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UNIVERSITY  
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JOHANNESBURG

**BECOMING A SUCCESSFUL UNIVERSITY STUDENT:  
A CASE STUDY OF SELECTED UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS FROM  
HISTORICALLY DISADVANTAGED BACKGROUNDS**

**BY**

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**THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE FULL  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE:**

**MASTER OF EDUCATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION**



**AT THE  
UNIVERSITY OF JOHANNESBURG**

**SUPERVISOR: PROF MICHAEL CROSS**

**OCTOBER 2014**

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this study to my husband and best friend, Alobwede. I will never forget the sacrifices he has made to help me complete this study. I could never have asked for more than what he has given me.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my deepest gratitude to God Almighty for giving me the strength to undertake this task.

I am indebted to Prof. Michael Cross, my supervisor, for his support, assistance, but most especially his patience and personal involvement in this study. I will always be grateful.

I acknowledge with gratitude the love, patience and support my husband has given to me throughout my academic career in South Africa.

I am grateful for my young beautiful children: Mejane, Makoge and baby Ehang, who have lived this journey with me. I hope that my studies will encourage them to become lifelong learners.

I am indebted to the respondents in this study. Their participation is greatly appreciated.



## ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to investigate how successful undergraduate students from disadvantaged backgrounds have managed their studies at the University of Johannesburg. It addresses the following main research question: How do successful undergraduate students from disadvantaged backgrounds negotiate their performance at university? "Successful" denotes positive achievements in their development and academic performance.

Snowball sampling was used: nine students were chosen in the Faculty of Education from the 2007-2012 student intake to participate in individual interview sessions. This study only considered students who had performed extremely well, and excluded any student who had failed any of their years. The data was collected through interviews, transcribed, coded, analysed and interpreted using an interpretive thematic lens. The themes which emerged showed that students from disadvantaged backgrounds brought different kinds of assets to those of the university's average students. Consequently, their academic integration and success depended on these assets (capital).

The first significant finding was that the background of these students equipped them with the ability to respond to the many and varied challenges in their educational environment so that they emerged as 'victors'. Their backgrounds had moulded them. They had to cope with the academic rigours of a higher education institution: they were resilient, self-determined and intrinsically motivated. Their life experiences gave them 'compensatory skills' (coping mechanisms) which they used when confronted with educational difficulties. The second finding revealed that an understanding of their backgrounds more than adequately explained their success. These students had to negotiate their way through academia very differently. They had to make different choices when faced with the problems of who could help them or where they should go for assistance with their academic work (whether peers, lecturers, tutors or other people). This study revealed that students from disadvantaged backgrounds develop and employ alternative forms of capital, dispositions and pre-dispositions, which when used creatively, enable them to

navigate their lives successfully within an academic environment. These forms of capital cannot be captured within Bourdieu's strict conceptualization of capital.



## DECLARATION

I, ATINDE MEJANG EHANG VIVIAN (Student Number 201220540), do hereby declare that this dissertation, which is submitted to the University of Johannesburg for the degree of Masters of Education, has not been previously submitted by me for a degree at any other university, and that all sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of a complete reference list.

Signature: ..... Date: .....

I also declare that this dissertation has been proofread and edited by an external editor.

Signature: ..... Date: .....



## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SA: South Africa

DoE: Department of Education

HEI: Higher Education Institution

NSFAS: National Student Financial Aid Scheme

REAP: Rural Education Access Programme

SASA: South African School Act

UKZN: University of KwaZulu-Natal





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# CHAPTER ONE

## Introduction

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### **1.1 Introduction**

Chapter one will give a brief background to the study's motivation and purpose. It will also discuss the research question and sub questions, the statement of the problem, the central argument, and the organization of the study.

This study focuses on the recent changes in higher education following the 1994 democratic elections in South Africa, which resulted in many students from formerly disadvantaged backgrounds gaining access to university education. The term 'disadvantaged backgrounds' means those people or social groups who, by virtue of their race, gender, geographic allocation (rural, township or poor neighborhood) have historically been placed on the margins or periphery of the mainstream social and economic hierarchy. The question is: how do they succeed once at university? The study aims to understand disadvantaged students' experiences at this institution of higher learning, as well as what they do in order to adjust or deal with these challenges and succeed.

In the contemporary age of globalization and technological advancement, formal education is regarded as a vital part of human progress. It plays a fundamental role in the development of human capital; it is linked with an individual person's well-being and opportunities for a better living (Battle & Lewis, 2002). It ensures the acquisition of knowledge and skills that enable individuals to increase their productivity and improve their quality of life. This increase in productivity also leads towards innovative sources of earning which in turn enhance the economic growth of a country (Saxton, 2000).

This study focuses on undergraduate students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds, who are students at the University of Johannesburg. It seeks to establish how undergraduate students, particularly those from rural South Africa

manage to achieve their goals. Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and habitus are conceptualized and used to explain how these students do succeed.

## **1.2. Background and motivation of the study**

Wickham and Bailey (2008) claim that the way in which students integrate into the university life is directly related to both their performance at high school and their own socio-economic background. This study claims that there is a gap in explaining exactly how students from disadvantaged backgrounds, as under-privileged students, integrate themselves into academic life. Higher education institutions (HEIs) have responded to the problem faced by these students by establishing several academic support structures. These include: libraries and writing centres and services such as academic, pedagogic and peer support services, as well as personal consultations with tutors. The problem is still not being adequately addressed. Wickham and Bailey (2008) indicate that despite the efforts made by HEIs to facilitate knowledge acquisition, the dropout and failure rates remain very high, particularly during the first year of study.

With many more previously disadvantaged students enrolling (HE), universities are being faced with the dilemma of having to deal with low throughput, high dropout rates and poor student performance (Burns, 2010, CHE, 2010; Cross et al., 2009). A study carried out by Dumont and Sommer (2011) suggests that HEIs in South Africa have been successful in reaching equity of access, but not equity in graduate output because of the high dropout and low graduation rates (Cross, Shalem and Backhouse, 2009; Paras, 2001; and Ntshoe, 2002). According to the Department of Education (2005), 50% of students enrolled in HEIs dropout in their first three years, with about 30% dropping out in their first year. South Africa ranks lowest in the world in terms of graduation rates, with a rate of 15% (Department of Education, 2005). When comparing students from disadvantaged backgrounds with historically privileged students, Letseka et al. (2009) found a significant difference in the dropout and graduation rates; the proportion of regular graduations for privileged students is double that of disadvantaged students.

This high dropout rate is not only attributed to financial issues, but also to issues linked to their adjustment to university life. Other factors include the diverse means of institutional mediation and language. In her budget speech to parliament in May

2005, the Minister of Education indicated that in a study of students entering HEIs in the year 2000, less than 40% graduated. The main reasons for the low graduation rate are a poor educational background, as well as the inability to pay for accommodation, registration fees, meals, books and travel expenses (Letseka and Maile 2008).

### **1.3 Statement of the problem**

Bitzer (2005:172) and Bitzer (2003:164) state that in the past, higher education, particularly university education, was regarded as the preserve of the elite. It was accepted that university students were a minority within the broader population, and that these students were youths from the upper and upper-middle socio-economic classes, who would undertake their studies in a predetermined period as full-time, residential students. 'Success' in the academic sense was defined as a student's ability to progress through the study years and adequately complete the required courses. Only those students who exhibited a natural 'fit' with the higher education system would be successful. Those who did not fit the mould were expected to make other educational choices.

This view of higher education, limited to those who could participate and succeed, has been challenged over the past few decades. The demands of knowledge-based economies for research and specialized skills have placed higher education at the heart of strategies for economic and social development. Higher education is no longer the preserve of the minority elite. To a certain extent, there is an effort to increase access and participation to higher education across all sectors of society. Higher education systems and institutions these days have to contend with a far more different student population than earlier. There are many more people of colour, people with disabilities, and people from poor socio-economic backgrounds. This influx has increased disadvantaged students' access into universities.

This student population arrives at university with different needs, challenges and expectations. These challenges and the difficulties higher education institutions face are reflected in the high drop-out and failure rates at higher education systems around the world, particularly during the first year of study. This phenomenon has led scholars to the strong belief that ideas about what constitutes student success must

be reconsidered. Bitzer (2005:172) argues that “a new view of what constitutes quality and success in higher education has become imperative. It must be one which accommodates increased student diversity and considers processes that contribute to holistic student development”. This suggests that there is a huge difference between student access and their actual performance. Evidence indicates that South African institutions of higher learning have achieved increased participation, but have not as yet achieved high performance( CHE2010; Cross and Carpentier, 2009; Forsyth and Furlong, 2003);

South Africa’s (SA) higher education institutions have been trying to address this problem. Some initiatives have been implemented to facilitate access and enhance performance. These efforts have led to the restructuring of programmes, specifically in the curriculum and teaching methods (CHE, 2010) and strengthening of university policies and practices (CHE, 2010; Cross and Carpentier, 2009). Service delivery has become a point of focus in the hope that the university environment might become not only more conducive to learning, but might also provide students with the impetus to study more effectively, thus increasing their chances of success.

In spite of these efforts, recent studies have indicated that many of the students fail and drop out (CHE, 2010). The question is: if the universities are providing adequate support, where does the problem lie? Why are students not finishing their degrees?

There is evidence that an increasing number of students in spite of the many constraints have been surprisingly resilient and extremely successful in their undergraduate studies. A key to understanding their success is the role played by their personal initiative and practices (agency), which they use to set goals and devise strategies to achieve their goals. This study explores the social and academic experience of these students in order to understand how they successfully manage their academic life. It is with this in mind that the study asks the following main research question.

#### **1.4 Research question**

How do successful undergraduate students from disadvantaged backgrounds negotiate their performance at university?

The following sub-questions are appended to the main question:

What challenges do students encounter when they enter the University environment?

What forms of agency enable these learners to adapt and succeed?

What can be done to further improve/assist them during their studies?

The study will rely on Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social and cultural capital to explain the enabling intellectual and social assets that the students in question bring to the university, as well as those factors which could be considered liabilities. It will also consider the support structures on campus. It is particularly important to map out the kinds of networks they do find useful and empowering, and to note how the students relate to these.





## **1.5 Argument**

These students have all come from poor families and poor communities and have attended under-resourced schools with inadequately trained teachers. Despite all these constraints they matriculated, enrolled at university and succeeded. The study argues that students bring different forms of capital to university, and their academic integration and success depend on these forms of capital. It shows that these students drew on their resilience, determination and motivation to confront the problems they encountered. They also developed effective coping and survival strategies in the different areas of their lives, including the life skills they brought to campus and applied to their new academic life. These skills include, among others, the principle of self-sufficiency — one only looks for help if and when and it becomes absolutely necessary. They demonstrated the unashamed ability to seek help in these circumstances, learning from the experience of their elders, and dealing with difficult situations or hardships...For example: knowing how to plan in order to survive on a budget of R200 in a rural village, prepares students in knowing how to budget, plan and spend a R22, 000 bursary very often shared with the siblings and the single mother at home. This is an ability rare among well-off students. The study argues that these forms of capital they use are mostly ignored in current sociological literature. These forms of capital impel them to work extremely hard despite all the challenges.

The study suggests that background plays a vital role in student success. Tinto (1993) confirms that the extent to which a student is able to integrate, academically and socially, depends, in part, on his or her tertiary pre-entry characteristics: prior schooling, family background, skills and competence, aspirations and goals. This is also true with historically disadvantaged students; they too come to university with their own unique assets which enable them to adjust and cope.

Despite the determination, resilience and motivation they bring with them to help them succeed, they do indeed face great challenges in learning. They find the subject content difficult to understand because the medium of instruction is English, which might also be the lecturers' second language. The course content is complex and more often than not irrelevant to their situation. As they are intrinsically

motivated, self-determined and resilient, they use the different support structures provided to assist them with their academic problems. It is common in their communities to go to a neighbour and borrow salt, soap or any other things one lacks. It seems to me that turning to a neighbour for assistance as in the village is a characteristic they bring to campus. Perhaps this explains why they turn to their friends for help or clarification concerning a particular task. As I see it, this is the way they use the compensating skills developed earlier in their lives. Some of them consult their tutors, lecturers, go to the library for information relevant to their assignment and take their essays to the writing centre. When an assignment is given and needs to be clarified, the majority of the students in this study consulted their peers; they worked as a team. Peer influence has been linked to educational resilience, through peer support and commitment to education (Alva, 1991; Horn and Chen, 1998). Peer support plays an important role in students' success on UJ campus.

## **1.6 OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS**

### **1.6.1 Chapter One**

Chapter one: Introduction. The introduction provides a brief background to the study: its motivation, purpose as well as the research question and sub questions. The aims of the study, the focus, statement of the problem and central argument as well as chapter summaries are included.

### **1.6.2 Chapter Two**

Chapter two: Context, disadvantages and student performance: what does the literature say? This chapter provides the context and review of relevant debates. The study examines the literature on students' retention and dropout. It also examines what the university does to assist them to adjust academically and socially. The chapter considers some of the challenges these students encounter at university, and how they are able to surmount them and complete their studies

### **1.6.3 Chapter Three**

Chapter Three - Theoretical Framework. This chapter throws more light on Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, social capital and habitus which is used to explain how these students' backgrounds contribute to enhancing their academic

performances in diverse ways. The study argues that some students come to university with skills and knowledge they must have acquired from their previous schools and social networks. These are common to students from urban areas, who attend good schools, but some disadvantaged students also develop their own coping mechanisms to enable them to deal with the challenges at the institution. While the traditional student is academically prepared for university studies and succeeds at university, the non-traditional student (also known as historically disadvantaged) is perceived as inadequately prepared or under-prepared (Cross & Carpentier 2009).

There could be a misalignment of their habitus with the institutional environment but their resilience and coping skills developed under much more difficult learning conditions help them to readjust their habitus and adapt to the university academic life. The data reveals that students from poor backgrounds bring in self-determination, resilience and intrinsic motivation which they have derived from their hard lives. This study reframes and uses Bourdieu's concept of capital in an extended manner to include the resources historically disadvantaged students bring to campus. It also draws on Tinto 1993 to explain why some students feel free on campus, while others do not, and what singular forms of capital these students bring to campus. Tinto (1993) confirms that the extent to which a student is able to integrate academically and socially depends, in part, on his / her pre-entry characteristics (prior schooling, family background, skills and competence, aspirations and goals).

#### **1.6.4 Chapter Four**

Chapter four covers methodology. It describes the process undertaken to collect and analyze data. The methods, the instruments of data collection, ethical considerations, data validity, sampling and data analysis process. This study draws on phenomenological research strategies to focus on students' experiences. The researcher obtained information from students who have lived the life and have had the experiences typical of historically disadvantaged communities.

#### **1.6.5 Chapter Five**

Chapter five: From disadvantage to success: How do they do it? This chapter examines in detail students' constructs on how they experienced academic life at the

university. The data revealed that some disadvantaged students entered university with different forms of capital (referred to as compensatory skills) which they used when faced with academic challenges. Therefore, because of their desire to succeed and achieve a better life, they become intrinsically motivated, self-determined and resilient when faced with academic challenges.

### **1.6.6 Chapter Six**

Chapter Six outlines the conclusion, recommendations and the limitations of the study.



## CHAPTER TWO

Context, disadvantage and student performance: what does the literature say?

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter reviews what other researchers and scholars have written concerning the challenges disadvantaged students face when they join institutions of higher education. It should be noted in passing that there are interesting strategies for inducting First Year Students (FYS) here at the University of Johannesburg. This study has however only concentrated on the significant institutional strategies mentioned in the students' narratives. The chapter addresses the main question: What keeps students going at the University of Johannesburg given the many challenges they face? In order to do this, it examines the literature on student retention and dropout, the strategies the university has created to assist students in adjusting academically and socially, the experiences students encounter, given that English is the medium of instruction, and a second language in most cases. Finally, the literature review discusses how students steer themselves through the diverse support systems in place to assist them with their academic work.

### **2.2 Adapting to the university environment: Key themes**

What are the different forms of resilience strategies students use to cope and remain at higher education institutions until they complete their studies? Tinto (1993) has argued that the extent to which a student is able to integrate academically and socially depends, in part, on his other pre-university entry characteristics: prior schooling, family background, skills (competence), aspirations and goals.

What students bring to university largely accounts for the differences in academic learning and their social interactions. The home factors count for three times more learning variance than the socio-economic status. Iverson and Walber (1982) agree that students' motivation and achievement are significantly correlated to parental stimulation. The hidden curriculum at home is characterized as a physical resource

which includes reading books or other educational tools, family demographics, stability, parental support and guidance, educational pressures and expectations, discipline parent-child conversations, extra lessons and cultural activities. There is no doubt that the family is the first and most important foundation in any culture; it is where children are socialized and acculturated (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The school is perhaps the most important factor in the child's formal learning. Together the family and the school are the two vital foundations most influencing children's development (Coleman, 1988 and Walberg, 1984). They have a major impact on students' aptitude, motivation and concentration in learning. Family and school alliances have the greatest and most positive effects on knowledge acquisition. The established resilience at university can be attributed to these working in tandem.

Underprivileged students bring different assets to campus, but the literature has remained silent on this matter. Students develop coping mechanisms when they encounter difficult situations; some of them are the result of their hard lives and the appalling poverty associated with their rural or township backgrounds. Many theories focus on one factor, but Walberg's (1984) nine factors productivity model examines the relationships at home, in the classroom and community and includes parents, teachers, students and peers. Walberg (1984:21) maintains that "learning is an individual ..., behaviour and cognitive activity that mainly takes place in the social context of the classroom group as well as in the home and peer group". This implies that a child initially learns at home, but also eventually extends this learning to formal schooling. The kind of support a child receives at home is a paramount factor in enhancing the learners' zeal to study in future.

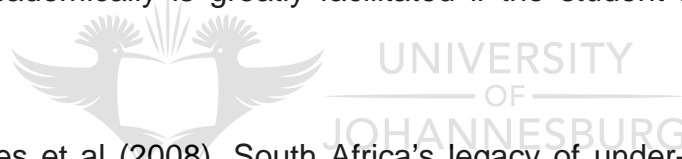
The South African Schools Act (SASA) of 1996 states that all South African learners should have access to the same quality of learning and teaching, similar facilities and equal educational opportunities. This is not the case in reality, as many schools, particularly in the rural areas struggle with the immense challenges of scholastic resources, infrastructure and poor access to services like water and electricity. Socio-economic factors directly affect the quality of education that learners experience. The Voice on Education in South Africa's Rural Communities (2005) agrees that socio-economic factors hinder knowledge acquisition. These are varied

and include: doing domestic chores before going to school as well as after school, arriving late at school, partly because schools are far away, going to school hungry, the lack of educational and scholastic materials as well as the lack of personal items like basic toiletries.

A further challenge is that most schools in the rural areas use the mother tongue as the medium of instruction (The Voice, 2005), while instruction at higher education institutions is either in English or Afrikaans.

### ***2.3 Challenges students face in schools***

Competence in the language of instruction is important in developing students' conceptual ability. The multifaceted conceptual skills that higher education demands, for instance, being able to think at a theoretical level and relate knowledge to new and different circumstances come easily to students fluent in the language of instruction. Similarly, the vital ability to engage critically with academic literature, as well as writing academically is greatly facilitated if the student is familiar with the language.



According to Jones et al (2008), South Africa's legacy of under-resourced schools and under-qualified teachers, particularly in historically disadvantaged black and rural communities, means that the competence associated with independent learning, including time management is often not sufficiently addressed at school. Indeed, both Rural Education Access Programme (REAP) and South African National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) referred to students being "spoon-fed" by their school teachers. This led to a difficult transition to higher education. The REAP staff and volunteers pointed out that by growing up in a rural environment the students had little or no exposure to either written or spoken English. This had a negative influence on their language competence at university. Most families did not have the money for resources like books, magazines and newspapers. Numerous disadvantaged students have not had access to information technology such as computers and the Internet or television in their homes. These fulfill an essential educational purpose by exposing young people to the outside world, as well as different careers and the world of work (Prinsloo and Stein 2004).

Jones et al (2008), explain that students' dropout rate is caused by students' inadequate academic and social preparation for tertiary education. Some of these students might even be the first generation in their families, and perhaps even in their communities to attend higher education institutions. Families do not have the educational capital or educational resources to assist students' integration or support at a tertiary level. Jones et al (2008) and Cross et al (2009) point out those students are largely unprepared for the demands of higher education. First year students find it difficult to relate to the higher education environment, specifically the shift from a regimented school environment with its enforced discipline and supervision to the higher education environment characterized by independence, free time, self-regulation and self-discipline. Additionally, given the inferior system of schooling they have received, disadvantaged students tend to lack a range of academic skills: study skills and time management demanded by higher education.

Most farm schools are small and have multiple-grade classes. They are the worst-off in terms of physical infrastructure, access to services and teaching resources. Of the 4657 farm schools surveyed by the Human Rights Watch in 2004, 1273 did not have lavatories, and none had Libraries. Twenty per cent of these schools were one-teacher schools. School attendance was either for short interrupted periods or learners dropped out completely. According to Delpit (1992), learners in some rural areas lack basic amenities like electricity and water, let alone libraries, a vital requisite for basic learning. They are further disadvantaged by the language of instruction, which is often in the mother tongue. All these factors hinder their acquisition of knowledge. Inevitably, conflicts arise when these learners enroll at higher education institutions, where the medium of instruction is the English language.

In an interview carried out at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) (2011), one of the interviewees said that she had never been in a laboratory during her secondary education. She only got to know what a laboratory was when she went to UKZN. During the first practical session, she said she could not contribute actively because she did not even know the names of the various devices used to conduct experiments. Despite some of these challenges, it is interesting to discover what motivates students to keep on going. The question remains: how are they able to



cope with all these complexities and diversities in the new environment? Tinto (1993) notes that the extent to which a student is able to integrate academically and socially depends, in part, on his/her pre-entry characteristics at tertiary institutions: prior schooling, family background, skills and competence, aspirations and goals. In addition, Bitzer and Troskie-De Bruin (2004), argue that academic integration is enhanced by positive interactions and relationships with the institutional staff, while social integration depends on student involvement in extra-curricular activities and interactions with peers.

#### ***2.4 Understanding university learning***

Education at a university is completely different from pre-tertiary education. Some students might perform poorly and develop a negative attitude towards a module. This can lead a student to withdraw from the course or even leave the university. Knapper (2001) confirms that teaching and learning at university have the following features: instruction that is didactic, lack of personal contact between students and the lecturers, assessment methods which are inadequate and sophisticated learning goals with little opportunity for students to integrate knowledge from different fields and apply what they have learnt to problems in the real world. This hinders learning especially if a student comes from a disadvantaged school background. While independent learning is empowering, it can be a painful experience. In this connection, Cross et al (2009:31) claim that “learning can be difficult when expectations are not communicated, when rules and principles of the specific area of specialization are not clearly spelt out, particularly for those who come from a learning background that works with very different criteria”. This means that independent learning is empowering for some students, but also disempowering for students who do not understand what is expected.

Enrolment at higher education institutions presents students with new learning challenges. For some, “it takes time to switch from a pre-university education, in which their learning is highly structured, to a learning environment in which students take greater personal responsibility for learning. It is easy to see in these moments of transition the potential for academic discouragement and failure” (Yorke, 2002:12).

## **2.5 Financial issues**

Jones, et al (2008) assert that disadvantaged students from townships or rural areas face a particular set of financial challenges at university as a result of their geographic and socio-economic circumstances. The challenges start with the need to pay the application fees charged by each institution. This is a real barrier which can either exclude disadvantaged students or preclude them from applying to more than one institution. Registration and tuition fees are often a major financial barrier even though the state-funded NSFAS loan caters for these fees in several institutions. Many students know little or nothing about registration fees or applying for financial aid, and are not aware of when to register. If a student applies late, he or she might not be able to access a loan for the first semester or even the entire first year of study. Worse still, failure to pay these fees at the end of the first year generally means that students are excluded from reregistering.

Even when application, registration and tuition fees have been paid, there are still a range of other financial challenges. They still have to find affordable accommodation in an unfamiliar city, pay for food and transport and to some extent textbooks and equipment. They also have limited financial resources or knowledge of how to manage their finances. Some studies have revealed that it is not just their own finances which affect disadvantaged students, but their concerns about the financial problems at home also reduce their ability to focus on their studies. However, according to Borden (2009:03) “financial support may improve access, but its role in promoting persistence and degree attainment is less certain”. Herzog (cited in Borden 2009:03), also affirms that “financial support is necessary but not sufficient”.

## **2.6 New environment**

Mellon (2002:6), points out that, “first year students are not only developing academically and intellectually, they are also establishing and maintaining personal relationships, developing a new identity, deciding about a career and lifestyle, maintaining personal health, wellness, and developing an integrated philosophy of life”. This implies that many of the students had to face changes that might seem

minor many years later, but were certainly quite daunting when they were freshmen and women at University. For example: sharing a room for the first time, finding their way around a new place, adapting to living away from home, learning to manage their own time, and adapting to new learning methods.

Indeed, students' experiences of academic and social integration have an enormous impact on their intentions and commitments to their chosen courses and institutions. These in turn have an impact on whether they complete their courses successfully or drop out. Apart from poverty, language barriers, social divisions, academic challenges, environmental challenges, they have to come to terms with themselves, their dreams, their studies, their acceptance and adaptation in a strange environment with diverse people (REAP, 2008).

### ***2.7 The use of information technology***

Jones et al (2008) established that South Africa has a legacy of under-resourced schools and under-qualified teachers, specifically in historically disadvantaged black rural communities. An Information Technology lecturer remarked that "for students to be adequately prepared for their respective courses, they need a basic level of computer literacy and, in the sciences, to have practical, hands-on experience of laboratory work". Jones et al (2008) confirm that many schools in rural South Africa do not have the infrastructural resources or adequately qualified staff to teach. REAP (2008), equally observes that schooling is so poor in some rural communities that any potential in learners is masked by the lack of opportunity to express it. In many cases they are simply unable to advance beyond secondary school.

Although computer literacy is an important skill for searching electronic information sources, it is not sufficient to overcome conceptual and cognitive problems relating to information seeking. Students need to know when information is needed, identify the information, evaluate it, organize it meaningfully and use the information to address the problem in question. Students need to know how to search for information using on-line information retrieval systems. Most students from the rural areas have never used a computer. When they get to higher education institutions, some of them are even scared to use one for fear of damaging the devices. This frustrates them and eventually many drop out. Some braver ones go to the library and enquire how to

use computers. Disadvantaged students, who struggle and do not have these forms of support and development, become de-motivated; their lack of academic progress erodes their confidence.

## **2.8 The need for an institutionalized response**

A study by Jones et al (2008) confirms that disadvantaged students often encounter many more challenges compared to advantaged students. Jones et al (2008) revealed that these challenges are likely to be intensified if there is no immediate support for the student. A range of support structures is necessary and needs to be accessed in a timely fashion. The academic needs of disadvantaged students are multiple; not just limited to a lack of reading and writing skills but also wider language, literacy and conceptual knowledge. These deficiencies are most often aggravated by the disadvantaged student's lack of exposure to urban life and the more sophisticated technology taken for granted by city dwellers.

## **2.9 Motivation**



Despite the challenges many of them exhibit the desire to succeed. They are highly motivated and committed to attaining their goal. Achieving balance and succeeding in studies means that individual students have to learn how to be responsible and manage their newly-found freedom. This can be a great learning curve for rural students from small and unsophisticated communities. REAP (2008) discovered that a particular student achieved his balance through being exceptionally well organized. He managed his time and prioritised his activities. He also was socially and academically well integrated, a veritable 'golden boy' and a model of student success. His personality and academic ability made this easy for him. Personal motivation, and especially knowing the reason why one is studying is evidently a factor in explaining academic success. REAP (2008) claims that the other major factor driving students' intentions and commitments to studies is student determination to succeed no matter the many obstacles they have to overcome. This determination is born out of a desperate need to uplift their families, themselves, and

in some instances, their communities from poverty. This inner strength and determination is of paramount importance.

### **2.10. Support structures**

Support structures are various programmes at higher education institutions such as tutorials, libraries, writing centres and internet access intended to assist students with academic and psychological issues. These enable students to navigate and integrate themselves on campus and increase their chances of academic success. It is however not enough to simply have the support systems there and expect students to make use of them. Support services need to understand students' diverse social and cultural issues, and the effects of these services on students. They need to reflect an institutional culture which is inclusive and accessible to the entire diverse student population. The services need to be marketed to ensure that they reach the target areas increasing student awareness and use of these facilities. Furthermore, integrating awareness of these services into the curriculum, as suggested by Thomas et al (2002), rather than viewing them as 'add-ons', would also de-stigmatize using the services. A staff member observed that the academic development unit for student development should be about the full development of the students (REAP, 2008).

For support systems to play a more significant role, they have to take into account the students' particular challenges and needs as well ensuring that support is culturally relevant and possibly conducted in their home language. This can be achieved through strategic tracking and monitoring.

### **2.11. Conclusion**

This section has engaged with the current debates on the challenges disadvantaged students face at higher education institutions, and what some of these institutions could do to assist them. Most institutions are aware of the diverse student population and the challenges student's experience. These range from the gap between the highly regimented school environment and the loose university academic context,

the challenge posed by English as the medium of instruction, the lack of visibility or specificity of their roles and responsibilities to the unfamiliarity of the learning environment. Institutions have responded by putting in place different mediation and support structures. Much has been put in place to support students, but it is left to the students to use these opportunities for their academic success. While the literature places emphasis on the dialectic between student agency and institutional mediation strategies, this study points to the need to pay more attention to nature of student agency, particularly in the case of historically disadvantaged students very often concealed under the blanket term of under-preparedness.



## CHAPTER THREE

### Theoretical Framework

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#### **3.1 Introduction**

Miles and Huberman (1994: 18) define a conceptual framework as a visual or written product that “explains, either graphically or in narrative form, the main things to be studied—the key factors, concepts, or variables and the presumed relationships among them”. This chapter discusses the conceptual framework, based on the work of Bourdieu’s theory of cultural and social capital. In line with Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of capital, some students come to university with skills and knowledge they must have acquired from their pre-tertiary school life and social networks. This background prepares these students to succeed in their university education. The question is: How do students’ from poor socio-economic background negotiate their performance at university. What resources do they carry with them to campus? Data reveals that students from poor backgrounds come with determination, resilience and motivation based on their hard lives. Tinto (1993) claims that students’ academic and social integration at university depends on pre-entry conditions such as prior schooling, family background, skills and competence, aspirations and goals.

This study attempts to explain how successful undergraduates negotiate their success in the University of Johannesburg. Many have access to the university, some drop out during their first year of study. The focus of this study is to consider those who do succeed, and explore what agency enables them to persist despite the challenges they have to face. The study examines their backgrounds and whether this factor contributes to their academic success.

A glimpse into the assets they bring to their studies gives an insight into their success. Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus, cultural and social capital are used to explain why these students do succeed. When students enroll at university, they do so with the intention of succeeding. The concept of agency supports the claim that students are not entirely helpless because they devise strategies to break the chain

of habitus to adjust to the situation (Cross et al, 2009). Coming from a mostly inferior educational system they arrive at university to find it very difficult to cope with the academic rigours.

### **3.2 Bourdieu's Concept: Capital, Cultural Capital and Habitus**

Bourdieu, working with various colleagues, developed the concept of cultural capital in the 1960s to address an empirical problem, namely the fact that “economic obstacles are not sufficient to explain” disparities in the educational attainment of children from different social classes (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964: 8). Bourdieu argued that, above and beyond economic factors, “cultural habits and...dispositions inherited from the family are fundamental to school success” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964:14). Thus Bourdieu and others broke away from the traditional sociological conceptions of culture, which tended to view it primarily as a source of shared norms and values, or as a vehicle of collective expression. They maintained that culture shares many of the properties characteristic of economic capital. In particular, he maintained that cultural “habits and dispositions” comprise a resource capable of generating “profits”. They are potentially subject to monopolization by individual people and groups (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964, 14).

Bourdieu's theory states that differences in cultural capital (referring inter alia to differences in cultural resources indicated by the schools attended and formal qualifications attained) play a vital role in students' academic success and persistence (Longden, 2004). For Burns (2012), the application of Bourdieu's theory to poor students' academic performance and retention, the achievement of success in elite education, requires prior familiarity with the various elite cultural codes in existence in an educational setting. It seems that students from rich socio-economic background are most often sufficiently equipped with appropriate cultural capital to secure access, and ensure success in the higher education environment, (CHE (2010). Students from poor socio-economic background struggle to gain access to higher education, and once they have done so, they make use of the diverse forms of agency they bring with them. Sometimes, these forms of agency are enabling, and sometimes they are not. It might be suggested that in this situation, both the traditional student (a student who grew up in an urban environment and most likely



coming from a wealthy family), and the non-traditional student (a student from poor socioeconomic background) bring diverse cultural capital.

### **3.3 Capital**

A person's position in life is determined by the form of capital she/he possesses and the extent to which any form of this capital is regarded as vital (Bourdieu, 1986). Some students appear to be advantaged or disadvantaged because of their capital. If this form of capital is well used, it empowers and influences students. It can on the other hand be disempowering for those students who have less capital. The differing nature of capital possession is a major factor leading to success or failure. Forms of capital are incorporated in student's habitus, and explain inequalities and how they manifest in the education field. Bourdieu, (1986) claims the core components of social resources define social, cultural, and economic capital. This study examines cultural capital to gain insight into how successful undergraduate students negotiate their success in higher education institutions.



### **3.4 Cultural capital**

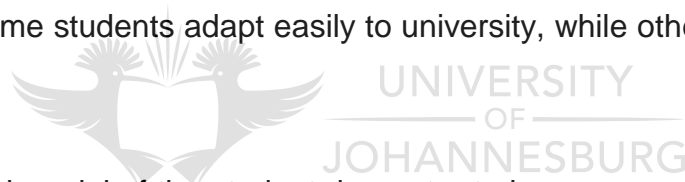
Bourdieu (1986:119) observes that cultural capital is “forms of knowledge, skills, education and advantages that a person has, which gives them high status in society”. Every person possesses cultural capital, but there is a difference in the diverse cultural capital students bring to university. In alignment with academic discourses and settings within the culture of the university, students who possess cultural capital will use it, and make an easy transition while students who do not possess cultural capital will have problems and may drop out of university. Bourdieu (1986) further stresses that cultural capital is accrued through one’s life experiences. Those who have more cultural capital achieve more. Families with more resources teach their children those values, attitudes and knowledge necessary for success in education and life. Students from disadvantaged families often lack the cultural capital that is consistent with the dominant university culture. Although these students do not carry cultural capital with them, they certainly do develop a range of compensatory skills which also become important resources on campus. This construct is used to analyze the data in this study.

### **3.5 Habitus.**

This concept of habitus refers to the collection of norms and practices of a specific social group or social environment in which the new member of society is expected to adapt (Nora, 2004:201; York & Longden, 2004:80). Habitus is more than merely the culture of a group of people; it also includes even deeper issues than the visible culture (such as social custom, beliefs and values). These greatly affect the social relationships within the social group (Yorke & Thomas, 2003:67). The customs and behaviour of a higher education institution create the framework within which students must observe a regulated set of perceptions and actions to fit into the habitus at the institution. Habitus can be ... the level of values and beliefs systems being upheld at an institution (Nora, 2004:182).

This means that students whose originating habitus (and thus their cultural capital) does not match the habitus of the institution will often struggle to adapt. Students

from poor backgrounds often find the disjuncture between the institutional habitus and their own cultural capital to be far more acute than is the case for students from more-well-to-do-families (Yorke & Longden, 2004:80). These students often experience their home cultures as being “deficient” or “invalidated by” or “incongruent with” the institution’s culture (Zepke & Leach 2005:53). Hence, the challenges that these students face is the lack of alignment of their habitus with the practices and social life of the university environment. Nonetheless, their intrinsic motivation, resilience and self-determination evolved from their difficult backgrounds enable them to work with these challenges on the path to success. Searle (1995) maintains that background is the different ways in which people are positioned in the world. It includes “...attitudes, practices, perceptions, actions (Broekman & Pendlebury, 2002:291) which one carries from one milieu to another (Cross & Johnson, 2008:305). Cross and Johnson (2008:305) state that background “enables and constrains what we intend, how we interpret our actions and the world around us, and how we are interpreted or socially constructed by and within our interactions with other people”. Knowledge of a person’s background brings to the forefront the realization that some students adapt easily to university, while others feel out of their depth.



Tinto’s longitudinal model of the student dropout rate is a measure of the fit between students and an institution (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983). Interactions between students and their educational environment influence the fit or congruency;; the stronger the congruency, the more likely the student will be able to persist. The purpose of Tinto’s model is not to describe why students voluntarily withdraw, but to explain how the interactions and experiences of a student do influence their decisions to leave university.

Academic integration includes the success of a student in terms of academic and intellectual development, the student’s perception of faculty concern on the quality of teaching and student development, and the frequency of non-class interactions with faculty (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979: 1983). Social integration includes a student’s involvement with extracurricular activities and the perceived quality of support a student receives from peers and faculty (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979: 1983). Tinto (1993) suggests that interactions between social and academic integration might be

compensatory, so that low academic integration could be offset by high social integration or vice versa. As the term progresses, students reformulate their commitment to their education and the institution; they decide whether to persist or leave.

### **3.6 Beyond Bourdieu's Concepts of Capital and Habitus**

Bourdieu (1986) argues that students from rich backgrounds come with suitable forms of capital they use as assets. This gives them advantages in facing the challenges of an academic environment. He also argues that, given their habitus, they come with dispositions and pre-dispositions which help them to adapt to this environment with ease. This would mean that students from poor or disadvantaged backgrounds would generally be condemned to fail. What this theoretical framework ignores is that the students from poor backgrounds develop alternative forms of capital, as well as dispositions and pre-dispositions that, when used creatively, enable them to navigate themselves within the academic environment. They have developed their own network skills, resilience and determination in order to emancipate themselves from poverty. This is referred to in this study as “compensatory capital” and includes compensatory skills — the ability to consult or seek help from elderly or more experienced people, the ability to work as a group — linked to the family and communal life in the village, assisting or supporting each other. Their dispositions and predispositions, essentially their sense of resilience, intrinsic motivation and self-determination to escape from poverty enable them to adjust their habitus on campus and cope with the new challenges. These students have to do twice as much as the average student from an affluent school. In this regard, Howell et al (2003) reiterate that the life events experienced by non-traditional students might make a positive impact on their approach to tertiary study. In many cases such events or experiences can make students more autonomous and self-directed. Without ignoring the main thrust of Bourdieu's theory, this study will follow this particular theoretical perspective.

### **3.7 Conclusion**

This chapter focused on Bourdieu's theory to understand how successful undergraduate students negotiate their success at higher education institutions. Bourdieu's concept of habitus and cultural capital shows that students come to university with certain forms of agency which can be enabling or disabling, but all of these actually depend on the student's background. According to Bourdieu, background is all-important for student retention and success at university. Various pre-entry attributes are predictors of students' academic success. This chapter has developed the notion of "compensatory capital" and includes compensatory skills to explain the nature of assets or resources that historically disadvantaged students draw on to succeed in their studies. It has also highlighted the dispositions and predispositions, essentially their sense of resilience, intrinsic motivation and self-determination to escape from poverty enable them, which enable them to adjust their habitus on campus and cope with the new challenges.

The next chapter discusses the research methodology and the different steps taken to collect data, the ethical concerns and data validity issues.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Research Methodology

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#### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter discusses the research processes of this study, the research approach and design. The study drew on phenomenological strategies for the capturing of human experiences and telling the story of the participants' real experiences. Van Manen, (1997) notes that lived experiences are the starting point and end point of phenomenological research. Therefore, from a phenomenological point of view, the study captured "rich descriptions of the phenomena in their settings" (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998:104). This is basically capturing the entire story as it unfolds, and its reality. Realities are "pure phenomena and the absolute truth from where they originate" (Heath, 2000).

A paradigm is described by Maykut & Morehouse (1994:4) as "a set of overarching and interconnected assumptions about the nature of reality". A paradigm reinforces the actions of the researcher and the approaches used in the research project. Conducting research within a specific paradigm provides the framework within which such research takes place and also provides the basis on which variable knowledge can be built. Merriam (1998) distinguishes three orientations of research paradigms: positivist forms of research, interpretive research and critical research. This study will use the interpretive research paradigm. This interpretative paradigm maintains that "reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social world. There is no one single reality, but multiple socially constructed realities" (Merriam, 1998:6). Interpretative research aims at "understanding the meaning of the experience from the perspective of the participants" (Merriam, 1998:4).

Since the objective of this study is to gain insight into how undergraduate students negotiate their success at university, the question is: What is the meaning of students' experiences from their own vantage points? What do we make of this meaning? The nature of the research question suggested that the use of qualitative research methodology was the most suitable one. Maykut and Morehouse (1994:2)

are of the view that this methodology generally examines “people”, words and actions in a narrative or descriptive way more closely representing the situation experienced by the respondents. Qualitative research methodology explores the experiences of successful undergraduate students at the University of Johannesburg. As Merriam states (1998:7) in qualitative research the researcher is the “primary instrument for data collection and analysis and primarily employs an inductive research strategy”.

#### **4.2 What is qualitative research?**

Bryman (1998:61) states that the most important feature of qualitative research involves “penetrating the frames of meaning with which they operate”. This view is also shared by Mouton (2001:53) who describes qualitative research as the generic approach to educational research, which takes the insiders’ perspectives on phenomenon as its point of departure. This research approach was chosen because the researcher wanted to answer the main research question, as Bryman (1988:61) puts it, through the “eyes of the people” being studied.

Qualitative research needs a relevant strategy in order to answer the question posed. Punch (2000: 53) describes research design as the basic plan to be followed in empirical inquiry. It includes four main components: strategy, conceptual framework, who or what will be studied and the tools and the procedure to be used for collecting and analyzing empirical data. These four components raise questions about the specific procedures the study adopts in collecting and analyzing data based on the conceptual framework, and specify how and from whom data was collected.

Merriam (1998:10) observes that there are a variety of qualitative strategies of inquiry. Although there appears to be no consensus on the major types of strategies of inquiry, Merriam (1998), and Denzin and Lincoln cited in Merriam (1999) agree that there are certain common major types: case study, ethnography, phenomenology and grounded theory. Merriam (1998) observes that these types share common features of qualitative research.

Patten cited in Merriam (1998:10), observes that various types of research design are dictated by “the kinds of questions a particular research will ask.” The research question of this study required research strategy, which maximised the gathering of highly descriptive information on the phenomenon of how students negotiated their academic success at the university.

### **4.3 Case study**

This is also a case study. Mouton (2008:281) describes a case study as an “intensive investigation of a single unit”. A case study can consist of an individual person, a group of people forming a single unit (such as a family), learners of a particular school, a teaching programme. Merriam (1998: 27) explains that “a case study is an examination of a specific phenomenon such as a programme, an event, a person, a process, an institution or a social group”. Merriam views a case study as distinct from other types of qualitative research design. She asserts that a case study serves the purpose of gaining in-depth understanding of the problem under investigation, as well as the meaning the study attaches to the object of study. This definition of a case study appears to be referring to a case study as the end product. What is important to note is that a qualitative case study is an “intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon or social unit” (Merriam 1998:27). She claims that descriptive case studies are helpful in producing basic information about areas of education where there has not been much research (Merriam, 1998:38).

Merriam (1998) also refers to descriptive, interpretive and evaluative case studies. In her view, a descriptive case study offers a detailed account of the research problem. Such case studies are descriptive giving basic information on the phenomenon being studied. I used a descriptive case study to explore and describe how successful undergraduate students negotiated their success in the University of Johannesburg. This case study suited this work because it was not guided by established generalised hypotheses.

### **4.4 Sample in case study**



This study used purposive snowball sampling. According to Mouton (2001), when selecting a sample on the basis of some knowledge of the population, one's knowledge should be used judiciously to judge and identify candidates.

A case study approach was used in order to examine a phenomenon in its real-life context. Cohen et al (2007 p.53) explains that case studies provide a unique example of real people in real situations. A case study approach gives the researcher details of what he or she intends to find out by the end of his/her study.

#### **4.4.1 Criteria for sampling**

Backgrounds of the student: graduates from poor schools in rural areas or townships; they are the most disadvantaged group of learners.

The socio-economic status of parents: whether they are employed or unemployed.

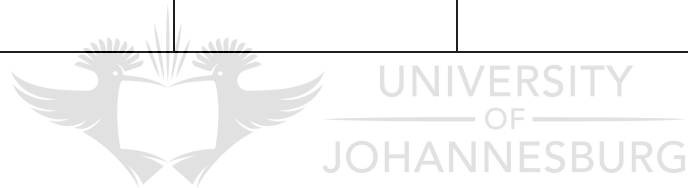
Language (where the instruction in the higher education institution might be the students' second or even third language).



## Participants in this study

<b>Year of study</b>	<b>Parents employed</b>	<b>Parents unemployed</b>	<b>Home Language</b>	<b>Place of origin</b>
<b>Year two</b>	No	Yes	Xhosa	Ngqushwa village
<b>Year two</b>	No	Yes	Zulu, Swati and Sesotho	Khatlehong
<b>Year two</b>	No	Yes	Xhosa and Afrikaans	Butterworth (Gcuwa)
<b>Year three</b>	No	Yes	Venda	Limpopo
<b>Year three</b>	No	Yes	Sotho	Pretoria

<b>Year three</b>	No	Yes	Sesotho	Lesotho
<b>Year four</b>	No	Yes	Northern Sotho	Bashai-Ditlou
<b>Year four</b>	No	Yes	Tsonga	Gravelotte Township
<b>Year four</b>	No	Yes	Tsonga	Majeje



The focus of this study was on undergraduate students in the Faculty of Education who were in their second, third and fourth year. Most importantly, the participants were students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds.

#### **4.4.2 Size of the Sample**

A small sample was specifically selected for this study to explore students' knowledge on how they negotiated their success at the University. According to Cohen et al (2007), sample size is also determined to some extent by the style of the research. In qualitative research, it is more likely that the sample size will be small. Lincoln and Guba (in Merriam 1998:64) indicate that the process of sampling can continue until a "point of saturation or redundancy is reached". In purposeful sampling, the size of the sample depends on the amount of information required.

#### **4. 4. 3 Sampling method (Snowball)**

Sampling is the process of selecting a few, or sample, from a bigger group which is your sample population, to become the basis for estimating or predicting the prevalence of an unknown piece of information, outcome or situation regarding the bigger group (Trochim, 2002). The sample is therefore a subgroup of the population in which you are interested. There are two major categories of sampling methods; first probability sampling and second non-probability sampling. In this study, the snowball sampling was used by asking each participant or group of participants to refer the researcher to others (Merriam, 1998:63). Snowball sampling was chosen because I did not know students from historically disadvantaged communities, as well as not having an updated list of students who received financial grants from the NSFAS. I therefore asked some of the participants to provide information on students from poor communities who could be respondents. Before interviewing these students I ensured that they actually met the criteria needed for this study.



#### **4.5 Data collection method**

Data is described by Merriam (1998:69) as an ordinary piece of information found in the environment. Information can be concrete or abstract, measurable or difficult to measure, for example, feelings or perceptions. The importance of a piece of information for research purpose is determined by the area of interest, and the researcher's perspective. The views of these students on how they negotiated their success were vital for this study.

Data can be collected in several ways: interviews, observations and analysis of documents among others. Walcott (in Merriam, 1998:69) describes the process of data collection as "asking", "watching", and "reviewing". The method of data collection in this study was interviews; one interview session was conducted with each student. It should be noted that the study was limited to undergraduates from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. There are sensitive areas which are not

immediately apparent, such as feelings, thoughts and intentions. Interviewing them enables the researcher to “enter into the other person’s perspective” (Patton in Merriam 1998:72). The interview method was unstructured with open-ended questions. It needs to be noted that this study was exploratory; therefore, I gave participants the opportunity to explore and gain insight into the factors which motivated them to keep on going. Interviews allowed for an in-depth exploration and understanding of the research problem. A tape recorder was used to record the conversations between the respondents and the researcher.

Kvale (1983) notes that average people being interviewed are given the opportunity to describe their own life-worlds, their opinions and their acts, in their own particular words. It is important to take into account Kvale’s (in Cohen et al, 2000:125) range of qualifications in order to be an effective interviewer. He explains that an interviewer should:

Have a sound knowledge of the subject matter so that an informed conversation can take place.

Clearly state the purpose of the interview, and how it will be conducted and concluded.

Be clear in expressing the subject matter.

Allow the respondents the freedom to verbalise their thoughts and feelings in their own way, and in their own time.

Keep track of what has been said earlier in the interview and use these as links in the conversation.

The interviews were on a one to one basis with each respondent choosing a spot where he/she felt comfortable. While conducting the formal interviews, I initially aimed at an interview on a conversational level and concentrated on maintaining a high level of interaction. While Conney and Cladinin (1990:04) feel that the respondent should be given the opportunity to tell his/her story, they also maintain “process of collaboration involving mutual storytelling and re-storing as the researcher proceeds”.

The collaboration between the respondents and the researcher allowed the respondents to talk freely and I felt no need to relate my own stories or give them

clues to answers. If the respondents strayed from the topic, I gently redirected them back to what they had been saying so that their stories did not diverge from the research (Burns, 2000:425). I also used probes as a way of eliciting more information. Bishop (1997) explains that interviews should focus on depth, details and probes which go further beneath the surface of the conversation to uncover more such as, “tell me more about” and “could you give some more examples to explain...?” And (asking the respondent to explain their responses in detail) asking “why?” and “could you explain your response in more detail?” (Creswell, 2002:208). In addition, I used parroting (mirroring) and minimal encouragers to keep the respondent talking; for instance, “So you are saying that...”, “Mm”, and “Uh huh...” (Burns, 2000: 426). The respondent was thus reassured that I was following and understanding what he/she was saying. I became a co-constructor of the data through prompts, encouragements and interest in what the respondents were saying (Henning, 2004:57).

#### **4.6 Data analysis**

The tape-recorded interviews were transcribed. The identity of the participants was protected by the use of codes. While analysing the data, I used an interpretational approach. Thematic codes were used in order to capture the qualitative richness of the phenomenon (Neuman, 2006). The collected data was arranged in a logical order, and categorized into meaningful categories. I then looked for relationships between the categories, looking for a common pattern in the data (Bertram, 2004). The common pattern of interaction in an interview context is the transaction which takes place between the interviewer seeking information and the interviewee supplying it. The data and the interpretations were analysed and thoroughly examined. These codes were grouped together into categories and constantly refined by using rules for inclusion until I reached my findings, which are discussed in Chapter Five.

#### **4.7 Ethical issues**

The ethical issues concerning informed consent and confidentiality involved in the interviews were cleared with the participants verbally, and by means of a letter, explaining what I was doing and why. (Cohen et al, 2007). The participants were reminded that the research would not harm them, and that confidentiality would be

maintained. Permission to conduct the research was granted by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education.

The necessary ethical forms were forwarded to the University of Johannesburg to expedite ethical clearance. Lankshear and Knobel (2004) disclose that within educational research, the issue of ethics is concerned with ensuring that the well-being of participants is not harmed as a result of the research. They explain that harm can range from participants experiencing insults to their dignity and being upset by conclusions drawn about them, all the way through to having their reputations publicly undermined.

I mentioned the objective of the study in the forms; I wanted the respondents to participate in the study fully aware of the requirements and process. The forms also assured them that the information they provided would remain confidential; and would be destroyed on the completion of the study. The participants were treated with dignity, fairness, openness of intent, disclosure of methods and respect for their integrity (Leedy, 1997). Participants were also given additional assurance on confidentiality and anonymity. They were assured that the data would only be used for study purposes and that all records would be safely kept with the university and disposed of after five years. They were once again allowed the freedom to withdraw from the study in case they did not feel comfortable in continuing the interview process. They were informed verbally and in writing that they were not obliged to take part in the research study. All the participants agreed to be interviewed and signed the letters of consent forms after reading and understanding them, before the commencement of each session. They felt at ease after the detailed discussion of the ethical issues surrounding the study. According to Merriam (1998) a good qualitative study is the one that is ethically conducted.

#### ***4.8 Validity and trustworthiness***

Validity and reliability are essential for effective research. Validity and reliability means that the research is credible and trustworthy (Meree, 2007). The term "validity" is more applicable in qualitative research and refers to the honesty, richness and depth of the data generated (Cohen, et al, 2007). Data or methods are

not as important as the meanings participants give to the data. Interviewees were given the transcripts to read in order to determine whether their views were correct and genuine. The use of two or more methods in studying human behaviour is called methodological triangulation which elicits a richer description of the phenomenon under study. Greater researcher confidence in the results is possible when several methods produce similar data (Cohen, et al, 2007).

#### **4.9 Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed the different steps undertaken in the research methodology, and also explains that the methods adopted were adequate so that the research question could be answered. The use of a narrative approach proved to be highly rewarding. It allowed for the gathering of the data throughout critical moments in the educational life of the participants to map out the experiences and the learning and development emanating from them. The students selected appeared enthusiastic and sincere in their narratives, an aspect that seems to have added value to the study.

The next chapter presents a detailed description of the data analysis in response to the critical questions, and discusses these under specific themes observed from the data collected during the interview sessions.



## CHAPTER FIVE:

### From disadvantage to success: How do they do It?

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#### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter discusses the results of the data analysis. It examines the different themes emerging from the data. The data reveals that different students come to university with diverse forms of capital which enable them to be successful when facing the challenges they encounter. The themes constitute the bedrock of this research study. The categories which answer the research question are discussed and supported by relevant quotes from the interviews. The discussion and interpretation of the findings are also linked to relevant literature, which is addressed as a way of explaining the findings.

The importance of their backgrounds displayed itself in different ways. Participants indicated that they could not give up their pursuit of education because they did not want to return to the life they had before coming to the University. This contributed enormously in moulding these students to become motivated, resilient and determined: "I grew up under deplorable situations and as such I've learned how to endure, I'm working hard". Their experiences enabled them to work hard, make use of the diverse forms of academic support the university had in place to assist them with their studies, as well as other networks like peers (working as a team). These students were able to negotiate success in diverse and meaningful ways until the completion of a career in education at the University. The discussion of the findings starts with the theme of intrinsic motivation: resilience and self-determination. These have their roots in the past; poverty in their families and poor education in their communities as well as being raised in rural South Africa. Surprisingly, many of them still passed their matriculation despite the difficulties.

## **5.2 Intrinsic motivation:**

One participant noted, "I'm not from a rich family and I do not want to go back to that kind of life I grew up in. So I have to study hard to make sure that I obtain that which will be my visa to a better life and it will enable me to assist my family financially and otherwise, because I don't want to live that life we're living in my home". The quotation points to what has been referred to in the literature as intrinsic motivation. In the study by Petersen et al (2009), intrinsic motivation positively predicted adjustment to the university. In a study to test the Petersen et al. (2009) model, it was established that psychosocial factors such as academic motivation, self-esteem and perceived stress contribute to students' academic performance. The study also revealed that intrinsic motivation plays a significant role in academic performance and equally predicts adjustment and academic performance.

In another situation a student said about the reason she was intrinsically motivated to study and not drop out like some of her friends, "The campus is a very big and different environment from where I come from. I know my neighbor and they know me. If I have a problem I know where to go to. But the life here is very different from the one I grew up in. That does not scare me at all, rather it motivates me to work even harder so I can be able to write my tests and exams and succeed like any other student". Another participant commented "I try to cope; there are times I can't even eat because there is no food. I spend the whole day at school and when I come back to rest, there is no food, somehow, I don't even consider these as challenges they harden and motivate me to work harder because I know I come from a community where there is lack of basic needs like food, electricity, and water yet I'm surrounded by all those here on campus but no food (laughs)". These tough experiences only heighten their level of intrinsic motivation because, according to one of them, "I don't consider these as challenges. If you want to know what it means to suffer go live where I come from". A different participant noted, "I know which doors to knock when I'm facing difficulties with my work and I don't fear to knock at those doors". The ability to make these decisions and thus maneuver themselves on campus, requires

particular kinds of skills, which are not limited only to students from far better backgrounds. The study calls these skills compensatory skills.

Kushman et al, (2000), assert that high intrinsic motivation and engagement in learning have consistently been linked to reduced dropout rates and increased levels of student success. Hence, the strong desire to succeed in education and not return to the poor and miserable life in the rural areas and townships motivates them to work hard. In a study conducted by Broussard in 2002 to find out if student motivation contributed to academic performance, the results supported the researcher's expectations that intrinsic motivation was positively related to children's academic performance. Niebuhr (1995) established that school and family have a strong direct impact on academic achievement because these elements motivate students to study hard.

Another student said about the reason she was working hard here at University, "...When we moved to this rural area, it struck me that, If I don't work hard, I may end up in that place considering what we were going through, I told myself that, that life was not meant for me. So I started taking my studies seriously because I knew that was the only thing that could take me out of that situation from that time, ... I started working hard for I didn't want to go back to the life of fetching water from distant streams, fetching wood etc. That experience has made me who I am today. It has motivated me to be a fighter, to work hard, be able to plan my things I think most of the experiences I had to me have shaped me to be who I am now". In a study by Gottfried and Fleming (1998) the home environment had a positive and significant effect on academic motivation. Children raised in homes where there was a greater emphasis on learning opportunities and activities, were more academically motivated.

A different participant said, "getting used to the environment was a challenge; at home you are confined to an environment, but here it is very different. Mm, I have to adapt since I'll be spending four years of my life here to obtain my degree". Another participant remarked, "it's the background situation where I'm coming from. I grew up under deplorable situations and as such I've learned how to endure, I'm working hard. Hm, hm, I have to work hard with all that the university has put in place to help me with the education."

In a study by Kusurkar et al, (2011), to see if motivation influenced academic performance in medical education, it was shown that the more self-determined or autonomous the motivation, the better the observed outcomes, that is, deep learning leads to high academic performance, better adjustment and positive well-being. It is plain that motivation is a prime asset which students from poor socio-economic backgrounds bring to university; it is this skill they employ to steer themselves through their courses. Students who are intrinsically motivated will do anything to succeed. If one has an innate drive one will use whatever comes, even the smallest thing. One just needs to know what one wants. "Impossible" is indeed nothing. All one needs is the drive and hunger! This applies to anyone and everyone despite their backgrounds. The students in this study epitomized this determination.

Another participant commented "If they can implement compulsory English classes especially for students who come from rural areas. ... I come from a community where I learnt English in the mother tongue, (laughs); I learnt all the subjects in my mother tongue, and coming to an environment where the medium of instruction is English makes it very difficult for me to cope. Eish ! Hm! This is just one of the reasons why most students who come from rural or township areas drop out during their first year of study. Eish, this is a challenge for me but I must learn this language, I have to learn it, I've been using different networks to learn it".

Despite the fact that English is the medium of instruction at UJ and a second language for these students, they were not ready to give up but went to different support groups or their peers for clarity or academic assistance. They wanted to return to their communities and transform them. Their deep desire to change their society motivated them, and they applied themselves diligently to their studies. A student who is intrinsically motivated will persist with the assigned task, even though it may be difficult (Gottfried, 1983; Schunk, 1990), and will not need any type of reward or incentive to initiate or complete a task (Deci, 1975; Woolfolk, 1990).

Students also highlighted the need to set goals for what they regarded as important in life and what they would like to accomplish in the future: "So you don't let your

home situation to interfere with your studies because you know If it does you might not make it. Because you might end up going back to that community and there will be no way to help your family or change your community”. Good intentions and the urge to succeed despite the hurdles was the starting point, as well as ridding themselves of bad habits which could lead to failure. They had to cultivate a strong sense of responsibility towards their work. Even though they knew that hard work was the path to success, they were aware of the need to have balance in their lives.

One participant commented; “Eish...sometimes I hang out with my friends but that is only when I do not have any assignment, or test coming up. When I do, I tell my friends no. This is because I know the reason why I’m here at the University of Johannesburg...I don’t lazy around when I have to study. Everything has its own time. I always see to that”. They had set goals for themselves and they ensured that these goals were uppermost. Motivation expressed as involvement more often leads to academic success than mere aptitude. All these constructs simply point to the high degree of intrinsic motivation of these students which had enabled them to deal with the diverse issues they encountered in all the aspects of campus life.

Intrinsic motivation is usually defined as an internal state which stimulates a person to engage in a particular form of behaviour; its core is the explanation of individuals’ conscious choices among different alternatives (Brown & Peterson, 1994). There are three types of motivated behaviour: intrinsically motivated, extrinsically motivated and motivated. For the purpose of this study, and based on my data, intrinsic motivation was the common factor of the participants. (Pintrich et al, 1999) state that an intrinsically motivated student is likely to display autonomy and employ self-initiated exploratory strategies. An extrinsic (identified, interjected and externally regulated) motivated student seeks approval and external signs of worth. (Sansone & Smith, 2000).

### **5.3 Resilience**

Educational resilience is ”the heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences” (Wang et al., 1994:46). Furthermore, resilience has

been defined as the process, capacity, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances (Howard & Johnson, 2000). Similarly Alva, (1991, p.19) affirms that academically resilient students are those “who sustain high levels of achievement motivation and performance despite the presence of stressful events and conditions that place them at risk of doing poorly in school and ultimately dropping out of school”. One of the participants said “For me...coming here ...was difficult ...because I could not express myself in English properly, even now I’m still learning. But like I said I don’t give up easily. Like when I came here it was my first time to see a computer and I was even afraid to touch it because I was thinking that I might destroy it if I pressed the wrong button ...mm (laughs) or will make a loud sound and every one will turn to look at me and know that it’s my first time to make use of it.” Despite the fact that this student was not familiar with a computer, gradually he started using it for his projects. He was resilient because he realised that it was really necessary for him to learn how to use this device to type his assignment and other projects.

Another student added “when I first came here, I thought I was very good in writing, but no; the marks I got were very poor. I felt bad but then I thought of my family, where I came from and I said ‘no ’I must ... I have to make it. This pushed me to go to different support structures to seek for help. I remained strong and that is why I’m here today... Eish... (Laughs) I’ve come a very long way, you can’t imagine”. Such an attitude is primarily rooted in the students’ past experience - their individual biography or background. “It’s the background situation where I’m coming from. I grew up under very deplorable conditions and as such, I’ve learned to endure” Moreover, the “never give up” principle is drawn from their experience in the ‘deplorable’ situations of their past, and the commitment to ‘never go back’ to it.

In a study carried out to examine diploma and attainment in Mexican-American and non-Latino white dropouts, Wayman (2002) hypothesizes that use of the educational resilience framework would increase knowledge about degree attainment in dropouts. He discovered that the success of dropouts who returned to gain high school credentials in the form of a high school diploma was associated with academic resilience and support from peers. The influence of peers has been associated with educational resilience, through peer support (Gonzalez & Padilla) and peer commitment to education (Alva, 1991; Horn & Chen, 1998). Such support

enables students to learn to trust; it provides them with someone who will help them learn from their problems. This contact does not necessarily need to be with a family member; teachers are often listed as sources of support, as are relatives outside the immediate family (McMillan & Reed, 1993).

The narratives and constructs point to an interesting theoretical insight: the role of agency among resilient students. This was eloquently expressed by one student: “you see the community I come from taught me to be strong, to stand on your own, stay positive, to push and to hustle. Because I don’t want to go back to that kind of life, I would like to make a difference in my community someday therefore, I try my best to beat the different and numerous challenges I encounter every single day on this campus”. A similar account was given by another student: “I like to be an agent of change; I know I’ll be influencing young lives each and every day. So I’ll be building their future positively that is what makes me strong now. I know there will be challenges but I will embrace them when time comes just as I’m dealing with those that I’m encountering here now”. The accounts show a rare pre-disposition of the students concerned to be critical change agents for reshaping their past.

Reyes & Jason (1993) designed a study to understand successful high school students in an inner-city school. Two groups of Latino students were identified as being either at low or high risk for dropping out of school; all students shared a similar socio-economic status, parent-student involvement, and parental supervision. They found that the low risk students reported a strong resiliency and agency, an attribute significantly lacking in the high risk students. It was found that although the participants worked through different phases in the change process, their final reaction was to choose to become victors, not victims, and to thrive despite their circumstances. Their insight and self-knowledge gained through setbacks and difficulties helped them become more resilient. Reflecting on the human qualities and other factors of resilience as identified in the literature review study and this finding, it seems evident that a central theme of these factors is the notions of choice and agency underpinning success among historically disadvantaged students.

#### **5.4 Self-Determination**

The bedrock or foundation of students' motivation is a strong sense of individual self-determination, which Deci et al (1991: 35) defines as "the process of utilising one's will". One student noted "my mother always said please work hard. I don't want you to live the life that I'm living. This made me to start thinking and setting goals for myself. It made me to focus more on my academics". Another student pointed out, "I know why I'm here and not at home. I must pass so that I can save my family from poverty". These narratives really demonstrate the students' unswerving determination. The result of a study on self-determination in the classroom proved that by giving students opportunities for self-determination their intrinsic motivation increased; this gave rise to an increase in their academic achievements. Gottfried (1990) has shown how intrinsic motivation and self-determination positively affected academic achievement among elementary and junior high school students. Similarly, Black and Deci (2000) also established that autonomy-supportive environments impact positively on the academic achievement of college students. A student was very specific on this aspect: "I'm in level three now because I was determined from beginning not to drop out but to use all the resources available to pass my exams and tests and assignments. That is why I'm in year three and I'll use this spirit to the end of my programme".

Deci (1980:35) defines self-determination as "the process of utilising ones will". Self-determination necessitates that people accept their strengths and limitations, are aware of the forces acting on them, make choices, decisions and determine ways to satisfy their needs (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). Hence, will and self-determination, flexibility, tolerance and adaptability are interconnected; to be self-determining, people need to decide how to act on the influences in their environment. According to Wehmeyer et al (1996), self-determination has four essential characteristics: autonomous functioning, self-regulation, psychological empowerment and self-realization. Students in this study talked about autonomous functioning, self-regulation, and self-realization. Autonomous functioning is characterized by strong agency in decision-making skills, problem-solving skills, choice-making skills, and



independent-living skills (Wehmeyer et al. 1996). The, students' narratives in this study concentrated on the following key attributes:

Autonomous functioning: "I have to take my own decisions and not let other people to influence me negatively". Or, "I can easily adapt to any situation because I know what I want to achieve here at the University"

"Eish, everything is a barrier to me here. From the environment, the language used in lectures, the culture, the computer, the lecturers even the attitude of some of the students here on campus ... but I'm determined to work hard despite these. My determination to succeed is what has kept me going because it's really not easy for me".

Self-realization through goal-setting around becoming agents of social change with altruistic purpose: "...I want to be an agent of change in my family and community"; or role models: "I'm working hard so as to be a role model for others where I come from..."

Responsible for good life in their future: "...I do face a lot of challenges; I knew I would encounter challenges when coming here...mm. I came here with a mind to succeed no matter what happens, nothing will make me change my mind concerning my studies. I came here to study because this certificate is my visa to a good life for me and my family therefore I'm not turning back. I must get that which I came to get: a certificate in education".

"...where I'm staying, I'm the only person studying, the rest of the tenants are not students: they make loud noise, music very high... it's too much distraction but I have no choice... you see I'm in year three now"

"Since I want to succeed, I derive means to do my work on campus because I don't have a study table at home; my friends are all on campus, so we make a plan".

The accounts highlight the individual strong desire to succeed which enables these students to seek ways of successfully completing their academic work on campus. They set goals to work harder so that they would be on the same academic level as their friends. They did not make excuses that they lacked reading tables or books, or that they lived in a place which was not conducive to studying. Autonomous functioning is characterized by strong agency in decision making, problem-solving, choice-making and independent living skills (Wehmeyer et al, 1996). This showed that participants consistently attributed their success to a key internal factor, self-determination particularly during first year, when they were still adjusting to the university environment and experiencing challenges which could have forced them to drop out (Looney in Chireshe, Shumba 2009).

After reviewing 181 intervention studies from 1970 to 1993, Hughes and Eisenman (1996) reported that there was an increase in the number of studies on self-determination from 1989 to 1993. They suggested that there could be a significant relationship between self-determination and positive adult outcomes, such as life adjustment, employment, and social relationships. Their assumption was confirmed by several research reports indicating a significant correlation between employment, self-determination, and postsecondary education (Adelman & Vogel, 1990; Wehmeyer, and Schwartz, cited in Black et al, 2000). Supporting the role of determination in academic performance or the relevance of determination for attaining success in whatever one sets out to do, is also discussed by Sung (2007) who investigated self-determination and academic achievement as an indicator of success in post-secondary education. The findings revealed that the role of self-determination was even greater in overcoming the barriers students were encountering at school.

In a study carried out by Brinckerhoff et al (2002), they found out that the growing number of people with disabilities in postsecondary education who were struggling with higher academic requirements, while receiving much less support than they had been given during secondary education, but were successful, was their solid desire to succeed. Their self-determination spurred them to work even harder. According to REAP (2008), the major factor driving students' intentions and commitments to their

studies in their data was the determination to succeed no matter what, even where their social integration was weak. Self-determination of these students is solidly based on a desperate need to uplift themselves, their families and, in some cases, their communities from their impoverished circumstances. Inner strength and self-determination was a vital factor in students' success at a tertiary level (REAP, 2008).

As referred to previously, another aspect associated with their agency is the desire to become transformative agents in their lives and those of their communities. This is explicit in some of their narratives. Key to achieving these goals successfully were their attitudes and pre-dispositions for hard work they had within themselves, in great part the survival strategies learned in their villages, which enabled them to adjust their habitus. These included the pre-disposition to make sacrifices (...“If you want something badly enough you will make sacrifices”); the pre-disposition of having to make difficult choices (“...guys I’m studying today, I’m going nowhere so please, give me a break”); the pre-disposition of adapting to new situations (“I can easily adapt to any situation... that has been keeping me going”); the pre-disposition of appreciating the limited services that the university could make available (Coming from the rural area has made me appreciate the different resources that the university has put in place to assist us; I never had these opportunities back home therefore, what will stop me from working hard”); and above all the pre-disposition of being able to do more with very little:

“I’m proud of anything I have and I can manage it because I grew up in a very poor home ... we always managed everything we had. That is why I’m contented with the bursary, so if they say they would pay just my fees I’m okay with that. I just want to study hard and succeed so I can get the bursary next year again”.

"The bursary is very small, but for me that is too much; I know how to manage it to last me the entire academic year”.

“...the bursary, support structures and lecturers, I told myself that I have hit a jackpot. I’m determined to exploit all these facilities. I know I have to make use of them so as to succeed. It’s my determination to succeed that has been urging me to

work harder. You see, we got NASFAS bursaries and many of my friends still dropped out. This is because they were not determined to work harder.

“Yoh, yoh, that money is a lot; I send some home so my mum can buy groceries. Then I manage the rest here”.

“...All the facilities at my disposal here were absent in my high school. I have learned how to use them. I really had”. A different participant said “being in class with students from urban areas was a huge challenge for me, but this made me rather more determined to work hard because I saw them as a huge challenge, so I exploited a lot of resources at my disposal so as not to be left behind. I mean academically

Overall, all the participants agreed that their background had played a major part in their determination not to drop out. Students’ backgrounds not only made them determined, but also gave them the capability of managing the little money they did have. Some were able to live on what they had and some even sent money home.

According to the REAP (2008), personal characteristics and attributes are important mediating factors in overcoming obstacles in academic and social integration; willpower, self-determination and intrinsic-motivation being the prime factors. REAP (2008) findings highlighted the fact that students with these characteristics had a better chance of success.

### **5.5: Seeking help from significant others**

The ability to make decisions and use them to enhance ones' skills to manoeuvre on campus requires particular kinds of skills, which include seeking help from significant others. The ability and confidence to seek help when desperate is highly entrenched in poor communities. Resilient students frequently form an informal support network of friends, family and others, providing areas of support in tough times (Geary, 1988). These support groups enable them to share ideas regarding assignments or academic projects. They seek help from their tutors or lecturers after exhausting the options the groups have given them. School environments and specific teachers who are supportive and provide a positive place for the student to learn, are important for academic success (Alva & Padilla, 1995; Finn & Rock, 1997; Wang et al. 1994).

The importance of support networks cannot be underestimated. Drawing on help from friends appears to be common practice: "I try to work alone and if I don't understand, I go to meet my friends and we talk about it". For this particular student: "My friends, some of them have brilliant and better ideas about what we are studying. If I'm confused about anything, they explain it to me like one, two and three (clicking his fingers)" we help each other both academically and socially...sometimes I go to the tutors because I consider them as small lecturers, and they too are able to assist me".

The importance of establishing networks of support besides friends is also valued and sometimes encouraged by the lecturers: "...Our teacher used to tell us that you need to work together as a team even in life you need to work together to make it even in life. Create networks; don't think you know too much because no one knows too much in life, go to other people get fresh and different ideas..."Then I go to tutors or lecturers for further help: "... I turn to my friends first, if I don't get it clear, I'll go to a tutor. Another participant said, 'But even when I get it clear from my friends, I still go to a tutor just to confirm. I believe that tutors have the knowledge then I go to the internet and the library is also within the range of options: I go to the library to make use of the internet. I do believe in the internet and my friends".

What benefits do students get from these encounters? The range of benefits is varied but featuring on the top of the list are issues such as the writing of assignments and academic projects: "We do our assignments. And if there is a project we even go and look for other friends because we are all boys so we see if a girl will join us. You see we are always worried about our work; we do our work every time like now we are working on another assignment. If I have a problem, I send a message to my friends and ask can you help me with this?" There are also benefits of different kind, which reflect the nature of support networks within poor communities. One student had the following to say, "one of my friends gave me books that he borrowed from his own friends. I used these books till the end of the academic year and then I gave them back in good condition. I'm a good caretaker". Students use economical ways of assembling study materials just as they did in their villages.

### **5.5 Conclusion**

The chapter has shown that determination, Intrinsic-motivation, self-determination and resilience enhanced the academic performance of the participants in this study. These personal characteristics, arising from their difficult life experiences in their communities, enabled them to come up with certain compensatory skills or alternative forms of social capital they used when faced by challenges at university. They used these diverse skills (Seeking for assistance, management skills, knowing who to turn to for assistance and so on.), to negotiate their success.

If students are willing to work hard for their degrees, and schedule their plans to fit into their studies, their efforts are most likely to be rewarded. The key to success rests on their strong individual agency and their positive pre-dispositions and attributes. These assets enable them to make the most of the opportunities they are given. They have to aim high, and do their best or in most cases outdo themselves. The conclusion we can draw is that their backgrounds shape the decisions they make at university. This study has revealed that students from historically disadvantaged background negotiate their successes at university differently All the

participants in this study stated that “they would not like to go back to the kind of life they once lived”. They wanted to go back home but to make a difference in their communities. They were willing to go more than the extra mile to succeed. Students from poor communities come to tertiary institutions with learning resources of different kind which are not always a liability in Bourdieu's logic, but a tremendous asset.



## CHAPTER SIX

### Conclusion: Recommendations, Limitations and challenges

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#### **6.1. Conclusion**

Rural students come from backgrounds with different values and socio-cultural systems. Their primary experience of higher education cannot be the same as that of urban students, and those who come from economically privileged backgrounds. There is thus a much greater gap between the socio-cultural practices of rural disadvantaged students and those of higher education institutions, than for the traditional student population of universities. According to the findings in this study, students from historically disadvantaged background face many more challenges. This study has revealed however, that students' backgrounds indirectly equipped them and thus prepared them with the qualities necessary to succeed. Students became resilient, motivated and determined, developing important skills such as the ability to choose and decide where and when to seek help, who to turn to in case of need, managing their sparse resources efficiently (e.g. bursaries, sharing resources (e.g. books), drawing on team work wherever possible, skills that reflect common practices within poor communities. They worked hard and made good use of the diverse forms of academic support.

They were also assisted by networks of peers (work as a team). Each student negotiated his or her success differently. This was evident when examining "who" and "what" each participant used when faced by academic challenges. Every individual student, from historically disadvantaged backgrounds came to the University with his or her own coping mechanisms in the same way a student from an urban area came with his or own network, knowledge and coping abilities essential for steering one's way through this different milieu..

The main conclusion can be summarized as follows: A personal choice to self-actualize regardless of circumstances underlies the interacting web of human



qualities and other factors in a resilient, motivated and determined person. Resilience, self-determination and motivation keep that person on the path of growth, self-actualization and self-transcendence, regardless of the circumstances. The students in this study were influenced by several important factors directly and indirectly relating to the concept of self, intrinsic motivation and self-determination. Other factors included the role of significant others, for example family support, lecturers' attitudes and peer support.

## **6.2. Recommendations**

This study challenges the tendency to approach historically disadvantaged/marginalized groups as being homogenous, particularly as some students come to university and succeed, while others fail. A generalized approach constrains how we design pedagogical and student mediation strategies.

There is also an epistemological break with the Western theoretical hegemony requiring modified or different analytical lenses which are sensitive to local complexities. Such a break has profound implications for the particular ways in which we conceptualize and apply theoretical and methodological strategies. Researching the marginalized requires awareness and understanding of the dynamics and processes of marginalization or disempowerment of people through knowledge representation. This study reframed Bourdieu's concept of social capital and habitus to do justice to the experiences of historically disadvantaged students. An important question in this regard is: How can research practice be conceptualized and used in ways which minimize misrepresentation and the consequent marginalization of historically disadvantaged groups?

Learning from research opens the path to maximizing student agency in designing pedagogies relating to marginalized groups. The key to success rests on encouraging and building on the positives.

## **6.3 Limitation and Challenges of the Study**

The fact that the researcher also comes from a historically disadvantaged background, might have provided room for bias because of my self interest, as well as my own experiences as student from the same socio-economic background. These experiences could have clouded my ability to pursue certain points or

contributed to her strong analysis of some points at the expense of fairness. This might have affected the findings. As Selltiz et al (cited in Bell, 1993: 95) points out, “there is always a danger of bias creeping into interviews, largely because interviewers are human beings and not machines, and their manners may have an effect on the respondents.”

As I am a student in this University gaining access to interviewing the students was not an issue. However, problems arose because the participants did not always turn up. When I saw one of the students who had originally accepted to take part in the interview I asked her why she had not turned up as promised, she told me she was not comfortable talking about her background or experiences because they brought back so many bad memories. She really did not want to be interviewed at all. This participant referred me to another student from a similar background. This student was eager to contribute in this study.



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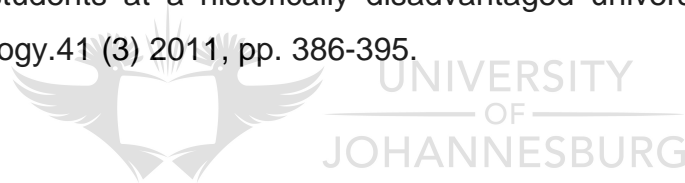
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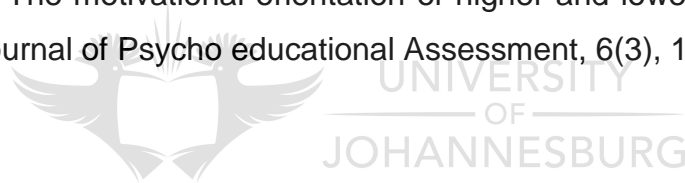
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