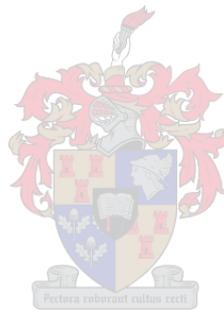


**An exploration of the educational engagement practices of first generation  
disadvantaged students at a university**

**by**

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**Dissertation submitted for the degree of Doctor of Education in the  
Faculty of Education at Stellenbosch University**

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## **Declaration**

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation focuses on the educational engagement practices of first generation disadvantaged students at a higher education institution. It responds to the question: How do disadvantaged students use their resources to navigate the university and optimise their education?

The starting assumption of this dissertation is that research in higher education lacks a comprehensive account of the resources and cultural capital that disadvantaged students bring with them to university study. This is based on the view that disadvantaged students possess valuable resources and assets that are not recognised by higher education institutions.

The dissertation is presented in the form of three articles and an Introduction and Conclusion chapter, which serve as its wraparound chapters. The Introduction chapter gives an account of the conceptual underpinnings of the dissertation as well as the rationale and aims for the study. The Conclusion chapter provides an analysis of the main conceptual arguments of the dissertation in response to the main research question. It includes a summary of the intellectual contribution of the research study on which the dissertation is based.

Methodologically, the three articles are based on a qualitative study on selected students at one university in Cape Town. The first article focused on the pre-university pathways of disadvantaged students for gaining entry into university study. The second article discussed the ways in which the students engaged with the institutional spaces of the university to establish their educational engagements. The third article concentrated on how the students engaged in their learning at the university.

The theoretical framework for the study was informed by Bourdieu's theory of practice and the associated concepts of field, hysteresis, capital and habitus. Based on the three articles, I offer the view that the selected disadvantaged students developed a particular 'logic of educational engagement practice' which placed them in a position to construct a pathway for successful engagement at the university.

I conclude the dissertation by arguing that the students in this study developed mediating capacity to engage in their university education and that they went on to

establish horizontal field-based engagement practices that enabled them accumulate the capital necessary to engage with the university's formal educational processes. Finally, I present the argument that the students worked out how to achieve success in their studies via embodied learning practices that were key to the formation of a successful learning habitus at the university.

## Opsomming

Hierdie verhandeling fokus op die opvoedkundige betrokkenheidspraktyke van eerste generasie benadeelde studente by 'n hoër onderwysinrigting. Dit is in reaksie op die vraag: Hoe gebruik benadeelde studente hul hulpbronne om hul opsies by die universiteit te verken ten einde hul opvoeding te maksimaliseer?

Die uitgangspunt van hierdie studie is dat navorsing in hoëronderwys nie 'n omvattende weergawe bied omtrent die hulpbronne en kulturele kapitaal wat benadeelde studente vir hul studies na die universiteit bring nie. Dit is gebaseer op die siening dat benadeelde studente waardevolle hulpbronne en bates besit wat nie erken word binne hoër onderwysinstellings nie.

Die studie word in die vorm van drie artikels, sowel as 'n Inleiding en Slothoofstuk aangebied, wat die bevindinge van die tesis samevat en afrond. Die Inleidingshoofstuk bied 'n uiteensetting van die konseptuele onderbou van die studie, asook die rasionaal en doelstellings van die studie. Die Slothoofstuk is 'n aanbieding van die gevolgtrekkings en verskaf 'n ontleding van die belangrikste konseptuele argumente van die verhandeling in antwoord op die hoofnavorsingsvraag. Dit sluit in 'n opsomming van die intellektuele bydrae van die navorsing waarop die verhandeling gebaseer is.

Methodologies is die drie artikels gebaseer op kwalitatiewe navorsing oor geselekteerde studente by 'n universiteit in Kaapstad. Die eerste artikel fokus op die uitdagings wat benadeelde studente moes oorkom ten einde toegang tot universiteitstudie te verkry. Die tweede artikel bespreek die maniere waarop hierdie studente betrokke raak in die institusionele ruimtes van die universiteit om hul opvoedkundige betrokkenheid te vestig. Die derde artikel konsentreer op hoe die studente betrokke geraak het by hul leer en onderrig aan die universiteit.

Die teoretiese raamwerk van die studie is gebaseer op Bourdieu se praktykteorie, sowel as die gepaardgaande konsepte van veld, histerese, kapitaal en habitus. Op grond van die drie artikels, kom ek tot die slotsom dat die geselekteerde benadeelde studente 'n bepaalde 'logika van opvoedkundige betrokkenheidspraktyke' ontwikkel het, wat hulle in staat stel om 'n basis te skep vir suksesvolle betrokkenheid by die universiteit.

Ek sluit die studie af deur aan te voer dat die studente in hierdie studie die kapasiteit vir bemiddeling suksesvol ontwikkel het om aktief betrokke te raak in hul universiteitsopleiding. Voorts is hulle in staat om horisontale veldgebaseerde betrokkenheidspraktyke te vestig wat hulle in staat stel om die kapitaal te verwerf wat benodig was om betrokke te raak by formele opvoedkundige prosesse. Ten slotte, argumenteer ek dat hierdie studente strategieë ontwerp hoe om sukses in hul studies te behaal via beliggaamde leerpraktyke wat die sleutel is tot die vorming van 'n suksesvolle leerhabitus aan die universiteit.

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This dissertation is dedicated to my late mother, Nabowea Norodien (28/8/1935 – 12/06/1982) and my late father Abdul Aziz Norodien (6/7/1942 -28/1/2009) who believed in the value of education and who always believed in my abilities.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1. Introduction**

This dissertation focuses on the educational engagement practices of disadvantaged first generation students at a university in Cape Town, South Africa. It arose out of my interest in understanding the university experiences of students in the post-apartheid era.

In this introduction I give an account of the conceptual underpinnings of the dissertation and the background of the study. I also provide the study's rationale and aims, theoretical and methodological assumptions, research questions and a statement of the contribution of the study to knowledge in this field. The introduction provides me with an opportunity to outline the constituent parts of the dissertation, the materials that are presented in the chapters, and how they contribute to the overall dissertation.

This is a dissertation by articles. It is located in the disciplinary field of Sociology of Education concentrating on the sub-field of students in higher education. It consists of three articles and introduction and conclusion chapters. The articles have either been published, are forthcoming or have been submitted for publication. The three articles were produced and finalised after the acceptance of my doctoral proposal in May 2013.

Each article consists of a description of aspects of the broader project, the theoretical framework and the methodology. These descriptions inevitably have commonalities but they are not identical, because of the different foci of the articles that reflect their different conceptual emphases. The analyses presented in the three articles are informed by the theoretical framework devised by Pierre Bourdieu (1990, 1992, 2000) in terms of which I have developed a distinct set of analytical lenses in response to the research focus and question of each article. The articles all follow a methodology based on the interpretative tradition. The data-collection methods consist of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions which took place over a period of eighteen months. The sample size, while based on all the students' interviews for the overall project, differs for each article depending on the requirements necessary to address the respective research questions.

The remaining part of the introductory chapter focuses on how my research question emerged and why I decided to adopt this research focus, how the research has been conceptualised, the research questions, the theoretical and methodological assumptions and methods, and the ethical considerations applicable to the study. The chapter ends with a brief summary of this introductory chapter as a build-up to the core of the dissertation, which consists of the three articles that follow on from this chapter.

The aim of qualitative research is to understand the uniqueness of individual experiences and not to generalise. In this light, the study focuses on selected students' educational engagement practices for gaining entry to the university as well as during their university study, especially concentrating on their experiences and interactions with their university's structures and processes. This study does not seek to 'speak' for all first generation students at university. It was delimited to a purposively selected group of participants at one university.

## **1.2. Rationale**

This study proceeds from the view that research in higher education lacks a comprehensive account of the resources and cultural capital that disadvantaged students bring with them to university study. How students access and engage the university, how they are positioned by the university and how they position themselves for their studies are some of the fundamental issues that this study addresses. The population for the study was disadvantaged black African students, also defined as first-generation students.

Existing research on disadvantaged students' educational engagement practices at the university point to a focus on two dimensions of engagement. The first dimension is students' responsibilities and commitments to the university (Kuh, 2009; Trowler 2010). Within this dimension some research focuses on disadvantaged students as outsiders who lack the cultural capital to engage successfully in their education at the university (Krause 2005; Levy and Earl, 2012), while others focus on student practices that enhance their engagement at the university (Bozalek, 2009; Strydom, 2009). The latter argue that active participation, shared learning and financial assistance are

factors that enhance their educational socialisation and learning. Kuh's research (2009) concentrates on what students do at university, in other words, their use of time and effort on study activities that are important for their educational success. Soudien (2008) points out that understanding how young people respond to the challenges and opportunities they face during their studies will provide us with insight into their educational experiences.

The second dimension focuses on what institutions can do to facilitate the optimal educational engagement of students (see Makgoba, 1997; Seepe, 2000; Smit, 2012; Bitzer, 2009; Van Schalkwyk, 2009). Within this body of research various studies focus on institutional underpreparedness and inadequacy of support in providing an intellectually engaging platform for disadvantaged students who enter higher education. The significance of students' integration into the university and the influence of academic and social factors that affect their engagement practices are highlighted.

Boughey (2007) suggests that changes in the curriculum and development of staff are attempts by higher education institutions to respond to the educational needs of disadvantaged students. According to Leach and Zepke (2011), non-institutional factors such as students' financial problems, their family responsibilities and the impact of poverty are aspects that must be recognised and addressed by institutions. Kioko (2010) makes the crucial point that institutions have an obligation to address the needs of disadvantaged students as a social justice imperative. In line with this argument, I suggest that the way in which students mediate and engage with the university is a core part of their educational engagement, and a key focus of this dissertation.

There is a third body of research that explores non-deficit perspectives on disadvantaged students' engagement at the university, focusing on how students deal with constraining and enabling conditions at the university (see Marshall & Case 2010; McKay & Devlin 2014; Smit 2012; Kapp, Badenhorst, Bangeni, Craig, Janse van Rensburg, Le Roux, Prince, Pym and Van Pletzen, 2014; Cross & Atinde, 2014). These studies emphasise a different way of thinking about disadvantaged students in higher education by focusing on the resources that they possess that are beneficial for their studies. Following on from these perspectives, I identified the need to understand how

these type of students mobilise their resources and forms of social and cultural capital to access the university and engage in their education.

My literature review shows that the term, disadvantage, can take on different meanings. The terms 'disadvantage' and 'first generation' are often used interchangeably when referring to students from poor schooling backgrounds and who are the first in their families to attend university. However, in a South African context, disadvantage could also be the result of the intersection of race, class, gender and ethnicity. In South Africa disadvantaged students are defined as first generation students, from poor schooling backgrounds who live in poor socio-economic circumstances, often accomplishing their education in a second or third language, and who could be said to not possess "knowledge about the dominant literacies valued by the academy" (McKenna, 2012, p. 53). Writing in the UK context, Trowler (2010) uses the term 'non-traditional' to refer to mature age, part-time or short-term students. Vilakazi and Tema (1985) argue that disadvantage and underpreparedness are portrayed in South African higher education practice and refer specifically to the educational make-up of black students. Cross and Carpenter (2009, p. 9) describe these type of students as 'new' students "who do not possess the necessary social and cultural capital to meet the challenges of a typically elitist academic and insitutional culture". Petersen, Louw and Dumont (2009) also refer to disadvantaged students as 'new' students who are educationally and economically disadvantaged. They examine the psychosocial factors that influence their adjustment to the university.

Zaaiman (1998) describe disadvantaged students as those students who do not have access to quality educational services. Tied to this understanding is the term, 'at-risk students' that is used to characterise students from disadvantaged backgrounds. According to Smit (2012, p.371), the term was used in the late 1980s to challenge the "deficit thinking inherent in the description of disadvantaged students". Smit explains that "risk factors such as poverty, poor schooling and limited English are often linked and their effects have been described as multiplicative rather than additive" (Smit, 2012, p.371). She questions the use of terminology such as 'lack' or 'problem' to describe disadvantaged students and cautions that they should not be negatively perceived as lacking in "literacy, numeracy, and academic skills crucial for higher

education” (Smit, 2012, p. 370). Devlin (2013, p. 943) suggests that deficit conceptualisations of these students are “unhelpful and detrimental” and invariably serves to blame the students for their educational shortcomings.

Boughey (2002) points out that a lack of theory and research on students from disadvantaged backgrounds reinforces commonsense understandings and contributes to deficit thinking. She indicates that commonsense ideas that link these students’ poor command of English to a lack of understanding of academic concepts is key to such deficit thinking. Boughey (2007, p. 8) proposes a ‘historical-structural’ understanding that locates disadvantage in structures that act on individuals. This type of understanding, she suggests, is able to provide a more nuanced account of the nature of these students’ social upbringing, educational backgrounds and practices. My use of the term, ‘disadvantage’ is motivated by the need identified by Boughey to provide one such nuanced account that specifically focuses on the ways in which disadvantaged students exercise their agency to establish productive educational engagement practices at the university. The dissertation offers an account that supports Devlin’s (2013) call for universities to problematise and shift their institutional practices in order to provide an engaging learning environment that is able to facilitate students’ successful study. I now briefly discuss the post-apartheid higher education policy context in order to position myself and the focus of my research.

### **1.3. Higher education in a post-apartheid context**

Major restructuring occurred in South African higher education with the advent of the new democratic dispensation in 1994. The National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) was established in 1996 to look at ways in which the higher education system could contribute to South Africa’s socio-economic reconstruction agenda. The White Paper on Higher Education published in 1997 established the terms to transform higher education. Two conditions were proclaimed: the first was the need to address the inequalities of the past, while the second emphasised the need to improve the responsiveness of higher education institutions to deliver on their mandate to produce optimal research, knowledge and training (Department of Education, 1997, p.7). Access to higher education was conceptualised in the White Paper as ‘access for

participation' and 'access for success' (Akoojee, 2002). The former focused on providing access to those who were previously excluded, while the latter focused on ways to provide opportunities and support to those who had previously been excluded, enabling them to succeed at their studies (Akoojee, 2002).

Reflecting student massification patterns globally, local South African universities increased their student numbers, which led to an influx of disadvantaged first-generation, mostly black, students into the university sector. By the mid-1990s black students' participation in higher education increased from 13% in 1993 to 39% in 1999. It is important to note that the success rates of such students did not improve and that by end of the 1990s higher education institutions had not produced enough science, engineering and technology graduates (Cloete & Bunting 2000). By 2000 the system recorded a decline in student enrolment, with a significant drop in university enrolments noticeable at historically black universities. This phenomenon was attributed to fewer school graduates obtaining matriculation exemptions (Bunting, 2010). Concerns were raised about the high dropout rate amongst students. According to Akoojee (2012, p. 97), "of the 120 000 students enrolled in higher education in 2000 30% dropped out in the first year of study, a further 20% dropped out during their second and third years."

The National Plan on Higher Education presented strategies to address the lack of adequate throughput (Department of Education, 2001). This led to the establishment of Academic Development (AD) programmes at universities to assist in providing better quality education to previously excluded students. The Plan stated the importance of academic development in improving graduate output (Department of Education 2001). Akoojee (2002) suggests that AD was the "only internal institutional redress strategy" in response to the challenge of improving the throughput rates of students. AD programmes were seen as a means to increase participation and success among disadvantaged first-generation students. However, higher education institutions did not undergo major qualitative changes with regard to their teaching and learning platforms as AD programmes were located on the margins of the university (Akoojee 2002, p. 4).

Scott, Yeld and Hendry (2007) produced a report on behalf of the Council on Higher Education in which they proposed a 'structural pathway' for the completion of undergraduate degrees. They made a persuasive argument for a four-year degree on the basis that adding one year to the current three-year degree programme would be

an important way of facilitating students' degree completion. As Soudien (2015, p. 23) explains, the essential argument of this idea was that "the mean time of students from first registration to graduation was already four years and that it would make pedagogical sense to have a four-year curriculum through which students could be taken to ensure mastery of the knowledge that they needed". Scott, Yeld and Hart (2007, p.14) made the argument that "the educational factor to which poor performance is perhaps most commonly prescribed ... is student underpreparedness for standard undergraduate programmes". These authors were at pains to explain that underpreparedness should not be equated with a fundamental inability to cope with higher education. While an extended degree pathway is one viable way of addressing students' underpreparedness by, for example, mainstreaming academic development within the core courses of degrees, governmental policy has thus far not responded to the suggestion for a four-year degree. It is within this policy discourse and institutional climate that this dissertation's exploration of disadvantaged students at university is situated and from which its specific research focus emerged.

#### **1.4. How the research focus emerged**

The focus of my research developed out of my Academic Development (AD) work during the last fifteen years at two universities in the Western Cape. As a lecturer in AD involved in the development of tutor and mentoring workshops as well as academic literacy skills amongst students, I encountered many first-generation disadvantaged students who, I believed, displayed a strong 'will to learn' and the determination to obtain a university education. My interest in this field led me to conduct research on student mentors' use of information communication technologies (ICTs) during a mentoring programme. This project stimulated my desire to understand the university experiences of students who came from historically disadvantaged backgrounds.

The research for my project revealed the agency and capacity of these types of students to construct mentoring practices through their use of ICTs. It particularly highlighted the capacity of students to establish their agency in difficult circumstances (see Norodien-Fataar, 2012). I recognised that there is a need for research into the complex forms of agency and capacitation that disadvantaged students are able to transact in order to succeed at their university study. I argue that understanding their

university engagement experiences would reveal how they encounter and go about establishing their educational practices at the university.

As an academic who works in higher education, I observed that research and educational practices at higher education institutions tend to be conceptualised within a deficit framework that seeks to fill the gaps left by apartheid education policies. In a deficit approach education practices focus on those skills and capabilities that disadvantaged students are presumably lacking – in other words, which they do not have to succeed in higher education institutions (Smit, 2012). Deficit perspectives and assumptions about disadvantages students highlight problems that are located outside the university such as the weak schooling system, or with the students themselves, such as lack of motivation, or of reading and writing skills.

However, when academic discourses and educational practices are framed in terms of deficits within the individual, they do not take into account the experiences, knowledge and complex paths whereby these students access and engage with their university education. Instead the knowledge, practices and learning strategies of these students are often misrecognised as a basis for successful university engagement. An exploration of the assets that students bring with them to the university and how these are deployed as part of their studies is an emerging strand in educational research (McKay & Devlin, 2016). These assets refer to their resilient domestic practices, home-based knowledges and multiple literacies. This dissertation is therefore an attempt to contribute towards understanding how disadvantaged students accumulate various practices and forms of knowledge and capital as a means of providing themselves with a platform for their educational engagement at university. The focus is on how they accrue forms of capital and resources and use these in their educational engagement towards successful study.

Inspired by Barnett's (2007) notion of the 'will to learn', which emphasises the 'becoming and being' of students during their university study, this dissertation aims to highlight perspectives about these types of students' resources and assets as key to understanding the educational engagement of disadvantaged students in higher education. Barnett (2007) highlights the central role of knowledge and skills acquisition in higher education. His appeal for an 'ontological turn' (p. 9) in higher education demands the necessity of understanding the 'being' of the students in higher

education. This alternative perspective involves focusing on a combination of students' affective experiences and their knowledge acquisition as crucial to their educational becoming. Barnett (2007) offers an alternative vocabulary to research students at university through concepts such as students' 'being and becoming, 'will to learn' and 'student voice'. In a similar vein, my research aimed to make sense of how disadvantaged students are able to engage with the university. I also wanted to understand the practices that they established to persist in their studies and succeed at the university. I sought to make sense of the interplay between the subjective and formative processes that make up their unique student becoming (Barnett, 2007) on the one hand, and the objective structural conditions of tertiary education in their student becoming on the other. The study aimed to capture the cultural capital and other educational resources and strategies that disadvantaged students draw on for their educational engagement with the university. The way that this impact on their engagement practices was central to the paradigm within which I positioned the research.

In an attempt to move beyond a deficit type of perspective the dissertation explores the forms of capital of disadvantaged students, the assets these students bring to the university (Cross & Atinde, 2014; McKay & Devlin, 2016), and the ways they go about mobilising these resources to succeed at the university.

The main research question that guided this study was:

How do disadvantaged students use their resources to navigate their engagement with the university and optimise their education?

The sub-questions were:

- How do disadvantaged students mobilise their networks, resources and forms cultural capital to secure a path towards university study?
- How do disadvantaged students navigate the infrastructure of the university to establish their educational engagements?
- How do disadvantaged students cultivate learning dispositions for their engagement towards their educational success at the university?

## 1.5. Theoretical considerations for the study

I framed my research on student engagement practices around important debates in educational research about the relationship between structures in society and the people (agents) who interact with them. When applied to my study, my interest was in the relationship between structures in society, which include the higher education institutions, and the disadvantaged student who functions in and between them. The structure-agency debates made me aware of the significance of the social context in which students engage with institutions as well as of people's agential capacity to interact in the social world. The challenge with regard to understanding and recognising how disadvantaged first-generation students engage with the social context was a central core consideration of my research.

I had employed Margaret Archer's (2003, 2007) structure-agency theoretical framework in my earlier research on students' information communication technologies' (ICTs) interactions. I found Archer's emphasis on a type of non-deterministic account of social interaction and behaviour useful. Archer (2003, 2007) utilises the notion of reflexivity to explain how human beings engage with their social context. She suggests that reflexivity serves as a mediating tool to assist human beings to behave in particular ways in their social surroundings. Archer's theoretic framework was compelling as it helped me to explain how individuals are able to exercise their agency in difficult circumstances. Utilising her 'human reflexivity' framework, I analysed the ways in which students at a South African university accessed and used ICTs (see Norodien-Fataar, 2012). Archer (2003, 2007) argues that reflexive behaviour is activated by the structural and cultural enablements and constraints of the individual's social context. Her concept 'modes of reflexivity' allowed me to understand how students were able to mediate between the structural conditions that influence social action, on the one hand, and go on to establish their reflexive stance towards their learning and engagement with ICTs, on the other.

Informed by Archer's conception of structure and agency, I turned to Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical work; his key concept of 'habitus' provided an attractive analytical lens to understanding the dispositional aspects of human agency while involved in a practice. Bourdieu offered me a robust account of the relationship between theory and empirical

research. Like Lingard (2013), I also found Bourdieu's rejection of an abstract type of 'theoreticism', on the one hand, and an overly deterministic view of empirical work, or as he puts it 'methodologism,' appealing. Bourdieu's theoretical oeuvre is based on an approach that enables work with and across the two (theory and method) in a reflexive and open-ended fashion. Bourdieu's theory enabled me to delve deeper into the relationship between structure and agency and the underlying factors that drive agency. His overall theoretical approach to the structure-agency debate is central to the conceptual and analytical work in this dissertation.

### **1.5.1. Bourdieu's theory of practice**

In Chapter 2 (article 1) I explore the notion of cultural capital to understand the pre-university pathways of disadvantaged students. Bourdieu provides a broad view of the concept of capital by "employing a wider system of exchanges whereby assets of different kinds are transformed and exchanged within complex networks or circuits within and across fields" (Moore, 2014, p. 99). This means that he conceptualises the notion of 'capital' not only as economic exchange but also in terms of other forms of capital such as social and cultural capital. Bourdieu (2006) suggests that different types of capital exist in three forms. The first is the objectified state, in the form of cultural goods such as paintings, books, machines. The second is the embodied state, which includes the dispositions of the mind and body, and physical features such as language, stances, intonation and lifestyle choices. The third form of capital is the institutionalised state in the form of educational qualifications (Bourdieu, 2006). Moore (2014, p.103) indicates that the third expression of capital is in the form of habitus, "which does not have a material existence in itself in the world" since it (habitus) "includes attitudes and dispositions but known only through its realizations in practice" (Moore, 2014, p.103).

Bourdieu first developed the concept of cultural capital to explain the disparity between children from different social classes when they participate in schooling. As he explains:

The notion of cultural capital initially presented itself to me, in the course of research, as a theoretical hypothesis which made it possible to explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social

classes by relating academic success, i.e. the specific profits which children from the different classes and class fractions can obtain in the academic market, to the distribution of cultural capital between the classes and class fractions. (2006, p.106)

This perspective is grounded in Bourdieu's basic argument that the cultural capital of different social groups is unevenly valued. He explains that the value placed on any particular form of cultural capital is arbitrary – that is, it 'cannot be deduced from any universal principle, whether physical, biological or spiritual' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p.8). He argues that cultural capital is not naturally acquired but is arbitrarily formed, and that the cultural capital of the middle class has a higher status than that of the working class. Giving more value to one group over another creates conflict and points of struggle among the different social class groups in the social world.

Using the notion of cultural capital, Bourdieu sought to move away from the view that academic success or failure is the result of natural aptitudes. He also challenged the economistic view which regarded monetary investments as a determinant of success. For Bourdieu, an economistic view fails to take into account "the best hidden and socially most determinant educational investment" – that is, the domestic transmission of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2006, p.107). Bourdieu (2006) gives credence to the family as a source in which cultural capital is created. He argues that what is generally seen as natural 'ability' or 'talent' is actually the product of an investment of time and cultural capital by the family. In Chapter 2 (article 1) I show how the selected students use the cultural capital and resources within their families and communities to enable them to gain admission to the university.

According to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), capital functions as power over a field and the more capital an individual can acquire, the more power he or she will be able to exercise in the field. Bourdieu understands 'field' in terms of social rather than geographical or territorial spaces (Lingard, 2013, p. 9). This concept of field as a theoretical tool offers an "epistemological and methodological approach to a historicized and particular understanding of the social life" (Thomson, 2014, p. 79). This means that the concept of field allows researchers to "translate practical problems into empirical observations" (Thomson, 2014, p.79). The field in my study is the social space which is made up of the university's educational support platform, which includes the

courses that the selected students are registered for, the teaching and learning support services, and other support services at the university.

According to Jenkins (1992, p.52) a field is defined by:

the stakes which are at stake—cultural goods (life-style), housing, intellectual distinction (education), employment, land, power (politics), social class, prestige or whatever—and may be of differing degrees of specificity and concreteness. Each field, by virtue of its defining content, has a different logic and taken-for-granted structure of necessity and relevance which is both the product and producer of the habitus which is specific and appropriate to the field.

Bourdieu compares the field to a game and argues that field is “competitive with various agents using different strategies to improve or maintain their position” (Thomson, 2014, p.67).

In this study I focus on students who are positioned as coming from low socio-economic and disadvantaged educational backgrounds. I show how students counter-position themselves at the university and employ strategies to engage in their education. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) compared the field to a game that is guided by rules according to which various players take up particular field positions. These positions in the game determine the nature and quality of their actions. However, “in contrast to the rigidity of the game system, the field is much more fluid and complex than any game that one might ever design” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 104), Bourdieu suggests that different fields and states exist and that each field contains “historically constituted areas of activity with their specific institutions and their own laws of functioning” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 87). Each field has its “own logic and taken-for-granted structure, which is both the product and producer of the habitus which is specific and appropriate to the field” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 52). Thomson (2014, p. 67) describes the nature of fields as “shaped differently according to the game that is played on them. They have their own rules, histories, star players, legends and lore”. These fields or areas of activity are each “quite peculiar social worlds where the universal is engendered” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 71). Jenkins (1992, p. 53) points out that “the field is the crucial mediating context wherein external factors—changing circumstances—are brought to bear upon individual practice and institutions”. In

Chapter 3 (article 2) I explore how students engage in the university field and examine the practices they are able to produce to participate in their education at the university.

Bourdieu (1990, 1992) introduces 'habitus' as a related concept to understand human actions in relation to the 'field conditions' that they are a part of. Bourdieu (1990, pp. 70, 86) defines the individual's habitus as "ways of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking" and adds that habitus "refers to something historical, it is linked to individual history". Habitus is a "property of actors (whether individuals or groups or institutions) that comprises a structured and structuring structure" (1994, p.170). Maton (2014) points out that for Bourdieu (1990, p. 53) "the structure comprises a system of dispositions which generate perceptions, appreciation and practices". Bourdieu suggests that these "dispositions or tendencies are durable in that they last over time, and are transportable in being capable of becoming active within a variety of theatres of social action. Habitus as a complex amalgamation of past and present is "a socialized subjectivity" and "the social embodied" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 127-8). Bourdieu describes the habitus as "durably inculcated by the possibilities and impossibilities, freedoms and necessities, opportunities and prohibitions inscribed on the objective conditions" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 54). He points out that habitus consists not only of mental abilities, but also of bodily gestures and comportments that individuals are not aware of. He explains the notion of habitus as a form of embodiment thus:

It [habitus] is the socialised body. The structured body, a body which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world or of a particular sector of that world – a field – and which structures the perception of that world as well as action in that world. (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 81)

This suggests that habitus is created in and through social processes and that the body is central to the emergence and formation of habitus.

### 1.5.2. The relationship between habitus and field

Bourdieu (1977, p. 72) sees institutional space as a “strategy-generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever changing situations”. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p. 129) suggest that individuals adopt strategies to find a ‘feel for the game’. They define strategies as “objectively orientated lines of action which the social agents continually construct in and through practice” (1992, p. 129). Jenkins (1992, p. 51) explains that, for Bourdieu, strategies are “the on-going result of the interaction between the dispositions of the habitus and the constraints and possibilities which are the reality of any given social field”. The relationship between field and habitus is thus fundamental to understanding social practices. For Bourdieu (2000, pp. 150-151) the relation between habitus and field can be regarded as “a meeting of two evolving logics and histories”. In the evolving higher education space the habitus of students is constantly emerging and reproducing educational capital and practices.

Bourdieu argues that habitus “realizes itself, becomes active only in the relation to a field, and the same habitus can lead to very different practices and stances depending on the state of the field” (1990, p. 116). Bourdieu uses the analogy of a game to discuss social life and compares the game to the social field. According to Thomson (2014, p. 67), “there is no level playing ground in the social field; players who begin with particular forms of capital are advantaged at the outset because the field depends on, as well as produces, more of that capital”. The habitus plays a crucial role in being able to master the game. For Bourdieu,

Habitus as the feel for the game is the social game embodied and turned into a second nature. Nothing is simultaneously freer and more constrained than the action of the good player. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 63)

Some players are able to understand the rules of the game and use their capital productively and progress further than others. Bourdieu points out that that “when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a ‘fish in water’: it does not feel the weight of the water, and it takes the world about itself for granted” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127). Here, one’s habitus is in alignment with the field and one is able to play the game successfully.

In Chapter 4 (article 3) I focus on how the selected students in this study built their habitus by examining how they went about producing their dispositions to learn in interaction with the university field. Wacquant's (2014, 2015) elaboration of the concept of habitus allows me to illustrate in this chapter how students engage in their learning and the learning practices they produce as a core constitutive element of their educational engagement practices. By exploring the field, capital and habitus of disadvantaged students, I seek to focus on the forms of capital that students produce in their engagement with the university. Exploring students' educational engagement practices based on a Bourdieusian theoretical framework allows me to give an account which explores the motivating factors that shape their educational experiences and the forms of capital they cultivate at university.

### **1.5.3. Theoretical frameworks and conceptual lenses in the three articles**

Each article responds to a research question and has a specific logical structure in response to the broader research question of the dissertation. I developed a set of analytical lenses for each article that enabled me to respond to a specific research objective. These lenses are based on an expansion of the Bourdieusian theoretical toolkit; in other words, while Bourdieu provided the overall theoretical orientation and related relevant concepts, I developed a set of mid-level theoretical constructs that extended his framework to the specific analytical focus of each article.

The first article focuses on the pre-university pathways of disadvantaged students. I focus on how students engage with the university before they gain formal admission to the university. By using Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital and Yosso's (2005) notion of community cultural wealth, I show how students as outsiders attempted to gain entry to the university. Yosso (2005) provides an analytical lens to enable an analysis of how students from low socio-economic backgrounds are able to construct and navigate their application and admission routes to the university. Yosso (2005) argues that disadvantaged students have community cultural wealth (CCW) in the form of capital found in their contexts that must be recognised in order to understand these specific students' practices. She identifies aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational and resistant capital as forms of capital that disadvantaged students are able to draw on to access the resources and networks present in their communities

and families. Yosso (2005) explains that disadvantaged students acquire various forms of capital characterised by the abilities, skills, resources and knowledge that they build up over time. They use cultural resources such as family and community support networks to navigate the social structural contexts in which they live and to access their education. Yosso (2005, p. 77) maintains that the “various forms of capital are not mutually exclusive or static, but rather are dynamic processes that build on one another as part of community cultural wealth”. The “community cultural wealth” (2005, p. 78) is mobilised by disadvantaged students for their education. By using Yosso’s (2005) framework of analysis to highlight the pre-university social locations, I was able to provide an understanding of the complex factors that impacted on students’ access to and admission routes into the university. This framework allowed me to find a pattern to explain the complex routes and processes that disadvantaged students follow to gain entry to university study.

In the second article I explore the educational engagement of students at the university and the ways in which they are able to navigate the university’s educational infrastructure. In the dissertation I use the term ‘educational engagement’ to refer to the practices that students establish to access and engage with the university as well as its support infrastructure, which is meant to provide them with their “opportunity to learn” (Boykin & Noguera, 2011, p. 1). Furthermore, I make use of Bourdieu’s concepts of field, habitus and capital to explain the ways in which students engage with the university. These concepts enabled me to explore the strategies and activities that disadvantaged students utilise to develop their educational engagements within the university. These concepts allow me to discuss how students are able to produce practices and dispositions by which they are able to access and engage the university as a ‘field’. The relation between habitus and field is a key component of the analysis and this article particularly highlights the uneven field conditions that the students encounter during their university study. The article shows how through the interaction of students’ habitus and field they develop an emergent academic habitus for their educational engagement, which is comprised of a series of complex forms of engagement as they confront the varied and uneven field conditions of the university, which ultimately influences their educational engagement.

In the third article I delve deeper into the selected students' agency in the social space of the university. It focuses on how students cultivate valuable dispositions to learn to engage in their education at a university. I focus on students' learning engagements within their specific courses in the Applied Sciences faculty and the types of learning dispositions they acquired in their educational engagement. In this article I employ Wacquant's (1992) conceptual elaboration of habitus to provide an explanation of the learning dispositions that students acquire at university. Extending Bourdieu's framework, Wacquant (2014a), who was Bourdieu's protégé, discusses three core constitutive components of habitus acquisition: the cognitive, conative and affective components. He argues that a deeper understanding of habitus requires an analysis of how individuals embody their experiences (Wacquant, 2014). The "cognitive, conative and affective building blocks of habitus" are regarded as the underlying layers encompassing social practices (Wacquant, 2015, p. 4). The affective, conative and cognitive elements, he argues, are "implanted, cultivated and deployed over time through our engagement with the world" (2015, p. 3). Wacquant's (2014, 2015) elaboration of habitus provided me with a lens to explain the types of learning dispositions that the students develop and deploy in their learning engagements at the university. This final article thus explores the interconnectedness of the affective, conative and cognitive dimensions of the selected students' learning dispositions. The article highlights the students' sense of disconnection between their habitus and the university field upon their entry into the university, and it shows how students mitigated these feelings of disconnection and produced effective practices for successful learning.

## **1.6. Methodology and Research Design**

This research study employed a qualitative research methodology to investigate the educational engagement practices of disadvantaged students at a higher education institution. Qualitative research is concerned with "illuminating meanings and how humans engage in meaning making" (Patton, 2015, p. 6). It focuses on understanding people's perspectives and experiences as well as their stories in the light of the systems in which they operate daily (Patton, 2015). Qualitative research gives research participants such as interviewees the chance to express their opinions and the satisfaction in sharing important events associated with their lives with a

sympathetic listener. Patton (2015, p. 13) suggests that qualitative research “analyses and interprets how human beings construct and attach meaning to their experiences”. Patton views qualitative research as an inquiry process that describes and interprets phenomena by “analysing words, stories, documents and observations” (2015, p. 14).

Rather than attempting to control or predict phenomena, qualitative researchers acknowledge that the researcher cannot be objective and hold value-free opinions. Henning (2004) suggests that a qualitative framework enables in-depth inquiry and sets out to understand the reasons why events and phenomena occurred. Patton (2015, p. 18) suggests that qualitative research work “is inductively generated from fieldwork, that is theory that emerges from researchers’ observation and interviews out in the real world rather than in a laboratory or the academy”. Using qualitative research not only allowed me to examine the selected student interviewees’ educational engagement practices, but also enabled me to better understand and explain the broader social contexts in which these practices occur. My research explains not only how students’ educational engagement practices emerged, but also more importantly why these practices occurred in the way they did. This study is thus suitably positioned within a qualitative research paradigm.

As this research undertook to understand the nature of the educational engagement practices of disadvantaged students at a higher education institution, an interpretivist paradigm was deemed suitable. Interpretivist research is fundamentally concerned with meaning; it seeks to understand social members’ definitions and understandings of situations (Henning, 2004, p. 21). Henning (2004, p.16) indicates that verbs like ‘understand’ and ‘construct’ imply an interpretivist theoretical paradigm. According to Babbie and Mouton (2006), interpretivist research is concerned with understanding social phenomena through the meanings people assign to them. My research endeavoured to understand how and why students constructed and developed their specific educational practices at the university. By taking into account the ‘thick descriptions’ and perspectives of the participants’ constructions, an interpretivist paradigm is well suited to giving recognition and voice to the participants in my study (Babbie and Mouton, 2006). This allowed me to capture and interpret the constructions that they provided, which, in turn, enabled me to generate particular insights about their practices.

The ontological and epistemological stance of my research is informed by a social constructionist paradigm to gain insight into and understanding of how the students constructed and interpreted their educational experiences at their university. According to Crotty (1998, p. 58), social constructionism “emphasises the hold our culture has on us; it shapes the way in which we see things (even in the way we feel things) and gives us a quite definite view of the world”. Crotty (1998 as cited by Patton, 2015, p. 122) points out that social constructionists are concerned with “diverse understandings” and “multiple realities”. Patton (2015, p. 127) explains that the social context is critical in understanding social constructions of reality and that social constructionist inquiry “tracks the way in which social constructions and worldviews change over time”. Social constructionist inquiry requires the researcher to be aware of how power affects and shapes social constructions and perceptions of reality. Patton (2015, p. 127) emphasises the ‘reflective approach’ that researchers must adopt when conducting research from a social constructionist perspective, as it affects the methods, findings and understandings of others and the researcher. I proceeded with the research based on the view that knowledge and experience are social constructions. Willis suggests that “research is ... a social constructed activity and that the reality it tells us about therefore is socially constructed” (2007, p. 96). Bourdieu’s theory of knowledge, which is described as social constructionist, sought to provide an account of the social world that illuminated the strategies that individuals adopt to engage in the world rather than being bound by the intrinsic “structural rules of practice” (Grenfell, 2014, p. 22). The social constructionist epistemological approach is suitable for my research as it sought to understand how students constructed, perceived and interpreted their educational practices as they engaged with the higher education social space.

According to Patton (2015, p. 244), the study’s research design “sets forth how you will fulfil your purpose and answer the questions you have identified”. Patton (2015, p. 244) emphasises that design “is not a mechanical, linear, set-in-stone plan; rather, design is a process and a way of thinking”. Meaning is socially constructed by the students in their interaction with the world. In order to understand these first generation student’s interpretations of their lives at this particular point in time and within the particular context of being a university student, I decided on the basic interpretive qualitative design. According to Merriam (2002, p37), “constructionism underlies a basic

interpretive qualitative study". I adopted this design because it allowed me to, through semi-structured interviews and focus groups discussions with the selected students, gain an in-depth understanding of the ways in which they approach their education at the university. I sought to understand the phenomenon from the participants' perspectives, meanings and subjective views. Patton (2015, p. 8) notes that "capturing diverse perspectives, observing and analysing behaviours in contexts, looking for patterns in what human beings do and think, and examining the implications of those patterns, these are some of the basic contributions of qualitative inquiry".

To gain a more holistic understanding of their life worlds, it was important to capture the roles of family and community and their investment in first generation students' educational journeys. I argue that their processes of educational engagement at university require an investigation into their pre-university experiences as well as their experiences during their studies at the university. Unlike a case study, which focuses on a specific bounded system or a boundary around a particular phenomenon and "a case being studied" (Patton, 2015, p. 259), the research was not restricted by a particular time, programme or place.

### **1.6.1. Researcher's position**

My researcher positionality was based on the assumption that in qualitative research one's role as the researcher is central to the research process, the data one is able to generate and the interpretations one derives from the process. Patton (2015, p. 3) states that the researcher's "background, experience, training, skills and interpersonal competence, capacity for empathy, cross-cultural sensitivity" must be acknowledged in the research process. As a researcher who works within the qualitative paradigm, I concur with Patton and others (Kacem & Chaitin, 2006) that the worldview and background of the researcher influence every aspect of the research process such as the use of language, the types of questions posed, the conceptual lens used for sifting the information collected from participants and producing meaning from it. Berger (2015, p. 220) states that the positioning of the researcher "can affect access to the 'field' and that the "nature of the researcher-researcher relationship" can influence the research. Alcott (1991) indicates that the social position of the researcher influences the meaning of words and meanings assigned to events and thus affects the findings

and conclusions of the study. For this reason my role as a lecturer in a centre for teaching and learning providing educational support was significant.

Oliver (2014, p.3) introduces the notion of the emic and etic perspectives. He suggests that the emic perspective represents the perspective of someone that belongs to that culture or someone that is part of a particular culture, in other words, the insider view. Willis (2007, p.100) suggests that the emic perspective is concerned with looking at “things through the eyes of members of the culture being studied”. The etic perspective “encompasses an external view on a culture, language, meaning associations and real world events” (Oliver, 2014, 3). The researcher invariably works on the basis of an etic perspective because she uses “pre-existing theories, hypothesis, and perspectives as constructs” (Oliver, 2014, p.3). In this regard Agar (2011, p.39) argues that the emic and etic perspectives contribute to “undertstanding” in the research process.

As a lecturer in AD involved in the development of tutor and mentoring training workshops, I work closely with students, which allows me to develop an insider view of their backgrounds and the challenges that these students experience. However, this positioning is confined to my knowledge of them as students. The students saw me as a sympathetic listener because of my role as their mentor trainer in the mentoring programme. I was acutely aware that my status as a lecturer in the mentoring programme could be a disadvantage as the selected students might have been trying to say things to impress me. I was aware that my research positionality might affect the data, and so too the findings (Berger, 2015). I therefore took care to probe their answers, asking them for explanations when they were giving formulaic responses. For this reason I conducted two sets of in-depth interviews with the participants and had focus group discussions to generate thick descriptions. In an effort to provide rich descriptions, I used the participants own words extensively in the chapters and provided extensive quotations, indicating their point of view and perspective. This was done to “to limit the level of subjectivity that a researcher may introduce in the data analysis” (Yin, 2010, Patton, 2015).

### 1.6.2. Reflexivity

Reflexivity was a core part of my researcher positionality throughout the research process. Adopting a reflexive stance allowed me to question, reflect, examine and understand myself in relation to the focus of my research. According to Patton (2015, p. 70), “reflexivity reminds the qualitative inquirer to be attentive to, and conscious of, the cultural, political, social, linguistic and economic origins of one’s own perspective and voice as well as the perspectives and voices of those one interviews and those to whom one reports”. The theoretical and practical decisions I made during the research process were complemented by the reflexive process that I had to undertake to interpret the data and understand my research participants. After the interviews and focus group discussions, I developed observational notes about each participant which provided a description of the viewpoints and perspectives that participants gave me. This provided me with further insight into their educational engagement practices and allowed me to reflect on my position as an AD lecturer who was interested in providing a non-deficit understanding of students’ educational engagement.

This reflexive process enabled me to go through a process of “self-questioning” and “self-understanding” (Patton, 2015. p. 70) when I interpreted the data. I reflected on the decisions that I made during the research process and why I made those decisions. The focus group discussions were also useful in my reflexive process as I was able to clarify issues that emerged during the semi-structured interviews. After the first set of interviews, I had to reflect on some of the commonsense assumptions I had about, for example, the impact of selected students’ schooling on their university study. The research participants decided to take decisive actions and use a range of resources in order to succeed in their schooling. The focus group discussions clarified aspects of their pre-university pathways and I uncovered the reasons why they had moved away from their homes in the Eastern Cape to the Western Cape to complete their senior years of schooling. Students’ movement from one area to another was significant in their aspirations for higher education.

During the second set of interviews I had to reflect deeply on my position as the researcher. Denzin (1986. p.2) maintains that “research begins and ends with the biography and self of the researcher”. As an AD lecturer involved with student

development and support, my key role is to provide co-curricular activities to develop students' socio-academic capacities at the university. Some of these co-curricular activities are the provision of mentoring and tutor training workshops that I designed to provide students support that would strengthen their capacity to engage in their education. This support role affected the type of questions I asked and the interpretations that I made. These interpretations were affected by my values and my identity as an AD lecturer (Staller, 2010). During this process I had to undergo a reflexive process whereby the assumptions I had about students and their educational engagement were challenged. In the end I believe I was able to elicit, based on two sets of interviews and focus group sessions, and a method of constant comparison of data, comprehensive perspectives organised on the basis of a set of themes about their educational engagement at the university.

### **1.6.3. Research methods**

The ontological and epistemological stance of the research influenced my decisions on the methods to use in the study. My decisions about data-collection methods were informed by the need to capture the uniqueness of each of these students' experiences and to honour their voice in the research. One of the traditional methods used in qualitative research is the semi-structured interview. Patton (2015) suggests that the aim of qualitative research is to elicit spontaneous responses from respondents rather than fixed responses, and goes on to suggest that an interview is "an interaction in which an interchange occurs and a temporary interdependence is created" (2015, p. 467). Participants in this study were asked to participate in semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions.

Qualitative research employs various research methods to collect data ranging from "focus groups, open-ended questions on surveys, direct observations in the field, postings in social media and analysis of documents" (Patton, 2015, p. 255). These methods assist in gathering the perspectives viewpoints, interpretations and experiences of the respondents. For these reasons I used semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to obtain data about the types of educational practices participants produced when they gained access to, and while they were studying at, the university.

The semi-structured interviews allowed me to gain an in-depth understanding of students' access to and engagement with the university. I prepared an interview guide to make sure that I asked the same types of questions to all the respondents. Patton (2015) highlights the view that an interview guide "provides topics or subject areas within which the interviewer is free to explore, probe, and ask questions" (p. 439). The interview guide consisted of questions to allow the interviewees to discuss issues beyond the questions and in their own words. The guide functioned as a 'checklist' during the interview to ensure that I included all the relevant topics (Patton, 2015, p. 439).

Okeke and Van Wyk (2015, p. 211) describe the ordering of semi-structured interview questions thus: "the researcher decides to order his or her questions in such a way as to present the interview procedure to the respondents". Struwig and Stead (2001) indicate that semi-structured interviews enable respondents to give multiple and detailed responses. The use of semi-structured interviews was therefore suited to the nature of my research questions, which were exploratory and descriptive.

#### **1.6.4. The population and sample**

The population for the study consisted of seven senior students in their fourth year of study who participated in a mentoring programme. They were all enrolled in the Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP) in the Applied Sciences Faculty. Students on this programme follow an augmented curriculum in areas such as Food Technology, Biotechnology and Consumer Science. Seven students (five female and two male) were purposively selected from a group of fourteen mentors. Purposive sampling allowed me to select information-rich participants from the population. Patton (2015, p. 265) defines purposive sampling as "strategically selecting information rich cases to study". I chose students who were first-generation black African students, who came from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and who were actively involved in the mentoring programme. The fact that purposive sampling is done subjectively is not a limitation as it is a "strategically purposeful" sample collection method (Patton, 2015, p. 265).

Five of the seven participants were from the Western Cape Province and were isiXhosa speakers. The other two students came from the Gauteng Province and were Tswana speakers. Three students lived in the university's residence and the rest in township communities in Cape Town. Three students were enrolled in the Food Technology course, two students were enrolled in the Biochemistry course, and two students were enrolled in the Consumer Studies course.

#### **1.6.5. Data Collection**

The first set of interviews either took place after classes or on a Saturday at a university venue that was suitable to the students. The interviews were ninety minutes long and were audio recorded and transcribed. I held one focus group discussion as the second form of data collection after the first interviews were transcribed and analysed. The focus group discussion was scheduled as a follow-up to the interviews. Krueger (1988, p. 18) suggests that a focus group discussion is a “carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive non-threatening environment”. Patton (2015) explains that focus group discussions are open-ended and focus on specific issues. The focus group discussion allowed me to clarify targeted issues that came out of the first set of semi-structured interviews that I wanted to probe into and expand on. Okeke and Van Wyk (2015, p. 340) point out that focus group discussions assist in establishing “multiple understandings and meanings”. The focus group discussion thus elicited further discussion on aspects that emerged from the interviews which needed more clarification. The focus group also served as a method of triangulation to confirm the veracity of certain experiences and events. Macmillan and Schumacher (2001, p. 408) suggest that there are various strategies that can be used to enhance design validity in qualitative research and that using more than one data collection strategy allows for triangulation in data collection and data analysis. Probing, asking deeper questions and triangulation are crucial in qualitative research.

My initial plan was to have one set of semi-structured interviews with the participants, but after transcribing the interviews I realised that I needed more information and understanding of the way that students engage with their learning at the university. I conducted a second round of interviews in the second year of this study over a two-month period. At this stage some students had graduated, some pursued further

studies and some completed outstanding credits. Some decisions and plans had to change as the study unfolded; for example, one participant had left the Western Cape after graduating and could not be reached for the second interview. I conducted this second round of interviews with the participants in order to find out more about how they were able to engage with their learning in their respective courses. The follow-up questions in these interviews allowed me to probe and ask detailed questions about the interviewees' learning engagements. The questions concentrated on the "what, where, who, why, when and how" (Patton, 2015, p. 465) with regard to their approaches to their educational engagement at the university. At the same time I was able to clarify some aspects with regard to their learning engagements that they mentioned in the first interview. As suggested by Patton (2015, p. 466), I used clarification probes to ask respondents to restate or elaborate on a response in the previous interview. The second set of interviews served as method of triangulation as I prolonged and persisted with my fieldwork (Macmillan and Schumacher (2001, p.408).

#### **1.6.6. Data analysis**

I used an inductive approach to analyse my data. This meant that I had to generate concepts and explanations from the data that I collected. Patton (2015, p.542) suggests that "inductive analysis involved discovering patterns, themes, and categories in one's data". I was able to identify patterns and themes in the data by using the using the constant comparative method of coding. Through this inductive method of analysis, important concepts and themes were extracted and patterns of data were highlighted and similar ideas were grouped together and themes were developed. Glaser (1965, p. 438) suggests that the constant comparative method is intended to assist in "generating a theory which is integrated, consistent plausible and close to the data." The inductive approach allowed me to extract important concepts and themes and patterns of data which were highlighted and

I went through a process of examining the data in stages to uncover the patterns and themes in the data. I had to organise the data to check for completeness. This meant I had to check the audio recordings against the transcripts and sequence and date the data. I read the transcripts for the semi-structured interviews and made initial notes to get a sense of the data and to record my observations. Thereafter I prepared the focus

group discussion in order to highlight aspects in the interviews that I needed to clarify. In other words, I had to interact with the data by examining the first interviews and then comparing them with the focus group discussions. This was followed by a comparison of the first interviews with the second interviews and the focus group discussions. This method of analysis meant that I interacted with the data in a continuous and reflective manner. Gay & Airasian (2003, p.228) describe this process as “a series of steps and iteration” in order to narrow and focus the research. Srivastava & Hopwood (2009, p. 77) asserts that “the role of iteration not simply a repetitive mechanical task but as a deeply reflexive process, it is key to sparking insight and developing meaning”. The iterative process of data analysis ensured that I was able to sharpen the focus of my research and deepen my understanding of the data and the emerging themes.

After the themes were developed a process of analytical induction occurred, which meant that I had to compare my data with the theoretical frameworks that I employed for the research. Taylor & Bodgan, (1984 p.127) suggests that analytical induction is a “procedure for verifying theories and propositions based on qualitative data. Through the data analysis I was able to analyse the data and generate analytical categories to elucidate the research. Patton (2015, p. 548) asserts that these are based on “analyst –generated patterns, and themes and concepts”. This inductive process of qualitative research thus allowed me to draw and build on the theory that I utilised for the research (Okeke & Van Wyk, 2015).

### **1.7. Ethical considerations**

The study received ethical clearance from Stellenbosch University’s human research ethics committee (see Appendix 3). Permission to conduct research at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology was sought and granted, (see Appendix 1). In my negotiation of access, potential participants were briefed on the voluntary nature of the research, the aims of the study, as well as their rights as participants. I explained to them that they had the right to withdraw from the research at any time. Their written consent to participate was given. Their permission was sought for all interviews and focus group discussions to be recorded. The semi-structured interviews and focus groups were transcribed and the audio and typed transcripts stored securely for the duration of the research study in order to protect the privacy of the participants. All

participants were given access to the transcripts of the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions for them to check for the accuracy of their contributions.

### **1.8. Concluding comments and summary of the introduction**

In this introductory chapter I provided the rationale and aims for my study on the educational engagement practices of disadvantaged students in higher education. I highlighted the paucity of research focusing on the resources and cultural capital of disadvantaged students. I briefly discussed the post-apartheid higher education policy context and presented an account of how my study emerged and the crucial role of my academic work in the field of AD in shaping the focus of my study and the research question.

The theoretical framework for the study was informed by Bourdieu's theory of practice which I believe was fitting for a study that has as its focus the relationship between human beings and the social structures in which they operate. Bourdieu's concepts guided my investigation into the educational engagement practices of disadvantaged students. The discussion of the methodological aspects of my research highlighted the qualitative and interpretative nature of this study. I described my use of qualitative research approach and the methods that I used to collect data on students' experiences.

The dissertation now goes on to present the three articles and its concluding chapter. The latter draws together the findings, interpretations and insights gained from the articles, and goes on to offer the overall argument of the dissertation in response to the study's main research question.

## Chapter 2 (Article 1)

The pre-university pathways of disadvantaged students for gaining entry to university study

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### 2.1. Abstract

This article focuses on the pre-university access pathways of disadvantaged first-generation students studying at a South African university. Based on data collected via qualitative methods, it draws on findings from a study of purposively selected students at a university in the Western Cape Province. It explores the ways they access and gain admission to the university. Combining Bourdieu's (2006) notion of 'cultural capital' with Yosso's (2005) notion of 'community cultural wealth', the article attempts to understand how these students use the resources in their families and communities to gain entry to the university. The article shows the decisive role that family capital and productive township networks play in the students' university admission pathways. Their ability to navigate around the 'darker' aspects of their impoverished communities and establish peer and community support networks is crucial in making their desire for university study a reality. The article illustrates the longer and circuitous admission routes that they take to gain university entry, one key consequence of which is that they adjust their aspirations to settle for less prestigious university programmes. Settling for programmes of 'lower' prestige was a way of securing admission to the university.

**Keywords:** disadvantaged students; pre-university engagements; cultural capital; access practices; admission; lowered aspirations

## 2.2. Introduction

This article is a discussion of how disadvantaged students establish a pathway to apply for, and gain admission to, university study. It discusses these students' navigation of their pre-university living contexts and the practices that they establish to apply for, and gain entry into, a university. The focus is on the difficult and circuitous paths they take to gain university entry in light of living in impoverished community circumstances. Central to the article is my attempt to provide an understanding of how they go about establishing their admission paths in these circumstances. The article is intended to provide understanding about the practices and identities of disadvantaged students as they struggle to access university study. Fuller recognition of the complex ways these students mobilise their community and family based 'cultural capitals' would enable universities to support their university study more adequately.

The article is set against the backdrop of the current debates on disadvantaged students and their access to, and participation in, higher education. Discussions in the reviewed literature about disadvantaged students' access to higher education in South Africa emphasise two aspects: 1) access for success, and 2) access for participation. The former concentrates on the students' acquisition of knowledge on courses and programmes (see McKenna 2012 & Boughey 2012), and the latter on admission, financial capacity and social equity (Akoojee & Nkomo 2012). Expanding on the notion of access for participation, the article explores the crucial period before students enter university, a period in which, I argue, they establish practices that enable them successfully to apply for and gain admission. The article will focus on the ways that disadvantaged students mobilise the networks, resources and cultural capital in their impoverished families and communities that secure a path towards university entry for them. It discusses how the students selected for this study went about establishing a path that eventually led to their admission to a university, in this case a university in the Western Cape Province.

The article builds on the work of Thesen (1997), Smit (2012) and Kapp, Badenhorst, Bangeni, Craig, Janse van Rensburg, Le Roux, Prince, Pym and Van Pletzen (2014), who call attention to the nature and extent of university students' navigations within their community and family contexts that enable them to access university education.

These authors argue that the knowledge and practices of working-class township and rural students provide them with important resources for their university education. Factoring these resilient practices and resources into their educational platforms would provide universities with a key basis to get students to participate more meaningfully in their university education. Universities would be able to organise their student engagement platform better to work with the community-based cultural capital that disadvantaged students bring with them to university.

The argument of the article is based on two premises; first, that it is the accumulation and mobilisation of resources via extended pre-university paths that enable them to ultimately gain entry to university study, and second, that these students' admission paths are much more circuitous compared to those of more middle-class students who make comparatively smoother transitions from high school to university (Reay, Crozier & Clayton 2009). I discuss how the students managed to accumulate enough resources, networks and assistance to enable them eventually to gain entry to the university. Research on disadvantaged students in higher education refers to students' social and cultural histories as significant in understanding how they access the university (Boughey 2012; McKenna 2012). Yet few studies have focused on the connections between the students and their families in explaining why and how they apply at university. The article draws attention to the lack of understanding of how disadvantaged students utilise the resources and cultural capital available to them to gain admission to university study.

### **2.3. Theoretical framework for the study of students' pre-university admission pathways**

This article employs Bourdieu's (2006) notion of 'cultural capital' and Yosso's (2005) 'community cultural wealth' (CCW) to understand how disadvantaged students create pathways to gain admission to university. Bourdieu (2006) argues that middle-class homes reproduce the type of cultural capital that is in alignment with their formal education. Cultural capital refers to the knowledge, skills, habits and values that one acquires through being part of a particular social class. He contends that the cultural capital of different classes is unevenly valued. He explains that the value placed on any particular form of cultural capital is arbitrary—that is, it "cannot be deduced from

any universal principle, whether physical, biological or spiritual' (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977, p. 8). Bourdieu (2006) gives credence to the family as a source in which cultural capital is created and argues that it is 'the best hidden and socially most determinant educational investment'—that is, the domestic transmission of cultural capital (Bourdieu 2006, p.107). He argues that what is generally seen as natural 'ability' or 'talent' is actually the product of an investment of time and cultural capital by the family. He thus argues that cultural capital is not naturally acquired, but that it is arbitrarily formed and that the cultural capital of the middle class has a higher status than that of the working class. Bourdieu (2006) argues that time is needed for the acquisition and accumulation of cultural capital.

Extending Bourdieu's views on cultural capital, Yosso (2005) points out that his conceptualisation is limited to understanding how middle-class homes reproduce cultural capital for their children in alignment with their formal education. She contends that Bourdieu does not provide explanatory purchase for understanding how the cultural and social capital and networks of poor people are put to work in their educational processes. Yosso challenges traditional deficit approaches, which claim that working-class students do not have the cultural capital to engage successfully in their education. Instead, she (2005, p. 82) argues that "poor families draw on their community cultural wealth (CCW) in order to establish social and racial justice". Community cultural wealth refers to the "accumulated assets and resources found in the lives and histories of disadvantaged students" (Yosso 2005, p. 77). She argues that there are various forms of capital that are nurtured in impoverished communities that must be recognised in order to understand how these students access and engage in their education. She identifies aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational and resistant capital as forms of capital that students draw on to access the resources and networks present in their communities and families. Yosso (2005) explains that disadvantaged students acquire various forms of capital characterised by the abilities, skills, resources and knowledge that they build up over time. They use cultural resources such as family and community support networks to navigate the social structural contexts in which they live and to access their education. Yosso (2005) maintains that each form of capital is made up of a dynamic process that develops, intersects with, and corresponds to forms of resources upon which students rely. She argues that a CCW framework provides one with the ability to understand the "multiple

forms of cultural wealth” (2005, p. 78) that are located in communities and families, as well as the “various types of capital” (2005, p. 78) that are mobilised by disadvantaged students in their educational processes.

Informed by a CCW framework, the discussion below focuses on how the selected students use the cultural capital and resources within their families and communities to enable them to gain admission to the university. I specifically show the role that families, especially mothers, play in the provision of what Gillies (2006) calls ‘emotional capital’ to broaden the understanding of the types of capital that support the selected students’ pathways to the university. This type of capital refers to the ways in which maternal figures in the students’ lives support them in their educational quest. Emotional capital refers to the mothers’ role in offering support, encouragement and a caring environment, which are crucial in the academic access practices of the students.

Another theoretical element at play in this article is the students’ recognition and utilisation of community circumstances, social resources and networks. The students deploy these as forms of capital in their quest for a university education. Some of these circumstances are unstable and dysfunctional, and pose a constant threat to their educational aspirations. Zipin (2009, pp. 26, 330) refers to “dark lifeworld assets” that poor students encounter and navigate to establish their pathways to university. Zipin (2009) shows how disadvantaged students who manage to succeed in their education are confronted on a daily basis by tough (dark) community circumstances. They are, however, able to employ a range of navigational assets (various forms of capital) to circumvent the worst consequences of these community influences. The ways students navigate their paths in light of these circumstances are central to understanding how they gain admission to the university. My theoretical approach emphasises the agency of students who establish their educational engagements in difficult circumstances; it stresses the forms of capital and social networks that they mobilise in order to access and maximise their chances of gaining admission to the university.

Through my combining of Bourdieu’s (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977, 2006) concept of cultural capital and Yosso’s (2005) CCW and other forms of capital, I provide a framework for an analysis of the students’ construction and navigation of their application and admission routes to the university. By highlighting their pre-university

social locations, this framework allows me to look beyond normative or linear expressions of admission pathways that fail to register the multifaceted routes, processes and difficulties that disadvantaged students have to navigate to gain entry to university study. My approach thus allows me to offer a perspective that acknowledges the diverse routes and complex ways in terms of which disadvantaged students gain admission to university.

#### **2.4. Methodology**

This article draws on a larger study which I did on the engagement practices of disadvantaged students at a university. The study adopted an interpretive qualitative approach as a way of ascertaining the viewpoints and perspectives of the selected participants. My preference for qualitative research is tied to the opportunities it affords participants for self-expression, the chance to express an opinion and the satisfaction of sharing important events associated with their lives. Patton (2002) suggests that qualitative methodologies attempt to understand the viewpoints of the participants as they live and experience events and phenomena. Participation was facilitated by the purposive selection of four students whose selection allowed me to illustrate the circuitous and complex routes students take to acquire university admission as well as to gain an in-depth understanding of their university access and admission practices. Purposive selection of participants was guided by the study's requirement to concentrate on first generation students from disadvantaged backgrounds taking a course in the university's Extended Curriculum Programme.

Purposive sampling allowed me to select information-rich participants who are knowledgeable about the issue under investigation (Patton 2002).

I collected the data for the study via semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with the selected students. The interviews took place in one and a half hour sessions and concentrated on questions that examined how they approached their families, communities and schooling contexts in their quest for access to university studies. The focus group discussion enabled me to clarify themes that emerged from the semi-structured interviews and allowed students to share their journey towards higher education.

Based on the CCW framework and through a process of thematic analysis, the data were coded and categorised to identify themes for analysis. Themes are regarded as unifying concepts that emerge from the data to offer general insights (Boyatzis 1998; Ryan & Bernard 2003). Data were collected about (i) the students' family lives and their families' attitudes towards university; (ii) the communities that students come from and the educational support and perceived outlook of people towards them as they attempted to pursue university studies; (iii) the students' schooling histories and the strategies they adopted in order to gain access to university; (iv) their support networks while trying to gain admission to the university; and (v) their application processes and how they gained admission to the university. I particularly probed the influence of their families, social networks and communities, and schooling en route to university.

In identifying the meanings that emerged from the data, I concentrated on the codes that focused on students' cultural capital and resources in families and communities as they built a path towards university admission. Particular attention was paid to what students were able to do, the resources they were able to draw on, and the support they were able to get to achieve their aspirations for university study. The data were coded using the constant comparative method of coding, after which units of meaning in the data were identified, compared and categorised. Through the inductive method of analysis, important concepts and themes were extracted and patterns of data were highlighted. Tesch (1990, p. 96) suggests that "the goal of the constant comparative method is to discern conceptual similarities, to refine the discriminative power of categories, and to discover patterns". The themes highlighted were: (1) family discourses about education; (2) shared family resources; (3) emotional support from mothers; (4) students' marginal position in their communities; and (5) accessing supportive networks within their school and community environments to assist with university admission. These themes enabled me to offer an analysis to achieve my research objective, which was to explore the pathways by which the selected students gained admission to the university.

The four students selected for this study provided rich stories about their circuitous paths towards university admission. They are all currently registered at the university for an Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP) in three different programmes related to the Applied Sciences. Each of the four selected students was given a pseudonym.

Noluthando hails from the Eastern Cape. She moved to Cape Town after she completed high school. She comes from a single-parent home and is the first in her family to study at university. She currently lives in Khayelitsha. Pulane moved from the Eastern Cape when she was in Grade 10. She completed high school in Philippi, Cape Town and lives with her aunt in Cape Town. Her mother and younger siblings live in the Eastern Cape. Thabisa grew up in a family of three in Temba township in the Gauteng Province. She came to Cape Town after she was accepted at the university, where she lives in a university residence. Sindiswa comes from Hammanskraal in Gauteng. She is the youngest in her family of five children and the first one to attend university. She currently also lives in a university residence.

## **2.5. Activating family capital to pursue university study**

This section presents a discussion of the four selected students' engagement within their family contexts and how they used their family-based capital to open a path to university study. Family capital refers to the "cultural knowledges nurtured among families that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition" (Yosso 2005, p. 79). I focus on the students' accounts of their parents' role in assisting them to pursue university studies, the role of the extended family and the mother's emotional support as resources that students utilise in their quest to gain access to the university.

The data show that their parents played a crucial role in laying the foundation for the four students' aspiration for university studies. They reported that their mothers and fathers instilled in them the desire and need for education. Noluthando explains why her mother encouraged her to further her studies:

My mom she would always say, she's not educated but she will always say the fact that she was not educated that wouldn't mean she doesn't want her children to get education, because I think it's because of the experiences she has been facing throughout growing up, because now if you're not educated you can't go get a better job. And she was working like I don't know how many hours, but she must be going to work by 5 am and come back by 5:30 pm and she was earning just a little money, so maybe that's why she was always encouraging us to go to school. (Noluthando)

Noluthando's account showed that her mother referred to her own lack of education and low-skilled job to motivate her to apply to go to university. Similarly, Thabisa's mother, a nurse, motivated her to study further by constantly reminding her of the need to be employed and have a qualification. She described some of her mother's ways of motivating her to study:

My mom like she comes from a poor background and she would make examples of somebody who picks up the dirt from the streets and people that watch people's cars when you're not there. My mom would tell me like such things, like you see if you don't go to school, this is what will happen to you. And like you end up working hard on things that you're not supposed to work hard on. So you better go to school [university] and work hard. (Thabisa)

This quotation is an example of the type of discussions that Thabisa and her mother had about furthering her studies and the emphasis placed on education as a means to escape poverty. Sindiswa related having similar discussions with her father. She was a good student at school and was the only one in her family who went on to university. She reported that her father motivated her to further her studies and spoke about his lack of opportunity to go to university:

My dad said that he didn't go to university because he was supposed to like take care of his brothers and sisters. But some they did manage to go to university but they didn't graduate and all that because of financial problems. I'm going to be the first one to graduate from university, that's why they're pushed me like hard like to go to university. (Sindiswa)

This comment by Sindiswa highlights how the lack of financial resources could prevent poor students from pursuing higher education. Sindiswa's family was motivated by the possibility that through education they could escape poverty. Noluthando's, Thabisa's and Sindiswa's parents' overwhelming moral support for them to pursue university studies provided them with the motivation to find a way to achieve their goals of attending university. This type of motivation for pursuing university education is rooted in their families' awareness of their own lack of opportunity and resources in the past

to pursue further education. Yosso (2005) refers to this as the memories and histories of disadvantaged students' families which inspire students to pursue university education. The ways in which their families talked about university and obtaining a qualification served as a powerful motivating factor for the students. These four students drew on the discourses of the family that viewed education as a route to break out of poverty. These discourses in turn acted as a resource and a form of capital to encourage Noluthando, Thabisa and Sindiswa to apply for a university placement.

The students in this study relied on extended family members to support them in their quest for university admission. Aunts, uncles, brothers and sisters were actively involved in the students' lives by giving advice, recommending places for further study, assisting with application forms and providing financial assistance to gain entry to the university. Their mothers and fathers were often constrained by low-paying jobs and as a result the students relied on other family members for such support. Extended families provided the instrumental and financial support to students to ensure that they were able gain entry to the university. Noluthando's older sister was very supportive towards her. She explained that "my sister, when I say financial, she will give me money, for travelling and at some point she bought me a laptop because she saw that I'm suffering" (Noluthando). Sindiswa's father was retrenched at the time she submitted her application to study at the university in Cape Town. She relied on her older sister to support her financially and to provide her with money for transport and food. Pulane also depended on her siblings to support her financially when she was eventually accepted for university study. She pointed out that "my siblings are the ones who are supporting me in terms of providing me with money for transport and food" (Pulane). Family members thus contribute financially by assisting students with short-term financial support for registration, travel, food and transport. Yosso (2005, p. 79) describes these support mechanisms as "instrumental support", which is an essential part of the family-based social capital upon which students draw. Yosso (2005) suggests that families become connected with each other around common issues and share family resources. The family members of these students were willing to pool their limited resources to invest in the students' education and used their resources to engender a supportive network, which opened up the possibility for the four students

to enter higher education. The extended family members were therefore influential in activating the processes necessary for opening up a pathway to the university.

While extended family members provided them with financial support, the students depended on their mothers to provide love, care and encouragement as they pursued their educational goals. This emotional support took on various forms. For example, Noluthando reported that her mother often consoled her after a difficult test during her matric year and persuaded her to aspire and not to give up on her goals. The mothers of the participants offered them emotional support and encouragement to apply at the university. Although their mothers played an essential affective role, they generally lacked the ability to support their children's education financially. Pulane gave an account of her mother's support by explaining that "my mom she is very supportive but not financially, because she doesn't have money to support me. But as her child she does support me" (Pulane). Pulane explained how she told her mother about her application:

In those days she didn't know and I didn't want to worry her about that because if I said to her that I want to further my education, she would wish me to do so but she didn't know how to help me to do so. I just decided to tell her when I was accepted. (Pulane)

Pulane did not want her mother to be concerned about her financial needs. Sindiswa expressed a similar sentiment when she said that, "financially she [her mother] is not there, because she does not have money, she supports me emotionally, and I can say she is there. When I need her she is there" (Sindiswa).

These findings are similar to those of Gillies's (2006) study of working-class mothers, which shows that mothers' emotional support acts as a resource and a form of capital that is advantageous to their children. The type of love, care and encouragement that Noluthando, Pulane and Sindiswa received from their mothers is described by Allat (1993) as a form of emotional capital. Allat defines emotional capital as the "emotionally valued assets and skills, love and affection, support, patience and commitment that even wayward children can draw upon" (1993, p. 143). Mothers compensate for the

lack of financial support by encouraging, caring and motivating students to further their education. The mothers' emotional capital served as a driving force that motivated these students to seek a university education.

This section highlighted aspects of the students' family contexts in their quest to gain access to the university. It discussed the type of resources and support available for them to establish a path towards university entry. Their engagement with their families is key to understanding their access paths. Parents' moral discourses about university education, the instrumental support of extended family networks, and mothers' emotional capital are significant resources that the students drew on to open a path to university. The next section focuses on how the selected students accessed and worked with their township community resources to prepare them for university entry.

## **2.6. Mediating the community contexts to open up a pathway to the university**

This section concentrates on how the selected students mediated their township community contexts to secure a path to university studies. Socio-economically, the students in this study hail from low-income townships in the Western Cape and Gauteng provinces. They describe their communities as places with a myriad of social problems that present challenges in terms of everyday survival. They identified social problems they witnessed daily while growing up as including alcohol abuse, lack of care for orphaned children, unemployment, teenage pregnancy and crime.

Noluthando explains some of the social conditions in the township:

Most of the time you will find people drunk, that's what they do. There are children who don't have parents, they stay on their own and only sometimes the social worker takes time to go there. (Noluthando)

Similarly, Pulane describes young people's attitude towards education:

You see in my community there's a lot of, I can say the people at my age are not that interested in education, I can say most of them they don't even have

their matric. The learners that I was studying with, they are just having babies, they are not doing anything in their lives. (Pulane)

Pulane's observation here shows her ability to recognise the challenging circumstances of the community that young people face living in the township. The students reported on the strategies they adopted to deal with these negative circumstances. For example, Pulane reflected on how people have to present themselves in order to avoid being robbed:

If you are wearing nice shoes, they will say take them off. Even the jacket, take it off. If you are going from home about, early hours, you have to wear like not clothes like, you know, that they would want. (Pulane)

They explained that crime is a ubiquitous phenomenon in township life. Noluthando explained the strategies she adopted to avoid becoming a victim of crime by suggesting that,

when I was doing my in-service training I had that situation, travelling very early. So I was like okay, let me have my phone for the sake of them. I have a phone I will have something to give them. (Noluthando)

Noluthando's example indicates that she had to work out strategies to deal with the crime in the area in order to navigate the township community. Pulane reports on how she dealt with violent incidents in the community by explaining that "for us you see our structures, our homes, we normally use, when there is a gunshot, you always sneak down. Sometimes you find it difficult to study. You learn to accept the situation" (Pulane). Pulane's comments show the difficult township environment she had to mediate to enable her to establish a path towards her university education.

Sindiswa describes similar complex living conditions in her township:

In the township there are 24-hour taverns open and they are busy playing music. But you just have to cope with the situation because you have nowhere to go.

The township library is only open at 10 and at about 2 pm they are closed. I'm not sure what's happening in those libraries. (Sindiswa)

Sindiswa's attitude of trying to cope with her environment and using the library as a possible place to study indicates that she was aware of the difficult circumstances that surround her life, but at the same time she looked for opportunities in her environment to achieve her goals for university study. While crime and complicated living conditions were prevalent in their communities, the selected students also had to be cautious about the types of friends they chose in the community. Thabisa described some of the people in her community and how she had to choose her friends carefully:

[but] you see when you grow up or when I chat with my mom, for instance, most of them [other peers] they didn't go to school. So she always tells me that, even their parents they are not happy with their children not going to school or being. Ja, so she always said I must always watch my back all the time and know everyone I will want to make friends with, if she or he's a good person or a right person. So I must look after the friend. I should not make friends with everyone because not everyone wants goods things for you, so I was always careful. (Thabisa)

Thabisa's description of her peers in the community shows that she had to choose her friends carefully in order to maintain her goals for further studies, as most of the young people from her community did not go to school. Similarly, Sindiswa explained why she does not have friends in the township by suggesting that,

because most of the time, the things that we talk about, they don't connect, it's just, it's easy like when I talk about education, but then it would be like you are bragging to them, because they don't do that and then most of them they don't have a Matric. (Sindiswa)

Sindiswa's and Thabisa's accounts show the lack of connection that they felt with their peers in the township as they pursued university studies. They did not talk to people in the community about their plans and ambitions for fear of eliciting bouts of jealousy

and gossip. Sindiswa described some of the people in the township as having negative attitudes about university studies. She pointed out that,

where I come from you know from the townships, if you go to university, they don't wish you well; they don't have that positive thinking. They always talk bad things and stuff, so they don't really motivate somebody to go forward because they would start talking about you. (Sindiswa)

The students stated that they chose to withhold information about their studies, making a concerted effort to hide their plans from other peers who did not have similar interests. Thabisa did not talk to people in the township about her plans to go to university. She felt that people would think that she was more privileged and would be jealous of her. She perceived them as “being jealous that they were not privileged to go to varsity” (Thabisa).

The selected students chose to manage the negative aspects of their township living circumstances, instead opting to focus on the positive support in the community. Zipin (2009) describes such experiences as part of the ‘dark lifeworld’ that students encounter and have to overcome if they want to make it into higher education. Although students were confronted with difficult circumstances in their township, they were able to utilise the supportive structures within the township to support their aspirations to get to university. The students, for example, made use of extracurricular classes, peer support and the church to support them in their attempt to gain a Grade 12 pass, with degree endorsement, which is necessary for gaining university entry. Pulane explained that she attended extra classes offered by an older student who had passed matric the previous year: “He gave us tutorials for Physics, actually, for all the matric subjects” (Pulane). She also attended extra English classes at school and explained “there were people or staff from the South African Environmental Educational Programme (SAEP) [non-governmental organisation], there in Observatory, who come to school and teach us English lessons after school” (Pulane). Thabisa explained that she attended a winter school during her matric year:

I went to winter school at home with the other learners. The schools around the area organised the winter school because it was all the matrics, almost all the matrics who gathered together for the winter school. (Thabisa)

These extracurricular classes served as a crucial form of support to those students who wanted to apply for university admission. The students sought out peers who were studying at university for support and advice. They formed study groups with peers who had similar aspirations for university study. Study groups helped them feel supported and motivated to study for their school examinations. Sindiswa reported that she formed a small study group with four of her school friends. Pulane explained the support that she received from a classmate thus:

And one of my classmates that I got to pass with he was very supportive and I still thank him, even today. He arrived during my matric year from Joburg and the rules were that a student that came to the school in the matric year is not normally allowed to be accepted in a school. But he was accepted due to his marks. He passed very well. And what he will do, if you are being taught something in a class and you don't understand, he wouldn't just give you the answers or you would be given the homework to do and if you don't understand that thing, he would show you how to do it. So that even if you are writing a test or an assignment, you get to know how to do it. He wasn't just going to give you answers just to copy. He would teach you how to do it and you get to know. (Pulane)

Pulane was assisted by this student to work productively through her schoolwork. She thus formed a strategic relationship with him to reach her goals for university entry. The selected students thus managed to find some support from like-minded peers and community-based initiatives that supported them in their schooling and preparation for the final Grade 12 examinations.

Besides peer support from like-minded peers and extracurricular classes, their respective churches provided them with religious support and spiritual comfort while they were preparing for and writing their examinations. Sindiswa commented that “we

used to have exam prayers for matrics on a specific day. Ja, so we get like, we get that strong feeling that we have to go on and on” (Sindiswa).

Pulane participated in the youth sessions provided by the church that she attended, where they were able to “talk about school, you know when you talk of what is it that you can do after matric” (Pulane). Thabisa reflected on encouraging announcements at church:

at church as well, like you would hear announcement like you know like there are bursary forms available at the city council and what not so, you know people would pass on messages like that to inspire you. (Thabisa)

The students were thus able to draw on the motivation and support that the church provided. Yosso (2005, p. 79) refers to this as the social capital found in disadvantaged communities in which “networks of people and community resources, peers and other social contacts provide both instrumental and emotional support”. The participants in this study made use of the supportive structures available in the township and developed strategic engagements with the people in the township to strengthen their chances of gaining entry to university. These engagements served as a means to achieve their aspirations for university study. At the same time the students had to navigate their community’s darker aspects such as crime, unemployment and negative peer pressure. Yosso (2005, p. 80) describes this navigational ability as the “individual agency” that students develop in response to the constraints they face in their community.

The selected students’ ability to steer between the ‘dark’ circumstances that they are faced with, on the one hand, and their ability to draw on and participate in the supportive structures of their community, on the other, represents the complex paths that the students had to walk in order to stay on course for entry into university study. Their capacity to generate positive networks and recognise and steer around the ‘darker’ aspects of their township life was central to their paving the way towards university admission. I argue that the students’ ability to differentiate between the constructive and the negative aspects of their community is a critical practice in their

educational lives. I now go on to focus on their application processes, aspirational routes and eventual admission to the university.

## **2.7. Circuitous routes towards their university admission**

One of the most striking features in the data is the high aspirations that the four students had while in high school about the types of careers they wanted to pursue. Thabisa's aspirations were related to her intense interest in Biology. She wanted to pursue a career in the science field. Sindiswa thought that she was good at Mathematics and Science when she was in high school, which informed her initial interest in studying in a science direction. She explained that "I always felt that I'm a science person. I want to pursue something in science. I wanted to become a doctor". Because of low marks for Physical Science and Mathematics for her Grade 12 examination, she lowered her aspirations. She describes why her aspirations changed:

I think when you grow up, you get low marks for key subjects, you start to realise like it's not only medicine, there are other courses that you can do. There are a lot of things that you can do and maybe you find that you're not that type. You don't want to be — how can I say? Like you don't want to be in the hospital, maybe you want to do other stuff. (Sindiswa)

While Sindiswa made a realistic assessment of the types of courses she would qualify for, she maintained her interest in the field of science. Pulane's choice represents a similar pattern. She wanted to become a chemical engineer and was very practical about her aspirational routes: "What changed me were my marks, I did not get good marks in Maths and Physics, but I wanted to do work in the science field" (Pulane). Pulane reported that her teachers and older siblings informed her about the benefits of studying Science. Explaining how she began to think about her potential field of study, Pulane said 'When you're doing your — when you did Physics, you can even be a pilot. You can even be a doctor. I was hearing like there are so many opportunities when you did your Physics' (Pulane). Pulane's account illustrates that she identified studying courses in the science stream in secondary school as a route that would provide her employment in an attractive profession. At the same time she recognised

the constraints of her low marks in Grade 12, but remained committed to the possibility of obtaining a university education.

Noluthando similarly aspired to become a doctor when she was in high school. Her aspirations changed quite markedly while still at school. She settled on aspiring to become a social worker. She explained why her aspirations changed by expressing a desire to help others in her community:

I don't think the social workers or there are not enough social workers, because there are people who need help out there, but there are not enough social workers around the community I'm living in, because I think if I can be a social worker I can see to the things that are there that people need to be attended on, so that further steps can be taken to help people. (Noluthando)

Noluthando's statement shows her desire to improve her community's living conditions, to make a difference in her township and her awareness of the township community's needs. The selected students had high career aspirations, but when they were confronted with their low marks in the Grade 12 examination, they adjusted their aspirations and settled for lower aspirations that would still give them entry to the university.

The data showed that the participants followed indirect pathways to secure their admission to university study. The participants in this study followed various avenues to apply for, and gain, university admission. Noluthando worked at a furniture shop after she matriculated, because her applications to two universities were unsuccessful. She continued to apply at several universities while she was working. In her first application after Grade 12 she applied for a Social Work degree, which was one of her aspirations, at another university in Cape Town, but was unsuccessful. She was able to save money for her registration fees while working. During her second year of work she submitted two unsuccessful applications to universities, one of which was to study teaching. Noluthando persisted in applying, continuing to hold out hope that she would be accepted. She explained how she had to apply and gain acceptance at the university:

I got the forms, I came here myself. And I was tired of sending the forms and you don't get a reply. So I thought maybe it would be better if I come here myself [to the university]. And then I got a letter saying that I'm not accepted for Education. And then I came back again, same year, asking them which course I can apply for, if Education is full. They showed me the courses that are still available. I applied for this course. I submitted the form again, same year and I was waiting for the response. I didn't get any response. I came back again to ask them for the response. The lady at reception, she said she will call; I will get the response before the 5<sup>th</sup> of December. I said to her and then if I don't get the response what must I do? She said you can come to me – and I was like I will come, luckily I got the response. (Noluthando)

Noluthando's actions illustrate her ability to find her way through the application process and her persistence and determination to gain entry to the university. After submitting three applications, she was eventually accepted for the Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP) in the university's Applied Sciences Faculty. Persistently applying over a two-year period thus eventually paid off. Noluthando's actions demonstrate her ability to "navigate through the spaces and places of institutions" (Yosso 2005, p. 80) before she gained access to the university.

Pulane did not have the financial means to attend university immediately after school. She worked for two years at various retail outlets to save money for her university studies, and in particular to pay for her registration fees during her first year. She initially wanted to study chemical engineering, but after obtaining poor results in Mathematics and Physical Science, she adjusted her expectations. She was still determined to do a course in the science field for which she would qualify with her lower Grade 12 results. Pulane approached an older student who was already studying at the university to help her with her application. She commented that she,

realised that the time is running, I'm running out of time now. I have to study and I asked the gentleman who was doing this course to bring me the forms and he got them for me. So I applied and they said in three months they will respond

but they didn't. So, I had their telephone numbers, everything, so I called.  
(Pulane)

Pulane planned her application route during the two years that she was working. She found information about the type of courses for which she could apply by, for example, approaching a university student about various courses. She made short-term financial plans to pay her registration fees. She planned to apply for financial aid once accepted. Pulane, too, had to opt for the (ECP) Applied Sciences, a course that accommodated her low results in Grade 12 Mathematics and Physical Science.

The other two participants took different routes to gain admission to the university. Thabisa applied to two universities after Grade 12, but was unsuccessful because her applications were late. Thabisa's aspiration to study in the field of biology could not be realised because of her Grade 12 results. She decided to look for other more practical options in the science field and decided to apply at a Further Education and Training College for a more realistic option. After attending the college for six months, struggling to pay the fees, she decided to apply for her current Biotechnology (ECP) course at the university in Cape Town. Her university entry was thus delayed by a year because of her enrolment at the FET College. Keen on university study in Cape Town, she got an uncle to assist her with the application process. She explained that,

He actually stood by me. He actually helped me to fax all the papers. Ja, he's the one who asked for my information – there's this university where you can apply there. You can apply to Cape Town. You can apply to whatsoever universities. Yes and he was the one who was talking me to about all these things. (Thabisa)

Sindiswa also took a somewhat roundabout route to gain her university admission. She aspired to study botany, but her father wanted her to study chemical engineering after she passed her Grade 12 examinations. He encouraged her to apply at the University of South Africa (UNISA) to do distance learning after she was unsuccessful with her other university applications. She studied chemical engineering for two years at UNISA, but did not like the correspondence distance-learning nature of the course. She wanted to attend a university where she would be supported more directly. She

explained her frustration with UNISA: “At UNISA you only study and you’re writing your exams. And there were assignments. You’ve got a lot of time but you don’t even know how to do it” (Sindiswa). Frustrated with distance learning, Sindiswa wanted to find an institution that would be suitable for her academic needs. After her two unsuccessful years at UNISA she began to plan her application to the university in Cape Town. Sindiswa’s sister motivated her to apply at the university and assisted her with the application process. Applying at the university in Cape Town was facilitated by her older sister. Sindiswa explained her sister’s role: “My sister was working in Cape Town and told me; she told me that Cape Town is a good place to study” (Sindiswa). She applied and was accepted for the Biotechnology (ECP) course. Despite her ambition to study chemical engineering at first, she opted for the ECP diploma in the Applied Sciences department. This diploma was an alternative option made available by this university for students, such as the selected students in this study, who had lower qualifying Grade 12 marks in the required subjects.

The students settled for a specific extended course as part their strategy to gain entry to the university. Settling on a course for which their Grade 12 marks qualified them is a strategy informed by what Yosso (2005, p. 77) refers to as a form of “aspirational capital”, which is ‘the ability of students to maintain hopes and dreams for the future even in the face of real and perceived barriers, by dreaming and nurturing a culture of possibility beyond their present circumstances’. The students’ determination to gain university entry is reflected by some of them taking on stints of work and finding alternative educational avenues, while still maintaining their aspirations to study at university. Their tenacity to remain engaged and committed to their aspirational quest for a university education was an important aspect of their admission and access routes. It is clear that they had to deploy a type of “aspirational capital” (Yosso 2005, p. 77) in their desire to gain entry to the university. They displayed endurance and focus in their commitment to gain entry, despite having to travel more challenging and varied application and admission paths than their middle-class peers. They had to contend with raising money and finding information about courses from friends and acquaintances. Applications were often made to more than one university over two years. The selected students were supported by family and community members in

their applications to the university. These supportive mechanisms can be regarded as the forms of capital that students utilise as they plan to seek admission to a university.

## **2.8. Conclusion**

In this article I presented four disadvantaged students' pre-university pathways towards their university application and acceptance. I argued that recognising these pathways would provide universities with a basis for establishing an appropriate access and engagement platform to immerse these types of students effectively into university study. The discussion showed the ways in which the students were positioned in their family and township networks, and how they went about maximising their contextual resources to gain university entry. They activated family capital such as parents' moral discourses, extended family networks and their mothers' emotional support as a means of channelling themselves in the direction of university study. They made strategic decisions to deflect and avoid some of the 'darker' aspects of their poor communities that would have prevented them from achieving their academic goals. The selected students were able to utilise support structures in the community in their attempt to establish an educational pathway.

The findings show that the routes that these students took to gain university entry were complex and circuitous, causing them to take much longer to gain admission to university study. The study also showed that although students maintained their aspirations for university study, they lowered the scope of their aspirations as a result of the constraints that they encountered within their social and schooling contexts. Taking courses that corresponded with their lower Grade 12 results is as much informed by settling for a realistic option as it was a means of staying on course on the path towards fulfilling their educational aspirations. Settling on lowered aspirations is a distinctive feature of the selected students' entry to the university. Gaining entry, albeit not for the courses they initially intended to follow, is an outcome of their desire to construct a pathway to, and stay on course for, acquiring a university education.

The article provides insight into students' complex mediations of their community contexts and mobilisation of available networks. It is clear that these students have

considerable and sophisticated intellectual mediating capacity which ought to be harnessed appropriately during their university study. Providing rigorous educational support processes that recognise and work with their social and intellectual capability would enable universities to engage disadvantaged students in their studies. Their community-based cultural capitals should therefore be acknowledged by the university when admitting students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This is a core challenge that emerged from my study. It is clear that if universities fail to adapt more rigorously its reception, student engagement culture and educational support practices to the requirements of these students, they will continue to offer mere access without providing such students with a platform for educational success.

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## Chapter 3 (Article 2)

Exploring the educational engagement practices of disadvantaged students at a South African university

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### 3.1. Abstract

This article discusses the educational engagement practices of disadvantaged first-generation students at a South African university. Based on qualitative research conducted in the interpretive tradition and using interviews and focus groups with selected students, this article explores how disadvantaged students engage with the education and support structures at the university. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1990, 1992) analytical tools of field, capital and habitus, it explores how students are able to produce practices and dispositions to develop their educational engagement within the university. The article highlights the varied and uneven field conditions of the university in terms of which the students had to navigate their university studies. Their responses to these conditions were strategically directed towards narrowly focusing on, and maximizing, their academic commitments to their studies. This resulted in minimal and halting engagement with the university's social support services. The article demonstrates the significance of the students' complex engagements with their lecturers, active and productive interaction with their student peers and the academic support offered by the university's Teaching and Learning unit. These were central to their engagement practices at the university. The article illustrates the students' acquisition of strategic emergent academic dispositions in an uneven university field. These dispositions, I argue, are crucial to them establishing productive educational paths at the university.

**Keywords:** disadvantaged students; educational engagements, university support structures, peer engagement

### 3.2. Introduction

After 1994 South African universities embarked on a process to increase access to higher education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (see Cloete et al. 2004). However, there have been a range of reasons why such efforts have not seen much progress. Seepe (2000) suggest that South Africa's universities are not optimally prepared for these 'newer' types of students who are mainly from township school backgrounds. Krause (2005) points out that the culture of higher institutions is foreign and alienating to first-generation university students from disadvantaged communities as they lack the social and cultural capital to engage effectively at university. Smit (2011) thus questions the adequacy of the response of higher education institutions to disadvantaged students and the nature of the support they provide.

A review of the literature shows that research on educational engagement and student support mostly focuses on what the institutions and students should do to facilitate students' engagement with the university (Trowler, 2010). A study by Leach and Zepke (2011) highlights how non-institutional factors such as students' financial problems, their family responsibilities and the impact of poverty influence students' educational experiences. Kuh (2009) suggests that the time and effort students spend on their study activities have consequences for their educational success. Bozalek (2009) focuses on what students can do to enhance their educational experiences at university. She suggests that active participation, shared learning and securing financial assistance are strategies that students employ for successful study. Solomonides (2013) discusses the affective dimensions of student engagement. Work on schooling contexts highlights the importance of behavioural, academic, psychological and cognitive aspects as key to understanding student engagement (see Christenden, Reschly & Wylie 2012; Fredericks, Blumenfeld & Paris 2004; Lawson & Lawson 2013).

What I miss in this research is students' accounts of their experiences and educational engagement practices at the university. This article thus focuses on students' agency and capacity to engage in their education at the university. It focuses on the educational engagement practices of first-generation students from low socio-

economic backgrounds at one South African university. The article explores the ways in which they are able to navigate the university's educational infrastructure. Educational engagement here refers to the practices that students establish to access and engage with the university as well as its support infrastructure, which is meant to provide them with their "opportunity to learn" (Boykin & Noguera, 2011, p. 1)

To make sense of how students are positioned at and by the university, as well as how students position themselves, this study draws on the work of Bourdieu (1990, 1992). Using qualitative research methods, I show how students engage the institution's enablements and constraints in interacting with the university's academic and institutional structures. My main finding is that they actively go about establishing productive engagements to strengthen their academic performance despite the uneven educational support environment at this particular university. Understanding how students engage within the institutional terrain is key to understanding the resources that they draw on and the activities they are able to generate to advance their education at the university. I argue that the selected students discussed in this article developed emergent forms of engagement that enabled them to establish productive educational paths at the university.

### **3.3. The context and participants of the study**

The university that forms the context for researching this phenomenon is in the Western Cape Province. In addition to its regular programmes, the university offers an alternative, longer programme for students who do not qualify for admission, namely the Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP). The ECP allows students who do not meet the requirements to enter the mainstream programme to register for a four-year diploma via this alternate route. The students on the ECP follow a similar curriculum to the mainstream programmes, but all their semester subjects are extended to a year. This allows lecturers to provide additional support in the form of tutorials, mentoring, technological support and service learning modules. The programme has a separate timetable during the first and second years with dedicated lecturers. Lecturers attend developmental workshops that support their pedagogical approaches towards

teaching these students. They are encouraged to give concerted targeted support to the students via the use of innovative teaching methods.

The participants of the study were selected from the Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP) and were registered for course in the Applied Sciences Faculty. They receive additional learning support in modules such as Physical Science, Mathematics and other modules related to their specific areas of study. The participants were all township school graduates. They obtained lower than required scores for Mathematics and Physical Science in their high school matric examination. Despite their lower matric results in these two key science subjects, they still wanted to apply for courses in the applied sciences field. They made a conscious decision to be part of the ECP, even if that meant that they would have to spend an extra year at university. The students regarded their admission to the ECP as a 'second chance' and an opportunity to compensate for the low marks they received in high school.

### **3.4. Theoretical framework**

Bourdieu's (1992) concepts of field, capital and habitus informed my understanding of the strategies that disadvantaged students employ to develop their educational engagements at the university. Bourdieu proposed that,

in order to understand interactions between people or to explain an event or social phenomena it was insufficient to look at what was said and what happened. It became necessary to examine the social spaces in which interactions, transactions and events occurred. (Thomson, 2014, p. 65)

The concept of field is an essential part of Bourdieu's analytical toolbox to explain individuals' interactions with the social structure. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p.97) define the concept 'field' as

a network of objective historical relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents and institutions, by their present and potential

situations in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital), whose possession commands access to specific profits that are at stake in the field as well as by their objective relation to other positions (domination, subordination, homology).

Field thus refers to the social space as made up of institutions, situations, power and people's practices. This study's 'field' is the university's educational platform, which includes the courses that the selected students are registered for, the teaching and learning support services, and other support services at the university. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) compares field to a game guided by rules and field positions for the various players who participate. The positions they occupy in the game determine their actions. However, in contrast to the rigidity of the game, field is "much more fluid and complex than any game that one might ever design" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 104). Therefore Bourdieu (2005: 148) maintains that it is necessary to "examine the social space" in order to understand social practices in the field.

Furthermore, Bourdieu suggests that the game that occurs in social spaces is competitive and that players use various strategies to maintain or improve their field position. The analogy of the field and the field positions of players are useful in a study that seeks to understand how first-generation students who gained access to the university through admission into an extended curriculum programme (ECP) navigate this social space. The focus in this article is on how and in what ways they are able to engage in their education at the university.

Bourdieu (1992) argues that individuals are always in the process of producing capital in the field, by which he means investments in social field. He argues that individuals are in the process of producing differing amounts and quality of capital to engage in the field, and that some even have 'trump cards' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 98). According to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), capital functions as power over a field and the more capital an agent is able to access and amass, the more power he or she will be able to exert in the game. However, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds might not have the extensive capital possessed by middle-class students, but they do have what Yosso (2005) calls community cultural wealth to draw on.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977: 8) argue that the “cultural capital of different social groups are unevenly valued in society, and that the value placed on any particular form of cultural capital is arbitrary – that is, it cannot be deduced from any universal principle, whether physical, biological or spiritual”. Giving more value to one group over another creates conflict and points of struggle among the different social class groups in the social. Bourdieu (1990) argues that practices are generated in the interaction of habitus, capital and field. He suggests that there are different power dynamics and conflicts within the field and individuals enter into formal agreements in the game and have a vested interest in the game. While the ‘field’ is the terrain for Bourdieu’s ‘logic of practice’ (1990: 80), habitus is introduced as a related concept to understand human actions in relation to the social structures that they are a part of.

Bourdieu (1990: 86) defines the individual’s habitus as “ways of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking” and adds that habitus “refers to something historical, it is linked to individual history”. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: 126) suggest that “to speak of habitus is to assert that the individual, and even the personal, the subjective, is social, collective. Habitus is socialized subjectivity”. Bourdieu describes habitus as a “feel for the game” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 28). He regards the ability of the individual to read the field as the function of her habitus. Bourdieu (1993: 87) indicates that individuals have various dispositions towards the game and argues that “dispositions or tendencies are durable in that they last over time, and are transportable in being capable of becoming active within a wide variety of theatres of social action”. Bourdieu (1992) argues that the relation between habitus and field is crucial for understanding how practices occur in social spaces. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: 127) suggest that the relation between habitus and field operates in two ways.

On one side, it is a relation of conditioning: the field structures the habitus, which is the product of the embodiment of the immanent necessity of a field or of a set of intersecting fields, the extent of their intersection or discrepancy being at the root of a divided or even torn habitus. On the other side, it is the relation of knowledge or cognitive construction. Habitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world, a world endowed with senses and value, in which it is worth investing one’s energy.

Maton (2014: 50) describes Bourdieu's notion of habitus as "structured by material conditions of existence and generates practices, beliefs, perceptions, feelings and so forth in accordance with its own structure". He explains that Bourdieu's notion of 'field' refers to "part of the on-going contexts in which we live, structures the habitus, while at the same time the habitus is the basis for actors' understanding of their lives, including the field" (Maton 2014: 51). For Bourdieu (2000: 150-151) the relation between habitus and field can be regarded as "a meeting of two evolving logics and histories". In the evolving higher education space the habitus of students is constantly emerging and reproducing educational capital and practices. The students' unfolding engagement practices therefore focuses on how their habitus emerges and adapts in interaction with the university field.

Thus, like Bourdieu (1977: 72), we see institutional space as a "strategy-generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever changing situations". Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: 129) suggest that individuals adopt strategies to find a 'feel for the game'. They define strategies as "objectively orientated lines of action which the social agents continually construct in and through practice" (1992: 129). Jenkins (1992: 51) suggests that, according to Bourdieu, strategies are "the on-going result of the interaction between the dispositions of the habitus and the constraints and possibilities which are the reality of any given social field". Bourdieu explains that individuals are involved in a "strategic calculation of costs and benefits" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 131). By employing Bourdieu's analytical tools of field, capital and habitus, this article explores the strategies and activities that disadvantaged students utilise to develop their educational engagements with the university. His analytical tools allow us to discuss how students are able to produce practices and dispositions by which they are able to access and engage the university as a 'field'.

### **3.5. Research design and methodology**

This study followed a qualitative, interpretative methodological approach to understanding the educational engagement practices of disadvantaged first generation students at the university. The sample population was senior students in their fourth year of study who participated in a mentoring programme. From this group seven students were purposively selected based on the criterion that they were first-

generation students who came from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Purposive selection emphasises information-rich participants (Patton 2002) and allowed us to gain an in depth understanding of their educational engagement strategies. Of the seven participants, five are from the Western Cape Province and are Xhosa speakers. The other two students come from the Gauteng province and are Tswana speakers. Three students live in the university's residence. Pseudonyms were assigned for all participants.

Bourdieu's analytical framework was employed to interpret the data on how students engage with the institutional context as a space that structures the habitus within which they navigate the world of being a student. The methods of data collection were appropriate for this purpose, as interviews gave the participants the opportunity to express themselves and share their opinions on important events associated with their educational engagement at the university.

Leach and Zepke's (2011) student engagement model was used as an organising framework for the semi-structured interview questions and the focus group discussion. This model focuses on significant aspects of engagement at the university such as students' transactions with lecturers as well as with peers, the institutional support offered to students at universities, and the non-institutional factors such as the support of family and friends, and the impact of poverty on students' educational experiences at the university. Leach and Zepke's (2011) model allowed us to understand the various spaces and places students were able to access and utilise for their educational engagement, i.e. the fields and capitals which they were able to mobilise in building up their habitus. The semi-structured interviews enabled us to elicit responses from students about their educational engagement practices and also assisted us to better understand and explain the broader university contexts in which these practices occur. We focused on the participants' perspectives, meanings and subjective views. Patton (2015: 8) notes that "looking for patterns in what human beings do and think, and examining the implications of those patterns, are some of the basic contributions of qualitative inquiry. The focus group discussion allowed us to clarify targeted issues that came out of the semi- structured interviews that we wanted to probe further. Okeke and Van Wyk (2015: 340) point out that focus group

discussions assist in establishing “multiple understandings and meanings”. The focus group discussion thus elicited further discussion on aspects that emerged from the interviews which needed more clarification. For these reasons we used semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to obtain data about the types of educational practices participants produced while they were studying at the university.

Data were collected on their interactions and engagements with the university’s support structures, lecturers and fellow students. Important concepts and themes were extracted and patterns of data were highlighted; similar ideas were then grouped together and themes were developed. We explored situations that could potentially inform us about students’ engagement with lecturers, their interaction with their peers, and their engagement with the support campus structures such as the counselling centres, computer laboratories, writing centres, residences and their off-campus life as these affect their university education. These themes enabled us to offer an analysis to achieve our research objective, which was to explore the ways students were able to establish their engagement practices with reference to the university’s support platforms. The themes highlighted were (1) active strategies to engage lecturers, (2) seeking support from significant others, (3) seeking support from older students, (4) pedagogical engagement with peers, (4) difficulty accessing and utilising support structures such as sport and religious organisations at the university, (5) struggling to engage effectively in the residences, and (6) time constraints experienced by off-campus students. These themes enabled us to inductively analyse how they mapped and established their engagement practices at the university. This involved reading and comparing our data with the theoretical frameworks that we employed for the research (Taylor & Bodgan 1984: 127). Our inductive approach enabled us to analyse the data and generate analytical categories to elucidate our research focus and questions (Patton 2015: 548). In the section that follows we discuss the three themes that emerged from the data.

### **3.6. Students’ tentative engagements with the university’s support structures**

Tinto (1993) suggests that students’ integration into social and academic life provides them with a strong sense of commitment to their institutional experiences and enables

them to become competent members of the academic community. My exploration of this shows that the participants were directed towards the institutional support services through the orientation programmes offered to first-year students. The students were given a brief overview of the types of support they could access. Students reported that they used the library to borrow books, meet with their study group, and search for journal articles, and access computers and the university's e-learning platforms. They indicated that they particularly used the library to meet with students for group projects and larger research projects. They made use of the learner management system (LMS) to access assessment information, announcements from lecturers and class notes. Naledi explained that during her first year of study the use of the LMS gave her opportunities to use the library's computer facilities. She explained that,

Blackboard gave me the influence of being in front of a computer almost every day; I had access to the announcement and could wait for the marks - so it gives me that feeling of using computers. (Naledi)

The research participants were compelled to complete a basic computer skills course during their first year of university study. None of them had prior access to computers during their high school years. During their four years at the institution their on-going exposure to computers for their learning gave them the computer skills necessary for university study. By their final year most of the participants had acquired personal laptops, which further facilitated access to the university's learning resources.

The students reported that they sought the support of the Teaching and Learning Unit (TLU) at the university for tutorials and for writing support. They stated that their department formally arranged with the TLU to offer their students writing, tutorial and mentorship support. Musa explained that he came to the TLU regularly to submit writing reports and that the department allocated a certain percentage towards their final marks if these reports had been submitted to the TLU for advice and improvement. Naledi expressed her appreciation for the tutorial support by explaining that she thought that "the TLU has faith in young people". She felt that such support gave her confidence to continue her studies. The students had a chance to engage with the writing consultants, tutors and mentees who were provided by the TLU. It was clear

that for these students' activities such as tutoring, mentoring and writing support were a crucial addition to their overall curriculum experiences and they established productive relationships with the TLU based services.

Although the students made use of the academic services, they struggled to make use of the counselling services offered by the institution. All students were aware of the counselling services and that they are available for voluntary and confidential access. Noluthando and Naledi both attempted to consult with a counsellor at the start of their studies. Noluthando indicated that she struggled to cope with her first year of study, because she was working and studying at the same time. She made an appointment to see the counsellor but did not meet up with the counsellor when it was time for her appointment due to time constraints. Naledi intended to access the counselling services for assistance during her second year of study, but failed to arrange an appointment. Despite having access to the services, Naledi did not seek the help that she needed. These students attempted to get a sense of the resources at the university in order to access the services available to them. Their lack of action and follow-through suggests that they did not always explore or utilise the counselling and other similar services for a more optimal university experience.

Most of the participants live off campus, a situation that hampered their opportunities to become involved in social activities on campus. They often had late afternoon classes and had to travel long distances to get home. Musa explained why it was difficult for him to get involved in other social activities on campus by saying that his "classes were ending at four and I had to travel and the trains, sometimes they delay a lot and I'm arriving at home eight o'clock. So I thought I will never make it". Similarly, Noluthando wanted to get involved in social group activity but was constrained by the long distances she had to travel to get home. Sifiso was willing to get involved in campus organisations but spent a substantial amount of time travelling to and from campus with public transport. The students had to fit in their studies around their travelling time. Social participation was difficult for them because of poor transport services to and from campus.

Leach and Zepke (2011) suggest that non-institutional challenges such as these are important to acknowledge when discussing students' engagement. They point to the "complex interaction between the personal and contextual factors" (2011, p. 200) that characterise students' university experiences. The selected students were confronted with difficult daily socioeconomic circumstances which impacted on their university life. On the other hand, those students who lived in the university residences participated in selected activities at the university. Thabisa and Sindiswa, who stayed on at the residence until their final year, joined the residence netball team. They did not have a formal coach but they would occasionally participate in practice sessions and matches amongst students at the residence. They explained that other students were not fully committed to participating in the games and that the netball matches were organised on casual basis. Their remarks show that despite living on campus they found it difficult to commit to participating in sport activities.

The research participants' tentative engagements with available social support structures can be attributed to their lack of knowledge about how to access them as well as the time constraints that prevented them from fully accessing the services and activities, even though information about these services and activities were given to them during the orientation programmes. de Certeau (1984) refers to this type of information as 'tour knowledge', referring to knowledge given via once-off impersonal instruction about the availability of resources, physical and social spaces, and other generic information. Such information or knowledge does not in itself capacitate the students to properly access and use these resources and services. The students were not provided with any type of 'map knowledge', which refers to detailed understanding of what is required to successfully navigate and maximise behaviour in social spaces (de Certeau, 1984). They did not get exposure to the type of knowledge and information for them to develop the necessary capacity or interpersonal skills to access and utilise the university's services.

Tinto (2008, p. 26) suggests that "students need to benefit from social support services, including academic advice, personal and career counselling". My data show that the students prioritised their academic work over social activities. They did not recognise the social support services as essential to their university education and were uncertain

about how to explore the social support structures. The students' attempt to develop 'a sense of the game' was constrained by limited access to the social support within these structures. They displayed only minimal or tentative interest about, and involvement in, social activities at the university as they had to focus their time and energy on their academic work. Bourdieu refers to this type of behaviour as resulting from a "strategic calculation of costs and benefits" (Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992, p. 133), which arises out of their habitus.

They calculated that it would be in their best interest to give precedence to the development of their academic capacity by utilising the university's academic support structures such as the TLU mentoring and tutoring services. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) argue that meaningful social action is only possible through access to forms of capital that are recognised in the field. The students identified the TLU as the space in which they would acquire the 'capital' necessary for success in their course. In the absence of a type of 'map knowledge' with regard to the other social support services on campus, they focused their engagement on their academic commitments, which is a reflection of their one-dimensional type of engagement at the university. In the next section, I focus on the strategies that the students adopted to engage with lecturers teaching their courses.

### **3.7. Students' strategies to engage lecturers**

This theme explores how the students engage with their ECP lecturers around module content and learning, and sheds light on the ways, and extent to which, the students were able to actively leverage university support for their academic development. Leach and Zepke (2011) conceptualise students' engagement with lecturers as a type of lecturer-student transaction entered into by two parties. My data show that students' consultations with lecturers were crucial to their educational engagement activities. Musa consulted with his Food Chemistry and Microbiology lecturers because he needed to familiarise himself with the scientific terms used on these modules. Musa explained:

I had a problem with the Food Chemistry. So she [the lecturer] said I must make sure that every day I am looking after Food Chemistry, because Food Chemistry it's more scientific, so it needs time, same as Micro [biology]. So, I treated Food Chemistry same as Micro because when I was studying Micro, I had a problem with it but the more I put time into it, at least I was having a better understanding.  
(Musa)

Musa's statement shows that through consultation with these two lecturers he was able to understand the importance of investing more time in some subjects in order to pass. Sindiswa consulted a lecturer because she found a module challenging. Through dialogue and discussions with the lecturer Sindiswa attempted to clarify her understanding of aspects of the module's content. Though she found reaching out to her lecturer challenging, she also knew that if she wanted to pass, she had to "keep on making sure that whatever I'm doing is right and I understand it". Sindiswa's interaction with the lecturer showed her persistence and determination to understand the subject.

Naledi chose to discuss her study methods with her Microbiology lecturer. She explained her study strategies to the lecturer and requested guidance about how to study for Microbiology. According to Naledi, the lecturer emphasised the importance of memorising key concepts at the initial stages of studying. She reported that the lecturer cautioned her about writing down too much information and that; instead, memorising was crucial at this early stage of learning the subject. Naledi stated that:

... when she looked at my summaries she said I did – I include a lot of information and unnecessary information. She said this information is too much; you won't be able to know this information,

Naledi's interaction demonstrated the importance of receiving clear guidance from lecturers about appropriate study techniques.

Another significant feature of the data was reports by some of the participants that they consulted with lecturers for their own as well as their study group's benefit. The

students felt that they needed to report back to their groups any information or skills that lecturers gave them during consultations. Sifiso pointed out that,

the lecturer knows that you are here for yourself and you are here for the rest of your study group. So when she or he explains it, she or he was explaining it in a way that you must get it. (Sifiso)

Sifiso explained that he consulted with lecturers with the view of giving feedback to his study group. Sindiswa developed a similar strategy. She provided the group detailed feedback about their lecturers' comments. The interviewed students consulted more readily with approachable lecturers who they felt were open to interacting productively with them. Thabisa referred to two lecturers whom she admired and who motivated her. She was impressed by these lecturers' commitment to connecting community-based initiatives to the lecture content, which made this module meaningful and the lecturers accessible to her. According to the students, supportive and engaging lecturers were easier to approach for assistance with the problems that they experienced with their learning.

Assessment feedback from their lecturers was an important area of students' engagement with the lecturers. Students regarded the post-test feedback discussions as a space for engagement and dialogue. Musa explained the value of post-test feedback,

And also what I like about lecturers, after assessment, you go through the question paper and you do some corrections and look at a better way to look at the problem because sometimes you understand it, the concept but not the question in the exam. (Musa)

Musa's comments showed that he considered his discussions with lecturers after assessments as a vital part of his learning. His engagement with lecturers after tests showed how he was beginning to learn to take up the types of practices crucial for acquiring the kind of academic disposition that would enable him to succeed at his studies.

The participants were encouraged by their lecturers to conform to the academic rules and processes within the departments. The students decided, in turn, to participate actively in these processes, in other words to 'play the game' necessary for their learning engagement. Some of the lecturers were aware of the responsibilities to provide support to these students and consequently offered one-on-one consultations, extra explanation, second assignment opportunities and writing support. The students explained that it was through using these support mechanisms that they were able to develop the required academic dispositions which placed them in a position to make their way productively through their various modules. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p.133) refer to this dispositional acquisition as part of engaging in habitus formation via "an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures". The support offered by the lecturers in these courses had a direct impact on the students' capacity for improving and augmenting their academic engagement, which played a key role in shaping their habitus in the university context.

Not all encounters with their lecturers were positive and beneficial. In one course, in particular, they were never given the opportunity to consult with their lecturers. These lecturers were described as unfriendly and unapproachable. Pulane explained that the lecturers were largely white lecturers and mostly spoke Afrikaans.

We only understand English and they will speak Afrikaans even in practicals and they will say in Afrikaans it's like this. I didn't do Afrikaans in high school. It's unfair. (Pulane)

Pulane's comment showed that she felt excluded and unrecognised when lecturers used another language. This affected her academic engagement negatively, which resulted in her failing the subject. Bourdieu (1977, p. 78) describes this type of experience as 'hysteresis', with reference to a situation "when practices are always liable to incur negative sanctions when the environment with which they are actually confronted is too distant from that in which they are objectively fitted". Pulane

experienced a sense of disconnection, which, according to her, added to her difficulty with this course.

In addition to these negative comments, Pulane and Noluthando also experienced negative post-test feedback from their lecturers. This compelled Noluthando to adopt a courageous stance towards her lecturers. Noluthando explained,

The Biochemistry teacher, 'that is rubbish' all over my script. He wrote rubbish. I showed the (HOD). It was very bad and it's not like I wrote something that was out of context or... But he must not do that, it's not nice because as a student... they are supposed to motivate us and when he wrote I'm writing rubbish, how's that going to motivate me? (Noluthando)

Though Noluthando was severely affected by the comment of the lecturer, she still went to the Head of Department to complain about this treatment. Her actions showed that she had the courage to speak out and took the risk of being victimised further. Speaking out was her way of resisting the destructive manner in which she was assessed. She hoped that this would result in improved interactions with the lecturer. She felt that asserting herself was important for herself as well as for future students, so that they would not experience a similar fate. Her ability to confront the department about her treatment by the lecturer meant that she took strategic action to challenge some of the rules and attitudes in the department.

Similarly, Pulane experienced a lack of support from the course lecturer when she wanted feedback after she failed a test. She consulted the lecturer and challenged her assessment mark; the lecturer responded by referring to the procedures and rules of assessment, which prevented her from gaining access to her script. The attitude of the lecturers towards the students meant that the students confronted a different 'field condition', which resulted in a "disruption between the habitus and the field" (Hardy, 2014, p. 127). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p. 105) describe these types of actions as "position-takings or 'stances, i.e. the structured system of practices and expressions of agents". These students, when faced with constraints in the department, chose to confront the lecturer, whom they experienced as acting against their interests. Their

ability to speak up and challenge the way lecturers engaged with them shows that students relied on their “resistant capital” (Yosso, 2005) to engage with the lectures. My data thus show that resistance and contestation are aspects of the educational engagement practices amongst the selected students.

In this section I discussed the students’ engagement with lecturers on the ECP at the university. I showed the complex forms of transactions between students and lecturers on the ECP course. The data show that when students are faced with supportive lecturers there is greater scope for the development of academic dispositions and engagement. On the other hand, in the absence of lecturer support, some of the students developed the ability to challenge unfair practices, which in turn influenced the types of educational engagement practices they are able to generate. The uneven forms of lecturer support in different courses in the ECP had consequences for the types of interactions the students had with lecturers and their educational outlook. Although the students developed various dispositions and qualities to address the difficulties that they experienced in their course, they sometimes faced constraints that impacted on their ability access the resources to succeed on the course. The students’ actions in addressing these structural constraints show that they sometimes had to contest some of the unjust practices.

### **3.8. Engaging with their peers: Student-to-student engagement**

An important finding of the study is that the participants’ peer engagement and support practices were significant aspects of their engagement stances at the university. Odey and Carey (2013, p. 294) suggest that “the journey through peer support focuses on growth in which an individual is still advancing and deepening their own learning through peer interaction”. The data show how these students use various strategies amongst themselves to establish their educational practices at university.

One of these strategies was to form study groups consisting of three to five students. When asked why they joined these groups, they said that the study groups gave them a sense of belonging and recognition. They also felt that their student peers’

explanations gave them a better understanding of the content of their modules. Musa's explained that he is

not sure whether a lecturer explains it differently or what, but when you're in a study group and someone explains it to you, it's easy to understand, since it's just a small group then that's why it's easy to understand. (Musa)

Sifiso reported that the study group enabled him to ask questions and express his opinion about the course content. He further explained that when he was in the study group he had more chances of repeating information and ideas and that the study group was a less pressurised environment and thus beneficial to him.

Noluthando preferred to be part of a small study group of three. She used to rely on old question papers to study, but when she joined the study group she realised the importance of debate and discussion for her learning. This indicated a shift in her learning practices from a more superficial approach to learning towards an emphasis on deeper dialogue and discussion.

Thabisa was part of two study groups, one consisting of students from her class and the second of students at her residence. She found the learning opportunities provided by both groups fruitful, but preferred the smaller study group from her class. Study groups were an essential learning space for the selected students and membership of the group was based on whether students worked well together. Sindiswa pointed out how students would gather together spontaneously outside the classroom and explain difficult concepts amongst themselves. She described that she,

learnt from other students as well. Like you know in Physics when maybe I didn't get something in class we'd go – we'd sit on the benches, we'd sit and then if somebody knows or gets the concept then they'd explain. (Sindiswa)

Sindiswa's statement indicates the significance of informal study groups outside the classroom and students' willingness to participate and learn from other students.

Another significant feature of the data was that some students sought the support of an academically stronger student and senior students to assist them their studies. Noluthando pointed out that she initially did not have a learning strategy. She described that she would “just take the notes and study like studying a magazine. I didn’t know how to study”. She approached an ECP student who was performing well on the course for help. Naledi expressed a similar strategy by seeking support from older students. She explained that “you must talk to your seniors and ask like previous question papers so that you can know the structures and how that lecturer sets the paper”. Naledi and Noluthando were able to communicate with, and seek the support of other, often older students, which they regarded as a key support strategy to bolster their learning.

The students were able to find other avenues of engagement besides study groups for support and encouragement. Through dialogue and discussion with the older students they managed to discuss different learning approaches as well as the expectations and challenges of the course. Connecting and forming relations with other students indicated that the students were able to recognise other peers as essential to their learning. These distinct practices were part of their strategy to build and discover their pedagogical voices and agency. They were able to ask questions and discuss certain aspects that they did not understand. The students connected with other students to ensure engagement with their academic work. Barnett (2007, p. 55) refers to students who begin to discover and develop their academic capability as people with “a voice just waiting to emerge”. Their pedagogical voices were developing with the support and encouragement of informal mentors and tutors, and in active conversation with their fellow student peers.

In this section I presented data that showed that the students were able to connect with peers to enhance their academic development. These strategies were vital to their emerging academic habitus to “provide a basis for the generation of practices” (Jenkins 1992, p. 48). The conditions within the field of the ECP course such as the opportunities made available on the timetable for students to engage with other peers enabled participants to develop a sense of solidarity and create opportunities to engage amongst themselves. Their encounters within the supportive ECP structures allowed them to generate educational practices which were essential for their engagement with

the university. According to Bourdieu, “habitus becomes active in relation to a field, and the same habitus can lead to very different practices and stances depending on the state of the field” (in Reay 2004, p. 432). The ECP provided the academic support bases for students to develop their habitus and to establish their emergent educational engagements and academic dispositions. The students connected with like-minded peers, older students and academically stronger students to advance their learning. These types of academic dispositions, I argue, were essential practices when more time and space were given to students to engage among themselves.

### **3.9. Conclusion**

In this article I discussed the educational engagement practices of disadvantaged students by using Bourdieu’s (1990, 1992) concepts of field, habitus and capital to analyse how students were able to engage in their education at the university. The article argues that the nature of students’ educational engagement practices must be seen in relation to the ‘field conditions’ that students encounter at the university. The findings show that there were various resources that the students drew on and activities they were able to generate for their education. I highlighted the students’ accounts of their engagement with the university’s education support structures and platforms as a significant perspective. I illustrated how their subjective educational engagements were established in the light of their active, albeit uneven, interactions with the social spaces of the university. It was from this interaction that their emergent and productive educational engagements were generated.

As first-generation students they entered the university as alternative access students in need of extra assistance and were directed to the ECP. They made strategic choices about the ways in which they engage in the social spaces of the university. They were always narrowly focused on obtaining the necessary academic capital for their academic success. The students cultivated a keen sense of engagement with the educational support structures that directly benefited their academic commitments such as the TLU, the library and LMS but found it difficult to engage in the social support structures such as counselling services. The analysis illustrates that in the absence of the institutional capacity to enable them to access the social support

structures; they either opted out of accessing these structures or interacted with them in them in superficial ways. As the example of their interaction with their lecturers highlight, the students familiarised themselves with the university or course rules and expectations in order to acquire the necessary practices to succeed at their university studies. Some of the participants also became empowered enough to question unfair practices and to challenge negative responses to their work. Thus, despite adopting strategic actions that would augment their studies, some students also did not hesitate to question lecturers and departments if they felt these impeded their progress. It is clear that the students were able to activate educational practices within the supportive structures of their courses and amongst themselves by forming study groups and purposefully seeking informal mentors and tutors. These educational engagement practices show the emerging academic dispositions among the students in terms of which they were able to generate strategic engagement practices in support of their university study.

The article raises important questions about the uneven and disparate educational support environments that disadvantaged students encounter in their university education. The article points to the potential of supportive educational environments in activating students' emerging academic dispositions. One key suggestion emanating from this research is that universities should actively recognise the importance of strengthening their support platforms as pivotal in enabling their students to intensify their educational engagements for successful university study. This would involve providing support for optimal access to course learning, lecturers taking care and showing concern in their dealing with the requirements of these students, and providing knowledge and opportunities to encourage students' active participation in the university's support programmes and extra-mural activities. Leveraging the university as a productive academic field would more adequately enable students to establish their educational practices for success.

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## Chapter 4 (Article 3)

The cultivation of learning dispositions among first-generation disadvantaged students at a South African university

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### 4.1. Abstract

This article discusses the learning dispositions of first-generation disadvantaged students at a university in the Western Cape Province. Drawing on qualitative data collected over an eighteen month period, it focuses on findings from a study of seven purposively selected students at this university. Utilising Bourdieu's (1990, 1992) concept of habitus and Wacquant's (2014a, 2014b, 2015) elaboration of this concept, the article explores the affective, cognitive and conative (i.e. purposeful action or practices) dimensions of students' habitus as interrelated aspects crucial to understanding students' dispositions to learn. The article highlights the centrality of the affective dimension of the students' habitus in activating the conative and cognitive aspects of their engagements. The article illustrates how the students went about producing strategies to learn which enhanced their learning practices and in turn helped construct learning dispositions for successful university study. I argue that it was via the active and strategic exercise of each of the three interrelated dimensions of their habitus that they were able to establish dispositions for successful learning at the university.

**Keywords:** learning dispositions; disadvantaged students; peer-based learning; mobile technologies; embodied learning practices

## 4.2. Introduction

Current debates on student learning experiences in higher education emphasize the view that students who are actively engaged in their learning demonstrate persistence, enhanced learning and success (Kuh, 2009). The debate has as one of its central arguments that students' ability to become involved in educational activities is central to their successful learning. Key to such involvement is their acquisition of an appropriate disposition for facilitating learning. As such the focus of this article is on the way in which students go about acquiring and cultivating appropriate learning dispositions that enable them to productively engage in educational processes at the university.

This article explores the learning experiences of first-generation disadvantaged students at one university. The focus is on ascertaining the nature of their learning by exploring the activities that they embark on, the strategies they develop to address their sense of alienation and disconnection, and the cultivation of learning dispositions deemed necessary for university study. Existing research on students' experiences of learning highlights the significance of spending time on educationally useful activities as a marker of successful learning. There are, however, few studies that focus on learning as an embodied process with multi-layered dimensions, which include intellectual and emotional aspects as well as the practical activities that student are able to engage in as part of their learning engagement.

This article expands the work of Case (2007), Mann (2001) and Malcolm and Zukas (2001), all of whom emphasize the crucial role of building relationships in determining university students' learning experiences. Case argues that the affective dimension of student learning is important in understanding students' experiences of learning (2007). Mann (2001) discusses students' position as university outsiders and their experiences of alienation when they enter their institutions, while Malcolm and Zukas (2001) draw attention to the socio-cultural context of student learning. Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) concentrate on students' dispositions to learn, adapt and transform over time. These perspectives signal the focus of this article, which is a discussion of students' capacity to cultivate dispositions to learn.

The main argument that I proffer in the article is that the formation of students' learning dispositions are contingent on their ability to modify and strengthen their university practices in terms of which they are able to learn successfully at the university. Understanding how students engage in their learning will give us deeper insight into the practices that they undertake to learn at university. Uncovering the underlying processes that drive their learning engagement would assist universities to provide a more connected and engaging educational platform to enable disadvantaged first-generation students to better connect with their learning challenges and thereby establish learning practices appropriate for successful study.

This article is based on a broader study that focuses on the educational engagement of disadvantaged students at a university. By adopting qualitative research methods I attempt to understand how students engage with their learning and the types of learning dispositions that emerged while studying at the university. This article employs Wacquant's (2014a, 2014b), 2015) elaboration of Bourdieu's concept of habitus to discuss the ways in which students go about engaging with their learning and constructing their learning positions. Wacquant (2014a, 2014b, 2015) highlights the affective, cognitive and conative elements of habitus as the core constituent properties of habitus; this approach allows me to examine students' 'affective' engagement with their learning, their knowledge and skills acquisition during their courses, and the activities they generated to establish their learning dispositions.

### **4.3. Theoretical framework**

This article utilizes Wacquant's (2014a, 2014b, 2015) elaboration of the concept of habitus to understand the ways in which students engage in their learning at the university. Wacquant challenges dualist notions of social understanding in terms of which external structures exist parallel to, but apart from, the rational decisions of human beings. Instead Wacquant (2015, p. 3) explains that structures in society have a significant impact on individuals in ways that are located "deep within the body as perceptual grids, sensorimotor capacities, emotional proclivities and indeed desire itself." He argues that social scientists have overlooked the crucial dimension of the 'corporeal' in understanding human behaviour (Wacquant 2015, p. 2). He favours an understanding of human behaviour that involves not only rational thinking but also the

role of the body as “flesh, desire and passion” (2015, p. 2), which he suggests would enable a fuller understanding of human practices. Wacquant (2014b, p. 119) argues for an understanding of social practices as emanating “from the body” rather than being “of the body”. He suggests that understanding social action from the perspective of creating and building social processes would explain the “active side of embodiment” (Wacquant 2014a, p. 10). Wacquant calls for understanding of “the primacy of embodied practical knowledge arising out of and continuously enmeshed in webs of action” (2015, p. 2).

Wacquant (2014a, 2014b, 2015) expands Bourdieu’s (1990, 1992) notion of habitus by elaborating on the underlying dimensions and properties of the concept. Bourdieu offers the concept of habitus as a way of explaining the relation between individuals and their social world. In other words, Bourdieu suggests that the concept of habitus provides “a way [of] understanding how social structures and individual agency can be reconciled” (Maton, 2014, p. 49). Bourdieu emphasized that a crucial part of understanding habitus is to understand the relation between individual agency and the field in which individuals establish their practices. He argues that there is an interdependent relationship between the field and habitus. By field Bourdieu means the social space which consists of institutions and people in which interactions occur. The habitus of individuals exists in relation to the field, while field influences the habitus. In this article ‘field’ is taken as the educational environment of the university such as the courses that the selected students are enrolled in, and the teaching and learning support at the university, in addition to the generic support platform that the university provides its students to aid their learning.

Bourdieu explains the notion of habitus as a form of embodiment as follows:

It [habitus] is the socialised body. The structured body, a body which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world or of a particular sector of that world – a field – and which structures the perception of that world as well as action in that world. (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 81)

This quotation highlights the view that habitus is created in and through social processes and that the body is central to the emergence and formation of habitus.

Habitus refers to “ways of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking” (1990, p. 70). Bourdieu points out that habitus consist not only of mental abilities but also bodily gestures and comportments that individuals are not aware of. At the same time Bourdieu suggests that habitus “refers to something historical, it is linked to individual history” (1990, p. 86). The individual’s history is a core dimension of habitus and vital to understanding the person’s actions in society.

A key dimension of the relation between habitus and field is the notion of hysteresis, which is defined as the “disruption between habitus and field” (Hardy, 2014, p. 127). Hysteresis refers to the “field conditions affecting individuals within a social space” (Hardy 2014, p. 128). This means that individuals might experience a sense of feeling out of place within a particular field. Hysteresis explains a “gap” between the conditions in the field and the individuals’ disposition to understand and engage in the field (Hardy, 2014, p. 30). In response to their sense of disconnection in their environment, individuals engage in practices, through their habitus, to augment their adaptation and survival in such disjunctural contexts. This article uses the concept of hysteresis to explain the sense of disconnection that students experienced in the university (field) and the subsequent strategies that they employed to engage in their learning. I discuss how the students develop strategies by accessing knowledge and resources within the social spaces of the university to be able to engage in their learning. I will argue that by responding to, and addressing, the hysteresis in their university field, they are able to effectively cultivate a productive learning habitus.

Wacquant (2014a) develops three core components of habitus acquisition: the cognitive, conative and affective components. He argues that a deeper understanding of habitus requires an analysis of how individuals embody their experiences (2014a p.10). The “cognitive, conative and affective building blocks of habitus” are regarded as the underlying layers encompassing social practices (Wacquant, 2015, p. 4). The affective, conative and cognitive elements, he argues, are “implanted, cultivated and deployed over time through our engagement with the world” (2015, p. 3). Wacquant (2014b, p. 126) explains that,

... forging of habitus is quintessentially collective: the categories of perception are discerned and taught through joint activities; the skills learned by observing and honed by acting in concert with members; the desires are aroused and channelled toward their proper objects in repeated interactions with other participants sharing the *illud* specific to the universe studied.

This quotation highlights the interrelationship between the affective, conative and cognitive components of habitus and the critical role of engaging with social structures in society.

Wacquant (2014a, p. 8) describes the affective element of habitus as “the vesting of one’s life energies into the objects, undertakings and agents that populate the world under consideration”. He refers to the distress that individuals experience and the awareness of their sense of alienation or connection that they feel within a specific context. This article explores the affective elements of the students’ habitus by drawing attention to their motivations, aspirations and determination to study at the university. At the same time it focuses on their feelings of disconnection when they encountered conditions in the university. The tension between their feelings of disconnection and their aspirations to study is presented as a form of ‘misalliance’.

While the affective component of habitus is crucial in individuals’ lives, the conative element works in tandem with the affective component to highlight the intentions and goals of individuals in social spaces. The conative element of habitus is explained “as made up of proprioceptive capacities, sensorimotor skills, and kinaesthetic dexterities that are honed in and for purposeful action” (Wacquant, 2014a, p. 8). This refers to the individual’s attempts to reflect and develop purposeful actions in order to make sense of their environment. Through my research I explored the conative aspects of the students’ engagement by focusing on how they cultivate their ‘will to learn’ (Barnett 2007, p. 15) at the university by disciplining their bodies for educationally useful activities. A central aspect of their motivation to learn is the use of appropriate bodily comportment and discipline to develop learning activities. A key aspect of the conative elements is the use of information communication technologies (ICTs) and social media tools which became part of their embedded learning practices.

Wacquant stresses the vital role of the cognitive component in habitus acquisition, which consists of “the categories of perception through which agents cut up the world, make out its constituents and give them pattern and meaning” (2014a, p. 8). For the purposes of this article, the cognitive element of habitus refers to the students’ ability to understand scientific concepts and competently carry out academic tasks such as writing and reading in order to succeed, as well as how they come to understand, learn and process information in the scientific courses. He refers to the importance of the individual’s ability to learn and acquire knowledge and expertise within a specific social space. A vital aspect of their engagement with their learning is the recognition of the students’ home language (Xhosa and Tswana) in deepening their understanding of scientific terms and the acceptance of English as a core part of the exercise of their ‘will to learn’ (Barnett 2007, p. 15).

Bourdieu & Wacquant’s (1992) theory of habitus is thus suitable to enable an analysis of not only the cognitive elements of the students’ experiences of learning but rather the cognitive together with the affective and conative experiences of learning during their years of undergraduate study at the university. Wacquant’s (2014a, 2014b, 2015) theoretical approach offers a perspective that acknowledges the central role of embodied knowledge rooted in the students’ desire to learn, their ability to take action and the capacity to master concepts and develop meaning. The students’ learning habitus is formed in relation to their particular field of higher education and, I suggest that understanding the complexity of the embodied student would provide an acute understanding of the nature of students’ learning at university.

#### **4.4. Methodology**

This article is part of a larger qualitative study that focuses on the educational engagement practices of disadvantaged first-generation students at a university. The sample population was senior Applied Sciences students in their fourth year of study who participated in a mentoring programme. From this group seven students were purposively selected based on the criterion that they were first-generation students who came from low socioeconomic backgrounds. They were purposively selected as information-rich participants (Patton, 2002) and allowed me to gain an in-depth understanding of how this specific group engaged in their learning. The participants

were registered for the extended degree programme at the university, which is provided for students, typically from disadvantaged backgrounds, who enter the university with low high school exit examination grades. These students do their first year of study over two years and are provided with additional academic support. All interviews and a focus group discussion took place in one and a half hour sessions. The focus group discussion allowed me to clarify themes that emerged from the semi-structured interviews.

Data were generated from two sets of semi-structured interviews held with the seven participants who were purposively selected to explore the educational engagement practices of students at the university. The first set of interviews took place in the final (fourth) year of their studies and focused on the students' family lives, the communities they come from, their schooling histories, how they gained admission to the university, their interactions and engagements with the university's support structures, lecturers and fellow students, and how they approached their learning. The second set of interviews took place after the fourth year of their university studies. By this time four research participants had embarked on their B.Tech. degrees at the same university, two participants had to redo key subjects in order to complete their credits for graduating with their diplomas, and one participant had left the Western Cape Province to work in her home town in Gauteng and could not be reached for the second interview. The second interviews followed up on the first interviews by delving deeper into the strategies students adopted to be able to learn, their approaches to their learning, and the skills and patterns of learning that they developed on their particular courses in the Applied Sciences. The participants were given the opportunity to explain in detail and share their perspectives on the way they engaged in their learning at the university.

Bourdieu's (1990, 1992) concept of habitus and Wacquant's (2014a, 2014b, 2015) conceptual elaboration of this concept were used to interpret the data on how students engage with their learning in the course. Units of meaning in the data were categorised and compared, which led to various coding categories and constructs (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). Their views and experiences on students' engagement with the course learning, their perspectives on being university students, what motivated them

to learn and the resources they were able to draw on to learn became aspects to explore in these discussions. The themes highlighted were: (1) students feelings out of place and disconnected from the course; (2) developing habits of learning and knowing what and how to learn; (3) grappling with their home language as well as English to learn; and (4) the ubiquitous use of students' mobile technology to learn. These themes enabled me to achieve my research objective, which was to discuss how students cultivated their dispositions to learn at the university.

#### **4.5. Experiencing disconnection in the university field**

This section focuses on the ways in which the selected the students engaged with their learning during the early period of their university study, mainly – but not exclusively – during their first year. I explore the students' feelings of disconnection and sense of feeling out of place early on during their studies. Wimpenny and Savin-Baden (2013, p. 321) describe these out-of-place feelings as students experiencing “a disconnection between their world and the new material (context)”. The data show that the students' feelings of disconnection were based on a number of factors that they perceived as barriers to their learning. One of the participants, Musa, received low marks in science subjects during high school and felt academically unprepared when he was admitted to the university. He explained how he negotiated with the head of the department to gain access to the course by saying that he,

... had a problem with Maths and Physics but luckily, when I applied at the university, I had a meeting with Dr. Du Plessis because I had bad marks in Maths and Physics. So, we negotiated that since I've got less marks in Maths and Physics so she can give me the opportunity from January until June. But if my marks are very low, then she will exclude me. So, she took me to Extended Programme. (Musa)

Musa's comments show that he was aware of his inadequate preparation in Maths and Science. Besides feeling academically unprepared in these subjects he also pointed out that he never studied Biology in high school which was a key subject for the applied sciences course he was enrolled in. Musa's lack of adequate knowledge in these key

subjects contributed to his feeling of disconnection. He nevertheless felt motivated to learn when he was given the opportunity to be part of the Extended Programme, which involved an additional year for his course of study. Naledi, on the other hand, felt out of place as a result of having to do university study in the medium of English. She explained that,

Actually, at the beginning in my first year, there were a lot of difficulties regarding language, because of my background here. English wise. I struggled with English. Here at school I was taught by my Xhosa people. So that English communication, it wasn't that much. I didn't have a background, a good background. So I was struggling in understanding English. But then I tried to attend to that, I tried to just not let that block my way. (Naledi)

This comment shows that she had to confront her English language deficiency. Naledi, however, referred to a specific Physics lecturer's classes as significant for her learning thus:

Yeah, since I mentioned my background, especially Physics, they used to explain the specific concepts, specific words in ... like the physics word in Xhosa. Yeah, they'll explain to us, this name for Physics, the specific name in Physics, and then in Xhosa it means like this. I was impressed with the Physics subject – especially my lecturer. That physics lecturer because he could explain to us in a sense that you will feel even if you were not good in Physics, but you'll make it to be good ... to feel that you can manage to do it.  
(Naledi)

Naledi's comments show that she was motivated to learn Physics because her mother tongue was used to explain concepts; this in turn made her feel that she could learn Physics more effectively. The validation of her home language as an important part of her learning process, during the lecture gave her a sense of connection and made her feel motivated and confident to learn Physics.

Sifiso also focused on his feelings of alienation during his first year at university when he observed social class differences between himself and other students. He commented that,

So you're like, I cannot afford what they have, because sometimes you just see them typing on their computer (laptop). Like, how will I get there? At that time your money is not like up there much, but you want to be there. So the impression of coming here was like, did I make the right choice? So it just makes you feel down really, when you see something else that you're not expecting and you get to the point of asking yourself: did I make the right choice? (Sifiso)

This quotation illustrates the discomfort that Sifiso experienced during his first year of study when he observed students whom he perceived to have access to more resources. Sifiso's lack of financial resources made him feel alienated from the university. Not being able to own a laptop and having fewer material resources was a significant part of his sense of not belonging. Pulane experienced similar feelings of discomfort during her first year. She commented,

It's just that I wasn't, when I started my first year, I was very hungry for knowledge by then, because I was so tired of just being at home. It's just that nervousness of being in first year and it's your first time to get to be taught by people who are different from your background. Because in high school and junior school we only had black teachers. (Pulane)

Pulane described her sense of disconnection through the nervousness she felt about being taught by people from a different (racial) background. Her comments show that she was acutely sensitive to the racial differences between herself and the lecturers. She explained that,

The thing is that I was very nervous for my white lecturers and I think it's the only thing that prevented me from passing the subjects. When you are in first year, sometimes you are very nervous even if you can achieve something. There is that barrier, nervousness that is holding you back. I just don't know

what made me, like when you are new in a place you're just nervous doing something. You are not yourself. (Pulane)

The quotation shows that being taught by white lecturers for the first time in her life had a significant impact on the way she engaged in her learning. She felt that her nervous responses prevented her from doing well on her courses and achieving better results.

The participants in this study experienced a mismatch between their earlier school experiences and the conditions at the university for which they were unprepared. Bourdieu (1992) refers to this mismatch as hysteresis and suggests that time is needed to respond to the conditions in the new field. Wacquant (2015, p. 3) explains that 'suffering' is an essential part of an individual's habitus and can be experienced in social contexts. Wacquant (2015, p. 3) describes suffering as the distress that individuals experience and the awareness of their sense of alienation within a specific context, as in the case of these students, where the university's education context (field) was vastly different compared to their school context. Pulane experienced nervousness that caused her anxiety and Sifiso felt aggrieved by his lack of study resources. Musa thought that his lack of scientific knowledge would influence his ability to succeed in the scientific course. Naledi considered her lack of proficiency in the English language as a barrier to her studies. Each of the selected participants drew attention to aspects within their educational environment that led to anguish and anxiety. Wacquant (2015, p. 4) suggests that these factors are the "sedimented" experiences of individuals' habitus which are "are gradually deposited in our body as the layered product of our varied individual and collective histories". Factors such as class and racial differences, inadequate preparation for science study and the lack of linguistic resources were an intricate part of the students' embodied identities that shaped how they perceived themselves in relation to their university studies, especially early on. The next section focuses on how the students cultivated their dispositions to learn at the university.

#### 4.6. Cultivating dispositions to learn at the university

In this section I focus on the selected the students' ability to cultivate dispositions to learn in response to feeling a sense of disconnection at the university. I focus on the students' ability to interpret the social space of the university and to take actions in order to cultivate the discipline to learn. I focus on the students' ability to develop purposeful activities to facilitate their learning. Wimpenny and Savin-Baden (2013, p. 322) show that "connecting with peers and mentors and expectations with the academic study supported engagement and tended to reduce disjunction". My data show that the students developed deliberate strategies to mitigate their feelings of disconnection and thereby engage with their studies. Relying on their peers is a key strategy. Musa explained that he was part of a study group with two other students. He explained the value of the study group thus:

It was great because those guys are great. When I'm looking at myself, they are better than me and they always make sure that they don't leave you behind. So they are always there for me and so I learnt a lot. (Musa)

He describes his interaction with them as a "kind of competition" which motivated him to make up for his inadequate knowledge of science. Sifiso commented that "we are in the same group, live in the same area and live in the same house". During their senior years they rotated homes and lived and studied together. This gave them the opportunity to become immersed in their studies and share experiences and knowledge. They thus spent time organising their personal space in their homes to engage more effectively in their learning.

Naledi approached her more senior peers who were in their third year of study to help with Microbiology. She described the kind of help she received from them by explaining that

they helped me a lot because in Micro[biology], I was struggling with Micro since there is a lot of theory and you must do summaries and you must explain

yourself when you are writing on paper and there are practicals that you have to write in formal English, in a proper way. (Naledi)

Naledi's comments show the significance of her senior peers helping her to understand the theory and required course writing in English. Sifiso, on the other hand, sought the advice of his cousin, who was also studying at the university. His cousin was able to counsel him by giving him advice on developing an appropriate attitude to his studies. He explained:

I still talk to my cousin a lot, about what he did to me because I had to stress down because of him. So he would just tell me that no, don't focus on that stuff, just study. They have stuff, you're also going to buy yourself those things, and so don't worry just be yourself and study. Just because you don't have that stuff [study resources] that does not mean you are dumb or something. You're also going to study and you're going to pass. So that kept me like strong. I was motivated. (Sifiso)

Sifiso's comments highlight how an older, more experienced student encouraged him to focus on his studies, which mitigated his anxiety about his studies. Pulane struggled to adapt to the department that she studied in and expressed confusion, which she described by explaining that "sometimes you feel like you just don't understand what the lecturer is doing, but you just keep on hanging in there and listening, and because you know it's for your future".

Noluthando experienced the same type of anxiety and decided to approach a more knowledgeable peer in the class for help. She describes the role of this peer, who assisted her with key learning skills:

It was difficult at first until I met this friend Zaza and she will tell me how she's dividing her work in order to make it easy for her to study, because at first I would just take notes and study like studying a magazine. And she would show me how to do mind-maps to make the work easy, and how to study. She would be the highest [best student] and I went to ask her how does she do it?  
(Noluthando)

These examples indicate the importance of the affective dimension of the habitus in developing appropriate learning dispositions as students drew on peer support to develop appropriate connections to their learning and course study. It is thus through investing in affective connections with others, via their strategies, to the university field, that they were beginning to align their habitus for productive university learning.

This enabled them to go on to establish effective learning engagement practices, which indicates the conative dimension of habitus in establishing productive learning dispositions. As the enactment of purposeful action, the conative dimension is especially illustrated by their reliance on 'hot knowledge' (Ball & Vincent, 1998) to generate learning engagement practices. Hot knowledge is described as "word of mouth knowledge gained from social sources such as family, friends, teachers and others" (Smith, 2011, p. 166). Smith (2011) argues that hot knowledge is useful to enable the students to access cold knowledge. Cold knowledge refers to formal knowledge produced by institutions found on official websites, documents, course information and pamphlets. My data show that accessing hot knowledge enabled the students to generate activities such as finding a tutor, forming study groups, accessing older students (mentors) for advice, and asking more knowledgeable peers for academic guidance.

Although they were able to access peer support to assist them with their learning at university, the students also had to develop concerted actions to establish routines and discipline to engage in their learning at the university. One example of the development of routines is sticking to their daily traveling schedule that starts early in the morning and is necessary for them to reach campus in time for their classes. Sifiso explained that he "comes in early, because I get to campus around 8 am or 8.30 am, depending on how the trains are doing". Most students travel at least one to two hours to campus by navigating the city's unstable transport infrastructure.

The selected students had to work hard to develop domestic routines and circumstances to be able to engage in their learning. Those who lived off campus, for example, developed strategies to avoid noisy home environments by studying late at night. Naledi, who lived at the university residence explained that in order to organise her time effectively she stayed away from family by avoiding home over weekends.

She stressed the importance of studying at night, which she considered a form of punishment. She explains that,

Actually, I told myself that I have to punish myself, because I didn't study during the day. So now, here is the night. So that is the only time that I'm using for studying. And we didn't have much time. There were a lot of things that we were doing, like regarding this new product development. It was challenging a lot. So we didn't have a lot of time. So each and every space you have you must use it effectively. (Naledi)

Naledi purposefully decided to study at night and had to figure out how to manage her environment at university. In her case she had to sacrifice being with her family for periods of time to be able to concentrate on her studies. The ability of the students to organise their time and routines illustrates their capacity to develop appropriate and effective learning habits. These routines assisted them to cultivate the required discipline and learning practices necessary for their university study.

Another significant conative aspect (establishing activities) is their deployment of learning practices around their ubiquitous use of mobile technologies. The students use social media tools such as WhatsApp, podcasts and YouTube to enhance their learning. WhatsApp is used extensively by them to collaborate with other students particularly for group work. Naledi described how she used WhatsApp:

So there we have a group on WhatsApp, since we had assignments that we had to submit, so we combined – we made a [WhatsApp] group, and then we'd discuss about our assessment proposal there. (Naledi)

Using WhatsApp, they were able to organise meetings, form group chats, clarify concepts, and post hyperlinks to content explanations and old question papers. The mobile technologies thus enabled them to circulate messages and course content, ask questions for clarification and engage with the content of the courses.

Having been introduced to podcasts by some of lecturers, the students became adept at downloading relevant podcast lectures from the university's Blackboard platform as well as the internet more generally. The students listened to the podcasts in social spaces outside the university and began to employ crucial academic literacy skills to be able to learn. They also began to create their own podcasts for study purposes. This shows their ability to use social media tools to acquire academic skills and to enhance their learning. YouTube was accessed by students if they wanted a clearer understanding of a process, experiment or concept. Sifiso explained that "I only use YouTube when I am confused about something in class and then I just want to see if there is another way of doing it". Musa elaborated on how he used YouTube to augment his lecture by explaining that,

The lecturer will show you how to move from this stage to another stage. Okay, this is the glucose, now it's separating to – its glucose, separating to fructose. Because there is a lot of Chemistry involved, that chapter I don't know, it was difficult to understand. So we had to incorporate YouTube, all the diagrams are there. So now I can see all the steps, all those steps are there and you can see. Now, you just have to make sure that you understand and you take the notes very well and listen to the person who is explaining there. So it was easy and we managed to understand. (Musa)

Musa's comment illustrates that he benefitted from the visual and aural presentation on YouTube and that through the medium of ICTs he was able to create learning opportunities outside of the classroom such as listening actively and taking notes to enhance his cognitive abilities. I found that the students at this university, mostly accessed YouTube in the university's IT centre, because of the high cost of the data needed to download a video from their mobile phone or computer.

The use of WhatsApp, podcasts and YouTube by the students show the significance of enhancing academic practices such as engaging in discussion, listening actively and note-taking through ICTs and social media tools. These academic literacy practices highlight the crucial role of the "body in practice" in students' engagement with mobile technologies (Wacquant, 2014a, p. 9). The students developed academic skills by

using mobile technologies and through the “body as a synthesizing medium of feeling awareness”; they were able to hone in on their personal learning styles to develop their academic skills (Wacquant, 2015, p. 3). Mobile technologies and social media tools became an integral part of the students’ learning experience as they developed various activities to strengthen their learning. This shows the digital nature of their learning disposition that extends beyond the university.

These digital activities indicate some of the conative strategies students utilized that became embedded in the students learning practices, enabling them to engage in learning activities through their mobilization of ICTs while at the same time the students felt more confident about their learning. This illustrates the formation of students’ learning dispositions and the “embodied practical knowledge” generated through the use of mobile technologies and ICTs (Wacquant, 2015, p. 2). The students were able to share, connect, collaborate, create and disseminate knowledge and information via mobile technologies in the development of the learning dispositions at university.

This section focused on the practices that the selected students established which, over time, enabled them to establish a productive set of learning dispositions to optimise their university learning. Highlighting the conative aspect of habitus, it explored the key role of peer-based learning support, the mobilising of hot knowledge to access course content (cold knowledge), and the role of ICTs as an embedded practices in shaping and positioning their habitus for effective learning engagement at the university.

#### **4.7. Developing the ability to engage with the scientific learning of the course**

The students over time acquired the ability to develop the knowledge and skills that were crucial for their learning in their science-based courses. I focus on some of the activities that they generated in order to learn the course content, offering an exploration of their ability to understand the scientific concepts necessary for completing their academic tasks. Lea and Street (1998, p. 157) suggest that for students to succeed at their university studies they have to undertake “new ways of knowing, new ways of understanding, interpreting and organising knowledge”. One key

way in which these students engaged with the scientific discourses of their respective courses was to grapple with understanding the key scientific terms. Musa explained how he grappled to understand the concept 'taxonomy':

I think that word I started to know about it during my undergrad. Taxonomy, but I didn't know what's going on. I thought maybe it's a toxic or whatever, but only to find out it's a kind of a family tree of that species whereby it will tell you the families, the genes, the species, the strain, all of those things are under the word taxonomy. So I think that's how the microbiologists identify the species based on these characteristics. (Musa)

He explained how he uses his mother tongue during study group sessions to describe scientific concepts and processes,

... when you are discussing as a group, Sifiso, Siya and myself, we normally use isiXhosa so that at least it can easily be reminded in your mind during – even if the words that are there can flush away then at least you know that, okay, this process I know it. This is how it goes. So somewhere, somehow, we use isiXhosa especially when we interact alone, we use isiXhosa to explain stuff for each other. (Musa)

Sifiso explained that they used playful strategies to understand new scientific words,

What I do and I think it's working out for us because sometimes we like to make jokes about these words. You will find a strange word and maybe you use it just to call someone and then we say that person is that word. When we see that person, we are just going to use that word. So that word is going to stick in our heads, so it is easy that way. (Sifiso)

Adopting a light-hearted and playful engagement with the scientific terms indicates that the students were willing and beginning to create a closer affective connection between themselves and the new knowledge they were exposed to. Naledi emphasized the value of learning the scientific terms by explaining that,

... you have to admit to that scientific word, especially if you've been told that this is 'velocity'. You have to admit that this is the 'velocity', so there is no other way that you can use another name or whatever. So actually, you must admit that this is that name – you can't just look for the word in isiXhosa because that will be very, very difficult. (Naledi)

Naledi's use of the word "admit" is significant as it indicates her struggle and eventually acceptance of the veracity of scientific concepts as described by English words, and for which there are no precise isiXhosa equivalents. Whilst admitting that the scientific word was crucial to her identifying as an Applied Science student, she is also acknowledging the use of her mother tongue as a strategy for grappling with, and coming to understand, the concepts. Similarly, Sifiso explained how his study group wrestled to understand the concepts through their use of English and isiXhosa. She explains that,

we're discussing you know, a certain topic, and we go through a paragraph where maybe we don't understand or somebody in the group does not understand, and somebody tries to explain and the person still doesn't understand, they explain it in English but still don't understand, but then the person would try to explain in, isiXhosa, so then it would be like, oh, okay, now I get it. (Naledi)

These students grappled with the scientific discourses using both English and their mother tongue as they engaged with their peers. These examples show the capacity of the students "to deploy a repertoire of linguistic practices appropriate to each setting, and to handle the social meanings and identities that each evoke" (Lea and Street, 1998, p. 158). They accepted and acknowledged scientific English as part of their 'newer' identity as university students. At the same time they were able to modify their learning practices as they were constantly moving between using English and their mother tongue to learn new scientific concepts. Coming to understand a scientific term expressed in the English language was thus partly achieved through strategic use of their mother tongue. This exercise of the cognitive dimension of their habitus thus

resulted in their acquiring an appropriate student disposition to enable productive participation in their courses.

At the same time the students were engaged in their learning by focusing on knowing how to write scientific reports. They identified scientific report writing as a central part of their course learning. Thabisa commented on the nature of the reports by suggesting that

You had to be more specific about the topic, like stick to the topic, don't go like involving such topics, because it's probably not related to this topic that you're dealing with at the moment. (Thabisa)

Musa commented that he struggled with the conventions of report writing:

I always had a problem with the report writing. We use international science for referencing, so I always had a problem with that and the scientific way of writing my report. It takes time for me to adjust, because you must have commas, brackets. So it was quite difficult for me to understand but now at least, I have improved a lot. (Musa)

Becoming competent and skilled at writing scientific reports was a fundamental part of their acquiring knowledge and skills on the course.

Another key cognitive dimension was the students' ability to adopt individualised strategies to read and understand scientific texts. This was central to their emergent learning practices. Musa developed the strategy of writing and memorising key words while reading course texts. He explains that he likes

... to write like make sure that as I read I write, all those key words. I prefer to write keywords. then okay maybe I made a spelling error then I will stretch that word then write it at the top. I try to memorise the meaning of the words so they stick with me. (Musa)

Sifiso preferred highlighting key words. He explained that,

I use a highlighter, most of the time. Yes, I just highlight the important words and I use three different highlighters, orange, lemon and pink. So I know that the ones that I highlight in orange, maybe are important and the ones that I highlight like it's something that I just have to look for and what is it about. So according to me it's about that. I read over things but I highlight it. (Sifiso)

Noluthando made extensive mind maps to help her understand the readings. She explained that,

... mind maps were very easy to remember the work, because when I use mind maps, I don't rewrite everything. I read, I write the key terms and then once I remember the key terms it would be easy for me to apply everything that I've studied. It will just come out easy. (Noluthando)

These individual academic literacy strategies adopted by the students show that each student chose a specific technique rooted in their personal learning strategies. They purposefully applied personal strategies to understand the reading content. Wacquant (2015, p. 3) refers to these types of techniques as the "experience and training" that people undergo in order to develop the necessary skills to survive and thrive in their surroundings. Each technique can be seen as a personal learning strategy which emerges as "embodied practical knowledge" (Wacquant, 2015, p. 2). These personal learning strategies gave them the confidence to develop ways of learning difficult science content, persevere with their studies, and begin to feel that they belong on their courses of study. After being actively engaged in their studies from the first year, by their senior year of study they felt confident about their ability to perform the academic tasks necessary for achieving success on their course.

In this section I focused on the ways in which students learnt scientific rules and concepts in their courses. I focused on the cognitive components of their learning by highlighting the importance of understanding scientific concepts, the conventions of scientific report writing and academic literacy strategies as key to improving their

knowledge of the course content. I showed that the students developed learning dispositions by creating learning activities (conative dimension) to enhance their cognitive abilities, while at the same time they drew on the affective elements of their learning by using their home language and personal learning strategies to learn. This indicates the emergence of learning dispositions constituted through the exercise of the conative, cognitive and affective dimensions of their learning engagement at the university, which, over time, enabled them to establish productive learning practices on their course study.

#### **4.8. Conclusion**

This article discussed how participants in the selected students at one university cultivated their dispositions to learn. Using Wacquant's (2014a, 2014b, 2015) elaboration of the concept of habitus, I discussed the nature of the students' learning engagement experiences, focusing on learning as an embodied process which involved the intersection of the affective, conative and cognitive dimensions of their emerging learning dispositions. The argument of the article is that it was the active and strategic exercise of each of these three interrelated dimensions across time that enabled them to acquire the necessary learning dispositions for establishing effective practices for successful learning.

The structural factors in the university field were the backdrop in terms of which the students developed their engagement with learning. The article highlighted the disjuncture between the students' habitus and the university field upon their entry into the university. This resulted in their experiencing a deep sense of disconnection. In order to mitigate the hysteresis between field and their habitus, they accessed peer networks for social and educational support as a way of counteracting their feelings of disconnection.

The data illustrate the practices that the students established to be able to generate productive learning dispositions at the university. A core aspect of their learning dispositions was the interrelationship between the affective, cognitive and conative dimensions of learning of their learning. The students generated activities to help them

to learn, which led to their forming connections with peers and developing feelings of connection to and belonging at the university. These affective qualities contributed to the constructive learning dispositions which students cultivated by developing routines and the discipline to learn. In order to enhance and deepen their learning, the students turned to ICTs to become more knowledgeable and skilled in their scientific courses. The use of mobile technologies and social media tools in enhancing students' academic skills and generating activities to learn indicates the importance of the embodied aspects of learning in the construction of students learning dispositions.

This article provided an understanding of the practices that the selected disadvantaged first-generation university students generated to learn by focusing on the underlying interrelated dimensions of their learning dispositions. It showed how the students were able to build processes and practices to establish their learning dispositions by examining the interconnection between the affective factors, knowledge acquisition and educational activities. By uncovering these underlying elements of the students' learning experiences, the article demonstrated the embodied knowledge and active processes that they were able to construct in the development of their learning dispositions at the university. The article highlights the students' acquisition of learning dispositions by demonstrating their capacity to shape and develop such dispositions. By discussing the nature of the students' learning dispositions from this embodied multi-layered perspective, it showed some of the complex ways in which disadvantaged first-generation students adapt, cultivate and build practices to learn at the university.

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## Chapter 5: Conclusion

This dissertation endeavoured to explain the educational engagement practices of first generation disadvantaged students as they access and engage with the university. I started from the assumption that research on disadvantaged students in higher education institutions lack a rigorous account of the resources and cultural capital of these type of students. In this light, I set out to explain the resources and strategies that these students used for their educational engagement with the university. I suggested that a fruitful way to understand their engagement practices is to recognise the assets and forms of capital that they bring with them to access university study. I strove to understand the students' educational practices in relation to how they went about achieving educational success.

This concluding chapter briefly summarises the conceptual framework and the theoretical orientation of the study. I then highlight the methodological orientation, research methods and the main research questions and sub- questions of the dissertation. Thereafter I present an analysis of the main conceptual arguments in response to the main research question. I conclude the chapter by presenting an exposition of the conceptual contribution of the dissertation across the three articles and in response to the main research question.

In Chapter 1 I introduced the rationale for the study and identified my research focus as a non-deficit perspective on disadvantaged students in higher education. I explained that my research emerged out of my academic work with students from low socio-economic backgrounds who displayed a 'will to learn' (Barnett, 2007). In other words, the focus was on those students who showed determination to succeed in their studies. I outlined a conceptual approach that was informed by key debates in social theory around the interaction between social structures in society in relation to human being's individual agency. The structure-agency debate in educational research was thus a key consideration in this study. I explained Bourdieu's 'logic of practice' with its attendant conceptual tools of capital, field and habitus, to explain students' educational engagement practices at the university. Bourdieu's logic of practice enabled me to see the "on-going constructions" (Thomson, 2014, p. 73) of students' education practices

in higher education. The epistemological orientation of my research was informed by a social constructionist approach in terms of which I was able to explore the subjective experiences of students as they engaged in their university study. Bourdieu's (1990, 1992, 2000) analytical tools of field, capital and habitus provided me with an analytical framework to understand the social practices of the student participants in my study. He emphasises a relational account of social practices in terms of which he highlights the dynamic engagement between people and the structures that they encounter. His conceptions assisted me in explaining the position of disadvantaged first-generation students and the difficult structural factors that they encountered through their educational engagements. Less concerned with the innate structural rules of practice, Bourdieu emphasises the social construction of the strategies that individuals adopt to advance themselves and their families (Grenfell, 2014).

Methodologically, the study was based on a qualitative and interpretative framework that sought to illuminate the perspectives, experiences and meanings of the students' educational engagement practices. The study strove to understand how the selected students produced their educational practices at the university. I conducted semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to generate the data for the study. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants to address the research questions; I was able to select information-rich participants who were knowledgeable about the research focus.

As a qualitative researcher I acknowledge my subjectivity and my influence on the context. I am aware that no research is objective or value-free. My position as an AD lecturer allowed me to develop an insider view into their struggles and strengths as students and informed the type of questions I asked. I was concerned about the deficit assumptions of students on the one hand, and on the other hand, to understand the students' strong determination and 'will to learn' (Barnett, 2007) that I observed in my engagement with students at the university. The tension between my position as an AD lecturer in terms of which I held particular perspectives of the participants on the one hand, and the participants' viewpoints and perspectives on the other, was key to my reflexivity during the research process. I wrote reflexive observational notes on my engagement with the research participants, which became information that allowed me

to deepen my analysis. During the research and data analysis process I asked self-reflexive questions in relation to the students' responses and was alert about my own position and perspectives as an AD lecturer working in the area of student support. The two sets of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions allowed me to challenge my own perspectives and viewpoints and enabled me to give thick and nuanced descriptions of the research findings. The two semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions assisted in triangulating the data and played a role in validating and ensuring their reliability. These provided me with multiple and rich perspectives and enhanced my understanding of students' experiences of engagement with the university.

The main research question that guided this study was:

How do disadvantaged students use their resources to navigate their engagement with the university and optimise their education?

The sub-questions were:

- How do disadvantaged students mobilise their networks, resources and forms cultural capital to secure a path towards university study?
- How do disadvantaged students navigate the infrastructure of the university to establish their educational engagements?
- How do disadvantaged students cultivate learning dispositions for their engagement towards their educational success at the university?

My responses to these questions were provided in the three articles that I presented for the dissertation. The study discussed the students' educational engagement practices in the following three ways, which made up the respective focus of each of the three articles in this dissertation: 1) the students' pre-university practices that enabled them access to the university; 2) their engagement with the institutional structures of the university; and 3) their engagement with their learning in specific courses at the university.

In Chapter 2 (article 1) I focused on how the selected students mobilised their networks, resources and cultural capital to secure a path towards university study. The

article focused on the practices that they embarked on before admission to the university. It gave insight into the cultural resources they drew on to be able to access the university. I was able to analyse how the students from low socio-economic backgrounds were able to construct and navigate their application and admission routes to the university.

What emerged from the analysis was that the students created pathways to the university by drawing on the social capital available in their community and family networks. I put forward the argument that it was through the accumulation of resources through the students' extended pre-university paths that they were able to gain entry to the university. I argued that disadvantaged students have sophisticated mediating capacities, acquired through their community cultural resources, which enabled them to create pathways to the university. I suggested that these resources and forms of cultural capital located within families and communities are not recognised by higher education institutions as valuable assets for providing a supportive learning environment.

Chapter 3 (article 2) put the spotlight on the ways in which the students engaged with the institutional spaces of the university to establish their educational engagements. This article built on the argument put forward in the first one, which focused on their complex admission pathways to the university. This (second) article explored the students' educational practices within the university field and their ability to navigate the institutional terrain. The emphasis was on the students' positioning at the university and the social and cultural capital they accumulated to enable them to engage in their studies. I used Bourdieu's (1990, 1992, 2000) logic of practice as a framework to explain the strategies that the students undertook to engage in their studies. I presented the argument that, while they encountered an uneven and disparate educational support environment, they actively sought productive engagements to strengthen their academic engagements. These consisted of accessing peer support networks, connecting with supportive lecturers and strategically utilising academic support services for their academic engagements. I suggested these practices were emergent forms of engagement that enabled them to navigate through the institutional constraints and possibilities of the university. I argued that their ability to navigate

through the institutional constraints and possibilities was critical in their adjustment to the conditions in the university field.

In Chapter 4 (article 3) I concentrated on how the selected students engaged with their learning while they were navigating the university's institutional limitations and opportunities. I focused on how they cultivated the required learning dispositions deemed necessary for their engagement towards attaining their educational success. The article explored the activities that they generated to boost their learning, the strategies they established to deal with their sense of alienation and disconnection at the university, and their ability to nurture appropriate learning dispositions for university study. I employed Wacquant's (2014, 2015) elaboration of the concept of habitus to analyse the ways in which the students engaged in their learning at the university.

The evidence from my research showed that the students experienced a sense of disconnection in the university field as a result of challenging structural factors such as class, racial differences, inadequate schooling and a lack of English language skills. The article explored how they were able to generate concerted learning activities to mitigate their feelings of disconnection by mobilising peer support, cultivating routines and discipline to learn, and utilising ICTs for their learning. A key aspect of their learning engagements was the use of their mother-tongue as well as English to learn course content. They demonstrated the ability to embody their learning through their motivation and 'will to learn', their ability to create educational activities, and their capacity to learn scientific concepts. They produced active processes to construct learning dispositions for successful university study.

I presented the argument that the students developed counter-positions to mitigate the sense of disconnection they were experiencing in the university. They developed practices and processes to circumvent the difficult structural factors that impeded their engagement at the university by concentrating on the acquisition of knowledge and skills in their courses. I showed that the students developed embodied educational engagement practices which consisted of honing in on the affective, conative and cognitive (see Wacquant 2014, 2015) dimensions of their learning. I argued that their learning habitus was formed at the intersection of the affective, conative and cognitive

dimensions of their habitus. Importantly, my research shows the significance of the affective dimension of students learning habitus in activating the conative and cognitive aspects of their engagements. These affective qualities generated activities and strengthened their connection to their studies, which in turn motivated them to develop active engagements with their university studies. I argued that it was through embodied engagement practices that they were able to develop an educational path at the university.

### **5.1. Towards an understanding of disadvantaged students' 'logic of educational engagement practices'**

As explained above, this study focused on three distinct and interrelated aspects of the students' educational engagement practices. These aspects (discussed above) provided analytical purchase on key conceptual dimensions of their engagement practices. The articles illustrated the students' capacity to mediate the constraining university field, their ability to accumulate social and cultural capital for their educational engagement, and their strategic practices in terms of which they were able to cultivate an appropriate learning disposition (or habitus) to engage productively in their studies. Overall, the dissertation was able to provide an understanding of the types of resources and forms of capital that they accumulated and utilised toward constructing their paths at the university. It also provided an understanding of the ways in which they built their learning habitus, which was central in leveraging their productive engagement practices.

I now go on to present what I regard to be the key argument of the dissertation in response to its main research question to provide an explanation of the engagement practices of disadvantaged students at a university. The study was concerned with developing insight into the engagement practices of first-generation disadvantaged students at the university on the assumption that we currently have very little understanding about how they access, mobilise and construct their educational pathways toward their university success. What is central to this explanation is the way in which Bourdieu's 'logic of practice' - with its associated concepts of field, hysteresis, capital and habitus - inform the overall explanation of the students' engagement

practices. In other words, informed by Bourdieu's theory and based on the study's core findings, the nature of the students' university-based educational engagement practices will be explained in terms of what I argue can be understood as the students' *logic of their educational engagement practices*. This is explained in terms of their interaction in the university field, their ability to amass social and cultural capital at the university and their capacity to produce practices (capital) required for effective learning (through their habitus). An exploration of the students' logic of practice allows me to explore how they were able to produce practices for their educational engagement at the university. The study showed that the students' logic of practice is based on three analytical dimensions: (1) developing mediating capacity to address their sense of alienation at university; (2) accumulating forms of capital in the mainstream of the university field; and (3) building embodied learning practices (habitus) to establish their educational engagement with the university. Elaborating on these dimensions, I now go on to discuss the students' 'logic of practice' in order to understand the nature of their educational engagement.

#### *Developing mediating capacity to engage in their university education*

With regard to the first dimension, evidence from my research suggests that the students in this study developed mediating capacity to engage in their university education by harnessing their individual and cultural resources to establish a foothold in the university field. My use of 'mediating capacity' is in reference to their ability to withstand, interpret and adopt practices and strategies that mitigated their initial sense of alienation upon entry to the university, and lack of knowledge about university study. In other words, the acquisition of this mediating capacity addressed their 'fish out of water' experiences which they initially encountered during their studies. Their mediating capacity played a decisive role in their attempts to address the hysteresis between their (pre-university) habitus and the dissonant university field.

Developing their mediating capacity took place in relation to what they experienced as an uneven and unresponsive university field. In other words, the university failed to understand, connect with and address these students' peculiar requirements for university study, causing their initial sense of distance from the university field, from

their courses of study, the university infrastructure and lecturers. They had entered the university with constraints associated with their poor schooling such as their inadequate knowledge of school Science and their undeveloped English language skills. However, I showed in the second and third articles how they confronted the uneven field conditions through the strategic decisions that they had to make, and the practices that they had to establish, in order to find a foothold for engaging in their studies. They thus responded by finding ways to mitigate the consequences of such alienation. Their strategies allowed them to close the gap between themselves (in particular their pre-university habitus) and the university field. In the absence of systemic support, they worked out how to engage in their learning at the university, how the university functioned in relation to provision of their courses of study, and how its institutional support structures were set up to support their education.

The drew liberally on the cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) in their families and communities such as emotional support, navigational and survival abilities, and linguistic and aspirational capital in order to develop capacity to mitigate their 'fish out of water' university experiences. They strategically sought support from like-minded student peers who helped them transition into university study. Crucially, forming connections with peers from similar and familiar backgrounds provided them with a sense of belonging that mitigated their sense of isolation at university. They nurtured these trusting peer networks early on during their studies as a means of negotiating their university studies. It is thus evident that such active and collaborative engagement with their student peers represented a form of *horizontal field-based engagement* that enabled them to acquire the capacity to mediate their educational engagements with the university. What is evident is that these horizontal engagement practices were mostly accomplished parallel to the formal educational platform of the university, which failed to connect with their requirements as disadvantaged students. The students took it upon themselves to develop practices, supported by peers and informed by their community cultural wealth, to find a footing to launch themselves into their university education. This in turn provided them the basis for their immersion in their study programmes.

*Accumulating forms of capital to engage in the university*

The second key constitutive dimension of the students' educational engagement was their ability to accumulate forms of capital necessary to engage in the university field. Accumulating these forms of capital enabled them to engage in the mainstream of the university, where they acquired the forms of capital they needed for successful university study. In other words, instead of establishing their practices parallel to the university's formal structures, as in the case of the previous dimension, these forms of capital were now accumulated within the formal structures of the university. While it was the students' ability to develop their mediating capacity as outlined in the first dimension that enabled them to enter and engage with formal university structures, the students were now in a position to confront the university's uneven field conditions by finding ways to engage with the formal structures of the university. Supported by their peers who assisted them in developing a sense of belonging, the students developed greater confidence, which was necessary for their university education. Engaging with the mainstream structures of the university was crucial in order to deepen their educational engagements and to acquire the social and cultural capital necessary to 'play the game' at the university.

Accumulating these forms of capital meant that the students began to shift their engagement practices from the margins to the centre of the university with the constant support and backing of their peers. While still depending on their student peer support networks, they started to engage with and confront the formal university structures to address the challenges they experienced with, for example, learning to study in the English language, grappling to understand core concepts, and acquiring the requisite Science-related knowledge in their courses. Productive and strategic interaction with their lecturers and other academic structures enabled them to bridge the gap between their peer learning practices and the formal university knowledge structures. Engaging with lecturers, in particular, was a key strategy in their attempt to accrue the requisite forms of capital in the field for successful course study. Approaching amenable lecturers for help with course content enabled them to strengthen their ability to learn more effectively. Although they were faced with some lecturers who were unhelpful and off-putting, they calculated that it would be in their interest to persist in their

engagement with those lecturers who were open and responsive to their needs. Here they relied on what Yosso (2005) calls resistant capital when, for example, they were faced with what they perceived to be unfair and unresponsive lecturers who ignored their requests for assistance. They were nevertheless able to persist in their interactions with those lecturers who were open to addressing their learning needs. They raised important issues that activated positive lecturer responses, which in turn proved crucial in their on-going attempts to succeed at their studies. The students were thus able to establish their agency by way of strategically and tenaciously navigating through the challenges posed by the university field, which was a core component of their accumulation of the requisite forms of capital that they needed to be successful at the university.

I contend that activating and (re)positioning their practices from the periphery to the centre of the university field represent a type of *'transversal engagement' practice*, which refers to those empowering practices generated by them to bridge the gap between their peer-based support practices and the academic structures of the university. These intersecting or bridging (transversal) forms of engagement practices established a link between the students and the university's formal educational offerings such as the lectures, the support infrastructure, their department of study and their course lectures. These practices enabled them to engage with the structures of the university in meaningful ways. Their transversal engagement practices were thus forms of engagement practices that involved a crucial shift from their horizontal peer-based support practices to establishing interconnections with the (vertical) formal structures of the university and, as such, signify a qualitative change in their learning practices. Bourdieu (1984, p. 126) suggests that "transverse movement entails a shift from one (part of the) field to another (part of the) field and the reconversion of one type of capital into another ... (which accords with) the vertical dimension". Accordingly, the students' transversal practices in order to move from the periphery to the centre of the university field, i.e. the vertical dimension, represent their ability to change and adapt their practices in order to accumulate the required forms of capital for successful study. These types of practices allowed them to confront their university's field conditions and go on to establish their emerging learning dispositions.

### *Building embodied learning practices*

Armed with their capacity to mediate their way into the centre of the university field and going on to accumulate the necessary forms of capital for their educational engagement, the students were now in a position to build embodied learning practices. This is the third dimension of their engagement logic of practice. These embodied practices were key to the formation of what I would describe as their emergent learning habitus. I offer the concept of learning habitus in reference to the students' ability to acquire the dispositions and capacity to engage in their learning at the university. Central to their learning habitus acquisition was their cultivation of a series of embodied practices that enabled them to engage with their learning in their programmes of study. As I illustrated in the third article of this dissertation, these practices encompassed a combination of affective, conative and cognitive aspects related to their learning practice acquisition that enabled them to shift, develop and adapt their learning practices necessary for acquiring an appropriate learning habitus for university study. While the students' accumulation of social and cultural capital helped them establish transversal practices at the centre or mainstream of the university, acquiring their learning habitus was central in allowing them to concentrate on those core learning practices and activities that facilitated active participation in university study.

The students' sense of connection and feeling of belonging at the university increased over time as they were accessing and interacting strategically with support structures at the university. They had at this stage developed a deep interest in the specific courses that they were enrolled in and were beginning to relate to their course learning in personal ways. Having figured out how to accumulate the kinds of capital that they needed to be successful, the students became very motivated to learn. They began to feel confident about their own abilities and positive about their capacity to engage in their learning at the university. The students became passionate about their studies and felt more connected to their courses, which motivated them to intensify their learning. These affective aspects of their learning habitus were crucial to the formation of the conative and cognitive dimensions of their development of a learning habitus.

The students cultivated their learning practices based on establishing disciplined and strict learning routines. They committed themselves to long hours of study. They established learning activities individually as well as in groups and were constantly involved in various projects to improve their learning effectiveness. The students became focused on developing productive learning activities. They became adept at using information communication technologies (ICTs) and mobile technologies to access social media tools in order to augment their learning and create purposeful activities. ICTs became part of their embodied learning activities. The students started to become independent learners and developed personalised learning styles. Their conative (practices) activities (see Wacquant 2014, 2015) assisted in shaping and positioning their learning habitus for effective engagement with the university.

In their quest to establish productive activities, the students became attentive to the skills and knowledge that they needed to engage successfully on their respective courses. They began to focus intently on the intellectual aspects of their learning and displayed the willingness to practice and become competent in acquiring the scientific skills and the knowledge offered by their courses. The students concentrated on learning practices in support of key scientific tasks such as writing reports and doing experiments, which were essential for their course learning. Grappling with scientific concepts in a second language, often by mobilising their mother tongue to develop an understanding of these concepts, was important for mastering the course content. At the same time these linguistic strategies enabled them to become (affectively) connected to their courses, and thereby supported them in reinforcing and thickening their learning. The intersection of the affective, cognitive and conative dimensions of their learning was thus central in the formation of their learning habitus. In other words, the students' motivation for their studies, the generation of purposeful activities, and their ability to focus on the scientific knowledge of their courses were interrelated aspects of their learning that developed simultaneously to generate a learning habitus for their educational engagement at the university. The study highlighted the capacity of the students to build processes and practices over time to engage in their learning. This was key to the formation of a learning habitus which enabled them to adapt, shift and change their practices to engage in their learning at the university.

In summary, the first dimension of the students' logic of engagement practice focused on their ability to develop mediating capacity in the light of an uneven university field, which allowed them to adopt practices to circumvent their sense of alienation at the university. The second dimension focused on their ability to accumulate forms of capital that enabled them to engage in their learning in the mainstream of the university field. I showed that on the basis of their mediation capacity, they were able to accrue the required forms of capital needed to engage in their learning. Their transversal engagement practices signified a shift from their horizontal peer-based practices on the margins of the university field to making interconnections with the formal (vertical) structures of the university. These practices led them to develop emerging learning dispositions that secured success. The third dimension focused on the establishment of embodied learning practices in the formation of a learning habitus. The affective, conative and cognitive dimensions of their learning were highlighted to illustrate their capacity to build practices and processes for their learning. I argued that the students' capacity to adapt their learning practices to ensure successful study was key to the formation of a learning habitus at the university.

## **5.2. Concluding remarks**

This dissertation explored the educational engagement practices of disadvantaged students at South African university. A key concern was to focus on the resources and forms of capital that this type of student is able to activate in order to engage in their studies. The study placed the spotlight on the capacity of disadvantaged students to navigate their way through difficult structural terrain. A crucial aspect of the study was the students' accounts of their encounters in a university environment that did not recognise their educational needs. However, despite this misrecognition, the students developed productive learning engagements by constantly striving to exercise their 'will to learn', based on the desire to open up an educational path which would give them a chance to improve their livelihoods. Once the students were in a position to focus on their learning, they displayed the ability to construct successful learning pathways through what I have argued above is their particular 'logic of educational engagement practice'. The study gave an insight into the experiences and practices that were pivotal to their university education. I would suggest that universities would do well to provide

a responsive and productive learning support platform, based on a fuller recognition of the assets and types of capital that disadvantaged students utilise to establish viable educational pathways.

This study has opened possibilities for further research about student engagement at universities. Research on the nature of the institutional support offered by, for example, university managers, lecturers, departments or support services would be crucial for developing a fuller perspective on how universities function to support disadvantaged students. Another possible area of research could focus on how these types of students make the transition from university to the world of work and the strategies they develop to enter into formal employment. What has emerged strongly for me as a future area of research is the need to investigate how disadvantaged students go about activating their 'logic of practice' in order to acquire disciplinary knowledge in their courses, and especially how they use their various forms of capital during their knowledge learning processes. A focus on disadvantaged students' knowledge acquisition would unveil the ways in which they go about gaining epistemic access to the knowledge of the university.

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## **Appendix 1: Interview Schedule**

### **Title of Study: Exploring the educational engagement practices of disadvantaged students at a higher education institution**

*Thank you for agreeing to be part of the study, and for being available to be interviewed by me.*

#### **Demographic Information**

Firstly, I want to know more about your educational background before you started studying at CPUT.

Info about schooling

When/where you matriculated?

Quality of pass (B degree pass or diploma pass/ subjects)

What did you do immediately after completing school?

Were there constraints to you starting your tertiary education immediately?

#### **A: Family:**

Can you describe your family as well your extended family?

Tell me about family members that you look up to as role models.

What role did your family play in your decision to pursue higher education?

What would you say are your family's views about pursuing higher education?

What would you say your family, as well as your extended family is known for?

#### **B. Support in Community**

In which community did you complete your last year of high school?

Were there any community initiatives that supported you academically when you were in matric?

Are there any supportive networks within the community and outside your community that you are able to draw on for support when you were in matric and now that you are on university?

In your community were you able to ask people for help or assistance as you made your plans to study at University?

Were there any religious, political or other organizations that assisted you students financially to study at University?

What role did the church play in providing support and motivations for your studies?

Who did you hang out with growing up: nerds and /or studious ones? Can you describe your friends in your community?

What were the attitudes and views of your family/friends/community towards education?

### **C. Aspirations**

*(What I would like to ask you about next, is about your aspirations.)*

What were the hopes and dreams that do you had for your future when you were at school?

When you were in primary school what did you want to become?

When you were in high school what did you want to become?

Now that you are at university, what are your aspirations? / Have your aspirations changed over the years?

How and in what way did your parents and family influence your aspirations for higher education?

Were there any other people that influenced your aspirations?

How does studying at CPUT help you in reaching these aspirations?

The hopes and dreams that you have, what aspects are realistic and what aspects are unrealistic?

Are there barriers that could prevent you from achieving your hopes and dreams?

[probe for financial/economic, personal, academic, barriers]

### **D. Access to University**

Was it always an aspiration of yours to study at University?

Why did you decide to study at CPUT?

Tell me about the preparations you made to get accepted at CPUT.

What do you think you will gain from obtaining your degree or diploma?

Did you always have the goal in mind to study at university?

When did you realize that it would be possible to enter to university?

As a first year student at CPUT - what your initial impressions?

What sport, cultural or religious organizations did you join on campus? If you did not join any, why not?

What were the other interest (informal) groups that you joined?

Do you interact with other students from different cultural backgrounds? If yes, what are your experiences/ impressions? If not, tell me why not?

### **E. Engaging in Learning at CPUT**

*(Next I want to explore your personal learning experiences at CPUT.)*

Let's start off by you describing your experiences of engaging with your learning at CPUT.

If you think back to your high school learning, how is it similar/ different?

How do you approach your learning at CPUT? What do you do in order to learn a new concept?

What would you say are the major differences and similarities with regard to your learning at university?

Are you part of a study group?

Explain your experiences?

Have you been able to learn from other students? Have you found the experience valuable? Or not?

What type of support do lecturers provide to you?

Have you ever met with lecturers for a consultation? Give me an example.

What type of feedback did lecturers give you when they marked your work?

Did your lecturers challenge you and make you think deeper about topics?

Which resources do you use on campus?

How regularly do you use the library to learn and study?

Do you access any other learning support structures e.g. mathematic support, writing support on campus?

Do you know about the counseling services? Would you ever use these services if you felt you needed it?

If you do not get any assistance from lectures, tutors, and mentors on campus would you find support elsewhere?

## **F. ICT use**

(I would like to find out next, about your knowledge and use of computers).

What knowledge did you have about computer usage when you started at CPU?

How often do you access the computer centre?

What do you use your computer for primarily?

Do you have your own laptop or computer?

What do you use the LMS (Blackboard) for and how regularly did you use it?

How does it influence and improve your learning? Can you give me some examples?

Do you have any other technologies such as tablets, Ipads, cell phones?

Do you use these for academic purposes?

What social media do you make use of?

Describe your views on social media.

What do you use social media for?

Do you think social media can be used for academic purposes, such as finding out about more information on assignments?

## **G. Language.**

How many languages do you speak?

What languages do you speak at home?

Describe your views about your home language?

Describe your views about English?

What strategies do you use to learn in your second language?

Do you or did you ever assist your parents or older family members with English writing e.g. letters, or reading newspapers or magazine articles?

Do you write poems, songs in English or Xhosa?

When you are among your peers at University, what language do you speak?

When you are writing assignments or essays, do you use a dictionary to find out the meaning of words?

Do you translate or explain concepts from English to IsiXhosa or from IsiXhosa to English?

Can you give me some of the concepts that you translated from isiXhosa to English and vice versa?

Do you read English newspapers or books?

Do you read isiXhosa newspapers or books?

Do your elders or parents tell stories or proverbs in your home language? What are these stories about?

## Appendix 2: Institutional permission letter from Cape Peninsula University of Technology



14 April 2014  
CPUT/SEC 2014/H02

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P.O. Box 1906 • Bellville 7535 South Africa • Tel: +27 21 442 6162 • Fax +27 21 447 2963  
Symphony Road Bellville 7535

**OFFICE OF THE CHAIRPERSON:  
SENATE ETHICS COMMITTEE**

The Senate Ethics Committee hereby grants approval to the Principal Investigator, Ms Najwa Norodien-Fataar, registered at Stellenbosch University, to conduct research amongst selected CPUT students.

This approval is for the research activities as described in the application dated 26 March 2014. You may proceed with the data collection at CPUT. Please note that if you make any substantial change in your research procedure that could affect the experiences of the participants, you must submit a revised protocol to the SEC at CPUT for approval.

**TITLE:** Exploring the educational engagement practices of disadvantaged students at a higher education institution

**Comment:**

This research is considered to be of value in the agenda of CPUT and higher education in South Africa.

This approval does not extend beyond 13 April 2015. An application for an extension must be submitted to the SEC should this study continue beyond this date.

The SEC must receive a final report within 3 months of the completion of this study.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Penelope Engel-Hills".

**Prof PENELOPE ENGEL-HILLS**  
CHAIR: SENATE ETHICS COMMITTEE

e-mail: [engelhillsp@cput.ac.za](mailto:engelhillsp@cput.ac.za)

## Appendix 3: Ethics clearance letter from Stellenbosch University



UNIVERSITEIT-STELLENBOSCH-UNIVERSITY  
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### Approval Notice New Application

26-Nov-2013  
Norodien-Fataar, Najwa N

**Proposal #:** DESC\_Norodienfataar2013

**Title:** Exploring the educational engagement practices of disadvantaged students at a higher education institution

Dear Ms Najwa Norodien-Fataar,

Your DESC approved **New Application** received on **07-Nov-2013**, was reviewed by members of the **Research Ethics Committee: Human Research (Humanities)** via Expedited review procedures on **25-Nov-2013** and was approved.

Please note the following information about your approved research proposal:

Proposal Approval Period: **25-Nov-2013 -24-Nov-2014**

Please take note of the general Investigator Responsibilities attached to this letter. You may commence with your research after complying fully with these guidelines.

Please remember to use your **proposal number (DESC\_Norodienfataar2013)** on any documents or correspondence with the REC concerning your research proposal.

Please note that the REC has the prerogative and authority to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modifications, or monitor the conduct of your research and the consent process.

Also note that a progress report should be submitted to the Committee before the approval period has expired if a continuation is required. The Committee will then consider the continuation of the project for a further year (if necessary).

This committee abides by the ethical norms and principles for research, established by the Declaration of Helsinki and the Guidelines for Ethical Research: Principles Structures and Processes 2004 (Department of Health). Annually a number of projects may be selected randomly for an external audit.

National Health Research Ethics Committee (NHREC) registration number REC-050411-032.

We wish you the best as you conduct your research.

If you have any questions or need further help, please contact the REC office at 0218839027.

**Included Documents:**

Informed consent form  
REC Application form  
DESC form  
Interview guide  
Permission letter  
Research proposal

Sincerely,

Susara Oberholzer  
REC Coordinator  
Research Ethics Committee: Human Research (Humanities)