

Exploring the Educational Engagement Practices of Disadvantaged Students at a South African University

Najwa Norodien-Fataar
Doria Daniels

Abstract

This article discusses the educational engagement practices of disadvantaged first-generation students at a South African university. Based on qualitative research conducted in the interpretive tradition and using interviews and focus groups with selected students, this article explores how disadvantaged students engage with the education and support structures at the university. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1990; 2000) analytical tools of field, capital and habitus, it explores how students are able to produce practices and dispositions to develop their educational engagement within the university. The article highlights the varied and uneven field conditions of the university in terms of which the students had to navigate their university studies. Their responses to these conditions were strategically directed towards narrowly focusing on, and maximizing, their academic commitments to their studies. This resulted in minimal and halting engagement with the university's social support services. The article demonstrates the significance of the students' complex engagements with their lecturers, active and productive interaction with their student peers and the academic support offered by the university's Teaching and Learning unit. These were central to their engagement practices at the university. The article illustrates the students' acquisition of strategic emergent academic dispositions in an uneven university field. These dispositions, we argue, are crucial to them establishing productive educational paths at the university.

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

Introduction

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

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

What we miss in the extant literature is students' accounts of their experiences and educational engagement practices at the university. This article thus focuses on students' agency and capacity to engage in their education at the university. It focuses on the educational engagement practices of first-generation students from low socio-economic backgrounds at one South African university. The article explores the ways in which they are able to navigate the university's educational infrastructure. Educational engagement here refers to the practices that students establish to access and

engage with the university as well as its support infrastructure, which is meant to provide them with their ‘opportunity to learn’ (Boykin & Noguera, 2011: 1).

To make sense of how students are positioned at and by the university, as well as how students position themselves, this study draws on the work of Bourdieu (1990; 2000). Using qualitative research methods, we show how students engage the institution’s enablements and constraints in interacting with the university’s academic and institutional structures. Our main finding is that they actively go about establishing productive engagements to strengthen their academic performance despite the uneven educational support environment at this particular university. Understanding how students engage within the institutional terrain is key to understanding the resources that they draw on and the activities they are able to generate to advance their education at the university. We argue that the selected students discussed in this article developed emergent forms of engagement that enabled them to establish productive educational paths at the university.

The Context and Participants of the Study

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

The participants of the study were selected from the Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP) and were registered for courses in the Applied Sciences Faculty. They receive additional learning support in modules such as

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

Theoretical Framework

Bourdieu's (1990) concepts of field, capital and habitus informed our understanding of the strategies that disadvantaged students employ to develop their educational engagements at the university. Bourdieu proposed that:

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

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

a network of objective historical relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents and institutions, by their present and potential situations in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital), whose possession commands access to specific profits that are at stake in the field as well as by their objective relation to other positions (domination, subordination, homology).

Field thus refers to the social space as made up of institutions, situations, power

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

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

Bourdieu (1990) argues that individuals are always in the process of producing capital in the field, by which he means investments in social field. He argues that individuals are in the process of producing differing amounts and quality of capital to engage in the field, and that some even have 'trump cards' (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 98). According to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), capital functions as power over a field and the more capital an agent is able to access and amass, the more power he or she will be able to exert in the game. However, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds might not have the extensive capital possessed by middle-class students, but they do have what Yosso (2005) calls community cultural wealth to draw on. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977: 8) argue that the 'cultural capital of different social groups are unevenly valued in society, and that the value placed on any particular form of cultural capital is arbitrary – that is, it cannot be deduced from any universal principle, whether physical, biological or spiritual'. Giving more value to one group over another creates conflict and points of struggle among the different social class groups in the social. Bourdieu (1990) argues that practices are generated in the interaction of habitus, capital and field. He suggests that there are different power dynamics and conflicts within the field and individuals enter into formal agreements in the game and have a vested

interest in the game. While the 'field' is the terrain for Bourdieu's 'logic of practice' (1990: 80), habitus is introduced as a related concept to understand human actions in relation to the social structures that they are a part of.

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

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

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

reproducing educational capital and practices. The students' unfolding engagement practices therefore focuses on how their habitus emerges and adapts in interaction with the university field.

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

Research Design and Methodology

This study followed a qualitative, interpretative methodological approach to understanding the educational engagement practices of disadvantaged first generation students at the university. The sample population was senior students in their fourth year of study who participated in a mentoring programme. From this group seven students were purposively selected based on the criterion that they were first-generation students who came from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Purposive selection emphasises information-rich participants (Patton 2002), which allowed us to gain an in depth understanding of their educational engagement strategies. Of the seven participants, five were from the Western Cape Province and were Xhosa speakers. The other two students come from the Gauteng province and were Tswana speakers. The latter two lived at the university's residence. Pseudonyms were assigned for all participants.

Bourdieu's analytical framework was employed to interpret the data on how students engage with the institutional context as a space that structures

the habitus within which they navigate the world of being a student. The methods of data collection were appropriate for this purpose, as interviews gave the participants the opportunity to express themselves and share their opinions on important events associated with their educational engagement at the university.

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

Data were collected on their interactions and engagements with the university's support structures, lecturers and fellow students. Important concepts and themes were extracted and patterns of data were highlighted; similar ideas were then grouped together and themes were developed. We explored situations that could potentially inform us about students' engagement with lecturers, their interaction with their peers, and their

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

Students' Tentative Engagements with the University's Support Structures

Tinto (1993) suggests that students' integration into social and academic life provides them with a strong sense of commitment to their institutional experiences and enables them to become competent members of the academic community. Our exploration of this shows that the participants were directed towards the institutional support services through the orientation programmes offered to first-year students. The students were given a brief overview of the types of support they could access. Students reported that they used the library to borrow books, meet with their study group, and search for journal articles, and access computers and the university's e-learning platforms. They indicated that they particularly used the library to meet with students for group projects and larger research projects. They made use of the learner management system (LMS) to access assessment information, announcements from lecturers and class notes. Naledi explained that during her first year of study the use of the LMS gave her opportunities to use the library's computer facilities. She explained that:

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

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

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

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

at the university in order to access the services available to them. Their lack of action and follow-through suggests that they did not always explore or utilise the counselling and other similar services for a more optimal university experience.

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

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

The research participants’ tentative engagements with available social support structures can be attributed to their lack of knowledge about how to access them as well as the time constraints that prevented them from fully accessing the services and activities, even though information about these services and activities were given to them during the orientation programmes.

de Certeau (1984) refers to this type of information as ‘tour knowledge’, referring to knowledge given via once-off impersonal instruction about the availability of resources, physical and social spaces, and other generic information. Such information or knowledge does not in itself capacitate the students to properly access and use these resources and service. The students were not provided with any type of ‘map knowledge’, which refers to detailed understanding of what is required to successfully navigate and maximise behaviour in social spaces (de Certeau, 1984). They did not get exposure to the type of knowledge and information for them to develop the necessary capacity or interpersonal skills to access and utilise the university’s services.

Tinto (2008: 26) suggests that ‘students need to benefit from social support services, including academic advice, personal and career counselling’. Our data show that the students prioritised their academic work over social activities. They did not recognise the social support services as essential to their university education and were uncertain about how to explore the social support structures. The students’ attempt to develop ‘a sense of the game’ was constrained by limited access to the social support within these structures. They displayed only minimal or tentative interest about, and involvement in, social activities at the university as they had to focus their time and energy on their academic work, Bourdieu refers to this type of behaviour as resulting from a ‘strategic calculation of costs and benefits’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 133), which arises out of their habitus.

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

Students’ Strategies to Engage Lecturers

This theme explores how the students engage with their ECP lecturers around

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

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

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

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

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

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

Another significant feature of the data was reports by some of the participants that they consulted with lecturers for their own as well as their study group's benefit. Students felt that they needed to report back to their groups any information or skills that lecturers gave them during consultations. Sifiso pointed out that:

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

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

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

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

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

enable him to succeed at his studies.

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

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

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

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

In addition to these negative comments, Pulane and Noluthando also

experienced negative post-test feedback from their lecturers. This compelled Noluthando to adopt a courageous stance towards her lecturers. Noluthando explained:

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

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

Similarly, Pulane experienced a lack of support from the course lecturer when she wanted feedback after she failed a test. She consulted the lecturer and challenged her assessment mark; the lecturer responded by referring to the procedures and rules of assessment, which prevented her from gaining access to her script. The attitude of the lecturers towards the students meant that the students confronted a different ‘field condition’, which resulted in a ‘disruption between the habitus and the field’ (Hardy, 2014: 127). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: 105) describe these types of actions as ‘position-takings or ‘stances, i.e. the structured system of practices and expressions of agents’. These students, when faced with constraints in the department, chose to confront the lecturer, whom they experienced as acting against their interests. Their ability to speak up and challenge the way lecturers engaged with them shows that students relied on their ‘resistant capital’ (Yosso 2005) to engage with the lectures. Our data thus show that resistance and contestation are aspects of the educational engagement practices amongst the selected students.

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

Engaging with their Peers: Student-to-student Engagement

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

One of these strategies was to form study groups consisting of three to five students. When asked why they joined these groups, they said that the study groups gave them a sense of belonging and recognition. They also felt that their student peers' explanations gave them a better understanding of the content of their modules. Musa's explained that he is:

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

Sifiso reported that the study group enabled him to ask questions and to express

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

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

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

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

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

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

This they regarded as a key support strategy to bolster their learning.

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

In this section we presented data that showed that the students were able to connect with peers to enhance their academic development. These strategies were vital to their emerging academic habitus to ‘provide a basis for the generation of practices’ (Jenkins 1992: 48). The conditions within the field of the ECP course such as the formal opportunities made available on the timetable for students to engage with other peers enabled participants to develop a sense of solidarity and create opportunities to engage amongst themselves. Their encounters within the supportive ECP structures allowed them to generate educational practices which were essential for their engagement with the university. According to Bourdieu, ‘habitus becomes active in relation to a field, and the same habitus can lead to very different practices and stances depending on the state of the field’ (in Reay 2004: 432). The ECP provided the academic support bases for students to develop their habitus and to establish their emergent educational engagements and academic dispositions. The students connected with like-minded peers, older students and academically stronger students to advance their learning. These types of academic dispositions, we argue, were essential practices when more time and space were given to students to engage among themselves.

Conclusion

In this article we discussed the educational engagement practices of disad-

vantaged students by using Bourdieu's (1990; 2000) concepts of field, habitus and capital to analyse how students were able to engage in their education at the university. The article argues that the nature of students' educational engagement practices must be seen in relation to the 'field conditions' that students encounter at the university. The findings show that there were various resources that the students drew on and activities they were able to generate for their education. We highlighted the students' accounts of their engagement with the university's education support structures and platforms as a significant perspective. We illustrated how their subjective educational engagements were established in the light of their active, albeit uneven, interactions with the social spaces of the university. It was from this interaction that their emergent and productive educational engagements were generated.

As first-generation students they entered the university as alternative access students in need of extra assistance and were directed to the ECP. They made strategic choices about the ways in which they engage in the social spaces of the university. They were always narrowly focused on obtaining the necessary academic capital for their academic success. The students cultivated a keen sense of engagement with the educational support structures that directly benefited their academic commitments such as the TLU, the library and LMS but found it difficult to engage in the social support structures such as counselling services. The analysis illustrates that in the absence of the institutional capacity to enable them to access the social support structures; they either opted out of accessing these structures or interacted with them in them in superficial ways. As the example of their interaction with their lecturers highlight, the students familiarised themselves with the university or course rules and expectations in order to acquire the necessary practices to succeed at their university studies. Some of the participants also became empowered enough to question unfair practices and to challenge negative responses to their work. Thus, despite adopting strategic actions that would augment their studies, some students also did not hesitate to question lecturers and departments if they felt these impeded their progress. It is clear that the students were able to activate educational practices within supportive structures of their courses and amongst themselves by forming study groups, participating in group work and purposefully seeking informal mentors and tutors. These educational engagement practices show the emerging academic dispositions among the students in terms of which they were able to generate strategic engagement practices in support of their university study.

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

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Najwa Norodien-Fataar
Fundani Centre for Higher Education
Cape Peninsula University of Technology
norodien-fataarn@cput.ac.za

Doria Daniels
Department of Educational Psychology
Stellenbosh University
doria@sun.ac.za