Reimagining the Success Discourse in a Higher Education Institution in South Africa: Potential Cum Laude and Summa Cum Laude Undergraduate Students' Perspectives

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Abstract. Universities in South Africa enhance undergraduate students' success by largely focusing on the provision of remedial academic support. The target of the structured support is to assist those undergraduate students categorised as 'at-risk' of not progressing in their studies and or failing to stay on course to complete successfully. Inadvertently, such support is inherently reactive, whilst excluding students who are on course to graduate in record time, including many with cum laude or summa cum laude potential. Consequently, the student success discourse in many South African universities is informed by focus on students' weaknesses rather than their strengths. This paper draws on a project implemented in the School of Education at a South African University. It explored the perspectives of potential cum laude and summa cum laude undergraduate (CLSL) students on their high academic performance to understand their success traits. Using a qualitative approach, Auto Scholar Advisor system enabled the process of identifying these students. Data were collected through qualitative methods using semi-structured individual interview and focus group. The 10 participants were drawn from a cohort of 1000 CLSL students registered in the School of Education in 2022. They were selected using maximum variation sampling. The data were analysed using thematic analysis method. The findings suggest that the participants characterised their high-performance traits in ways that reveal their capacity for self-authorship. Beyond that, the findings point to evidence of participants' intentionality and determination in developing their success traits of self-authorship. This finding indicates that student success traits are learnable, which implies the need to refocus the discourse of academic support for undergraduate students' success in the school. We argue that proactive and structured academic support that enables students to develop their high-performance strengths can augment current reactive remedial support practices.

Keywords: Success · Higher Education · Undergraduate Students · Academic Support and Academic performance

1 Introduction

Interest in students' academic success is a universal phenomenon that is driven by context specific objectives [38]. Identifying the factors that influence undergraduate student success is a matter of specific interest, which is dependent on the context and practices that are specific to individual universities. Further, student success is a product of various elements that are common to and broadly important in higher education institutions (HEIs) for many and varied reasons [38]. Academic support interventions for student success, as one such element, mostly centre on underperformance [28]. However, academic support research usually focuses on support for struggling students and their weaknesses. Conversely, commensurate attention has not been given to understanding students' strengths, particularly from the perspective of high performers. At least, in the South African context, as one example, potential cum laude and summa cum laude undergraduate (CLSL) students' success factors, and students' perspectives of their own high academic performance has not been adequately studied. The CLSL students in this study refer to those that consistently achieve a weighted average of 75% and above in their overall performance and for all their modules. In addition, they should have met the academic requirements for progression and or completion of their programme of study.

Given the prevailing low rates of student throughput nationally, researchers have sought to understand the factors that influence student success at the undergraduate level in South African universities [30, 41]. However, these studies mostly focused on underperformance by students that are classified by the universities as being 'at-risk', meaning that they are not performing according to expectation and struggle to meet the minimum academic requirements for progression and or completion in their programme of study. In contrast to those 'at-risk', CLSL students are omitted in such research on student success.

Whilst there is substantial literature on what predicts and enables students' academic success at the university level [19, 42], there is a gap in the body of knowledge on the success experiences of the academically high performing students. Given this paucity of research on high performing students, the perspectives of CLSL students are unknown. Their perspectives can provide useful insight for modelling students' experiences to enhance academic success in higher education. Thus, understanding how CLSL students deal with varied and complex factors documented in the literature as influencing the undergraduate students' success in South African universities [16] is important. In this context, the challenges of students' low performance, slow progression, low and skewed completion rates, and issues of equitable outcomes underscore the need for a holistic and creative approach to enhance students' success in higher education. Against this backdrop, the questions that we sought to answer in this study are as follows:

 (i) *What are the CLSL students' perspectives of high academic performance?*
(ii) *What success factors enhance high academic performance?*

In seeking to view students' success factors from a different prism, the study's purpose also affirms that academic support must be empowering to enable students develop self-authoring abilities.

Students can take ownership and self-author in their learning to have the capacity to make important curriculum choices and decisions regarding their academic performance, life, and university studies [11, 32]. Thus, understanding CLSL students' perspectives of high academic performance and success is important. Moreover, it increases interest in seeking to understand what high performing students are doing differently, and their motivation. It is critical to gain insights into CLSL students' experiences that can inform evidence-driven strategies to positively impact on their academic strength and high performance.

In the introduction, the paper reflects on the concept of student success. Next, the underpinning theory of self-authorship that provided the theoretical lens for the study is explained. This is followed by description of the methodology, presentation of findings and discussion. The paper concludes with the argument for reimagining the success discourse and suggestion for further research.

2   The Student and Student Success

Student success starts with individual students and their ability to navigate their learning in higher education. Research has shown that students are the most important contributors to their success while all the other stakeholders can only support as enablers. In elaborating on student engagement as the formation of understanding, it is suggested that the student enacts agency and has the capacity to collaborate with the various stakeholders to achieve desirable learning outcomes [6]. For example, academic advising is considered an important factor in student success [31]. However, the student's ability to personally invest, recognise need for, and act in collaboration with academic advisors, could be the most important factor to ensure their successful navigation of learning in higher education [23].

The student's active agency is contributory to their academic success in university [24]. Agency can also reflect in the student's approach to own success and that of others [50]. For instance, Kapur explained that goal-oriented students display a positive attitude towards their studies through being disciplined, diligent, and resourceful [21]. Student engagement is important, and it contributes to academic success. This positive attitude towards academic success through engagement could support the emotional and cognitive domains to the student's agency [36]. The emotional domain relates to the student's capacity to understanding their emotions and self (intrapersonal skills), whilst simultaneously considering the emotions of others (interpersonal skills). The cognitive domain enables the student's analytical reasoning, commitment to studies and critical thinking [20]. Self-authorship provides the useful lens to study the student and student success in terms of understanding the meld of socially constructed knowledge (cognitive), and students' own beliefs, values, and goals (intrapersonal) and those of others (interpersonal) [31].

3   Theoretical Framework

Self-authorship is an integrative development model in student development theory propounded by Marcia Baxter Magolda. Its focus is on the epistemological development

of students. It weaves the social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions to understanding student agency [7]. Drawing on the work of Kegan, Baxter Magolda, self-authorship is considered as "the internal capacity to define one's beliefs, identity, and social relations…". The cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions of self-authorship in terms of the four phases of its development, which are following formulas, crossroads, becoming the author of one's life, and internal foundation. However, whilst recognising that these four phases are not linear [7], it is perhaps the student's development of capacity (understanding need for and making the move from external formulas to making meanings of their life and decisions based on their inner voices or internal foundation) that is the most critical part in the process of self-authorship. In this sense, the student's exertion of agency in balancing social factors with a strong sense of self-knowledge is essential self-authoring ability to self-regulate, set own goals, and orient to a positive attitude towards academic work [21].

The self-authorship model is the basis for supporting student learning and advancing their learning outcomes, which enables their development of critical self-reflection and active involvement necessary for the exercise of agency. The development of student self-authorship starts with cognitive dissonance that occurs as the student finds her/himself at crossroads, in search of acceptance while attempting to balance own beliefs with societal expectations [18]. During the second phase, the student begins to develop the ability to become the author of one's life [32], moving away from normative ways of thinking and doing. For example, from reliance on the viewpoint of authority figures and others without being able to have their own ideas and beliefs to inform their action. The last phase involves the student's acquisition of internal foundations, which allows their actions to be guided by their own internally derived principles.

Thus, self-authorship requires of the student a certain ability to act, that is, the agency. The student must be capable of moving away from feeling inadequate to adopting a positive attitude towards their learning, to become an author of one's life, and to enable change through the development of a strong internal foundation to guide actions [21]. In the context of this study, this agency reflects the positive attitude that underlines the CLSL students' cognitive dissonance at their crossroads and their capacity of subsequent actions and informed choices and decisions that they make to enable and enhance their own academic performance and success, and that of others.

Self-authorship enables students to navigate their learning and attain success. However, how self-authorship is developed among students in higher education contexts varies. For example, Baxter Magolda and King's model of learning partnership involves the development of student self-authorship through collaboration. The model suggests that while students require autonomy to take charge of their academic success, learning is also socially constructed because meaning is constructed in collaboration with others [7]. Other studies highlight how student self-authorship is developed through a process whereby they take ownership of their own learning. Students set their own goals and take the initiative and responsibility for their own learning whilst developing self-authorship. Recent work on experiential education and self-authorship, place emphasis on approaches to developing student self-authorship that favour collaboration and co-creation as ways of finding solutions to problems. CLSL students' perspectives and their experiences can contribute to contextually relevant academic support for student success

in the university. In addition, such perspectives could foster collaborative and co-creative approaches to enable shift in emphasis from students' underperformance to enhancing their self-authorship.

4   Methodology

4.1   Background of the Project

This paper derives from the student academic success project in the School of Education that investigates CLSL students' academic success. The purpose of the project is to investigate, among other things, what the CLSL students are doing differently. Thus, the project seeks to better understand the success factors and academic support needs of CLSL students to enhance their performance at full potentials. The School of Education is home to more than 6000 students, 66% of which are pursuing undergraduate programmes. The students mostly hail from quintiles 1–3 (under-resourced) schools, rural backgrounds, are second language English speakers, and require basic digital literacy skills. Most of these students receive government funding for their studies. In this study, being able to easily to identify students on track to graduate cum laude or summa cum laude was key. The AutoScholar Advisor system was used to facilitate the process of identifying the relevant participants by evaluating the performance of each student in each semester.

4.2   Selection of Participants

Initially, 1000 students were identified across the undergraduate programmes in the school as performing at a 75% weighted average in addition to satisfying the progression requirements, which implied that they were on track to achieve *cum laude* or *suma cum laude* performance. Further, 10 participants were purposively selected from the cohort of the 1000 students. These were identified using maximum variation sampling strategy. The sampling strategy was considered appropriate to ensuring that the participants selected were representative of the diversity of the CLSL students in the school for the 2022 academic year in terms of their diverse levels of study, race, gender, schooling, social, language and funding backgrounds. In addition, the sampling strategy was a way of ensuring that multiple perspectives of individual CLSL students was not discounted given such diversity. Using the maximum variation strategy proved useful because it enhanced richness of the data collected by complementary use of focus group and individual interview methods. Table 1 shows the participant CLSL students' demographic profiles. Given that the participants represented a range of experiences, bringing academic, demographic, and social dynamics with their backgrounds, the use of a focus group discussion and in-depth interviews enhanced the quality of data.

4.3   Data Collection

Data were collected using focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. These were conducted by two of the researchers and coauthors who were also staff members in

Table 1. CLSL Participants' Demographic Profile

	Focus Groups	Individual interview
Age Range		
17 – 24	9	3
25 – 26	1	1
Total	10	4
Race		
African	7	3
Indian	2	1
Coloured	1	-
White	-	-
Total	10	4
Gender		
Male	4	2
Female	6	2
Total	10	4
Level of study		
Year 2	1	-
Year 3	3	1
Year 4	6	3
Total	10	4
Schooling Quintile		
1 – 3	7	3
4 – 5	3	1
Total	10	4
Funding		
NSFAS	8	3
Funza/Lushaka	1	-
Other	1	1
Non-Funded	-	-
Total	10	4
Family Background		
1st generation to attend at university	5	2
Family member attended	5	2
Total	10	4
Home Background		
Urban	3	1
Township	2	1
Rural	5	2
Total	10	4
Language and Literacies background		
High Proficiency	4	1
Average	3	1
Low Proficiency	3	2
Total	10	4

the school. Two focus groups of five participants each were conducted online in the second semester of 2022 via Zoom. Focus groups had an average duration of 65 min. They were audio recorded and transcribed. Four in-depth interviews were held face-to-face. They were conducted after the focus groups. Two participants were selected from each focus group based on the diverging backgrounds presented in Table 1. Data were collected using a qualitative pre-formatted semi-structured interview guide developed by the project team [35]. The in-depth interviews were audio recorded and each session had an average duration of 45 min. The audio data were later transcribed.

Cognisant of the need to mitigate power dynamics, the researchers took steps to ensure that interview sessions were conducted in environments conducive to enable the participants to relate their experiences in a relaxed atmosphere [5]. The individual interviews were useful to supplement the data collected using focus group discussions. Salient points were further probed with the individual participants for validity as well as to elicit more information about their personal feelings. The qualitative data collected were analysed with the three dimensions of self-authorship as a framework for organising the themes using repeated patterns in the data set. Thus, the themes were used to identify the critical ideas in the data that are aligned to the research questions.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance approval reference number - HSSREC/00003054/2021 was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. This guided the researchers and the research processes to ensure that participants were protected accordingly (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017) and that participation in the study was voluntary and informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity were upheld. The next section presents the findings and discussions. The codes P1–P10 are pseudonyms for the participants.

5 Findings and Discussion

This section analyses the findings that emanated from the CLSL students' perspectives and experiences. The three dimensions of self-authorship, which are the cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal as outlined in the theoretical framework were adopted as the concepts to thematically organise the data for analysis.

5.1 The Cognitive Dimension

The participants expressed their capability of cognition of the mental processes involved in their choices, what they think about themselves and their learning. They narrated their experiences in a manner that suggested that they were being guided internally to construct their own identities, meanings, and beliefs about themselves and what they wanted. They commented on their ability to transcend their discomfort at that time or make cognitive dissonances to enable their attainment of self-set targets, which suggested their agency. The following was shared during an in-depth interview session:

I grew up in a place with so many people that I didn't look up to. They were people that I didn't want to be like. So, in anything I do, I try not to be like those people. Not, not in a bad way, but I try not to turn out to be whatever I am [not], and I was exposed to… (P1).

It emerged that CLSL students experience the same pressure of environmental and social factors that may impact their sense of self and identity, and the choices they make in their learning as any other students. However, P1's comment indicated that CLSL feel a sense of motivation, which showed in their constructs of identity, self, belief, and in relationship decisions that are internally guided. Such a sense of motivation is derived from the student focusing on "decisions that had a greater impact on personally defined, long-term identity rather than immediate decision." The CLSL student participants showed that they cognised their conditions and reflected this in how they viewed their options. The following was said,

Seeing what was in front of me, I just didn't like it and I decided to twist the coin (P6).

The decision to twist the coin is an apt expression of the actions that the CLSL students took that suggested their being aware of their responsibility for own thoughts and beliefs and the influences of external sources. Strayhorn (2014) described the student's development of self-authorship as starting with their cognitive dissonance in their moment of crossroads. Similarly, P6's awareness of his crossroads and demonstrating cognition and the need to do something differently. P1 was reflective about her circumstances as she mentioned that the people around her were not good role models. She wanted to be different and took responsibility in her determination to overcome the constraints emanating from the lack of a role model.

The ability of cognitive thinking of CLSL students also highlighted their improved motivation to act. Focus group comment indicated such determination that CLSL show in taking action to seek self-directed and intrinsically driven opportunities for self-improvement, coupled with a positive view of the self:

There are changes in terms of how I view my life. I was not born achieving well, especially in my lower grades. I wasn't doing well. If you could look at my performance, you would see [think] that this is not me. You'd even be surprised that it's the same person from primary school who is now a high performer in university (Focus group).

The CLSL students' narratives showed their intention to improve oneself that is internally guided. Strayhorn (2014) suggested that student cognitive dissonance leads to self-reflection to improve. The CLSL students understood themselves and their needs for improvement. In her comment, P9 showed that implementing change meant active control of her decisions to direct her future and learning to self-improve. She emphasised this control as requiring determination and time to learn to develop competencies such as being organized. She said,

I feel that being organised is something that one must spend time learning (P9).

The feeling of taking active control and changing one's circumstances was shared by the other participants. P3 commented as follows:

…and [then I] find out that if I were to do it in another way, what would happen… [a defining moment of decision to learn to do something differently]. And here I am, doing well (P3).

The ability to understand their crossroads and make sense of what they needed pointed to the CLSL students being products of self-regulation. Self-regulation enables the process where the student enacts their ability to "personally activate and sustain cognitions, affects, and behaviors that are systematically oriented toward attainment of personal (self-set) goals" [53, p. 1]. For example, the comment by P3, showed that students were self-reflective about their needs and sustained this cognition in their intentionality, which showed in the actions they took as enabling desired outcomes. The CLSL students' expressions that they could affect change and orient towards attainment of their own goals showed their cognitive self-authorship.

CLSL student participants also showed that they recognised their weaknesses but prefer to work with and develop their strength. This is emphasized in the importance that P5 attached to self-perceived competence by using technical knowhow to circumvent personal limitations of poor memory in his learning whilst cognisant of the other aspects. He expressed the following:

I write everything down because I have a terrible memory. I write down everything all the time. I tend to do well on the technical aspects of [using digital devices] … for example, recording of lecture dates and times (P5).

Ability to focus on one's strength can encourage motivation to learn, and it is an important self-regulatory strategy. It is important for students to focus on their strengths. The individual's focus on their strength entails their being able to identify their relative strengths and weaknesses, but importantly to utilise their strengths to fit how they engage in the various learning activities [18]. In the following comment, P3 mentions the difference it makes to be focused on what one can do rather than the difficulties confronting them.

When you go through hard times, you can say what, no, man, actually I can do these things [attain high performance in modules]. So, your focus… on how I can do it, what can stop me doing that. So, it's different when you say what I'm suffering and… [stop yourself] (P3).

Beyond the ability to self-regulate and identify one's strengths, the CLSL students also indicated that they were conscientious in their learning. They showed that they understood the importance of reliability and consistency that are required of them to be up to date. This is considered as pertinent for them to ensure they are ahead in their learning:

Making sure that you are up to date with the work is important. And sometimes it's not about [when] you attend but making sure that you catch up and sometimes stay ahead in some modules (P8).

The internally deriving constructs of own identities, meanings, and beliefs about themselves and what they wanted that underpin choices and self-regulation of the CLSL students led to the determination they showed in taking control of their learning. This is evident in the emphasis they put on remaining focused on their strengths. This aspect of their experiences also relates to the second stage of self-authorship [33]. Thus, the recursive process of self-authoring dimensions of the students' self-authorship is perceptible in their narratives. This reflects the meld of the cognitive and intrapersonal, whereby the student begins to develop the criticality and enabling experiences of self-authoring their own life.

5.2 Intrapersonal Dimension

The CLSL students demonstrated their goal-setting and positive attitude to their studies. They reiterated the importance of their ability to deliberately set objectives from the start of their university education and self-motivate through strong self-belief, self-control, and determination to achieve their goals. Their narratives suggested that they drew on previous experiences to make meaning of the present and improve their performance. In the same way, they prioritised what they considered as crucial to achieve their set goals of success. The following comment is an apt example:

And because I was working, I had to, you know, you have to know what time your next shift is because your shift changes from all day. So, when the entire restaurant industry collapsed, I decided to use some of my savings to come and learn how to teach. So here [at university] you must know what you prioritise, I mean, learn to organise, if you are to succeed (P9).

This significance of prioritising what is important and organising to achieve results is echoed by other participants. For example, below is an excerpt from an in-depth interview session:

I prefer to have a schedule and plan for my day. For example, my lecture is at 10h00 on a Tuesday, and it lasts for an hour… I know this is time when I must sit and use my notebook to take notes, and… ask questions (Focus group).

The CLSL students showed that they understood the importance of time management in how they prioritised their studies. Time management behaviours and undergraduate students' performance suggests that the students perceived that control of time had a significant correlation with cumulative grade point average [2]. P5's comment on scheduling for the day to prioritise lecture time is a demonstration of CLSL students' understanding that university education requires self-regulated time management and consistency to enact the plan.

Baxter Magolda identified the capacity of an individual to "select own values and identity in building an internally formed sense of self that regulates interpretation of experience and decisions" as an intrapersonal dimension of self-authorship [7]. This

dimension of self-authorship relates to the student's ability to regulate emotions, demonstrate resilience and show self-awareness of whom they are, what they want, their confidence, motivation, and determination in their learning. The self-awareness that the CLSL students possessed is exemplified:

> *I'm just someone ordinary from Bergville who believes that I can make it in life, even though some circumstances once made me believe that I wouldn't make it. I'm kind of self-motivated and I have people that I look up to, yes. I'm not doing things for people; I'm doing this [achieving high-performance] for my personal fulfilment…* (P7).

As expressed in this individual interview comment by P7, the CLSL students, like any other students, experienced moments of self-doubt, and had people that they considered their role models. It is perhaps, not just externally derived inspiration but mostly their own conviction and internally drawn motivation that separated the CLSL students from the rest in terms of the ability to deal with ups and downs in their learning experiences. Again, Baxter Magolda described self-authorship as the way individual's select their own values and identity in the development of a sense of self [7]. This is mirrored in P7's comment, which apart from revealing his understanding of self, showed that he had the capacity to make meaning of his experiences and decision-making regarding his studies.

However, even where the CLSL student recognised challenges of lack of support, they made positive sense of their experience to build resilience. Drawing on their choice of values as against unmet expectations of support, the CLSL students' stories indicated that they maintained self-regulation through their determination to achieve the set objective of high performance. One of the participants said,

> *… it's not always the case that you can attend to all the lectures… because I've always wanted to be on top of my potential. I like… [I must do more to maintain] top of my potential… even as I don't have any support. I don't have anyone who checks up on me… But I don't like, stop, or blame anyone* (P2).

Although students usually encounter difficulties and limitations of personal circumstances, the above comment is an indication of how CLSL students expressed that they committed to their set course of high performance. This is perceptible in the resilience they showed in pursuit of their set course, even in the absence of any support. The participants' construct of themselves, which suggests self-authoring ability, aligns with intrapersonal self-authorship, affirming their capacity to construct own beliefs, identity, interests, values, and goals [33]. In approaching difficult learning content, the CLSL students explained that they depended on their strength and interest to afford the other areas the attention they required. The following was said,

> *So, I'd say focus more on what you are good at, what you enjoy so that you get more time for other modules like technology and everything where, you may be struggling. So that's that, that's my advice...* (P8).

Confronted with challenges as university students, the participants' narratives suggested that CLSL students focused more on their own strength, beliefs, values, sense of identity, and invested in strategies of self-regulatory efforts in their determination to attain the self-set goal of high performance. These self-authoring behaviours were central to the participants' experiences and perspectives reflected in the findings.

5.3 Interpersonal Dimension

Social relation is an important component of self-authoring the individual mediates. As students socialise with others, opportunity is created for their sharing of experiences, and drawing from, and enhancing others' as well as their own knowledges. However, albeit learning is a socially constructed experience and learners are impacted by a complex array of influences, the self-authoring learner is marked by their ability to determine the path they take and initiative to follow that path. CLSL student participants showed that they recognised the social dimensions of learning and made important constructions of their own identities to enable meaningful engagements in the learning processes. The following excerpt explains the participants' view of higher education:

Our campuses have different students of all races [Indian, White, Black African, and Coloured] … I interact with all the races [students from the different racial backgrounds] to share ideas and to learn from them… [I see my interactions as something] good to enhance my success (P1).

The university as a social environment entails co-existence of people; staff and students from different social and cultural backgrounds including racial classification. The interpersonal dimension is a key aspect of self-authoring that matters in how the students engage in their learning, particularly regarding the ability to deal with the co-existence of diversity and differences with their constructs of self, identity, own beliefs, and values. Self-authoring students can negotiate different cultural dimensions during their learning. Again, interpersonal self-authoring ability is shown when students can mingle with diverse student peers irrespective of their demographic and background characteristics and still engage in learning and negotiate the space for their self-identity. The type of students' engagement with higher education often predicates on their development of understanding as engagement in curricular and community [6]. P10 comments on how the CLSL students negotiated their sense of self-identity to collaborate effectively with others including peers and lecturers in the learning space.

I know a lot of people that struggled with that particular module. So, I'm not sure what could have helped others, but what I was provided with helped me. I think I engaged virtually every single lecture. With my lecturers mm-hmm... in terms of maybe the engagement, you know, when we were face-to-face, we used to have the consultation time, which is outside the lecture time, um, if you're struggling with something, now what, what do you do? …usually mm-hmm, I'm a class representative for two different modules, so I tend to be in contact with lecturers a lot anyway… so I normally am passing on requests from other students or, or if there's just something I'm confused about, I'll send them an email and 98% of the time I'll have an answer within the timeframe I expect it (P10).

Self-authorship entails students developing the ability to exhibit required behaviours they need to incorporate working relationship with others [13]. The comment by P10 echoes the CLSL students' assertion of cognitive awareness of the role of others in their learning and their own role in shared learning. Again, this finding aligns with previous studies [13]. The interpersonal dimension relates to social relationships between people and the social self. The student's ability to develop interpersonal skills is also essential for building their sense of identity, which impacts academic performance [25]. This is affirmed in P1's comments that sharing ideas and learning from peers from different backgrounds was important because it contributed to her success.

Further, interpersonal skills assist students to create authentic societal relations with others. This is necessary for collaborative and co-creative engagement with student peers significant others such as lecturers and advisors. The following comment summarised CLSL student participants' expressions regarding their view on engagement with others in the learning process.

I find that I do much better in those modules [using face-to-face and synchronous classes] than the ones where there is just a pre-recorded lecture or just notes that are uploaded. The live lecture also assists you to engage, you know… [with other students]. Yes. I'm okay… with all the modules that I've had this semester that were engagement modules (P4).

Students' ability to engage is a critical factor in their learning because it builds their collaborative social relations with lecturers and fellow students. While the CLSL students expressed their ability to self-regulate and determine their own path in their learning, they also understood the importance of collaborative relationships with others, perhaps not just like other students. However, their perceptions and construction of this collaborative engagement with others differed. The following excerpt reflects on the differences:

It depends on who you interact with, even at that moment… most of the people maybe, you just have to take what they say and [but] use it positively. Cause there are a lot of negative things that peers can say. Um, some, some would just come to say, you would see when you are performing well, and then they come to tell you, Hey Val, even everyone is gonna get this degree (P7).

Distraction that emanates from fellow students is among the plethora of problems that have a detrimental effect on students learning in university. Distraction from fellow students does not only influence the learning environment but also challenges the focus of the student in ways that may result in their being burdened with unwanted cognitive loads [15]. P7 demonstrated that CLSL students showed the capability to ward off unwarranted distractions that come with engagement with others and to maintain their own internally drawn beliefs against competing perspectives.

The CLSL student participants felt that their engagement with lecturers, academic advisors and mentors could be useful interaction to help with high performance. They suggested that they benefit from class triangulated interactions between themselves, their lecturer and student peers. The following was said,

When we ask questions and have a dialogue with a lecturer, we ask questions in [during] the lecture… I may not have thought of. And the lecturer answers, and it's just that kind of interaction, it is really nice. So, from that point of view… of in-person lecture interaction with people. I do like it (P5).

The comment by P5 underscores the importance that CLSL students attached to classroom participation as learning interaction that supported their high performance. Students benefit from cognitive social presence and affective social presence that happens in learning settings where student-to-lecturer and student-to-student interactions are enhanced [47]. Similarly, one participant described her experiences with mentoring and writing support below:

I may utilise the Writing Place or the library to discuss the content with other fellow students… I don't have any mentor, and I would like to have one, but she's a busy person, but when she's my mentor, when I get to talk to her, I get to even ask maybe for some advice, but for me, when I'm going through something, [I would want my advice in a way] it can easily be attended, or I can get advice on it fast…, faster than when I'm just there on Facebook (P4).

The CLSL students indicated that they needed academic support just like other students even though they are on course for high performance. Enhancing students' performance in higher education is an important strategy to ensure success. Although high performers often show that they are more self-regulated, students' perceptions of their academic support have been shown to be related to the willingness to seek that intervention [10, 43]. The CLSL student participants indicated that they knew the kind of support they wanted and had a view of how that support could be provided. For them, the support they wanted, which P4's comment suggested, must be timeous for it to be helpful.

The CLSL students showed their awareness of who they were and their construct of their own identities, meanings, and beliefs about themselves in the interactions they had in other areas of the learning space outside the classroom and academic content support matters. The CLSL student participants demonstrated awareness of their home background and context in the way they related and interacted in the social spaces like in their residences where they lived as illustrated in the comment below:

So, I get to interact with a lot of my friends around the halls of residence. It's different coming from a rural area where they just know what to say… And some-times even from campus that I meet them. I'd say, it's what you take from people and how you take it that determines how you perform. Because some people will just say when you even help them, like Jay, it's different... Then I'm like say me? For me, even in the negatives, I find my way to make it positive (P2).

The comment by P2 underlines the positive feelings that CLSL students bring to their social interactions while being supportive to their fellow students not withstanding their background. Kapur affirmed this positive attitude as a mark of goal-oriented students that they show toward their studies and in their resourcefulness to assist other students. This attitude also enables them to overcome feelings of inadequacy [21], and in this instance,

the feeling of coming from a rural area and indifference that P2 felt some people around him showed. Thus, this finding suggests that the CLSL students' self-authoring ability was also influenced by other students' social attitudes towards them. Baxter Magolda asserted that self-authoring students "do not separate from others but rather reconstruct their relationships to be more authentic…".

Overall, the findings point to the tendency of high performing students to rely on their self-regulating and internally drawn strength to develop own beliefs/identity, values, and sense of self, and to chart own course towards high performance whilst asserting their autonomy in the process. However, in their interpersonal interactions, they equally demonstrated self-reflective and positive attitudes in showing responsibility to others, which was motivated by their own well-founded beliefs. These findings suggested a trajectory in self-authorship that the students showed and were cognisant of as supporting their high performance and success experiences.

6   Limitations

There are three notable limitations to this study. While this is qualitative exploratory research, understanding the CLSL students' self-authorship can be better improved using a complementary quantitative approach that uses appropriate instruments to access their constructs of self-authorship including their assertions of independence, autonomy and self-authoring ability of knowledge processing as well as their sense of self. Secondly, whilst the study does not seek to generalise the findings as opposed to depth of understanding of the CLSL student's agency in development of self-authoring ability in their learning, research that involves a wider population and across several universities combining qualitative and quantitative data could produce a better result with richer nuances to the subject of inquiry than permitted by the scope of the present study. Lastly, the online Zoom focus group discussion could have had influence on the way the participants responded given their varying digital competency and fluency. Those struggling with the use of technological skills and proficiency with the Zoom platform to conveniently interact in the discussions and have open conversations may have been affected differently in ways that we could not sufficiently mitigate. However, the use of the face-to-face individual interviews was a strategy to mitigate this limitation.

7   Study Implications

Whilst complexity in all three domains of self-authorship is needed to reach self-authoring [1], students can model self-authorship and the positive attitudes to develop the consistent action and agency that findings in this present study indicated as characterising the high performing students' approach to their learning. Therefore, it is important that a view of student success that transcends dissatisfaction with performance to place the focus on understanding the student self-constructs and motivations for performance should inform the success discourse in the university. This would imply a shift away from deficit-informed models to a more proactive developmental model that would centre on the student, recognising that the institution has responsibility to intervene, and capacitate them to enable their potential human agency and strengths to achieve high

performance. There are four key perspectives of the high performing students of their academic high performance and success factors that the findings underline.

Firstly, student self-knowledge is important for their academic success and high performance. The findings indicated that high performing students have a strong sense of who they are, what they want and what they want to do to succeed; not just to pass a module but to attain high performance. Self-knowledge is important for the student to self-regulate and build a positive attitude [21], which is needed to enable them to focus and achieve own set goals of high performance.

Secondly, student determination is important for their academic success and high performance. The high performing students indicated strong determination to perform exceedingly. They self-regulated and organised their time to ensure that they meet the requirements that are necessary to achieve their objectives. The findings suggested that they do not only know what they wanted and what to do to succeed. More importantly, they were determined to plan for attaining success and execute such plans despite the various challenges. Hence, they can maximise their success with high performance that imply accomplishment of learning process, gaining content knowledge, and developing important skills. This can be attained through their resourcefulness by supporting fellow students.

Thirdly, the student's focus on their strength is important for their academic success and high performance. The findings showed that high performing students viewed their focus on their own strength as critical to their high performance and success. Studies suggest that focusing on own strength is an important way through which the student can be prepared to engage in the learning activities [16]. The high performing students in this study demonstrated that they were capable of identifying their areas of strength and capitalising on those to boost their performance, even in those areas or modules that they found challenging.

Lastly, goal-oriented interaction is important for academic success and high performance. The findings indicated that the high performing students viewed the ability to focus on set goals without being distracted in their learning interactions with others, including student peers, as being critical to their high performance. While interactions are not goal-oriented, distraction of fellow students and others can possibly result in the kind of disruption of the student's perspective considered as unnecessary cognitive load [15]. However, it is evident from the findings that high performing students showed willingness for social interactions; to collaborate with others but in a goal-directed manner based on their internal commitment.

From the findings, it is also apparent that high performing students demonstrated agency, strong sense of self and resilience – reiterating the importance of considering students' own beliefs, values, and goals in promoting strategies for enhancing their attainment of high performance and academic success at the university level. This is consistent with the approach to fostering self-authorship by recognising the student as active co-creators with agency in their learning.

8 Conclusion

Recognising that students can construct their own identity and set their own goals as they navigate their learning is important especially in South African universities. Again, the

student as a major role player in their learning should be at the centre of support strategies to promote their high performance and enhance their academic success. However, students can be agentic in reimaging their success if they are supported to enable their own self-authoring abilities towards high performance as the findings in this study suggested. Critical insights from the CLSL students' perspectives of their high performance and success experiences can inform strategies that draw on evidence-driven academic support development for the students in the School.

The study demonstrated that students can be supported to achieve high performance and maintain their success by weaving the development of abilities needed in social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions in their learning. Taken together, the findings showed that experiencing cognitive dissonance and being dissatisfied with one's academic performance is not sufficient as students needed to enact agency. This means that they must take consistent action and develop own cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal competencies to build high academic performance ability of self-authorship. However, this also opens the possibility of disrupting current reactive approaches that tended to mend students' academic weaknesses to enable them to pass to strategies that model self-authoring abilities as learnable and proactive support to enhance the student high performance and success in the School. Finally, we suggest further survey research to investigate and analyse what the high performing students are doing differently from other students and why.

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