2020; Liamputtong, 2011). According to Guest et al. (2013), a focus group has the ability to generate in-depth research information by engaging participants on the why and how of their experiences, behaviours, perceptions and beliefs. It is for the aforementioned reason that the researchers employed a focus group; we wanted to gain an authentic and in-depth picture of how the research participants experienced academic probation, and what factors and processes including emotions, thoughts and actions enabled them to achieve success after academic probation.

The naturalistic atmosphere of a focus group discussion enhances good interaction between the research participants (King & Horrocks, 2010). According to Liamputtong (2011), successful focus group discussion depends on creating a non-threatening environment within the group where participants feel comfortable discussing their opinions and experiences without fear of being judged by others in the group. Since a focus group resembles social interaction between participants, focus groups are likely to be more comfortable and enjoyable for the research participants (Liamputtong, 2011). The researchers observed that an atmosphere of camaraderie developed among the participants in this research study while they shared their narratives in an open, transparent and relaxed manner.

The focus group discussion was facilitated by using an interview guide composed of pre-determined, open-ended questions. The focus group lasted for 90 minutes. With the permission of the participants, the focus group discussion was tape-recorded. A research field journal was kept in order to detail observation notes on the interaction between the participants, the body language of the participants as well the atmosphere during the discussion.

We chose to employ the 4D cycle used in appreciative inquiry (AI) as a guiding principle for constructing the interview guide. This was because AI is grounded in strength-based principles, established on the concept that all communities have factors that will empower them to be effective, productive and thrive, even in the face of challenges (Lehner & Hight, 2006; Lewis & Emil, 2010). Table 1 provides the actual interview guide of this study.

Table 1: The Interview Guide of the Study

Phase	Open-Ended Questions
The Discovery phase: Appreciating what life gave you	Please describe any positive thoughts you had about your probation period? What were some of your best moments in the probation period? Describe any good surprises you had during the period?
The Dreaming phase: Envisioning what might be	What motivated you? When did you realise you can achieve your academic goals? What helped you to persevere when things were not looking good during the probation period? What kind of emotional and/or psychological support did you seek? How did that support help you cope? To what extent did you believe in your academic competency? What were your highest hopes for your studies?
The Designing phase: Determining what will be	What academic characteristics did you have to acquire in order to be successful in your modules? What sort of academic assistance did you require to be successful and how did you obtain the help? What institutional support systems enabled your success in the probation period? How did the institutional resources help you cope during the probation period? How did your faculty contribute towards your success?
The Destiny phase: Planning what will be	What was the toughest but best decision you made that ensured the success of your studies? What do you think is at the heart of your success? What made the probation period work for you? What was your way of life during the probation period? How did your social life change following the probation period? What were helpful activities that you did with your peers?

Findings

Bean and Eaton's (2001) individual psychological processes which included attitudes, coping behaviours, self-efficacy beliefs and an internal locus of control align with the intrapersonal factors this study reports on and thus these processes outlined in the authors' theory will act as a structure for the presentation of the findings.

Attitudes

Bean and Eaton (2001) suggest that attitudes enable individuals to become intentional and to act towards the behaviour depending on what they believe about the consequences of that behaviour; therefore, positive attitudes, which are influenced by favourable perceptions about the outcomes of that behaviour, are linked to productive intentions which lead to acting towards that behaviour.

The participants in this research study indicated that academic probation changed their attitudes and that this newly gained insight transferred to other spheres in their lives. This is evident from the following statement made by one of the participants:

"I would say my attitude changed ... and the good thing is that I applied it in areas other than my studies and in many other areas of my life".

They also felt that the academic probation was character-building and that their academic probation changed them for the better. One participant expressed this with the statement:

"It [the academic probation] changed my character as a person and my depth as a person".

During the probation period, it became important for them to know who they were and what they valued so that they could make better personal decisions and prioritise their studies. What was equally important to them was that they did not want their academic probation to define them in negative terms. This is evident in the following statement by one of the participants: ...

"Do not see your failures as failures ... take them as a learning curve".

The participants believed that by confronting their weaknesses they could work on these areas of their lives and develop them into something positive and meaningful. This is confirmed by the following statement:

"Focus on your weaknesses, at the end of the day it [weaknesses] becomes something of a strength".

Coping Behaviours

According to coping behavioural theory, such behaviour is defined as actions that are intended to minimise stress (Eaton & Bean 1995). Two major actions emerged as prominent coping behaviours which determined the participants' academic success, namely academic practices and academic integration. Academic practices such as study skills, time management and consulting with tutors and mentors have been deemed an important part of student success (Balduf 2009; Tovar and Simon 2006; Trombley 2000). All the participants agreed that before they were placed on probation they had undervalued academic practices that had been suggested to them as valuable. One participant described it as follows:

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“I think sometimes it’s that attitude that you do not want to react to the obvious things such as study methods, time management you prefer that you have the pressure to study ... and it was that you were alone and you had to push yourself and that is a tough thing”.

The probation period forced them to change their mindset and engage in those practices. This is evident by the following statement:

“For the first two years attending class was not that big of a deal but from your consequences the threats of academic exclusion we were forced to change our ways and try something different and doing things that we were never doing before like attending classes on a regular schedule”.

They also all agreed that they were required to adapt their academic behaviours and attitudes in an attempt to address their academic work differently. This is reflected by the statement:

“When it comes to the probation period you actually are looking for systems that actually work like attending classes or studying or how you study, study patterns you actually apply them more in that phase”.

Humphrey (2005) also found that probationary students begin to realise the advantages of simple activities such as consistent class attendance during academic probation. The participants in this study came to this realisation:

“Hard work is more helpful than thinking you are smart”.

Academic integration refers to the ability of a student to comply with academic standards such as passing courses as well as the ability for a student to engage in academically meaningful activities (Kuh et al. 2006). It requires that a student knows what to do, when to do it and how to do it, in order to be academically successful. It was clear throughout the discussion that the participants became academically mature while in the probation period. Being academically more mature to them meant the following:

“Your priorities change and I was like more focused on the hard work”.

They also became more conscious of how they had to change their mindset to become more deliberate with their actions. This is evident in the following statements:

“I mentally adapted to other [study] habits ... and ... if you apply yourself more it actually works and you can actually follow up through that”.

This in turn promoted pro-academic behaviour such as ...

“you start sticking to routine and ... I limited my time with my friends”.

Locus of Control

An internal locus of control motivates an individual to make the effort to perform well academically since they believe that the situation is within their control (Bean & Eaton, 2000). The research participants' internal locus of control was displayed by their courage and perseverance; they believed that despite the anxiety evoked by the thought of not being able to succeed they had what it takes to overcome the fear and meet the expectations of the probation period. One participant was able to capture the courage of the group and how they endured this difficult time with the following statement:

“Just carry on through that so I had to ... sort of be self-motivated and be sort of strong and courageous ... be ... ya ... self-motivated I would say and just carry on and of course be determined and focused”.

Being able to persevere meant that the participants had to manage feelings of anxiety and that they had to take responsibility for their learning. They became acutely aware of the fact that if it was meant to be it was up to them to make it happen. This is evident in the following statements:

“You think to yourself that let me push a bit by myself ... and ... I think it was that the issue that I had to study that set everything aside and just keep on pushing”.

Self-Efficacy

A person's recognition of his or her own competence determines higher aspirations of persistence, self-confidence, task achievement and personal goals (Bean & Eaton 2001). The participants in this research study seemed convinced that believing in their ability to achieve their academic goals was important for their success. They all shared the thought that if you believe in yourself, you are able to convince others that you are capable of academic achievement.

Some of the participants believed that successful experiences instilled the belief in themselves that they are capable and able to succeed. One participant shared how the experience of failure was still very prominent in his mind when he started with the probation period and to be able to move beyond this he just had to try the second time. By trying the second time he experienced some success and this propelled him forward to keep on building on his success. He said the following:

“Well mostly I doubted my abilities but then from the doubts I had no choice but to try and from trying I somehow achieved and from there it just kept on building and eventually I actually started believing. It gave me hope that ... this is actually doable”.

One participant felt that hard work and a strong belief in himself ensured his academic success. He stated:

“I was more focused on the hard work more than anything so I didn’t believe that much in academic performance [natural abilities] ... but I could do it ... I can execute it and get there”.

A strong motivating force in the participants’ success was that they also wanted others to believe in them. To be able to achieve this they felt that they had to prove themselves to others as worthy and able. This is evident from the following statements:

“You just sort of want to correct who you are and like sort of want to make it clear that I am still this kind of person. I know that I can do it you just want to prove to them that I can do it ... and You have been given a chance to prove yourself and to think that you must be dependent on someone else to help you what happens if they are not there”.

Discussion

It was evident in this study that the participants were able to succeed in the academic probation period partly as a result of their attitudes, coping behaviours, internal locus of control and positive self-efficacy beliefs. Even though they were faced with the fear of not being able to succeed, the participants displayed courage and perseverance by choosing to believe in their own academic potential. As they achieved success, they began to gain more self-confidence and continued to persevere in their studies. Their success, coupled with this self-confidence, created an attitude of confidence as well as a good work ethic in them which developed them personally and academically.

The participants in this study acknowledged that before they were placed on academic probation, they took the academic skills that they had been taught in an academic literacy course for granted but that being placed on probation made them realise the value of those simple yet valuable skills. As a result of their probation, the participants pointed out that they had to learn how to apply those skills as well as other life skills; the result is that they acquired coping skills through their academic probation.

In this study, the participants believed unwaveringly that they were competent to be academically successful. Their internal locus of control enabled them to participate in activities that would benefit their studies. As a result of success, they began to improve in their studies; this led them to become self-confident and develop positive self-efficacy beliefs. In turn, their self-efficacy impelled them to prove to others that they were also able to achieve well academically. These findings confirm the notions that positive self-efficacy leads to self-confidence and improves an individual’s level of persistence and achievement and that students who possess positive self-efficacy tend to be more willing to apply themselves in order to achieve their academic goals (Micomonaco & Espinoza, 2022; Demetriou, 2011).

Furthermore, as evidence of their internal locus of control, the participants showed courage by displaying a sense of self-compassion towards their personal circumstances. They were able to acknowledge their own shortcomings, show empathy towards themselves and embrace their failure as part of their human experience. As a result of self-compassion, they were able to develop the necessary courage to confront the probation period.

Individuals who have self-compassion hold a positive attitude that allows them to engage in activities out of interest rather than as an effort to protect their self-esteem (Lee & Lee, 2020; Neff et al., 2005). Furthermore, the participants showed a spirit of perseverance throughout their academic probation by pushing themselves to work hard despite a history of underachievement. Persistence has been found to be an important determinant of students' success in academic endeavours (Demetriou, 2011).

People act in response to their intentions. The intention to act is determined by the person's attitude towards the particular circumstance (Turner & Husman, 2008). The participants' optimistic attitude towards the probation period and their intention to display competence allowed them to act in such a manner that enabled them to succeed, thereby displaying that positive attitudes towards a situation can lead to pro-academic behaviour.

Being academically integrated allowed these participants to cope with the probation period and motivated them to persevere towards achieving their academic goals. Therefore, we learn that academic success, even on a small scale, leads to hope and courage and can encourage students to progressively do better. This is referred to as the feedback loop, where academic integration facilitates better interaction with the institution, and in turn, fosters institutional satisfaction and students' intention to persevere in their studies (Bean & Eaton, 2000). For the students in this study, it started with their commitment to showing that they could achieve academic success. Following success in assessments such as class tests, these students became more courageous to do better.

On a personal level, the participants started maturing as a result of the academic probation and gained skills and competencies that were also valuable outside of the study environment. This personal development was enabled by their internal locus of control, high self-efficacy beliefs and positive intentions that led to productive actions and the courage to persevere.

Conclusion and Limitations

With this study, we hoped to edify the available literature on experiences of students on academic probation, and in particular, experiences that enabled success. This study highlights the need for further research into the experiences of readmitted students. One of the limitations of this study was the small sample that we were able to access and we, therefore, do not believe that the findings of this study are sufficient to inform best practices when it comes to making difficult decisions relating to academic exclusion, redirecting students and granting them academic probation. For this reason, we recommend that further research could include experiences from a larger number of research participants. Since this was a strength-based inquiry, it is possible that other significant experiences of students on academic probation were marginalised. For example, we noticed that the students could not stop talking about the fear that the probation period had evoked. This has implications for further research and it may be valuable to focus research specifically on this topic and how this may be overcome. We also recommend that research explore the value of a strength-based/appreciative counselling approach to support students who are readmitted.

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