



A dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of
PhD in Social Work

***Recognition of Prior Learning and Identity Transformation: Experiences of
Social Work graduates in the Western Cape, South Africa***

By

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DEDICATION

For Lujhain, my biggest gift. You are the light in and of my life.

PAGE OF ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My biggest thanks go to Girlie, Lelo, Lovey, Mary, Mason, Ms M, Nancy, Percy, Simon, and Stella for sharing their life stories with me. Without you there would be no study. Your open and authentic shares touched and inspired me more than you know, and you have strengthened my commitment to my work.

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study aimed to understand the meaning social work graduates who entered university via Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) attach to their RPL experience and social work education. The goal was to determine whether participation in RPL and studying social work influences identity transformation at a micro level. The researcher intended to address the lacuna in extant knowledge on RPL which focusses on the macro and pedagogical considerations linked to RPL. She is confident that the study provides new knowledge on the influence of RPL and social work education at a micro level.

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design was used because of the intention to provide an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences. The study included two universities offering social work programmes in the Western Cape, South Africa i.e. the University of the Western Cape and the University of Cape Town. Five participants were purposively selected from each institution and all the participants completed their social work education in the last five years. Three interviews, using semi-structured interview schedules, were conducted with each participant. The interviews were described and analysed using an amalgamation of the six steps of IPA data analysis.

Transformative Learning Theory and Identity Theories were used as theoretical frameworks for the study because these theories address the macro issues related to higher education and account for the internal shifts that university learners can achieve. The results reveal that enrolling in the RPL programme and studying social work had been a transformative learning experience for the participants. The study further reveals that RPL promoted significant identity transformation for the participants and the results allude to the potential of RPL to be transformative at a micro level. The results further revealed that not only did participating in RPL and studying social work influence the participants' identities, but it also influenced their self-awareness and their behaviour.

There were challenges with obtaining the sample and evidently RPL is underutilised in social work programmes in South Africa. The thesis thus includes recommendations for future research in RPL and to universities and social work programmes so that RPL can be strengthened.

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CHAPTER ONE:

PROBLEM FORMULATION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This study sought to understand the meaning social work graduates who entered university through the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) programme attach to both their RPL experience and social work education. The goal was to determine the significant ways in which participants felt that their identities had changed due to participating in RPL and studying social work. The study thus rests on three areas viz. RPL, social work education and identity transformation. The first chapter provides the context in which the study is located. The rationale, aim of the study, research questions, and objectives follow. The clarification of the key concepts used in the study is provided. The researcher paid special attention to the ethical considerations of the study, which are clarified, because the study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, with its devastating consequences for South Africa. This was a qualitative study, and the positionality/reflexivity of the researcher is also elucidated. An outline of the thesis precedes a summary of the chapter.

1.2 BACKGROUND

Globally policies articulate that higher education plays an important role in the social and economic development of society and a tertiary qualification is seen as a tool for promoting social inclusion and transformation and for developing the country (Smolentseva, 2023, p. 235; Mhlanga, Denere & Moloji, 2022, p. 464; Kumalo, 2021: 178). Inas much as higher education plays a key role at a societal level, the researcher agrees with Cleveland-Innes (2020, pp. 159,162) who argues that contemporary higher education should focus more on its mandate to develop individual learners. This is important because all people who aspire to study at higher education institutions (HEI) see qualifications as vehicles to a better future (Pearson Jr & Reddy, 2021, p. 6; Brosnan et al, 2016, p. 845).

Higher education plays a transformative role in shaping the individual learner and allows citizens within societies to become who they really are (Smolentseva, 2023, p. 240; Moorhead, Bell & Bowles, 2016, p. 456). By their very nature universities produce certain identities since education is linked to identity formation (Karlsson, Muhrman & Nyström, 2022, p. 114; Morgan, 2021, p. 13; Nkhoma, 2020, p. 523).

The researcher argues that any examination pertaining to the field of higher education in South Africa must consider the political and structural factors that have shaped the higher education landscape. South African universities have become even more politically complex spaces in the last while. In 2015 the Fees Must Fall (FMF) campaign brought the transformation of higher education firmly into the spotlight. FMF highlighted the complexity of transforming Apartheid's legacy and universities are still grappling with issues of transformation and decolonisation of the curricula.

The political ethos has influenced the culture of HEIs, which continues to alienate Black learners and resembles American and European universities (Van Schalkwyk et al, 2022, p.625; Hendricks, 2018, p. 17). This means that Black learners feel excluded at these institutions. Black learners' struggles were confirmed during the COVID-19 pandemic which illustrated inequalities linked to education in societies (Chauke, 2023, p. 164; Makumbe, 2020, p. 621). South African universities migrated to online teaching which disadvantaged Black learners who lived in communities that lack the infrastructure and digital means for online learning (Chisadza et al, 2021, p. S114). The struggles of Black learners are relevant given that all the participants of this study are Black¹.

1.3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Adult learners that were the subject under investigation in this study often see education as a vehicle to find their possible self (Brunton & Buckley, 2021, p. 2702; Reay, 2002, p. 403). This refers to how the adult learner internally represents how they wish to be or not to be in the future (Scollan, 2019, p. 200). Researchers argue that adult learners have a clear idea of their possible selves and many of them actively reflect on their past and how it has impacted on their lives (Delahunty & O' Shea, 2017, p. 464; Stevenson & Clegg, 2013, p. 27).

The term learner (instead of student) will be used in this thesis, because of the implied agency in the term. A learner is active and autonomous, taking responsibility for their learning whereas student is the official, one-dimensional term for someone admitted to a university (Bremner, Sakata & Cameron, 2022, p. 6; Cleveland- Innes, 2020, p. 161). The agency of adult learners

¹ In this study the term Black is used for anyone who is not White.

must be recognised for several reasons, including that they negotiated multiple identities prior to entering university.

Adult learners despite being part of education for a very long time, have recently attracted more attention in research, teaching, and learning (O'Donnell & Tobell, 2007, p. 313; Gardener et al, 2021, p.1). However, they remain a neglected population in research on university learners. The little research that does focus on this population does not reflect the significant increase in the number of adult learners enrolling at universities (Iñiguez-Berrozpel et al, 2020, p. 66; Belzer, 2022, p. 281).

Many assume that university learners are young, entering university straight from school. However, research contradicts this (Rabourn, BrckaLorenz & Shoup, 2018, p. 22; Nel, Troskie-de Bruin & Bitzer, 2009, pp. 975-976). Fifty % of South African learners are older than 23, with the vast majority being undergraduate learners (Dykes & Green, 2015, p. 577; Walters & Koetsier, 2006, p. 97). In 2013, learners over the age of 35 comprised 17.4% of the learner population in the country (MacMahon, Watson & Zietsman, 2018, p. 2). These statistics affirm that learners may be older when they enter universities and thus their learning experiences require closer scrutiny. Many adult learners enter university through RPL and, despite the focus on social work graduates, the findings of this study can contribute to the extant knowledge in the field of adult education.

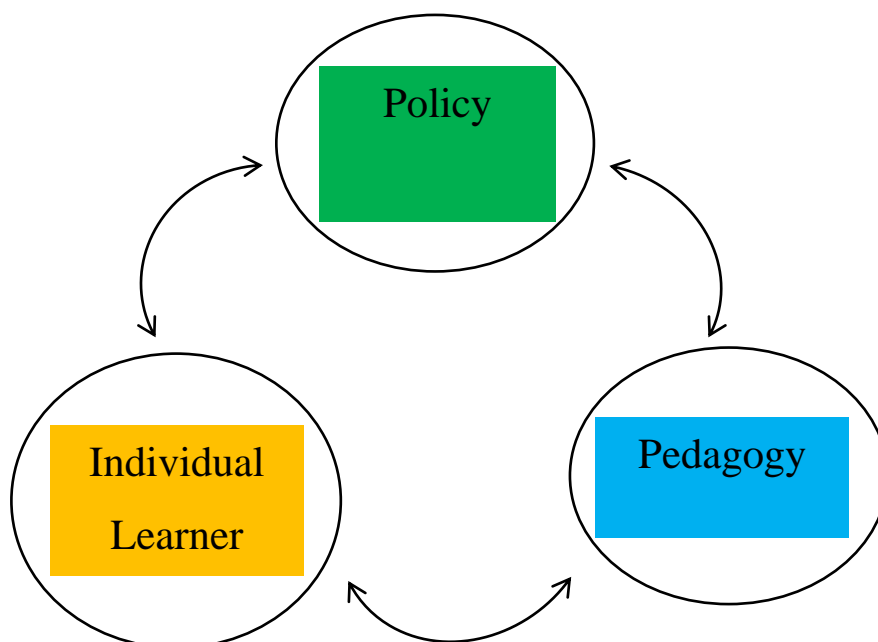
RPL — known by different names in different countries — presents learners with the opportunity to have access to tertiary studies (Maurer, 2023, p.1; Guimarães & Mikulec, 2021, p. 111). It emerged in America and the United Kingdom in the 1970s and is described as a “second chance” to achieve a tertiary qualification (Chen & Hayes, 2022, p. 2; Cooper, Ralphs & Harris, 2017, p.197; Hamer, 2013, p. 482). RPL links directly to a range of initiatives that include increasing participation in higher education, leading to more flexible and learner-centred curricula and decreasing the divide between work and higher education so that people can be more employable. It seeks to increase the number of skilled workers in a country which in turn enables the country to compete more effectively in economic markets (Stephens, 2022, p. 495; Ng, 2018, p. 390).

In South Africa, RPL is directly linked to the country's transformation agenda (Osman & Castle, 2002, p. 63; Gredley & Hodgkinson-Williams, 2022, p. 17). Many Black South African

learners did not meet entrance requirements because of the schooling available to them and/or they were forced to work because of needing to provide for families. RPL as a phenomenon in higher education involves three areas namely, a) national policies governing RPL, b) the pedagogy linked to it, and c) the individuals who participate in and experience RPL. To date it appears as if most research has emphasised policy development and the pedagogical aspects of RPL. There has been insufficient focus on the people who participate in RPL, specifically how they experience academic programmes.

RPL is a powerful mechanism that can promote transformation of society and individual citizens (Harris, 2006, p. 178; Miguel, Ornelas & Maroco, 2016, p. 189). Therefore, there must be a balance between the development of RPL policy at a macro level and development of RPL practices at a micro level (Frick & Albertyn, 2011, p. 153). It must be practised in a circular manner because the policy influences the pedagogy which in turn influences the learner. The feedback from learners should thus be used to guide the pedagogy, which should guide the policy.

Diagram 1: Relationship between policy, pedagogy, and learner



If RPL is to be truly transformative, the power it holds for individuals who use the process must be harnessed. The study sought further to understand participants' perceptions of how, if at all, the forementioned shaped their personal and professional lives. Part of the significance

of this study lies in the fact that it will provide first-hand evidence of RPL participants' experiences of the RPL process. In doing so, the study will add another dimension to the existing knowledge of a phenomena that is central to South Africa's agenda for transforming higher education.

Cherrstrom et al (2022; p. 100) and Brown (2017, p. 62) bemoan the fact that the transformative changes in the social identities of RPL learners are often not seen and that there is limited research on learners' experiences of RPL. Previous research on the micro level transformation of RPL focused on the participants' learner identities or their skills improvement or the qualities that improved because of engaging in RPL (Hamer 2012, p. 117; Brown, 2017, p. 61). They do not provide an in-depth understanding on whether individual learners' personal identities were transformed in any way after being admitted to university. Nor do they discuss how the learner understands and makes meaning of these changes, and their subsequent influence on their lives.

RPL is an under-researched area in social work and other professional programmes (Baumeler et al, 2023, p. 2; Valentine, Bowles & McKinnon, 2016, p. 495). The researcher concurs and questions whether RPL is being used to its maximum potential. The findings of this study can assist with ensuring that the practice of RPL be strengthened so that it can become what it was envisaged to be. The researcher engaged with academics in various disciplines in preparation for this study. She was concerned that the implementation of RPL does not appear to be a mainstream academic activity, because it is being implemented to varying degrees across different disciplines and universities. The researcher suspects that this is partly because of a lack of knowledge about RPL and a resistance to implement it because RPL is inherently different to what is deemed to be normative in the academy.

The researcher hopes that the findings can provide guidelines for the implementation of RPL in social work education because the aims of RPL are so closely linked to the values underpinning social work education. Scholars concur that RPL and social work share many values. These include social inclusion and promoting equity (Robinson & Goldingay, 2021, p. 4; Souto-Otero & Whitworth; 2017, p. 765; Gair, 2013, p. 73)

1.4 RATIONALE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The findings of this study can be used to influence the policy, pedagogy related to RPL, and the individual learner, i.e. because of the circular relationship between these aspects as proposed in diagram one.

The results of this study can shape RPL policies in several ways. Firstly, the findings can influence how policies that mandate the use of RPL in higher education should be implemented and monitored. The information can also shed some light on the policies around the admission and the assessment of RPL learners and whether the current practices facilitate access to HEIs. One of the challenges with current RPL policy is that it stipulates that RPL learners cannot account for more than ten % of a class (Mantashe & Nkonki, 2019, p. 43; Singh, 2011, p. 803). This is problematic because this stipulation is exclusionary when RPL is intended to be inclusionary. The knowledge generated by this study can generate debate about the policy stipulation that limits the number of RPL learners in a class.

The need for social workers to influence policy is supported by the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP), which is the professional body that all social workers and social work learners must be registered with. The SACSSP indicates that social work values both the individual and broader society. It notes that the international definition for social work emphasises that the profession promotes social justice, human rights, empowerment and the dialogic relationship between people and their contexts (SACSSP, 2017). If social work is to promote social justice, then social work programmes must produce graduates who can promote social justice. Social workers can only practice in a manner that promotes social justice if they are able to reflect on how they have developed personally and professionally and on the societal issues that impact on client systems (Esau & Keet, 2014, p. 455). It is therefore essential for social workers to understand macro factors affecting society and policy shapes these factors.

RPL directly challenges the persisting elitist and exclusionary practices that were entrenched by colonialism and Apartheid in higher education in South Africa. The data of this study can be used to interrogate the pedagogical values within social programmes and how RPL ties into the types of graduate attributes that programmes want to inculcate.

Scholars support this statement and argue that RPL is a special kind of pedagogy and has specific pedagogical values attached to it (Cooper et al, 2017, p. 200; Baumeler et al, 2023, p. 11). The information generated by this study can further contribute to producing indigenous knowledge of the influence that not only RPL but also a social work education can have on individual learners. The researcher posits that a first-hand account of RPL participants will demonstrate the value of implementing RPL in HEIs and in doing so strengthen the view that RPL is a core part of transforming higher education.

The findings can further be used to assist with programme development of social work programmes so that the needs of adult learners can be met effectively. The researcher has observed through her work with RPL applicants that they do not see their past experiences as relevant to the academic endeavour, nor do they see the transferability of knowledge and skills obtained elsewhere. She hoped that through this study she would be able to ascertain whether the learners can construct narratives that can link their previous experiences to their academic experiences. If RPL applicants understood that the knowledge they possess is legitimate and can be converted into academic skills and knowledge, their adjustment to university may be easier. These narratives of the intellectual capital that they have can be incorporated into the teaching and learning strategies of social work programmes.

The importance of this study is underscored by Hughes (2011, p. 689) and Martín-Estalayo et al (2021, p. 8) who posit that focussing on the individual learner and their transformation can improve the experiences of the learner. This can ultimately contribute to the overall development of the profession. The RPL process is powerful however the focus of this study extends to an in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences. This is essential because their experiences, if found to be positive, support the need for social work programmes to continue to develop RPL practices.

The researcher believes that adult learners must be supported as they have a significant contribution to make in the university and to social work. The value of this study further lies in the fact that it can assist with determining what academic support RPL learners require. RPL learners have usually had to leave employment and they have multiple responsibilities to contend with alongside their studies, which is challenging. If programmes offered appropriate support, the throughput of these learners may be positively influenced.

The necessity for understanding the experiences and internal transformation of social work learners and graduates can further be seen by the fact that self-awareness is fundamental to the effective practice of any social worker. There is a plethora of research that emphasises the need for social workers to be self-aware and to reflect on themselves (Lu & Chen, 2022, p. 462; Maidment and Crisp 2011, p. 410). The centrality of self-awareness in social work practice is affirmed by The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) which has included the need for social work graduates to be able to reflect on themselves in relation to their personal and professional identities as part of the standards that social work graduates must meet.

1.5 THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

This study included two of the three universities offering social work programmes in the Western Cape, South Africa i.e. the University of the Western Cape (UWC) and the University of Cape Town (UCT). The third university in the province does not accept learners via RPL for undergraduate social work studies. The researcher works within the Western Cape and aimed to examine the topic in order to understand the RPL landscape within social work programmes within the province.

1.5.1 The University of the Western Cape (UWC)

UWC was founded in 1959 as a part of the University of South Africa. The university's formation was part of the Apartheid government's strategy to keep education segregated. It was intended for Black learners but only enrolled coloured learners. UWC was recognised as a university in 1970 and enrolled its first Black African learners in the 1980s. Transformation is central to the university's mission, and the university sees itself as a key player in the national transformation of higher education (www.uwc.ac.za).

The university is a pioneer of RPL in higher education in South Africa (www.uwc.ac.za) and defines RPL as the “formal acknowledgement of the knowledge, skills, expertise and capabilities that people possess as a result of the prior learning that may have occurred through formal, informal or non-formal means – through self-study, work or other life experiences.” (UWC RPL policy, 2020). UWC has implemented RPL since 2001 (Walters, 2014, p. 1) and offers admission via RPL in two ways i.e. the Portfolio Development Course (PDC) and the Tests for Access and Placement (TAP). The former is a four-month course that prepares learners for compiling a portfolio of evidence that they can use to support their application.

The portfolio is assessed by academic staff and applicants are usually interviewed. The second route comprises of two tests. The first assesses learners' motivation and previous learning experience. The second is the National Benchmark Test (NBT) (www.uwc.ac.za). RPL is used solely for access.

1.5.2 The University of Cape Town (UCT)

UCT was established in 1829 and was initially known as The South African College, which was a boys only secondary school. Females were admitted in 1886 and the college became a university. The university formally became the University of Cape Town in 1918 (Jansen, 2023, p. 19). The university was a traditional 'White' university and first opened its doors to Black learners in the 1920s. By 2004 almost fifty % of the university's learners were Black. South Africa was the first African country to introduce social work education and UCT was the first university to offer the qualification in 1924 (Sewpaul & Lombard, 2004, p. 537; Mbedzi, 2015, p. 58).

UCT defines RPL as "making visible, mediating, evaluating and acknowledging the knowledge and skills that a candidate has gained other than through formal study to enable them to gain access to higher education even though they don't meet the traditional entrance requirements" (UCT RPL Policy, 2016). The university implemented its first RPL policy in 2004 and applicants were first admitted to the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) in 2010. Applicants at U.C.T. follow a special application process that includes the submission of a detailed questionnaire about their experience and motivation to study. They are subsequently interviewed by academic staff to determine their academic and professional suitability for the BSW. RPL is used solely for access. It is evident from the above that each research site has a different RPL process, however there is one similarity in that both sites require that applicants attend an interview.

1.6 RESEARCH TOPIC

Recognition of Prior Learning and Identity Transformation: Experiences of Social Work graduates in the Western Cape, South Africa.

1.7 AIM OF STUDY

The overarching aim of this study was to give a voice to social work graduates who were admitted into university through RPL and to examine the potential of RPL to transform the individuals who participate in it. The aim of this study was thus to understand the identity transformation, if any, experienced by social work graduates who were admitted to university via RPL.

1.8 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What were the participants' early experiences that influenced their identity formation?
- What changes, if any, have the participants experienced in their salient identities since participating in RPL and studying social work?
- How have these changes in their salient identities influenced their personal and professional lives?
- What is a best practice model for the use of RPL?
- What contributions can be made to the theory on the transformative potential of RPL at an individual identity level?

1.9 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To explore the participants, early experiences that influenced identity formation
- To explore any changes that the participants have experienced in their core identities since participating in RPL and studying social work.
- To understand how these changes in their core identities have influenced their personal and professional lives.
- To arrive at a best practice model for the use of RPL.
- To contribute to the theory on the transformative potential of RPL at an individual identity level.

1.10 RESEARCH ASSUMPTIONS

The researcher assumed that participants who engage in RPL find it profoundly transformative at a micro level and that it leads to core shifts in their individual identities. She assumed that they initially struggled with becoming learners and that their previously constructed identities were challenged because of becoming a learner. She further assumed that participants found studying social work both rewarding and challenging. The influence of RPL transcends the

meso and macro levels because these individuals engage with wider systems, and they influence these systems in substantive ways. She assumed that these changes were often unexpected and not concretised into the consciousness of the individual.

1.11 CONCEPT CLARIFICATION

RPL — recognises previous learning that has been obtained formally or informally (Stephens, 2022 p. 496; Hamer, 2012, p. 113). Many South Africans were denied access to formal education and RPL was designed as a process that seeks to equate and recognise informal knowledge so that a learner can enter a more formalised learning process (Boughey & McKenna, 2021, p. 44).

Identity — refers to the pervasive and established traits that individuals assign to themselves and that are assigned to others by them. The individual's environment shapes their identity because the person is in an interactional relationship with their social environment (Carter, Hernandez & Morales, 2023, p.223; Brenner, Serpe & Stryker, 2018, p. 58). Every individual has what Illeris (2014, p. 156) describes as a core identity which is defined as how the person uniquely experiences themselves irrespective of any changes or developments they experience. This core identity 'holds' all the individual's identities.

Transformation — in higher education, is about correcting the injustices of Apartheid and promoting access to education in South Africa (Ralphs, 2016, pp. 8-10).

Identity transformation — refers to any change in the core identity because of the acquisition of a new identity or changes in a pre-existing identity (Illeris, 2014, p. 159). An example would be that an adult learner must acquire the university learner identity. If the learner is a parent, how they may see themselves as a parent may change because of being a learner.

Higher Education — The Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 (1997, p. 223) defines higher education as any academic programmes that lead to qualifications that achieve the requirements of the Higher Education Qualifications Framework.

Lifelong learning — refers to the idea that people have the ongoing need to acquire new knowledge and skill to meet the ever changing economic and social environments, obtain

learning through education and acknowledges different forms of knowledge attained throughout an individual's life (Miguel et al, 2016, p. 179).

Adult or non-traditional learner — describes learners who do not enter university immediately after leaving school (Belzer, 2022, p. 282). This will be discussed further in chapter three.

Experience — along with meaning, is a concept in qualitative research to obtain an in-depth understanding of people's perspectives. There is a distinction between inner experiences - which comprise of the individual's emotions and will, and their experience of the external world i.e. lived experiences. These concepts are interconnected and form the whole experience. The person will have an experience when they reflect on a lived experience. Experience happens continuously, and the person does not necessarily stop to think about the experience (Daher et al, 2017, p. 67).

Meaning making — occurs when the individual makes sense of an experience and certain knowledge becomes available to the person (Daher et al, 2017, pp. 68-70).

Social Work — is interested in systemic and individual issues; its' overall purpose is to promote community and human well-being and to ameliorate social problems that detract from this well-being (Bogo et al, 2020, p. 1; Bell, 2012, p. 409).

The Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) — is the basic required degree to practise as a social worker in South Africa (Mbedzi, 2015, p. 58). This is a four-year programme and must be completed at an accredited HEI (Qalinge, 2015, p.13). There are currently 16 South African universities that offer social work training (Safodien, 2021, pp. 263-264).

Social Work graduate — refers to any individual who has completed a four-year BSW and can practise social work in South Africa.

1.12 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethics are especially relevant in social work research because of the profession's ethical requirements (Strydom & Roestenburg, 2021, p. 117; Sobočan, Bertotti & Strom-Gottfried, 2019, p. 2). Furthermore, research ethics in African post-colonial societies must be carefully

considered given the issues of power and subjectivity in research (Brear & Tsotesi, 2021, pp. 1-2; Afolabi et al, 2014, p. 625).

The researcher selected the research topic because of her interest in understanding the participants' lived experiences and she elected to do a phenomenological study which required in-depth engagement with the participants. The methodology raised specific ethical issues because theory notes that qualitative research requires specific ethical considerations because of its' highly subjective nature (Taylor, Killick & McGlade, 2015, p. 8; Punch, 2005, p. 276). The researcher was also going to conduct what the literature refers to as "acquaintance interviews" - where participants are known to the researcher (Roiha & Ikannen, 2022, p. 3) — and — she thus had to be very mindful of the ethics of the study.

The researcher knew that her manner of engagement with the participants was central to the rigour of the study and scholars emphasise that the researcher's behaviour is part of a study's ethics (Neubauer, Witkop & Varpio, 2019, p. 95; Strydom, 2001, p. 23). The COVID-19 pandemic required engagement with ethics related to online research, because some participants preferred to meet online. Some authors argue that the ethical issues pertaining to online research and in person research are the same (Kobakhidze et al, 2021, p. 3; O' Connor & Madge, 2017, p. 435). Others, however, argue that some ethical considerations in online research need special consideration and must be considered differently to face to face data collection (Melo & Dourado, 2022, p. 2; Sipes, Mullan & Roberts, 2020, p. 235).

The following ethical considerations pertain to this study:

1.12.1 Informed consent

Informed consent is seen as the bedrock of all research (Xu et al, 2020, p. 93; Shaw & Holland, 2014, p. 10). It implies that the participants are informed of every aspect of the study, especially the purpose of the research (Rassel et al, 2023, p. 38). The participants were informed of the aims of the study and were asked to complete a written consent form that included all the relevant information on the study and addressed some potential questions that they may have had (see Appendix A).

Internationally, and especially in post-colonial societies, informed consent can be challenging because of the unequal power dynamics due to cultural differences and experiences of

oppression (Visagie, Beyers & Wessels, 2019, p. 166; Brear & Tsotesi, 2021, p. 2; Loue, 2018, p. 86). The researcher anticipated that most of the participants would be Black women (as she is) but she considered cultural issues in obtaining consent. Mackenzie (2016, p. 168) states that language is essential in the transmission of cultural values. It is also noteworthy as part of informed consent because the person must understand the information (Visagie et al, 2019, p. 168; Afolabi et al, 2014, p. 625). The researcher pondered the effects of language on the provision of consent because English was not all the participants' first language. They were, however, all proficient in English.

The researcher considered her pre-existing relationship with some of the participants at many stages during the research process. For example, she was guided by scholars who note that in this instance, careful consideration must be given to informed consent (Roiha & Iikkanen, 2022, p. 8; Sobočan et al, 2019, p. 811). Informed consent also requires special attention when research is conducted online (Lobe, Morgan & Hoffman, 2020, p. 5; Engel & Schutt, 2017, p. 158). The researcher discerned on how to obtain informed consent for the online interviews. She opted to phone the participants to introduce the study and to request permission to send the consent form via email. This decision was informed by scholars who argue that the researcher must explain the research because participants do not necessarily read consent letters (Xu et al, 2020, p. 98; Gupta, 2017, p. 7).

The researcher acknowledged Newman, Guta and Black's (2021, p. 4) concern about obtaining written consent during a pandemic where people may not have access to digital signatures or printing at home. She, however, thought it essential to obtain written consent and participants were asked to initial the form and to confirm in an email that they were sending the consent form. They also had to return the consent form via email before the first interview. All the participants also gave verbal consent at the start of each interview.

1.12.2 Voluntary participation

Voluntary participation means that participants should be able to decide whether to participate in research. This is important because if participants are coerced into being part of a study, the results of the research may be compromised (Rakotsoane & Nicolaidis, 2019, p. 28; Carpenter, 2018, p. 6).

One concern was that participants known to the researcher may have felt obligated to participate in the study. She noted Engel and Schutt's point (2017, p. 707) that even where participants are told that they may refuse, they may feel obligated to participate. She continuously reassured these participants of their right to refuse and advised them to consider the request before agreeing to participate in the study. She suggested that they email her to inform her of their decision to avoid the possible discomfort of having to decline verbally. No one refused to take part in the study.

Upon agreeing to be part of the study, participants were told of their right to withdraw at any point during the study. The right to withdraw can be linked to protecting participants from harm, which is especially relevant when there is an existing professional relationship between the people who are involved in the research (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015, p.121; McConnell-Henry et al, 2010, p. 2). Participants should be reassured that they can withdraw from the research at any point; implicit in this is that their participation in the research is voluntary (Resnik, 2018, pp.143-146). The researcher confirmed at the start of each interview that the participants wanted to proceed. No one withdrew from the study.

Participants known to the researcher may have felt further pressure to respond in certain ways. Authors concur and argue that they may feel beholden to the researcher and give only positive feedback on questions (Taylor, 2011, p. 14; Loue, 2018, p. 87). These participants were encouraged to answer questions authentically and were reminded of her role as researcher.

1.12.3 Deception of participants

Scholars indicate that deception occurs when the researcher misleads participants, withholds and/or misrepresents information. Authors further argue that participants be informed of all information pertaining to the study to avoid any form of deception (Maxfield et al, 2022, p. 1091; Cresswell, 2014, p. 137). The participants were informed and regularly reminded about the purpose of the research to avoid any deception. The researcher was particularly concerned that the participants known to her did not feel deceived or that she had in any way abused her previous relationship with them. Roiha and Iikkanen (2022, p. 8) state that this ethical consideration speaks to the fact that researchers are clear about their identity within the study and what the purpose of the research is. This was adhered to. There was no deception of the participants in this study.

1.12.4 Avoidance of harm

All research carries the risk of harm, which researchers must be aware of (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012, p. 6; Rassel et al, 2023, p. 41). Beneficence is the principle that underlies this ethical principle; a general guideline is that participants do not face greater risks of harm than they would in their normal daily lives (Müller, Olesen & Rømer, 2022, p. 68; Ferguson & Clark, 2018, p. 354; Leedy & Ormrod, 2015, p. 120). The researcher was aware of the sensitive nature of the topic, which required a careful consideration of avoidance of harm as confirmed by Olson (2021, p. 8).

Where a pre-existing relationship with participants exists, researchers must pay extra attention to creating a safe space for the participants to share what they need to (Malacrida, 2007, p. 1332; Brewis, 2014, p. 856). The researcher used her social work skills to make all participants feel comfortable and contained during the interviews. She knew that this pre-existing relationship and her experience with doing interviews could paradoxically be disadvantageous to the participants because it could have resulted in participants revealing more than they intended to. Shaw and Holland (2014, p. 8) validated this concern by saying that a skilled researcher may elicit more information than the participants had intended to share. This was avoided by also noting that McLaughlin (2007, p. 65) says that the avoidance of harm extends to the researcher being deliberate about the purpose of all questions asked so that unnecessary information is not elicited. The pilot study enabled the researcher to see the depth of exploration that was necessary to obtain the data in an unobtrusive manner.

The Coronavirus pandemic increased the risk of harm to participants (Surmiak, Bielska & Kalinowska, 2022, p. 218). These authors highlight potential emotional harm, but the pandemic also raised concerns about physical safety, hence participants were given the choice of where to meet. The researcher contracted to inform anyone who chose in-person interviews if she had exposure to the virus or was symptomatic (which did not arise).

Online research poses a challenge in that it may be more difficult for the researcher to assess how the participant is responding to the interview (La Iacono, Symmonds & Brown, 2016, p. 6; Sipes et al, 2020, p.236). The researcher regularly checked whether participants needed a

break. On one occasion a participant requested a short break, because her child needed attention.

Research can benefit an individual, community, or institution directly or indirectly and how the study may benefit the participants must be considered (Amungune & Otieno-Umotoko, 2019, p. 48; Carpenter, 2018, p. 42). The participants benefited from the opportunity to reflect on their personal, academic, and professional journeys; all of them indicated how valuable they found the research as they made new meaning of their experiences.

1.12.5 Privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality

Social work shares many of the ethics emphasised in research (Müller et al, 2022, p. 64) including confidentiality. Confidentiality is underpinned by the ethic of respect for persons (Marshall & Rossman, 2015, p. 47) and is an extension of privacy because it refers to how the information that the individual shares is handled (Moriña, 2021, p. 1562; Loue, 2018, p. 90). The participants' identities are not revealed in the findings chapter. The researcher knew that participants would be sharing deeply personal narratives and that they needed to trust the confidentiality of the process to feel comfortable to share. She reassured the participants of confidentiality throughout the study. The avoidance of harm was discussed previously and Lahman, Thomas and Teman (2023, p. 679) conclude that the protection of the participant's identity is an important way in which harm to participants is avoided.

Online data collection may present further challenges with confidentiality (Archibald et al, 2019, p. 6; Lobe et al, 2020, p. 6). The researcher used a password protected computer to store data and information was only shared with her supervisor and the transcriber. Confidentiality is one of the ethical considerations that requires special attention when there is a pre-existing relationship with participants and the one way in which the researcher can do so is to clarify her role as researcher (McConnell et al, 2010, p. 3). As mentioned previously the researcher was always clear about her role as researcher with these participants.

Confidentiality means that the findings cannot be linked to any specific individual whereas anonymity implies that the identity of the participants is protected even though the researcher knows the identity of the person (Rubin & Babbie, 2016, p. 87; Rassel et al, 2023, p. 43). The researcher could not guarantee absolute anonymity given the study's methodology. The literature confirms that in qualitative research and where data is collected online one cannot

proclaim absolute anonymity (Roth & von Unger, 2018, p. 311; Eklund et al, 2022, p. 488). Each participant chose a pseudonym to protect their anonymity from the transcriber, who had signed a confidentiality agreement.

Respect for the person's privacy, which refers to the individual having the right to decide what he will share with another (Padgett, 2017, p. 83), is paramount in research. Privacy in this study also refers to where the interviews were conducted. Privacy can be a challenge with online interviews because the interviews happen in spaces where the researcher has no control of the setting. The researcher should also expect interruptions (Melo & Dourado, 2022, p.5; Rassel et al, 2023, p. 43). She emphasised the need for privacy with participants who met online and they ensured that there was privacy. There was one interruption in an interview, which was managed.

1.12.6 Debriefing of participants

Debriefing is recommended because interviews may generate emotions or concerns for the participants and they should be given the opportunity to resolve any concerns (Pascoe Leahy, 2022, p. 791; Mc Shane et al, 2015, p. 81). The pilot study revealed the need for debriefing and the researcher saw that the interviews were evocative. Both individuals who participated in the pilot study confirmed the researcher's observation. Strydom and Roestenburg (2021, p. 126) suggest that debriefing occurs as soon as possible after the interview. The researcher spent some time after each interview processing the participants' experience of the interview. They said that the interviews were an empowering experience where they gleaned new insights; no one required further psychological support. She also checked in subsequent interviews how the participants felt after the previous interview.

1.12.7 Compensation

Compensating participants for participation is unethical, however reimbursement for expenses incurred because of being part of the research is appropriate (Strydom & Roestenburg, 2021, p. 125). The form of compensation considered the context of the COVID-19 pandemic as advised by Newman et al (2021, p. 7). Participants were either compensated for transport costs or given an allocation of one gigabyte of data per online interview.

1.12.8 Publication of findings

Whilst publishing the findings is not a breach of ethics, careful thought should be given to whom the results will be made available (Alvesson, Sandberg & Einola, 2022, p. 24). The

participants need to be informed about how the results will be brought into the public domain, especially where participants are known to the researcher (Carpenter, 2018, p. 43; Brewis, 2014, p. 854). The participants were informed of how the results and thesis would be made available to the public and a written report of the findings of this study will be made available to the participants. Researchers must also ensure that they report on the research in a clear manner (Carpenter, 2018, p. 43). The researcher discussed presentation of all the content in the thesis with her supervisor to ensure accurate reporting of the data.

1.12.9 Avoidance of harm to the researcher

Whilst authors argue that the potential for emotional harm is greater than physical harm, there are instances where the researcher is at physical risk (Enyon Fry & Schroeder, 2017, p. 6; Ryen, 2021, p. 39). The researcher had greater concerns about her physical safety given the possibility of contracting COVID-19. The consent form thus required participants to disclose if they have had any exposure to COVID-19 or if they were symptomatic and participants completed a screening form (see Appendix B).

Recently scholars addressed the issue of harm to researchers where sensitive material is researched in the online space, especially where participants share deeply personal narratives (Hanna, 2019, pp. 525; 528; Enyon et al, 2017, p. 6). The researcher was not overly concerned about listening to emotionally laden narratives because she was accustomed to hearing traumatic personal accounts. Access to debriefing during data collection and analysis is one way of mitigating harm to the researcher (Shaw & Holland, 2014, pp. 8, 10) and she had regular debriefing sessions with her supervisor.

1.12.10 Researcher's competence

Theory indicates that the researcher must ensure that they can conduct the study, especially research based on sensitive issues (Pascoe Leahy, 2021, p. 784). This study used an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design. In this type of study, the researcher must have the skills to manage the interview sensitively and how and when to probe (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 42). The researcher has previously conducted research and she received supervision from a senior academic throughout the research process.

Researchers must be able to deal with the different cultural issues that may arise during the research (Sturm et al, 2022, p. 1; Arifin, 2018, p. 32). The researcher has extensive clinical

experience including experience working with diverse populations, so she felt prepared to engage with the influence of culture during the data collection. Her primary anxiety was around having to collect data online and she received assistance with this through engaging with relevant university resources. Kobakhidze et al (2021, p. 5) confirm that using online platforms require specific skill sets which can be challenging for researchers who are not *au fait* with conducting research online. Ultimately, the researcher had no problems managing the online interviews.

1.12.11 Transcribing

The researcher was behoved to consider the ethics around transcribing, because scholars say that there are ethical considerations to consider when an external transcriber is used (Hennessy et al, 2022, p. 1197; Cilliers & Viljoen, 2021, p. 9). These include being cognisant of how the participants are depicted and that respect needs to be shown when transcribing words into text. Underpinning this is the need to show respect for the participants and their views (Marshall& Rossman, 2015, p. 167).

The transcriber was trained on what was expected of her, as advised by Oluwafemi et al (2021, p. 419). The researcher also listened to all the recordings to check that the transcriptions were accurate reflections the participants' accounts. In service of avoiding harm to all, the researcher offered regular debriefing to the transcriber. She was reminded by scholars that transcribers are often forgotten in terms of the impact the study has on them (Malacrida, 2007, p. 1334; Hennessy et al, 2022, p. 1198). The researcher considered the influence of the digital nature of her engagement with the transcriber as advised by Wilkes, Cummings and Hay (2015, p. 30) because material was exchanged using online platforms. Two face-to-face meetings were held with the transcriber just as a check-in.

The above section discussed the ethics related to the study and the next section discusses the researcher's positionality/reflexivity.

1.13 POSTIONALITY/REFLEXIVITY

Scholars note that reflexivity is essential in qualitative research because of the subjective nature of the approach. The researcher must firstly examine why she has the chosen the research topic, and subsequently, the motivations for the chosen methodology (Ademolu, 2023, p. 2; Maxwell

et al, 2020, p. 2; Pollio, Graves & Arfken, 2006, p. 255). The researcher is deeply invested in her work and not separate from it. She could relate to the literature that argues that the discourse around reflexivity has changed over time. The shift has been from seeing the researcher as distant from their work and focusing on their knowledge of their emotions to a position where the researcher's emotions are central to reflexivity (Alvesson et al, 2022, p. 23; Penkauskienė 2019, p.155; Berger, 2015, p. 220). It is essential to look at emotions as both the social identities and reflexivity of the researcher are influenced by emotions (Reed & Towers, 2021, p. 3; Burkit, 2012, p. 460).

Dahal (2022, p. 44) concurs that the stance the researcher takes and their approach to the world are key in phenomenological studies. This stance contributes to the rigour of the study (Luong et al, 2022, p. 818). Furthermore, the phenomenological researcher is required to employ 'bracketing' to suspend their views of the world so that they may be open to explore the topic under investigation without judgement (Rietmeijer & Veen, 2022, p. 117; Morgan, 2021, p. 657; Finlay, 2008, p. 3). Given these cautions, the researcher realised that her reflexivity was core to the accuracy of the study.

On deciding to embark on doctoral studies, the researcher's immediate decision was to do research in the field of RPL. She realised that her interest in this topic stemmed from a resonance with the RPL learners with whom she has engaged. She lived abroad and returned to Cape Town to study at UCT. The researcher struggled with her social identity at university and found it difficult to reconstruct her learner identity. Her previous learner identity had been constructed in a very different academic space and her feelings of alienation made it very difficult to ask for help. Living overseas had left deep feelings of being the 'other' because she had no cultural capital to draw from.

Similarly, the RPL learners whom the researcher has engaged with enter the university with a very definite perspective of the world only to have this worldview challenged in several ways. In many ways she had to just as her learners do navigate two very opposing worlds where her personal identities were often in direct conflict with her learner and professional-in-the-making identities. The researcher was very mindful of the need to suspend her own judgement to avoid pre-empting her findings. She interrogated her own views and experiences in supervision, which was indispensable. The researcher is confident of the value of the study and that her investment in the topic has strengthened the study rather than detracting from the study.

She kept a journal of her thoughts and feelings about the research because scholars confirm that research can generate several emotions for the researcher (Olson, 2021, p. 3; Reed & Towers, 2021, p. 2). Alvesson et al (2022:36) highlight the surprises that can happen during a study, and Reed and Towers (2021:2) confirm that research has tended to neglect the positive emotions that can be evoked for the researcher. The researcher's biggest surprise was how intense the interviews were for her. The participants' honest and very deep sharing inspired her, and their narratives forced the researcher to examine her own narratives about her identities. Conducting the study was a profoundly transformative journey for her and her own growth has been a serendipitous aspect of the doctoral journey.

1.14 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

The thesis consists of the following chapters:

Chapter one: Problem formulation — The chapter introduces the study and sets out the various areas related to the conceptualisation of the study.

Chapter two: Theoretical frameworks — The core theoretical frameworks of the study and the theories within these are discussed in this chapter.

Chapters three and four: Literature reviews — The first literature review chapter presents a review of the literature pertaining to higher education and social work education. The second discusses literature on RPL and identities are highlighted in this chapter.

Chapter Five: Methodology — All the methodological considerations of the study are discussed.

Chapter 6, 7 and 8: Findings — These chapters present the study's findings. Chapter six focuses on the participants' histories prior to studying, chapter seven elucidates their experiences at university and chapter eight looks at where they are now.

Chapter 9: Discussion and Recommendations — In the final chapter the researcher discusses her findings and makes recommendations based on her findings and conclusions.

1.15 SUMMARY

The aim of this study was to address the lacuna in the extant knowledge on what, if any, the influence of RPL and social work education was on the participants' identities. South African higher education is a contested space, and this chapter presented the problem formulation and provided the context in which the study was situated. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated some online data collection. The ethics around the study were presented in the chapter along with the reflexivity of the researcher. The second chapter presents the theoretical frameworks of the study.

CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

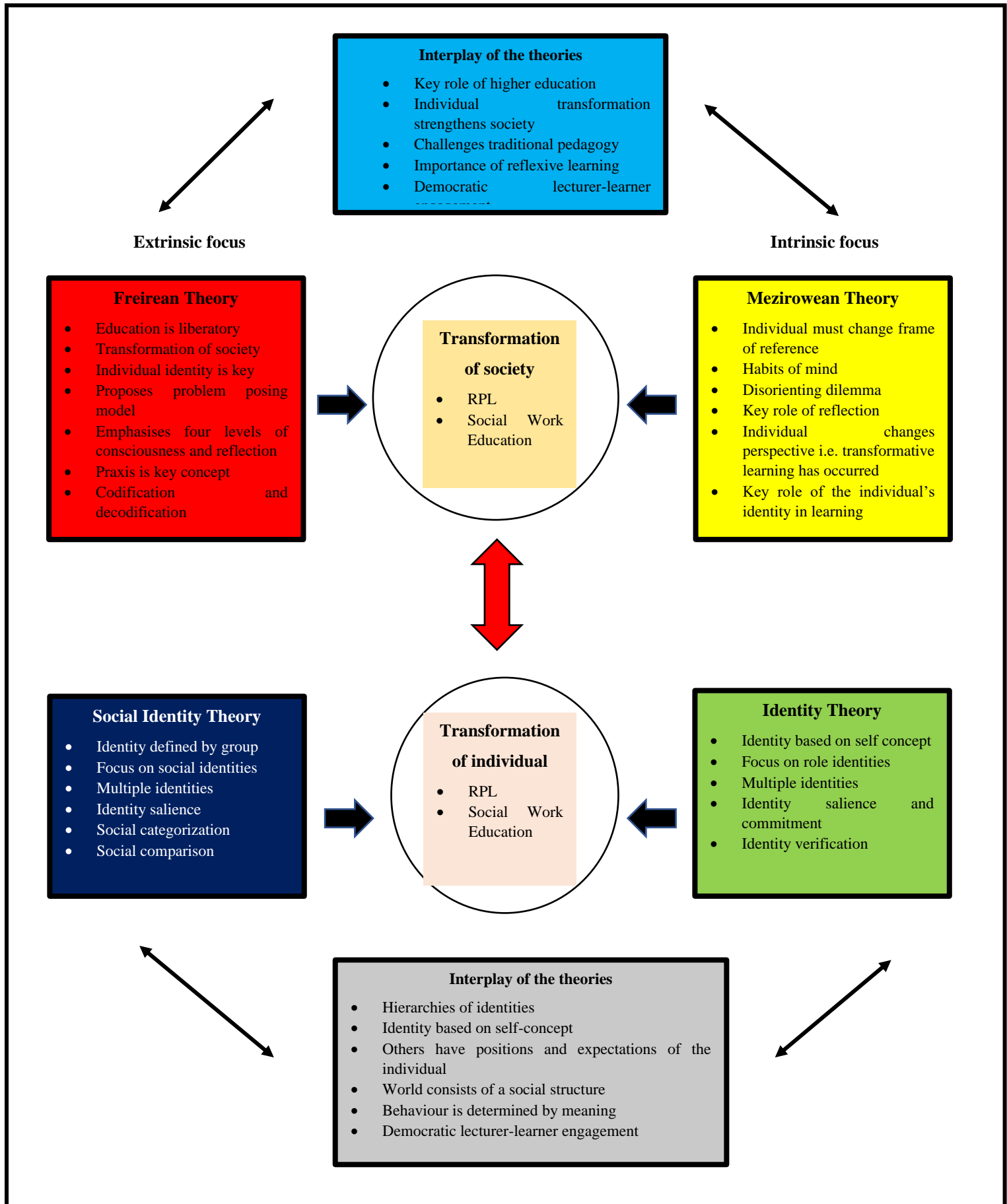
2.1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of the study warranted the use of theories that can account for the external and internal factors that influenced and shaped the participants' experiences. Two theories were selected to serve this purpose, namely: Transformative Learning Theory (TL) and Identity Theories. This chapter presents a detailed overview of these theories.

A combination of two different approaches within TL i.e. Freirean Theory and Mezirow's Cognitive Rational Theory were used ((Ryan et al, 2022, p. 4; Hyde, 2021, p. 380). Two core theories were used: Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 224).

The chapter firstly presents a diagrammatic representation of how the theories can be linked with each other and provide the lens through which the research problem can be understood. The motivation for using the two theories as frameworks is clarified in the chapter. A summary completes the chapter.

Diagram 2: The Theoretical Frameworks



2.2. TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THEORY

TL focuses on social action and individual change as well as the process and results of a specific kind of learning (Acheson, Dirkx & Shealy, 2022, p. 173; Eschenbacher, 2020, p. 317). TL is perfectly situated to frame this study given that RPL challenges traditional pedagogy. In addition, the sample of the study comprised of adult learners and TL, which includes several different theories, has been a key theory in adult education (Hoggan, Malkki & Finnegan, 2017, p. 49; Amponsah, 2020, p. 533). The researcher believes that the philosophy of TL directly speaks to the philosophy of RPL, which is to promote transformation.

TL aims to promote transformation in the private and public spaces of citizens. There is an emphasis on both public and private domains because the self is crucial in the learning experience and human relationships are central the development of an individual (Finnegan, 2022, p. 1; Acheson et al, 2022, p. 173). Within the private domain, the theory looks at how individuals develop. TL argues that building identity is a continuous task where the person works towards becoming who they are (Harrison & Leitch, 2018, p. 682; Hyland-Russell & Syrnyk, 2015, p. 516). The theory examines how identity develops from birth and posits that the child has a great capacity to learn. The nascent cognitive abilities present at birth become more complex as the child grows (Illeris, 2016, p. 49) thus the individual develops the ability to learn more complex material whilst at the same time also building their identities.

In the public space, education should assist citizens to promote co-existence and to work towards transforming society (Eschenbacher; 2020, p. 372; Vaikousi, 2020, p. 52). Dykes and Green (2015, p. 578) underscore the utility of TL for this study because it considers the lived experience of the learner and how transformative learning at university can be. Freirean theory will be presented first.

2.2.1 Freirean Theory

Freire was a pioneer in developing TL (Lima, 2018, p. 220; Buttigieg & Calleja, 2021, p. 169). He argued that people can achieve liberation through education (Bello, 2023, p. 225; Ho & Tseng, 2022, p. 2186). The philosophy of Freirean theory directly addresses the aim of this study as RPL can be a mechanism that promotes individual and social transformation.

Freire asserted that the value of education lies in the process of learning rather than in the product of it and the world cannot be transformed if the subjectivity of the world is not acknowledged (Goodman, 2014, p.1055; Freire, 2000, pp. 43-54). He noted that reality is not static and that individuals must endeavour to change the challenges they experience (Darder, 2014, p. 7; Lima 2018, p. 220). Underpinning Freire's philosophy is his belief that an individual's purpose is to be a subject who "acts upon and transforms his world" (Wiggan, 2011, p. 6; Adebisi, 2016, p.440). In this process an individual opens opportunity and lives a more meaningful life (Ramalho, 2022, p. 276). The researcher has observed that RPL learners come from challenging socio-economic circumstances and are often motivated to study to change their circumstances. There is thus resonance between her observation and what the theory posits.

Freire also focused on the individual transformation of learners. He contended that identity plays a central role in education and emphasised the need for learners' identities to be considered within educational institutions (Castro & Oliviera, 2022, p. 15). One of the aims of education should be to help people develop their sense of "selfhood" i.e. develop learners' identity (Castro & Oliveira, 2022, p. 3; Buttigieg & Calleja, 2021, p. 170). Freirean philosophy argues that for education to be transformative, the learner and lecturer must both be active in the learning process. The social identities of both, which become intertwined in lectures, must be acknowledged and developed to foster this transformation (Nweke & Owoh, 2022, p. 105; Machakanja & Sameul, 2020, p. 685).

Freire posited that every person can engage critically with the world through interaction with others. The individual, if supported in this process, can grapple with their personal reality, face the paradoxes in their reality, and then engage with it critically (Bello, 2023, p. 225; Goodman, 2014, p. 1055). A key Freirean idea is that there are four levels of consciousness (Lee & Hill Haskins, 2022, p. 105; Vaikousi, 2020, p. 43). The first level denotes "*intransitive consciousness*" where the individual does not understand their oppression. The second level is where people accept their reality and retain the status quo i.e. a state of "*semi-intransitivity*" (Ramalho, 2022, p. 278; Cruz, 2013, p. 173). The third level is where "*semi-transitive consciousness*" occurs and the learner begins questioning their world. The final level involves action, where through a process of *conscientisation* learners test their assumptions of the world, especially those beliefs that keep them oppressed, and start to change things by acting (Lee & Hill Haskins, 2022, p.105; Hegar, 2012, p. 162).

Another cornerstone of Freirean theory is that education is seen as a political endeavour (Lee & Johnstone, 2023, p. 3; Shin & Rubio, 2023, p. 200). By its very nature, RPL continues to challenge traditional pedagogical values and practices. Frick and Albertyn (2011, p. 146) argue that because of the issues of equity and redress linked to RPL in South Africa, it connects well to the Freirean objectives of education. He is best known for his perspectives of pedagogy. Freire distinguished between a traditional approach to pedagogy and a transformative approach that furthers liberation in society (Freire, 2000, pp. 32-33; Machakanja & Sameul, 2020, p. 685). He refers to traditional pedagogy as being based on a “banking” model, a highly paternalistic model which sees the lecturer as depositing information into the learner, who is seen as a vessel that needs to be filled (Bello, 2023, p. 227; da Silva Iddings, 2017, p. 25). Learners are not required to think critically, nor do they need to be active in the learning situation. They are thus completely unable to transform their situation (Freire, 2001, pp. 32-33; Govender, 2020, p. 216). The lecturer has all the knowledge and power in the teaching space because the lecturer determines what is taught and how it is taught (Rugut & Osman, 2013, p. 24; Torres, 2021, p. xiv).

Adult learners, according to Chen (2014, p. 407), do not learn optimally in the banking model type of learning environment. The researcher believes that at a micro level, lecturers must reflect on how they teach adult learners if they are to facilitate their learning. At a macro level, if universities in South Africa want to further the transformation agenda, then merely granting access to RPL learners is not enough. Freirean theory accounts for the shifts that academics need to make. He argued that anyone interested in transformation must embrace the problem-posing model (Freire, 2002, pp. 78-79; Khandekar, 2021, p. 35). This model focuses on the dialectical relationship between an individual and their world and emphasises the importance of the consciousness of people (Kastner & Motschilnig, 2021, p. 227; Cowden et al, 2020, p. 125). It has profound implications for the lecturer-learner relationship and the power dynamics within it. The lecturer is seen as being able to learn from the learner and both parties are responsible for learning (Freire, 2002, pp. 78-79; Brito & Ball, 2020, p. 24).

One of Freire’s most notable concepts is “praxis”, the ongoing interaction between the process of reflection and action (Nweke & Owoh, 2022, p. 105; Aitchison & McKay, 2021, p 343). Freire spoke of *codification*, a process through which the learner gets information and represents images and experiences, and *decodification*, where the learner can identify with a situation thereby understanding the situation (Rugut & Osman, 2013, p. 26). One can thus argue

that through decodification the learner gains insight. Burstow (1991, p. 200) argues that these processes can be introduced into social work education in several ways, for example offering learners extra support and encouraging them to identify with their clients who face disadvantage.

Even though Freire did not address social work education, he addressed the role of social workers in society and as far as back as the 1970s, social workers acknowledged the importance of Freirean theory (Burstow, 1991, p. 196; Narayan, 2000, p. 200). He collaborated extensively with social workers and saw social work as synonymous with change (Hegar, 2012, p. 164; Carroll & Minkler, 2000, pp. 26-28). Freire emphasised the substantive role that social work can play in transforming individuals and society. He further highlighted the role of a social worker as educator and emphasised that social workers take an empowering stance to education (Cowden et al, 2020, p. 123; Narayan, 2000, p. 198).

Scholars assert that social work education, if practised correctly, ties into Freirean philosophy because social work education requires that both lecturer and learner are seen as needing to reflect on themselves and co-create knowledge (Lee & Johnstone, 2023, p. 6; Meredith, Heslop & Dodds, 2021, p.3) The researcher agrees with this argument, which also illustrates why Freirean theory is a useful framework for this study given the population under investigation. RPL links the academy to the broader social issues in society and requires that the academy examines the power relations within it, what knowledge is valued, and how learners are seen as co-creators within knowledge production.

Another value of Freirean theory for this study is that it speaks to the broader social context and looks at the power and agency of the individual within this context. It sees the individual learner as a powerful agent who has the capacity to transform themselves and, in doing so contribute to the transformation of the society. This study in essence explored identity transformation and the transformative aspect of the theory directly addresses the key aim of the study.

The second theory within TL is Mezirow's Theory. Mezirow confirmed that his work was directly influenced by Freire's theory (Carter & Nicolaides, 2023, p. 28; Kreber, 2022, p. 139). The value of this theory for this study is that it can explain the internal shifts within the learner. Freire's work, which was the first attempt to frame adult education as transformative, focuses

on social justice while Mezirow focuses on the centrality of reflection and rational thought in transformational learning. (Netseane, 2011, p. 308; Kuk & Tarlau, 2020, p. 593).

2.2.2 Mezirow's Theory

Mezirow's doctoral thesis focused on adult education; he investigated women who had returned to study after many years (Hoggan, 2018, p. 36; Flemming, 2022, p. 3). This alludes to the theory being a useful framework for this study because RPL learners also return to study after an extended break. Mezirow's theory is a key theory in TL (Carter & Nicolaidis, 2023, p. 28) and has been used extensively in research in social work and social work education for example by Calderwood and Rizzo (2023); Rogerson, Prescott, and Howard (2022); and Bay and Macfarlane (2011). This appears to be because the theory, like social work, emphasises critical reflection. Furthermore, it can explain challenges faced by social workers and social work learners and how these experiences change their perspectives.

Mezirow asserted that the individual's experiences form the basis of critical reflection and transformative learning, which in turn leads to the person choosing to act in new ways, i.e. the person transforms (Hamman, 2019, p. 77; Hoggan, 2018, p. 38). He argued that people make meaning of their experiences, beginning in childhood where the most significant experiences are not conscious. One can only understand the meaning made of these experiences in adulthood (Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2022, pp. 666-667).

Mezirow studied how learners' - specifically adult learners' - identities are transformed through learning. He saw their transformation as a process through which the learner recreates their narratives of themselves through the learning process and he outlined certain steps through which transformative learning occurs. These steps are based on Freire's levels of consciousness and the process of conscientisation (Carter & Nicolaidis, 2023, p. 27; Vaikousi, 2020, p. 43; Mezirow, 2000, p. 19). The first phase in transformative learning is termed the "disorienting dilemma", which can take the form of a crisis or can be a process that happens over time where the individual reflects on their situation and finally relooks at their assumptions about the experience and the world (Morgan & Cieminski, 2023, p. 4; Flemming, 2022, p. 11). South Africa is in a unique position given its political history and the current socio-economic struggles faced by the country. Cox and John (2016, p. 304) challenge the idea of the dilemma being disorienting and assert that in this context, the dilemma may instead be labelled as orienting, where a learner is introduced to a programme that can change their lives. Whilst

these authors studied young learners, the researcher posits that this argument applies to adult learners who engage in RPL because wanting to study is usually driven by a need to improve their lives and not necessarily as a traumatic response to a crisis.

The second and third phases of transformative learning are based on self-examination and reflection (Carter & Nicolaidis, 2023, p. 32). Once the person has had the disorienting dilemma several things happen. Mezirow's theory is based on understanding the process that a person undergoes when they become aware of their deficient assumptions and gain autonomy and agency to decide on how they wish to behave (Calderwood and Rizzo, 2023, p. 139; Hodge, 2014, p. 165). When individuals experience an event that does not tie into their frame of reference it forces them to re-examine their assumptions. He summarised this as the individual having to change their "frame of reference" (Mezirow, 2003, p. 58; 1997, p. 5).

The person's assumed views of the world are termed "habits of the mind" and are very deeply embedded (Singer-Brodowski, 2023, p. 3; Kreber, 2022:144). These "habits of the mind" are significant also because they help the individual to make meaning of experiences (Hoggan & Higgins, 2023, p. 16). Adult learners are older, have more lived experience, and have very definite views of the world. One can argue that adult learners' assumptions of the world are more embedded and a decision to make such a significant change as studying would require a tremendous amount of reflection by the learner.

The influence of Freirean theory can further be seen in that Mezirow realised and argued that for learners to change their frame of reference they need to have critical awareness (Botha, 2021, p. 42; Mezirow, 1998, p. 1). Critical thinking and awareness are central to this theory and Mezirow argued that it allows the individual to unlock new opportunities for themselves, others, and the world. Critical reflection in the theory refers to a very deep reflection on events along with critical awareness. Hence, critical reflection often leads to increased self-awareness (Formenti & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2023, p. 105; Morgan & Cieminski, 2023, p. 5). In the process of critically evaluating their held assumptions, individuals must also try out new roles and go through a process of self-examination including their feelings about the situation (Singer-Brodowski, 2023, p. 4). If this leads to a change in frames of reference, this means that transformative learning has occurred (Mezirow, 2003, p. 61; DeAngelis, 2022, p. 586).

The new meaning that is made of experience is termed as “perspective transformation”. These changes in perspectives have an influence on the “habits of the mind” (Hoggan & Higgins, 2023, p. 16) and thus a change in perspectives leads to a change in meaning. For transformative learning to occur, the individual needs to let go of their assumed views of themselves and the world and to create a better world (Buttigieg & Calleja, 2021, p. 170; Christie et al, 2015, p. 11).

TL has not been without criticism (Singer-Brodowski, 2023, p. 5; Hoggan & Kloubert, 2022, pp. 667-669; Amponsah, 2020, p. 533). Michelson (2019, p. 145) argues that the theory does not account for how deeply entrenched an individual’s world view is and that the theory is too idealistic. Hoggan and Kloubert (2020, p. 296) counter this by saying that TL does indicate the deep embeddedness of an individual’s values and view of the world. Other criticisms include that Freire’s work lacked rigour (Khandekar, 2021, p. 31; Brito & Ball, 2020, p. 23) and that it has not explained how education can be transformed (Martin, 2008, p. 32; de Sapio, 2017, p. 58). Freire has also been challenged for not sufficiently recognising individual autonomy (Finnegan, 2019, p. 51) and for reiterating colonial values in education (Kuk & Tarlau, 2020, p. 594; Kee & Carr-Chellman, 2019, p. 90).

Critics of Mezirow’s theory argue that it focused too much on the individual and that it does not focus on social action or change (Flemming, 2022, p. 3; Kreber, 2022, p. 140). Mezirow and others counter these criticisms by saying that critical discourse must accompany critical reflection. Critical discourse implies that the individual is aware of the collective and underlying critical discourse is social action (Mezirow, 1998, pp. 70-73; Hyde; 2021, p. 2; Formenti & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2023, p. 107). The researcher has engaged with these critiques but believes that the theory does hold value for the study, especially given that she is using a combination of two TL theories. Transformative Learning Theory examines the transformative aspects of learning at both a macro and micro level. The learners’ identities can influence how they experience their academic journey and hence this study has two components which feed into each other. This involves also exploring the internal transformation that occurred during participants’ social work education. The central focus of this research is identity transformation and Bremner et al (2022, p. 426) confirm that Identity Theories are a useful framework for researchers studying identity development.

2.3 IDENTITY THEORIES

The term identity straddles several disciplines however the definition and use of the term varies significantly (Aqeel, Akram & Batool, 2023, p. 60; Serpe, Stryker & Powell, 2020, p. 2). Identity always applies to certain situations which either promote or hamper identity development and people have as many identities as the number of social spheres they belong to (Brenner et al, 2018, p. 59; Scanlon, Rowling & Weber, 2007, p. 228). Human behaviour is however not just because of extrinsic factors but also because of intrinsic psychological factors that must also be examined (Whanell & Whanell, 2015, p. 44).

2.3.1 Identity Theory

IT initially aimed to clarify and operationalise the concepts of the self and society (Stets, Burke, Serpe & Stryker, 2020, p. 193; Stryker & Stryker, 2016, p. 1). It emerged out of symbolic interactionism because of Stryker's concern that conventional personality theories focused on individual characteristics and ignored the individual's social context (Kuscul & Adamsons, 2022, p. 193; Brenner, Serpe & Stryker, 2014, p. 231). IT has branched into two different but interlinked directions. These branches will not be discussed separately, because despite their different foci, they are both part of the theory and fit together perfectly. They are said to be one unified theory and researchers are warranted to use both aspects of the theory (Terry, Hogg & White, 1999, p. 225; Burke & Stets, 2022, p.1).

Identity Theory focuses on identity in relation to the person's self (Walker & Lynn, 2013, p.153) and has become a key theory of the self in the last few decades. The theory distinguishes between the self and identities and indicates the important relationship between these two constructs. The self and identity are separate but the self always precedes the construction of an identity (Rocque, Posick & Paternoster, 2016, p. 47; Cinoğlu & Arıkan, 2012, pp. 1116-1117). According to Cinoğlu and Arıkan (2012, p. 1116), the self is constructed because of the meanings made by the brain of the interactions between the person and their social environment, and the self uses internal and external dynamics to create identities. IT accepts Mead's assertion that the self consists of many parts that are independent and interdependent on other parts, and which support or conflict with each other (Burke & Stets, 2022, p. 16; Robinson, Smith-Loven & Zhao, 2021, p. 215). The participants in this study are multi-dimensional beings who, as much as they belong to social groups and engage in normative ways, also have their unique 'selves', which must be understood.

An individual's self-concept evolves over time and individuals can change and adapt their identities depending on the requirements of the context in which they find themselves (Iyer, Jetten & Tsvirikos, 2014; Gross-Spector & Cinamon, 2018, p. 20). Self-concept refers to the 'self' realising that it exists separately and distinctly from society and self-concept includes how individuals make sense of who they are (Cinoğlu & Arıkan, 2012, p. 1116). IT thus provides a lens through which any possible internal changes of identity within an individual can be understood. The individual's self-worth is based on their self-concept and the person's self-concept is based on how they see themselves and their perception of how others see them (Ng & Feldman; 2007, p. 115; Burke & Cerven, 2019, p. 17). Self-concept comprises of cognitive aspects, which are based on the individual's identities, and emotional aspects, which are based on their self-esteem (Stets & Lee, 2021, p. 133; Stets and Burke, 2003, p. 130).

An individual's self-esteem is primarily based on their perceptions of how others see them, and a positive self-esteem ensures positive outcomes for the individual (Stets & Lee, 2021, p. 133; Iyer et al. 2014, p. 188). Self-esteem is very closely linked to the identity verification process and is fundamentally located in identities (Grindal, Kushida & Nieri, 2021, p. 44). The more identities the person has, the more positive the outcomes for them will be (Haslam et al, 2022, p. 162). Identities also suggest what behaviour is needed from the person (Burke & Cerven, 2019, p. 20).

The purpose of IT is to understand the links between individuals' sense of themselves, their behaviour in social situations, and the impact of social structures on these relationships (Burke & Stets, 2022, p. 2; Stryker, 1968, p. 559). Identities are seen as influencing society because of individuals' actions, and in turn society shapes the self (Owens, Robison & Smith-Loven, 2010, p. 478). Another core component of the theory is that the person's perception of and the meanings that they attach to themselves will be a key determinant to their behaviour (Brenner et al, 2014, p. 232; Burke, 2006, p. 84).

An individual takes on several identities during their life and has several identities operating at once. Identities can also become active at any point in the person's life (Brenner et al, 2022, p. 426; Burke & Stets, 2012, p. 2). There are three core bases to identities which in turn then form the basis of the self. Any discussion of changes in identities needs to examine all three bases as changes in any one will impact on the individual's well-being (Carter & Marony, 2021, p. 253), as discussed next.

The bases of identities

IT organises identities around three areas ie. social identities, role identities, and person identities (Carter, 2017, p. 284; Davis, Love & Fares, 2019, p. 255). Role identities refer to the meaning that individuals make of the roles that they play in relation to others who play counter roles (Carter et al, 2023, p. 222; Robinson et al, 2021, p. 216). Roles are viewed as the interaction between the behaviour, cognitions, and thoughts of an individual and the social systems they occupy (Stets & Burke, 2014, p. 413). Roles are said to be at the centre of identities (Owens et al, 2010, p. 480; Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 229). Stryker (2011, p. 1084) uses the terms role and identity interchangeably.

Person identities refer to the meanings a person makes that makes them unique, for example their values, moral standards, and character traits (Stets & Burke, 2014, p. 414; Carter & Moroni, 2021, p. 254). More stable and less open to change, they are the core identities of the individual (Carter & Bruene, 2019, p. 429). Social identities will be discussed in the section on Social Identity Theory (SIT). An important aspect of this study was to understand what identities the participants had prior to studying, which identities they acquired during their studies, and how their pre-existing identities had shifted, if at all. It was thus necessary to look at how identities are formed.

Identity formation

People are born into social categories and obtain their sense of identity from the groups they belong to (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 225; Stets & Serpe, 2013, p. 34). The self uses the groups that it belongs to to create identities and society employs culture to help or coerce the self into forming identities (Carter, 2014, p. 243; Cinoğlu & Arıkan, 2012, p. 1115). Identity formation is thus a relational process, where the values and structure of the group become second nature to the individual who is building their identity as part of the group (Stets & Serpe, 2013, p. 34; Sawatsky et al, 2018, p. 1381).

The primary socialisation happens within the family (Carter, 2014, p. 243; Stryker, 1968, p. 558). At birth an individual starts developing a budding self and their personal identities start forming the basis of their role and social identities (Owens et al, 2010, p. 479; Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 225). The individual is socialised and based on their subjective experience of the external reality, a process of identity formation begins (Stets & Serpe, 2013, p. 34; Scanlon et al, 2007, p. 228). The emotional climate within the family significantly influences identity

formation (Prioste et al, 2020, pp. 1521, 1531). Where parents are absent, children are neglected and suffer trauma, which may result in role reversal in that children take on adult roles, which impacts on their identity formation (Barker & Chang, 2013, p. 140; Schimmenti, 2018, p. 559).

The child shares role identities with their parents in that they accept roles given to them and they ascribe roles to their parents (Kiecolt & LoMascolo, 2003, pp. 27-29; Litton Fox & Bruce, 2001, p. 395). Along with parents, siblings play a central role in the development of the child and fulfil many functions for each other, including improving well-being. A positive sibling relationship is a protective factor against future mental health problems (Jones et al, 2022, p. 352; McHale, Updegraff & Whiteman, 2012, p. 913). The child develops their person identities because of internalising their cultural characteristics and making unique meanings of these cultural representations, which in turn then define them in a unique manner (Haslam et al, 2022, p. 162; Stets & Serpe, 2013:38). IT and SIT emphasise the importance of values in identity formation and the subsequent behavioural choices made by the individual (Neville et al, 2021, p. 4). There are, in fact, specific values attached to all roles an individual has (Russel, 2020, p.17).

Identity formation is a strong theme in adolescence and continues through the lifecycle (Rocque et al, 2016, p. 46). In adulthood, physiological, psychological and life changes precipitate further identity development (Fadjukoff, Pulkkinen & Kokko, 2016, p. 8). An important aspect of ongoing identity formation is the level of commitment that the person has to a specific group and the context, which in turns provides consistency and continuity for identity development to occur (Scanlon et al, 2007, p. 227; Tsarenko & Polonsky, 2011, p. 466). The above section denotes the fundamental role of the family in identity formation and development. Carter (2014, p. 244) cautions that the family is influenced by the environment in which it is located. Once again, the impact of Apartheid on South Africans is evident because Hall and Posel (2019, p. 3) say that 33% of children live with neither of their parents. South African children are often raised by alloparents i.e. family members who step in where parents are unavailable (Coovadia et al, 2009, p. 823; Perry, 2021, p. 198). The key concepts in IT in are discussed next.

Identity salience and commitment

Identity salience refers to the extent to which an identity will be active in different situations (Thoits, 2020, p. 39; Morris, 2013, p. 24). It consists of three parts i.e. the commitment to the

identity, the participation within the identity and the value expectations that accompany the identity (Stets, 2006, p. 94; Burke & Stets, 2012, p. 3). IT emphasises that identities operate in a hierarchical structure (Serpe, 1987, p. 45; Stryker & Serpe, 1994, p. 17) and the hierarchy of salience refers to how probable it is that an identity will be activated. Thus a very salient identity will most likely be activated in any situation where the identity is appropriate (Carter et al, 2023, p. 226; Thoits, 2020, p. 39).

Salient identities contribute in several important ways to the individual's life. Firstly, the more salient identities will determine how the individual views the world and interpret experiences; secondly, they guide the person and provide direction to the individual's life in times of uncertainty and when the individual experiences a transition these identities will shift (Brenner et al, 2014, p. 232; Ng & Feldman, 2007, p. 116). IT can provide an understanding of identity transformation because it questions how identity salience can change over time (Carter & Moroni, 2021, p. 254; Fujita, Harrigan & Soutar, 2018, p. 58).

Commitment refers to the level of importance that an identity has and is seen as the origin of identity salience (Carter et al, 2023, p. 226; Kuscul & Adamsons, 2022, p. 195). The level of commitment that an individual has to an identity will also be reflected in terms of how high the cost of losing or relinquishing the identity would be (Thoits, 2020, p. 40; Morris, 2013, p. 23). There are two types of commitment i.e. *interactional commitment* — the number of social relationships related to an identity and the bonds between the relationships, and secondly *emotional commitment* - the depth of affective attachment to certain others in social relationships (Walker, 2021, p. 247; Stryker, 2011, p. 1093).

The researcher has previously observed that becoming a learner influences the identities of the learner and Serpe (1987, p. 53) confirms that when learners enter university their commitment to their prior identities are challenged because of the new social relationships they engage in. This in turn influences their identity salience. This is especially the case where learners are unable to find opportunities to engage in relationships in accordance with their existing identities (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p. 287). The theory provides a useful framework for understanding the participants' experience of entering the academy and having to face possible challenges to their pre-existing identities. Identity verification, as another key concept, is now discussed.

Identity verification

Identity verification happens when others successfully confirm the presence of an identity. This engenders positive feelings in the individual and people thus always look to have their identities verified. On the other hand, a lack of identity verification leads to distress (Gallagher, Marcussen & Serpe, 2022, pp. 12; Burke & Harrod, 2021, p. 31). More distress is evident when the identity verification is unsuccessful because of a lack of verification from a loved one (Grindal et al, 2021, p. 43; Stets and Tsushima, 2001, p. 283). When there is a need for self-verification of the more intimate, group-based identities, more cognitive strategies are usually used whereas for the less intimate role-based identities, behavioural strategies are employed (Grindal et al, 2021, p. 43; Stets & Burke, 2003, p. 151).

Whilst IT focuses more on the individual in terms of identity transformation, scholars confirm that there are mechanisms in society that act as boundaries that either facilitate or hamper an individual's opportunities to access groups they may be committed to (Bochatay et al, 2022, p. 84; Stryker, 2011, p. 1094). Such boundaries include class and race. In South Africa it is easier for White learners to access university and even though a poor, Black learner may want to enrol at a university, it will be much harder for them to do so.

2.3.2 Social Identity Theory

SIT, initially developed by Tajfel, was consolidated by Tajfel and Turner at The University of Bristol (Turner, 1999, p. 1; Burford, 2012, p. 144). SIT has been highly researched and used within a range of different fields (Simbula, Margheritti & Avanzi 2023, p.5; Shteynberg, et al, 2022, p. 41). The theory has had some offshoots, for example The Social Identity Approach to Education and Learning, but these theories are seen as part of SIT (Jay, Adshead & Rykklief 2022, p. 2; Raskovic & Tacaks-Haynes, 2021, p. 147). Central aspects of the theory are that the individual's identity is shaped by and is reliant upon their social environment, and that an individual has multiple identities. Key concepts are social identity, social categorisation, and social comparison (Tajfel, 1981, pp. 254-255; Chen, Ng & Wu, 2022, p. 2; Cheng, Gu & Li, 2022, p. 3).

Social identities

Social identity is defined by Tajfel (1982, p.2) as how the individual sees themselves because of being part of a group/groups and how important the person feels it is to belong to the group (Chen et al, 2022, p. 2; Deaux, 2000, p. 2). The primary purpose of SIT is to explain how an

individual comes to behave because of their social identities (Simbula et al, 2023, p. 5; Raskovic & Tacaks-Haynes, 2021, p. 146). Aspects of SIT assisted with understanding the findings of this study given that all the participants belong to specific, established groups and with these groups came certain identities. Jay et al (2022, p. 2) confirm the utility of SIT for this study and state that it has been used to explain how learners' identities are transformed because of being learners. They argue that learners share the social identity of being a learner and that there are interrelated elements that can promote identity changes in learners.

Fundamentally, SIT provides a framework for understanding the way the social context and social groups the participants of this study belong to influenced their experiences of becoming a learner, studying, and becoming a professional. Both the social context and social groups would have had a powerful influence on the meaning made by the participants of their experiences. This is what the study sought to explore.

Social identities can be broken down into three concepts (Willetts & Clarke; 2014, p. 166; Burford, 2012, p. 144). Identity salience (discussed previously) is a central component of this theory. SIT focuses on the salience of a social identity which is determined by the group context, and individuals will engage in the identity which they perceive as most necessary within a particular context (Tajfel, 1981, p. 255; Scholz et al, 2023, p. 3). The theory also emphasises the notion of a hierarchy of identities. This implies that the multiple identities of an individual are ranked depending on the social situation and the individual's social identity is not the same in one group as in another (Willetts & Clarke, 2014, p. 166; Hornsey, 2008, p. 207).

Nested identities, the second concept in social identities consists of lower and higher order identities and are directly linked to 'formal, social' groups for example a profession. Identity salience is somewhat stable in nested identities. (Der-Karabetian et al, 2019, p. 9; Willetts & Clarke, 2014, p. 166). Cross-cutting identities are linked to social groups, which can be formal or informal, and are lower order identities, so they tend to have a proximal effect on the person (Willetts & Clarke, 2014, pp. 166-167). Social identities result in consequences for the person at a cognitive, evaluative, and emotional level (Brown, 2020, p. 6; Bliuc et al, 2011, p. 562). The cognitive aspect of social identities is upheld through two cognitive processes, the first being social categorisation, which is discussed below. The second cognitive process refers to self-enhancement and social comparison (Tajfel, 1981, p. 256; Mirbabaie et al, 2021, p. 24).

Social identities are cognitively seen in the form of archetypes that determine the beliefs, values, and behaviour within a category to enhance similarities within the category and differences from people who do not belong to the category (Tajfel, 1981, p. 257; Terry et al, 1999, p. 228). The evaluative consequence means that the members of a category are expected to define themselves in a certain manner and determines who belongs to the group and who does not (Bliuc et al, 2011, p. 562; Sindic & Condor, 2014, p. 5).

SIT helps us to understand the salience of the learner identity that emerges through the RPL process. This can be examined through the three key parts of that identity i.e. the cognitive, affective, and evaluative components of the identity. The cognitive component refers to how the learner defines themselves as a learner, the evaluative component refers to how the learner compares themselves to others who are not learners. The evaluative component also requires that other people see the individual positively (Fujita et al, 2018, p. 57). For a learner, being seen positively by other learners would increase their positive evaluation of themselves as a learner (Bliuc et al, 2011, p. 564; Whitaker, Whitaker & Cleary, 2006, pp. 312-311).

The emotional consequences refer to the fact that any individual can have an idea of how they see themselves in the future, for example Whitaker et al (2006, pp. 312-313) state that if the learner desires to be seen as a learner, this could influence the decision to apply for RPL. Identities are stronger in different contexts, for example the learner identity would be stronger in academic-related activities. In other contexts, this identity may not be as strong and could be seen as disruptive (Scheifele et al, 2020, p. e3), for example at home a mother may face the challenge of balancing having to study with caring for her family.

SIT highlights how an individual who wishes to improve their social identity can use certain mechanisms to do so, for example they can deny belonging to a group and attempt to join a more desirable group or use more favourable characteristics of the 'in group' to compare to others (Bochatay et al, 2022, p. 83). For RPL learners this could be a wish to be like others or a wish to be different from others. Being a learner is seen as desirable a means to a bigger end that goes beyond the RPL process (Whitaker et al, 2006, pp. 312-313).

The social categories that the individual belongs to play fundamental roles in their social identities. Social categories, i.e. groups, are governed by certain values and norms and

individuals identify themselves as being part of social categories by looking at their own behaviour, beliefs, attitudes and attributes in relation to these norms, which in turn influences their behaviour and feelings (Hogg, 2023, p. 4; Häusser et al, 2022, p. 2). The second key concept in SIT is social categorisation, which is elucidated below.

Social categorisation

Social categorisation is a process whereby an individual categorises the world into categories and identifies with certain categories (Zakiryanova & Redkina, 2020, p. 2; van Knippenberg, 2020, p. 62). The characteristics the person shares with other in the people in the group are emphasised and the differences between the group and other groups are highlighted (van Bezouw, van der Toon & Becker, 2021, p. 410; Hornsey, 2008, p. 209). For example, a woman who has a child will see themselves as a mother and will behave in a manner that they feel mothers are expected to behave.

Both IT and SIT highlight self-categorisation as vital in identity formation and an essential component of the person having a positive view of his identity (Häusser et al, 2022, p. 8; Jetten et al, 2021, p. 244). SIT focuses more on how identity is formed because of being part of a group whereas IT emphasises the roles that arise out of belonging to social categories (Cinoğlu & Arıkan, 2012, p. 1123; Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 225). IT argues that when an individual recognises that they share roles with others, they start forming their role identity in a manner that meets the standards of the role (Carter, 2014, p. 244; Cinoğlu & Arıkan, 2012, p. 1118). SIT argues that an individual will form identities based on comparing themselves to others in the same group (Shteynberg et al, 2022, p. 36; Islam, 2014, p. 1781). These theories are similar, but they emphasise different aspects in identity formation (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 234).

This theory is further relevant for this study because it can provide an understanding of the participants' experiences. RPL learners have been part of their social groups for longer because of their age. The changes that they must make because of studying could influence these groups. The response from these groups, in turn, could influence the learner's experiences and perceptions of their social identities. Furthermore, in attempting to comprehend the transformation that the participants experienced, the groups they belong to must be understood. This is because these groups comprise their cultural context, which has a profound influence on their sense of 'self'. SIT can explain this because it argues that for transformation of any context to occur, the bounded cultural context of the group must be considered (Rubin, Milanov

& Paolini, 2016, p. 231; Hahn Tapper, 2013, p. 418). The final key concept, which is discussed next, concludes the section on SIT.

Social comparison

Social comparison refers to the way groups use stereotypes to assess and value themselves in relation to other groups. This is done by a comparison between the features of the group and those of other groups in a manner that favours the in-group (Tajfel, 1981, p. 257; van Bezouw et al, 2021, p. 411). RPL learners enter the academy with several pre-existing social identities and SIT can provide an understanding of how the social identities of the participants were influenced because of being part of a group of learners. Bliuc et al (2011, p. 560) further indicate that the way the learner views their learner social identity will have a significant influence on how they learn.

Identity is constantly evolving and individuals can change and adapt their identities depending on the requirements of the context in which they find themselves (Stets and Burke, 2000, p. 233; Tasrenko &Polonsky, 2011, p. 470). Any identity change is predicated on the existing identities that the person has (Iyer et al, 2014, p. 191). The need to understand how identities change across the lifespan is important (Carter, 2017, p. 282) and because this was a core aim of the study, the next section looks at identity transformation.

Identity transformation/ change

Changes in identity can have either a positive or detrimental effect on the person's sense of self (Cox & John, 2017. p. 313; Carter & Bruene, 2019, p. 426). The greater the magnitude of the change in the identity, the more intense the emotional consequences will be (Carter & Moroni, 2021, p. 256). Shifts in identities can be expected or unexpected (Settersten Jr. & Thogmartin, 2018, p. 361; Iyer et al, 2014, p. 188), for example an unexpected change may occur because of sudden trauma and an expected change may be becoming a learner when the person has elected to study further.

Identity change happens when the individual experiences a stressful event or chronic stress (Golden, 2001, p. 260; Praherso, Tear & Cruwys 2017, p. 266) that disturbs the person's role identities. The person believes they can change, others support the change, and the person realises that the change is worth the cost of change. SIT argues that people may opt to change their social identities if they seek to belong to groups that are seen as more valuable than the

groups they already belong to (Aqeel et al, 2023, p. 61; Ellemers & Haslam, 2012, p. 382). Additionally, identities can be discarded or added to, the ranking of the identity can remain as is whilst the importance of it can change, or the importance of an identity can change (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 231).

There are two reasons why people choose to change their identities: where the person is unable to verify a certain identity or where a number of identities are activated at the same time (Davis et al, 2019, p. 265; Carter, 2013, p. 206). Identities shape behaviour when activated, and identity activation is a core part of the identity process (Burke & Stets, 2022, p. 54). Identities become active when a social situation is seen as having the same meaning as an identity. Carter (2013, p. 206) defines identity activation as “the process by which an identity is triggered and subsequently controlled by an individual”. Identities that are activated together often have very similar levels of salience and commitment; generally identities with similar meanings are activated together (Stets & Burke, 2003, p. 151).

One of the ways in which changes in identities can be explored is changes in meaning that are made when an identity changes (Carter, 2017, p. 284; Burke, 2006, p. 81). IT argues that behaviour has meaning and the conduit between identity and behaviour lies in the meaning that is shared between them (Stryker and Burke, 2000, p. 289). The meanings around identities are also related to the fact that for each identity there is a standard of what is expected from that identity (Burke & Harrod, 2021, p. 13). For example, a new mother may see her identity as mother as meaning that she must spend all her time with the child, but as she settles into the role, her view of what it means to be a mother may change. How she assesses her performance in the role is also based on what the social standard for being a mother is.

A second way identity change can be examined is the extent of the identity change, i.e. the magnitude of the person’s experience of how they have changed as a person, in a role or as a member of a group (Carter & Moroni, 2021, p. 257; Stets & Serpe, 2013, p. 37). The third dimension which can be used to assess identity changes is the direction of the change and whether the person sees the change as progressive or regressive. If the person sees themselves as more of a person, more part of a group or playing more of a certain role (for example someone who wanted to be a mother becomes one), they will see the identity change as progressive. If the opposite happens, for example a learner who wanted to study fails, the person will see the changes in their identities as regressive. (Carter & Moroni, 2021, p. 256).

The temporal aspects of identity change are also noteworthy given that some changes in identities take longer than others (Carter, 2017, p. 293; Whannell & Whannell, 2015, p. 46).

IT and SIT share similarities and have differences (Hogg, Terry & White, 1995, p.255). The differences in the two identity models stem from the fact that they come from two different disciplines. SIT has its roots in social psychology and IT comes from sociological theory (Davis et al, 2019, p. 255; Hogg et al, 1995, p. 262). Some theorists argue that SIT emphasises group-based identities and does not focus primarily on what happens at the individual level (Bliuc et al, 2011, p. 562; Thoits & Vership, 1997, p. 10). IT, on the other hand, clearly emphasises role identities and thus focuses more on what happens within the individual (Deaux & Burke, 2010, p. 318; Thoits & Vership, 1997, p. 108).

Critics of IT have argued that the theory has not received enough critical scrutiny and that it needs more systematic evaluation (Desrochers, Andreassi & Thompson, 2004, p. 66; Markovsky & Frederick, 2020, p. 164). Stets and Serpe (2016, p. 8) argued that the theory does need further development but this is discussed further by Stets et al (2020, p. 192), who argue that any theory is under development and evolves as more research is done. There are several other challenges to IT raised by Markovsky and Frederick (2020), for example the scope of the theory. They challenge IT based on their understanding of identity salience and commitment. The researcher engaged with the challenges and studied the responses given by Stets et al (2020) in their rebuttal and she is of the opinion that IT is a useful framework for this study.

SIT has also been challenged by Brown (2020, p. 10), who raises questions about whether SIT can be seen as an identity theory. He argues that SIT states that in a situation one identity will be salient and he sees this view as quite narrow. SIT has thus been said to be reductionist (Dashtipour, 2012, p. 16). The researcher, however, agrees with Burford (2012, pp. 143; 149) that this theory can be valuable in understanding how learners build their learner and professional identities. Despite Burford's (2012) focus on medical learners, the researcher argues that the findings he presents can be extrapolated to social work learners given that the medical degree and social work programme have several similarities, including the practical components of the degree and that learners need to establish a professional, helping relationship with people.

Other criticisms levelled against SIT include that it does not give enough credence to the individual's context and the complexities of group dynamics (Dashtipour, 2012, pp. 16-19;

Huddy, 2001, p. 138). Despite these criticisms, the researcher believes that using a combination of the two identity theories addresses all the questions related to the identities of RPL learners. The researcher posits that the individual identities and social identities of these learners influence each other and thus both theories are useful to frame the study. Using a combination of the theories is supported by Davis et al (2019, p. 25) and Stets and Burke (2000, p. 234), who argue that a combination of the two theories can help with understanding identity changes at a macro, meso and macro level.

2.4 INTERPLAY BETWEEN THE TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THEORIES AND IDENTITY THEORIES AS USED IN THE STUDY

Freire and Mezirow emphasised the importance of emancipation in society and the key role that higher education plays in this regard (Tualaulelei & Green, 2022, p. 433; Finnegan, 2019, p. 49). They argue that when the individual transforms, this strengthens the transformation of society (Morgan & Cieminski, 2023, p. 7; Vaikousi, 2020, p. 44). Freire and Mezirow both challenged traditional education policies and traditional pedagogy and stated that education must be empowering (Fleming, Kokkos & Finnegan, 2019, p.8; Finnegan, 2019, p. 54). They see learning in a constructivist manner and both view learning as subjective (Mezirow, 1997, p. 7; Rennick, 2015, p. 77; Cox & John, 2016, p. 308).

The importance of reflexive learning is argued by both Freire and Mezirow because they argue that learning informs the learner and vice versa (Ryan et al, 2022, p. 2). The importance of consciousness is thus evident in both theories (Vaikousi, 2020, p. 43; Baumgartner, 2012, p. 102). Learning for both theorists happens in social institutions whether through cultural traditions or in institutions (Rennick, 2015, p. 80). Another commonality stems from how the relationship between learner and lecturer is conceptualised. Both theorists argue that the relationship must be a democratic one (Hoggan & Kloubert, 2020, p. 299; Tualaulelei & Green, 2022, p. 433). Mezirow later also emphasised that lecturers contribute to change and his arguments on the relationship between learner and lecturer mirrored Freire's view. However, they saw the responsibility of the lecturer slightly differently because Freire saw the lecturer as the initiator of social action whereas Mezirow saw the lecturer as supporting social action undertaken by learners (Vaikousi, 2020, p. 48).

Irrespective of which identity theory one ascribes to there are core principles which identity theories share. These principles are 1) Behaviour is determined by how the individual defines

the world and makes sense of their interactions with it; 2) The world of an individual is comprised of a social structure which in turn is made up of different positions ; 3) Individuals perceive others as having certain positions and therefore have expectations of them depending on their perceived position; 4) Individuals also have expectations of themselves and make meaning of their own behaviour; and 5) Social behaviour is determined by these meanings and expectations. These meanings are negotiated and modified as interaction happens (Whanell & Whanell, 2015, p. 44; Deaux, 2000, p.2; Terry et al, 1999, p. 228).

Other similarities include that a central aspect of both SIT and IT is that the individual's identity is shaped by and reliant upon his social environment and that an individual has multiple identities (Gallagher et al, 2022, p. 2; Stryker & Serpe, 1994, p. 16). Both theories agree that there is a hierarchy of identities and that identities vary in terms of how central they are to the person (Kuscul & Adamsons, 2022, p. 198; Stets & Burke, 2014, p. 414). The concept of identity salience and commitment is also shared between the two theories (Ng & Feldman, 2007, p. 116; Whanell & Whanell, 2015, p. 43).

Transformative Learning Theory and Identity Theories both address the notion that individuals can change who they are (Ukpokudu, 2016, p. 114). Both theories assert that identity formation and transformation is an ongoing task (Harrison & Leitch, 2018, p. 682; Hyland-Russell & Syrnyk, 2015, p. 516). TL focuses on learning as the process that drives identity formation and transformation (Tett, 2019, p. 156; Hobson & Wellbourne, 1998, p. 78) whereas Identity Theories focus on internal mechanisms (Adamsons & Pasley, 2016, p. 224; Praherso et al; 2017, p. 266). The theories also address the important role that the individual's self-concept plays in the person's life, and both argue that the self-concept evolves over time. Both theories argue that the self- concept is shaped by the external environment and that identity and learning are influenced by social factors (Gross-Spector & Cinamon, 2018, p. 20; Tett, 2019, p. 157). Both theories also highlight the key role of reflection in identity work (DeAngelis, 2022, p. 586; Tarpey, 2021, p. 373).

2.5 SUMMARY

The researcher motivated her selection of Transformative Learning Theory and Identity Theory as the two overarching theories that frame the study in this chapter and provided a discussion

of the two theories that were used to guide the data analysis and generate the findings of this study. The following chapter presents the first literature review chapter.

CHAPTER THREE:

SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION WITHIN HIGHER EDUCATION

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The first literature review chapter focuses on higher education, more specifically social work education. An overview of the evolution of South Africa's higher education sphere is firstly provided. The chapter then focuses on adult learners and their motivation for pursuing higher education. Social work education will be expounded on prior to a discussion of salient issues in the academy. The chapter penultimately focuses on key related policies and ends with a summary.

3.2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

3.2.1 The evolution of South Africa's higher education sector

Apartheid has been described as an extension of colonialism (Mogaji, Maringe & Hinson, 2020, p. 3; van der Westhuizen, Dykes & Carelse, 2022, p. 2) and its policies resulted in Black citizens having limited access to education. The first South African university was founded in 1829 and entrenched white privilege in the country (Soudien, 2021, p. 136; Hendricks, 2018, p. 23). With democracy came the challenge to dismantle Apartheid's discriminatory laws and policies; the new government had a mammoth task to promulgate policies to correct the inherent structural inequality of the higher education system. Although South Africa has undoubtedly seen major structural re-alignment in education since 1994, the remnants of Apartheid persist (Idahosa & Vincent, 2019, p. 780; Chauke et al, 2023, p. 166).

Black schools are still plagued by overcrowding, under-qualified teachers, and a lack of resources (Kapp, et al, 2017, pp. 18-20). The concern about teachers is worrying because authors indicate that teachers shape learners' school experience and academic outcome (Timm & Barth, 2021, p. 5 Bietenbeck, Piopiunik, & Wiederhold 2018, p. 555). The challenges in the country's education system are not only related to schools and scholars posit that the condition of higher education is such that it is not addressing the needs of the population (Collins & Millard, 2013, p. 70; Themane & Mabasa, 2022, p. 7).

Class has become the criteria to determine who has access to quality education (Soudien, 2021, pp. 137,144; Mzangwa, 2019, p. 2). Apartheid ensured that race and class are linked; thus,

Black citizens continue to struggle with poor quality education. Language is another challenge that is central to the discourse on the state of education because it is correlated with the challenges around poverty, race, and class. Scholars argue that the language of instruction will have a profound impact on learners' academic achievement because it can either facilitate learning or significantly hamper it (Uleanya, 2022, p. 96; Chaka et al, 2023, p. 11).

Other contemporary challenges in HEIs include upholding excellence whilst expanding access, dealing with globalisation whilst reflecting the African reality, and how African universities should operate as indigenous institutions rather than being modelled on western realities (Bawa, 2019, pp. 253,254; Soudien, 2014). Thus, given these aforementioned factors, despite the substantial rise in the number of Black learners since 1994, especially at previously whites-only universities, there is still a significant difference in the number of Black learners who enter university compared to their White counterparts (van Schalkwyk et al, 2022, pp. 622-623; Kessi & Cornell, 2015, p. 1). Black learners struggle to transition into institutions and, because they enter the academy underprepared for tertiary education, the barriers to their academic success are amplified. This landscape influences the educational trajectory of any adult learner, and the next section discusses adult learners in more depth.

3.2.2 Who are adult learners?

The literature search revealed a range of definitions of non-traditional learners; however, age appears to be the most common factor. These learners are said to be at least 24 years old (Novotny et al, 2019, p. 110; Javed, Qureshi & Khawaja, 2022, p. 4). South African adult learners are seen as older than 23, having had a significant break between leaving school and studying further, and having usually had other employment and life experiences (Walters & Koetsier, 2006, p. 99; Walters, 2012, p. 254).

Classifying learners as non-traditional is contentious because scholars posit that it reinforces the view that there are 'normal' learners (February, 2016, p. 25; Scollan, 2019, p. 210). Internationally, the dominance of white, middle-class values automatically means that non-traditional learners are automatically seen as 'the other' and 'less than' and universities do not do enough to integrate these learners into the university (Trowler, 2015, p. 299; Woldeab, Punt & Bohannon, 2023, p. 5).

However, not all learners fit into the middle-class mould (Adu-Yeboah & Ndzama Forde, 2011, p. 402; Kasworm, 2018, p. 77). Adult learners are a heterogeneous group with different life experiences and histories (Sutton, 2023, p. 12). They often have families, work full or part-time, and have limited engagement with social activities on campus. They may also be going through a major life transition like divorce (Woldeab et al, 2023, p. 12; Osam, Bergman & Cumberland, 2017, p. 54).

3.2.2.1 Adult learners' motivation for studying

Motivation in this context refers to adult learners actioning their desire to achieve learning goals (Boeren et al, 2012, p. 249). These motivations, how they are taught, and the nature of the learning environment will have a profound influence on how adults learn (Chung & Chapman, 2023, p. 3; Dykes & Green, 2015, p. 577). It is thus important to understand the motivation that prompts their decision to study further, and this is discussed next.

Intrapersonal and interpersonal motivation

Intrapersonal motivation refers to motivation that comes from within the person whereas interpersonal motivation is motivation that is guided in relation to an external goal (Chung & Chapman, 2023, p. 3; Montgomery et al, 2019, p. 41).

Adult learners are more motivated by intrapersonal factors than their younger peers are (Roth, Lemos & Goncalves, 2017, p. 7; Javed et al, 2022, p. 16). Underpinning adults' desire to study further is often a deep-seated hope and they are said to have a more definite sense of purpose when they enter university (Gray et al, 2019, p. 503; Newton & Rowe, 2018, p. 147). Studying is seen by many adult learners as a way of achieving personal legitimacy (Saddler & Sundin, 2020, p. 337; Bohl, Haak & Shrestha, 2017, p. 168). The programme learners enrolled for also appeared to have a great impact on how these learners fared, and Hunter- Johnson (2017, p. 176) argues that adult learners prefer to enrol in professional programmes.

The intrapersonal hopes for adult learners include wanting better, secure employment, interest in the subject, and a desire for self-development. (Steinhauser & D'nn Lovell, 2021, p. 225; Busher & James, 2019, p. 95). For women, gaining a qualification can be a way of building a new identity and doing something that is for them; studying can provide them with respite from living in difficult environments (Merril, 2014, p. 78; Karlsson et al, 2022, p. 115). Many adult learners use studying as a way of dealing with a difficult personal background and, in South

Africa, these circumstances can include living in overcrowded, crime-ridden, and poorly serviced areas (Keet, 2021, p. 5; Saddler & Sundin, 2020, p. 337). Social mobility is another significant motivator for adult learners (Ronnie, 2016, p. 266; McCall, Western & Petrakis, 2020, p. 107) and this can be a way of escaping poverty. Mattarozi Laming, Morris and Lynch (2019, p. 45) found that the primary reason that adult males chose to study further was linked to employment but this also translated into having a better life, rather than just having better work.

Several factors determine how adult learners select a university including proximity to home, the chances of being accepted, and knowing alumni of the institution (Carriera & Lopes, 2021, p. 1351). The following section focuses on social work education.

3.2.3 Social work education

Social work in South Africa is challenging with high attrition rates because of high caseloads, poor and irregular supervision, lack of resources, and low salaries (Kheswa, 2019, p. 2; Joseph, 2017, p. 5; Calitz, Roux & Strydom, 2014, p. 163). However, the intrinsic rewards that social workers receive from their work are powerful motivators for them (Ho & Chan, 2022, p. 235; Jessen, 2010, p. 25) and their professional and personal lives often overlap (Dunk-West, 2018, p.10; Graham & Shier, 2010, p. 758).

Social work education is central to producing and preparing future social workers to render effective social work services (Joubert, 2021, p. 696; Simpson, 2015, p. 565). It aims to equip graduates with the knowledge, values, and skills to be able to practice (Kamali, Clary & Frye, 2017, p. 1; Sesoko, 2015, p. 63). Social work education seeks to produce practitioners who are competent, confident, self-reflective, self-aware, and who can deal with the demands of the work (Hughes, 2011, p. 688). Learners are introduced to very particular values and must learn what being a professional encompasses along with learning the knowledge of the profession (Makhubele, Matlakala & Mabvurira, 2018, p. 100; Simpson, 2015, p. 567).

Education does not happen in a vacuum and scholars argue that one must look at the socio-political context in which social work education occurs because it influences how social work is taught (McCulloch & Taylor, 2018, p. 2273; Joubert, 2021, p. 696). The history of social work education will thus be addressed first.

3.2.3.1 The history of social work education

Social work education began in America in the latter part of the 1890s (Simpson, 2015, p. 565; Dhemba, 2012, p. 1). The history of social work and social work education on the African continent has been chequered. Colonialism had a profound influence on social work education and some South African schools of social work actively promoted Apartheid (Ibrahima & Mattaini, 2019, p. 809; Hochfeld, 2010, p. 358).

Most African social workers studied abroad because social work education was not offered in Africa (Nnama-Okechukwu & McLaughlin, 2022, p. 4; Mupedziswa & Kubanga, 2016, p. 119). Social work education was introduced using Western based theories which has led to authors questioning its value on the continent. The dominance of Eurocentric theories is argued to be irrelevant in the African context (van Breda & Qalinge, 2018, p. 1; Kreitzer, 2012, p. 5). The challenge with learners being taught Western based theories is that these theories do not account for South Africa's contextual realities, nor do they prepare learners to deal with the cultural nuances their clients may present. Learners cannot therefore intervene in a way that promotes indigenous practice and indigenous knowledge is an essential component in the lives of the poor (Shokane & Masoga, 2018, p. 2 Masoga & Kaya, 2011, p.160). Scholars state that the decolonisation of the curriculum remains the most pressing debate in social work education across the continent (Nnama-Okechukwu & McLaughlin, 2022, p. 4; Engelbrecht et al, 2021, p. 557).

Another debate concerns the approaches being used by social workers and taught at African universities. Researchers argue that there has been over-emphasis on remedial approaches and insufficient focus on developmental approaches, which they argue are more relevant to the African continent, given its substantive macro-based problems (Amadasun & Gray, 2023, p. 535; Diraditsile & NESTEANE, 2022, p. 63). A developmental approach focuses on social change by focusing on the individual and the community; a remedial approach focuses more on clinical intervention (Amadasun & Gray, 2023, p. 546; Patel & Hochfeld, 2012, pp. 691,698). The researcher believes that learners should be exposed to both approaches. The continent has massive macro challenges but many citizens continue to deal with the significant, ongoing psychological consequences of these problems, which the remedial approach is valuable in addressing.

The BSW provides theoretical and practical training, and the following section discusses the field practice component. The field practice has been termed the signature pedagogy of social work education (Shulman, 2005, p. 52; Ketner, Cooper-Bolinsky & vanCleave, 2017, p. 2) and thus warrants further consideration.

3.2.3.2 Field practice

Accreditation bodies internationally recognise the fundamental contribution of the field practice in social work education (Pallas et al, 2022, p. 3; Chen & Fortune, 2017, p. 468). This component, also known as practice learning and field instruction, is integral to universities being able to produce effective, competent, and ethical social work graduates (McConnell et al, 2023, p.12; Ayala et al, 2018, p. 281). South Africa has specific outcomes for the BSW that are linked to the field practice (Beytell, 2014, p. 171; Engelbrecht, 2004, p. 206).

Universities place learners in a variety of settings (Caspersen & Smeby, 2020, p. 1; Mupedziswa & Kubanga, 2016, p. 120) and they obtain a range of different practice experiences. The literature clarifies that the field practice has several aims. The primary purpose is to prepare learners with the skill and knowledge to practice ethically and effectively (Ioakimidis & Sookraj, 2021, p. 168; Hay, Ballantyne & Brown, 2014, p. 26). Dhemba (2012, p. 3) argues that the field practice teaches learners about managing social and economic factors in society, integrating theory with practice, and dealing with their clients' problems. A further fundamental aim is to develop the learner's self-awareness and professional identity (Bogo, 2015, p. 318; Beytell, 2014, p. 171), and reflection is a core aspect of the field practice (Chen & Russell, 2019, p. 60; Bogo et al, 2020, p. 24).

This aspect of the BSW can provide several challenges for universities including struggling to find placements and competing for placements (Lane, 2023, p.36; Ayala et al, 2018, p. 286). Placements are regularly chosen because of convenience rather than the placement's ability to meet the learning needs of the learner (Hay et al, 2019, p. 25; Gray et al, 2018, p. 976) and organisations where social work is not the primary service may not value the social work service as being a professional service (Bogo et al, 2020, p. 2; Chen & Fortune, 2017, p. 468). Some learners are supervised by non-social workers within their placements or there is no supervisor within the placement who can supervise the learner (Papadopoulos & Egan, 2023, p. 612; Engelbrecht, 2015, p. 326).

Role of supervision

Supervision is a central part of social work as a whole (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014, pp. 10-11). Globally learners are assigned a supervisor who must monitor and assess the learner's practice (Mehrotra & Gooding, 2022, p. 2; O' Donoghue, 2015, p. 137). All South African social workers and social work learners must receive supervision and learners must be supervised by a registered social worker (Mamaleka, 2018, p. 214; Engelbrecht, 2015, p. 316).

Field practice supervision refers to the process where a learner learns to integrate the theory they are being taught in a practice setting under the tutelage of an experienced social worker (Nadkarni, Juvva & Nair, 2020, p. 1; Domakin, 2014, p. 727). Supervision is crucial because the learner's supervision experience will significantly influence how they experience their field practice and, ultimately, how they practice as social workers (Gushwa & Harriman, 2019, p. 17; Ketner et al, 2017, p. 2).

The emphasis on the educational function of field practice supervision distinguishes it from supervising qualified social workers. Supervision must have some didactic instruction where constructive feedback is provided (Joubert, 2021, p. 710; Ketner et al, 2017, p. 4; Domakin, 2014, p. 727) but educational supervision is not the only aspect. The supervisor has other functions including acting as a role model for the learner (Budeli, 2018, pp. 241, 244; Flanagan & Wilson, 2018, p. 573). In fact, the success of supervision is dependent on the relationship between supervisor and supervisee. The supervisor is a symbolic 'parent' for the supervisee and helps the supervisee gain insight into themselves (Karpatis, 2010, p. 518; Schamess, 2006, pp. 410-411).

Supervision can present obstacles, most notably the lack of regular supervision (Amadasun & Gray, 2023, p. 535; Hay et al, 2019, p. 27). Learners also struggled when supervisors were unaware of the theories that they were being taught, did not provide learners with enough information, and provided limited constructive feedback (Chen & Fortune, 2017, p. 468; Kamali et al, 2017, p. 7). Critical and unsupportive supervisors are also an obstacle (Coohey & French, 2017:2; Ketner et al, 2017, p. 4). Field practice itself can pose many challenges for adult learners who must juggle many responsibilities along with doing their practical work. These challenges could mean that they leave the programme or delay their studies, and these must be mitigated (Gushwa & Harriman, 2019, p. 21; Hemy et al, 2016, p. 216). These are discussed next.

Challenges in the field

The field practice happens outside of the ‘safety’ of the university, which can raise tremendous anxiety for learners, (Chen & Russell, 2019, p. 63; Budeli, 2018, p. 239). Learners for example must also contend with crime when they are in the field and learners’ safety whilst undertaking the practice is a global worry (Beytell, 2014, p. 181; Lyter & Abbott, 2007, p. 19).

Learners may feel unprepared for practice, that they don’t possess the skill or knowledge to work with their clients, and struggle with integrating theory and practice (Lane, 2023, p.33; Rehn & Kalman, 2018, p. 460). Beytell (2014, p. 180) found that learners struggle with working in agencies which required contextual knowledge they have not been taught. The learner’s countertransference or their own mental health issues could also be challenging (Chen & Russell, 2019, p. 63; Joubert, 2021, p. 711). This is significant given that social work learners often have their own history of trauma, and one must thus be mindful that the practice can evoke powerful emotions. Pallas et al (2022, p. 9) found that Black learners further sometimes encountered racism in their placements. Despite these challenges the field practice provides learners with the opportunity to practice social work, and they may be very excited about it (Chen & Russell, 2019, p. 67; Beytell, 2014, p. 184).

Social work education clearly has many facets and demands. On top of that, families often respond very negatively to the decision to study social work (Daniel, 2011, p. 903; Mosier, 2021, p. 8). Yet many learners still pursue the profession, and one must thus examine their motivation for choosing social work. This motivation is important because researchers assert that understanding this motivation facilitates learner retention and contributes to social work as a profession (Byrne, 2019, p. 702; Stevens et al, 2012, p. 17).

3.2.3.3 Motivation to study social work

Social work attracts learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds and who hail from families with histories of substance abuse, trauma, violence, or psychiatric disorders. Not only do these factors play a role in the decision to study social work but they also influence which area the learner will eventually practice and specialise in (Couturier et al, 2022, p. 1785; Earl, 2008, p. 122).

Several scholars have established that a wish to help others and the possibility of self-realisation were key reasons for pursuing social work (Butler-Warke & Bolgor, 2021, p. 1025;

McCartan et al, 2020, p. 3). This altruism extends to seeing social work as being able to alleviate poverty and many learners have a deeper desire to promote social justice and transformation in their community and society (Papadopoulos & Egan, 2023, p. 609; Byrne, 2019, p. 2). Learners may also enter social work because of their own religious or spiritual beliefs (Stoltzfus, 2017, p. 849; Rawlins, 2013, p. 68). Research further indicates that opting to study social work was often prompted by exposure to social workers (Byrne, 2019, p. 709: 1025; McCartan et al, 2020, p. 12.) The above section focused on social work education and the next section discusses the transition to university, which is a salient, well-documented concern in the academy.

3.2.4 The transition to university

A third of South African first year learners drop out of university (Motsabi, Diale & van Zyl, 2020, p. 72) and global research indicates that the first semester, which is when most likely when learners irrespective of age will leave the institution, provides the biggest challenge (Young, 2016, p. 17; Pedler, Willis & Nieuwoudt, 2022, p. 406).

Researchers argue that non-traditional learners' transition to university is more complicated because of their minority status, their life demands outside of university, and the fact that they have often been out of education for a while (Jama Mapesela & Beylefeld, 2008, p. 998; Singh, 2019, p. 348). Academic requirements produce significant stress for them because they feel the need to meet the academic standards in a very demanding intellectual environment (Osman and Castle, 2006, p. 521; Brenner, Stets & Serpe, 2021, p. 4). These learners struggle with not knowing how to use university resources like libraries; working with technology can exacerbate the situation (Turcotte, 2015, p. 1; Karmelita, 2018, p. 152). For example, internationally adult learners struggled with simultaneously negotiating online learning and family demands during the Coronavirus pandemic (Bellare et al, 2023, p. 34; Sutton, 2022, p. 7-8).

Adult learners often grapple with the university's physical environment and get lost, which increases their sense of dislocation (Mallman & Lee, 2016, p. 690; Christie et al, 2008, p. 570). Their transition to university is compounded by having to develop new routines. Males, for example, have reported needing to reduce contact with friends in order focus on studies (Mallman & Lee, 2016, p. 689; Hunter-Johnson, 2017, p. 177). Adult learners may also focus on working to provide for their families instead of on their studies (Goings, 2018, p. 163).

HEIs assume that the maturity of adult learners will ease their transition to university, so they don't give cognisance to the extreme shock that entering university generates (Scollan, 2019, p. 203; Singh, 2019, p. 347). These learners may feel unsupported and pressured to adjust quickly because of their age and life experience (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003, p. 610; Mallman & Lee, 2016, p. 691). This worsens the already stressful transition period.

There are two central aspects that facilitate the learner's transition to university. Firstly, the learner's school background and perceptions of university; secondly, the level of social integration they achieve at the university (Thomas, 2002, p. 435; Steinhauer & D'nn Lovell, 2021, p. 223). Adult learners may choose not to assimilate into the university and focus on achieving the qualification rather than on being at university (Gray et al, 2019, p. 591; Mattarozi Laming et al, 2019, p. 88). These learners often see themselves as learners but believe the social aspects of university are not for them; many used isolating as a coping mechanism (Mallman & Lee, 2017, p. 515; Sutton, 2019, p. 110). Another concern is that their other commitments prevent them from spending time with their university peers, yet developing a sense of belonging within the university was also important to them (Gray et al, 2019, p. 591; Singh, 2019, p. 348).

Agency is an important concept when investigating adult learners. Authors define agency as making informed choices and taking responsible actions to achieve specific goals (Karlsson et al, 2022, p.166; Matusov, von Duyke & Naumova, 2016, p. 422). Scholars note that adult learners and those admitted via RPL can find their own agency because of the challenges they face in academe (Delahunty & O'Shea, 2021, p. 472; Cooper, 2011, p. 53).

Mengistie (2022, p. 11) argues agency is closely linked to empowerment in that when an individual gains access to resources and exerts agency, they are more likely to be empowered. Whilst he referred to African female adult learners, the researcher argues that this applies to all adult learners.

Globally, the drive to increase the enrolment of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds so that they contribute to the global economic market has led to a focus on learner retention (Motsabi et al, 2020, p. 73; Cross, 2018, p. 44; Gale & Parker, 2014, p. 736). The departure rate at universities has historically been a global concern (Strydom, du Plessis & Henn, 2016, p. 233; Ramsey & Brown, 2018, p. 87) and Black first-generation learners from poor families

are more at risk of leaving university (Lavhelani, Ndebele & Ravhuhali, 2020, p. 138). Learner retention is elucidated next.

3.2.5 Learner retention

Despite South African universities' success with promoting access, they have not attained equity in terms of graduate outputs. Botha (2021, p. 42) stipulates that only six % of South African learners will graduate within six years. Almost half of university learners drop out of university (Uleanya, 2022, p.89). Social work was declared a scarce skill in South Africa and the retention of social work learners is critical so that HEIs can produce social work graduates to meet the country's welfare needs. Authors, however, note the high attrition rates of social work learners worldwide (Collins and van Breda, 2010, p. 14; Botha et al, 2018, p. 910).

Research on whether non-traditional learners fared poorer than 'traditional' learners is inconclusive (Deggs, 2011, p. 1543; Smith, Mahon & Newton, 2013). The dropout rate for adult learners is, however, high. This is because of responsibilities linked to their families; they encounter more barriers to learning than their younger counterparts (Woods & Frogge, 2017, p. 95; Remenick, 2019, p. 124; Biney, 2021, p. 17). If retention is to improve, adult learners' barriers to learning must be explored.

In the adult learning landscape, barriers are defined as those factors that will detract the adult learner from returning to university (Bellare et al, 2023, p. 34). RPL learners usually have encountered many structural barriers and they enter the academy with several pre-existing barriers. The researcher argues that supporting them to deal with these barriers can improve their retention rates. The literature concurs that learning is facilitated when learners are supported to deal with their barriers to learning (Naik & Wawrzynski, 2018, p. 604; Goeman and Deschacht, 2019, p. 815).

3.2.6 Barriers to learning

3.2.6.1 Internal barriers

Internal barriers stem from the learners' experiences, their psychological well-being, and their behaviour (Burton, Golding Lloyd & Griffiths, 2011, p. 27; Karakitsiou, Tsiakiri & Kedraka, 2021, p. 123).

The first difference between adult learners and their younger peers is their age. Whilst there are benefits of being older, including being more focused and having more life experience, adult learners often feel alienated because of their age (Radovan, 2012, p. 96; de Abrue Bengo, 2020, p. 73).

They face complex emotions because of being at university and scholars indicate that these learners have deep fears of failing and a need to prove that they can succeed. They often lack self-confidence, doubt their academic ability and struggle with feeling overwhelmed (Kupetz et al, 2022, P. 3; Byrd et al, 2018, p. 76; Lin, 2016, p. 121). Adult learners may have had negative experiences with learning and could feel that they do not belong at university (Lange et al, 2015, p. 84; Jokic, Albrecht & Smith, 2019, p. 4). They regularly encounter feelings of shame, frustration, and confusion when their behaviour does not conform to normative university behaviour (Karakitsiou et al, 2021, p. 126; Marandet & Wainwright, 2009, p. 116). The gendered nature of adult education is evident in that feelings of shame appear to be more prevalent in female learners (Karakitsiou et al, 2021, p. 126; Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003, p. 608). Whilst these feelings can be motivating, they can serve as a barrier if the learner cannot manage the feelings (Keita & Lee, 2022, p. 80; Falasca, 2011, p. 587).

Adult learners are eager in the first year and learn about 'acceptable' university and classroom behaviour from their younger peers (Munro, 2011, p. 120; Bohl et al, 2017, p. 170). Their eagerness frequently puts them in a double bind because lecturers want more participation but their peers frown on it. They counter peers' censure by stigmatising young learners for their classroom behaviour, e.g., using their phones and talking in class. Their feelings of disapproval allowed them to see their own academic commitment more positively and to claim themselves as responsible learners (Kasworm; 2010, pp. 146, 152; Mallman and Lee, 2016, pp. 693, 697-698). There are also external barriers arise from the spaces in which the learner lives (Falasca, 2011, p. 585; Hunter- Johnson, 2017, p. 177). These will now be presented.

3.2.6.2 External barriers

Most adult learners' stressors arise because of the roles that they have (Tumuheki, Zeelen, & Openjuru, 2018, p. 961; Johnson, 2021, p. 86). Gender is once again relevant as women face more barriers because of the greater physical and emotional demands in their personal lives (Cantwell, Archer & Bourke, 2011, p. 232, Biney, 2021, p. 8). Women often struggle with childcare and those with younger children are more likely to leave university (Keita & Lee,

2022, p. 80). This is amplified for single mothers, especially feelings of guilt because of limited availability for their children (Brooks, 2015, p. 510; Wladis, Hachey & Conway, 2018, p. 810).

Adult learners experience a process of identity formation which can produce challenges in their interpersonal relationships and previous identities (Brosnan et al, 2016, p. 848; Mallman & Lee, 2016, pp. -685- 686). Learners must face the disjuncture between their old identities and the new identities they acquire because of studying (O' Boyle, 2015, p. 93; Willans & Seary, 2011, p. 136). Women frequently struggle with resentful partners and may feel the need to choose between their relationships and studying (Tumuheki et al, 2018, p. 967; Biney, 2021, p. 4). They may feel isolated because of being accused by partners, family, or their community of disloyalty and desiring to be 'better than them' (Merril, 2015, p. 1866; Brosnan, et al, 2016, p. 848). Mosier (2021, p. 259) focused on first generation social work learners and reported the same changes in family dynamics for women that were noted above. Changes in family dynamics and feelings of guilt are, however, not limited to females; they are also a significant barrier for males (Mattarozi Laming et al, 2019, p. 45).

Lack of time can be a huge barrier for adult learners because they may not have time to meet all the academic demands due to other familial matters which need attention (Bergman et al, 2014, p. 92; Keita & Lee, 2022, p. 80). Non-traditional learners who commute to university also live with families who do not understand academic demands and may not give the learner the space, time, and support to meet academic demands (Walters & Koetsier, 2006, p. 105; Bohl et al, 2017, p. 169).

Finances are a barrier for adult learners and social work learners across the world (Groener, 2019, p. 55; Bagalow & Gair, 2019, p. 290). They may need to work to support their families, which further decreases the time for studies (Woods & Frogge, 2017, p. 95; Tumuheki et al, 2018, p. 964). RPL learners may have to resign from employment to pursue full-time studies and the concerns around an income to support themselves and family is an essential consideration. Tuition costs are a key factor internationally; one of the two most common reasons for learners leaving university globally is finances (Earl, 2008, p. 120; Bowers & Bergman, 2016, p. 146; Hunter- Johnson, 2017, p. 180).

Dykes (2009) found that fees and accommodation were a major concern for the RPL learners in her South African study. Another barrier is that learners, especially first-generation learners,

are unaware of how to apply for financial assistance so they miss the closing dates for bursaries. The implementation of The National Learner Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) is part of the South African government's attempt to assist poor learners to study further. Whilst this has meant an increase in learner loans, these loans only cover a fraction of the exorbitant costs of completing a degree (Breier, 2010, p. 5; Wangenge- Ouma, 2012, p. 835). The delay in payment of these loans or bursaries compounds the learner's financial woes (Phatlane, 2021, p. 74; Wilson- Strydom, 2011, p. 408).

South African adult learners without transport may be absent from some classes, cannot attend early or evening classes, or must travel such long distances to and from campus that by the time they get home, they are too exhausted to study (Wawrzynski, Heck & Remley, 2012, p. 116; Jama et al, 2008, p. 1001). Adult learners who must pay for childcare struggle even more with transport costs (Maidment & Crisp, 2011, p. 417). Dhemba (2012) indicates that the lack of a stipend for the field practice is a significant problem because social work learners struggle to pay for transport to and from their placements.

Despite these barriers, studying is not all doom and gloom. It has been shown to have a positive influence on adult learners' families as their children are more likely to attend university when they complete school (Ronnie, 2016, p. 265; van Rhijn, Lero & Burke, 2014, p.15).

Institutional barriers

Institutional barriers refer to how HEIs retain power by defining what comprises acceptable learner behaviour. Many universities do not see adult learners as valuable undergraduate learners because they do not conform to normative standards (Kasworm, 2018, p. 77; Unterhalter, 2012, p. 269). Sociologists highlight the importance of life events and social identities in adult learners' learning processes, however, the culture of institutions often demands that learners should be independent with little acknowledgement of the disadvantages these learners encounter when they enter the academy (Merrill, 2015, pp. 1860-1861; Mallman & Lee, 2016, p. 686).

South African RPL learners are usually Black and have had extensive exposure to racism. The literature addresses the significant amount of psychological energy and resilience needed to cope with the racism prevalent at universities (Pryce-Miller et al, 2023, p. 5; Lange et al, 2015, p. 92). The institutional habitus can also be a barrier. This refers to what type of knowledge is

valued by the university and how the institution furthers the values and practices of a particular class. Habitus refers to more than just the culture of the institution; it is also about the policies and practices within the institution (Morreira, 2017, p. 288; Luvalo, 2019, p. 185).

South Africa's education system favours certain cultures (Roux & Becker, 2016, p. 136; Hendricks, 2018, p. 18) and divisions are often maintained by using marks and academic potential to justify them, but ultimately they are about maintaining privilege (Furlong and Cartmel, 2009, p. 2; Bazana & Mogotsi, 2017, p. 5). The expectation that all learners must be the same further retains privilege at universities (Christie, Munro & Wager, 2005, p. 6; Daddow & Schneider, 2017, p. 1370). Along with the culture of the university, staff may be a barrier as they may lack the skill to deal with adult learners. They may not be aware of the lived experiences and their influence on adult female learners especially (McKay & Devlin, 2016, p. 351; Hornor & Brooks, 2023, p.9).

Academic staff disconnect from the other roles the adult female learner has, especially the mother role (Marandet & Wainwright, 2009, p. 118; Wilsey, 2013, p. 209), and this is a significant concern given the importance of this role for learners. University learners can further face a range of stressors that contribute to their barriers to learning. Manik (2014, p. 159) terms these stressors deprivations. This will be discussed next because of the necessity for social work academics to understand these stressors and their impact. Hughes (2011, p. 696) concurs and argues that social work academics have a responsibility of care towards learners.

3.2.7 Learners' deprivations

Deprivations can be of a socio-economic, personal, and academic nature (Manik, 2014, p. 160).

3.2.7.1 Environmental deprivations

Adult learners experience higher levels of stress than their younger peers (Tilley, 2014, p. 102). The researcher has observed that social work learners often come from challenging backgrounds. This is confirmed by South African authors who state that these learners often face the same stressors as their clients (Earl, 2008. p. 122; van Breda, 2013, p. 20). The significance of poverty will briefly be discussed again.

Poverty

Scholars write that adult learners and social work learners are more likely to come from poor socio-economic backgrounds (Groener, 2019, p. 56; Schenck, 2009, p. 306). There are several types of poverties and poverty is defined in different ways, including earnings and material resources. Unemployment is also a key factor in poverty and South Africa has one of the highest rates of unemployment in the world (Khalid et al, 2021, p. 1; Nwosu & Ndinda, 2018, p. 82).

Definitions of poverty further include deficits in well-being (Bagalow & Gair, 2019, p. 93; Unterhalter, 2012, p. 258). Part of being poor relates to “negative feelings of the self”, which include fear, feelings of being powerless and voiceless, and the worry that poor individuals face about the future (Nussey, 2021, p. 53; Sabi et al, 2020, p. 145). Keet (2021, p. 5) adds that poverty, forced removals and living in overcrowded situations perpetuate cultural trauma and are key forms of social misrecognition in South Africa. Poverty is clearly linked to inequality in the country (Nwosu & Ndinda, 2018, p. 82; Bhorat et al, 2017, p. 1).

The psychological sequela of poverty are also relevant because poor people have a greater propensity for physical and mental health problems (de Quidt and Haushofer, 2019, p. 127). Scholars further highlight the link between poverty and crime in South Africa. Exposure to crime and violence can lead to chronic psychological problems (Seff et al, 2022, p. 2; Bhorat et al, 2017, p. 3). The following section will focus on deprivations related to HEIs.

3.2.7.2 Institutional deprivations

As previously indicated, language is a factor in education in South Africa. Language determines who has access to HEIs and, despite having eleven official languages, English is the dominant language in education (Pearson Jr & Reddy, 2021, p. 4; Mzangwa, 2019, p. 7; Mwaniki, 2012, pp. 220-221). Language is a central element in the retention of most non-traditional learners and social work learners because they must study in a language that is not their mother tongue. This perpetuates the historical disadvantages of Black citizens (Chaka et al, 2023, p. 10; Mthombeni, 2021, p. 274; Turton & Schmid, 2020, p. 378). Language is a fundamental component of identity. It contributes to the feelings of shame experienced by adult learners whose mother tongue is not English when they compare themselves to other learners and is linked to belonging. These learners’ shame stems from their insecurity around their fluency in English (Aqeel et al, 2023, p. 59; Castañeda, 2017, p. 141).

3.2.7.3 Individual deprivations

The researcher is cognisant that there are a myriad of stressors that adult learners may face. However, given the scope of the thesis, the next section discusses a select few stressors.

Personal trauma or loss

Scholars internationally indicate that more learners are presenting with severe psychological concerns and several studies show that social work learners present with more mental health issues than other learners (Linton et al, 2021, p. 1; McCartan et al, 2020, p. 5; Vungkhanching, Tonsing & Tonsing, 2017, p. 2000). Adult learners, too, have often experienced trauma and illness (Lange et al, 2015, p. 93; Hyland-Russel & Groen, 2011, p. 68). Most South Africans live with historical trauma because of the violence associated with oppression and the country now has one of the highest crime rates in the world (Munyoro & Manhungu, 2022, pp. 308-309).

The literature distinguishes ill-being and well-being. In social work education, well-being includes training learners to be self-aware and to practice self-care (Tham et al, 2021, p. 11; Grant & Kinman, 2012, p. 612). Ill-being includes struggling with psychological concerns and, in South Africa, also includes the absence of resources and residing in dangerous contexts (Tan et al, 2018, p. 203; Walker, 2020, p. 59). Loss and bereavement must be considered because Morris et al (2017, p. 25) assert that the emotional results of childhood trauma can persist into adulthood. For example, the death of a parent in childhood can lead to traumatic grief that continues into adulthood (Bergman, Axberg, & Hanson, 2017, p. 41). Broadbent (2013, pp. 266, 268) found that therapists who had significant bereavement experienced the bereavement as a life-changing event that also influenced their personal and social identities. This argument can be extended to social workers who also offer counselling to clients.

Divorce

Social work learners may have had to deal with the divorce of their parents in their childhood (Dykes, 2011, p. 524). Marriage has always played a key role in African society, however, currently 50% of couples in South Africa will divorce. There are long-term effects of divorce and authors note the many emotional consequences of divorce for children (Andrew & Segun, 2019, pp. 98, 108; Ncube, Mulaudzi & Mudau, 2018, pp. 11486, 11491). These challenges include having to negotiate relationships with step-parents and relocation (Barker & Chang,

2013, p. 138). Relocation is said to be very traumatic for children and can have long term effects their mental health.

Residential mobility is argued to further social inequality (Anastasio, Leventhal & Amadon, 2022, pp. 96-97; Avci et al, 2021, p. 201). The next stressor to be discussed is teenage pregnancy because a third of South African women have an unwanted or unplanned pregnancy before the age of 20 (Stoner et al. 2019, p. 559). Given these statistics, adult female learners may have experienced teenage pregnancy.

Teenage pregnancy

Teenage pregnancy is a major health concern given that 90% of teenage pregnancies occur in the developing world. Race, poverty, and a negative relationship with parents are key risk factors for teenage pregnancy (Asmamaw, Tafere & Ngenash, 2023, p.2; Mkhwanazi, 2014:1085). There are several significant consequences of an unplanned pregnancy and a central one — especially for Black women — dropping out of school (Jochim et al, 2022, p.2; Stoner et al. 2019, p. 561). A teenage pregnancy also interferes with the career aspirations of women (Mjwara & Maharaj, 2018, p. 137). The final individual stressor is substance abuse, which will be discussed next.

Substance Abuse

Nyandu and Ross (2020, p. 528) found worrying levels of alcohol consumption by social work learners. Authors add that substance abuse is also common in the families of these learners (Couturier et al, 2022, p. 1788; Pillay and Bundhoo, 2011, p. 418). In families where there is substance abuse, learners may have had to take on adult roles during their childhood e.g., they often end up parenting younger siblings. This means that learners must live with their own unmet emotional needs and occupy dual identities of child and adult at the same time (Pasternak & Schier, 2012, p. 52).

Where learners have psychosocial concerns, they may use poor coping skills including self-isolating, which can originate in childhood (Matthews et al, 2018, p. 273; Garrett, Liu & Young, 2017, p. 335). Scholars note that resilience assists learners with completing university and adult learners have been shown to be highly resilient (Abood & Hmaid, 2023, p. 55; Sutton, 2019, p. 100). This is discussed next.

Resilience in adult learners

Resilience is defined as an individual's ability to deal with challenging environmental stressors and high levels of pressure, without being negatively affected (Rajan-Rankin 2014, p. 2426; Kinman & Grant, 2011, p. 262).

There is some debate whether adult learners are more resilient than their younger counterparts, but there is agreement that the stressors that they experience are different (Chung, Turnbull & Chur-Hansen, 2017, p. 78,83; Munro & Pooley, 2009, p. 53). Furthermore, social work is a very stressful profession (Uclaray, 2023, p. 101; Stanley, Buvanewari & Arumugam, 2021, p. 41) and social work learners need to be resilient. An ability to be reflective increases resilience in social work learners and self-care is argued to be an important means of building resilience (Uclaray, 2023, pp.111; Brewer et al, 2019, p. 1114).

Fostering resilience means that learners require support beyond the university because research reveals that people who have social support are more likely to be resilient under challenging circumstances (Abood & Hmaid, 2023, p. 48; Sanchez-Moreno et al, 2015, p. 2370). If HEIs seek to increase the numbers of adult learners, then these learners must be offered support that speaks directly to their needs (Bowers & Bergman, 2016, p. 148; Remenick, 2019, p. 114). Where learners are not provided with support for their personal stressors, their risk of dropping out increases (Eloff & Graham, 2020, p. 1; Lavhelani et al, 2020, p. 141). Whilst Singh (2011) and Dykes (2009) found that RPL learners did not require extra support, they also argue that learner support is essential.

3.2.8 Learner support

Authors distinguish between formal and informal social support, and indicate the importance of informal social support networks for both adult and social work learners (Agpar, 2020, p. 927; Papadaki et al, 2012, p. 829). Support from family was a significant predictor of adult learners' success (Carreira & Lopes, 2021, p. 1353; Wong, 2018, p. 7) and many adult and social work learners rely on their younger peers for support (Collins, 2020, p. 117; Papadaki et al, 2012:821). Contact with other adult learners is also very beneficial (Hornor & Brooks, 2023, p. 9).

3.2.8.1 Institutional support

Universities should have structures to address the specific learning and cultural needs of adult learners and should be spaces where they are treated with respect (Urban & Jirsáková, 2021, p. 154; Cleveland- Innes, 2020, p. 170). This includes encouraging adult learners to integrate through orientation programmes and the provision of mentors (Chapman, 2017, p. 118; Goings, 2018, p. 164). Appropriate administrative processes and providing effective curriculum advice are further sources of support for adult learners (Bowl, 2001, p. 152; Glowacki-Dudka, 2019, p. 85).

The high prevalence of psychiatric problems amongst learners confirms the necessity of mental health services for learners. Internationally, scholars indicate that adult and social work learners are more likely to present at learner counselling centres and HEIs should further consider how to offer specific support for learners doing professional programmes because these learners must learn how to be a professional whilst also being a learner (Wright, 2018, p. 116; Howells & Bald, 2020, p. 573). Bantjes et al (2020, p. 2) argue that the provision of mental health services by South African universities is an essential aspect of transformation given the country's history of unequal access to health care. The literature addresses the principles of trauma informed classrooms and these include providing safe classroom spaces, peer support structures, positive engagement with lectures and schools and universities being aware culturally sensitive spaces (Miller, Flint Stipp & Bazemore-Bertrand, 2023, pp. 56-58; Cavanaugh, 2016, pp, 41-44).

3.2.8.2 Relationships with staff

Studies have found that found that staff's attitudes and relationships with adult RPL learners was integral to learners completing their degrees (Francois, 2014, p. 31; Stephens, 2022, p. 503). Positive relationships with staff benefit adult learners academically and enhances the psychosocial functioning of the learners, for example it enhances the emotional confidence and social adjustment of the learner (Lin 2020, p. 207; Marandet & Wainwright, 2009, p. 120).

TL addresses the type of relationship that lecturers should aim to establish with learners. Freire, for example, argued that this relationship can allow learners to critically reflect on their role in the world and the interaction between learner and lecturer is one where both parties develop (Gunnlaugson et al, 2023, p. 91; Tennant, 2012, pp. 55- 73). The researcher believes that the BSW requires a learner-centred approach because of the need for learners to reflect and

critically engage with clients and their academic work. A learner-centred approach has been shown to increase learning, promote autonomy, and increase the learner's ability to critically engage with and reflect on their work (Bremner et al, 2022, pp. 1-3; Arif, 2021, p. 41). More importantly, this kind of approach can facilitate transformation within the learner (Blackie, Case & Jawitz, 2010, p. 638).

This researcher argues that if higher education is to be learner-centred, the focus must be on the learners and how they learn. Lecturers' teaching skills are thus essential, especially the ability to demonstrate the theory through practical examples (Howells & Bald, 2020, p. 570; Simpson et al, 2010, p. 730). Supervisors' support is essential for learners and increases their resilience in the field (Bogo et al, 2020, p. 23; Chen & Russell, 2019, p. 72; 247; Cleak & Smith, 2012, p.). A good supervisor encourages learners to reflect on their experiences in the field and stimulates the growing of the 'self' in the learner (Coohey & French, 2017, p. 7; Domakin, 2014, p. 728). The final section in this chapter focuses on policies related to higher education and social work education.

3.3 POLICY AND LEGISLATION

Since 1994 there has been a move towards framing social work education and social work within a social development perspective (Engelbrecht, 2019, p. 306; Patel, 2005, p. 66). South African policies have endorsed this move as seen in The White Paper for Social Welfare of 1997 and as stipulated by SAQA in 2007 (Lombard & Twikirize, 2014, p. 318; Hochfeld, 2010, p. 357). The Social Service Professions Act no 110 of 1978, now The Social Service Professions Act 102 of 1998, is discussed first because it governs social work practice and social work education in South Africa.

3.3.1 The Social Service Professions Act no 110 of 1978 (the Act)

This legislation, published in 1979, was a pivotal policy in the development of social work as a legislated profession in South Africa. It provided for the creation of the SACSSP and all social workers henceforth needed to be registered to practice as social workers (Engelbrecht, 2019, p. 305; Schultz, 2015, p. 210).

The Act no 110 of 1978 has a monitoring function to ensure that the practice of social work in South Africa upholds the ethical standards of the profession; the Act is a means of ensuring

that the Code of Ethics are upheld (Republic of South Africa, 1979, pp. 4-9). It stipulates what the required minimum subjects are for an individual to be eligible to register as a social worker. Social work learners are required to register as learner social workers in their second year of study (Republic of South Africa, 1979, pp. 4-9; Lombard, 2015, p. 2).

Given South Africa's extensive social problems and the shortage of social workers to address these problems, there has been a move to include and recognise a wider pool of social service professionals to render services to the population. The Act was amended by The Social Work Amendment Act 102 of 1998, which made provision for the creation of boards for social service professions beyond social work (Republic of South Africa, 1998, p. 2). This Act produced several changes from the 1978 Act including that The Council for Social Work became the South African Council for Social Service Professions.

3.3.2 The Higher Education (CHE) Qualification Standards for the BSW

The aims and the content of the programme is often decided by professional bodies who accredit the qualification (Luckan, 2021, p. 93; Jones, 2009, p. 14). The CHE is responsible for the quality assurance of higher education in South Africa (www.che.ac.za).

The advent of democracy saw the establishment of standard generating bodies (SGBs) for each qualification. The SGBs were tasked to ascertain minimum standards for every qualification. In 1994, social work education in the country changed from being norms-based to becoming outcomes-based (Collins, 2015, p. 495; Engelbrecht, 2004, p. 207). The SGB for social work devised 27 exit level outcomes (ELOs) for social work, and social work programmes must be aligned to The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) (Lombard, 2015, pp. 4-5; Spolander et al, 2011, p. 822).

In 2015 the CHE produced a draft document that outlined new qualification standards for the BSW. These replaced the ELOs and universities are currently having to demonstrate how their BSW programme is aligned to these standards. The CHE defines a qualification standard as a pronouncement of how the teaching, assessments, intended course outcomes and graduate attributes of a degree are aligned to the overall qualification and meet the NQF level requirements at which the degree is situated. There are nine domains graduates must achieve for the BSW (CHE, 2015, pp. 2-3). The first domain is directly linked to this research as it focuses on the learner developing and consolidating their professional identity.

The BSW is set at an exit level 8, which means that graduates can proceed to a master's degree. The importance of self-awareness can also be seen in the criteria for an NQF 8 level qualification. A qualification must meet ten criteria to be accredited at this level and these include the ability to behave ethically in a wide variety of situations because of critical self-reflection (CHE, 2015, p. 13). BSW programmes must thus be able to demonstrate that learners are required to demonstrate self-awareness.

3.4 SUMMARY

The chapter encapsulated a discussion of the higher education sector including some of the challenges faced in the sector. Key policies related to social work education were also presented. From this chapter it is evident that higher education in South is still beset by many historical challenges. The following chapter presents a discussion of RPL and identity formation, the two core areas under investigation.

CHAPTER FOUR: RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING AND IDENTITIES

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter elucidates the literature on two of this study's core areas. RPL, which is core to this study, is a means to improve access to higher education and the widening of access will be discussed first. The chapter also presents literature on some key identities that an individual can have as identity transformation is another core pillar of the study. The chapter closes with a summary.

4.2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

4.2.1 The widening of access to HEIs

Internationally, the drive to improve access to higher education is not new (Chen, 2017, p. 1; Billingham, 2018, p. 1). There has been a focus on increasing the numbers of learners from poor socio-economic backgrounds in South Africa, however, the need for increased access for poor Black citizens remains a central concern in the academy (Soudien, 2021, p. 137; Ndzangwa, 2019, p. 2). The need for equity is directly linked to access because equality does not necessarily provide equity (Badat & Sayed, 2014, p. 128; Sehoole & Adeyemo, 2016, p. 3). Despite citizens having equality and being able to access university, Black citizens do not necessarily receive equitable treatment at university. Writers note that Black learners face tremendous resistance to transformation and were often deemed unworthy of being at university (Shaik & Kahn, 2021, p. 974; Kessi & Cornell, 2015, p. 1).

South African adult learners previously had no access to universities for a range of reasons, including secondary schooling not being compulsory for Black learners (Finn, 2019, p. 74). Despite the move to increase the enrolment of adult learners, they are not offered the required support and the policies and culture of HEIs do not align to their needs (Estes, 2011, p. 199; Singh, 2019, p. 348).

The genesis of RPL in South Africa cannot be separated from the country's political history. RPL was spearheaded by the trade union movement just before the rise of the democracy as South Africa concentrated on redressing the legacy of Apartheid; it was officially launched in

1998 (Lee, Heo & Kim, 2016, p. 69; Ralphs, 2016 a, p. 8). The aim of RPL in South Africa was to ensure that more Black learners entered university and to enhance the skills and knowledge of the country's workforce so that the country could become more internationally competitive (Cooper et al, 2017, p. 197; Osman, 2004, p. 50). The RPL arena is discussed next.

4.2.2 The RPL arena

Several philosophical debates have arisen in response to RPL.

4.2.2.1 Philosophical debates related to RPL

The question of recognition

Recognition, which is central to RPL is a complex concept, argued to be a fundamental human need and an essential part of relationships (Honneth, 1992, p. 189; Sandberg & Kubiak, 2013, p. 351). Honneth's theory, a central theory in education, focuses on recognition in relation to identity development. He asserts that there are three types of recognition i.e. emotional recognition (love), legal recognition (rights), and recognition achieved from accomplishments (solidarity) (Honneth, 2004, p. 354; Honneth, 2012, pp. 80- 81). He adds that there are also three forms of misrecognition. The first is where individuals' rights are violated, which impacts on their self-esteem. The second is where rights violations are legally enshrined, finally where there are cultural standards that discriminate or dismiss certain ways of being or living. For many, education is a way to deal with misrecognitions (Fleming, 2016, p. 20; Hamer, 2010, p. 103). The researcher believes that understanding these types of recognition and misrecognition is valuable in trying to understand the possible meaning that RPL and seeking tertiary education had for the participants of this study.

Fleming (2016, p. 23) presents a link between Transformative Learning Theory and Honneth's theory. He argues that for RPL learners the need for recognition can be a disorienting dilemma where the learner must choose between remaining in their current identities and situation or seeking recognition through learning and developing new identities. In RPL, the focus of recognition is about what the learner has previously learned, which raises the debate around knowledge.

The question of knowledge

The knowledge debate is central to RPL discourse and scholars have addressed this debate to varying degrees (Pokorny, 2023, p. 2; Naudé, 2022, p. 9). The debate centres around what constitutes knowledge and the control of knowledge (Harris & Wihak, 2017, p. 696). Scholarly work asserts that a core aspect of the debate is whether knowledge acquired elsewhere can be equated with academic knowledge (Valentine et al, 2016, p. 499; Pitman & Vidovich, 2012, p. 762; Browning, 2020, p. 19).

Knowledge obtained from experience has traditionally been viewed as ‘less than’ formal, academic knowledge (Ooi & Eak, 2019, p. 4; Peters, 2005, p. 276); RPL fundamentally challenges the types of knowledge and ways in which knowledge is produced in the academy (Cooper et al, 2017, p. 199; Breier, 2008, p. 32). The parley around RPL means that communities are spaces where knowledge is created rather than sites where knowledge obtained in the academy is implemented (Naudé, 2022, p. 3; Cretchley & Castle, 2001, p. 488). Some scholars, however, assert that knowledge gained from previous work and life experience is different to codified academic knowledge (Brenner et al, 2022, p. 427; Sandberg, 2014, p. 684). The researcher posits that RPL applicants often have ‘know how’ given their life experience and what they need to learn is the formal ‘knowing’. Codified knowledge is different but she argues the experience that RPL candidates have deepens their understanding of codified knowledge because RPL allows different ways of knowing to be brought into academe.

The question of learning

The question of knowledge is directly tied to the question of learning. How learning obtained outside of the academy is assessed and recognised has had much investigation (Olesen, Husted & Aagard, 2022, p. 22; Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021, p. 164).

There are several approaches to learning, for example the well-known theory of Andragogy as formulated by Knowles (Woldeab et al, 2023, p.3). Another approach distinguishes between deep learning (where the learner aims to understand the work) and surface learning (where memorising of content is the aim). Adult learners are more likely to adopt a deep approach to learning (Howard & Davies, 2012, p. 771).

Research has also highlighted the key role that phronesis — i.e. “practice wisdom” — plays in learning (Breier, 2009, p. 188; Breier & Ralphs, 2009, p. 480). Learning is however not solely based on experience. For learning to occur, experience must be reflected upon (Starr-Glass, 2012, p. 2; Simpson et al, 2010, p. 740). From the start, RPL candidates must consciously or unconsciously reflect on their experience to determine their eligibility for a programme or for credits towards a programme (Galloway & Edwards, 2017, p. 10; Breier, 2008, p. 18). Validation is said to be an essential part of building knowledge and in RPL it is vital because it legitimises knowledge obtained in spheres outside the academy (Andersson & Fejes, 2005, p. 597; Andersson et al, 2013, p. 408).

RPL is a “process of engagement” and learners can reconstruct their own self-narratives which is extremely empowering (Kupetz et al, 2022, p. 4; Starr-Glass, 2012, p. 2). The process is itself a space where learning happens because applicants must learn to express what they know and start acquiring new knowledge, for example, being exposed to academic language (Heinonen & Tuomainen, 2020, p. 404; Fejes & Andersson, 2009, pp. 37, 38). Academic learning and experiential learning can both be accepted as legitimate means of knowing (Cooper and Harris, 2013, p. 448; Sandberg & Andersson, 2011, p. 767). This raises the question of legitimacy.

The question of legitimacy

The attainment of a qualification provides a sense of legitimacy for the individual, especially when it is accompanied by an increased salary. Increased self-esteem that comes with the recognition of having a qualification is another benefit (Sandberg & Kubiak, 2013, p. 363; Guimarães, 2012, p. 73).

The question of legitimacy extends beyond the individual learner. The dominant discourses about higher education have meant that alternate entrances to the academy have not really been used and, more importantly, are often frowned upon (Maurer, 2021, p. 480; Wong, 2011, p. 286). RPL learners can face stigma because of how they gained access to the university. Globally academics are sceptical about RPL, which is seen as an easy access route for learners who don't meet the usual admission criteria, and as contributing to the lowering of academic standards (Maurer & Morshed 2022, p. 7; Cooper & Harris, 2013, p. 449). There are also concerns about the theory behind RPL, including theory on adult learning. This resistance is

said to extend to a lack of formalised knowledge in RPL (MacCready, 2020, p. 1132; Cooper et al, 2017, p. 199).

The above debates reveal that RPL despite its noble ideals, has not gone without challenge. The different forms of RPL, which influence the process of RPL, will be discussed below.

4.2.3 Forms of RPL

There are two primary forms of RPL. Firstly, where it is used to provide access to learners who don't meet the usual admission requirements, and secondly, where RPL is used to provide the learner with credits towards a formal qualification (Gredley & Hodgkinson-Williams, 2022, p. 18; Jacobs, 2018, p. 101). While institutions globally face the same challenges linked to RPL, South Africa faces unique challenges because of its history. These challenges link to low literacy and numeracy rates (de Villiers & de Villiers, 2022, p. 15; Breier, 2009, p. 183). The researcher supports scholars who argue that because of these factors RPL can be used mainly for access purposes rather than for credits (Sandberg & Andersson, 2011, p. 769; Castle & Attwood, 2001, p. 61).

Osman (2004, p. 57) further posits that access, rather than awarding of credits, is indicated where key aspects of the learner's chosen academic programme cannot be replaced. Given that the BSW has legislated definite outcomes, determining credit for informal learning would be very complicated. RPL can be implemented through different models, each with its own philosophy and values underpinning it.

4.2.4 Models of RPL

Procrustean RPL

Procrustean RPL, also known as the credit exchange model, allows learners to obtain credits at one institution based on courses that they did at another recognised institution (Gredley & Hodgkinson-Williams, 2022, p. 18; Cooper, 2016, p. 27). It is frequently tied to standards and qualifications (Pokorny, 2023, p. 2; Guimarães, 2012, p. 72) and is commonly used because of its pragmatism (Harris, 1999, p. 127; Cameron, 2012, p. 90). This pragmatism means that it does not sufficiently recognise the context in which learning occurs (Sandberg, 2014, p. 683; SAQA, 2002, p. 14). The model focuses on economic concerns and is viewed as having very little concern with redressing social disadvantage (Barros, 2013, p. 439).

Learning and development RPL

This model is on the opposite end of the continuum from the credit exchange model and extends more support to the learner (Cameron, 2012, p. 89; Breier, 2011, p. 207). The learner's self-awareness and agency are integral to the process, and it acknowledges the previous knowledge and experience that people achieved elsewhere (Guimarães & Mikulec, 2021, p. 111; de Graaff, 2014, p. 3). It focuses on experiential learning and the learner is key in the RPL process. Despite it commonly being used in the social sciences and professional training, it does not challenge the traditional ways of seeing knowledge (Barros, 2013, p. 440; Harris, 1999, pp. 130-131).

There have been several criticisms levelled at the first two models (Cooper, 2016, p. 27). The first model is "potentially coercive and confrontational" because it attempts to find common areas between two different arenas (Maurer & Morshed, 2022, p. 2; Osman & Castle, 2006, p. 67). These models are contested because they see education as neutral and are not seen to promote social inclusion (Sandberg, 2011, p. 778). Other criticisms include that they are restrictive and do not allow for the full potential of RPL to be realised (Sandberg, 2014, p. 683; Sandberg & Andersson, 2011, p. 778).

Radical RPL

Radical RPL views learning, experience, and knowledge as interlinked and education is seen as a means for promoting liberation (Guimarães & Mikulec, 2021:112; Moodley, Shah & wa Bofelo, 2016, pp. 96,97). It argues that education is political and includes the arguments of theorists like Freire (Barros, 2013, p. 441; Volbrecht, 2009, p. 22). The model is transformative as it perceives RPL as a mechanism that values and recognises other forms of knowledge and challenges the authoritative forms of knowledge (Mantashe & Nkonki, 2019, p. 35). Critics of this model argue it sees education as taking a backseat to political issues (Harris, 1999, p. 133).

Trojan Horse RPL

Trojan horse RPL attempts to equalise different kinds of knowing and to bring synergy between experiential learning and more formal knowledge (Naudé, 2022, p. 6; Cooper, 2016, p. 27). It recognises experiential learning and is applied in more flexible, practice-based programmes (Guimarães & Mikulec, 2021, p. 112; Harris, 1999, p. 136-137). This model leads to greater diversity in the academy (Sandberg & Andersson, 2011, p. 770). Curricula are viewed as needing to address the needs of the economic market, social society, and the academy. The

relationship between knowledge, power, and social inclusion is a central aspect of this model (Barros, 2013, p. 442; Breier, 2008, p. 33).

Irrespective of which model is favoured, RPL can address a host of social issues (Werquin, 2021, p. 392; Lee et al, 2016, p. 69), however, South African scholars posit that redress and equity are not sufficient on their own to implement RPL (Osman, 2004, p. 52; Ralphs, 2016, p. 151). The implementation of RPL will be discussed below.

4.2.5 The implementation of RPL

There are several factors which need to be considered when implementing RPL.

Clear aims and policies

RPL has many potential outcomes and higher education institutions must decide on the desired outcomes prior to deciding how RPL will be assessed and implemented (Osman, 2004, p. 53-54; Ooi & Eak, 2019, p. 8). Institutions must thus have clear policies and strategies that demonstrate a commitment to RPL if it is to succeed within the institution (Roy & El Marsafawy, 2021, p. 2; Ooi & Eak, 2019, p. 9).

A clear understanding of the purpose of RPL must be openly communicated within departments and faculties so that RPL can have credibility in the institution (Hlongwane, 2019, p. 781; Luckan, 2021, p. 88). Admission criteria need to be explicit and available to all; application processes must be as simple as possible (Hlongwane, 2019, p. 783; SAQA, 2019, p. 15; Singh, 2011:816).

Management support

Policies alone are insufficient for the implementation of RPL and effective implementation of RPL requires open support and commitment from senior management (Browning, 2020, p. 30; Hlongwane, 2019, p. 778). For RPL to be successfully instituted, a RPL-friendly culture needs to be created within universities (Snyman & van den Berg, 2018, p. 36; Wong, 2011, p. 287).

Advocacy

Advocacy is essential to ensure that RPL is sustained within higher education and so that communities are aware of RPL (Browning, 2020, p. 30; Hlongwane, 2019, p. 782). Advocacy from senior management, academics, and stakeholders ensures that HEIs can challenge

obstacles to the implementation of RPL institutionally and nationally (Roy & El Marsafawy, 2021, p. 22; Cooper et al, 2017, p. 205). The next factor links to staffing.

Staff development

RPL — especially the assessment of it — can be very challenging for academics involved in it. The institution’s teaching and learning plan should therefore include staff development for academics working with RPL (Klein-Collins & Wertheim, 2013, p. 57; Van Os, 2017, p. 213). Staff should be educated on the value of RPL and the processes that will expedite applications; assessors should be trained on how to assess candidates (MacCready, 2020, p. 1140; Conrad, 2022, p. 7).

Curriculum change

Many institutions require RPL learners to integrate into the mainstream curricula which have not been influenced by RPL. For example, Dykes (2009) revealed that RPL learners at UWC indicated that the curriculum did not elicit their prior knowledge. Other scholars argue that RPL requires new debates around pedagogy, andragogy, and curriculum development (Luckan, 2021, p. 92; Cooper et al 2017, p. 205).

The literature search revealed that a central aspect of RPL is the assessment of candidates (Gredley & Hodgkinson-Williams, 2022, p. 33; Heinonen & Tuomainen, 2020, p. 405) and this is discussed below.

4.2.6 RPL Assessment

SAQA (2002, p. 21) defines assessment as “a systematic, flexible, collaborative and transparent process involving the learner and assessor within a specific context such as an institution of education and training”. Candidates may be required to show competence, often using a portfolio of evidence (Kupetz et al, 2022, p. 3; Breier, 2009, p. 185). Other methods of assessment include essays, interviews, testimonials, and demonstrations (Heinonen & Tuomainen, 2020, p. 404; Ooi & Eak, 2019, p. 2).

Many RPL applicants have had negative educational experiences and research indicates that applicants need assistance with preparing for the assessment and support to alleviate their anxiety (Hlongwane, 2019, p. 783; SAQA, 2002, p. 13). Some scholars argue that assessment is fundamental to quality assurance of programmes (Luckan, 2021, p. 73; Rothboeck, Comyn

& Banerjee, 2018, p. 406). Others have described it as a form of colonising the applicant and note concerns about the consistency and reliability of RPL assessment (Pokorny, 2006, p. 270; Singh, 2011, p. 806). There are also time constraints that do not allow for a relationship to be established with the candidate (Gredley & Hodgkinson-Williams, 2022, p. 36; Hamer, 2011, p. 93).

Role of the assessor

The assessor's role extends beyond the initial assessment; ongoing support is essential for the learner's success and formation of their learner identity (Klindt, 2021, p. 93; Brown, 2017, p. 66). HEIs are powerful sites of meaning construction where learners' identities are shaped and RPL evokes personal responses for the learner and RPL practitioner (Andersson, 2020, pp. 21-22; Osman, 2006, p. 205). The learner has agency in terms of forming or resisting these meanings, The RPL assessment can thus be a place where meaning is negotiated and RPL can lead to transformative learning (Kupetz et al, 2022, p. 4; Hamer, 2010, p. 107).

The RPL process must be attuned to the applicants' cultural and social context and assessors must be mindful of the power dynamics and the engagement thereof because that will determine the kinds of identities that will be shaped through the process. The learner and the assessor must decide, understand, and summarise what the learner knows, which requires a process of reflection on the learner's part during which the learner's identity is revealed and open to being challenged (Andersson, 2020, p. 22; Hamer, 2010, pp. 107-108).

The debates highlighted in this chapter have revealed that RPL has not been without contestation (Lugg Mabitla & Angelis, 1998, p. 208; Mothokoa & Martitz, 2018, p. 1). This will now be discussed.

4.2.7 Is RPL always transformative?

There have been many barriers to implementing RPL across the world. RPL has been said to be more complicated and costly than its proponents anticipated (Maurer, 2023, p. 4; Rothboeck et al, 2018, p. 396). For example, there has been a focus on access and little attention has been paid to the retention and success of these learners (Stephens, 2022, pp. 495-496; SAQA, 2019, p. 3). The researcher believes that for RPL to be transformative learners must graduate and institutions need to ensure that they do. Dropping out would cause more harm because learners

end up with the burden of financial debt, re-finding employment; psychologically, failure to complete can lead to even greater feelings of social exclusion.

Hamer (2013, p. 482) argues that RPL has in some instances been detrimental rather than transformative and scholars state that RPL may not further social inclusion (Andersson & Fejes, 2010, p. 16; MacCready, 2020, p. 1133). There is also the possibility that achieving a tertiary qualification can alienate an individual from their social environment and challenge their self-view and sense of belonging (Hamer, 2010, p. 105). So, whilst RPL can lead to transformation, this transformation can lead to displacement and losses at different levels.

Scholars further argue that RPL has become less about social justice and more about focussing on benefiting society and economic progress (Lima & Guimaraes, 2016, p. 33; Andersson et al, 2013, p. 406). Other writers contend that what RPL sets out to be is not necessarily what it is because of overly bureaucratic RPL systems, the hierarchical value of different kinds of knowledge, and how RPL is implemented (Luckan, 2021, p. 59; Mothokoa & Maritz, 2018, p. 2).

Hamer (2010, p. 103) found that some RPL candidates had previous exposure to higher education, and they need to have confidence in their academic ability to apply for admission. Furthermore, they need to be able to reflect on the knowledge that they possess, which marginalises the people for whom RPL is intended. RPL can be seen as a way of ensuring normative assessments and, in this way, is oppressive rather than transformative (MacCready, 2020, p. 1135; Pokorny, 2012, p. 126).

Candidates are assessed against a particular norm, and this disadvantages applicants who do not possess knowledge of the dominant culture of the institution and do not know how to present their experience (Andersson, 2006, p. 31; Brenner et al, 2022, p. 426). Authors argue that RPL processes must move away from the approach of ensuring normative assessments to a process where there is more negotiation and relating between the assessor and the applicant (Sandberg and Kubiak, 2013, p. 362; Pokorny, 2012, p. 129). The researcher agrees with this argument because the RPL process is where the relationship between the learners and the chosen academic department begins. The nature of this engagement sets a very important tone for the learner's entry and adjustment to the university.

RPL is an empowering process but also a practically and emotionally demanding one (Brenner et al, 2022, p. 437; Snyman & van den Berg, 2018, p. 28). Applicants can experience the process as one where control is being exercised over them (Andersson, 2020, p. 19; Gibbs & Armsby, 2011, p. 388). The rigid structures and rules of universities, for example, requiring full-time attendance, do not address the needs of and are exclusionary for RPL learners (Luckan, 2021, p. 59; Browning, 2020, p. 25). The academic calendar is a threat to RPL as the learner must follow this calendar and cannot advance through the course at their own pace (Robinson & Goldingay, 2021, p. 13; Cretchley & Castle, 2001, p. 498).

The researcher argues that whilst these challenges are significant, the value of RPL outweighs these challenges. Based on authors' assertions, RPL can improve the cultural and social capital of individuals who participate in it and can positively influence the individual's self-esteem. It provides individuals with the opportunity to make new meaning of their histories, and in doing so the opportunity to positively transform their identities (Pokorny, 2023, p.7; Conrad & Wardrop, 2010, p. 13). The interest in understanding the possible transformation that individuals can experience has driven this research and the second section of the chapter focuses on some of the key identities that an individual can have.

4.3 KEY IDENTITIES

4.3.1 Racial identity

Racial identity which plays a central role in all individuals' identities, is formed by the combination of individuals' internalised views of the cultural group they identify with and their own internalised values (Burke & Harrod, 2021, pp. 12-15; Yoon, 2011, p. 144). Racial identity in South Africa is an essential consideration given its history; Ndimande and Neville (2018, p. 931) posit that racial identity is important because the country remains a racially divided one but more importantly because education can play a key role in negating internalised racial stereotypes². A Black identity refers to the meaning that the person makes of being Black in a racially oppressive society (Ndimande and Neville, 2018, p. 935; Whittaker & Neville, 2010, p. 384).

² A White identity will not be discussed because this study's participants were all Black.

A positive racial identity contributes to better psychological outcomes for the individual and is a protective factor when an individual must deal with discriminatory threats to the self (Kiecolt et al, 2021, p. 77; Whittaker & Neville, 2010:387). Many Black South African learners, especially at historically White universities, struggle with their identity in a space where they are seen as ‘less than’ (Nomdo, 2017, p. 194). Yoon (2011, p. 153) adds how important it is for Black learners to feel a sense of solidarity in a space where they feel discriminated against. Adult learners also find it essential to have contact with learners who share their racial identity (Burke & Harrod, 2021, pp. 21;28; Reay, 2002, p. 413).

Nomdo (2017, pp. 195-198) argues that being a Black learner in a challenging space also provides the opportunity for the learner to transform their racial identity, to discover their sense of agency, and to see themselves as complete and valuable citizens (they can combat shame). If adult learners are willing to engage with the shame, then it can be used to promote profound internal transformation (Walker, 2017, p. 357).

Adult learners can have several identities including family-based identities, often their most salient identities (Rozvadzka, 2020, p. 191). This will be presented next.

4.3.2 Familial identities

Partner identities

Being a partner in an intimate relationship which includes being a wife or husband, is one of the identities that accompanies adulthood (Luyckx et al, 2014, p. 193). Research has established that being in a happy marriage or co-habiting relationship increases the life satisfaction of people (Gattig & Minkus, 2021, pp. 142-143; Tumin & Zheng, 2018, p. 632).

In contrast, an unhappy marriage/relationship can be detrimental to the individual (Wójcik et al, 2021, p. 15). Whilst South Africa has some of the most progressive policies to further gender equality, the reality for women is grim (Sennott & Kane, 2022, p. 2). Husbands may support their wives’ careers but they still have very traditional views on what being a wife means (Fuad Mohamed, 2019, p. 41). The role of wife, especially in traditional Black communities, is one where she is expected to fulfil the stereotypical functions associated with this role (Pierz & Dapi, 2022, p. 194). The role of husband is often associated with power and control (Carter, 2014, p. 251) and because South African society is patriarchal, husbands are given absolute power and seen as head of the household and sole provider for the family. Being

able to provide for his family, is thus central to the husband identity (Bassey & Bubu, 2019, pp. 23, 27).

Mother/father identity

Becoming a mother remains one of the most significant identity transitions for women (Golden, 2001, p. 236). Society has changed with the push for women to join the workforce but the role of the mother has not changed significantly (van Egmond et al, 2010, p. 164; Raskin, 2006, p. 1357). Motherhood still carries significant demands and mothers still have the primary responsibility for child rearing (Webber, 2017, p. 410). They are expected to put the needs of their children above their own and play a central role in the identity formation of their children (Brenner, 2021, p. 193; Estes, 2011, p. 201).

The high rates of teenage pregnancy in Africa were noted previously. For teenage mothers, becoming a mother is complicated. They often face tremendous censure from families and struggle to adjust to the role of mother, especially where there are complications for example having a sickly child (Mjwara & Maharaj, 2018, pp. 133, 136). This identity is significant because it links to both women's efficacy-based self-esteem and their worth-based self-esteem because they feel valued by society because of being a mother (Stets & Lee, 2021, p. 134; Gajardo & Oteíza, 2017, pp. 144,145). This identity can be challenged when an adult learner must adjust to possibly having to put her academic commitments before the needs of her children. There are also positive consequences for female learners who have children, for example, studying can change their identity as mother which results in responding to their children in new ways (Webber, 2015, p. 217).

The father identity is important for men and this identity has changed significantly in Western cultures over the past decades. Yet the expectations that men have of themselves as fathers is very different across different contexts (Gervais et al, 2021, p. 375; Collett, Vercel & Pierce, 2019, p. 366). This is a complex role; many cultures men see the role of father as being very closely tied to the role of provider (Baxter et al, 2015, p. 994; McClaughlin & Muldoon, 2014, p. 445). Fathers from low socio-economic backgrounds often prioritised their worker identity because of the need to provide and many men continue to struggle with the balance between work and family commitments (Quinn, 2021, p. 172; Collett et al, 2019, pp. 360-362).

Apartheid influenced the roles of mother and fathers within families (Parry & Gordon, 2021, p. 798; Mathews, Jewkes & Abrahams, 2011, p. 961). For example, fathers were often absent from their children's lives because of the migrant labour system and because childrearing is seen as women's responsibility (Coovadia, et al, 2009, p. 823; Parry & Gordon, 2021, p. 798). The consequences of fathers being absent are dire for the identity formation of children and their social and emotional development. The lack of positive male role models is especially significant for identity formation in boys (Thupayagale-Tshweneagae, Mgutshini, & Nkosi, 2012, pp. 117-118; Coovadia et al, 2009, p. 23).

Adult learners who have children must create a learner-parent identity (Estes, 2011, p. 199). This can be very challenging because of needing to learn how to be a learner whilst parenting which results in these learners often feeling that they are underperforming in both roles (Sallee & Cox, 2019, p. 640; Estes, 2011, p. 200).

Daughter/ son identity

Adult learners would also have been a son or a daughter. Being a daughter is one of the most significant roles that a woman can have (Jilani et al, 2022, p. 136; Buhl, 2008, p. 382). Daughters learn what it means to be a woman, mother, and a daughter from their mothers (Lawall, Tram & Kumar, 2021, p. 444; Klann, Wong & Rydell, 2018, p. 501). The woman's view of gender roles and what it means to be a daughter can continue into adulthood (Moen, Erickson & Dempster-McClain, 1997, p. 282; Alford & Harrigan, 2019, p. 348). The role expectations of being daughter are also profoundly shaped by the wider culture and women generally have a clear idea of what it means to be a good daughter, with many women playing this role even when they do not want to (Jilani et al, 2022, p. 136).

The role of son is also central in the lives of men because men learn about masculinity partly through their role as son, and sons learn about being a man, a father, and a son from their father (Klann et al 2018, p. 501; Lawal et al, 2021, p. 444). Sons play a key role in families because of their patrilineal function and because of name transmission (Le, & Nguyen, 2022, p. 1; Tafuro, 2020, p. 984). In most patriarchal cultures couples prefer to have sons over daughters because sons are seen as being able to provide economically for their families (Seo, Koropecykj-Cox & Kim, 2022, p. 165; Tafuro, 2020, pp. 984-986).

Whilst adult learners may be parents, they may also still have parents and therefore have the identity of an adult child. The term ‘sandwich generation’ was coined in 1981 to explain the fact that due to increased life expectancy, many adults now find themselves having to look after aging parents. This has meant that individuals are having to raise children whilst looking after aging parents and managing work demands (Steiner & Fletcher, 2017, p. 133; Mancini & Blieszner, 1989, p. 275). Filial demands include offering financial support and providing physical care (Boyczuk & Fletcher, 2016, p. 54; Mancini & Blieszner, 1989, p. 276).

4.3.3 Learner and Professional Identities

Scholars confirm that there is limited research on mature undergraduate learners and the formation of their learner identity, which is how the learner identifies themselves as a learner (Kasworm, 2010, p. 145; Brown, 2017, p. 62). Adult learners may have previously held learner identities; if they have had a negative experience of being a learner, they can have a negative view of themselves as a learner (Klindt, 2021, p. 931; Busher & James, 2019, p. 81). They also have the identity of being an adult learner, which comes with its own set of expectations (O’Boyle, 2015, p. 94).

One of the challenges to the learner identity is that these learners are used to being autonomous and responsible whereas as a learner they are reliant on others and must adhere to requirements set by others (Illeris, 2016, p. 53; Askham, 2008, p. 90). Furthermore, adult learners may have a worker identity, which also may challenge their learner identity. Identifying as a learner can mean that the person feels that they become powerless in relation to academic staff and that they return to being seen as someone who is inexperienced, meaning they also lose recognition (Askham, 2008, p. 89; Boud & Solomon, 2003, pp. 330-331).

A key aim of social work education is to assist learners with acquiring a professional identity (PI); learners are expected to have a definite social work identity when they graduate from university (Yao, 2021, p. 930; Wiles, 2017, p. 349). The acquisition of the professional identity is significant because Pullen-Sansfacon and Crete (2016, pp. 776) state that the quality of the professional identity acquired whilst training is a strong predictor of the kind of PI that the social worker will have.

The field practice component plays an integral role in the learner developing a PI (Rishel, Guthrie & Hartnett, 2020, p. 441; Levy, Shlomo & Itzhaky, 2014, p. 744). The settings in which the learner and, ultimately, the social worker works will also have a significant influence on the formation of this identity (Zhu et al, 2021, p. 5; Wiles & Vicary, 2019, p. 48). Stubbings, Helmich and Cleland (2018, p. 43) found that medical learners sometimes struggled to create their professional identity because the realities of practice did not match their expectations of what working as a doctor would be like. The researcher posits that this could apply to adult social work learners given that adult learners have definite motives for choosing social work as a profession and the reality of the social work context may differ from these expectations.

The process of developing a professional identity is complex and requires that the learner internalise the profession's values and standards into their own self-concept and behaviour; learners must make use of personal and environmental resources in the process of acquiring this identity (Shlomo, Levy & Itzhaky, 2012; Rishel et al, 2020: 441). Mezirow's theory can assist with understanding the development of the PI in that the notion of perspective transformation can be used to explain the process that learners go through to acquire this identity. Mezirow emphasised critical reflection and the learner must intently reflect on their work, the profession, and, most importantly, themselves in relation to their work (Fenwick & Tennant, 2020, p. 62; Hogg, 2018, p. 44).

There is some contestation around what the professional social worker identity is (Mackay & Zufferey, 2015, p. 646), however the researcher accepts the definition provided by Wiles (2017, p. 352), who states that the social work identity refers to what it means to the person to be a social worker. This identity is often a collective identity which cuts across geographical boundaries (Wiles & Vicary, 2019, p. 60). The social worker's PI is multi-layered. This identity is a transformative identity because the individual's personal and professional selves are in a process of ongoing interaction and influencing each other and the identity is a dynamic one (Brown & Brimrose, 2018, p. 247; Webb, 2015, p. 3).

PI is further influenced by the country's social context (Wiles, 2017, p. 357) and the social worker's passion, values, and commitment to the profession and social justice (Wiles & Vicary, 2019, p. 57; Zhu et al, 2021, pp. 2-3). There are several factors that influence the development of a professional identity (Rishel et al, 2020, p. 440; Webb, 2015, pp. 10-12). These factors

include the individual's values, experiences, gender, and racial identity (Yao, 2021, p. 940; Rajan-Rankin, 2014, p. 2429).

The above discussion presented some of the identities that are relevant to this research. The final section examines policies related to RPL.

4.4 LEGISLATION AND POLICIES RELATED TO RPL

RPL is a national priority in South Africa and, unlike in other countries, is aligned to specific policies that emphasise transformation, the NQF, lifelong learning, and accreditation (Mothokoa & Maritz, 2018, p. 1; Singh, 2015, p. 32).

4.4.1 The Department of Education White Paper 3 of 1997

1997 was a pivotal year in South Africa's education system as along with the Higher Education Act, The Department of Education White Paper 3 of 1997 (the White Paper) was formally announced in the government gazette (Grobelaar, 2004, p. 39). This policy, which is underpinned by the principle of justice, was central in influencing the democratic government's response to higher education because higher education was seen as an important sector to assist with redressing the inequality which Apartheid caused (Kumalo, 2021, pp. 176-177; Gwatirera, 2018, p. 72). The White Paper outlines the role of higher education as developing human resources through lifelong learning. It expounds on the need for South Africa to produce world class graduates who are socially conscious and can transform society (Themane & Mabasa, 2022, p. 1; Mekoa, 2011, p. 106). This policy emphasised economic empowerment through the provision of funding for learners using NSFAS and grants for teaching development (Gwatirera, 2018, p. 74; Schoole & Adeyemo, 2016, p. 6).

The White Paper emphasised three core areas in terms of transformation: 1) increased access for Black learners; 2) the need for HEIs to be responsive to the needs and demands of the economy; and 3) the need for collaboration between all the role players in higher education to create a higher education culture that respects and promotes diversity, reconciliation, and the dignity of all (Badat, 2009, p. 457; Schoole & Adeyemo, 2016, p. 4). The White Paper indicates that higher education plays a role in developing citizens who are self-reflective, critical, and willing to review ideas and practices to work for the benefit of society (Dept. of Education, 1997, p. 7).

Heymann and Carolissen (2011, p. 1378) note that The White Paper specifically mentioned improved access for Black female adult learners. This policy is pertinent to this study as RPL learners are usually Black, mature, and female. One of the criticisms of the policy is that it did not stipulate how transformation would be achieved (Grobbelaar, 2004, p. 39; Akala, 2018, p. 240). Badat and Sayed (2014, p. 140) add that all South African education policies provide a clear vision for society but not enough practical discussion of how this vision can be attained. For example, as indicated by Akala (2018, p. 241), despite Black learners having access to HEIs, the dropout rate amongst Black learners remains high as discussed previously. In theory South Africa's policies promote transformation and access to RPL learners specifically, but writers argue that the South African government has not succeeded in achieving what it set out to do in (Van Schalkwyk et al, 2022, p. 626; Badat and Sayed, 2014, p. 129). They support the researcher's argument that achieving transformation in education is still a way off.

The second key policy linked to RPL is The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) because according to Ralphs (2016, p. 9), RPL was a fundamental vision of the NQF. Thirteen of the NQF principles support RPL (Breier, 2011, p. 203).

4.4.2 The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Act 67 of 2008

The National Commission on Higher Education was established in 1995 and was tasked by government to develop policies and strategies to transform higher education using the Constitution as a framework for these policies (Jansen, 2023, p. 106; Harris, 2000, p. 66). The provision for the development of a National Qualifications Framework was the first item of legislation linked to education passed in the new South Africa. The idea of a NQF underpinning education in post-Apartheid South Africa is directly linked to opposing Apartheid's racially divisive education policies and then sought to implement an integrated education policy where education and training would be united in one integrated system (Naudé, 2022, p. 2; Meko, 2011, p. 108).

The National Qualifications Framework Act 67 of (2008) replaced The South African Qualifications Authority Act 58 of (1995); and the latter's three Quality Councils gave rise to the NQF (Naudé., 2022, p. 4). These quality Councils are 1) The Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF), overseen by the Council on Higher Education; 2) The General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework (GFETQSF), overseen by Umalusi; and 3) the Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (OQSF), overseen by the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (SAQA, 2013, p. 9).

SAQA is the body that implements the NQF (Hlongwane, 2019, p. 778; Lombard, Grobbelaar & Pruis, 2003, p. 1) and is mandated to develop policies around RPL (Breier, 2011, p. 203). The policy objectives are “integration, access, mobility and progression, quality and redress” and RPL is essential for the attainment of these objectives (SAQA, 2011, p. 6). The guidelines and criteria for RPL were revealed in 2003 (SAQA, 2013) and the first SAQA policy on RPL was released in 2002 (SAQA, 2003). This policy was amended by SAQA in 2013 and was situated within The Human Resource Development Strategy (HRDS) and the National Skills Development Strategy. The policy also considered the National Development Plan 2030 (SAQA, 2013, p. 5).

The 2013 SAQA policy looked more holistically at RPL as a process of engagement as compared to the 2002 policy which focused on assessment and credit exchange (Ralphs, 2016, p. 151). The latest SAQA policy was released in 2019. Both UCT and UWC have committed to promoting equity and providing access to adult learners as a means of supporting and admitting learners who do not have matriculation exemption (University of Cape Town, 2016; University of the Western Cape, 2002). At UCT, the Senate has the power to admit learners who do not have matriculation exemption, which power has been transferred to individual faculties. Faculties can admit applicants via the RPL route who demonstrate potential and the university has had a RPL policy since 2004. The final decision about the entrance of a candidate is made by the Deans of Faculties (University of Cape Town, 2016; University of Cape Town, 2004). UWC applicants who do not have matric must complete the Portfolio Development Programme and Tests for Access and Placement. Applicants who have done matric but did not achieve a university entrance grade can be considered for admission by the Senate (www.uwc.ac.za).

4.5 SUMMARY

The researcher investigated literature and presented a synthesis of the central information and most pressing debates linked to RPL. Any higher education imperative is guided by policy and hence a brief description of the main policies pertaining to education and RPL was provided. The study’s participants were admitted to university and completed undergraduate studies because of the imperatives of these policies and the commitment of both research sites to providing access to adult learners. The chapter also included a discussion of some of the salient identities that an individual can have. The fifth chapter presents the methodology of this study.

CHAPTER FIVE: METHODOLOGY

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Researchers must be clear about their epistemological and ontological positions. Ontology refers to the researcher's belief in the nature of reality (Staller & Chen, 2022, p. 73; Gaudet & Robert, 2018, p. 8). The researcher subscribes to the view that knowledge and reality are subjective. She thus approached this study from an interpretive position, which scholars posit indicates that the researcher believes that the meaning that the participants' make of their world is what constitutes their reality (Sefotho, 2021, p. 9; Henning, van Rensburg & Smit, 2004, p. 20). This view determined the methodology of the study, which is addressed in this chapter. The chapter concludes with a summary.

5.2 RESEARCH APPROACH

The research approach speaks to the overall method for the research (Fouche, 2021, p. 63; Punch, 2005, p. 142) and this study used a qualitative approach. Qualitative research is a dynamic and contested area that comprises of diverse practices (Marlow, 2023, p. 11; Flick, 2018, p. 3). These approaches have existed for a very long time and are flexible; the researcher aims to develop explanations rather than to prove pre-determined hypotheses (Kohler, Smith & Bhakoo, 2022, p.184; Denzin, 2017, p. 9; Tuffour, 2017, p. 52).

Theory identifies that this approach sets out to provide a deep understanding of phenomena from an emic perspective (Schurink, Schurink & Fouche, 2021, p. 290; Azungah, 2018, p. 384); central to qualitative research is the meaning individuals make of their experiences (Hovey, 2022, p. 1; Thyer, 2012, p. 120). The researcher wanted to ascertain what meaning participants have made of RPL and studying social work, and the possible influence thereon of identity transformation for them. Meeting this aim required a substantive delving into the participants' experiences and this approach provided the multi-layered data that was required to gain this understanding.

Qualitative research allows researchers to understand participants' behaviour *in-situ* and can clarify things that are not always immediately visible (Kelly, 2023, p.4; Lichtman, 2017, p. 44). Authors confirm the relevance of this approach for topics that require an in-depth

understanding of a social issue (Xu et al, 2019, p. 1302; Teherani Martimianakis & Stenfors-Hayes, 2015, p. 669). The researcher believes that RPL within higher education is an important social issue and she wanted to examine if RPL, which has primarily been touted as transformative at a macro level, influences individuals who engage in RPL at a micro identity level.

There is a precedent for the use of qualitative research in studies with similar aims as this study, for example, Brown (2017, p. 63) and Hewlett (2006, p. 112) used qualitative approaches. Qualitative research is also appropriate to explore topics about which there is very little information (Fischer & Guzel, 2023, p. 260; Geddis-Regan, Exley, & Taylor, 2021, p. 215). The dearth of knowledge on the topic of this research topic was discussed in the first chapter. The researcher further resonated with how qualitative research views the researcher as central to the research and not as detached from it (Geddis-Regan et al, 2021, p.215; Raheim et al, 2016, p. 1). The ‘involved’ position of the researcher in qualitative studies has drawn criticism, but this researcher agrees with Geddis-Regan et al (2021, p. 215) that the researcher’s ability to draw on their practice knowledge to collect and interpret data is a key strength in research. These authors further argue reflexivity can mitigate the potential issues related to being a practitioner and researcher. The researcher declared her reflexivity/positionality in the first chapter.

Another covert motivation for the selection of a qualitative approach was the researcher’s intention to gain an understanding of the common experiences shared by the RPL candidates and how such an understanding can inform how these learners can be optimally supported through their studies. The theory confirmed the decision to adopt a qualitative approach to meet this aim because authors note that qualitative research argues that there is a core part of an experience that is shared between people who have had the same experience (Engel & Schutt, 2017, p. 516; Marshall & Rossman, 2015, p. 20). The research design will now be discussed.

5.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

Phenomenology, founded in Germany in the early twentieth century, was originally a philosophical movement. Researchers in the social sciences drew on this philosophy to derive this research design (Eberle, 2022, p. 108; Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2013, p. 76). This design has become popular in several disciplines (Kuchinke, 2023, p. 41; Alase, 2017, p. 10).

A cornerstone concept in phenomenology is ‘lifeworld’, which refers to the world in which individuals live and their experiences within their everyday lives. Phenomenology is said to be about studying experience because it seeks to understand how individuals experience these daily experiences (Porter & Cohen, 2013, p. 181; Smeeton & O’Connor, 2020, p. 678; Kuchinke, 2023, p.42). The lifeworld and individuals’ experience thereof is dynamic (Vagle, 2018, p. 7). The researcher was particularly interested in the meaning the participants made of their experiences and her intent was not merely to describe their experiences. Scholars confirmed her decision to adopt a phenomenological design as they indicated that phenomenology is more concerned with the meaning that is made of everyday experiences than the actual experiences themselves (Rietmeijer & Veen, 2022, p. 117; Staller & Chen, 2022, p. 79).

The researcher further identified with the design because of the holistic way individuals are viewed. ‘Dasein’, which refers to individuals as ‘beings in the world’ is another core concept (Cohen, Kassar & Wada, 2022, p. 390; Rietmeijer & Veen, 2022, p. 115). Authors indicate that phenomenological studies make sense of the meaning of experiences through a holistic understanding of participants’ memories, emotions, perceptions, desires, and their somatic awareness (Schurink et al, 2021, p. 293; Sajama & Kamppinen, 2014, p. 68).

The term ‘phenomena’ is used very specifically in phenomenological studies. Phenomena arise because of people living in the world; they refer to how individuals experience themselves in relation to the world and others (Rietmeijer & Veen, 2022, p.116; Larkin, Flowers & Smith, 2021, p. 13; Vagle, 2018, p. 20). This was an important consideration in the researcher opting to use this design. The literature review chapters confirm the relational aspects of adult learning and that adult learners’ role identities are significant for them. The researcher thus wanted to employ a design that could provide explanations for how these identities were possibly transformed through engaging in RPL and studying social work. She concluded that a phenomenological design would be ideal for the study.

The emphasis on the relational nature between individuals and their world is also evident in another phenomenological concept i.e. intentionality, which focusses not on the kinds of decisions made but on how these decisions are made (Brudzińska, 2022, p. 106; Larkin et al, 2021, p. 13). Phenomenological theory’s position on intentionality was another driver for using this design. The researcher believes that intentionality is directly tied to consciousness and the

phenomena that adult learners experience. Their experience of the process of the decisions that they made, for example the decision to study, could also have influenced their experience of RPL and social work education. Similarly, the researcher was interested in intentionality linked to how they possibly managed any challenges to their core identities posed by studying.

Research theory confirms that in phenomenology the focus is not on quantification of experiences but rather the interpretation thereof (Zahavi, 2019, p. 52; Bradbury & Van Nieuwerburgh, 2023, p.53). The need for social work learners to be reflective has been extensively discussed and the researcher entered the research process with an assumption that the participants would be able to consciously reflect on their experiences. She also realised that to gain in-depth data, the participants would have to be willing and able to reflect on their experiences. There was thus a synergy between her views and what phenomenological theory expounds because it emphasises consciousness (Schurink et al, 2021, p. 293; Eatough & Smith, 2017, p. 3).

The theory additionally talks about the *eidetic* i.e. the 'essence' of common experience (Eberle, 2022, p. 109; Zahavi, 2019, p. 45). Phenomenology is predicated on the basis that individuals can provide narratives of common experiences that have a common structure (Padgett, 2017, p. 77; Marshall & Rossman, 2015, p. 148). The researcher wanted to establish whether the participants had common experiences in terms of possible identity transformation. Scholars highlight that phenomenology has been a contested field as discussed by Williams (2021), Zahavi (2019 a), and van Manen (2017). The researcher however selected this design, because it was ideally suited to the primary aim of this study.

Phenomenology includes different schools of thought (Kuchinke, 2023, p. 41; van Manen, 2017, p. 777). These include the Duquesne school and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), as theorised by Smith (Smith, 2018, p. 1957; Langdrige & Hagger-Johnson, 2009, pp. 386-387,397). This study adopted an IPA lens as the focus of the enquiry. The primary motivation for this is that one of the direct aims of IPA is to highlight the narratives of individuals (Solmiano et al, 2022, p. 363; Pringle et al, 2011, p. 24).

IPA is based on hermeneutics (Kirkness et al, 2023, p. 241; Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 41). One of the key features in IPA studies is the experiences that the individual has had; experience is seen as a multi-faceted concept with the focus of the research being on experiences that are

significant to the participants and the meaning they make of these experiences (Farr & Nizza, 2019, p. 200; Shinebourne, 2011, p. 18). IPA, which has been found to fit very well with studies that seek to understand psychological phenomena, is a systematic way in which research in the social sciences can be undertaken (McInally & Gray-Brunton, 2021, p. 71; Pringle et al, 2011: 24). It differs from other phenomenological perspectives that focus more on descriptions, in that it emphasises interpretation (Lee et al, 2022, p. 901; Pringle et al, 2011, p. 20). IPA is idiographic in nature and looks at an individual holistically to provide an understanding of the individual's experiences in their entirety (Téllez-López et al, 2023, p. 11; Nizza, Farr & Smith, 2021, p. 375; Agarwal & Sandiford, 2021, p. 219). All these factors made this a suitable design for this research.

The researcher did a literature search to determine whether IPA is appropriate for a study of this nature and scholars advise that IPA is very useful to researching major life events (Paley, 2017, p. 121; Carey, 2016, p. 88). The justification for using this design is further supported by Saddler and Sundin (2020, p. 334), who specifically focused on adult learners and argue that IPA provides an intensive view of individuals experiences. Kirkness et al (2023, p. 241) also assert that IPA is useful in studies that focus on identity formation. The researcher believes that for RPL learners the decision to study and studying are major life events thus this design was deemed suitable for the study.

The approach and design of the study determined how the research was executed and the rest of the chapter will elucidate the method of the study, commencing with a discussion of the sampling procedure.

5.4 SAMPLING

Sampling is based on the idea that a group of a population can give an idea of what the views of the population would be; correct sampling is essential to ensuring the rigour of the research (Sukmawati, Salmia & Sudarmin, 2023, p. 132; Cash et al, 2022, p. 1). It is necessary given that a study cannot include all the people relevant to the research population (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2020, p. 92; 2017: 116; Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016, p. 2

Qualitative research generally involves non-probability sampling (Hennink et al, 2020, p. 92; Padgett, 2017, p. 116). Non-probability sampling involves different types of sampling and

refers to sampling that does not use randomisation (Sukmawati et al, 2023; 136; Etikan et al, 2016, p. 1). As opposed to quantitative studies, qualitative studies usually involve smaller samples (Rassel et al, 2023, p. 261; Hammersley, 2013, p. 14). The type/s of sampling used will depend on the aims of the study with the intention to obtain the richest data (Strydom, 2021, p. 382; Silverman, 2017, p. 272). In this study purposive sampling, which is frequently used in IPA studies, was used. Purposive sampling infers that the sample is decided based on certain characteristics deemed necessary for the study and assumes that the participants can provide in-depth information on the topic. It relies on the researcher's judgement and needs clearly identified sample criteria (Zickar & Keith, 2023, p. 318; York, 2020, p. 335). Phenomenological studies require that the sampling ensures that the participant have experienced what is under investigation and must be willing to participate (Larkin et al, 2021, p. 48; Pollio et al, 2006, p. 257).

IPA studies usually comprise of smaller samples (McInally & Gray-Brunton, 2021, p. 71; Smith & Osborn 2008, p. 55) and authors suggest a sample of between three and twelve participants (Cresswell, 2014, p. 239; Larkin Watts & Clifton, 2006, p. 103). These suggestions are relevant for this study because the RPL learners form a small cohort within the BSW at the two research sites. The sample for this study consisted of ten participants with five participants being purposively selected from each university.

The sampling criteria included:

- All participants were admitted to the BSW via RPL.
- All participants graduated with a BSW within the past five years. The researcher is mindful of the issues of recall in research, however in a phenomenological study it is appropriate for the participants to provide data on events retrospectively because of the nature of the phenomenological inquiry (Farr & Nizza, 2019, p. 204; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008, p. 32).
- Participants had to be willing to complete all three interviews.

After obtaining ethics clearance for the study, the researcher telephoned prospective participants who had graduated from UCT in the past five years to introduce the study and to request permission for the consent form to be emailed to them. She contacted seven UCT graduates but two people did not respond to the attempts to establish contact.

As noted in the first chapter, the researcher gave extensive thought to being an insider vs an outsider at research sites as noted in the theory (Mercer, 2007, p.2; Ademolu, 2023, p. 2). She was acutely aware of the nature of her interaction with the participants known to her and she clarified that she was contacting them as a PhD candidate and not as their previous lecturer. She affirmed that the purpose of the telephone call was to obtain consent for the consent form to be emailed to them and not to confirm participation. The five individuals who received consent forms agreed to participate and returned completed consent forms prior to the first interviews.

Obtaining a sample from the University of the Western Cape was the biggest challenge in this study. The researcher was guided by the literature that indicates that negotiating entry to the research sites must be considered when planning research (Hennink et al, 2020, p. 192; Taylor et al, 2015, p. 114). She contacted the gatekeepers at UWC as authors argue that gatekeepers are an essential part of the research because they assist with gaining access to participants (Prior, 1997, p. 63; Hennink et al, 2020, p. 99). The academic who was responsible for the RPL portfolio in the social work department and had extensive experience in working with RPL had initially offered to assist the researcher by providing a list of contact numbers of the UWC graduates.

As the researcher was set to commence with data collection, The Protection of Personal Information Act came into effect. The prescripts of this legislation meant that the academic at UWC now needed the graduates' consent to give their contact information to the researcher. She had to explore other avenues to get a sample which included posting information about the study on the department's Facebook page. Despite the invaluable assistance, this did not yield success.

The researcher, after consultation with her supervisor, decided to approach other universities in South Africa. She contacted five universities but none of these institutions offered RPL access to the BSW. After further discussion in supervision, the researcher obtained an amendment to her ethics clearance to include employing an assistant. The researcher employed one of the departmental administrative staff as a research assistant with support from the head of department at UWC. The assistant contacted UWC graduates for permission to provide the researcher with their contact number, which was confirmed via email so that there was record of this consent.

Upon receipt of email confirmation, the researcher contacted the individuals and followed the same process that was followed with the UCT graduates. She was not known to these individuals and she introduced herself, including that she worked as an academic at UCT. Eight prospective participants were contacted. Three people agreed to be contacted by the researcher but after three unsuccessful attempts to finalise arrangements for the first interview, the researcher decided not to pursue this. The first five people who agreed to meet for the first interview and returned the consent form comprised the UWC sample. The data collection process will now be discussed.

5.5 DATA COLLECTION

5.5.1 Pilot study

The literature notes the importance of conducting a pilot study with the purpose being to ascertain whether the participants can provide the required data, whether the interview schedule is appropriate, and whether it will yield the necessary data (Malmqvist et al, 2019, pp. 2-9, Rassel et al, 2023, p. 260). A pilot study was conducted with two individuals. They met the sample criteria as advised by scholars (Malmqvist et al, 2019, pp. 2-9; Silverman, 2017, p. 290). Based on the pilot study, minor revisions were made to the interview schedules (Appendix c).

5.5.2 Data collection method

IPA studies require that the researcher uses a method of data collection that is nuanced enough to elicit the meanings made of experiences by the participants (Tomaszewski, Zarestky & Gonzalez, 2020, p. 4; Larkin et al, 2021, p. 58). One way to do this is using face-to-face interviews, which scholars note is the most common path when the researcher wants to explore individuals' personal experiences (Téllez-López et al, 2023, p.10; Geyer, 2021, p. 355). Interviews are also considered the most suitable method for an IPA study (Alase, 2017, p. 13; Smith & Osborn, 2008: 57).

Generally, more than one interview is recommended in IPA studies (Seidman, 2013, p. 21; Miller, Chan & Farmer, 2018, p. 245). Three interviews were conducted with each participant. The interviews were lengthy which is unsurprising because scholars note that IPA based

interviews are lengthier (Carey, 2016, p. 88; Larkin et al, 2021, p. 62). The interviews were on average an hour and ten minutes long, with some being close to two hours long.

The researcher consulted theory for guidance on structuring the interviews. Authors advise that the first interview focusses on the participant's experience with the matter being examined, the second interview focuses on the participant's current experience, and the third interview links the past and present experiences to form their core experience of the matter (Marshall, Rossman & Blanco, 2022, p. 167). In this study, the first interview focused on the participants' experiences before studying, including the experiences that led to their decision to study social work. This interview also examined the core identities that they had prior to studying. The second interview focused on the participants' experiences at university and their perceptions of how, if at all, being at university influenced their pre-existing identities. The third interview explored their current professional identity and aimed to establish an understanding of their overall perceptions of how, if at all, their identities had shifted since studying.

The researcher intended to conduct all the interviews face to face despite writers noting that online research is well established (Chuey et al, 2021, p. 2; La Iacono et al, 2016, p. 2). Her intention to collect data in person was driven by the sensitive nature of the content; she was also mindful that the participants may not have access to the internet. She was however obliged to offer participants the option of meeting virtually because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Online interviews allow for social distancing (Chuey, et al 2021, p. 2; Kobakhidze et al, 2021, p. 4) and participants may not have wanted to deal with the risks of meeting in-person.

The in-person and virtual interviews were similar, but the researcher was able to observe more non-verbal cues in the former. Establishing rapport also took longer in the first online interviews. All online interviews were conducted using the Zoom platform and face-to-face interviews were conducted in the researcher's office, as decided by the participants. The table below sets out where the interviews were conducted.

Table 1: Sites of interviews

Participant³	Interview one	Interview two	Interview three
Lovey	Face to face	Face to face	Face to face
Mary	Online	Online	Online
Ms M	Face to face	Face to face	Face to face
Simon	Face to face	Face to face	Face to face
Nancy	Face to face	Face to face	Face to face
Stella	Online	Face to face	Face to face
Lelo	Face to face	Face to face	Face to face
Mason	Online	Online	Online
Percy	Face to face	Online	Online
Girly	Online	Online	Online

Percy, who did the first interview face-to-face, elected to meet online for the second and third interviews because of her other commitments. Stella had challenges with connectivity and her first interview was disrupted by loadshedding. She thus elected to do the balance of the interviews face-to-face.

The researcher followed all COVID-19 protocols in the face-to-face interviews and the participants completed the COVID-19 screening form. She took the temperature of each of the participants at the start of the interview with a handheld thermometer. She also took her own temperature which she displayed to the participants. The screening added another role for the researcher in that she also played a monitoring role by doing the screening. The researcher was aware that this was a legal requirement and was necessary to ensure the physical safety of herself and the participants, however the screening felt awkward at the start of the first interview. It felt quite intrusive having to take the participants' temperature and one of the reasons she showed the participants her temperature was to decrease the power imbalance within the screening situation. After the research relationship was established in the first interview, the awkwardness resolved.

³ The participants are identified by their chosen pseudonym.

The researcher had not experienced this type of engagement in her previous studies, and she was even more aware of her stance during the interviews. Both from a qualitative and phenomenological perspective, the stance of the interviewer must be one where the participants are seen as the expert of their own experience (Marshall et al, 2022, p. 161; Larkin et al, 2021, p. 66). This implies that the participant has power and is a co-researcher in the study. The researcher was especially mindful of the relational aspects of the interviews, especially with the UCT participants. In the opening phase of the interview, she reiterated that she was meeting with them as a researcher. With the UWC participants, the researcher was cognisant of the fact that she was unknown to them and, given the sensitive material explored in the first interview, spent a considerable amount of time building rapport with them.

5.5.3 Data collection instrument

Interviews can be informal or have a semi-structured guide to determine what is discussed (Ruslin et al, 2022, p.24; Best, 2014, p. 75). The researcher works from an emic perspective, exploring some general areas but allowing the participants latitude to answer questions in a manner that they choose to (Geyer, 2021, p. 358; Langdrige & Hagger-Johnson, 2009, p.398).

The use of an interview schedule is recommended in an IPA study because it allows the researcher to focus more confidently and thoroughly on what participants are sharing (Shim, Dik, & Banning, 2022, p. 701; Smith & Osborn, 2008: 57). The amount of data required for the study was a further indication for the use of interview schedules. The researcher followed the theoretical guidelines on constructing the interview schedules. The first consideration was that these schedules were linked to the aim of the research and the research questions as recommended by scholars (Rassel et al, 2023, p. 125; Hammond & Wellington, 2020, p. 110).

The importance of the questions contained in the schedule is highlighted and each question should form part of the coherent, whole interview schedule (Marshall et al, 2022, p. 161; Engel & Schutt, 2017, p. 506). These points were all integrated into the development of the interview schedules. Authors note the importance of considering these factors because it determines the quality and the depth of the data collected (Shim et al, 2022, p. 700; Kallio et al, 2016, p. 2955). The researcher consulted reliable and valid scales that tested Transformative Learning and identity development, (Sieger et al, 2013; King, 2009; Kember et al, 2000) to gain an idea of the kinds of questions that could explore the core areas of the study. She incorporated some of these questions in an open-ended manner in the interview schedules.

The participants needed to be able to share their experiences freely so that a deep understanding of their experience could be obtained and for them to have some power in the interviews. Theory also cautions against the researcher rigidly adhering to the interview schedule and advises that it be used flexibly (Ruslin et al, 2022, p. 24; Kallio et al, 2016, p. 2955). The researcher was aware of the overall data that she wanted to obtain and allowed for flexibility within each interview. This meant that sometimes participants moved between speaking of the past, present, and future within each interview. Recording the interview is advised so that researchers can ensure that they can focus on the participants (Téllez-López et al, 2023, p. 11; Coleman, 2022, p. 3) and this is discussed below.

5.5.4 Data recording

The participants must agree and feel comfortable with whatever technology is being used to record the interview and must consent to the interview being recorded (Rassel et al, 2023, p. 176; Henning et al, 2004, p. 76). Permission was sought from the participants for the interviews to be recorded at the start of each interview. Online interviews were recorded via Zoom and the face-to-face interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder.

The interviews were turned into text through transcribing, which is the standard practice in qualitative research according to Oluwafemi et al (2021: 418). Scholars suggest that even where the interview is being recorded, notes are made during the interview or immediately after. These notes can include the researcher's observations (Marshall et al, 2022, p. 161; Babbie, 2016, p. 315). These notes were especially helpful to know which areas to explore and how to avoid repetition where the participants raised areas across interviews. The above section described the process of collecting the data and the next section discusses the data analysis.

5.6 DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative data analysis involves reducing the raw data into a coherent framework that forms the study's findings (Fouche, 2021, p. 42; Rassel et al, 2023, p. 175). The researcher who conducts an IPA-based study views the data from an interpretive stance (Ndaa et al, 2022, p. 49; Pringle et al, 2011: 21). Data analysis is a complex process because of the large volume of data that IPA studies can generate (Marshall et al, 2022, p. 231; Shim et al, 2022, p. 700).

There are several ways to analyse data in an IPA study. However, this is invariably a double heuristic process as the researcher focusses on both the meaning made by the participants of their experiences but also interprets these meanings (Larkin et al, 2021, p. 34). Traditionally there are six steps in IPA analysis (Paley, 2017, p. 133) but in this study the steps as outlined by Smith and Osborn (2008, pp. 67-77) and Langdrige and Hagger-Johnson (2009:398-401) were followed. These steps are an amalgamation of the six steps of IPA data analysis:

- 1) The researcher searched for themes in the first case — the first transcript was read, notes were made, and the language used was commented on. The transcript was read several times and the researcher began to identify themes.
- 2) The researcher then connected the themes — the themes were recorded and she looked for links between the themes. This was an iterative process and she checked that her interpretation was justified by what the participant had said. The themes were then indicated in an integrated framework.
- 3) The analysis continued with the other cases — the researcher used the themes as a guide to study the rest of the transcripts. Whilst she sought for congruence in themes, the researcher also noted where new themes or differences emerged. All the themes were then noted.
- 4) The researcher wrote up the findings — once all the themes were clear, the researcher wrote up the findings and indicated the meaning in the participants' experience. The narrative of all the themes contained a more in-depth discussion and each theme was linked to the extant literature as it was discussed.

The following section addresses data verification.

5.7 DATA VERIFICATION

The trustworthiness of a qualitative study was historically viewed through the 'quantitative' concepts of validity, reliability, objectivity, and generalisability. Lincoln and Guba were pioneers and proposed that credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability addressed the concerns around trustworthiness in qualitative research (Marshall et al, 2022, pp. 47-49; Megheirkouni & Moir, 2023, p. 849). They later added a fifth criteria, authenticity (Elo et al, 2014, p. 2; Schwandt, Lincoln & Guba, 2007, p. 12).

5.7.1 Credibility

Credibility ties to the concept of validity and is central to promoting confidence in the research findings (Megheirkouni & Moir, 2023, p. 849; Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 104). Key to ensuring credibility is for the researcher to have prolonged contact with the research setting, to discuss the data and interpretations thereof with the participants, to gather data from several sources, to use different theoretical views, and to discuss findings with peers (Coleman, 2022, p. 204; Babbie & Mouton, 2001, p. 277). The researcher regularly discussed the findings with her supervisor and referred to her interview notes throughout the data analysis. She clarified and interpreted information that participants had shared to confirm that she had understood them correctly.

5.7.2 Dependability

This concept links to reliability i.e. how stable is the data ‘over time’ and can it withstand changes across studies (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 242; Megheirkouni & Moir, 2023, p. 84). Dependability also refers to whether the findings can be viewed as the result of a dependable and consistent research process. If the study has credibility, then it is automatically assumed to have dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316; Nieuwenhuis, 2016:124). One way in which dependability can be achieved is through an audit that checks for consistency of the data (Schurink et al, 2021, p. 394; Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 105). Regular checks of the data were completed and the researcher’s supervisor monitored the research process.

5.7.3 Confirmability

Confirmability is akin to objectivity and means that the data and findings are formed by the participants’ responses and not by the researcher’s assumptions (Megheirkouni & Moir, 2023, p. 84). The data must be able to be traced to the providers of the data (Schurink et al, 2021, p. 394). The researcher was aware of her own position and used supervision to assist with the presentation of the findings of the study, which are based on the participants’ responses. The techniques that can be used to ensure confirmability include doing an audit of the study, the triangulation of methods, and the researcher using a “reflexive journal” during the research (Lincoln and Guba, 2013, p. 105; Marshall et al, 2022, p. 262). The researcher kept a journal where rigorous notes were kept of her supervision sessions as well as notes that she made during the research interviews.

5.7.4 Transferability

Transferability is like generalisability and refers to the “external validity” of the study (Schwandt et al, 2007, p. 12; Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 316). In the natural sciences the researcher must demonstrate that the findings are relevant elsewhere, however, in qualitative studies transferability means that the reader must prove that the findings are pertinent to her context (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 240). The researcher should provide a deep understanding of the context of the study so that another person can determine whether the findings are relevant to her context (Lincoln and Guba, 2013, p. 105; Marshall et al, 2022:260). The researcher has been involved in the field of RPL and social work education since 2009 and she is confident in her understanding of the context. She also consulted with several scholars who work with adult learners and in the field of RPL prior to commencing with the study.

The need for transferability further supports the use of purposive sampling (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 316; Nieuwenhuis, 2016, p. 123). Transferability in an IPA study can also refer to theoretical transferability, where researchers link the data analysis to the extant literature and their own professional experience (Larkin et al, 2021, p. 51). This is done in the presentation of the findings.

5.7.5 Authenticity

The researcher paid much attention to authenticity given the sensitive nature of this study. In pursuing authenticity, the researcher must consider fairness and authenticity in terms of ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity, and tactical authenticity (Amin et al, 2020, p. 1479).

Fairness refers to how the researcher reflects a range of realities and justifies her interpretations (Elo et al, 2014, p. 2). The researcher should ensure detailed descriptions of the data and do regular audit checks with peers. In this study fairness was also ensured by using the same interview schedules for all the participants as suggested by Amin et al (2020, p. 1480).

Ontological authenticity refers to how the participants’ initial accounts are clarified so that the consciousness of both the participant and researcher improves. Ontological authenticity can be promoted through the researcher comparing the initial information that participants share to their later accounts and documenting these changes (Amin et al, 2020, p. 1480; Lincoln, 1986, p. 6). The researcher previously noted that she clarified and interpreted the information

provided by the participants and, in doing so, the participants often indicated that these interpretations allowed them to glean new insights into their experiences.

Educative authenticity and ontological authenticity are similar in that they improve consciousness but educative authenticity refers to the participants building an awareness of others. This was evident in the interviews where the participants indicated that in narrating their experiences, they became conscious of the challenges faced by their significant others in supporting them through their studies and they acknowledged their gratitude to them. Research must lead to action, and this is where catalytic authenticity applies. The knowledge generated by the research should be made available to the participants, other scholars, and practitioners so that the knowledge can be used in practice (Manning, 1997, pp. 100; Lincoln, 1986, pp. 6-8). The findings of the study will be published and a report made available to the participants.

Tactical authenticity means that the researcher accepts that the information shared by the participants belongs to them and the participants are seen as co-researchers in the research process (Manning, 1997, p. 101; Lincoln & Guba, 1989, p. 230). The use of a consent form and making the findings available to the participants are two ways in which the researcher tried to address tactical authenticity. Theory indicates that to add rigour to the study, the researcher must proclaim the study's limitations as all research has limitations. The researcher must also declare the delimitations of the study (Marshall et al, 2022, p. 101; Cresswell, 2014, p. 174). These are discussed next.

5.8 LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS

Limitations involve aspects that the researcher could not control and need to be considered in relation to the effect that they could have on the integrity and results of the study (Egbert & Sanden, 2015, p. 83; Price & Murnan, 2004, p. 66). Delimitations on the other hand are decided upon by the researcher in advance and are limitations that are imposed by the researcher and determine the scope of the study. Through stating the delimitations, the researcher argues why she elected not to choose alternative actions (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018, p. 157; Cresswell, 2014, p. 170). The following aspects were considered as delimitations and possible limitations:

5.8.1 Research design

The lack of generalisability is one of the limitations in qualitative research and IPA (Paley, 2017: 121; Pringle et al, 2011: 21). The purpose of the study and the transferability of it should be borne in mind; qualitative research seeks deep understanding of issues and does not aim to generalise (Taherdoost, 2022, p.59; Mohajan, 2018, p. 41; Queiros, Faria & Almeida, 2017, p. 370). The purpose of the study was not to generalise the findings but to achieve an in depth understanding of the participants' experiences.

Van Manen (2017, p. 778) argues that IPA is psychological interpretation rather than phenomenological research because of the focus on the individual, and that IPA does not provide enough depth to understand the very deep, primal issues that phenomenology aspires to achieve. Prior to reading Smith's (2018) rebuttal of van Manen's arguments, the researcher disagreed with van Manen (2017) on the very basis raised by Smith (2018, p. 1955). Smith (2018, p. 1955) argues that while researchers doing IPA studies may be therapists, they are acting in their role as researcher not therapist. Furthermore, Smith (2018, p. 1956) argues that individuals inherently reflect on themselves and try to make meaning of their experiences. The researcher does not kindle this need; instead they witness how the person has made meaning of the experiences and then interpret it.

5.8.2 Sampling

One of the delimitations of the study relates to the size of the sample. The researcher aimed for a small sample as larger samples can be a disadvantage in an IPA study. Writers argue that a large sample might mean that the researcher does not get the required depth of understanding of the topic under investigation (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 42).

It is also essential to remember the points made by scholars that qualitative research focuses on smaller samples and does not aim for the "representatives" of a large sample (Sukmawati et al, 2023, p. 132; Levitt, 2021, p. 99). In fact, Padgett (2017, p. 119) concurs that a small sample in qualitative studies is not a limitation unless the size of the sample leads to a lack of depth in the findings. The researcher is confident that because of the in-depth understanding she attained, her aim of achieving a deep understanding of the area under investigation was met. She also reached data saturation, which scholars posit is when no new data is elicited (Daher, 2023, p.98; Schonfeld & Mazzola, 2012, p. 283).

5.8.3 Data collection

Another delimitation was the decision to use interviews to obtain the data. The researcher resolved that interviews were best suited to obtaining the data required to complete the study. This method is not without criticism and theorists indicate that some of the limitations of conducting interviews is that they are time consuming and that gaining access to participants can be difficult (Ruslin et al, 2022, p. 28; Mane & Nikam, 2019, p. 136). Gaining access to some of the participants was a challenge, however the researcher reached the intended sample size.

The limitations of interviews can further include the fact that participants may not have all the required information, that they may not be willing to share details that make them feel uncomfortable, and that they may withhold information (Alsaawi, 2014, p. 154; Pascoe Leahy, 2022, p. 782). The researcher experienced the opposite; participants shared freely. This sharing facilitated the participants gaining new appreciation for their experience and they felt affirmed because they became ‘witnesses’ to their achievement.

Given the South African context collecting data online was a key consideration in terms of the delimitations of the study. Online interviews require access to the internet and one of the limitations of online interviews is that participants may not have access (Kobakhidze et al, 2021, p. 5). There may also be technical disruptions to connectivity (Chuey, et al, 2021, pp. 2;3; Archibald et al, 2019, p. 4). The researcher considered possible challenges with connectivity and regular power outages versus the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic. She elected to give the participants the choice about meeting virtually. Interviews were scheduled when neither party was expected to have power outages. The one participant had issues with connectivity and an unscheduled power outage, which was dealt with.

From the outset of the study, the researcher decided to meet with each participant thrice. This meant that one of the parameters of the study was that more than one interview schedule was required. Queiros et al (2017, p. 377) indicate that the construction of the interview schedules can take a lot of time which can be deemed a limitation. This was not a concern in this study. The literature also indicates that bias can also arise during the interview and mistakes can be made if the questions are not asked correctly (Hennink et al, 2020, p. 134; Holstein & Gubrium, 1997, p.113). The researcher has extensive experience conducting interviews and she was confident in her ability to manage the interviews.

The employment of a transcriber was another delimitation of the study and the researcher had to consider the possible limitations linked to transcribing. Transcribing can present several challenges because something that is spoken does not always resemble something that is written (Marshall et al, 2022, p. 223). The visual aspects of the interview are also not captured during transcription (Hennink et al, 2020, p. 217; Marshall & Rossman, 2015, p. 164). The researcher briefed the transcriber on what was expected and had regular contact with her. The notes the researcher made after the interviews also assisted, as did her listening to all the audio recordings.

5.8.4 Data Analysis

The literature raises several possible limitations linked to qualitative data analysis including that it can be very time-consuming and the researcher may miss key aspects of the data (Azungah, 2018, p. 390; Anderson, 2010, p. 2). The researcher is confident that these are not limitations in this study. Nieuwenhuis (2016: 126) argues that it is also possible that researchers can produce different findings from the same data and that the one manner to mitigate this is to ensure credibility. The researcher addressed credibility and dependability earlier in the chapter.

Another delimitation of the study was using semi-structured interview schedules. Schonfeld and Mazzola (2012, pp. 278-29) posit that there is a risk that the researcher can over identify with the participants, which will in turn influence how she analyses the data, and one way in which this can be avoided is using semi-structured interview schedules.

5.8.5 Researcher's bias

As this was a qualitative study, the researcher considered that she may herself be a limitation in the study. Qualitative research is highly subjective; the researcher's own values, ideas and expectations can contaminate the research (Marlow, 2023, p. 45; Ruslin et al, 2022, p. 26). There are three recommended tactics for dealing with this including: 1) the researcher needs to be as rigorous as possible; 2) the data analysis steps must be clearly noted; and 3) the researcher must declare her reflexivity (Mackieson, Shlonsky & Connolly, 2019, p. 967; Probst, 2015, pp. 37, 43). The researcher was aware of her own views throughout the study and stated her position in the first chapter. The data analysis steps were disclosed earlier in the chapter.

The above section noted the limitations and delimitations of the study however, the study also has methodological strengths. The choice of IPA as the research design allowed the researcher to gather rich data which is reported on in the findings chapters and ultimately allowed the researcher to meet the aim of the study. In meeting this aim, the researcher has contributed new knowledge not only in the field of RPL but has also in the debates around transformation in South African higher education. The researcher managed the impact of COVID-19 on the data collection process and she was able to meet the regulations surrounding social contact in a manner that did not detract from the research process. The decision to do three interviews with each participant enabled the researcher to obtain a deep, longitudinal view of the participants' experiences. Having three interviews also ensured that the researcher had the time to build a relationship with the participants that facilitated a very deep sharing of their narratives. The key value in this is that the study provides new insights into the experiences of learners who engaged in RPL and studied social work specifically around identity formation and transformation.

5.9 SUMMARY

This study adopted a qualitative approach with an IPA design and this chapter justified the motivation for the approach and design being employed. The researcher noted the challenges that she experienced in composing the sample and the chapter further explained how the data was collected and analysed. The issue of quality control in research is integral to the rigour of the research and the data verification techniques were clarified. The limitations and delimitations of the study were presented. The following chapter will present the first findings chapter.

CHAPTER SIX: BEGINNING THE JOURNEY

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This findings chapter focuses on the participants' life histories prior to studying. A biographical profile of the participants is presented because understanding who the participants were when they entered the academy⁴ is needed to comprehend the identity changes that they later described. Their histories shaped their identities and profoundly influenced their sense of self. A framework of analysis follows and the findings are presented under the themes which emerged from the data. A summary ends the chapter.

6.2 PARTICIPANTS' BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILES

Girly - A woman in her thirties, Girly was born in Johannesburg and moved between the Eastern Cape⁵ and Cape Town during her early years. Core themes in her childhood were absence and separation. She never knew her father and had an absent mother. This led to several challenges, including that she and her siblings were raised separately by "aunties". Her childhood was marred by chronic emotional abuse by the aunt who raised her. She described these events in a detached manner and her accounts demonstrate that she learnt to be self-reliant. The detachment was a coping mechanism to deal with the trauma that she was experiencing. Girly matriculated, did a course in design, and worked as a designer prior to studying social work. She is married with two children and lives with her family in Cape Town. Her most important need is to provide for her family, which can be because she has had first-hand experience of not being provided for. She speaks mainly of financial and practical provision.

Lelo - A 47-year-old woman, Lelo was born in Cape Town and moved to the Eastern Cape when she was little. Her parents were both married to other people. Her father's

⁴ Information that could identify the university where participants studied is omitted to protect their anonymity.

⁵ Cape Town is in the Western Cape. The Eastern Cape and Kwazulu Natal are two other provinces in South Africa.

absence was a key event in her childhood and she described a deep yearning for a present father figure. Lelo had strong feelings of being different to other children who lived with their fathers, including feelings of despair and envy. Her yearning for a paternal figure was exacerbated by living with an alcoholic stepfather. Lelo chose to live with her grandmother because of domestic conflict caused by her stepfather's drinking. She developed a pattern of negating her own needs through being silent to protect her mother. The need to help and protect others persisted through her life and this was partly what drew her to social work. Lelo returned to Cape Town just after matriculating. She completed a diploma in Information Technology and worked at two insurance companies. Like her mother, she married an abusive man. Lelo obtained a divorce and lives with her three children in Cape Town. She has completed a master's degree.

Lovey - A 57-year-old woman, Lovey was born in Cape Town. She was the only participant who described her childhood as happy. Her description of her family reflects the stereotypical view of the nuclear family. Her father was the breadwinner and head of the household; her mother stayed home to look after the family. Lovey became very attuned to her father's power in the family and how to manage him. His omnipresence was evident in that she provided very little account of her mother in the interviews. She was rebellious, which can be seen as an exploration of her own power and her history suggest that she has always challenged gender stereotypes. Lovey's emotionally distant father emphasised the importance of education, which was seen as a vehicle to achieve financial independence. She had seven siblings and her family focused on ensuring that their basic material needs were met. She matriculated and enrolled for a Law degree, which she did not complete. She then worked at two insurance companies (she met Lelo at one of them). Lovey is married, has two children and lives in Cape Town.

Mary - A 36-year-old woman, Mary was born in Cape Town. A central feature of her childhood was being separated from her parents when they moved to their own home and she was left with her grandmother, because her school was near to her grandmother's house. Mary saw her parents over weekends. She felt abandoned, questioned her parents' love for her, and struggled with having to negotiate the different rules in her grandmother's and parents' homes. The different rules meant that Mary always felt the need to know how to manage spaces, what doing the right thing was, and she feared disapproval. Her insecurity was exacerbated by later having to leave her grandmother's

home. She and her parents then moved a few times. There are themes of loss, insecurity, and a need for love.

Mary's grandmother died when she was 14 and she ended up attending a school beset with social problems. These events angered her and she rebelled by using substances and being truant from school. Her rebellion included marrying her first boyfriend whilst still at school (because she felt loved by him) and converting to another religion. She has a conflictual marriage and lives with her husband and four children in Cape Town. Mary matriculated and did numerous jobs before entering university. She was a first-generation learner, completed an Honours degree and is currently doing a master's degree.

Mason – A 39-year-old male, Mason was born in Cape Town. He witnessed his father physically abusing his mother and often intervened to protect her. Mason's mother's feelings of rage and disempowerment were projected onto Mason and she asserted her power through physically abusing him. He struggles with attachment, which was evident in the detached way he described starting work at age 12 and being separated from his family. He does not recount the fear that a 12-year-old would have felt at being left alone in a strange place. He travelled constantly for his business, which he started during adolescence.

Mason's rage towards his mother served as protective factor to help him cope with his situation. His ascent into criminal activity, which he ascribed this to his all-encompassing rage, confirms how challenging his childhood was. He spent several years in prison and became dependant on substances. Mason continued the cycle of challenging intimate relationships that he was exposed to and has three children from different women. He is also separated from them as they live outside of Cape Town. The pattern of violence is further evident as he physically abused his wife, whom he is separated from. Mason matriculated, did a community development course before entering university, and was a first-generation learner.

Ms. M - A 33-year-old woman, Ms M was born in Kwazulu Natal. Her history is characterised by chronic exposure to trauma, with the most significant trauma being witnessing her father's murder when she was three years old. Ms M's mother was absent throughout her childhood, and she was left with her grandmother for a long period after

her father died. She also had to contend with several relocations, with the last one being whilst she was in high school to a community where the values and modus operandi were alien to her. By then, her mother had remarried an abusive, alcoholic man who once set their home alight whilst she and her mother were asleep.

Ms M describes compromising her values to fit into her new community resulting in her falling pregnant in Matric. She matriculated and went to study at a college but dropped out because of financial reasons. The theme of separation and a challenging maternal relationship continued with Ms. M and her children whom she left in her mother's care and had a tenuous bond with before studying. A first-generation learner, Ms M is married and currently lives with her husband and two children in a town outside of Cape Town. She completed an Honours degree and is currently doing a master's degree.

Nancy - A 33-year-old single woman, Nancy lives with her one child and two adopted children in the informal settlement where she was born. The overarching themes in Nancy's history are a lack of protection, betrayal by loved ones, and shame about her circumstances. Her shame stemmed from her mother's behaviour because she would cause scenes and physically abuse Nancy at home and publicly. Nancy's mother had several children with different fathers who were unknown to them. She was the only one raised by her mother, which invoked her siblings' envy. She and her mother lived in poverty after her mother became unemployed. Her mother is an alcoholic who remains verbally abusive.

Nancy had a great need to be rescued. Her one brother, who taught at her school, made no effort to help her. Instead, she was regularly shamed by teachers and learners because they knew that she was his sister but that she remained poor. The theme of betrayal by people who should have protected her continued when her close friends initiated a situation which resulted in Nancy being raped at age fourteen. This incident was followed by ongoing sexual assault by the same man. She matriculated and worked in the retail sector before studying. She adopted her two nephews after her sister died.

Percy - A 41 -year-old woman, Percy was born in Cape Town. Her early history was characterised by significant losses and an absence of care. Her parents, who had both been married before, separated when she was five and the dissolution of the marriage

brought three major consequences for Percy. Firstly, her mother was forced to work as a domestic worker, which meant that she was often away from home and Percy received little emotional care from her. Percy was mostly left with an older half-sister, who ill-treated her. The pervasive lack of a caring caregiver led to her becoming self-reliant early on. She ascribed her falling pregnant at age 19 to the absence of a female figure who could guide her in negotiating intimate relationships.

The second consequence was that it generated a pattern of instability. Her father would leave home for a period, return for a couple of months, and then leave again. The separation from her father was complicated by him being involved in numerous relationships with women who ill-treated her. Percy has vivid memories of feeling betrayed by her father when he supported his partners instead of providing for her. The third consequence was that Percy's mother could not provide financially when her father was away so she lost her lifestyle and they lived in poverty. Percy had some respite when her sister came to live with her and was devastated when she was murdered when Percy was ten years old. The influence of this trauma was visible when she narrated this; she said that only recently was she able to talk about this event without crying. She completed grade 11 and did numerous jobs before studying social work. Percy was a first-generation learner and completed an Honours degree. She is married with three children and lives with her family in Cape Town.

Simon – A 37 -year-old male, Simon was born in Kwazulu-Natal. He moved to Cape Town when he entered high school. Simon presents as quiet and seemed to struggle to find his voice. When exploring his history, the origin of this is evident as he had several experiences of him - or others- being silenced. His family was firstly affected by floods when their home was washed away. They were then forcibly removed because of Apartheid and relocated to another province. This had disastrous consequences for his family because his father lost his job and the resultant financial struggles caused discord between Simon's parents. Simon's father started abusing alcohol and as his drinking escalated, he became physically abusive towards Simon and his mother.

After his mother left his father, she began working as a domestic worker and was away from home for long hours. Simon had to take care of his two younger brothers and started working from a very young age, which affected his performance at high school. He

describes the need to protect his mother and siblings and how he learned to subsume his needs because he prioritised his family's needs. This sense of responsibility has persisted. Simon matriculated and studied graphic design. He worked as an artist and did marketing in community organisations before studying. He is married with two children and lives in Cape Town.

Stella - A 37 -year-old divorced woman born in Cape Town, Stella describes a stable early childhood until her mother developed cancer when she was 11 years old, and died two years later. Her father remarried shortly afterwards to a woman who ill-treated her. At that point, being abandoned by a loved one became a characteristic of her life. At one stage social workers became involved with the family but did nothing to help Stella. This cycle of chaos post stability continued. Stella obtained a scholarship to study at a prestigious school but fell pregnant in grade 10. The baby's father deserted her and she was forced to leave school. Her challenges continued when her baby developed a medical disorder and she moved into a residential facility for terminally ill children so that her son could receive the care he needed.

She was separated from her family and had no familial support for a year because they made no effort to contact her. A year later her father passed away, at which point she had not seen him for two years. Stella's tenacity throughout her life is evident. The medical facility for example, offered her a job and paid for her to be trained as an auxiliary social worker, because she was industrious and helped with the work in the facility. She did numerous jobs before studying social work. She was a first-generation learner and currently lives with her son in an informal settlement in Cape Town.

6.3 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The table below sets out how the findings will be presented:

6.3.1 Table 2: Framework of Analysis

Objectives	Themes	Categories	Sub-Categories		
To explore the participants' early experiences and identity development.	Strained familial relationships	Strained maternal relationship	— Maternal separation — Maternal absence		
		Strained paternal relationship	- Paternal separation — Paternal absence — Playing adult roles		
		Strained sibling relationships			
		Surrogate parents			
To explore the participants' early experiences and identity development.	Development of value base	Solid value base			
To explore the participants' early experiences and identity development.	Participants' community context	Poverty	— Unemployment — Poor housing — Limited access to resources		
To explore the participants' early experiences and identity development.	Significant early life experiences	Parents separating	— Residential mobility — Exposure to different worlds		
		Experiencing loss			
		Substance abuse			
		Exposure to violence			
		Teenage pregnancy			
		Coping mechanisms	— Accessed resilience		
To explore the participants' early experiences and identity development.	Participants' education history	Positive school experience	— Role of teachers		
		Post schooling education			
To explore the participants' early experiences and identity development.	Participants' self-concept	Self as unworthy	— Yearning — Anger — Self-doubt — Despair — Less than — Betrayal		
			Self as invisible	— Lack of trust — Abandonment — Fear — Alienation	
			Self as shameful	— Guilt — Ambivalence — Envy	
			To explore the participants' early experiences and identity development.	Participants' salient role identities	Racial identity
		Son/daughter identity			
		Mother/father identity			
-Partner identity					
Learner identity					
To understand how these changes in their salient identities have influenced their personal and professional lives.	Motivation to study social work	Intrapersonal motivation	— Altruism — Developing self — Hope for a better future		
			Interpersonal motivations	— Exposure to social workers — Developing community	
		To understand the meaning that participants have made of their experience of participating in RPL.	Experiences of RPL Process	Positive experiences of the RPL process	— The RPL process — Staff support — Preparation for university
Challenges of the process	— Evoked difficult emotions — Meeting requirements				

6.3.2 Theme 1: Strained familial relationships

Almost all the participants reported that many of their early challenges originated in their family. The significant negative influence of these events was evident in how vividly they narrated events and in the heavy emotional climate in the interviews when they recounted them. One of the challenges was their relationship with their mothers.

6.3.2.1 Strained maternal relationship

Most of the participants spontaneously raised their negative maternal relationship. Challenges included mothers being verbally or physically abusive. For example, when Mason (who had only spoken about his father) was asked about his relationship with his mother, he described a deeply volatile and abusive relationship, which enraged him. He ascribes his involvement in crime and violent behaviour to this rage:

Me and my mum, we weren't really that close. She beat me up a lot, man. She would stab me with a knife and blame me for so many things and just made me angry. I think it was the biggest reason why I just became so violent for a big part of my life, because I was angry and I went out there and I wasn't scared anymore of dying. I did terrible things out there in the world until I started studying and I actually figured out, "Oh, this is why I'm angry."

Nancy also noted her mother's abusive behaviour which led to her yearning for her mother's love and her determination to gain it. She described herself as determined, because she needed determination to survive her relationship with her mother:

The environment was abusive but at the time I did not recognise it because on weekends she would get drunk and she would cause chaos, she would chase us away, like, the entire street knew that on weekends we're literally running around looking for a place to stay because if we stay in the house she's going to beat us out for no reason. She's always been the one that's been behind my determination. Initially, it was positive because I thought that me being able to provide certain things for her will make her a better mum, a more loving mum, a mother that I thought I needed. Nothing has changed.

The central role of the mother in identity formation is illustrated in the findings, which also demonstrate how relational the development of an individual's sense of self is. The participants found their mother's behaviour challenging but more importantly the biggest challenge was in how she related to them. The data demonstrates that their maternal relationship had several persisting consequences for these participants. It negatively influenced their self-concept and how they negotiate relationships. Emotional consequences for them included feelings of rage

and being unloved. Significantly, they seemed to have developed insight into the reasons for their mother's lack of care but are aware how this relationship negatively shaped their sense of self. Carter (2014, p. 243) confirms the findings in this section and indicates how important the role of the mother is because the primary socialisation happens within the family.

Maternal separation

Most of the participants had experienced separation from their mother because she was often away from home or lived elsewhere. These separations left the participants feeling several, complex feelings. Ms M, for example, felt abandoned and unloved by her mother. She said:

I never had a relationship with my mother. I knew that she's my mother, but I never had that bond. For me, my mother was my grandmother because she always demanded to stay with me. My mother was too busy for me at that point. I would go to a dark place or somewhere just alone to the mountains... just far away from everyone just so that I can release the pain.

Mary on the other hand, noted her ambivalence about this but, ultimately, she too felt abandoned:

At first it was very nice because having to live with my grandmother was very spoiled, I'm the only child. But at times I missed that connection with my mummy. There are certain things you can speak to with your grandmother but there are certain things that you want to speak to your mummy about. I started to miss that bond and that connection with my mummy.

The separation from their mother had a profound influence on these participants which can be seen from the feelings of loss and fear that they describe. Their accounts demonstrate that they saw themselves as being alone in the world and not having their emotional needs met by their mother was damaging for them. This ultimately shaped their sense of self and influenced their identities as daughters/sons. The findings of this study are supported by scholars who noted the importance of parents in identity formation. Authors indicate that parents are central to identity formation because the child shares role identities with their parents in that they accept roles given to them and they ascribe roles to their parents (Kiecolt & LoMascolo, 2003, pp. 27-29). This implies that how parents fulfil these roles will influence not only how the child not only experiences the parents but also their perceptions of themselves and the roles they play.

Maternal absence

Some of the participants experienced maternal absence. This absence was sometimes through death, as described by Stella:

When she passed away, it was a new thing. Everything changed ... the atmosphere ... Everything just went falling down for us, especially for myself because, as a teenage girl, no one is assisting you navigate through life, so it was just kind of overwhelming for me.

Others described experiencing their mother as emotionally absent, which was traumatic for them. Their mothers worked long hours and were then too tired to meet their emotional needs. They revealed that not being able to rely on their mother to meet their needs led to a realisation that they needed to become self-reliant, which was not healthy given that children are not meant to look after themselves. For example, Percy said:

She doesn't know how to really be a good mother. She doesn't know how to be loving, nurturing, because she never got that. The other thing, my mother worked long hours. She had no time. By the time she comes back, she's tired. She doesn't want to speak. She doesn't want to know what happened. She just wants to eat and sleep. And she expects that each of us should know what to do.

This finding illustrates how traumatic the loss of the mother can be for the child. However, further reveals that the absence of the mother does not have to be physical but can also involve the absence of an emotional connection, which is equally devastating. The importance of the emotional tone in relationships is clear. Prioste et al (2020, pp. 1521, 1531) concur, stating that the emotional tone of the parental relationship is key in identity formation because it will influence how the child perceives their parents and how they interpret their sense of self. These participants were acutely aware of feeling unloved because their emotional needs were not met. They coped by learning to take control of their own care. The absence of care would have generated tremendous anxiety and striving for control could have been driven by a need to create some sense of being safe in the world.

6.3.2.2 Strained paternal relationship

Most of the participants additionally had a challenging relationship with their father. Challenges included fathers being abusive to their mothers and to them, fathers building lives with other families, which resulted in being separated from fathers, and fathers being absent. Often, when their fathers built lives elsewhere, there was conflict with their fathers' partners, which further exacerbated the participants' woes and left them feeling more uncared for.

I think when he lost everything during the floods, that's where he started drinking heavily. And then things started escalating whereby he lost his job because he was drinking and not pitching up at work, and then he started becoming abusive to my mother. Sometimes to us as well, but it was not bad as compared to my mum. Simon

So, life went down like from up and like down, because the very same year, unfortunately, my father, he got married the very same year. So, we got to meet this new lady ... our step mum. Me and my step mum we fought a lot. Stella

The strained paternal relationship complicated an already challenging situation for the participants' identity formation. Ideally, their fathers should have mitigated some of the difficulties caused by their strained maternal relationships, however, instead, the paternal relationship confirmed their sense of being unloved and uncared for. Coovadia et al (2009, p. 23) focused on the role of the father in the identity development of boys, however the researcher argues that fathers are central in identity formation in girls as well. This is confirmed by (Stryker, 1968, p. 558) who argues that for all children the primary socialisation happens within the family i.e. both parents are central in identity formation.

Paternal separation

Some participants experienced separation from their fathers either because their parents never married or when the parental relationship ended, participants were forced to relocate. All of them felt that the lack of the paternal relationship was a central event in their lives. This separation engendered challenging feelings for these participants, including anger and a yearning for love.

My father was married to someone else. And my mother was married to someone else. I would go to my father at Port Elizabeth during holidays, and I will be with my mother all the other times. I was very angry. I felt like he was more with the kids that he was staying with than me, I could see ...he loved me. But I wasn't satisfied with the level. Because I compared myself with the other kids that I went to school with. Their fathers would go during sport. They would drop them during school. And my father was not there. Then I became a very silent child because I didn't want my mother to ... be bothered at the same time. Lelo

And then, in 1996, things become tougher between my mother and my dad, so they decided to separate. So, my mum moved to Cape Town to my maternal grandfather. She used to work as a domestic worker in Cape Town. Sometimes, she would come late, and then, as an older sibling, and then I had to like cook for them lunch and then start preparing supper. Maybe halfway then my mum, when she arrived, then she would take over. I had to learn to be responsible at a very young age. Simon

The influence of this separation had substantive negative consequences for the participants. These included a feeling of being less than and the need to take care of others. Looking after others could also have made them feel better about themselves but having to take care of others also meant that the participants did not expect care. This amplified their earlier mentioned need

to be self-reliant. There is an interesting paradox in that these participants yearned to be loved but at the same time ensured that they did not make any demands of their parents i.e. they negated their own needs through their self-reliance.

Paternal absence

Some participants had absent fathers, mainly due to not knowing who their father was. These participants seemed resigned to their reality and mentioned not knowing their father in a very detached manner. It is interesting to note that the participants who were separated from their fathers expressed their distress about this much more directly.

I've never met my father. I don't even know his surname Recently heard that my mother went behind my back and looked for him. But when she arrived, she heard that he passed away. I heard from family members that he's from Lusikisiki. He was married. And later ... I used to ask about him in my primary years, but my mother would just change the subject and ignore it. Girly

We all had different fathers. None of our fathers was present in our lives. So there was no father figure. So I grew up in the streets of Khayelitsha. Nancy

Despite their initial detachment it later became evident that these participants felt their fathers' absence. This absence confirmed their sense of deprivation not only physically but also emotionally. Not knowing or having a father led to the feeling of being incomplete. The influence of paternal absence is documented by Thupayagale-Tshweneagae et al (2012, pp. 117-118) who indicate that an absent father leads to identity, emotional, and social challenges for children. The findings above indicate that these participants had very little parental care. Based on the narratives, it is evident that this lack of parental care was a precipitating event for many of their challenges. TL supports the researcher's statement and indicates how important it is for children to have positive role models in identity formation (Illeris, 2016, p. 49). A core consequence of the disruption in the parental relationship was that these participants took on adult roles.

Playing adult roles

Almost half of the participants took on adult roles during their childhood, including taking care of younger siblings, taking care of the home, and working to provide financially. For example, when Mason was asked what the key events of his childhood were, he replied:

One thing was working from a young age. So, I was 12 years old back then. I remember when we started, when my dad decided that he's going to start the business. But I had different experiences. I was doing things from 12, 13 that I think 21- and 25-year-olds haven't even done yet, you know I was surviving out there.

Stella said that she had to take over the running of her household and how she matured because of this:

I had to take the role of my mum: the groceries, the cleaning of the house, everything. I had to adapt very fast. At the time, as I said, I had to grow up very soon as my mum passed on because I had to take over the role of being a woman in the house. So, already, I was an adult in my mind.

The loss of their childhood was a cornerstone event in the lives of these participants. They missed out on normative childhood experiences because they carried adult responsibilities. These participants experienced a role reversal; they were providing care when they should have been the recipients of it. In terms of identity formation, having to take on adult roles meant that their identity formation negatively accelerated. They also struggled to develop a sense of belonging with their peers because they had different roles to them. Feeling alienated from peers constituted another loss and could have provoked a yearning to be like other children. This finding is supported by Schimmenti (2018, p. 559) who states that there are negative consequences for children's identity formation when they take on adult roles in childhood because of the role reversal that this entails.

The participants also experienced strained sibling relationships, which compounded their challenges in their parental relationships.

6.3.2.3 Strained sibling relationships

Half of the participants were separated from their siblings and four of them also had to deal with separation from a parent/s. The separation from siblings was a loss because siblings are an important source of support and can be significant role models. Ms M, for example, spoke of her loneliness because her older brother was left with her grandparents because, culturally, children born out of wedlock do not live with the mother when she marries another man.

Because my mother got him when ... before the marriage, he stayed with her parents in the Eastern Cape. I think back then, when you had a child before your marriage, your parents will treat that child. They don't want you to take your responsibilities as a mother. Instead, your parents will take the responsibilities as the biological parents of that child of yours.

Nancy was also separated from her siblings and had to deal with their envy of her.

My siblings grew up in the Northern Cape with my grandmother. I was the only child that actually got the chance to be raised by our mother, which was single by the way. We all had different fathers. And I understand now, as an adult, that they also envied me for being able to stay with my mum while they couldn't.

The separation from siblings presented several challenges for these participants including preventing a close future relationship with them. The lack of care from siblings contributed to an overall lack of care for the participants, which further illustrates how lonely and challenging their childhoods were. Jones et al (2022, p. 368) confirm this finding and note that siblings play a central role in the development of the child and happy sibling relationships improve well-being. The participants were not totally devoid of care and experienced some care from other family members. This will now be discussed.

6.3.2.4 Surrogate parents

Some participants lived with grandmothers, aunts, and uncles who were ‘surrogate parents’ and they relied on them for love, physical care, and guidance. They provided these participants with some experience of being cared for by a ‘parental’ figure.

The presence of my maternal family. My mother's family was very supportive. I had a grandmother that was hands on. So, in that, I felt that I was supported on one side.
Lelo

My mother was my grandmother because she always demanded to stay with me. Because for me, she was always there and she's the one who seemed to be very protective of me as compared to my mother, and I can say that the only person who knew me personally is my grandmother as compared to how my mother knows me, which I don't think she knows me. Ms M

Surrogate parents provided some protection from the negative consequences of the lack of parental care and played a crucial role in the development of the participants' sense of self and their identities. This study confirms the literature that says that being left in the care of family members is common in South Africa, however, previous research notes that this is because of the migrant labour system (Hall & Posel, 2019, p. 3). So, whilst this study also found that participants were left in the care of others, the reasons for parental absence in this study are different.

The researcher explored development of the participants' values because identity theories highlight the role of values in identity formation and subsequent behavioural choices (Russel, 2020, p. 17; Cinoğlu & Arıkan, 2012, p. 1120).

6.3.3 Theme 2: Development of value base

Solid value base

All the participants stated that they developed a strong value base. Their values were inculcated by either their parents or grandparents and these values remained with them.

I think certain things, certain things and the values that she instilled in me, they played a significant role in my identity as well, because I think I only slept out while I was 23, and that's when I got pregnant. Nancy

I think that the core values that my grandmother instilled in me is that we always need to be respectful of people, we need to respect people that's older than us. I'm 35 and I still live by that philosophy that you need to go to bed a certain time and you need to eat a certain time because that's how it was by my grandmother. So, I think protecting my children, teaching them respect, teaching them to respect other people. Mary

The narratives highlight that the participants developed a range of values, for example, respect. They also learnt specific values attached to their different roles. One would have expected that the participants may have struggled to develop a coherent value base given the challenges in their families but it is possible that their challenges enabled them to see which values they did not want to embrace. Paradoxically, as negative as their experiences were, they showed them what they did not want to be.

The first two themes focused on the participants' experiences within their families and the next theme examines their community context. Families do not exist in isolation and IT confirms the need to consider people's context and social categories. The theory explains that context has a significant influence on identity formation (Stets & Serpe, 2013, p. 34).

6.3.4 Theme 3: Participants' community context

The participants' overarching contextual reality was that their race determined where they lived. Black communities historically have significant psychosocial challenges and the most pervasive challenge that emerged from the findings is:

6.3.4.1 Poverty

Most of the participants lived in poverty, and their families struggled to meet their basic needs which resulted in food insecurity among others. Percy for example described not having enough food and how living in poverty left a lasting impression on her.

My mother would bring an old loaf of bread from work, and my elder sister and I and her child would fight. The bread had moulds in it The green stuff. And then, we would put it in a dish, and put it in a pot and water and switch on the stove so that, at least, it gets so I come from a poverty situation. So, I hate poverty. I still do.

The findings reveal how pervasive the effects of living in poverty are. Poverty was not only physically challenging, but participants also made meaning of being poor which included an implicit sense of shame. They thus developed a desire to change their circumstances. These participants experienced emotional deprivation within their families and the physical deprivation accompanying poverty compounded their feelings of deprivation. The psychological challenges of poverty evident above are supported by Nussey (2021, p. 53) who posits that part of being poor also relates to “negative feelings of the self”, which include fear, feelings of being powerless and voiceless, and the worry that poor individuals face about the future. The prevalence of poverty in this study is unsurprising given that Groener (2019, p. 56) notes that poverty is often a factor in adult learners’ backgrounds.

Unemployment

Unemployment was strongly linked to the participants’ accounts of poverty. Their parents being unemployed was directly linked to their inability to meet the participants’ needs. The participants further saw being poor as being correlated to the opportunities that were available to them.

Things started to just get worse at that point because she was not working, so I would go to school on an empty stomach. And there were times where whatever we had for supper. I would notice that she would eat half of her plate for me to have something to eat when I came back home from school the following day because there was no hope of us having another meal the following day. Firstly, coming from a poor family that doesn’t necessarily have a specific status in the community, there’s a lot of rules in the kind of dreams that one has. Nancy

Despite their desire to escape poverty, many participants had limited opportunities for social mobility. Their options were determined by not only their race but also their economic status.

These two factors are interlinked and in South Africa were the basis for the social exclusion and isolation that these participants experienced. In essence, the society was structured to promote misrecognition and for these participants this misrecognition influenced their sense of self and their person identities. Scholars concur with this statement and assert that recognition can positively influence an individual's social and self-identities and, conversely, misrecognition can negatively influence these identities (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021, p.155).

Poor housing

Living in poverty extended to not having proper housing and living in overcrowded conditions. When Ms M was asked whether she felt that moving to Cape Town negatively affected her, she said:

It really did, more especially that we're staying in the shacks. They were just close to each other. Your neighbour is just here. And it's so chaotic, it gets confusing. Yeah, and it also enforces you to live the life that everyone else is living. There's no way that you can escape from it because it's just here, in front of you, everyone is up and down, people are drinking alcohol, people are playing their loud music. You don't have that space whereby you feel the peace and quietness like in the Eastern Cape.

The challenges of living in overcrowded communities without proper housing go beyond the physical. The consequences include a lack of privacy, and exposure and pressure to live very differently to what they were used to, which implies a feeling of coercion and a negation of who these participants were. The physical conditions in informal settlements also mirrored what participants who moved there had lost because of relocating, which included a sense of being anchored in their communities. The lack of infrastructure in these communities was an external manifestation of the fragmentation within their families and their sense of self. South African literature links living in overcrowded situations to cultural trauma and Keet (2021, p. 5) states that not having proper housing is a powerful form of social misrecognition.

Limited access to resources

The participants further spoke about the challenge of having limited access to resources, which was associated with poverty. For example, Stella indicated she had to move into a medical facility when her son needed oxygen, because her home had no electricity to power his oxygen supply.

We didn't have electricity in Khayelitsha, so he couldn't stay without the oxygen, so that is why he was admitted there.

The link between a lack of resources and poverty found in this study concurs with Walker (2020, p. 59) who says that poverty and ill-being in South Africa include the absence of resources and residing in a dangerous context. All the consequences of poverty are interlinked and not having access to resources also promoted feelings of social exclusion and misrecognition. A lack of resources accompanies a lack of choice and makes moving out of poverty very difficult. Once again there was a resonance between the participants' external world and the situations within their homes. They also had very little choice within their families and their domestic situations were not what they had hoped for. Ultimately the findings illustrate that these participants experienced social inequality because their race determined their social reality.

The participants had early life experiences that influenced their self-concept and the development of their salient identities. The following theme comprises of the five most prevalent types of experiences the participants had.

6.3.5 Theme 4: Significant early life experiences

6.3.5.1 Parents separating

Almost half of the participants experienced their parents separating either through divorce or the ending of the parental relationship. Two of these participants later went through their own divorce. The breakup of the parental relationship produced several challenges for the participants including living away from parents and experiencing financial difficulties. For example, Simon described what happened after his mother left his father:

My mum was a single parent now. We had to start from the beginning, like, you know, getting resources. I think we were poor at one point because it was difficult to get like food like three times per day. As a teenager, it was quite tough because I had to find a part-time job. So, I was working for Pep Store, I was distributing pamphlets on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays, of which it helped me a lot in terms of like pocket money and helping at home.

Percy shared a similar narrative:

I was the only child in their marriage, I grew up quite well to the age of nine, when they separated. My mother was a domestic worker and my father had a good job, paying job, so when he left, he left with the money, and then we started struggling.

The consequences of parents separating represent several losses and consequent disruptions for these participants including a loss of their lifestyle and the need to contribute financially. Having to help the family to survive influenced their role identities and their sense of self in many ways including being alienated from peers as they had to take on adult responsibilities. Parental separation led to participants needing to move (a physical disruption) and a sense that they were living in two opposing worlds (an emotional disruption). This furthered the general instability that the participants experienced which negatively influenced their psychological development. Avci et al, (2021, p. 201) support this information and assert that divorce can have several negative consequences for the children, which can persist into adulthood.

Residential mobility

Several participants experienced disruptions because of relocating to different cities; some of them had to deal with several moves. Relocations were either due to their parents' relationship ending or their mother's inability to look after them, as indicated by Girly and Ms M:

I was born in Johannesburg. Spent my primary years in Cape Town, but also in Eastern Cape. But I studied in Eastern Cape up until Grade 7, then came back to Cape Town again to finish my studies. I've been in Cape Town ever since. Most of my life I've never ... I can't say I've been raised by my mother. She only raised me for a little bit. Girly.

I was born in KZN. And, after I was born, my mother just took me to her mother in the Eastern Cape. So, there I was 5 years old. And then from then I studied until Grade 3, but I went back to my mother in KZN, then, from there, I went back to the Eastern Cape, where I did Grade 7 and 8 and 9, then came to Cape Town because, by then, my mother relocated from KZN to Cape Town. Ms M.

The psychological consequences of these relocations are notable. Relocations made it very difficult for the participants to establish a sense of belonging and to meet friends, which would have been especially challenging during adolescence when the peer group is central to identity formation. Being new to the community could also have exacerbated their pre-existing sense of isolation and social exclusion. Once again, this influenced their sense of self and authors note that relocation and moving are said to be very traumatic for children and can have long term effects on the individual's mental health (Morris et al, 2017, pp. 257-258). These participants had pre-existing experiences of social inequality, which were exacerbated by

relocating. Scholars concur with this argument and note that residential mobility furthers social inequality (Anastasio et al, 2022, p. 96).

Exposure to different worlds

The participants made deeper meaning of relocating in that they felt that they were exposed to different worlds with different values and norms. They experienced feelings of confusion and alienation, as well as a yearning for the community they lost. When Ms M. was asked to describe her feelings about moving, she voiced how hard this was:

First of all, it's being exposed in a community such as (name of community) at a very sensitive stage of being a teenager. I think as a teenager you don't need an environment like that because it just shapes you to be someone that you're not even But sometimes you just don't end up not knowing the person you are at all and end up being like everyone else in the community because that's what is normal. In the Eastern Cape, the female child doesn't go up and down in the streets. But coming to Cape Town, you're not going to church, and the place is overcrowded, there's music playing in the next door, people are drinking, so people are just doing their life differently.

Lelo spoke about relinquishing a part of herself when she moved to her mother's family. She comes from mixed-race parents and was accustomed to living according to both her parents' traditions and values. But her maternal family had different ways of living, which she had to adopt:

I'm Xhosa and my father is mixed. So, in my father's side, I have Coloured. It's very different. I knew that from my father's side, they are very flexible with most things but on my mother's side, I knew that I had to conduct myself, so in that, I adopted more on my mother's side than my father's side.

The influence of place on identity is evident. The participants ascribed meaning to the geographical place that they occupied, which was shaped by their emotions about the community and its values and norms. The loss of place thus challenged their sense of self and how they navigated the world. Scanlon et al (2007, p. 228) also address the significance of the loss of place and argue that a person's sense of belonging and identity are linked to geographical locations. Moving is a loss and challenges the identity of the individual and for these participants, moving further promoted the experience of their world as unstable.

6.3.5.2 Experiencing loss

Most of the participants experienced loss through the death of significant figures, including a parent. These losses were traumatic, which was evident in how vividly they spoke about them. Some of the participants struggle with unresolved grief.

I think no one has ever spoken to me about it with me up until I went to Student Wellness and there is man nurse that asked me about my family background because he knew the surname from KZN. And then he asked me what I want here because he knows people with my surname from KZN. Then I just started crying because I knew that's actually where I'm coming from. I had to tell him how did I end up here; how I've been moving up and down after my father was no more. Ms M.

Because I lost my sister when I was ten think I'm getting better every time, to talk about it, because she was stabbed. She was my confidant. She was my run-to person. And I was still traumatised because I saw her in the coffin, so I was still traumatised. It still is. I think I'm getting better every time, to talk about it. I used to struggle. Percy

The influence of these losses, especially the loss of a parent is clear in this study. This type of bereavement was an overarching loss because the death of their parent meant the loss of an anchoring presence. The significance of the death of a parent is confirmed by Bergman et al (2017, p. 41) as being so significant that the consequences can persist into adulthood. This loss triggered several other losses for example the loss of economic security and loss of place. As discussed previously, these losses influenced how the participants saw themselves and the world. Authors confirm these findings and note that a bereavement can influence the development of personal and social identities (Morris et al, 2017, p. 257). The third key event in the lives of many participants was exposure to substance abuse within their homes.

6.3.5.3. Substance Abuse

Half of the participants experienced substance abuse within their family. In four of these cases, a parent was abusing alcohol; the fifth participant experienced narcotics being used in her home. Both male participants disclosed their own history of abusing substances.

My father was drinking. I think when he lost everything during the floods, that's where he started drinking heavily. And then things started escalating whereby he lost his job because he was drinking and not pitching up at work. I started drinking in 2004. Life was not great. My life was like, stagnant, so to speak, It was kind of like seeing the world shutting down on me, you know. Simon

The one is smoking drugs. The other one is smoking It was just a very chaotic home and, thinking back, that wasn't the space that I wanted to be in. Mary

This data is supported by Couturier et al (2022, p. 1788), who indicate that there is a high prevalence of substance abuse in the families of social work learners. The effects of substance abuse on children are evident from these results and the participants experienced their homes as unsafe. Given that they also lived in unsafe communities, it was a battle for them to feel any sense of security. The researcher has alluded to the repeated experiences of instability and this finding is another example of this pattern.

6.3.5.4. Exposure to violence

Most of the participants flagged the prevalence of crime in their communities and almost half of them were direct victims of violence. Three participants witnessed violence between their parents and were also the victims of physical and emotional abuse within the home. When asked to describe their families and their early history, participants spontaneously narrated violent incidents.

My dad was shot in front of me because we were outside together and the truck I was three years old back then, but I can just I still have a picture of what happened even though I didn't know what was going on, and I know how he died because it was like a feeling at that time. Ms M.

I was raped but it was my boyfriend because I wasn't ready to engage in sex. All of my friends had already started having sex, so now they planned with my then-boyfriend to bring me to him. So, they brought me to him on this specific night. It was the 24th of December. And they said so-and-so is calling you. And I went, they said to me, "He's going to break your virginity. And if you resist, he's going to beat the hell out of you". Nancy

We grew up in a household ... there was a lot of violence. My dad was violent. He fought with my mom a lot. And I had to intervene a lot and that kind of really had an effect on me. I mean, I was married, and I hit my wife. Mason.

The effects of crime on the participants have persisted. Nancy clearly remembers the date when she was raped for the first time and Ms M, who was three years old when she witnessed her father's murder still has clear recall of the event. This shows the significance of these events. The findings demonstrated that living in poverty can be associated with exposure to crime, which is confirmed by Munyoro and Mavhungu (2022, p. 309), who further indicate that South Africa has one of the highest crime rates in the world. It has previously been said that these participants had multiple experiences of feeling unsafe and that their homes were dangerous spaces. Physical threats were accompanied by emotional threats; seeing their parent's violent behaviour would have made their already tenuous relationship with their parent even harder. Experiencing a chronic feeling of threat had a profound influence on the participants identities

because they would have tried to create some sense of safety through their person and role identities. Other research indicates that exposure to crime and violence can lead to chronic problems (Seff et al, 2022, p. 2). For all these participants, these events have had a profound influence on their identities and sense of self.

6.3.5.5. Teenage pregnancy

Nearly half of the female participants became teenage mothers. All of them believed that their pregnancy was directly linked to their poor maternal relationship and the absence of a positive female role model who could guide them on how to manage intimate relationships. They believed their lack of knowledge led to choices that culminated in their pregnancy.

It was my Grade 10, but then, unfortunately, I got pregnant by then because everything was chaotic in my life, because my life was a bit unordinary. I got involved with boys not knowing what was happening because I didn't have someone to teach me as to how to You know when you get involved in relationships and stuff. Stella.

When I was moved to Cape Town, there were no rules there. I'll continue staying in that house but they just didn't work because that was a different house now that doesn't have rules, which is what makes me to blame my mother for being pregnant when I got to Cape Town because I always felt like if I was still in the Eastern Cape, and if I had to stay there for my whole life, I wasn't going to be pregnant at that age. Ms M.

The most significant implication of this finding is that the pregnancy fundamentally changed participants' role identities and meant that they had to take on the very central role identity of mother. In addition, they had to take on the role of provider because they needed to provide for the child as they had no support. The pregnancy led to multiple disruptions including disrupted schooling. This information concurs with the argument made by Jochim et al (2022, p. 2) that teenage pregnancy is a major disruption in a young woman's life and results in several negative outcomes including dropping out of school. The literature explains that the participants were at risk for teenage pregnancy because Mjwara and Maharaj (2018, p. 137) state that a negative relationship with parents, and being Black and poor are risk factors for teenage pregnancy in South Africa.

The participants faced significant challenges whilst forming their identities and it was necessary to explore how they coped with these challenges.

6.3.5.6. Coping mechanisms

Accessed resilience

This was the most common coping mechanism. Nine of the participants asserted that they drew on their own resilience; this emerged as a significant thread throughout their narratives.

There's been something inside me that always tells me that, "You have capability. You can do this." Even though there ... like, those feelings of sadness, doubt, and all that, but I'll still believe that I can do this. I'm a person who likes being in quiet places. Maybe being in a quiet place will be very depressive but then again, it's what I need.
Ms M

Rugby was one thing that helped me get rid of some of my frustration and really, sport played a big part in my life. It really, really helped me deal with some of it ... you know.
Mason

The participants found ways to deal with their challenges and this alludes to the definition of resilience as provided by Kinman and Grant (2011, p. 262). They define resilience as an individual's ability to deal with challenging environmental stressors, high levels of pressure, and challenges without being negatively affected. On top of their resilience, there was an interesting split in that half of these participants indicated that they immersed themselves in activities outside the home to deal with their domestic challenges, whilst the other half isolated themselves. The literature denotes isolation as an unhealthy coping mechanism (Matthews et al, 2018, p. 273), however, isolation provided some relief for the participants who used this coping mechanism.

The preceding sections provided an insight into the participants' personal history. The next theme elucidates their educational history.

6.3.6. Theme 5: Participants' education history

6.3.6.1 Positive school experience

All the participants reported that they primarily had a positive school experience. Their primary school years were positive and they excelled academically. For some things changed at high school and their performance decreased.

I had a very good primary school. High school, I had a bit of a I started high school in Factreton just for Grade ... what's standard 6? Grade 8, and then we moved. It wasn't a good time because this back and forth, and I did not have I had teachers You know when you come from primary school because when I was in Grade 7, I

was like top of the class and when we got to high school, I don't think they prepared us mentally and emotionally for the huge gap at that time. Lovey

In primary school I think I was excelling because, like for exams, I didn't even study for exams. I would just go to exams and then pass, like, I would be in the top five or top ten. And then, high school, I had some difficulties because of the responsibilities and chores at home. Simon

The findings once again demonstrate the influence of relocating on the participants because, for all of them, a decrease in their school performance came after a move. For example, Simon's narrative is linked to the fact that he had to work because his family needed the income after they moved to Cape Town. When recounting their school experience, most of the participants spontaneously spoke about the important role of teachers in their school experience, which is discussed next.

Role of teachers

School became a haven for most of the participants and they highlighted the benefits of a positive relationship with teachers, which included feeling valued and cared for. Negative experiences with teachers, on the other hand marred, their school experience and sometimes left lasting impressions on them.

Every time we had an excursion, the teachers would pay for me. It was because teachers paid attention. They would notice when maybe my shirt wasn't ironed, and they would ask questions because they knew that I was an only child, even though I did it myself, and it was not always perfect. So, school was the best thing for me. Nancy

There was also that one teacher that I would say killed my confidence. I remember, we were reading in class, I'll never forget that, and I read a word, and because I know she would mock you when you say something wrong, I read a word and I couldn't read it, and at that point, I said it wrong, and she mocked me. And I can tell you, I'm 41 years old, but I'll never forget that. She mocked me and killed my confidence. Killed my public speaking. Percy

Timm and Barth (2021, p. 5) concur with these findings and state that teachers play an essential role in learners' school experience and their academic outcome, however for these participants, teachers' care had deeper meaning. Teachers were seen as symbolic parents and thus either acted as positive authority figures, positively influencing the participants' self-concept, or confirmed the negative parental experiences they had had. When teachers were kind and caring, the participants had some further experience of being cared for by an adult.

Furthermore, the recognition from teachers satisfied some of the unmet needs that they had in relation to their own parents.

6.3.6.2 Post schooling education

More than half of the participants studied at tertiary institutions post school. Most of them did not complete their courses either because of financial reasons or because they discovered that they did not want to study the course that they were doing. These participants indicated that they only chose these courses because of a lack of other options. Some of the participants who did not study after school completed other courses related to social work prior to studying, indicating that they already had an interest in social work.

I had to choose between Law and Library Science, and obviously Library Science wasn't So, I took Law, but I was never my heart was never in it, I just did it for a year and a half. Lovey.

The only thing we knew about it by then was Boland college, which is in Strand. So, that's where I ended up going as well. Ms M

There's something better for me, which is when she enrolled me to for an auxiliary course in 2004 at City Mission. Stella

The drive to improve their circumstances is evident in that the participants attempted to study further after school, despite having limited options and access to resources. These efforts to study are a further testament to their resilience. At a deeper level their desire to change their paths and to achieve prosperity can be seen as a quest to achieve worthiness and to escape from a social and family reality that was continuously undermining their sense of self.

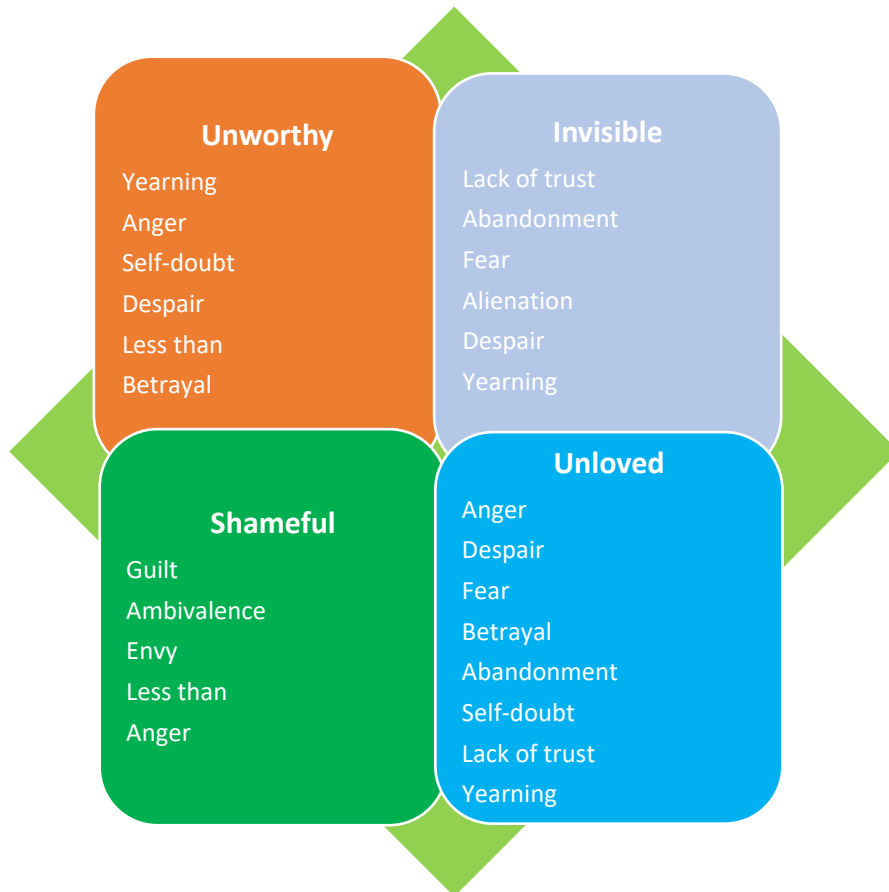
The preceding sections highlighted the participants' experiences; their narratives showing that very deep emotions accompanied these experiences. Based on the analysis, these emotions influenced their self-concept. The decision to explore how the participants saw themselves was guided by theory that indicates that the self-concept comprises cognitive aspects and emotional aspects (Stets & Juha, 2021, p. 133).

6.3.7 Theme 6: Participants' self-concept

The participants described many intense emotions when they relayed their experiences, which have been diagrammatically depicted. The researcher interpreted the deeper meaning of these emotions to gain an understanding of the participants' self-concept. The participants' view of

themselves was complex and these iterations of their self-concept are not mutually exclusive. Most of the participants' emotions fell into more than one category, which has been depicted separately for ease of reading.

Diagram 3: Iterations of self-concept



6.3.7.1 Self as unworthy

More than half of the participants saw themselves as unworthy. They spoke about feeling unworthy both directly and indirectly several times over the course of the interviews. The examination of the participants' background and experiences revealed how they could have developed a sense of unworthiness. For example, in one interview, Lelo, who had been through an abusive marriage, said:

I was almost cancelling myself. I felt useless. I felt unloved. The lack of confidence should have been from my previous life because I was recently divorced, and I thought I'm not worthy of anything beautiful. I think it was also a combination of my background as a child.

These participants experienced deprivation at multiple levels during their early years and they may have interpreted the fact that they were not getting their needs (which they were entitled to) met as them not being worthy of care and having their needs met. This was a devastating realisation and, not surprisingly, resulted in several powerful emotions:

Yearning

Most participants described feelings of intense yearning which later became part of the motivation to study at university. Many of them had specific yearning linked to their families prior to studying and unmet yearning generated different emotions including despair, envy and anger. Yearning also included wanting to have financial security as noted by Girly:

I wanted to go to school and not worry about any money, and not have to worry about being left out by my cousins who I grew up with who were attending school.

The participants' yearning indicates a deep wish that their situations were different and indicates how deprived the participants felt. They spoke about this deep-seated yearning without the researcher needing to prompt and the heaviness it generated was evident in the interviews.

Anger

Almost all the participants experienced immense feelings of anger, which persisted. This anger was primarily directed at their parents and was driven by their need for care and a realisation that they were not getting the care that other children were getting. The experiences that they were having at home fuelled their rage. The quote below is an illustration of this⁶.

I just became so violent for a big part of my life because I was angry and I went out there and I wasn't scared anymore of dying. I got expelled in Standard 7. My class teacher, she was a social worker and she called in my parents, and I think that was also a big part of where my dad realised how violent I had become. I wasn't scared of beatings, I had become dangerous because now I had lots of guns. I had different experiences. I was doing things from 12, 13 that I think 21- and 25-year-olds haven't even done yet. Mason

⁶ Only one quote is provided for each emotion, because of the parameters of the thesis.

The extent of their anger demonstrated how difficult their childhoods were. The participants were acutely aware that their homes were different to their peers, which also left them angry at being different. Their friends' experiences mirrored what they did not have and one can argue that their anger was an expression of their desire to also have what peers had and their disillusionment with their parents.

Self-doubt

More than half of the participants experienced intense feelings of self-doubt because they questioned their worthiness. This was also very evident during the RPL process. Ms M, when asked if the RPL process evoked any feelings for her, said:

It did because first of all I was doubting myself and no one knew that I'm doubting myself, but I had to just put I think there's been a pressure in my life that you need to prove people the other way, and there.

The participants' childhood experiences stripped their confidence about who they were and their abilities. Instead, their circumstances perpetuated ongoing misrecognition, which contributed to their self-doubt. The importance of being recognised is highlighted by scholars, who argue that recognition is a core human need (Honneth, 1992, p. 189; Sandberg & Kubiak, 2013, p. 351).

Despair

Most of the participants who described feeling anger also described feeling despair. The despair was in relation to their relationship with their parents or because their lives were not what they had hoped for. They often felt a loss of hope and a resignation that things could not change. Mary's narrative is an illustration of this:

I was kind of very sad because I miss my mummy a lot. And like, what was just the point of moving on, like I felt like I didn't need to go to school. I didn't need to make plans for the future, because what was the point then? I didn't. Reflecting, I think I was very depressed at that time.

The participants' anger often masked their despair because this despair was devastating. In order to cope with this overwhelming sadness, they became angry; one can argue that their self-reliance was also a defence against despair. Looking after themselves meant that they

could avoid acknowledging how uncared for they were and the consequent despair that arose from this.

Less than

This was another pervasive feeling for most of the participants, which added to their sense of themselves as being unworthy. They often measured themselves against others and were left feeling less than and not as worthy as others.

Sometimes I doubt myself and think other people are better than me, especially, as I said, when you find people that they study, they went to this Model C school and stuff, they had a better life than yours, like, their life was never a struggle. So, for me it has always been a ... it has always been a challenge. Stella

From this finding one can once again see the psychological effects of poverty. In this instance, Stella highlights that the lack of access to resources contributed to her sense of being unworthy. Stella's quote is an example of the meaning that the participants made of not having the opportunities that others had. However, the feeling of being less than had a deeper origin and that was the participants' families. The researcher argues that if they had felt loved and had been cared for, the consequences of poverty may not have had such a substantive influence on their sense of self.

Betrayal

Many participants felt betrayed by a parent, which generated some of the other feelings discussed above. Percy recounted an incident where she asked her father for financial assistance after he had received a large amount of money. When she arrived at his home, he was celebrating with his partner and refused to help her, nor was she asked to join the celebration. Her anger and despair were visible to the researcher, and this incident has clearly been etched in her memory.

I was not given a piece of KFC and I had to walk ... it's quite a long distance. I walked there. Normally, we would take a taxi. But I knew I'm not going to ask my mother for that money, so let me just walk. When I was about to leave ..., then I said to my father, "Bye." And he said, "Bye". He knew the distance. But he couldn't do anything. That was a different story for me. I did not want to associate with my kind.

This betrayal added to their sense of being unloved and not being able to rely on their parents for protection. There were lasting consequences of this betrayal for all these participants and many of them continue to struggle to trust others and remain self-reliant.

6.3.7.2 Self as invisible

Most participants further spoke about seeing themselves as being invisible. They had deep feelings of not having a voice within their families, that their families did not recognise them, and their needs were unimportant. When Ms M. spoke about her relationship with her mother, she spoke about a time where she was feeling particularly despondent about the relationship:

I just decided to ask her (her mother), "If, let's say, I just die, and people want to know the things that I liked as a person, as a daughter, for example, colours or the music that I liked or the song that I like, what will she have to tell them?" And she just didn't know.

These findings also indicated that their sense of self as invisible was because of the lack of care that the participants experienced. The feelings related to this are discussed below.

Lack of trust

Nine participants described struggling with trust, with the most common manifestation being feeling unsafe with others and in the world. The need to be self-reliant (which many participants had noted) was also explained as them not trusting that anyone would take care of them.

I struggled with relationships. I struggled with trust. I struggled with opening myself up to love. I struggled with believing someone that said they loved me. I struggled with that. I never believed that, so it made it hard for me to reciprocate their love because I don't even believe that they do love me. Nancy

This was a significant finding given that trust is central in human relationships and the genesis of their mistrust is their relationship with their parents. The need for self-reliance was also linked to the need to be in control by almost half of the participants. They felt safe when they felt in control and did not rely on anyone.

Abandonment

Half of the participants struggled with feelings of abandonment. All the participants who struggled with feeling abandoned had experienced being separated from a parent/s.

I think it's mostly confusing because for me it was like, "Didn't my parents want me to stay with them?" Because that's what I was thinking. So I felt like, "Didn't they want me here, or ... do they feel like I'm better off with my granny?" Mary

The feelings of abandonment had a profound influence on the participants' emotions and their sense of self. These feelings led to participants seeing their self as unloved because for them being abandoned meant that they were not important enough to their parent/s for them to stay with them. Feeling abandoned also contributed to the feeling that they were invisible to their loved one. This sense of being invisible led to other feelings like anger, and once again the interconnectedness of many of these feelings can be argued.

Fear

Half of the participants described living in fear for most of their childhood and that they felt unsafe and unprotected. This is understandable given the homes and communities that they were living in.

Weekends were hectic for me because I would go from this smokelhuis (tavern) to another smokelhuis with her and I was always, I remember. I was always afraid of something bad happening, and at times she would leave me in bed thinking that I must sleep, and then I would wake up and she's not there. Imagine the fear of a young child being alone in the house. Nancy

Once again, the findings reveal that the participants' emotions had many facets to it. The fear is notable though because it is difficult to establish any sense of security in the environment and confidence in self in the presence of such fear. For all these participants, their fear was also tied into other emotions, for example, Nancy's quote reveals that she also felt abandoned by her mother.

Alienation

Many of the participants struggled with feeling alienated from their family, community, and society, because they saw themselves as unseen. This was a powerful feeling that evoked many of their other feelings and later became a factor in their adjustment to university. Mary described what it was like for her when she moved to live with her parents:

And the children that was in the road didn't know me. I didn't know them. It was hard connecting with them. So it was kind of It was very troubling for me.

The participants' previous experience of social exclusion was compounded by their sense of alienation from their family and community. Their sense of being different was turned into a positive when they decided to study. They were doing something different to their communities

as most people their age do not study. Some of these participants are first-generation learners, which further speaks to them turning their feeling of being different into a positive.

6.3.7.3 Self as shameful

Feelings of shame were a very prevalent finding in this study, with more than half of the participants directly describing this. For example, Percy described the shame that she carried because of her circumstances:

The rest of them were affording everything and I couldn't ... was very into myself. I think I carried shame. Yeah. I carried shame because of rejection. We are groomed or raised as black people to only accept the instruction, not interrogate, not think out of the box, you follow what you are told.

The influence of shame on the sense of self is dire for several reasons. It leads to isolation as Percy describes above and feelings of 'badness' and exclusion. Percy also alludes to how Apartheid systemically inculcated shame through making Black citizens believe that they were less than and defective because of their race. These participants, experienced shame-inducing events not only at a macro level but also within their families. Shame invoked powerful emotions, and these are:

Guilt

Almost a third of the participants voiced feelings of guilt that have continued into their adulthood. The guilt in childhood had many sources, for example, feeling that they were a burden and having what others did not have had. The guilt described by Mary is an example of how guilt manifested in their adulthood when she spoke about not being present for her children:

Jack⁷ was this central person, like, a person of importance. But the person of importance had to be my child because I had to do what's best for my child, but I was so selfish that everything was like, "What's going to make Jack happy?" It wasn't, "What's going to make my child happy?" So, there is a lot of sadness. Lance must always have the best of everything." So, just reflecting back I think that that guilt is still there, with me.

⁷ Names have been changed to protect Mary's anonymity.

Guilt is described separately because the researcher argues that shame lies at a deeper level within the self. Someone may feel guilt and not see themselves as shameful but, in this study, the guilt was a symptom of a deeper view of the self as shameful.

Ambivalence

Half of the participants struggled with feeling shameful because they had ambivalent feelings towards their parents. They felt both love and challenging feelings for their parents, which meant that at times, they described their parents in quite paradoxical terms. For example, Mason indicated that his father was abusive, but he described their home as happy.

My dad, when he was also a bit younger, he was still strong, he was violent. He fought with my mom a lot. And I had to intervene a lot and that kind of really had an effect on me. But other than that, it was a loving home.

The ambivalence was tied to participants' understanding of the normative expectation that children love their parents. They were at pains to speak positively of their parents when they had also disclosed very challenging experiences with their parents. The ambivalence was a way of coping with their negative feelings towards their parents because they tried to compensate for it by countering it with positive emotions or by describing parts of their parents positively.

Envy

Some participants experienced feelings of envy and were also the object of envy. Where they were envied, they felt shame for what they had and experienced shame in relation to others not having. Nancy described how she envied her sister but also realised how her sister envied her:

It was better in a way, but because we were raised apart, we had our own issues. I was so jealous of her. She was more beautiful than me, light skinned and there were always comparisons whenever I was with her. And that annoyed me. I was the only child that actually got the chance to being raised by our mother, which was single by the way. I understand now, as an adult, that they also envied me for being able to stay with my mum while they couldn't.

The participants' envy was borne out of their awareness of others having what they did not and wanted to have. This desire was often about a belief that what the 'other' had would make their lives easier. Nancy's narrative alludes to the shame that people with very dark skins face in communities. In her case, the light skin that her sister had symbolised being more attractive and visible in society. The final iteration of self is self as unloved which is discussed next.

6.3.7.4. Self as unloved

Most of the participants also saw themselves as being unloved and once again this arose in their family of origin. For example, when Lelo was asked what her main challenge was with her father living in another town, she stated:

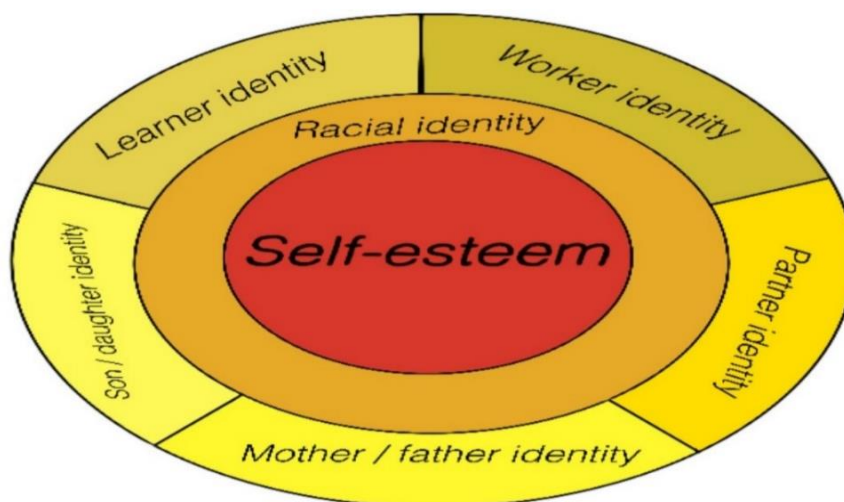
My worry was that he didn't love me enough.

Based on the participants' previous description of their relationship with their parents, one can see how this relationship would lead them to feeling unloved. It is also difficult to feel loved when one feels unworthy. The feelings related to feeling unloved are noted in the diagram and have been discussed above. The exploration of these emotions and life events also revealed the most salient identities that the participants had, and this comprises the next theme.

6.3.8. Theme 7: Participants' salient role identities

Identity theorists add that self-esteem is fundamentally located in identities (Grindal et al, 2021, p. 44). The following diagram shows the key salient identities that the participants had, all of which significantly influenced their sense of self and their self-esteem.

Diagram 4: Relationship between self-esteem and Identities



6.3.8.1. Racial identity

Whilst the participants did not spontaneously talk about what it meant to be a Black child in South Africa, the centrality of their racial identity later became evident. Underpinning much of

their narratives, it showed how their racial identity informed their perceptions of their future as Black people.

Apartheid, you know, it was designed for us to be garden boys or kitchen girls, you know. Simon

The assumptions that we, black people that we are lazy, the assumptions that we don't know. For example, the ... restaurant experience, eating out, that we ... examples, and then you pick up, Nah, man. There's an assumption here that we maybe have not experienced that kind of life. Also, the assumption that because you're black, you come from Eastern Cape. Percy

The participants' views of their social identity and role identities were shaped by what they thought being Black meant. Many participants chose to later challenge the expectations that came with being Black. Stella spoke about her challenge around what is expected from Black women in their role as wife.

His expectation was for me, as our culture says a wife has to go to Eastern Cape and stay with the mother-in-law and let the husband work in Cape Town. So, it was that kind of stereotype that, now that I was no longer working, I should have taken this package of mine and went to his mum, you know, and fix whatever needed to be fixed in his home. Then I was like, "This guy is crazy. Does he think I'm going to take my money and give it to his mum"? I was breaking boundaries, because the values of being a black child in an underprivileged community, as I said that, you are seen in a certain way.

The devastating consequences of Apartheid are evident in these quotes. The participants had a clear idea of what society expected their destiny to be because of their race (as indicated by Simon) and the findings reveal the extent of the discrimination that these participants felt. Their experience of being a Black person informed their other identities and Burke and Harrod (2021, p. 12) confirm these findings as they note that the racial identity of an individual is central in their identities.

There were a few role identities that the participants spontaneously spoke about when recounting their life story.

6.3.8.2 Son/daughter identity

The male participants emphasised their role as son in relation to their father in a very different way to how the female participants described being daughters. Most of the female participants spoke about their daughter identity in relation to their mother which is not surprising given the

high number of them who had no relationship with their father. Their daughter role was important to them despite the conflictual relationship with their mother, and they continued to behave in accordance with the role expectations of this identity.

As a son, I was quite respectful. I respect my father. Because at some point he had livestock. And then, I was responsible to look after the livestock and take it to the fields and also fetching the livestock. So, as a son, I think I was loyal, I think my father relied to me a lot. Simon

The most important role at the time was still being the good daughter. It took me a while. I think it's only recently, while I was doing my degree, that I got to understand certain things and got to accept and acknowledge certain things about my life that may never change. I think I still had hope that one day that we would wake up and the situation would be better. I prayed. I did everything that I thought any mother would be proud of. Nancy

The daughter/son identity was a salient one for the participants if one looks at the theoretical definition of identity salience, i.e. that it refers to the commitment to the identity, the participation within the identity, and the value expectations that go with the identity (Burke & Stets, 2012, p. 3). Participants were committed to this role and had definite ideas of the expectations related to these role identities. With this identity came very ambivalent feelings but it continues to have deep emotions attached to it.

6.3.8.3 Mother/ father identity

Nine participants were parents prior to university and eight of them described this as their most salient identity, which was a strong motivator for them to study further. All the teenage mothers struggled with being pregnant but the mother identity became their most salient identity. More than half of them stated that they wanted to parent differently to how they were parented.

I made a decision when I had that child, that would be the best mother. Everything that I wanted to have and I didn't get from my own mother, I would ensure that my daughter gets it. And she then became the centre of everything I did. Percy

I care a lot about my kids. They mean the world to me. They are the reason I decided, I think, because I had such a great relationship with my father, I wanted to have the same great relationship with my kids. Mason

This identity being so salient for the participants is not only because this is commonly a central identity as noted by Quinn (2021, p. 159). It also provided them with the opportunity to heal some of the wounds that they experienced as children. What was evident was their own negative experiences and how they used their understanding of what they had needed as

children to guide how they parent their children. Ultimately their desire was that their children should have primarily positive childhood experiences.

6.3.8.4 Partner identity

Nine participants spontaneously spoke about their identity as a partner before they studied, and only three described a positive relationship with their partner. For example, Simon said:

As a partner, I ... was always good at maintaining relationships. For example, my first relationship lasted like three years. I was quite good at maintaining relationships because I would understand people, the way they think, understand the way they do things.

The rest had challenges in their relationships, as illustrated in these quotes:

I'm an alpha male. Because I'm man-a-man, you know? That's just how I am. A lot of strong females, they kind of just ignore me, "Yessus, no... you're too full". I like being in my own space. As a partner, my relationships always seem just have a two-year term then the honeymoon phase is over, and I get bored and I move along. Mason

The reason why I say I'm so disgusted by thinking back, because, at that time, like I said, I was so young and naïve, I just I felt like I just lived my life to please my husband at the time. Like, I needed to be a good wife, I needed to cook well, I needed to dress a certain way. Mary

The narratives highlight the values that the participants had around this identity. The descriptions provided by the male participants show they had very different values attached to being a partner. Mason had a traditional view of his role as being the head of the household, which is what his father was. His view reflects what Carter (2014, p. 251) notes, i.e. that the role of husband is often associated with power and control. Simon, on the other hand, described a more egalitarian view of being a partner. Mary and the other female participants described a very traditional view of a wife being responsible for domestic duties, which is confirmed to be very common in South Africa (Pierz & Dapi, 2022, p. 194).

6.3.8.5 Learner identity

Half of the participants emphasised the importance of their learner identity and how this identity boosted their self-esteem. Through their learner identity, they countered the feelings generated by their other identities and felt competent and recognised.

I was considered one of the clever students in the primary school until ... I think that ended when I went to (name of town). But every time I got ... for example, when I'm

coming from school, my uncle will want to see our books. And then, if someone did better than the other one, it's your prize. Everyone will be given their prize for doing better. One who did the most will get better prizes compared. I always wanted to make sure that I get that prize and everyone at home will know that that is going to be my prize. Ms M

I started high school then I excelled again. I was always dressed. I had my skirt, and my shirt, and my tie, and my blazer, and I liked my blazer. Even when it frayed, I started cutting out, you know, the leather, and I'm making just leather, and here I make leather. I always liked to look neat and tidy, and I was always the one that, you know when teachers trusted you with information and to do things. Lovey

The recognition that school provided was very powerful and mitigated the lack of recognition in the participants' families. They achieved this recognition through their academic performance but part of the value of the learner identity for them was gaining approval and recognition from authority figures, which at a deeper level was akin to affirmation from parental figures.

6.3.8.6 Worker identity

All the participants possessed a well-defined worker identity that they were committed to. They were hard working and seen as dedicated workers by their colleagues.

At the time, I was not a mother. I was not a wife. I was just a designer. You can say a trendsetter because people would love Most people loved how I dressed and wanted to have what I had. I would say I was a trendsetter, a designer, a people's person. Girly

I got my promotions and things like that because they could see ... even in a time when promotions was frozen, I was one of those people that got a promotion. Lovey

The participants' worker identity provided them with the same recognition that their learner identity did. Their experience of finding recognition outside of their homes was positive for them. Additionally, they had an opportunity to discover their agency and to be industrious, which was very important given that they came from backgrounds where they often felt disempowered and helpless. Work was an important space for them, and the following section discussed what motivated them to leave the space and to go and study.

6.3.9 Theme: 8: Motivation to study social work

The participants had intrapersonal and interpersonal reasons for wanting to study further which were not mutually exclusive. They also made deeper meaning of obtaining a degree which informed their motivation for studying.

6.3.9.1 Intrapersonal motivations

The three most prevalent intrapersonal motivations will be discussed below.

Altruism

Altruism was by far the most common factor with eight of the participants mentioning that they had a deep need to help others. In some cases, their altruism was driven by a need for others not to have the experiences that they had. They believed that if they helped others, they could protect them from experiencing similar challenges. Stella, for example, said she was driven to social work because it would enable her to help children so that they did not experience the childhood losses and traumas that she had endured:

I want to be a social worker because I want to help kids who are in the same position as my situation So, I'm that kind of person that I want to make a change in someone's life even though I don't have nothing.

Ms M who herself had battled after becoming a teenage mother, said:

I saw myself having this NGO, helping people at my age, like, 14, 15, talking about teenage pregnancy, empowering them, helping them about focusing in their That's all that was in my vision.

The participants' awareness of their own pain because of their childhood experiences engendered a key desire to help others. The need to help others is tied to a need to provide care as these participants had experienced an absence of care. It is interesting that all these participants, as highlighted by Stella and Ms M, wanted to focus on client groups who were at the same developmental stages that they were when they had key traumatic experiences. One can thus argue that getting satisfaction from alleviating suffering was also a mechanism that promoted some healing within the participants themselves. The motivation described in this finding aligns to theory that states that learners who study social work are often motivated by altruism (Butler-Warke & Bolgor, 2021, p. 1025).

Developing self

Some of the participants saw studying social work as a means to heal themselves. They knew that studying would not just be an academic endeavour and this awareness was driven in some instances by previous exposure to social workers. For example, Lelo said:

I knew that my life will turn around, and with the programme, since I've interacted with social workers, so I knew that this would do something within me besides my studies.

Nancy also noted that her primary motivation was because she had a desperate desire to change and develop:

Firstly, for me, personally, it meant growth. It meant moving forward instead of the stagnation that had taken place in my life. It meant that I would then make... I could obviously then change the situation at home.

The potential for a social work education to be transformative at an identity level and in shaping how the person engages in the world is implied in this finding. The fact that the participants knew that the degree would be more than an academic endeavour suggests that the social workers they came into contact with had left them with the impression that the degree also influences change within the learner whilst studying. Another inference from this finding is that the degree had deeper meaning, and participants saw it as providing a second chance. This second chance would also allow them to heal their past and unlock a new future. It was also a vehicle to achieve their hopes and become their possible selves, which Scollan, (2019, p. 200) confirms is common motivation for adult learners.

Hope for a better future

Tied to a desire to become their possible selves, some participants verbalised that they studied because they hoped for a better future. There was an awareness of their increasing age, and they felt an urgency to change their and their families' lives.

You know, when you are closer to 30, you are thinking that time is running out. Things are not going well. I want to get married. I want to have kids. How am I going to feed these kids if I things are going to be like this? I want a house, I want a car, I want all of this, but things are not going my way. I have to come up with plan. Girly

I want to afford things that I want because I knew that I have responsibilities. I need to afford those responsibilities. I don't want to be rich, but if I want to buy myself a car, when the time comes, I need to buy that car. If I need a house, maybe I want to stay in Kirstenbosch, I need to have those things. I can't be there in Khayelitsha and that is my forever. That is not my forever. I'm moving out from Khayelitsha. Stella

The desire for a better future was underpinned by a wish to escape poverty and achieve social mobility. McCall et al (2020, p. 107) underscore this information and state that social mobility is a significant motivator for adult learners. The accompanying need to this wish was a yearning

for emotional and social recognition because escaping poverty was a move towards social inclusion. The participants' mother/father identity is also a factor because through studying they could be a positive role model for their children and provide for them.

6.3.9.2 Interpersonal motivations

There are two primary interpersonal factors that motivated the decision to study:

Exposure to social workers

Many participants were exposed to working with social workers because they were doing volunteer work, were auxiliary social workers, or because they needed social work services. This exposure promoted their interest in the profession.

I worked in each and every project that came out in the townships. Every time they had an opportunity, they wanted peer educators, I was there. I went to camps. But, growing up, my mother would take in kids, orphans within the family, foster sometimes, sometimes just take them and just provide the intervention of social workers. So, I've been exposed to social work. Percy.

This exposure was not always positive, and half of the participants were motivated to study because they were disillusioned with the services offered by some social workers and wanted to do better.

I can see what these kids need, and these social workers come from nice backgrounds, they don't know hardships from that side of the tracks. They don't know hard ... they don't really know and being poor. The ideas that they have to help the foster kids, I saw, but it's wrong. Mason.

The exposure to social workers clearly made a huge impression on the participants. They saw the power of social work interventions and the positive or negative influences, depending on how social workers performed. Seeing the positive results of social work was a motivation to pursue the profession as it would allow the participants to express their altruism. The data of this study correlates with Byrne (2019, p. 709) who posits that mature learners are often motivated to pursue social work studies because of exposure to social workers.

Developing community

A third of the participants were motivated to study to break the cycle of poverty and violence within their communities. The desire to develop communities included providing positive role models for the youth within their families and communities. Their motivation to study thus went beyond making a change in their own lives.

Khayelitsha can have something better than just for it being known as a gangster place, a shack place. We can change it around. Because now, the tik is like, became a nice time other than something that people can ... you go to jail for. So, the people that are selling tik they are like, what was I going to say, they are role models instead of being criminals because we are sitting and doing, not doing nothing about that. And if I have an idea, sharing it with another person saying, "Guys we can do this. We can start this." Stella

The need to develop their communities indicated an intrinsic desire to promote social justice and transformation because these participants were acutely aware of their communities' psychosocial problems. The way they spoke about helping their communities created an image of a desire for their communities to accompany them on the path to emotional, social, and economic prosperity. Byrne (2019, p. 2) supports these findings because he indicates that learners see social work as being able to assist with poverty alleviation and learners have a deeper desire to promote social justice and transformation in their communities and society.

There was no single event that prompted the participants' decision to study; this decision was made over time which confirms Cox and John's (2016, p. 304) argument that South African learners do not have the usual disorienting dilemma described by TL, instead the dilemma is orienting where a learner is introduced to a programme that can change their lives. Most of the participants heard about RPL via word of mouth, which prompted their decision to apply to study. All of them had decided to apply for RPL because of their age and they would not have met the entrance requirements. The final theme in this chapter discussed the participants' experience of the RPL process.

6.3.10 Theme 9: Experiences of RPL Process

The participants found the RPL process to be positive and challenging at the same time. The positive experiences will be discussed first.

6.3.10.1 Positive experiences of RPL process

The RPL process

Many participants experienced the process as affirming, which left them with a feeling of recognition. Through the process, they also learnt about themselves because they had to prepare for their application. Girly spoke about learning about herself whilst she compiled her application:

I really liked it because there were some things that I did not know about myself that I got to discover when I had to write the CV. Or some things that I was not acknowledging about myself that I got to discover when I wrote that CV.

The RPL process was profound for a third of the participants who stated that the process was transformative for them. Nancy for example said:

The programme itself played a big role in just enabling me to see myself beyond education. I started believing that I can actually I don't have to limit my dreams. I don't have to limit my abilities and skills as well. Why don't I stretch the current skills or resources that I have to the actual place that I know that I love entirely? It was the best thing that ever happened to me.

Most described the interview as being positive, despite their anxiety about it.

The interview was quite helpful because the officer who interviewed me, they could see the potential in me, of which, up until this date, I am quite proud of, you know, because the interview was straightforward. It was more about why I apply social work. It was more about proving myself that I'm worthy to be enrolled at (name of university). I quite respect the officers in charge for interviews because they only saved me. Simon

The meaning the participants made of the process went beyond the practical because it symbolised an opportunity to become who they wished to be and to achieve social and economic recognition. The narratives show how empowering the process was and previous research confirms the findings of this study. Brenner et al (2021, p. 12), for example, states that the RPL process can be both empowering and transformative for the RPL applicant.

Staff support

The most common positive aspect of the RPL process involved the way university staff engaged with the participants. The validation and recognition from staff were seen as confirmation that these participants were worthy of being at university and helped ease their anxiety and self-doubt. For example, Stella spoke about the support from a staff member:

Then I met this woman. She is my rock to this day. Because when I came to RPL and there they speak English. I do know how to speak English but there were few Black people. There were Coloured. There were Muslim. So, for me, it was a new thing. Then I was like, "Okay, am I doing this thing? What's happening?" But, with everything happening in my marriage, I want to change my life, and now, I'm living it now, it's like difficult. But the funny thing is, Mrs (name of staff member), she was very lovely.

The importance of the relationship with university staff was a continuous theme throughout the study and staff members played a significant role in the participants' experiences from the moment they applied and throughout their time at university. Luckan (2021, p. 73) concurs with this information and posits that staff are integral to the RPL process; he notes the importance of the role of the RPL assessor.

Preparation for university

Some of the participants highlighted that the RPL process prepared them for university. Through the process, they learnt what the academic and social demands of university would be.

The interview helped with first year, if I can put it that way. I still remember that one individual asking, "How are you going to cope because everybody in your class is going to be younger than you?" And I'm like, "Why is this question valid?" But then, in my first year, I was like, "Oh! now I understand why this question was asked." Mary

I think it really prepared me for what to expect at university When I started university the next year, I had a great understanding of what to expect. And I think RPL, because I handled a lot of things in life already, RPL just gave me this great platform and it gave me this peak at, "This is what you can expect." Mason

The findings reveal that the importance of the RPL process extends beyond the assessment as it gave the participants some insight into what would be expected at university. Whilst the researcher did not ask this directly, she suspects that preparation could have somewhat mitigated the transition to university because the participants were not entirely unfamiliar to the campus and its demands when they first arrived at university. There were also some challenging experiences for the participants in the RPL process and this is elucidated next.

6.3.10.2 Challenges of the process

Evoked difficult emotions

The primary challenge was the negative emotions evoked for the participants. The most common were fear and self-doubt. The primary fears were their application being unsuccessful and being seen to be unworthy of being at university.

It was not an easy process itself. Let me first start into that. There were people that were bank tellers. Like, people with big cars. They've been working in certain industry, important industries unlike the call centre that I was working in for ten years, and so I felt small. I didn't even think that I would be selected. Nancy

I think because I was afraid of being looked ... stupid, like a stupid ... or anything like that. Ms M

The RPL process evoked the participants' view of themselves as unworthy of being at university and this finding alludes to their fear of the consequences of an unsuccessful application. Being rejected would have meant that they would not have gotten what they referred to as their second chance and that their new life would not materialise. One can thus see that internally the participants felt tremendous pressure to succeed.

Meeting requirements

More than half of the participants had challenges with meeting the requirements of the RPL process, which stemmed from either being unclear about the expectations or because of a lack of resources to meet the requirements.

I think the RPL process for me was the most anxiety-provoking. The process is as follows. They send you an application form. And after this form, they send you this 10-page questionnaire. And I literally took a week to fill it in because I wasn't sure of my answers, or should I rectify this, should I have said that? The questions there were super anxiety-provoking for me. Mary

Then and there, we called, and then we were told we needed R600, and that was where are we going to get the R600? Percy

The participants' lack of access to resources was discussed earlier in the chapter. Their uncertainty about the requirements could mean that these requirements were unclear and issues linked to language were discussed in the literature review. The researcher suspects it is more about the importance of being accepted and that their anxiety impeded their ability to understand the requirements. The process generated much anxiety because it had such deep meaning for the participants. The findings in this section are underscored by Brenner et al (2021, p. 12), who assert that the RPL process can be practically and emotionally demanding.

6.4. SUMMARY

This chapter provided an insight into the participants' lives and the significant challenges they experienced before studying social work. It gave an understanding of their motivation to study and their experience of the RPL process, which was evidently a complex one for them. The following chapter focuses on their experiences at university.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE UNIVERSITY YEARS

7.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter highlights the participants' time at university because their experiences at university may have influenced whether they experienced any identity transformation or not. The framework of analysis will firstly be provided. The themes pertaining to these experiences will precede a discussion of the participants' perceptions of the identity transformations that they experienced. The chapter is completed by a summary.

7.2 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Table 3: Framework of Analysis

Objectives	Themes	Categories	Sub- Categories
To explore any changes that the participants have experienced in their salient identities since participating in RPL and studying social work.	Positive university experiences	Intrapersonal experiences	— Recognising life experience
			— Learning
			— Academic success
		Interpersonal experiences	— Peer relationships
			— Influencing children
		Positives of field practice	— Practising
		— Use of self	
		— Clients improving	
		— Agency support	
To explore any changes that the participants have experienced in their salient identities since participating in RPL and studying social work.	Challenging university experiences	Age	
		Challenges within university	— Physical environment
			— Language
			— Encountering racism
			— Academic challenges
			— Younger peers
			— University resources
		Challenges outside university	— Family demands
			— Lack of support
			— Poverty
	— Lack of transport		
Challenges in field practice	— Practice evoked anxiety		
	— Non-social work supervisors		
To explore any changes that the participants have experienced in their salient identities since participating in RPL and studying social work.	Participants' support structures	University-based support	— Financial support
			— Staff support
			— Peer support
		Environmental Support	— Family support
To explore any changes that the participants have experienced in their salient identities since participating in RPL and studying social work.	Psychological experiences at university	Positive psychological experiences	— Increased self-awareness
			— Accessing resilience
			— Affirmation of agency
			— Rediscovering values
			— Retaining values
			— Transformed racial stereotypes
		Re-experiencing childhood-based emotions	— Anger
			— Alienation
			— Ambivalence
			— Despair
			— Guilt
			— Fear
			— Feeling 'less than'
		— Mistrust	
		— Self-doubt	
		— Overwhelmed	
Experiences of salient identities	— Racial identity		
	— Familial identities		
	— Learner identity		
	— Learner social worker identity		

The participants had a definite purpose for coming to university, which was to obtain the qualification. This purpose had a deeper meaning for them, including that the qualification was a vehicle for changing their and their families' lives. Thus, all their experiences at university were interpreted in relation to how it facilitated or detracted from their ultimate goal.

7.2.1 Theme 1: Positive university experiences

Most participants indicated that they had adjusted to university by the end of the first semester.

7.2.1.1 Intrapersonal experiences

Recognising life experience

More than half of the participants found their life experience was beneficial because they could relate to academic content because of experiencing similar issues to what was being taught.

When the lecturers spoke about something, I have a memory to associate it. So, I don't write while I'm listening because the memories are already here, And that made me strong, it made me confident, it made me do well. Mason

I could relate to what was lectured in the classroom. Then it just made me to be more interested because I was ... The teachings were about the things that I can relate and the things that are also happening in our environment. Ms. M

Seeing the transferability of their experiences meant that the participants reflected on and recognised the value of their life experience. This finding is supported by Honneth's (2004, p. 354) theory which asserts that accomplishments can counter misrecognition. At a deeper level, relating to academic content affirmed their worthiness to be learners and their ability to make a valuable contribution to the academy. Their worthiness to be learners was an affirmation of their worth as people, which boosted their self-confidence and self-esteem.

Learning

Almost half of the participants spoke about their initial excitement to acquire new knowledge especially about social work. When participants were asked what they were looking forward to about being a learner, Lelo replied:

I was just looking forward to this learning new things because I didn't have much, much knowledge of what social work is all about. So, I've learnt new things. I saw different things happening within the campus itself, so it was exciting.

Several participants noted that obtaining new knowledge was an ongoing positive experience. For example, Stella described her routine at campus:

I was absorbing everything, and I was hungry to learn each and every thing that was expected for me to know. I would stay in the library...

The participants' motivation to study because of a desire for self-development means this finding is not unexpected because new knowledge would have contributed to feeling that they were developing. Many had been doing some form of community work prior to studying and they wanted the qualification so that they could be seen to be working legitimately. Ongoing learning had deeper meaning and allowed the participants to meet their need for legitimacy. Authors concur and state that adult learners' intrapersonal motivation to study included a desire for self-development and the need for legitimacy (Saddler & Sundin, 2020, p. 337; Steinhäuser and D'nn Lovell, 2021, p. 225). Legitimacy would also bring recognition and Honneth (1992, p. 189) indicates that recognition is a powerful human need.

Academic success

Passing academic assessments assisted some participants with their transition to university because it boosted their confidence and reassured them that they belonged at university. Passing was seen as a confirmation that they could succeed and lessened their self-doubt. The participants were asked to describe initial positive experiences they had at university and Ms M. said:

I think that was after a month when I wrote my first assignment. Then I got a PASS. Then that started easing my doubts. I started feeling like, "Okay, I can still do this. If I managed to type from a computer whereby I've been searching for alphabets I couldn't see for seconds. So then, if I can continue doing this, I'll get a pass and I'll end up getting my degree.

Academic success was an ongoing positive experience for these participants and passing assessments strengthened their confidence. Simon said:

I kind of like made peace that I belong to this institution, and through seeing my ... results from exam, tests, you know, it gave me confirmation that I'm capable of moving forward. I quite enjoyed that. It kind of like also boost my self-esteem. I would submit a paper that I was not so sure of and then I will find out that maybe I got 55 or 60, and then I wouldn't be hard on myself... . I would just celebrate any mark that I received.

Academic success was powerful for these participants because they had such profound feelings of self-doubt and being unworthy of being at university. These feelings signified how important the qualification was for them and academic success was conformation that they could achieve their aim. Academic success was a powerful source of recognition that countered some of the previous misrecognition experienced by these participants. As mentioned earlier, Honneth (2004, p. 354) speaks about the recognition that comes from accomplishments.

7.2.1.2 Interpersonal experiences

Peer relationships

Relationships with peers was the most positive aspect of the transition to university for the participants, most of whom spoke about the importance of the support of classmates', especially other adult learners. Peers often provided support with academic work. Half of the participants noted that they established new friendships, which have endured.

I think it meant a lot in in the sense of, like, belonging as well. Because even though I was older, I knew I had to get support from other individuals as well. I can't be on myself. I depended a lot from my peers. Me and this person is still friends until today. She told me, "Okay. This is how you write a essay. This is how you do the introduction, the body and the conclusion". Mary

When I arrived at (name of university), I met few other RPL students, and they were very much outspoken or vocal, so they shared their feelings, so I happened to also have to share with some and we supported each other. Lelo

These findings are another indication that adjusting to university was challenging and that the participants required support. Engaging with other adult learners normalised their challenges and seeing peers coping mirrored the possibility that they could also manage. Friends played an important role in promoting the participants' feeling of belonging within the university. Collins (2020, p. 117) concurs with this finding and posits that many adult and social work learners rely on contact with other adult learners and on support from their younger peers.

Influencing children

Most of the participants revealed that a rewarding aspect of studying was the marked, persisting influence that this had on their children. Percy noted that her daughter became more conscientious and consequently her marks improved.

My daughter loves dressing up and stuff and then being in a neat uniform. But she was never that kind of a person who spends time in a books and stuff. But now she's focused. She's a straight A student. People don't believe this. She's hard working. She pushes. And she doesn't say it often, but she would say, "My mother is a hard worker". I really believe that it was a positive influence on her.

So, yes, also for my kids also, besides not giving up because they've had challenge and failing the year, but they didn't give up. They just went again and tried again because I always said, "Even though you ... you fail, look at it differently, as a challenge, and see what you can do differently, and you don't park there. Lovey

The finding is notable given that half of the participants were motivated to study in order to be a role model for their children. The influence that they were having meant achieving their aim. The participants saw influencing their children as essential to their mother/father identity. Seeing their children improve academically verified the identity and increased their self-esteem. Gallagher et al (2022, p. 1) supports this data and notes that when individuals verify their identities, their self-esteem increases. Previous research underscores this finding and asserts that adult learners' studying has a positive influence on their children (Ronnie, 2016, p. 265).

The participants also raised several positive experiences in relation to the field practice.

7.2.1.2 Positives of field practice

The significance of the field practice for the participants was evident. When asked to describe their most significant year of studying, six participants described the year in relation to a field practice placement or event. For instance, Stella said.

But the memorable... . When we took oath on the second year when we were wearing those coats. So, for me, it felt real that, this is happening. I am going to wear this gown in two-years-time and I'm going to walk that stage and they're going to call my name. I'll be seen on television.

These findings are unsurprising because the field practice is where learners get to practice what they are taught and the value of the field practice has been discussed by Chen and Russell (2019, p. 67). Many of the participants were motivated to study by altruism and a desire to develop their communities and the fieldwork allowed them to enact and meet these needs.

Practising

All the participants were excited about being able to practise and implement their new knowledge. Their first practice experience was significant for them because it symbolised the realisation of their dreams of being a social worker. When they were asked how they felt about their first practicum some responses were:

I felt like I'm doing the real thing. I felt like I was being trained as a social worker. I was so excited, but I was very nervous at the same time. I had a mixture of feelings. I was very excited. I could see myself in the field already. Lelo

It meant now, Social Work ... is no more about theory. We are now being seen as social workers for real. It meant that now they are no longer seeing us as just students. And it meant that when we were at the field, we were recognised as social workers, which was nice because it's what we...it's what we came to the university for to be social workers. Girly

Seeing clients was a confirmation that they had gotten their 'second chance' and that they were worthy to do the work. The field practice can thus be argued to be a powerful site of recognition. Freirean theory can be used as a lens to interpret this finding. Freire asserted that the value of education lies in the process of learning (Goodman, 2014, p. 1055) and in the process of learning to practice, the participants also learnt about themselves. Beytell (2014, p. 184) also asserts that social work learners are excited about the possibility of practising.

Use of self

Once again, the participants saw the value of their life experience and most of them appreciated being able to use their experiences and drawing on parts of themselves in the practice. This was affirming because they were able to recognise who they are as people, and they felt that their 'use of self' benefitted their clients.

My struggles. My past experiences of poverty, rejection, yeah, having a child at the young age. Basically my ... life. I could relate with a lot of people, with a lot of experiencing ... experiences people were going through. I had been exposed to all. I had gone through myself, so yeah I could relate with a lot of my clients. Percy

I was in my element. We spoke the same language. They were so surprised when they heard because when you come to the schools, you're introduced as a social worker, but they were so shocked when they could hear, "This social worker is not like other social workers." This social worker knows our slang. He speaks our language. And that made

the clients that I worked with so much more cooperative. I could use my own mistakes.
Mason

The key point in this finding is that these participants had reflected on their own histories and how this related to clients' experiences. According to Bogo et al (2020, p. 24) the process of reflection is a core aim of the field practice. This finding thus indicates that participants were meeting this aim. The data also shows that the BSW was not only an academic programme, and the participants identities were active through their studies. The participants' ongoing reflection about their clients and themselves in relation to their work is an illustration of Freire's concept of "praxis", which refers to the to the ongoing interaction between the processes of reflection and action (Ho & Tseng, 2022, p. 2188).

Clients improving

Seeing clients' situation improve was especially valuable for half the participants. The improvement was rewarding and boosted their confidence in their efficacy as social workers. When Simon was asked what he enjoyed about the practice, he replied:

I managed to open other fields for her to see a different perspective in terms of like that she wasn't in a healthy relationship. And then eventually she ... thanked me because she kept asking me for advice but I was like, "I'm not here to advise you. I'm just here to guide you, make a right decision". And then eventually she made the right decision. I could see that the purpose or the passion is there for me, you know, to make a difference in people's life.

The benefit of clients improving for the participants' sense of self was because clients improving was a symbol that they could help others. This boost was an important source of recognition for them not only because helping satisfied their altruistic needs and at a deeper level was linked to worthiness. When clients progressed and thanked the participants, this provided what Honneth (2004, p. 354) refers to as emotional recognition, which he argues is a vital form of recognition.

Agency support

Agency support was a central factor of the field practice for almost half of the participants because it assisted them with doing the work and taught them much.

I always had somebody, you know, that would call me in, a certain day that we had to chat, maybe an hour as to what, how I felt, how my week was, how the sessions were, and if there was maybe information that they had give us and what I liked the fact that they took me, especially in (name of organisation), that they actually took me with them to do things. Lovey

Social work literature underscores this information and notes that supportive agencies play an important role in the learner's success in the field (Flanagan & Wilson, 2018, p. 572). However, this finding has deeper meaning because the power of agency support denoted support from an authority structure. Most participants had negative experiences within the original authority structure (the family) and at a symbolic level this support provided participants with an experience of their needs being seen and recognised by an authority structure. Supportive agencies thus provided a corrective experience for them.

The above section denotes that the participants had numerous positive experiences at university, which had deeper value for them. They also had challenges at university which are discussed next.

7.2.3. Theme 2: Challenging university experiences

7.2.3.1. Age

All of the participants spontaneously raised their age as their first challenge. Their age was viewed as a social and academic barrier. Once they settled into university, they saw the value of their life experience as discussed previously.

When I went to go study again, social work, I felt like I was too old. You know, that feeling when you previously studied and you are going back to study again, you are feeling like, in fact, I felt like I was too old to be at university now. Girly

I was 33 or 32. I think as an older student, I kind of imagined studying with an 18-year-old, and it kind of created a barrier for me and I won't say ashamed, but something similar to that, where you are telling yourself that you are late, I'm telling myself that I should have been here a long time ago. Simon

Adult learners across the globe have identified their age as a barrier (Abrue Bengo, 2020, p. 73) and in this study the participants saw their age as a confirmation of the limited or lost opportunities they had. Their age initially reinforced their alienation and sense of shame within the academy because they were different to their younger peers. Implicit in this difference was that they were less than their younger peers and that the university was the rightful place for young learners. These participants thus initially questioned their legitimacy in the university. Once they had claimed their space as learners, this challenge receded because it was tied to a

sense of belonging. There were also challenges for the participants within the university and these are expounded below.

7.2.3.2. Challenges within the university

Physical environment

Even though the participants had some exposure to campus during the RPL process, they battled with the physical environment. This environment and getting lost on campus were the most significant challenges for almost all the participants because it added to their sense of alienation. Once they became familiar with the campus, this challenged resolved.

It was crazy. We would get lost on campus. We were there for the orientation, shown where the classes take place and all that, but there was a lot of confusion with regards to the class ...where a certain class is So, at times we would get to the venue and the class would be going out. Nancy

Unfortunately, just that we had to look for ... for venues, responses as well, and it was a bit hard for us, matured students. Percy

Mallman and Lee (2016, pp. 689-690) confirm this information and assert that the physical environment of universities and getting lost on campuses are huge challenges for adult learners. The psychological implication of this finding is that all the participants entered the academy having secure worker identities, which included security in their physical environment. On arrival at university, they literally and figuratively entered a new world, and went from being experts to being novices. This ‘regression’ challenged their previous identities. IT can assist with understanding why this was so stressful because it states that if the person sees themselves as less of a person, less part of a group, or playing less of a certain role they will see the identity change as regressive (Carter & Moroni, 2021, p. 256). For these participants getting lost equalled being less than other students and not belonging but more importantly they went from knowing to not knowing.

Language

Language was the second most challenging aspect and most of the participants stated how alienating academic language was. They battled with negotiating academic content in English and struggled to understand other learners. Participants felt alienated and saw themselves as less than because of the way they speak English. Stella said:

This language is confusing me. I don't know what's happening. You know, these youngsters, they scare you. With their language?!? Yoh! Like, we would walk the corridors. Everyone is speaking English. Even the Xhosas, they speak English among themselves. I was like, "What's happening here?" It was, like, shocking. We used to laugh about it with my friend, "Should we also do this? But we're dying here now..." We always said, "It's like Hong Kong." They speak like that [makes the sound for it].

Race was tied to language and Ms. M narrated the following:

When a black person is speaking English, it's like more like they're speaking it in Xhosa. You will hear every word. But now, because a white person, it's his or her language, now they are used to it, you'll feel like they are very fast or you can't even hear the words that they are Even if you can listen with all your attention, but you still feel like they're speaking another language, but it's English.

These findings demonstrate the power of language. The participants saw their accent as a manifestation of their backgrounds and who they are; implicit therein was a sense of shame. The accents of other Black learners speaking English had deeper meaning related to class and ultimately worthiness for the participants. These other learners who spoke in 'white' accents were seen as privileged, having had access to better resources and belonging to a different class thus being more worthy of being at university. This finding supports Castañeda's (2017, p.141) argument that language is tied to shame for learners whose mother tongue is not English.

Encountering racism

This was the third most mentioned challenge as more than half of the participants encountered racism from staff or other learners. These experiences led to feelings of anger and alienation.

Most of ... our, black guys, stayed at the back. Even though we did not talk deeply about these things, but I think the mentality was also the same with them that we're obviously invisible here. So, we might as well sit at the back. I would say some lecturers did not then deal with whatever that we were struggling with. They just then ignored us ... and made us sink more into whatever hole that we were in. Percy

I had a white friend, and when we had conversations with people, and then they were like, to her, "Okay, so what are you studying?", and then she's like, "I'm studying social work". And then they're like, "So, you work here?" Then I'm like, "No, I don't work here. I study here". Yeah, that's what I encountered in the first few weeks. people assumed because I am dark of complexion, they assumed I'm working there. You never see white, older people getting that response that I got. Mary

Experiencing racism compounded the participants' sense of alienation and fear of not belonging at university and these events amounted to them experiencing further social misrecognition. These narratives further reveal the perpetrators' assumptions about who belongs at university and the social and occupational spaces that older Black people occupy. These participants challenged these assumptions by their very presence as learners. Apartheid's legacy has been noted throughout this thesis and these findings are another demonstration of this. Experiencing racism added to the participants' stress. Lange et al (2015, p. 92) confirm this data and highlights the tremendous amount of psychological energy and resilience for learners to cope with the racism prevalent at universities.

Academic Challenges

Whilst participants had academic success, they also faced academic challenges. The difficulties during the transition period were the academic content, writing essays, and managing technology. Ongoing academic struggles included the workload, meeting deadlines and doing academic assessments.

What was also challenging for me, I would say the IT part ... accessing lectures. Because I don't think Is there like a session with the ... whereby they teach you on how to work on ... I don't know ... because I've missed out the orientation week. Simon

I got it. I was just much slower than others. I got it, but the gist of it. Because, I was ... man, the last time I did that kind of thing was what ... in 1979 or 1980? So, to come back to do those kind of things, it was a huge challenge. Lovey

Lovey and Simon's narratives allude to participants' awareness of their age and doubt about their academic ability, which was part of a deeper-seated self-doubt. The participants' academic challenges are understandable because they had not studied for years, all of them had attended under-resourced schools and had limited exposure to technology. The challenges with writing and technology have also been noted by Brenner et al (2021, p. 4).

Younger peers

Many of the participants struggled with their younger peers' behaviour and/or their work ethic. They saw their younger peers as privileged because they could focus on their studies as they had no other pressures. Peers' behaviour was a distraction, which angered them as can be seen from Girly's quote:

When you come back from home, you have other responsibilities that are waiting for you. You are now a wife. You are someone's mother and you have all these assignments,

and you are thinking, "Yarr, lucky are those who don't have any responsibility in class. They are just students and can focus on their assignments.

Some chose not to interact with younger peers. For example, Lelo asserted:

Some of them were very playful because they were young. They didn't come like I did. I felt like I don't want to be around them because they don't know what it within me is. I want to get the best out of this because they were playful, like being young ones.

The findings demonstrate the participants focus on the qualification and that they did not want to be distracted from their primary purpose. They additionally indicate that the participants saw themselves as different to their younger peers because they were not at the same life stage. There is a negative judgement in their view of their younger peers. These participants felt alienated and discriminated against. Paradoxically, through their judgement, they were doing the same to their younger peers. Other scholars concur with these findings and note that adult learners often frowned upon their younger peers (Mallman and Lee, 2016, pp. 697-698). In this study, participants' disapproval served a deeper function as it was not just about commitment but also about worthiness i.e. these participants used their feelings of disapproval to assert their worthiness as learners. They believed that despite having more responsibilities, they were more committed and focused than their younger peers and they were thus more deserving of academic success.

University resources

Half of the participants struggled with accessing university resources because they were oversubscribed. The most needed resource was assistance with writing, but others indicated that they additionally needed psychological support.

It was not helpful, and then the third time, it was difficult to get a slot because of, I don't know, they were too busy ... the system, it was not really working up to the point whereby I gave up on the Writing Centre. Simon

It was difficult to even get a psychologist. For me to be able to get ... an appointment with the psychologist, it took me getting an episode, a panic attack in school. After getting the panic attack, I had to go to the doctor on campus and then, only then was I able to get an appointment with a psychologist. Nancy

There are some positive aspects to this finding. Firstly, participants reflected on their situation, secondly, they had insight into needing assistance; finally, they were agentic to access the help

that they needed. Despite battling to get the help, participants completed their courses, which indicates how resilient they were and that the support they received elsewhere was beneficial. Lavhelani et al (2020, p. 141) reiterate these findings and state that the provision of support is essential to improve the retention of adult learners.

The participants had established lives outside of the university and some of the challenges they experienced emerged there.

7.2.3.3. Challenges outside university

Family demands

The primary ongoing challenge for most of the participants was meeting family demands. They initially struggled to develop new routines to accommodate their studies, which challenged their relationships. Throughout their studies participants battled to concurrently manage their domestic and academic demands.

Sometimes I felt very guilty towards my children and my family because I was so invested in what I was doing. I still remember my daughter saying, "Mommy, can you give me a little attention now?" I felt so bad when she said that, and that is when my mummy had a talk with me. I thought, "Wait here, I needed to do a shift." And Jack got very annoyed with me because he just felt like I was being selfish because ... it's just work, work. Mary

The demands made by families included how they reacted to the participants studying. These demands and reactions raised several difficult feelings for the participants including guilt (as revealed in the above narrative) and anger. Mary described her reaction when her family complained about her being busy all the time:

I reacted defensively because I felt it was a attack on me and them not wanting me to grow or achieve my goals. I felt quite angry at them for thinking that I'm selfish. I was angry at the fact that "Why couldn't they just support my notion or find ways to accommodate me like how I always had to accommodate them?" Mary

Simon also described his anger when he was asked to pay bills, despite being unemployed:

There were some demands that I need to pay certain things, and I would rebuke that immediately and I'll remind them constantly that, "I'm studying, guys". And then they would understand, but it kind of like surprise me in the first place that they would ask certain things, to contribute on groceries or like to do extra, like extra chores, or like, you know.

Becoming learners disrupted the homeostasis of the participants' families'. The family resisted this because they wanted to return to a homeostatic state. Not meeting family demands challenged these participants' role identities because these identities were highly salient for them, and they could not verify their identities the way they previously did. The literature underscores these findings and scholars report that adult learners face tremendous challenges because of their family-based roles and the demands that come with them (Singh, 2019, p. 348; Johnson, 2021, p. 86). The participants felt guilty that the dynamic and status quo in the family had changed, but their accounts further revealed feelings of anger because for the first time (for many of them) they were prioritising their own needs. Part of the anger was because they were studying to improve their family's circumstances, so they expected support.

Lack of support

Many participants battled with little support from their family and friends whilst studying, which left them feeling isolated and resulted in the ending of some friendships.

I'm the first one at university. No, they thought, "Argh! It's just ... just a year or two then he's going to quit. He's not going to help people. To sit in a class for five years and ... I think in our home, we kind of live on our own It's just my sister and her kids doing their thing. It's my mom. And then I'm at the one part of the house and I'm also doing my thing, and I cook my own food, I wash my own washing, I do my own thing.
Mason

I had to cut down on friends because most of my friends, they were not really passionate about studying. And then those one who had degrees, they were also not supportive to me. I don't know ... if it was jealousy or what, but they were not supportive. And then, because I had a feeling that since they've gone through this journey, maybe they'll be more supportive. Simon

Families of the first-generation participants were unable to relate to what studying entailed and meant for them. The disappointment felt by these participants evoked their previous history of being disappointed by significant others, and the lack of support was another blow to their sense of self. These findings confirm Biney's (2021, p. 4) assertion that adult learners may experience multiple challenges in their interpersonal relationships and previous identities whilst studying. Poverty fuelled the families' financial demands because many participants had been the breadwinners and leaving their jobs to study had dire financial implications for their families, which increased these participants' guilt about not meeting their roles in their families.

Poverty

Linked to the finding above, most of the participants faced ongoing challenges related to poverty due to loss of their income. Most worried about being able to provide for their family; the financial challenges were so severe that a few participants considered leaving university. Three of these participants attempted to work whilst studying which proved impossible.

If food isn't there, I had to find a way, even though I won't cook for food sometimes, but I was still that mother, I was still that wife. I left it like that, then I went to my lecturers to say, "I'm going to have to quit because I have to work", and ... they knew my story. They understood that I was struggling. Percy

Struggles related to poverty included not having the resources for studying and that their living conditions that made studying difficult, as indicated by Stella:

I never had a laptop when I was studying. I used my cellphone to write all my assignments. I will be able to buy food for my son to eat because, you know, when you're studying and you're a single parent, you don't have enough electricity or you don't have enough of whatever food in the cupboard, your mind's stuck, and there's something your son lacks, like, uniform, or at school ... you don't have money. My mind was, like, "I can't write an assignment right now. I have to go and borrow some money so that at school, he gets this, so that he gets that."

The negative consequences of poverty are once again clear and Bergman et al (2014, p. 93) indicate that globally financial reasons are one of the most common reasons learners leave university. These findings demonstrate the participants' resilience because they persisted with their studies despite their financial barriers, and they studied under very difficult conditions. This information also reveals the participants' commitment to their salient family-based identities because they made every effort to look after their families despite the challenges that they faced with meeting family demands.

Lack of transport

The second most common challenge for the participants was not having transport which resulted in hours of travelling because they lived far from campus. Lovey noted the time it took for her to travel to campus:

But that was a major challenge, and that, to have that first thing in the morning, 8 o'clock. I had to leave, take a bus at 6 to be here, you know, for that 8 o'clock lecture. So, that was a huge challenge.

The participants also struggled with transport costs. Percy, for example had to walk 24 kilometres per day to get from home to university because her husband's salary was not enough to cover transport costs⁸.

His money was not enough that we had to walk from ... to ... in the mornings and me going to varsity and my children were ... my eldest was going to ... High and my other one, also in ... Primary. So, we had to walk. Sometimes we would have money from ... then to ... but we'd walk to

This data has also been reported in other research that notes that transport is a barrier for South African learners (Biney, 2021, p. 4). The participants managed this barrier; however, it complicated the challenges they were experiencing in relation to their role identities. Long hours travelling meant that they had even less time for their family who were already struggling with them studying. The physical consequences of having to spend hours using transport are also notable as the participants had to deal with the additional battle of studying whilst fatigued. The fact that they coped with an additional challenge is yet another demonstration of their resilience.

7.2.3.4. Challenges in field practice

Practice evoked anxiety

The most prevalent general challenge was that half the participants were very anxious when they started seeing clients. Some doubted their ability to manage clients' situations. When Lelo was asked about her first practice experience, she replied:

I was there and I was so excited yet nervous. I was so scared on what I was going to say to the first client. I felt like I'm doing the real thing. I felt like I was being trained as a social worker.

Stella noted her fear about clients not respecting her and her awareness that the work would influence the lives of her clients:

It was on my second year I was scared to be in front ... because it was like kids. Yeah, let me just think. I'll start speaking. And I was like, "Lord, am I going to be able to do this thing? Are they going to listen to me first of all?" That was my fear that, you

⁸ Names of the areas have been omitted to protect Percy's anonymity.

know. Whatever project we're going to be doing, it's going to change even if it's a little change, it's going to change some of the students.

The field practice was evocative for participants and underlying the anxiety was the realisation of the responsibility that came with working with clients. This anxiety originated in self-doubt, which these participants had previously struggled with. Other scholarly work confirms this information and has established that learners face initial anxiety in the field practice courses (Chen & Russell, 2019, p. 63).

Non-social work supervisors

A third of the participants found it challenging being supervised by a non-social worker placement-based supervisor. They felt unsupported and that they received insufficient guidance. Mary for example when asked what challenged her in the field, said:

The agency supervisor was not a social worker. She was just a manager at the old age home. She didn't know exactly what tuning was, clarification, all that. We couldn't ask her to ... to assist us. We had to go back. I just think ... I know it won't be possible, but it would be nice to have a agency supervisor that has a bit of experience in the field of working with people, who understands where you're coming from.

The importance of the supervisor being a role model and understanding social work practice is once again evident. When supervisors were not social workers, these participants felt that their educational and supportive needs could not be met because their supervisors did not understand the work they were doing. Supervisors play an important symbolic role because the supervisor represents a parent figure (Karpetsis, 2010, p. 518) and the deeper meaning of the participants not having a social work supervisor was that it was another absence of a parent figure. They were once again responsible for meeting their own needs and had no one to rely on. Engelbrecht (2015, p. 326) also concluded that this it is not ideal when supervisors are not social workers.

The above theme revealed that the participants experienced several challenges during their time at university. The following theme explores their support structures.

7.2.4. Theme 3: Participants' support structures

The participants received support from within the university and from their environment.

7.2.4.1. University based-support

Financial support

Most of the participants spoke about the importance of NSFAS funding. Whilst this funding was not without challenges, they relied on it. Ms. M spoke about what helped her at university and said:

I think it was better now that there is NSFAS. Yes, so it did play a role.

The participants, however, stated that NSFAS funding is insufficient for adult learners, because of the many financial responsibilities they have. Girly for example noted:

I needed finances because, even though there's NSFAS, you need finances to travel, to eat in university, otherwise you won't survive, you'll end up beaten.

The financial challenges faced by the participants alluded to the need for financial support. These findings show that despite being helpful, the funding was insufficient to meet the participants' needs. They spontaneously mentioned NSFAS, and extant research indicates that there are problems with the NSFAS system (Phatlane, 2021, p. 74). Given the extensive responsibilities the participants had, financial woes would also have exacerbated the challenges that they were facing in relation to their family-based role identities.

Staff support

Most of the participants highlighted the value of support from academic staff, which was especially beneficial when they were struggling. Percy, for instance, related how cared for she felt when her lecturers refused to let her leave university.

I went to my lecturers to say, "I'm going to have to quit because I have to work," and they knew my story. They understood that I was struggling. And ... (name of lecturer) also came in and she also called others and they had a discussion with me. And they were like, "No, we won't allow you to do this. We will support you. We will do whatever it takes to ensure that you finish."

A third of the participants further spoke about the importance of the support from their university supervisor. They received emotional support and valuable guidance with their work with clients.

Knowing that I had a supervisor that will guide me kind of gave me some relief. But since we had supervisors, when you come and report that, they would make time to go

and see such agencies and kind of try to explain to them what is it that is expected, that they would help us with. Lelo

This support signified care from authority figures within the university and presented a corrective experience for the participants, because they could experience what it felt like to be cared for by authority figures as they had done with their teachers at school. The finding can be understood through Freirean theory, which highlights the significance of the relationship between staff and learners (Tennant, 2012, pp. 55- 73). This information further concurs with Lin (2020, p. 207) who found that staff and supervisors' attitudes and relationships with learners was integral to their success.

Peer support

Most of the participants spoke about the support received from their peers, who were often other adult learners. The role that peers played was discussed earlier in the chapter.

It felt like family because there were times where maybe I'd run late and I'd receive a call, "Are you okay?" Or maybe be stuck in a certain building, trying to get to the next building, then my peers would then call, "Where are you? Okay, we'll come and find you". It was a new thing, new experience. Very nice experience. Percy

Peers are, arguably, symbolic siblings and their care was significant for the participants. As noted previously, many participants had difficult relationships with their siblings and being supported and affirmed by peers was a powerfully corrective experience for them. The participants believed that peers who were contemporaries could relate to them in ways that their younger peers could not. This resonance made the participants feel heard and visible. The literature addresses the important role that siblings play and how positive sibling relationships improve well-being (Jones et al, 2022, p. 352).

7.2.4.2. Environmental support

Family support

Whilst many participants had no support from their family, the participants who had familial support believed that they would not have succeeded without their families practical and emotional support.

The years when I was doing social work, it was tough. I had a baby. So, it was a struggle to do assignments. I was always tired when I come home. And then there's a baby who needed my attention and social work is hectic. Whenever I was busy with assignments, my husband and the grandmother, my mother and my husband, my mother would assist in taking care of the child. Girly

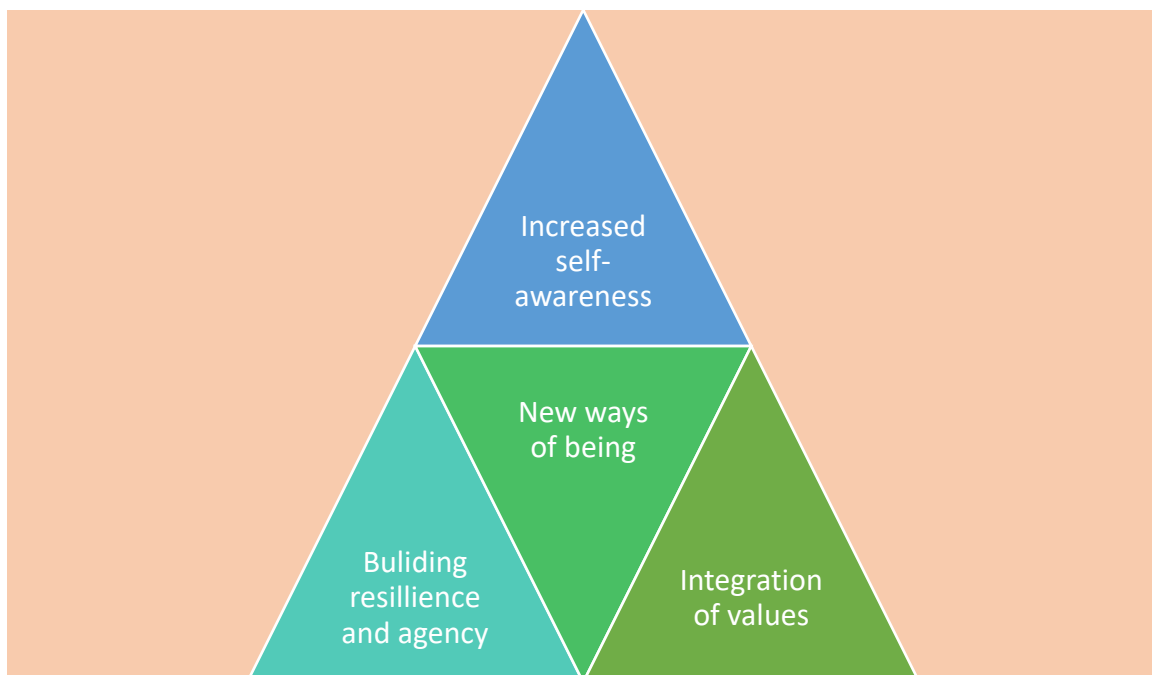
I think I spoke to my husband of how I felt. And then he would always just say, “But ... Alright, I hear what you're saying, but if this is what you want, you need to go find it, what you need to do.” And that is what I did. Lovey

The participants saw family support as an acknowledgement of their need for help, and they interpreted this as being visible and valued within their families. This support was thus an important source of recognition for them. The importance of family support is underscored by Steinhauer and D’nn Lovell (2021, p. 223), who state that adult learners’ success has been positively correlated with support from family.

7.2.5. Theme 4: Psychological experiences at university

The findings revealed that the participants’ university experience was a psychologically complex one. Their university years elicited many difficult emotions that evoked their pre-existing view of themselves and challenged their identities. At the same time, this was a period of growth, and this will be elucidated first.

Diagram 5: Areas of growth at university



7.2.5.1. Positive experiences

Increased self-awareness

All the participants stated that a significant benefit of studying was that their self-awareness increased and continues to grow. These participants have been able to transfer this self-awareness into their personal lives and have used it to improve their personal situations. They continue to see the benefit of self-awareness in their lives.

I actually figured out, “Oh, this is why I’m angry. Oh, this is what they say...”. And you know, when you start thinking about this and it starts making sense, and I started understanding myself better. Mason

The most important lesson that I’ve learnt is understanding the person I am, who I am. It was not an easy thing to do. I had to do it throughout the whole journey because I also didn’t know who I am. Being a student helped me to understand myself better, and after then, that also helped me to then let the people around me to understand me because now I was able to understand myself, then I can let them know who I am. Ms M

The importance of and need for social workers to be self-aware is well documented and is a required outcome for social work education in South Africa (CHE, 2015, p. 13). This finding indicates that for these participants the benefit of developing self-awareness goes beyond the skill required by the profession as it has also enriched their relationship with themselves. They draw on this self-awareness in all areas of their lives because they see the value of it and not merely because they were taught to be self-aware, which alludes to them integrating what they were taught into their person, role, and social identities.

Accessing resilience

Most of the participants spontaneously spoke about drawing on their resilience at university. When Girly and Mason spoke about dealing with the challenges of meeting family demands, they said:

I realised that I am stronger and I am focused. While I was at university, I had two kids. And there you are. You're busy being a student and mother, a wife and all these things. You're thinking, “How am I going to do this? Maybe this is not for me.” But you keep on pushing. Girly

But in reality, because there's times that I need to step out and I need to step up because then they need me. And I had to go and do it. And at times it...it was frustrating a bit, I said, I've been through so many things in life, and I've been in some of the worst kinds

of situations that You just learn to deal with it. It's just something that comes and you deal with it. Mason

The participants had other responsibilities in conjunction with meeting academic demands and this finding demonstrated the resilience that they needed and had in order to do so. This information also speaks to the participants' ability to transfer knowledge from one context to another and demonstrates an interesting connection between insight and resilience. The participants used their insight into situations to know what to do and their resilience to take the necessary action. The link between insight and resilience was also noted by Kinman and Grant (2011, p. 270), who say that an ability to be reflective increases resilience in social work learners.

Affirmation of agency

More than half of the participants used their agency to obtain support, actively seeking support when needed. Their reliance on peers can be seen as an expression of their agency because participants knew that they could not succeed at university in isolation. When Mary was asked if support helped her, she answered:

Afterwards, it became such a big part of my university life that I seeked that knowledge, I seeked for resources. I think that's also important because you must have... have that balance where, yes, lecturers are there to guide you but at the end, you should also look for things yourself because they can't do everything for you.

The findings above noted a link between insight and resilience; based on the findings on agency, the researcher asserts that the participants used their agency to express their resilience i.e. their agency stems from their insight and resilience. The RPL process can be argued to be a form of agency in that these participants had insight into needing to change their situation and their resilience enabled them to undertake this change and all its consequences. Freire argued that an individual must work towards changing the challenges in her reality (Lima 2018, p. 220) and one can argue that in being agentic, these participants were attempting to do exactly this.

Rediscovering values

More than half of the participants indicated that they rediscovered values that were important to them. These were values that they had lost before coming to university because of relocating (as indicated by Ms. M below), peer pressure, or events in their families.

I think it changed my behaviour. Growing from the Eastern Cape whereby you don't talk back when your parents say something and coming in whereby you feel like you need to defend yourself by saying something, because people are walking all over your head. That slowly changed my behaviour, because now I was doing what is considered as wrong from the Eastern Cape. But then studying from here at (name of university), I after becoming myself again, being that rural girl, that doesn't Even when my mother is making me angry.

The narrative indicates how embedded these participants' childhood values were. Temporarily losing their values was in response to participants living in very challenging spaces. These participants felt that they were meeting their need for self-development through studying. The process of growing meant that they interrogated their values, which allowed them to rediscover their original values and beliefs about being. TL is a useful lens to understand the return to original values because the theory confirms how deeply embedded an individual's values and view of the world are (Hoggan & Kloubert, 2020, p. 296).

Retaining values

Whilst some of the participants rediscovered lost values, a few participants retained their core values because of the synergy between what they were learning and their own values. Girly, for example, had no desire to change key parts of herself whilst Percy used what she learnt at university to strengthen the values she already had:

It did not influence my family values. I would say my value are still the same. They were not influenced by social work. Girly

I was actually amazed when there was talking about the social work values because .. they are my values, I'd say. I saw the importance of holding on to my values and I'd say studying strengthened my values and ... and my belief system, and the importance of.. also being balanced spiritually as well. So, it didn't change. It just improved on... how I held on my...my beliefs. Percy

These participants interrogated their values but concluded that they were secure in their values. IT can be used to explain this finding as it indicates that person identities, which include the individual's values, are less open to change (Carter & Moroni, 2021, p. 254). One can thus understand how for these participants their values remained constant; however, this could be because their core values did not contradict social work values. Had there been a contradiction with their value sets, they may have had a different outcome.

Transformed racial stereotypes

Several participants indicated that studying and being exposed to diverse people led to an interrogation and transformation of their racial stereotypes. They mainly became more tolerant of others.

You know, when you grow up, you learn certain things, and with those things, you think that everyone goes this route. But when you explore, you learn that people are different. My values are not the same as other people's values. So, I learnt that we are unique in different ways and various ways. Lelo

It got me to embrace diversity, I must say because we were people from different backgrounds. Even though we're African, we're from different parts. So, our understanding of different things, it moulded me to function in a diverse environment and respect people's opinions even though I do not agree with them. Nancy

The shift in the participants' racial stereotypes can be understood using Freire's four levels of consciousness. The third level is where people question the world (Ramalho, 2022, p. 278), which is what these participants did. They questioned themselves because of exposure to other race groups. Based on this reflection — and along with what they were learning, the participants were able to relinquish their long-held stereotypes. The above section highlighted the participants' positive experiences at university. University also brought challenging experiences, which are presented below.

7.2.5.2. Challenging experiences

Having values challenged

The participants had very definite views of appropriate social behaviour as prescribed by their traditional cultural backgrounds and half of them found it very difficult having their values challenged when they started university. Their values either changed positively or remained the same, but this was after a difficult process of questioning their values.

When the students maybe they talk about their weekend and this sex, they don't even know the guy ... they met this guy and they went off and, you know, they slept together and, the drinking and the drugs and sometimes the pot. And I just thought, "Yarr. How can you...? You don't know this person from Adam, and you just go off with this person?" Now, you know, for me was mos now, the thing is this, sex is supposed to be when you get married. Lovey

There were certain things that challenged me, particularly with young ones around, the way they dressed. In first year, I said to myself, "I don't think my kids can go in such an environment." Some will have very short pants, some will have their stomach out, some will just go around with the boys around... and I said... . It was challenging. Lelo

The primary challenge to the participants values came from their younger peers whose behaviour or choices symbolised the freedom in the university. The obvious differences between peers' behaviour and the participants' conduct challenged their values, because the participants saw behavioural choices as an indication of underlying values. They reflected on and interrogated their values and then chose how they wish to live based on this reflection. Their choices can also be linked to the participants being self-aware and knowing how they wanted to live their lives.

7.2.5.3. Re-experiencing childhood-based emotions

The researcher previously presented how the participants saw themselves and discussed their key emotions in relation to their sense of self. Several of these emotions were evoked when the participants entered university and some of them persisted through their studies.

Anger

Almost all the participants who had expressed significant feelings of anger in their childhood indicated that they struggled with anger whilst studying. For a number of these participants their anger arose out of feeling that they were being discriminated against. Mary for example spoke about the assumptions people made about her:

Wow! We' re-living that in 2015." And I was like, "Why do Coloured and Black people always get, these lower-class assumptions? Why is it that people always assume that we are cleaners or we are tea girls or ... you know what I mean?" I think I reacted defensively because I felt it was a attack on me and them not wanting me to grow or achieve my goals.

The anger felt by these participants was also directed at their families. Simon spoke about his younger brother usurping his position as eldest son because he was contributing financially when Simon could not:

Well, the ... the deeper feeling that I had was, if you have money, like, the people, they value you, you understand? And if you don't have money, people don't value you.

The participants' anger reflects that they felt injured by these experiences and that their negative inner sense of self was evoked. This resentment was complex as it also belied other emotions, for example, both these narratives also allude to shame and sadness. In the previous

chapter, the researcher discussed four possible views of self and the anger described above could fall into one or more of these categories.

Alienation

All the participants who described childhood emotions of alienation described having this feeling at university, which resolved once they had adjusted to university and developed a coherent learner identity.

I don't fit in with the general picture, but I knew I just need this degree so that I can go back and there I can make things happen again. The type of person that I am, my background where I come from, I could see people in my class come from people with money, you know, and they come from the nicer part of life. And I didn't ... I mean, I knew what I was all along. I'm not like them. Mason

I felt like I'm in the wrong place, I don't belong here. I struggled. I struggled with belonging, like, the sense of belonging. Nancy

Once again, the participants' feelings were linked to other deeper feelings. Feeling alienated was tied to seeing themselves as unworthy and unworthy of being at university. The findings allude to an underlying need to belong, and their alienation was evoked when they questioned whether they belonged at university. This need to belong that these participants expressed concurs with previous research that notes the importance of belonging for adult learners and their struggles with it (Karakitsiou et al, 2021, p. 126).

Ambivalence

Half of the participants experienced great feelings of ambivalence and three of them had experienced these feelings in childhood. They were often ambivalent about being able to meet their own and their family's needs, as noted by Mary:

Sometimes I felt very guilty towards my children and my family because I was so invested in what I was doing. I felt guilty of not giving them enough attention. However, I felt also like, "But wait, I'm doing this for me. This is This is the one time that I'm doing something for myself and not for them." I felt like this was also my time to shine. So, I felt different emotions at the time.

The two participants who had not previously spoken about ambivalence had ambivalent feelings about being at university, which abated once they had settled into university.

I was excited. But also, because you didn't know what to expect, and I think with the fact that when the lectures and stuff started, and that, where they say to you, you have

assignments and all those kinds of things, that was like a ... I was actually very nervous. It was like thrown in the deep end. Lovey

The initial ambivalence voiced by some of the participants is expected because adjusting to university can be accompanied by conflicting emotions for most learners. Ongoing ambivalence is different because it alludes to deeper meaning. One can see Mary's narrative as an example of how these participants judged prioritising their own needs. They were conflicted about the opposing demands of their family-based role identities and their learner identity; their ambivalence was powerful because it evoked a sense of shame.

Despair

Half of the participants expressed feelings of despair which for all of them was a pre-existing feeling. The despair was in relation to their family and arose out of an unmet expectation that they would be supported because they had always supported their family. Instead, they were met with indifference or negative reactions.

I was on the verge of going into depression because instead of them subsiding, they were actually taking over my mind. I would think that any mum would be proud of her child for achieving things that she never could and be supportive of that. But somehow, with her, it was the opposite. You never seem to show any interest so, I didn't know if you were interested. Nancy

The lack of support was experienced as wounding especially by those participants who questioned their family's love for them. Their family's reaction confirmed their sense of being unloved because the participants felt that if they were valued, their needs would matter. They needed more than practical support and for families to show an interest in what they were doing. Furthermore, this was another instance of having their needs unmet by loved ones. The meaning they made of the lack of support was intense, hence their despair.

Guilt

Almost half of the participants indicated that they felt guilty whilst studying. Once again most of them had experienced guilt previously. Their guilt was around not being as available to fulfil their role identities.

I felt guilty, like, when you're feeling like you're neglecting your duties as a mother because now you have to do assignments ... unending assignments. They never end in Social Work. So, now at some point you start to feel like you are neglecting your child

as a mother. And you can see that you're also not present as a wife sometimes, because Social Work is demanding. Girly

The participants' guilty feelings are another indication of how they had to change their family routines because of studying. It further demonstrates the salience of their family-based role identities because they felt guilty specifically about not being able to perform these roles in the same way. These participants were unaccustomed to prioritising their own needs and felt guilty for doing so. They felt that they were doing something wrong, which ties into being shameful. This information supports what was found by Johnson (2021, p. 86), who notes that adult learners encounter many challenges because of having to juggle their domestic roles with their studies. Wladis et al (2018, p. 810) also concur with this finding and add that women often feel guilty about neglecting their children.

Fear

Most of the participants reported experiencing fear which primarily manifested in a fear of failing. The fear of failing stemmed from a fear that they did not have what it takes to succeed. Many of these participants had pre-existing fears.

It comes first because I want to pass, and I want to go to the next level. I can't fail. I don't have time to fail because I'm an adult already. Remember, my fear was always studying with the young kids ... coming fresh from school, and here I was, I've been out of school for the longest time. I always had that fear, "Will I be able to manage things?"
Stella

These participants' fear was tied to questions around worthiness and not belonging at university. More importantly the fear of failing was driven by the fear that they would not get the second chance they wanted. Their age was a factor as well as these participants were acutely aware that they were lagging professionally. Keita and Lee (2022, p. 80) concur with this data and asserts that adult learners can have significant fears of failing and a need to prove that they can succeed.

Feeling 'less than'

Feeling 'less than' remained a prevalent feeling for all the participants who had felt this way prior to studying. Age was another generative factor for this feeling. Firstly, participants felt that they may be expected to know things because they were older and secondly, they had not studied for so long. They thus felt 'less than' their younger peers. When Percy was asked what was challenging for her in lectures, she replied:

I was kind of shy to ask questions in class. I... would first debate with myself if I had a question. I remember there were questions I had and I did not ask because I felt maybe it's going to sound stupid, I should know these things. I was very hard on myself because of my perceptions, obviously. It was a big thing for me because she's a lecturer and remember I already had that mentality that I am the lowest of them all.

Feeling 'less than' was evidently linked to a fear of not belonging at university. Percy's narrative is illuminating as it shows that for these participants, there was shame inherent in this feeling. Some of them carried an internalised shame because of their circumstances. They felt traditional learners came from more privileged backgrounds and exposure to their younger peers amplified their sense of being different. The participants' internalised sense of shame meant they interpreted this difference as meaning that they were 'less than' their peers. Their default position of being less than is a further illustration of their negative sense of self.

Mistrust

Many participants had previously voiced feelings of mistrust and for all of them these feelings of mistrust persisted. This finding is a cogent one because the lack of trust extended beyond a lack of trust in others but primarily into a lack of trust in self. For example, when Mason was asked what one of his challenges at campus were, he noted:

I didn't want to fall into my old trap. I'm here now and the times that I'm not doing university work, go and visit friends and that kind of thing. I didn't want to fall in that trap. Then it's going to ... I was too scared for where it could lead, and I would rather keep myself busy with things like that.

Ms M. described how she isolated herself because she did not trust others. This isolation was further driven by fear.

I think first of all I had mistrust issues. I didn't even trust the people I was staying with, thinking that if I don't lock the room when I'm sleeping, someone might just come in. It was like the first time for me to be away.

A lack of trust in self speaks to how negative these participants' self-concept was. One can also infer the influence of environment in shaping identity and self-esteem from this finding because the participants internalised their numerous experiences of external misrecognition. The introjection of these experiences meant that external experiences were translated into a mistrust of self. The lack of trust in 'self' manifested in a range of emotions including self-doubt. The

importance of context in identity formation is espoused by IT (Gross-Spector & Cinamon, 2018, p. 20) and this theory is thus useful in understanding this finding.

Self-doubt

Self-doubt persisted for the three of the participants who had struggled with it previously. The self-doubt expressed by these participants was tied to a sense of unworthiness and a lack of trust in self.

Self-confidence has always been a struggle I fight every time because there is this negative fight. Then I have to fight it, like, "No. If I can reach this far then I'm able to do this. So, stop pulling me back and say, "No. What are people going to say? Are they going to listen to you?" You know what I'm saying? You are Black. But you are black. Imagine, even now. Stella

There were a further three participants who indicated that they first struggled with self-doubt at university.

Well, half of me, you know, whenever I come to (name of university), I was having that negativity that self-doubt, "What have I got myself into?" Simon

These participants struggled with accepting that they belonged and were worthy of being at university, which can be argued to another form of self-misrecognition. Goeman and Deschacht (2019, p. 815) support these findings and state that adult learners often lack self-confidence and see themselves as impostors in the academic project.

Overwhelmed

All the participants spoke about feeling overwhelmed at different times during their studies. These feelings often were related to battling to simultaneously meet family and academic demands. Girly said:

I felt too old to be a student at that time. Every time when I would get home it would click. I am a mother. I am a wife. Responsibilities are waiting. And I'm expected the next day to be a full time as a student. It was exhausting. I felt like ...everyone demanded a piece of me. The kids wanted a mother, the husband wanted a wife. Now there is school. Then lecturers need my attention too. It was a bit too much for me, but I had to do what I had to do at that moment.

This finding confirms the earlier information that revealed that the participants struggled with the multiple role identities that they had. This data concurs with international data that demonstrates that adult learners have been shown to struggle with feeling overwhelmed (Jokic et al, 2019, p. 15). This finding further shows how salient their learner identity was because they ensured that they met the requirements of this identity, despite feeling overwhelmed. The following section discusses the participants' experiences of their most salient identities whilst at university.

7.2.5.4. Experiences of salient identities

Racial identity

A few participants discussed what it meant for them to be Black at university. This included how they saw themselves and how others saw them. Initially, these participants felt that they were either invisible or deemed unworthy of being at university, which was very distressing for them. Once these participants had settled into university, they claimed the space. Percy, for example, described what it felt like to be in lectures:

Most of our guys, Black guys, stayed at the back where we won't be staying because I think the Even though we did not talk deeply about these things, but I think the mentality was also the same with them that we're obviously ... we're invisible here. So, we might as well sit at the back.

The centrality of their racial identity was evident in the participants accounts of these experiences. Burke and Harrod, (2021, p. 12) confirm the significance of racial identity and the participants felt that the very core of them was challenged when others responded in a racist manner towards them. They responded by retreating (as illustrated by Percy above) or became angry and challenged the status quo (as illustrated by Mason below):

I've been oppressed so much in my life. I don't like it when people try to oppress me now. I don't like it. I push hard. I push back hard when people try to oppress me.

The participants who retreated attempted to make themselves invisible — another form of self-misrecognition. Those who challenged the status quo had a very strong Black racial identity and used their anger to negate the racist attempts to undermine them and their right to be at university. Grindal et al (2021, p. 39) found that a strong racial identity was a protective factor against threats to the self because of discrimination. One can see in this instance how Mason used his anger to protect himself from the discrimination he perceived.

Familial identities

Not surprisingly, all the participants experienced significant challenges to their family-based role identities, which engendered a range of emotions in response to this. The primary emotion for the ‘parent’ participants was guilt because they often had to contend with anger from their children who felt neglected.

Sometimes I felt very guilty towards my children and my family because I was so invested in what I was doing. I think they were not too happy about me being at varsity because they just felt like everything just went around varsity and not about them anymore. Mary

The salience of these identities has been previously noted. Negative reactions from their families meant that the participants experienced challenges with identity verification which was distressing for them. Identity Theory confirms that a lack of identity verification leads to distress (Burke & Harrod, 2021, p. 31). These participants’ struggles underscore what Mattarozzi Laming et al (2019, p. 45) say about adult learners struggling with guilt in relation to their children and having to meet academic demands.

The male participants reported no changes in their partner identity whilst studying, however most of the female participants who were in relationships struggled with their wife/partner identity because of their partner’s reactions, which generated a lot of anger.

He made my life difficult. He told himself he was going to make my life difficult. And on top of that, he was jealous that I was in school. That was always his problem. It was a battle. But at the end of the day I was, now, coming from school, I couldn't study at home. I could no longer study because it was difficult to, like, open a book and read, because it was this struggle. Stella

The stress produced in the family system when the participants became learners exacerbated previous conflicts. IT once again serves as a useful framework through which the findings can be interpreted. IT argues that an individual forms their role identity in a manner that will meet the standards of the role (Carter, 2014, p. 244). The female participants had challenges in relation to their wife/partner identity because they could not meet the standard of the wife role because their partners had very patriarchal views of standards of the wife role. This patriarchal view is common in South Africa (Sennott & Kane, 2022, p. 8).

Some of the participants also spoke about the challenges to their identity as son/daughter. The female participants had to rely on their mothers for childcare, which made them dependant as daughters again. When asked about how her children felt about being left in the care of her mother, Nancy replied:

They did not like it.. The second born and the last one would somehow make it clear that they felt it not fair that, "You're always leaving us with gogo and you know gogo drinks and gogo shouts at us, beats us up for no reason." And to them, at times it felt like I was doing it on purpose, like, I somehow deserted them because when I'm there its better because I'm there to defend them, but when I'm not, nobody defends them from gogo.

For the males being unable to contribute financially meant that they lost their previously held status in the family. Simon said:

Something that I didn't want to think about it because remember, when I was working and providing, I can easily say I was a favourite person, and then now, student and my brother's working. I kind of like acted as if I don't see it. So, the roles were changed as the older brother was not treated the same, as now I don't have an income, yeah. So, the attention was on my brother who was working, and I've accepted that and then I made him make decisions in the house.

These participants had high levels of commitment to their son/daughter identity and struggling with this identity was challenging. Considering how difficult the maternal relationship was for these participants, one can understand how the female participants struggled to be dependent on their mother to assist with childcare. This meant they felt that they could not challenge their mothers. Previous research argues that women generally have a clear idea of what it means to be a good daughter and that they play this role even when they do not want to (Jilani et al, 2022, p. 136). The challenges for the males with their son identity were compounded by their inability to provide financially. The need for sons to provide is part of the cultural framework of these participants; Seo et al (2022, p. 166) note most patriarchal cultures see sons as providers.

Learner identity

Nine out of the ten participants indicated a shift in their university learner identity. Initially several participants did not see themselves as university learners despite having had a clear learner identity at school. This could be attributed to their anxiety about being at university which was exacerbated by their initial experiences at university. Nancy and Lelo respectively described their initial learner identity:

When I entered, I was just a girl, a woman from Khayelitsha. I was from a disadvantaged background. Majority of the time, we like to focus on that so much that we are limiting ourselves. I don't want to lie, that is the attitude that I came to campus with.

In the first few weeks, I was still, as a student, I was still trying to get myself because of the way lectures were given. They were a bit different from the experience, so I was trying to get my way and I've never studied things like History.

The struggle to develop a secure learner identity can be linked to the participants' self-doubt. For example, Nancy's narrative reveals her feelings about being incapable of succeeding at university. Her quote also shows her views about her racial identity and her perceptions of the opportunities that accompanied this identity. These participants had a positive school learner identity, but the findings allude to the shock that entering university brought. They also had an idealised view of university and held being a university learner in such esteem that they forgot they had been successful learners before. The shift in their learner identity was often linked to succeeding in academic assignments which meant that they became more confident. At a deeper level the participants started seeing themselves as worthy of being at university. When asked if their learner identity had transformed in any way, Nancy and Lelo noted:

I think the shift started ... I started to see things differently or myself differently, academically, as I said, when I got back my scripts because whenever I would write something, I would like, "Oh Lord, I don't know the crap that I just showed you." I'd be anxious until ... and I get back my script and then I'd find out at least I was in line with what was requested. Nancy

It wasn't easy. Change is always a challenge. It wasn't easy but slowly, slowly, I adjusted. As I've already mentioned, with my marks, I could see the change slowly going up. Lelo

The qualification had immense meaning and the participants all desired to become learners. The findings illustrate SIT's argument that people may choose to change their social identities if they seek to belong to groups that are seen as more valuable than the groups that they already belong to (Brown, 2020, p. 6). For these participants being part of the learner group was attractive because it held such meaning for them.

Learner social worker identity

Nearly all the participants narrated how their learner social worker identity changed through the course of their studies. Initially they did not feel confident in their ability to fulfil the role of learner social worker.

I was so scared on what I was going to say to the first client. But I was very excited. I felt like I'm doing the real thing. I felt like I was being trained as a social worker. I was so excited but I was very nervous at the same time. I had a mixture of feelings, but I've learnt a lot from it. Lelo.

These participants later became more confident in this role and developed a clear learner social worker identity. When Lelo was asked if her learner social worker identity had changed, she said:

On the fourth I felt that the last three years of my studies, the previous three years of my studies, prepared me to be a social worker. On the fourth year, I felt like I was being prepared to go out there and do whatever I've learnt, more on the past three years.

The findings show that the participants reflected on themselves and their work throughout the practice. When looking at the participants' description of the process of developing a learner social work identity, Mezirow's theory is useful to understand the development of the professional identity. The notion of perspective transformation can be used to explain the process that participants went through to acquire this identity. Mezirow emphasised that the learner must really reflect on their work, the profession, and, most importantly, themselves in relation to their work (Fenwick & Tennant, 2020, p. 62), which these participants did.

7.3. SUMMARY

This chapter depicted the participants' experiences at university and some of the key changes they experienced in some of their most salient identities. Being at university was a complex journey for the participants. The deep meaning and emotions tied to qualifying were evident in the interviews when the participants were visibly emotional. The first two findings chapters explored the past and the penultimate chapter of the thesis focuses on the participants' accounts of their current experiences.

CHAPTER EIGHT: NOW AND BEYOND

8.1 INTRODUCTION

The final findings chapter starts with a profile of the participants' occupational information. The framework of analysis outlining the themes follows. These themes pertain to the participants' experiences of social work practice, their accounts of the shifts in their perceptions of themselves and their most salient identities, and, finally, their recommendations for RPL practice. A summary ends the chapter.

8.2 PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS' OCCUPATIONAL INFORMATION

Table 4: Profile of Participants occupational Information

Name	Age entering BSW	Number of years to graduate	Year of graduation	Years employed as social worker	Current position
Girly	Mid-twenties ⁹	N ¹⁰	2019	2 years	Social worker
Lelo	32	N	2016	5 years	Social worker
Lovey	48	N+1	2017	4 years	Social worker
Ms M	26	N+1	2019	2 years	Social worker
Mason	34	N	2020	N/A	Manages own non-profit organisation
Mary	30	N+1	2019	10 months	Social worker
Nancy	28	N	2020	N/A	Volunteer social worker
Percy	32	N	2016	5 years	Social worker
Simon	31	N+1	2020	1 years	Social worker
Stella	32	N	2020	N/A	Volunteer social worker

Most of the participants entered university in their thirties, Lovey was the oldest and started studying in her late forties. The majority completed the BSW in the minimum period. All the participants have continued to practice social work, despite some not finding employment.

⁹ Girly would not reveal her age.

¹⁰ N= minimum period of study

8.3 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Table 5: Framework of Analysis

Objectives	Themes	Categories	Sub- Categories
To explore any changes that the participants have experienced in their core identities since participating in RPL and studying social work.	Positives of practice	Work provides meaning	
		Doing the work	
		Workplace support	
To explore any changes that the participants have experienced in their core identities since participating in RPL and studying social work.	Challenges of practice	Finding employment	
		Role not as envisaged	
		Staff conflict	
		Lack of supervision	
		Lack of resources	
To understand how these changes in their core identities have influenced their personal and professional lives.	Experiences of personal transformation	Change in values	— Reciprocity between values
		Current emotions	— Hope
			— Empathy
			— Determination
		Changes in self-concept	— Insight into self
			— Changes in view of self
			— Changes in behaviour
		Changes in salient identities	— Racial identity
			— Mother identity
			— Father identity
			— Daughter identity
			— Son identity
			— Partner identity
— Worker identity			
— Initial professional identity			
— Current professional identity			
To arrive at a best practice model for the use of RPL in social work programmes.	Recommendations for RPL practice	For prospective applicants	— Recommending RPL
			— Being proactive
			— Obtaining relevant work experience
			— Accessing support
		For universities	— RPL drives transformation
			— Orientation and support for RPL learners
			— Marketing RPL
			— Funding
		For BSW programmes	— Admission requirements
			— Thorough assessment
		— Support	

8.3.1 Theme 1: Positives of practice

8.3.1.1 Work provides meaning

All the participants, When asked what the positive aspects of their work were, all the participants said their work provides significant meaning in their lives. They made different meanings of their work, but this meaning was deeply embedded for them.

It has such a powerful meaning. Let alone the fact that I had never wished to work with children. I think it's because of my own childhood experience. But bringing change to people's lives, it's what I really had a desire to do in the future. I feel very much fulfilled when I've managed to help clients and I see a smile on their face. So that makes me to feel like, "Okay, I am good in this." Ms M

Along with bringing meaning to their lives, most participants added that their work has influenced their lives positively because they use what they learn at work in their private lives. For example, when asked about whether her work influences her life, Mary said:

I'm doing mediation social work, so I deal with a lot of conflict at work. I think how it helps me is how to resolve conflict. If I can make an example. So, me and my daddy had a disagreement. Normally, I would jump out of my skin and react the same way he does, and you know, that type of thing I think now I'm calmer and I listen more attentively to what he's saying, the underlying.

These participants reflect on and are conscious of what their work means to them. The meaning of their work, which is compounded by their belief that their work allows them to give their family a better life, is related to feelings of worth and being visible. They see being a professional as enabling them to break the cycle of poverty and mediate the challenges that played out in their family of origin. Work is thus fulfilling their wish for a second chance. The findings can be understood through the lenses of TL and IT as both theories emphasise the importance of consciousness (Vaikousi, 2020, p. 43; Baumgartner, 2012, p. 102). The Freirean concept of “praxis”, which refers to the ongoing interaction between the process of reflection and action (Ho & Tseng, 2022, p. 2188), is relevant to this finding because the participants reflect on their work and then act in accordance with the insight that arises out of the reflection. The narratives indicate that the participants transfer what they learn from their work to their lives. Furthermore, their professional identity is integrated into their lives and is not separate from how they live as people. The literature confirms that the professional and personal lives of social workers often overlap (Graham & Shier, 2010, p. 758).

8.3.1.2 Doing the work

Linked to the meaning that their work provides, most participants indicated that the key benefit of practising was doing the work because this means that they are making a difference in people's lives. They are thus achieving what was, for many, a key driver in choosing to study. The participants who are volunteering as social workers do so because of their need to make a difference.

I would say it's going home and going to sleep knowing that you managed to help someone. You're able to sleep well and it brings a smile on your face also, and to know ... that person got... assisted. So, that is one of the positive things about a social worker. I think it's what is making me better, or to stay in it. Even when I'm feeling like the work is too much, then I will think at least. Girly

I think it adds value to... to society because every child needs to be with a family. If it can't be with ... If I can't be part of reunifying a child to their biological family, and it's almost like it's a cause. It's not just a job. Lovey

The meaning of helping others is that it provides a sense of worth and being visible through connection with others. Through practising, the participants claim a legitimate space as a professional in society and this legitimacy for them means that they live more meaningfully. At a macro level, these participants also feel that they are contributing to the transformation of society. Freirean Theory explains the profundity of this deeper meaning because underpinning Freire's philosophy is his belief that an individual's purpose is to be a subject who "acts upon and transforms his world" and in this process an individual opens more possibilities and lives a more meaningful life (Ramalho, 2022, p. 276).

8.3.1.3 Workplace support

Support in the workplace was a big positive for the participants and the importance of the supervisory relationship emerged clearly in the findings. Nearly half of the participants said that this positive supervision experience enhances their work experience.

I could easily talk about to my supervisor and that will make my anxious to be at ease. When I go home, I don't find myself while cooking or washing dishes, thinking about the children or At least I know, "Okay. I talked to Mr. Lawrence," and now he advised me to do A, B, C and D. So, makes me to feel a little bit better to know that what I will do in the case. Ms M

Several participants indicated that colleagues' support added positively to their work experience.

I am grateful for the network of people that I have met and I guess with...with social workers, it's important to network, and it's important to maintain those relationships because what has helped me is, almost all the opportunities I got except for the one that I'm in now, it's through people who knew me, who I've worked with, who might ... my ex supervisors. Percy

The narratives highlight how the supervisor's presence and affirmation influence the work, but at a more intrinsic level, this affirmation boosts participants' sense of self. The literature confirms the importance of supervision and its supportive function is noted to be integral to the success of the supervisory relationship (Mamaleka, 2018, p. 214; Kadushin & Harkness, 2014, p. 11). Belonging to and having positive experiences with colleagues i.e. people who belong to the same group, is positive for these participants given their early history of challenging relationships. Colleagues' support allows them to categorise themselves as social workers thus enhancing their social identity as social workers. One can understand the importance of the finding through SIT which argues that social categorisation is an essential component of the person having a positive view of their identity (van Knippenberg, 2020, p. 62).

From the above, it is evident that the participants' experience several positive aspects to being a social worker. The next theme examines their challenges in this regard.

8.3.2 Theme 2: Challenges of practice

8.3.2.1 Finding employment

Most of the participants mentioned that their biggest challenge was finding employment. Three of them have not been able to find posts and two of these participants volunteer as social workers.

I've been trying in several places. So, it has been difficult, particularly last year. I was unemployed. So, in 2019 as well, I've been having many interviews with different organisations including the Department of Social Development. Lelo

The unemployed participants have a further concern in that their unemployment has disillusioned their family, who no longer see the value of higher education. Nancy indicated:

While I was studying, I would keep on emphasising the fact that I'm going to finish and things will be better. So now, having to still motivate them to go to tertiary, to go further their studies I'm worried about the effects of it. Because now I feel like this experience, and they keep on suffering, it's going to change their perspective on getting an education, for one. As I've noticed that, even on social media, they're starting to ... promote the view that education is no longer significant.

Participants struggling to find employment is not unexpected given that Nwosu and Ndinda (2018, p. 82) state that South Africa has one of the highest rates of unemployment in the world. The battle to find employment engendered tremendous fear and anger for the participants. Their fear was that their hopes would not be fulfilled and their anger stems from the significant sacrifices they and their family made, to no avail. Their qualification was seen as the vehicle out of poverty and remaining jobless challenges these hopes. Psychologically, ongoing unemployment also means not being able to fulfil the desire to build their professional identity. IT argues that where an identity is not verified, this will lead to distress (Gallagher et al, 2022, p. 2) and this is evident in this finding.

8.3.2.2 Role not as envisaged

Most of the participants indicated that their role as social worker is not what they expected it would be. For example, they did not anticipate how extensive the role of the social worker can be and several of the participants addressed high caseloads and a heavy administrative load as major challenges. Their workload led to feelings that they were not rendering services effectively. When asked if their role was what they expected, Girly and Lovey respectively said:

I knew that social work was going to be, assisting with community problems solving problems. So that is what I'm doing. But I did not expect the work to be so much. Maybe it's because of the organisation that I'm at. The work is too much and this few of us.
Girly

I would say it's totally different to what I envisaged. In my head, I think it's because of the fact that I was longer at (name of organisation), the case is cut and dry ... whatever you do, you have your next appointment but you are not in that space of that child to an ... or that hours that you are there for the day. This is totally different because my time is... There is such a diverse work that you have to do for that child. It's a lot.
Lovey

The participants had a specific vision of what working would be like and their role being different constitutes another disappointment. SIT helps us to understand this disappointment,

which can be examined through the emotional component of the identity. The emotional component of the identity is that any individual can have an idea of how they see themselves in the future (Fujita et al, 2018, p. 57). With their role being so different, their expected view of themselves could not be completely realised, which again would pose problems with the identity verification of their professional identity. Their perception that they are not helping clients optimally produces feelings of guilt for them and frustrates their altruistic needs. Being unable to help also feeds into their sense that the profession was not what they had envisaged. The notion of self as shameful was discussed previously and not being able to render a proper service to all clients could evoke unconscious feelings of ‘badness’ or being shameful. The literature confirms the challenges faced by social workers in the country, for example, Joseph (2017, p. 5) highlights the high caseloads that social workers have.

8.3.2.3 Staff conflict

Many of the participants struggle with staff conflict in their workplace, which challenges their sense of belonging in the profession. The conflict has different roots, for example Simon said he struggled with colleagues’ engagement with clients:

Something that is new is the politics around social work whereby colleagues that there’s like clashes, sometimes, you know? Like, we are in the same field or we are in the same, what to call it? We have the same vision ... but people have different ways of treating clients. So, what I kind of like imagined before, is ... that maybe I would work in harmony with other social workers. It kind of like came as a surprise, somewhere, whereby I see I have to, you know, raise my voice or stand my ground.

The participants dealt with the conflict either by being assertive, as Simon indicates above, or they retreated, as narrated by Percy:

I kind of lost that ... where I am, like, I pick myself up every time because people are really discouraged there, and demotivated. It drains you if you are motivated and then you want to make a difference, and people look at you like, “Oh, you’ll be tired in the next two weeks.” So, whatever ideas, bright ideas you bring, then they get shot down. I’ve opted now, to then work independently.

These participants found the staff conflict evocative because it tapped into their earlier experiences of conflict within their homes. It is interesting that participants used pre-existing coping mechanisms, for example, isolation. The challenges with staff conflict can be understood through the importance of social categorisation from a SIT perspective. Authors indicate that the social categories that the individual belongs to influence their behaviour and feelings, and ideally the characteristics that the person shares with other people in the group

should be emphasised (Scheifele et al, 2020, p. e4; van Bezouw et al, 2021, p. 410). The negative consequence of the strife for the participants' social identity as social worker is that these participants feel different to colleagues, thus preventing them from fully categorising themselves as belonging to the same group as them.

8.3.2.4 Lack of supervision

Just over half of the sample raised challenges with supervision. The biggest challenge was not having supervision, which they believed was essential, and participants felt the absence of it. They required guidance with their work and the lack of supervision meant that they had to be self-reliant, which for many was a negative pattern developed in childhood.

I don't have supervision. I... I have to search for my own supervision from outside the organisation. Lelo

So now, here we are, recently graduated social work ... workers, yes, very passionate, wanting to effect the little change that we can in our part of ... of the community, but now we are literally stuck because we don't have the proper guidance. So, it was a challenge. Nancy

The supervisor is the symbolic parent (Karpētis, 2010, p. 518). Thus, this finding is noteworthy because the lack of supervision mirrored these participants' childhood experiences of a lack of care and guidance from parental figures. Additionally, once again, their needs for support were not being met. At a practical level this finding is worrying given that it is mandatory for South African social workers to receive supervision (Engelbrecht, 2015, p. 316) but, despite the law, Joseph (2017, p. 5) states that poor and irregular supervision is a general concern in the country.

8.3.2.5 Lack of resources

Some participants highlighted the lack of resources to be a significant obstacle to their work. This either involves lack of human resources or a lack of resources for them to fulfil their duties towards clients.

My work is nice, neh? But it's demanding. You're always on the road and there is less of us. Maybe if there's ... there were more hands to help, it will be nicer. But now it's demanding. There's few people, there's more work. You can't even enjoy it because the work is too much. Girly

They would need to look for places which you Takes time to get them. So now that case ... that issue will always be in your mind, there are those children that need someone. What are they doing? It's raining. Have they got something to eat? As much as they say you just leave your profession in the office when you leave the space, but

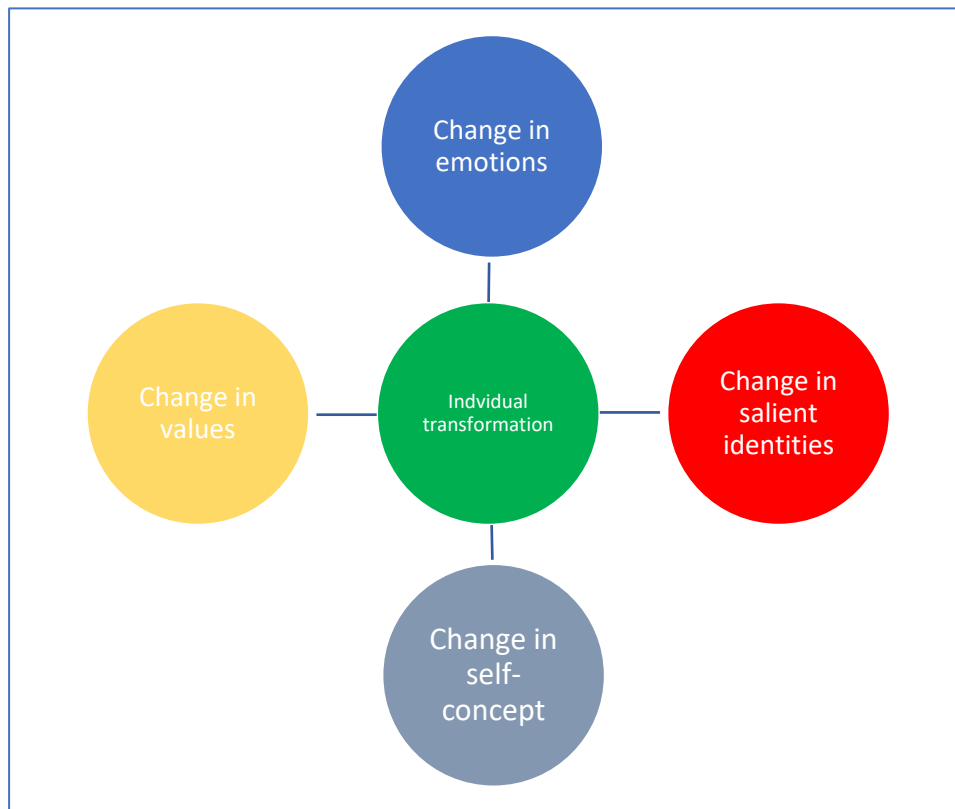
it's not easy when you know that there is a child that needs help but you don't know how to help. Like, you don't have enough resources to help that child. Ms M.

These participants wanted to prevent others from suffering as they had suffered and their altruistic needs are being frustrated by the lack of resources. Ms M.'s narrative illustrates how challenging the participants find the shortage of resources. They further carry this burden into their personal lives. A lack of resources translates into the participants not feeling confident about the quality of their services and this challenges their self-confidence and leaves them feeling powerless. This finding is supported by Kheswa (2019, p. 2), who posits that the emotional consequences of resource constraints for South African social workers are dire. The third theme expounds the findings of their accounts of personal transformations that they have experienced since participating in RPL and studying social work.

8.3.3 Theme 3: Experiences of personal transformation

The participants' studies had a powerful influence on them and through the studying, key parts of them changed. This theme comprises four core areas, which together indicate the profound transformation reported by the participants as illustrated in the following diagram:

Diagram 6: Aspects of personal transformation



Most participants spoke about the changes in their values as being of great significance for them and this is discussed first.

8.3.3.1 Change in values

Several participants indicated that their values changed significantly over the course of studying and working as social workers. Their values are very different to the values that they were raised with and that persist in their families of origin.

I have my values that I've grown up with, but now I have a new set of values, and sometimes it does How can I put it? It's kind of conflicting to the people around me, but not to myself. Because I feel like you can't just Yes, you have positive values, but sometimes you have negative values as well. And if I can make an example of that: My father always used to say if I talk then he ... if he talks, sorry, then I need to be quiet. And that has shifted for me, where I don't have that attitude towards my children. I feel like their opinion is also important. Mary

This patriarchal thing, it annoys me. Some people, because it's Khayelitsha and the people are so, like, narrow-minded, they don't understand me as a woman. Even my boyfriend, he struggles with me. I'm like, "You take me or you leave me." Stella

Values is a core area that emerged many times during the interviews and has been reported on in the previous findings chapters. The data in this section further implies a process of reflection and interrogation of their original values. These participants' comfort with their values being different from their families is significant because of the salience of their family-based identities. This finding implies that they now feel free to be who they are, despite potential censure from loved ones. More importantly, the findings suggest that the participants experienced a transformative learning experience. Mezirow's theory supports this statement. He asserts that when individuals re-examine their assumptions and change their frames of reference, then transformative learning has occurred (Mezirow, 2003, p. 61). This is what the participants did though interrogating and transforming their values.

Reciprocity between values

Most of the participants asserted having an ongoing reciprocal relationship between their work and personal values. Simon noted that values he learned in childhood are also core social work values and he consciously uses these values to inform his practice:

My values have and influence somehow in such that we, as social workers, we need to be honest, you understand? Of which that ways ..., the values that I learnt at a young age, and also, social worker, yeah, we need to be honest all the time, you know, with

our client, with our work. I think that was the first value that I think I practise every day, and also, respect of clients, not mistreat them, and not judge others, you know? I see them resurfacing again in my career. My work shapes my values. I think it's part of the .. .the declaration that we sign as social workers.

The interaction of work and personal values also extended in the opposite direction. Several participants indicated that they now consider social work values before they take any actions in their personal lives and that they marry these values with their behaviour.

I just did it because I want ... I want so I'm going to go and take it. That was my mentality, but now, with ethics, and now that I know I can't go and still do these wrong things, I just have to say, "Arrrgh." It feels ... it goes against something inside of me. I can't do it anymore. Mason

I'm very conscious about what I post and what I don't post because I am a person, but I am still a professional. I still have to conduct myself in a certain way. There's Facebook group in where I stay, and sometimes people post things but then they will react very meanly. And then I'm busy typing out a response and then I'm like, "Please stop yourself because if you're going to respond it might result in a cyber fight or verbal fight on social media and people is going to go back to your Facebook profile." And then I just leave it. Mary

Social work education has always been informed by certain values (Makhubele et al, 2018, p. 100). These findings also reveal a deeper process. The participants are internalising their work and their social worker identity is being woven into a core sense of their self-concept. The participants have integrated the values that come with belonging to the social work group and use their personal values to guide their work. This integration is not only a psychological integration but also translates into their behaviour, which is guided by the amalgamation of their different values. The results can be understood through IT, which states that the values and structure of the group become second nature to the individual who is building his identity as part of the group (Sawatsky et al, 2018, p. 1381). This finding further demonstrates Rishel et al's (2020, p. 441) assertion about the complexity of developing a professional identity because the process of integration of their values is a complex one.

8.3.3.2 Current emotions

There was a notable shift in the emotions that the participants identified when they narrated how their lives currently are. They spontaneously disclosed very positive emotions unlike when they recounted their childhood experiences. There were three core emotions that they mentioned.

Hope

Hope was the most common emotion described by most of the participants. Their hope was about having new beginnings and being able to have new experiences and opportunities.

I will probably find love that side. That's my hope. Maybe that's one of the reasons that I'm just, like, playing it low here. So, yeah, that's it, basically. You know, I smile a lot, so I want it to continue. I don't want it to fade. I want it to continue even to the higher level. Lelo

I want the time to be able to do things ... what I want when I want. Maybe that's why I'm considering going into education, because, you know, they have four holidays in a year. Maybe that is why – not that the school environment, I ever thought about it but I've only thought about it since I was exposed to it and I thought, "Hey! Four holidays in a year." Girly

This finding is a change from the participants' sense of self and emotions whilst growing up. Underlying that was a sense of a limited future and lack of hope. Now they have a sense of new horizons being open to them and their hope extends to a wish that they will sustain the positive changes that they made because of studying. Having hope also implies a sense of trust in themselves and their abilities to achieve. This hope is a powerful symbol of self-recognition. The hope is borne out of a sense of accomplishment and Honneth's (2012, pp. 80- 81) assertion about recognition from accomplishments has been previously noted.

Empathy

The second most common emotion many of the participants voiced was deep empathy, which manifested in powerful expressions of altruism. Altruism being a driving force for studying social work was noted in the previous chapter; being qualified social workers gives the participants the vehicle to express this altruism in practical and legitimate ways.

My ultimate vision, I think it's either having a ... a certain organisation or being part of one that supports destitute women and children. Yeah, I think that is in my heart. The main vision behind it would be to restore women, helping them to achieve what they want or their dreams, what they had given up on or what they deemed impossible, linking them to resources. Percy

Whilst the participants always had concern for others, this was more sympathy driven. Now that they have a more positive sense of self, this concern is empathy based because they see that they must take care of themselves and are aware of boundaries. The empathy is thus underpinned by a care for 'self' whereas in the past their sympathy was a sign of resignation in that they were not cared for but could care for others instead.

Determination

Half of the participants felt a strong sense of ambition and they verbalised very clear feelings of determination. At the same time some felt very disillusioned by the conditions in both social work and South Africa. Three of these participants were still determined to change the situation in their communities despite their disillusionment.

The biggest gain is to know that, I can be able to market ... to get a job because even now, while I'm sitting, not working, neh, I know I'm going to get a job because I've got a degree that's going to knock for me. Stella

I wanted us to help each other, you know, get rid of corruption and get rid of the stigmatisation that we are too independent in such a way that we don't look at the next door, you know? Yeah, I just wanted to make right by my community. Simon
You face the reality and you just have to be realistic with what ... how the country is and how things are happening, so how are you going to get there in this country that you are living in? Ms. M

The participants know what they wish to achieve as social workers and their disillusionment shows how salient their professional identity has become. They are concerned about the reality of social work practice, but this has not deterred them from wanting to make a difference. Identity Theory confirms that any change in identity can have a positive or negative effect on the person's sense of self; the greater the magnitude of the change in the identity, the more intense the emotional consequences will be (Carter & Moroni, 2021:256). One can argue that the presence of the emotions described above is an indication of shifts in the participants' key identities and sense of self. The changes in the participants' self-concept are discussed next.

8.3.3.3 Changes in self-concept

Insight into self

All the participants highlighted that studying allowed them to gain insight into themselves and understand their personal history. These insights have been profound as it has helped them to see themselves differently. When the participants were asked if and how they have changed because of engaging in RPL and social work education, Mason and Ms M. respectively said:

I learnt so much about myself. I actually learnt that ... it's ... five years is a very long time and it takes not just commitment but re-commitment because in the five years. So, that self-awareness, and pushing yourself and becoming your best motivator. Mason

This is how I felt now when I feel like I'm being good on being self-aware of myself, now you start knowing yourself better, and if something that you just discovered from the person that you introspected, you like that person or you don't like that person. I just learned to leave the habits that I don't like. The most important lesson that I've learnt is understanding the person I am. It was not an easy thing to do. I had to do it throughout the whole journey because I also didn't know who I am. Ms M

These accounts reveal how transformative social work education was for these participants and how they changed based on their reflections into themselves. They identified aspects of themselves that were unhelpful, and consciously chose to change certain behaviours. The narratives reveal that gaining insight is not always easy. This study's theoretical frameworks provide a lens to explain these findings as both theories highlight the key role of reflection in identity work (Buttigieg & Calleja, 2021, p.173; Tarpey, 2021, p.373). Freire's concept of decodification is especially useful because through it the learner gains insight (Rugut & Osman, 2013, p. 26), which is what these participants described. These insights formed the basis of changes in how they see themselves.

Changes in view of self

All the participants described significant changes in their role identities along with how they see themselves. Many of them revealed a dramatic positive shift in these spheres, partly because they managed to obtain a qualification despite the odds they faced.

I think it made Mary a better person because the time when I went to varsity, if I think back and if I reflect, I was living in a bubble. I was in a box. It changed me a lot, and helped me with personal growth also definitely how I saw myself because I had this assumption of myself that I'm from the ghetto and I will always be like that. But then I'm like, "Wait, I'm a educated person from the ghetto." So, it definitely changed how I thought about myself. I couldn't change the fact where I came from, but I can change the fact where I'm going to, and I always stick to that. Mary

I was very negative. I was in the dark. I was hopeless. I felt like my dreams were shattered, from the past experiences and the marriage experience. I thought, nothing better will come out. I've found myself. That's how I felt. I felt I found myself. I felt that I was lost, but the opportunity with the RPL gave me an opportunity to live again because I've written myself off as ... I'll keep on saying this. For me, it's a testimony. I talk about it everywhere I go. I found me. Lelo

This information builds on the data in the above section and confirms the profundity of studying for these participants. The quotes reflect what all the participants said but these examples are poetic descriptions of participants' belief that they found themselves. Participating in RPL was essential to this transformation as it provided access to university. The findings suggest that

the participants found what they were looking for i.e. an internal feeling of legitimacy and that they have the right to be who they are. Both theoretical frameworks address the notion that individuals can change who they are (Ukpokudu, 2016, p. 114). Mezirow, for example, argues that one of the aims of education should be to help the person develop their sense of “selfhood” and the learning process allows the learners to transform and recreate their narratives of themselves (Macgill, 2021, p. 8). Kupetz et al (2022, p. 4) state that RPL can lead to transformative learning and these findings support their assertion.

Changes in behaviour

Most of the participants described significant changes in their behaviour in addition to the other shifts they made. They attributed these behaviour changes to the insights they gleaned through studying. When asked what, if anything they had lost in the process of RPL and studying, the participants who indicated a loss stated that the loss was either negative behaviours or negative views of self. Thus, all the participants indicated they had only gained.

Sjo! I gave up everything to study. My one friend was found guilty We were really close he's going to be in prison for the rest of his life. The things we did. And I left everything behind. If somebody was on that lower level, you would treat him on that low. But now, I would never. I wouldn't speak to a person like that. It really changed me because it's wrong. My mum likes to say it, she still can't believe it. I was a, terrible person. I was angry and I was mad and I didn't care for... didn't respect the law. I just did as I pleased. I wasn't scared of anything or anyone. Mason

I have chilled a lot. I have become relaxed. Because I am doing now something that I am passionate about. And I'm living this, what I want to do or what I always wanted to do. I feel more alive and you know, I love my grey hair, I love my style that I have because I could not care. I can't be bothered what people say and their opinions. I always say that is their opinions and as long as I know I'm not hurting people, I can't be bothered. I am going to do what I want to do. Lovey

The changes in their behaviour were associated with changes in their attitudes and values as further illustrated by Percy, who did not directly address her behaviour but indicated how changing her attitudes and values now informs how she behaves:

I think I've grown to understand that beautiful things, when you can afford them, it's good. But if you can't afford, then you should be happy with what you have while working hard to get whatever that you want. I don't want to say “I was”. I am an SUV kind of person. I honestly enjoy SUVs but I have still a different side of me. I've learned that humility is the best. It's very important being firm in you ... in your values but still humble enough to allow yourself to explore and be exposed to different things. So yeah, I'd say humility is one thing that has changed.

The participants revealed quite marked behaviour changes. Their current behaviour is different because of the positive meanings associated with their new behaviour. These changes are informed by the changes in their self-concept and most salient identities. The findings affirm that these participants experienced transformative learning as previously discussed. The findings are in line with Mezirow's argument that individuals transform when they experience transformative learning (Hamman, 2019, p.77). The next theme presents the findings in relation to the changes in the participants' salient identities.

8.3.3.4 Changes in salient identities

Racial identity

The participants did not directly address their current racial identity but they evidently feel that they have transcended the limited opportunities and expectations that come with being a Black South African. All of them expressed a belief that they can do anything that they set out to do and that they have broken the mould that they were cast into by virtue of being Black.

The minute you have a baby at the age of 16 or 17, your future is gone. So, you are expected to raise that child if your parents are not there or if your parents are angry enough for you not to go back to school. The next step for you is to get a job at Shoprite. It's to get the job at the restaurant. Your life is, like, set out. I know I can leave a legacy one day because my dream is to open up my own NGO. So, I see myself as a social work manager. I see myself, as I said, that with this programme that I'm about ... I'm doing.
Stella

You know, Apartheid also, we all know that it was designed for us to be less people ... it was designed for us to be garden boys or kitchen girls, you know. I've upgraded my ... skills in terms of ... or my value as a person, you know, as a qualified social worker.
Simon

The centrality of their racial identity is again visible because despite these participants feeling that they have transcended their prescribed destiny, they are still acutely aware of their race. Social Identity Theory allows for an understanding of the self of the individual as the individual is defined by belonging to the group (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019, p. 129) and these participants have very definite views (which were shaped by Apartheid) on what it means to be Black in South Africa. The shifts in their views can be framed through TL which argues that building identity is a continuous task where the person works towards becoming who they are (Harrison & Leitch, 2018, p. 682). The participants used the opportunities that democracy opened, which include RPL access to university, to become more empowered citizens.

Mother identity

Seven of the eight female participants had children before they studied and all of them described significant shifts in their mother identity. All of them had always desired a close relationship with their children and from the start wanted to mother differently to how they were mothered. Some participants did not form an initial attachment with their children due to circumstances, as indicated by Ms M:

My kids were staying with my mother. I didn't have that attachment with them, I think because I got them when I was still young or while I was also trying to find myself. And then social work made me to try and build a relationship with them by reading the theories of Winnicott and Bowlby, I figured that they might have issues when they are older, like I do. So, I started being more involved in their life now. I'll make sure to do the things that they like with them. So, that made us to be more close. I felt like a good mother as compared to how I felt about my mother.

The shift is that these participants now have insight into how to relate to their children and they actively mother differently. They are building nurturing, open relationships with their children, as described by Nancy:

I'm more understanding of certain behaviours and I sometimes worry that I'll become more of a social worker to them than a mother. And my values as well. Yes, my values. There's a shift, a big shift where I am now able to talk about sex with my kids. Yes, it's uncomfortable for them, but I do talk about sex and boyfriends as well. I try as much as I possibly can to create an environment that will enable them to be their own individuals. I don't want them to be like me. I always re-iterate and stress the importance of not being afraid to be different, not being afraid to have big dreams.

It is evident that studying influenced the participants understanding of their mother identity. This finding concurs with Webber (2015, p. 217), who states that adult learners often mother differently once they start studying. The salience of and commitment to the identity increased and how they enacted the identity has shifted significantly. IT states that identity change happens when the individual experiences a stressful event or chronic stress that disturbs the person's role identities. The cost of the change must be seen to be worth the stress for the individual to embrace the change (Praherso et al, 2017, p. 266). The chronic stress that the participants experienced due to family demands was previously noted. These findings, however, reveal that they embraced the changes because they saw these changes as benefitting their children.

Father identity

Both male participants described a significant change in their role as father. They noted how their relationship with their children has changed; that they father actively, are present in their children's lives, and see the need to support their children emotionally and practically.

I used to shout at them. Now, we would talk. And I can do it calmly. I think I had a limited vocabulary first. I think that was my first problem, so I swore a lot. I learnt how to express myself. I learnt I can convey my ideas more clearly. I can speak to somebody in a better way. They can understand me better now. So, studying has definitely changed the way I father. I'm ... I'm just a bit more there. Mason

Before I went back to the university, I was kind of like encouraging my son to be more himself, you know, like, "Whatever that you want to do in life, you know, you just have to go with the flow to do whatever that you like." And then now, as a qualified or graduate social worker, I kind of like push my son to be educated first before anything. Whereas before I didn't have such teaching because I was not educated myself. So, there is a change there whereby now I'm gunning for him to ... study, you know? Whenever he doesn't do the homework, I always remind him of those men begging next to traffic lights, and then he immediately, I could see it's working for him. Simon

The participants' responses demonstrate the same shifts described by the female participants above. They, too, father differently to how they were fathered. The difference is that the female participants were always practically more hands on with their children whereas the male participants became more so because of the insights they gained through studying. The way these participants fathered previously is not uncommon and Parry and Gordon (2021, p. 798) indicate that South African fathers often see childrearing as women's responsibility.

Daughter identity

Five participants still have mothers and four of them described that their behaviour as daughters has changed. Studying provided insight into their mother's behaviour and they learnt to set boundaries with her to protect their interests. They feel that their current relationship is healthier for them.

My mother will definitely say that I've become more disrespectful because I will call it challenging because now I'm no longer the person that accepts any story that is being told. So, if you come to me and say, "This is what happened. So and so are getting divorced, da, da." I start asking questions. Nancy

But it's me knowing that she is my mother, so that makes me to tolerate her a lot because she is my mother. Yo! I have so many meetings with her, who is Ms M. But then it's still not easy for her because they grew up in a time whereby they had to be people who their parents expected them to be. I'm such a challenging child to her because I'm

totally different from her, and I think it's through my study that I'm able to talk to her actually and tell her that ... other than just keeping quiet and doing whatever that is expected from me. Ms M

The findings must be understood through recognising the cultural context of these participants because, according to Jilani et al (2022, p. 136), culture shapes the role expectations of being a daughter. These participants grew up in a culture where the daughter is expected to be obedient and they did not challenge their mothers. Identity Theory reiterates that identities suggest what behaviour is needed from the person (Burke & Cerven, 2019, p. 20). The changes in terms of this identity can be coupled to the fact that when the participants entered university, they acquired new identities that made them question and reflect on their pre-existing identities. They made shifts in their identities based on this reflection. This statement is guided by IT which posits that one of the reasons people choose to change their identities is because several identities are activated at the same time (Davis et al, 2019, p. 265).

Son identity

Both male participants described quite traditional views of the 'son' identity; they believe a son must be obedient and take care of parents. Their fathers are deceased so they described this role in relation to their mother. Their son identity shifted in terms of their feelings about the identity. Mason was very angry with his mother prior to studying but now has a good relationship with her. Simon's role changed during his time at university, as previously noted, but since working he has reclaimed his status as eldest son.

We get along fairly well. I think from where we come from, I think we're in an okay space right now. Yes, and I do. When she needs me, then I'm there. When she needs me to do things for her, I'll go. I'm very obedient. As old as ... I'm not old, but yeah, I'm obedient. If my mother ... I still come from that school. Mason

As a son, I saw myself as a leader and after the separation between my mum and dad, I took the responsibility of trying to help my mum. You know, like, I started working at a very young age. I was trying to help there and there. I think somewhere, somehow, the ... situations that you find yourself in as a person can also shape the way you think, you know, rather than having your goals set up from the start. Simon

Both participants have very definite expectations of themselves as sons. The role has deep meaning for them. This was especially evident for Simon, who struggled to deal with the loss of status of eldest son whilst he was studying. There is a difference between the male and female participants as the females became more assertive with their mothers and the males

became more loving with them. This is interesting because both males and females changed in ways that move away from the traditional gender role expectations i.e. where daughters are the nurturers and are expected to be loving and sons are the providers and expected to focus on more on practical care. IT and SIT argue that inasmuch as individuals have expectations of others, they also have expectations of themselves and make meaning of their own behaviour (Whanell & Whanell, 2015, p. 44). Through studying and reflecting on their roles and sense of self, these participants made new meaning of what being a son entails.

Partner identity

Only three participants described no change in their partner identity. Simon was one of them and Mason indicated he has decided to be alone. The rest of the participants, all female, described that they changed as partners in that they see themselves as more equal in the relationship, as illustrated by Mary:

If I think about the role as a wife, that was like a flip because I had this, where I had the ... my idea of what the wife is and what the wife was supposed to do, but then when I went to varsity, I was enlightened and then I'm like, "Wait!". But the husband and a wife is equal." So, like, that shifted for me in the sense of, "But wait, wait." The thing... The word was before ... wasn't equal. So, that shifted now.

Part of the shift was also that they learnt that they need to ensure that they have their needs met. For example, Lelo, who is not currently in a relationship, said:

I was not interested in any kind of relationship, particularly with males, intimate relationship. So, then, as I was ... I could see myself having that within me, feeling that "No, I need to be with someone." It came alive although, you know, studying social work gives you eyes as well. You look at things differently. Because I haven't met anyone as yet, but I'm able to see things differently. Yeah, so, with that as well, I've learnt that I would rather be alone than accept whatever.

As indicated previously, some female participants struggled with partners' resistance to their learner identity. These findings further demonstrate that the participants reflected on their roles and needs and now have a clear sense of how they can meet their desires in their relationships. It also reflects how their sense of self has changed as they see themselves as worthy of having expectations in relationships. These changes can be seen as a progressive identity change i.e. where the person sees themselves as more of a person (Carter & Moroni, 2021, p. 256).

Worker identity

Most of the participants described nuanced changes in their worker identity. These participants had a strong pre-existing work ethic and, whilst they remained committed workers, they still felt that the changes in their worker identity were noteworthy because they enhanced their worker identity.

I've grown. Like, ethics had a really big impact. It just changed the way I do things. It's ... it made limit the things that I would allow myself to do. If it's not ethical, then I won't even go there. Back in the day, I didn't worry. It was money. I don't care about if it's ethical. Now that I know it's wrong, you know. Now, it changed me as a worker. It really makes me take these things into consideration before I do anything and before I act, I think, "Is this right?" Mason

I was very quiet. I've learnt to do things with passion, whatever I do. I remember my manager used to say, "Lelo, you are a" What was the word? A "workaholic". When I start something, I want to finish it. I would even work longer hours, which was not very good at times because if you work very hard, you will have some upset days. Then I will say, "No, I can't come because I'm tired." But now, at least I know when to stop. It goes back to boundaries. I know when to stop. Lelo

The findings allude to IT, which states that one way identity change can be examined is how the individual experiences the magnitude of the change. (Stets & Serpe, 2013, p. 37). Whilst the participants always worked hard, they find the meaning of their worker identity is very different and they experience the change in this identity as significant. The transformation in their worker identity is related to gaining insight into how to better manage their work and what drives their work-related behaviour. They realised the importance of boundaries, ethics, and the like, all of which also reflect that they have internalised the social work values that they were taught.

Initial professional identity

Most of the employed participants indicated that their social worker role identity was not what they expected it to be. This was not surprising given that they had previously indicated that their role was not what they had envisaged.

I thought maybe after graduating I would choose a place whereby I want to work. I never wanted to work with children because I know how it emotionally affects me seeing children in need and I cannot help. So now I was just placed to a place where I never wanted, like, in a position that I never wish to work to, like, dealing with children's issues and all that. Ms M

Well, my role, I mean, my imagination before I.....studied Social Work, it was more about rescuing people and, you know, applying the law, and doing a transformation in... my community, you know? Whereas now, ..it's a variety, it's a mixture of different things whereby my current role is whereby I'm offering counselling. Well, the difference is just that...the broadness of...of this profession. Simon

The narratives revealed that acquiring a professional identity was not a smooth process for the participants. Despite their disappointment and struggle when the profession turned out to be different than what they expected, the findings reveal their resilience in that they coped with the demands of this identity. The reality of practice being different to the idealised expectation of what the profession would entail concurs with Stubbings et al (2018:43) who found how challenging creating a professional identity is when the context does not match the individual's expectations. The data additionally indicates that the identity was salient enough for them to persist in social work, despite the challenges. Ultimately their commitment to the profession is evident.

Current professional Identity

All the participants described a clear sense of their current professional identity. For most of them, this highly salient identity is evolving as they gain more work experience. The participants who are volunteering have a clear vision of how they see their careers progressing.

I'm just starting to get off the ground. I see myself in five years' time in my own little practice, having a very good clientele but also have people to run the NPO¹¹ for me but obviously, I oversee the NPO, and making a difference in communities and people's lives. Mary

There are so many things that I want to work with them to implement. As I said to you, at the moment, at (name of workplace), our kids are ... it's just now at the age from birth to five years old. So ... and they're only there between three and six months for the most. As I said to you, we are ... we have this proposal we're just waiting for ... we sent it to DSD¹². They are 100% behind us. Lovey

Previously in the chapter, the interplay between the participants' professional and personal lives was discussed. The powerful influence of their professional identity is thus evident;

¹¹ NPO- Non-Profit organisations are created to provide social work services and these organisations work on the basis that no profits are earned from the services rendered.

¹² DSD- The Department of Social Development is the state department responsible for the provision of social work services to South Africans.

scholars confirm that the PI is a dynamic, transformative identity because of the interplay between the individual's personal and professional selves (Brown & Bimrose, 2018, p. 247).

One can surmise that the participants experienced significant identity transformation in terms of their most salient identities. Participating in RPL and studying social work was a transformative experience for them. The last section in the chapter presents their recommendations for RPL practice.

8.3.4. Recommendations for RPL practice

The participants made recommendations for RPL in relation to three areas.

8.3.4.1 For prospective applicants

There were five areas that emerged from the findings:

Recommending RPL

All the participants indicated that they would recommend that eligible candidates apply for RPL; almost half have actively been encouraging others to do so. Some added that they would advise applicants to be confident about who they are and what they can contribute to the academy.

And it was the first time I was even hearing about if there's such a thing as RPL. Now I'm advertising it to so many. Because it helped me. Girly

I would firstly advise them to first just don't see themselves as people who are... . They mustn't allow their background to determine the people they are. (name of area) is the area where they are coming from, but they must know themselves as a person, not describe yourself as your place where you're coming from, but describe yourself as the person inside you. Ms M

The fact that participants would recommend RPL and studying further indicates how valuable they found the experience and demonstrates their altruistic needs. They are aware of the need in their communities and believe that more people qualifying as social workers would eventually help their communities. The recommendation for applicants to claim their space at university shows how difficult the participants found it to obtain a sense of belonging at university and the insecurities they had. It was noted that the participants had a strong wish that others do not have the negative experiences that they have had, and this recommendation is another manifestation of this wish.

Being proactive

A few of the participants stated that they would advise applicants to plan for how they will manage their personal demands along with their studies, because this will be a challenge for them.

If you're going back to school with responsibilities, you need to have a plan – financially, mentally. And you need to prepare the people around you as well because now you'll find that certain responsibilities that you used to do, you can't, and now it needs to be delegated amongst family members, and at times, they don't take lightly to it. They complain about you not being there, about them having to cook, if it's now about having them to do this, about them having to accommodate you all the time.
Nancy

This recommendation is once again indicative of the participants' own experience and that, upon reflection, they can see what is needed to prevent experiencing the same challenges that they did. The finding also underscores what the participants mentioned previously about the challenges of juggling all their demands.

Obtaining relevant work experience

The participants realise that there is limited intake of applicants into the BSW programme and many of them indicated that applicants must do work related to social work to improve their chances of being accepted into the BSW. They realised how intellectually challenging university is and believe that applicants need to have had other learning experiences so that they are not completely overwhelmed by the academic demands.

RPL, it's not easy because they only take a few. If you don't have a Matric, at least you must have the auxiliary social work course. Someone needs to follow, to be along the path, to be familiar with the social work thing or else would have done an auxiliary social work because you can't just stay with your Matric certificate, and you've been working at Shoprite and what-not and think you can just become a soci They need to first do something before going to RPL. Stella

Underpinning this finding is the knowledge of what applying to study means and the wish that people who apply have a chance of being accepted so that they can reap the benefits of obtaining a qualification as the participants have done. In essence, this recommendation is another expression of the participants' altruism.

Accessing support

A third of the participants indicated that they would advise applicants to seek support when needed and to use the academic and social resources within the university.

My advice is that you won't be lonely there, you know? And make friends as much as you can, whether they are young students but preferable make friends that are ... with older student. You must fight your battles because it's not going to be easy. Something that will challenge you. It won't be a smooth road. So, you must always be in a fighting spirit in the sense that, if you sense that something's wrong, go and ask. You know, don't die in silence just because you feel that it is not your space, you feel that it is the 18-year old's space. Claim the space, you know? You have right to be there. Simon

Once again, the participants' own experiences are visible, including the realisation that they would not have succeeded without support. The finding was also linked to advising RPL applicants that they belong in the academic space and thus are entitled to support.

8.3.4.2 Recommendations for universities

RPL drives transformation

All the participants recommended that universities should implement RPL because it is an important transformation mechanism for South African higher education. They argued that marketing RPL should be part of the university's transformation agenda. Three of the participants explicitly said that RPL should be implemented across all academic fields.

I definitely think it falls in the bracket of transformation in the sense of that there's a lot of people out there that want to study but they don't have that academic requirements but they do have that life and work experience, especially older people. I'm just thinking on top of my head, people needed to leave school to help their parents or there wasn't any money to go study, so definitely in terms of transformation, it could help a lot of people out there. Mary

I think, looking at our history, there are lots of people who deserve to be at university, but due to financial constraint, people end up doing odd jobs, people end up not really challenging themselves or ... finding their gifts, so to speak. So, RPL, it gives those people a chance to say, "Hey! There's a transformation in South Africa. You might be oppressed or you were maybe financially excluded but here's a chance." So, it kind of meet those old folks halfway in terms of making their dreams come true. Simon

The participants reflected on RPL as a transformation mechanism both in terms of providing access for adult learners and as promoting social inclusion. As much as they are aware of the macro implications of RPL, they also reflected on the meaning of RPL at a micro level. RPL was seen to be transformative in that it provides hope for people who have a history of political disadvantage. These recommendations have legislative support because, according to Jacobs (2018, p. 102), South African legislation prescribes that universities offer access via RPL.

Orientation and support for RPL learners

Most of the participants spoke about the shock that accompanies entering university and emphasised the need for intensive orientation focussing on the curriculum and on the resources that learners can access.

Just to have a session with us as to where we can have that freedom to say, like we're speaking now, you know, to be able to say those are the challenges, that we need to maybe say that if it is that you're fearful, or you need to adjust to the age group, or the work or whatever, just to have that, where we have that space, safe space, in order to just verbalise. Because many times, I find that people all have the same thing but they are too afraid to speak. But if one person starts, I'm sure the others will also follow to say. Lovey

The findings allude to the participants' realising that learners need both practical and emotional support. The importance of support has been discussed previously. Goings (2018, p. 164) further supports this finding and asserts that orientation programmes are important for adult learners.

Marketing RPL

More than half of the participants believed that universities should improve their marketing of RPL because many people are unaware of RPL.

It should not be advertised only on the website because not everyone has access to internet. So, it's not advertised. It's only advertised online. You get to hear about it via word of mouth, if you hear about it. Girly

It's not exposed enough, but I don't know, can it be exposed via broadcast, like, the radio stations in our communities because not everyone knows about it. So, if you didn't meet me in my community, then you don't know anyone who's studied. Even there, within the premises of the university, you go to the gate, you say you're going to RPL, they say they don't know. Stella

The participants' belief that RPL should be accessible to all is evident in this finding. The underlying perception is that RPL is not seen as a mainstream part of the academy and that is why many staff are unaware of it. This finding is further informed by a belief that universities need to engage with historically disadvantaged communities in ways that promote the view that universities are accessible to all. Previous research concurs that universities should ensure that communities are aware of RPL (Roy & El Marsafawy, 2021, p. 22).

Funding

Some participants indicated that there needs to be specific funding available for RPL learners specially to assist with managing their lives outside of university.

Make some funding available to them. Make sure these people have taxi fare. Make sure that they have data. Give them the resources. It's so easy to say that they dropped out. Students especially when you're an adult and you have kids, having problems with Financial Aid not paying you on time can seriously impact you life and it can impact your ability to concentrate on the work that you have to do. Mason

Given that finances were such a barrier, it was expected that there would be recommendations about the need for financial support for these learners. The information shows that if participants had access to funding, it would have mitigated some of the stress of meeting the requirements of their family-based role identities, which in turn would have made it less stressful to meet their academic demands.

Admission requirements

A few of the participants indicated that universities should interrogate and ensure that their entrance criteria for RPL are not exclusionary. They argued that applicants should be given support during the application process, which includes following up with applicants to see if they are managing the application process.

I think it's the phone calls that I got that made me to see that my application was in process, progressing well. Other than that, if I wasn't followed up by the phone calls, I don't think I will have finished it. Ms M

Certain things in the questionnaire that older people don't necessarily understand or they don't know how to answer it, but like what could happen is — where the person is having a sit down with this individual and saying, "Okay, this is what this question means. This is what you need to answer." So it also gives that person support and a clear insight of what that requirements of that specific question is. Mary

This recommendation stemmed from the fact that the application process raised difficult emotions for the participants and several battled with meeting the requirements. The need for admission criteria to be explicit and available to all candidates is also noted by SAQA (2019, p. 15). This data also confirms Hlongwane's (2019, p. 783) assertion that applicants need assistance with preparing for the assessment.

8.3.4.3 Recommendations for BSW programmes

The participants had three key recommendations for social work programmes:

Thorough assessment

The most prevalent recommendation was that social work programmes need to do a thorough assessment of RPL applicants, which includes academic and professional suitability. These participants argue that the assessment process should ensure that only people who are really committed and stand a chance of academic success should be accepted, because of the limited spaces available.

I would probably recommend that they double check if the person is ready to do it. It goes back to wasting resources or closing the opportunity for people that are serious about it. It's ... I think it's about interviewing people on their future plans, probably, will make much difference because some people are not serious about these things. Lelo

This finding reiterates the previous findings on how challenging and meaningful the assessment process was. The literature that addresses the importance and complexity of the assessment process was noted previously. This data also alludes to how intellectually and practically challenging studying was for the participants.

Support

All the participants indicated that RPL learners should not receive special attention because this would stigmatise them further, but some said that all learners should be offered emotional and academic support.

If I had access to certain services on campus, in our department or in our faculty, the journey wouldn't have been so marked. Why is it that don't we have social workers that are available for us before we go to the psychologist? Because sometimes we believed that if we had the support inside the department, it certainly would be better ... and the fact that the RPL candidates are usually people that are much older, so I'm not saying that they should get special attention or anything because that will somehow spoil things for them. Nancy

In one year, there were four students who were diagnosed with depression. And it was not surprising. Others were already taking pills for depression. The pressure was too much. There were too many assignments. I understood why they diagnosed with depression. Even those with no responsibility, no kids. So you need support. Girly

A central aspect of this finding was that participants felt that they did not need extraordinary support, and secondly, that RPL learners would experience further alienation if they were seen

to have different needs to their younger peers. Previous research has also shown that RPL learners did not require extra support as compared to their younger peers (Singh, 2011; Dykes, 2009).

8.4. SUMMARY

Based on the changes described by the participants in their professional and personal identities and their perceptions of how their identities have changed because of engaging in RPL and studying social work, the meaning of RPL and a social work education goes way beyond policy and pedagogical considerations. The meaning of RPL and social work education extends to having been powerful influences on the lives of the participants. The meaning of RPL and social work education can also be seen in the final section of the chapter as participants provided very clear recommendations regarding the practice of RPL. The final chapter of the thesis presents a discussion of the findings and the researcher's recommendations.

CHAPTER NINE: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

9.1. INTRODUCTION

The culminating chapter presents the discussion of the findings of the study which is framed using the research objectives as headings. The chapter further includes the researcher's recommendations. These recommendations are made to universities and departments offering social work education. They include recommendations for future research in this field. A conclusion completes the thesis.

9.2. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

9.2.1. To explore the participants' early experiences that influenced their identity formation

The participants' early development was turbulent and filled with numerous emotional and physical disruptions. Before coming to university they experienced multiple challenges, which influenced their sense of self and the formation of their salient identities. These experiences will be discussed separately, however, the reader should note that identity formation is a complex process that is influenced by many interrelated factors as discussed previously.

The pervasive influence of families on the lives of their members was evident in the study; families were the genesis of most of the participants' challenges. The utility of TL and IT as theoretical frameworks is once again evident as both theories highlight the role of the family in identity formation (Illeris, 2016, p. 49; Stryker, 1968, p. 558). The study demonstrates that the relationship with both parents is central to identity formation and the negative consequences of a lack of parental care on identity formation are extensive, which Identity Theory confirms, as discussed in chapter two.

The key role of the mother in identity development was highlighted because the participants' negative views of themselves and their identities were influenced by a challenging maternal relationship. This relationship was characterised by mothers' physical and/or emotional absence and the importance of the mother's emotional presence is demonstrated in this study. A high number of participants had an absent father, which compounded the challenges they experienced in their maternal relationships. Participants therefore had very little parental care,

further negatively influencing their identity formation. These conclusions confirm the extant knowledge about the central role of parents and the significance of the emotional tone of the parental relationship in identity formation (Prioste et al, 2020, pp. 1521, 1531; Kiecolt & LoMascolo, 2003, pp. 27-29).

The influence of a conflictual relationship between parents on children can also be concluded from this study as parental conflict exacerbated the existing negative relationship that participants had with their parents. In many instances this conflictual relationship resulted in divorce and the long-term effects of divorce are well documented (Andrew & Segun, 2019, pp. 98, 108; Ncube, Mulaudzi & Mudau, 2018, pp. 11486, 11491). Additionally, participants did not have siblings' support, which resulted in them receiving very little care in their nuclear family. The negative sequelae of a lack of sibling support are confirmed by scholars (Jones et al, 2022, p. 352; McHale et al, 2012, p. 913).

Both identity theories employed as theoretical frameworks address the importance of context in individual development (Kuscul & Adamsons, 2022, p. 193; Rubin et al, 2016, p. 231), which is clear in this study. The study confirms that families do not exist in isolation and participants' families experienced several psychosocial challenges. Whilst this was not an overt aim, the study highlighted that the consequences of Apartheid, including poverty and the sequelae associated with it, persist. These consequences such as crime, overcrowding and lack resources are also described by scholars (Nwosu and Ndinda, 2018, p. 82; Bhorat et al (2017, p. 1). The researcher especially notes the congruence between the findings of the study and the assertion made by Sabi et al (2020, p. 145) that poverty also leads to negative feelings of the self. The psychological consequences of poverty on the participants and their families emerged in this study; most evident were feelings of social exclusion and misrecognition.

The participants' early development was further complicated by chronic exposure to traumatic events, including subjection to violence and substance abuse. This exposure included witnessing and being direct victims of trauma. Once again, the findings add to existing knowledge that posits that social work and adult learners often hail from difficult backgrounds beset by poverty, trauma, and substance abuse (Lange et al, 2015, p. 93; Nyandu & Ross, 2020, p. 528).

The combination of negative family relationships and exposure to trauma negatively influenced the participants' sense of self and the formation of their identities. The participants internalised the problems in their external world and introjected this into a very self-critical narrative. The meaning they made of these experiences was that they revealed something about them instead of seeing that it was a reflection of their external environment. The participants self-concept had different negative iterations that were not mutually exclusive. These forms included seeing self as unworthy, unloved, shameful, and invisible and the participants' emotional worlds contained many difficult feelings. Despite their struggles, the participants developed very clear value bases and their cultural values influenced their commitment to and enactment of their role identities. Their family-based identities were most salient and they were most committed to them, which confirms Rozvadzka's (2020, p. 191) findings about the centrality of familial identities in the lives of adult learners.

The study revealed that children who have little parental care can benefit from the presence of other caring adults. The literature addresses two key sources of care: alloparents, which is common in South Africa (Perry, 2021, p. 198), and teachers (Timm & Barth, 2021, p. 5). This applied to many of the participants and school was a haven for them. Supportive teachers played a notable role but uncaring teachers were a source of misrecognition, which further negatively influenced the participants' sense of self.

The challenges with retention in South African higher education also emerged in this study as most of the participants they had some prior exposure to tertiary education. Factors like financial challenges, associated with dropping out in adult education and social work literature (Uleanya, 2022, p.89; Bagalow & Gair, 2019, p. 290), were confirmed in this study. However, finances were not the only reason and the influence of the lack of access to resources due to poverty is clear. The participants who studied further enrolled at institutions and degrees that were not their first choices. They registered because they had no other options because of a lack of access to resources.

The study demonstrates that individuals can develop inner strength in adversity; the study's sample displayed high levels of resilience. They drew on this resilience throughout their childhood and their time at university. Abood and Hmaid (2023, p. 55) also write about the high levels of resilience in adult learners. The exposure to adversity necessitated that the participants became self-reliant and industrious as evidenced in their success at school and later

as workers. Their industriousness was based on a yearning for a better future, one of the factors that led to a decision to study social work. The decision to study further was made over time and the choice of social work was deliberate. Cox and John (2016, p. 304) adapted Mezirow's concept of a disorienting dilemma to the South African context, labelling the dilemma as orienting where a learner is introduced to a programme that can change their lives. The results of this study support their assertion because these participants' decision to study was life-altering.

Selecting the BSW was driven by a range of motivations including the participants' own experiences and woundedness. Social work was seen as a place where they could make a difference in society. The need to transform their communities and society was founded on altruism generated by wanting to protect and heal people who struggle. The underlying motivation for their altruism is a further indication of their arduous early experiences. The motivations to study revealed in this study concur with global research that examined the motivations that prompted the decision to study social work (Papadopoulos & Egan, 2023, p. 609; Couturier et al, 2022, p. 1785; Earl, 2008, p. 122). Participating in RPL had meaning for the participants beyond providing access to university and was an expression of a yearning for a better life and a wish to become a better 'self'.

9.2.2 To explore any changes that the participants have experienced in their salient identities since participating in RPL and studying social work

RPL is a legislated mechanism that promotes transformation at a macro level as discussed in chapter four. Based on the findings, one can conclude that participating in RPL can also facilitate transformation at a micro level. Brunton and Buckley (2021, p. 2702) also note that one of the reasons adult learners pursue higher education is to find their 'true self'; one can conclude that these participants achieved that.

The participants' accounts demonstrate the nature of a transformative learning experience and the centrality of reflection in transformative learning. Both Transformative Learning Theories assisted with understanding these accounts because they emphasise reflection in transformative learning (Nweke & Owoh, 2022, p. 105; Netseane, 2011, p. 308). The benefits of reflection are further evident in this study because it promoted insight into how the participants enacted their identities. The role of insight in identity change is notable because the participants' identity shifts were often preceded by gaining new insight.

The BSW was more than an academic programme and the influence of studying social work on all the participants' identities was evident. Karlsson et al (2022, p. 114) concur that universities influence identity formation because they produce certain identities. The academy was a paradoxical space where, on the one hand, the participants navigated significant challenges and experiences of misrecognition because of age, race, and class. These findings underscore the research that focuses on challenges faced by Black learners in South Africa, which were discussed extensively in the third chapter. On the other hand, the academy became a space that enabled the participants to experience profound transformation in their personal, social, and role identities.

This study reveals that universities are powerful sites of recognition and, in this instance, played a central role in correcting the participants' prior experiences of misrecognition. The person identities of the participants transformed and for some these shifts were quite marked. Others saw the changes as a consolidation of their core identity. Identity Theory frames this finding by stating that person identities are more stable and less open to change, the core identities of the individual (Carter & Bruene, 2019, p. 429). A central aspect to marked transformation in person identities was a shift in values. Where changes were minimal, the participants retained their core values despite challenges to their values within the university. The role of values in identity is thus evident in this study and once again this confirms a central premise in both identity theories that values are central in identity formation (Russell, 2020, p. 17; Cinoğlu & Arıkan, 2012, p. 1120).

Entering university meant resurrecting a dormant learner identity. Additionally, some participants had never been a university learner. As with all their identities, these learner identities had very deep meaning and were seen as the vehicle to acquiring other identities, including a professional identity. The university learner identity elicited many difficult feelings, which were compounded by the participants' struggle to negotiate the external environment. The physical space of the university became a symbol of a loss of knowing and of becoming a novice (in a very challenging environment). The significance of the physical environment is noted by Scanlon et al (2007, p. 228), who address the significance of the loss of place and argue that a person's sense of belonging and identity are linked to geographical locations. The learner identity was the first identity to shift significantly and was tied to the participants adjusting to university, thus moving back to a place of 'knowing'.

The BSW is a professional programme and the participants had to build a learner social worker identity along with their learner identity. The literature notes that building a professional identity is one of the primary aims of social work education (Rishel et al, 2020, p. 441). This identity evoked very powerful emotions for the participants but was also rewarding and most participants tied their most significant year of study to an event associated with being a learner social worker. Chen and Russell (2019, p. 67) confirm how rewarding the field practice can be for social work learners.

The centrality of the participants' racial identity must be noted, which is unsurprising given that Burke and Harrod (2021, p. 12) assert that racial identity is a cornerstone identity. The participants transformed perceptions of the meaning of this identity and how they see themselves in relation to it. Prior to studying, they saw this identity as resulting in social and economic exclusion and misrecognition. The status and opportunities that came with being a professional enabled the participants to challenge the destinies that they had ascribed to their racial identity and acquiring an education promoted feelings of inclusion and recognition.

Some identity shifts were more marked than others, for example, the changes in the worker identity were less obvious. Participants were content with their worker identities prior to studying and the shift in this identity was nuanced and more of a consolidation. However, on top of the worker identity, the participants also had to develop a professional identity, which has not been without challenges. As with their initial identity formation, the challenges to the development of their professional identity came from external sources. The contextual realities of social work practice in South Africa, for example, a lack of supervision and resources, have resulted in the most challenges to this identity. Kheswa (2019, p. 2) and Joseph (2017, p. 5) confirm this to be common for social workers in the country. Despite these struggles, the participants demonstrated a clear commitment to developing this identity and actively sought to verify the identity.

The benefits of translating insight into action can be seen in this study. Through the insight gleaned from studying, the participants changed their behaviour and enactment of their salient identities. The most obvious transformation occurred in their family-based identities, which is not unexpected given that they were top of the participants' hierarchy of identities. The participants developed new attitudes to these identities and had a strong need to enact their identities in ways that was also restorative for them. The influence of their past experiences

on the meanings that their family-based identities held for them must be noted. These participants consciously fulfil their role identities in ways that are very different to their own experiences, which is most evident in how they enact their mother/father identity. This identity is the most salient identity for most of the participants, which is in line with research that argues that this identity is the most salient for mothers and fathers (Golden, 2001, p. 236; Gervais et al, 2021, p. 375).

Research argues that adult learners' studying has a positive influence on the lives and academic prospects of their children (Ronnie, 2016, p. 265) and this was demonstrated in this study. The participants further verify their mother/father identity very differently to how they did before they studied, which has had a very positive influence on their children. The influence on children confirms that participating in RPL can contribute to societal transformation from the bottom up as the growth that the participants experienced has extended to others.

Transforming identities can be a difficult process given the relational nature of identities and the powerful need for families to retain the status quo, which was also shown in this study. The changes in the participants' identities often provoked a backlash from family, especially when they acquired their learner identity. The gendered nature of adult education, which is articulated by many scholars, was demonstrated in this study because these repercussions was especially relevant for female participants. The challenges faced by female adult learners was discussed in chapter three. Female participants had to renegotiate their wife identity with partners who held very patriarchal views of what it means to be a wife. The family's resistance did not deter these participants from pursuing their goals and the subsequent identity changes that came though the influence of their studies. These changes were seen as progressive identity changes because the female participants believe that they became themselves and are better mothers because of studying. Identity Theory explains this conclusion as it argues that progressive identity changes occur when the person sees themselves as more of a person, more part of a group or playing more of a certain role (Carter & Moroni, 2021, p. 256).

9.2.3 To understand how these changes in their core identities have influenced their personal and professional lives

There has been an integration between the participants' identities and a symbiotic relationship exists between their personal and professional lives. Other scholars have also found this with social workers (Brown & Bimrose, 2018, p. 247; Webb, 2015, p. 3). This reciprocity, which

includes the meaning that their personal and professional lives give to each other, is evident in how their personal values guide their professional lives and vice versa. The interconnectedness between their personal and professional lives is a further indication that, for these participants, social work is more than a career. They continue to reflect on their work and lives on an ongoing basis, which means that they have internalised the need for continuing reflection and alludes to enduring growth. The study reveals that developing insight, identity formation, and transformation are perennial processes.

It is unfortunate that this study confirms Khalid et Al's (2021, p. 1) assertion about unemployment being a massive problem in South Africa. Despite being qualified professionals in a field that is deemed a scarce skill, participants struggled to find employment. Some continue to struggle. However, the overwhelming view was that these participants will continue to practice as social workers. They find reward in the work despite the professional challenges they have faced; clearly their professional identity is a highly salient one for them. The personal lives of the participants appear to be positive despite some of their previous challenges remaining. Their insights and shifts in their identities play a central role in how they manage their stressors. How participants cope with their life situations is also a reflection that their belief in themselves has shifted positively and they have integrated a different narrative about themselves and their lives. Their emotional landscape has altered and now includes strong feelings of hope and determination.

9.2.4 To arrive at a best practice model for the use of RPL

The literature addressed the concerns raised by academics about RPL lowering academic standards (Maurer & Morshed 2022, p. 7; Cooper & Harris, 2013, p. 449). The results of this study act as a strong contestation for these concerns seeing that most of the participants completed the degree in the minimum period and their commitment to their studies is undoubted. The participants believe that RPL is central to South Africa's transformation agenda and made several recommendations regarding to how RPL should be practiced.

Their first recommendation was that clear admission criteria are central to the RPL process, so that applicants know exactly what is required. This conclusion is supported by SAQA (2019, p. 15). The participants confirmed that universities should interrogate how the RPL process is structured because the process holds such powerful meaning for applicants. This study further revealed that the RPL process is a powerful source of recognition and holds the dreams of these

individuals. This statement is confirmed by authors in the RPL arena who write about the powerful emotions that can arise out of the RPL process (Brenner et al, 2022, p. 437; Snyman & van den Berg, 2018, p. 28). The RPL process is complex because practically it requires applicants who have been out for school for a while to engage with material, resources, or technology that they do not understand. Seeing that the process can evoke powerful feelings and practical challenges, applicants thus require support with the RPL process, as also argued by Luckan, (2021, p. 73).

The support from university staff has been noted to be important both during the application process and throughout studying; much has been written about the role of academic staff in adult learners' success (Tennant, 2012, pp. 55- 73; Chen & Russell, 2019, p. 72). The remnants of Apartheid persist in the higher education sector and the alienation experienced by Black learners because of race and class was evident. The participants' age exacerbated their feelings of alienation and they struggled to achieve a feeling of belonging at university. This study indicates that the support from staff serves deeper functions, including helping learners to acquire the cultural capital required at university. It is also an important source of recognition and promotes feelings of inclusion and belonging. The study thus alludes to the key role that staff play in furthering a transformation agenda through ensuring that Black students not only have access to universities but that they can also claim the space socially and academically.

The need for and value of learner support was extensively discussed in chapter three and this study concurs with the argument that learner support is integral to the retention and throughput of adult social work learners. Learner support is essential because academic requirements provided much stress for these participants. Whilst they did not require more support than younger learners, the study does reveal that if universities are to enroll learners from previously disadvantaged backgrounds (irrespective of age), academic support is crucial.

The findings clearly show how significant personal and financial demands were and support should include funding tailored to the specific needs of adult learners, given their other commitments. The findings of this study confirm Dykes (2009)'s study, which focused specifically on whether RPL learners require 'extra support'. She also concluded that they did not but that finances were a significant battle for them.

The use and implementation of RPL is determined by the university, however some specific social work items must be noted. Social work education focuses on promoting social justice and the macro and micro transformative potential of RPL speaks directly to social justice. The synergy between the aims of social work education and RPL was noted in the first chapter and social work programmes are thus ideally situated to promote the utilisation of RPL in the academy. Not all South African universities offer the BSW via RPL, which indicates that there may be barriers to the implementation of RPL in universities. These barriers may be informed by resistance to RPL but could also be due to a lack of knowledge on what RPL entails. Whilst this study focused on social work graduates, scholars note that internationally there have been barriers in other disciplines too with implementing RPL (Maurer, 2023, p. 4; Rothboeck et al, 2018, p. 396).

The centrality of the field practice in social work education is evident in this study as also documented in social work literature (McConnell et al, 2023, p.12; Baikadi & Cheng, 2022, p. 45). The field practice was demanding but it was also a site of great meaning for the participants because it symbolised that they were getting the opportunity to practice social work. It represented an avenue where they could express their altruism and provided hope that they could achieve professional legitimacy. Other authors confirm this conclusion and Beytell (2014, p. 184) states that field practice generates a lot of excitement because learners can practice. The importance of supervision was highlighted, especially supervision from social workers. Emotional support is necessary because the field practice can be very evocative for learners who have had experiences that are like those of their clients. There is a body of knowledge on supervision in social work and this aspect was discussed in chapter three.

The above section provided an integrated discussion of the findings; the following section presents the researcher's recommendations based on the findings of the study.

9.2.5 To contribute to the theory on the transformative potential of RPL at an individual identity level

This objective has been indirectly addressed in the findings chapters and in the discussion of the previous objectives. For the purpose of addressing this objective overtly, the researcher argues that this study has provided new knowledge on the longitudinal experiences of the

learners who participated in RPL and studied social work. The findings of this study address a lacuna in the extant literature in RPL and social work because previous studies focused only on the development of learner identities or the development of certain skills. This study on the other hand provides a holistic, in-depth knowledge of the participants' experiences and transformation in relation to their key identities. This transformation was facilitated through participants' participation in RPL and studying social work. The study thus demonstrates the potential for RPL to be transformative at both a macro and micro level.

9.3. RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations are made in three areas.

9.3.1. Recommendations to universities

Given that RPL is enshrined in policy and that the findings of this study show how transformative it can be, the conversation about RPL and its links to the transformation of higher education is essential. The researcher recommends that universities that use RPL should promote conversations about the utility of RPL in the higher education sector. Different fora can be used, for example, colloquiums, academic associations, and spaces where the senior management structures of universities meet. The researcher is mindful of the autonomy that universities have, however, all South African universities purport to have a transformation agenda and RPL is an important part of this agenda.

The researcher further recommends that these discussions should include RPL being an access route to all fields of study. Therefore she is recommending that universities — and not only social work programmes — spearhead the move to use RPL. Social work programmes fall within university structures and, if there is resistance to implementing RPL at university level, these programmes would not have the support from the university to successfully introduce and implement RPL.

Departments can apply for exemption from the 10% RPL admission policy rule, however this means additional work for departments. At a philosophical level, universities should interrogate the 10% stipulation, which can be seen to be another form of exclusion. The researcher is aware that universities have resource constraints and that the argument can be

made that these resources should be prioritised for young learners because the normative standard is that individuals go to university after leaving school. The move to lifelong learning counters these arguments and, other than the resources required for the RPL assessment process, there is no evidence that these learners require extra support and thus more university resources after being admitted to university.

Whilst this study did not aim to evaluate how RPL is being used by the two universities attended by the participants, their accounts — and those of colleagues in the field — showed that RPL is not seen as a mainstream activity with many people within the universities being unaware of it. RPL will not flourish without the support of senior management and it must be part of the mainstream academic strategy for it to be used optimally. The researcher recommends that universities should consider bringing RPL to the fore within institutions, which can be done in several ways. Firstly, the need to actively market RPL was clearly articulated in this study and the researcher agrees with this. Professional programmes are perfectly placed to market RPL through their professional bodies, associations, and partner organisations. The programme can also be marketed through the general marketing strategy of the university.

Secondly, the researcher concurs with the participants that the admission process and admission criteria need to be clearly articulated on the websites. The researcher explored the websites of both research sites and, whilst some information was available, it could be much more clearly articulated. Most prospective applicants do not have English as their mother tongue and language must be considered. Universities can also ponder that staff involved in the application process be available to offer guidance should an applicant struggle with understanding admission requirements. This could be noted on their websites and application forms.

The assessment process, thirdly, is integral to the success of RPL at universities. The researcher recommends that training on RPL processes and assessment is made available to all staff on an annual basis to account for staff turnover. Within departments, working with RPL should be viewed as a departmental initiative that is included in the formal functioning and calendar of the department. It should not be left to staff who have an interest in RPL. The challenge with relying on staff who are ‘RPL advocates’ is that RPL remains on the fringes of the department and there is the danger of the RPL initiative dissolving (when these staff members leave) .

The study revealed how powerful interactions with peers are and that the culture that exists in lectures can be alienating for non-traditional learners irrespective of their age. The researcher believes that it would be useful for universities to do climate surveys on how learners experience the university and how a student centred culture can be built. Regular reviews of curricula are recommended and learners should be included in these reviews so that they can give input on how the curricula can be more responsive to their realities. This recommendation is not exclusive to adult learners. The importance of emotional support has been highlighted in the study, speaking to the need for easily accessible psychological services. The literature also highlighted that the numbers of learners who struggle with serious psychological problems has increased; the researcher is aware that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this situation. Universities may not have sufficient resources to offer counselling to their learners in-house and the researcher thus recommends that universities could explore how to build partnerships with state institutions or other organisations that could offer psychological support to learners.

9.3.2. Recommendations to social work programmes

The importance of orientation programmes was highlighted by the participants. The researcher thus recommends that social work programmes offer specific orientation to all their incoming first years, including RPL learners (that is separate from the general university orientation). This orientation can provide some information on funding, university resources and the like, but can also be more nuanced in terms of addressing the anxieties that incoming social work learners have. This orientation can be in the form of experiential workshops where learners can work together so that they start making social connections (the findings highlighted the important role that peers play); building connections can also help with building a sense of belonging. At this workshop, students could be encouraged to work with peers given that peers played such an important role in how the participants experienced university. This orientation can happen just after registration so that resources are not invested in individuals who may not take up the offer to study.

The researcher is aware that this would add to the workload of academic staff and departments can thus recruit senior learners in the department to facilitate the workshops. These facilitators could be managed by academic staff members on a rotational basis. The researcher is mindful that budgets are structured differently across departments. There are cost implications in appointing senior learners and, given that departmental budgets may already be constrained,

departments could ask for financial support for this line item from structures within the university that are geared towards promoting transformation. Departments could also look at ways in which these senior learners could do the orientation on a volunteer basis, for example, offering them positions as tutors on courses where there are existing budgets for tutors.

Both universities use RPL to provide access and not for credit exemption. The researcher recommends that this practice be continued. Even though the participants had exposure to courses related to social work, they needed the theoretical knowledge that is covered in the BSW. The researcher is by no means arguing that credit exemption cannot be given, however, this would require a different kind of assessment to the one currently employed by the two universities involved in this study.

The need for social work learners to be reflective has been noted throughout the thesis and these reflections could be used to inform the curriculum more explicitly. The life experience that adult learners bring into the academy could be of great value to younger learners as well. Lecturers in senior courses, for example could consider that certain aspects of the curriculum be taught in seminar format where students are required to present papers on the theory being taught and that they must reflect on their own experiences or values about these topics.

This study confirmed that many social work and adult learners have histories of significant trauma. Social work programmes can provide support at multiple levels and given the importance of peers as mentioned previously, mentor systems could be introduced where senior learners can act as mentors to learners in preceding levels of study. Mentors can offer support but can also model academic achievement. The classroom is a powerful space and lecturers can encourage support and collaboration between learners through the use of group discussions or activities and group-based assessment tasks.

The field practice especially has been shown to be especially evocative and social work programmes must thus ensure that learners receive emotional support when needed. The importance of supervision in the field practice has been established in many other studies, as discussed in the literature review, and was also found in this study. Whilst this recommendation applies to all social work learners, the researcher notes that social work departments must ensure that learners receive the necessary supervision. For adult learners, the supportive function of supervision is essential given that these learners have had experiences

like their clients and the field practice may be even more evocative for them. They also have significant lives outside of their studies, which does influence their academic journey. Group supervision is recommended so that the learners receive supervision from their supervisor, but additionally they can receive support from their peers who are in their supervision group. They can also learn about working collaboratively through having to share the space with other learners. Peer support is also an important aspect of providing a trauma informed learning space.

Given that this study revealed that learners often had non-social worker supervisors, departments must ensure that learners are receiving effective guidance on how to effectively work with their clients to ensure that learners are meeting the field practice outcomes. This is an important quality assurance issue within the BSW. Additionally, there is an ethical component to this recommendation. The researcher believes that social work programmes have an ethical responsibility to placements and must ensure that their learners can effectively render services to clients.

Social work academics and supervisors play an important modelling role in how to be empathic and professional and, as such, cannot remain detached from their learners. Staff cannot be the learners' counsellors as this would be a crossing of boundaries but can assist with referrals to other services. Social work academics are registered social workers and they are equipped to provide trauma informed classrooms through being culturally sensitive and providing safe teaching spaces so that learners feel supported. Social work departments have extensive networks in communities through the field practice programme and learners can be referred to these networks for further emotional support. This also speaks to a trauma informed stance as lecturers would be supporting learners through the referral process.

9.3.3. Recommendations for future research

Future research could establish how widely RPL is being used at South African universities and what the barriers to using RPL may be. Research that focuses on these barriers can contribute an understanding of what remedial measures need to be put in place to increase the use of RPL. The researcher believes that studies exploring possible resistance to RPL would need an in-depth exploration of views and perceptions about RPL, which would necessitate the use of qualitative research approaches. Quantitative approaches could, however, provide valuable statistics on the use of RPL in the country.

The researcher argued that RPL continue to be used in social work programmes for access only and research could be conducted to examine how using RPL for credit exemption could be implemented. Retention was not a concern with these participants but the concerns around South Africa's throughput rates was previously noted. Therefore, research that explores the retention rates of RPL applicants would also provide more insight into factors that enable or hinder the retention of RPL learners. Whilst there is much research on the retention of adult learners, indigenous research that accounts for the South African context could also guide how RPL programmes can be further strengthened.

The perspective of academic staff on RPL is vital to contribute to the knowledge in the field and research that explores academic staff's experience of and with RPL learners could further contribute to knowledge about RPL at a micro level. The importance of the field practice was seen in this study and social work research could investigate the experiences that supervisors have of working with adult learners.

In line with building knowledge of the influence of RPL at micro level, this study could be replicated with RPL learners from other degrees and other professional programmes. The results of such research would shed further light on the potential for RPL to be transformative at a micro level. The sample of this study came from urban residential universities and the situation in rural areas may be very different. Future research could thus be targeted towards rural universities and universities that offer distance learning.

This study highlighted the responsibilities that adult learners have outside of the university. Exploration of families' experiences could also provide knowledge on what can be done to support families so that they may better support the adult learner, with the aim of reducing the barriers that adult learners face. This could further contribute to the retention of adult learners. The study revealed that identity work is an ongoing process and a longitudinal study to ascertain the experiences of RPL social work graduates would have great utility. It would also be interesting to explore whether these graduates remain in social work.

9.4 CONCLUSION

The aims of this phenomenological study included giving voice to and providing an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences of participating in RPL and studying social work. The researcher is satisfied that these aims were achieved. The study demonstrated that participating in RPL and studying social work can be transformative at a micro level and, in doing so, the overarching aim of this study was achieved. The participants were doing significant identity work whilst studying and embraced the self-reflection that was encouraged in their social work studies. Participating in RPL and studying social work have been profound experiences for these participants. The participants overcame tremendous odds and for all of them, obtaining a professional qualification meant a dream came true. The journey to obtain this qualification evolved into a journey of self-discovery and finding recognition, which has ultimately changed their lives.

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APPENDIX A

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH STUDY

Dear _____

My name is Fatima Williams, and I am currently enrolled for the degree of Doctor in Social Work at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. I am conducting a research study to meet the requirements for the degree, and I would like to invite you to be part of my research study. Below you will find all the information on the study and a consent form for you to complete, should you be willing to participate in the study.

Title of the thesis: Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and Identity Transformation: Experiences of Social Work graduates in the Western Cape, South Africa.

Aim of the study

The aim of this study is to understand the identity transformation experienced by social work graduates who were admitted to university via RPL at two universities in the Western Cape Province, South Africa. The concept of identity will be explored by examining the changes in the social and role identities of the participants. The central research question is what meaning the participants have made of how their salient identities changed as a result of the RPL process and their studies.

What does the study entail?

You will be asked to participate in *three one on one interviews* and each interview will be an hour to hour and a half. The interviews will be scheduled for a time that is convenient for you. You have the choice to meet face to face or online using a platform of your choice.

You will choose a pseudonym which will be used during the three interviews. *You may stop the interview at any point and can elect not to answer any question/s that you are not comfortable answering. You can also withdraw from the study at any time.* The interviews will be recorded and sent for transcription.

Who will know the results?

The information will be kept confidential, and all recordings will be safely stored. An external transcriber will transcribe the interviews after signing a confidentiality agreement. The

researcher is being supervised by Dr Khosi Kubeka, Senior Lecturer, Department of Social Development at the University of Cape Town and the findings will be discussed with her, however she will not have access to your real names. The researcher will provide all the participants with a brief outline of the findings once the thesis has been examined. The thesis will be available to the public on OpenAccess.

How will your participation benefit you?

You will not be remunerated for participating in the study so there will be no direct benefit for you. The sharing of your personal experiences will drive the ultimate aim of the study which is to address the gaps in the knowledge on the impact of RPL at the micro level and to contribute to the development of the theory in this field. It is hoped that in contributing to the theory development of the transformative potential of RPL at an individual level, that the theory could be utilised to build best a best practice model for the use of RPL in social work programmes. You will thus be contributing to the development of RPL practices and also the development of social work programmes.

Please see the attached consent form **and if you are willing to participate please complete the section below and return to Fatima.williams@uct.ac.za**. If you have any further queries, please feel free to contact me on 082 7838348.

Yours faithfully



F Williams

Student number: WLLFAT002

Email: Fatima.williams@uct.ac.za

Cell number: 082 7838348

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I _____

agree to take part in this research study and I agree that:

- I understand the information that has been shared about the study.
- My participation is voluntary, and I have not been pressurised to participate
- My identity will be kept confidential, and a pseudonym will be used during the interviews.
- The interviews will be recorded.
- The interviews will be transcribed by an external party who will be employed on the basis of signing a confidentiality agreement.
- The interviews will be conducted in a place or online platform of my choosing.
- If I choose to meet face to face all COVID-19 protocols will be adhered to and if I have any symptoms of COVID-19, I will disclose this to the researcher.
- I will disclose any contact with anyone who has been diagnosed with COVID-19.
- The researcher will not proceed with face-to-face interviews should she have any symptoms of COVID-19 or she has had contact with someone who has been diagnosed with the disease.
- I can withdraw from this study at any time or choose not to answer any question/s that make me feel uncomfortable.

Signed at: _____ on the _____ 2021.

Signature of participant _____

APPENDIX B

COVID 19 SCREENING FORM

Name:

Cell number:

Date	Have you been diagnosed or had contact with anyone who has been diagnosed with COVID- 19 in the past 2 weeks?	Do you have any symptoms of COVID- 19 as listed on the U.C.T. HEALTH APP/CHECK?	Temperature

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW SCHEDULES

INTERVIEW ONE

1) Introduction and Clarification of the aim of the research and contracting

2) Demographic details

- Age
- Residential area
- Relationship status
- Number of children
- Current position
- Highest level of achievement at school
- Year of entry into university
- Year of graduation
- University where graduated from

3) General exploration for how participants entered into studying

- Tell me about where and how you grew up
- What was your family life like?
- What do you feel were the major events of your childhood that shaped your life?
- What were the core values that were instilled in you as a child?
- What were you like as a learner at school?
- How did you feel about school?
- What were the major experiences that you had at school that shaped how you felt about school.
- What did you do after school? Explore
- What major experiences made you to decide to do the above?
- How did you see yourself at the time?
- Looking back now would you have wanted to do things differently? Why?

- What do you feel were the most important roles that you fulfilled in your life at that time?
 - How did you feel about this? Explore feelings around each role
 - What experience/s made you decide to change what you were doing at the time?
 - How did you come to the decision to go to university?
-
- What made you choose to go into social work?
 - What were your feelings about this decision and what did this decision mean to you?
 - Did you discuss this decision with anyone and if yes what made you do this?
 - What preparation did you do that helped you finalise your choice to study social work?
 - What was the reaction of you family and loved ones to this decision?
 - How did you go about turning the decision into reality?
-
- How did you find out RPL?
 - What was your experience of the RPL process? (Explore positive aspects, challenges and meanings made by the participant during the RPL process).
 - What made you decide which university to apply at (explore if they were/were not accepted at their first choice in terms of university and what their feelings were about this?)
 - Once you had applied to the university what were some of the feelings that you had to deal with?
 - What do you think these feelings were about?
 - Were you able to share this with anyone and if yes did this help?
 - What did it mean for you that you could study at university? And specifically at the university where you graduated from?
 - What was the response from those close to you when you made the decision to study?
 - What were their reactions to you being accepted to study?
-
- 4) What were the factors could have been that supported and challenged the participants pre-existing identities?**
- What were the things in yourself that you felt you would need to change in terms of becoming a student?

- What were you excited about in terms of becoming a student?
- What were your concerns about becoming a student?
- How did you deal with your feelings about becoming a student?
- Were you able to talk about it to anyone?
- If yes who was this and how did this person/s help?
- If no what were the reasons for this?
- What did you do in preparation for becoming a student e.g. reading etc
- What were your feelings about becoming a social worker?
- What were your expectations in terms of what getting a qualification would mean for you firstly?
- And secondly for your family?

5) End interview

How did you find the interview?

Are there any questions you have?

Contract re next interview

INTERVIEW TWO

1) Introduction and tuning in

2) Entrance into and adjustment to university in terms of learner identity

- What do you remember about your first few weeks at university? (Explore the feelings and meanings around the experience).
- How did you experience the university environment?
- When you first started university, how did you see yourself as a student?
- What were some of the struggles that you had in terms of adjusting to being a student?
- What were the positive experiences that you had in those first few weeks?
- What support did you have during this time?
- What did it feel like being in lectures?
- Did how you see yourself as a student change in any way during the first few weeks of university?
- Were there any issues that came up for you in terms of being older than your peers? Explore what these were
- Were your values challenged in any way?
- What do you think the reasons for this were?
- What kind of support did you need in terms of adjusting to university?
- What support did you receive and from whom?
- What did this mean to you?
- So what did you do to help you to adjust to university in terms of your studies?
- How long did it take you in your opinion to adjust to being a student again and managing studies and home life?

3) Entrance into and adjustment to university in terms of personal identities

- How did your new routine in terms of having to attend lectures etc. affect your home life?
- What were your feelings about these changes?
- How did you see yourself at the time?
- What were the reactions of your family to the new routine?
- What was your response to these reactions?

- What did you do in terms of your personal life in order to allow you to meet the demands of home and studies?
- What came up for you as a result of these changes in routine, your family's reactions and juggling work and home?
- What if anything did you need to change in terms of how you saw your roles in your personal relationships in order to adjust to university?
- Looking back now how would you have done things differently in terms of adjusting to being a student, if at all?

4) Student identity

- How long did it take for you to feel that you had settled into university? - explore.
- How did you see yourself as a student once you had settled in?
- What were some of the positive aspects of yourself being a student that you discovered as you went through the programme?
- What did this mean for you in terms of how you saw yourself?
- What were some of the feelings that being a student raised for you?
- What remained challenging for you in terms of being a student?
- What did this mean for you in terms of you saw yourself?
- How did you deal with these challenges?
- What, if any changes did you experience in terms of how you saw yourself as a university student over the duration of your studies?
- What do you think are the reasons for this?
- How did this influence how you saw yourself generally?
- Looking back how did being at university influence your values, if at all? Explore

5) Student social worker identity

- What was your first field practice experience like?
- What meaning did you make of starting to see clients and becoming a student social worker?
- What were some of the feelings that came up for you then?
- What were some of the challenges you experienced in finding your feet as a student social worker?
- What were some of the positive experiences of being a student social worker?

- What parts of yourself did you draw on to help you with your field practice?
- What was the most memorable year of your studying and why?
- Looking back what, if any changes did you experience in terms of how you saw yourself as a student social worker?
- What meaning did you make of these changes?

6) Personal identities-

- Once you had settled into university what was your home situation like?
- At this point did you feel that the roles you previously played at home had changed? Explore how if yes.
- If no what do you think ensured that your roles stayed the same.
- What feelings were raised for you by this?
- What meaning did you make of this?
- What were the positive influences that you studying had on your family?
- What were the challenges that you studying presented to your family?
- How did you deal with these challenges?
- In what way did how your family saw you change as you went through the programme?
- If we specifically look at your family values, how, if at all did studying change these values?

7) Graduation-

- How long did you take to complete the BSW?
- What did it mean for you to complete the degree?
- What were your feelings around completing the degree?
- What did your graduation mean to you?
- What feelings did your graduation raise for you?
- What did your graduation mean for your family?
- What were your expectations of what working as a social worker would be like?
- How did you think being a qualified professional would influence your life?

8) End interview and debrief.

INTERVIEW THREE

1) Introduction and tuning in

2) Current employment and social worker identity

- What work have you done since graduating?
 - What is your current position?
- A) If employed as a social worker
- What have the positive aspects been for you about practising as a social worker?
 - What have the challenges been for you about practising as a social worker?
 - Where do you see yourself going in terms of practising as a social worker?
 - What do you see your role as a social worker as being?
 - Is this different from what you thought it would be? –explore.
 - What meaning do you make of your work?
- B) If not working as a social worker
- What are you currently doing?
 - What are the reasons that you are not practising as a social worker?
 - Do you see yourself going back into social work?
 - What are the reasons for this?
 - How do you see yourself in terms of who you are currently as a working person?
 -

3) Perceptions of changes in worker identity

- Before you studied how did you see yourself in terms of who you were as a working person
- Has that changed in any way? Explore if yes how.
- What in your opinion are the reasons for this? Explore
- Where do you see yourself in five years' time (explore aspirations for worker identity)
-

4) Perceptions of changes in personal identities

- Before you studied how did you see yourself in terms of who you were as a person in your personal life?
- Has that changed in any way? Explore if yes how.
- What in your opinion are the reasons for this? Explore

- Where do you see yourself in five years' time (explore aspirations for personal identities)

5) Recommendations for RPL practice

- What are your thoughts on RPL as a mechanism of transformation in higher education in South Africa?
- What recommendations would you make to universities in terms of how RPL should be implemented?
- What recommendations would you make for the implementation of RPL specifically in social work education?

6) Meaning around participation in RPL and studying

- What are your overall feelings about participating in RPL and going on to study social work?
- What have been the biggest gains/achievements that you have made as a result of engaging in RPL and studying social work? - explore all areas.
- Would you have done anything differently? Explore.
- Would you recommend engaging in RPL and studying social work to anyone? Explore why.

7) End interview and debrief.