The Pedagogy of the Marginalized: Understanding How Historically Disadvantaged Students Negotiate Their Epistemic Access in a Diverse University Environment

Michael Cross & Vivian Atinde

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

The Pedagogy of the Marginalized: Understanding How Historically Disadvantaged Students Negotiate Their Epistemic Access in a Diverse University Environment

Michael Cross and Vivian Atinde

This article explores how successful undergraduate students from marginalized communities or historically disadvantaged backgrounds negotiate their performance within a university environment. It addresses one important question: How did they make their way up the academic ladder in the face of hardship determined by their unique historical circumstances? By ''marginalized'' we mean those individuals or social groups who, by virtue of their race, gender, geographical location (rural, township or poor neighborhood), etc., have historically been placed on the margins or periphery of the mainstream social and economic hierarchy. According to this definition, we targeted students who suffered a considerable degree of marginalization by virtue of being black, originating from poor families, and who graduated from relatively under resourced schools in rural areas, including gender given the lower status of girls compared to boys in these areas. As such, their experiences have become either a blind spot in current academic scholarship, or an object of knowledge misrepresentation that contributes to the perpetuation of their marginalization.

This article challenges the assumption common in current South African literature that students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds are doomed to failure because of a lack, or inadequate forms, of social capital (Naidoo 2004; Jones et al. 2008; Czerniewicz and Brown 2011; Fataar 2012). Within this literature, Bourdieu's theory of social capital and habitus is popular. Drawing on the same theory, we show that some of these students offer different forms of assets that facilitate their academic integration and success at university, which are not easily intelligible when approached strictly within Bourdieu's conceptualization. We confine the idea of student ''success'' to productive use of accurate plans, development, and learning opportunities resulting in the completion of their academic goals. Broadly, we conceptualize academic integration and success as ''epistemic access.''

In line with current interpretations of Bourdieu's (1986) theory of social capital, it has been argued that students from rich backgrounds enter university with suitable forms of capital that they use as assets to succeed in their studies, thus giving them an advantage in dealing with the challenges of an academic environment (Tzanakis 2011, 77). It has also been argued that, given their habitus, these students come with dispositions and predispositions that help them to adapt easily to the academic environment (Kloot 2009). This point of view would imply that students from poor or disadvantaged backgrounds, perceived as being underprepared for academic life, are generally condemned to failure. What this theoretical framework ignores is that some students from poor backgrounds develop assets that enable them to navigate successfully at university. These assets include active cognitive processes or a ''pedagogy of survival'' that is well captured in Bandura's (1977) theory of behavioral change centered on the concept of self-efficacy. Accordingly, through persistence in activities that may be subjectively threatening, experiences of mastering these, and the consequent enhancement of self-efficacy, people process, weigh, and integrate diverse sources of information concerning their capability, which becomes central to regulating their choice of behavior and effort expenditure as they confront new situations (Bandura 1977, 212).

This article shows that, under certain circumstances (e.g., supportive family environment), the background of such marginalized students equips them with the capacity to respond positively and productively to key challenges within the university. At a social level, they have developed their own network skills, resilience, and determination to emancipate themselves from poverty. We refer to this phenomenon as ''compensatory capital'' which includes compensatory skills such as coping mechanisms, self-reliance, perseverance, adaptability, and flexibility in the choices they make to their advantage, and the ability to consult or seek advice from older or more experienced people. Such skills also include the ability to work as a group—linked to communal forms of life in the village—with people assisting or supporting each other. At the level of dispositions and predispositions, while their habitus may conflict with a campus lifestyle, it is essentially their sense of resilience, intrinsic motivation, and self-determination to free themselves from poverty that enable them to adjust to life on campus and cope with new challenges. Briefly, we argue that some students from disadvantaged backgrounds develop alternative forms of capital, dispositions, and predispositions, and a pedagogy that, when used creatively, enable them to navigate their lives successfully within an academic environment. It is the cognitive processes entailed in their experiences, particularly the ability to apply the resulting learning to new situations, which we refer to as the ''pedagogy of the marginalized.''

We have endeavored to write this piece as a way of exposing the problematic nature of what, within South African universities, as primary sites of knowledge production, has translated into an epistemological deficit with regard to the study of the experiences of the marginalized. Borrowing from hooks (1994, 9), having lived experiences of marginalization in the past as the students in this study, we claim that by moving from the position of being silent on these experiences to speaking about them, we are able to support them in

making a move from the position of object to subject and in gaining a form of liberated voice.

RESEARCH METHOD

The article is based on in-depth interviews using a life history approach, with eight students selected from the 2007–2012 cohorts in the Faculty of Education at the University of Johannesburg. Taking into account factors such as race, class, gender, and the profile of parents, we targeted black students from poor rural communities outside Johannesburg, who, in our view, find themselves at the bottom of the economic and social ladder. Given the sensitivity of the matter and the ethical concerns surrounding it, the students participated in the study of their own volition and all ethics requirements were complied with. We replaced their real names with pseudonyms, namely Sipho, Tsepo, Dumisani, Thabiso, Lerato, Makhanana, Precious, and Selina.

The interviews are rooted in the tradition of narrative inquiry, which, in Goodson and Sikes's (2001) terms, allows for ''learning from lives.'' Narratives of lived experiences offer opportunities to interpret the relations between past, present, and projected events in students' lives and, in particular, how they become successful under unpredictable, adverse, and changing circumstances. In this regard, using unstructured interviews with open-ended questions, the study involved intensive face-to-face conversations with the interviewees, recalling their experiences from home, high school, and moving from the community to university.

The data were coded and categorized to identify themes for analysis. The first step in this process consisted of grouping the data according to the thematic categories we had already identified from existing studies. Attention was given to the following critical issues that have some bearing on the students' capabilities, dispositions, and learning experiences: (1) their background, to highlight their experiences before joining the university; (2) their social and educational life, the difficulties faced, and how these were overcome; (3) the challenges confronted at university and strategies used to address them; (4) the interface with peers, faculty members, and support structures; (5) their initiative or agency, how they perceive themselves and others (as students); (6) what motivates them to be resilient; and (7) campus life (some students live with their parents, some live in university residences, some rent flats or rooms where these are available, and thus they all enjoy different living conditions that may enable or interfere with their studies).

The second step involved identifying other segments of meaning from the codes or constructs that emerged from the data. Particular attention was paid to codes embedded in the constructs of their day-to-day communication and the language of expression in the narratives of their experiences, perceptions, and understanding of these (e.g., phrases such as a ''never give up'' attitude, being a ''fighter,'' ''self-made,'' etc.). Cross-level analysis was undertaken, which entailed horizontal analysis to identify patterns and trends of constructs across all narratives, and vertical analysis within each story to keep individual

stories ''intact'' by theorizing from the case rather than from component themes (categories) across cases (Riessman 2008, 53). We share with Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett (2008) the belief that such a strategy has the advantage of providing ''entrées into the black box of subjectivity by exploring its . . . social [and cultural] dimensions'' (9). As such, instead of lengthy narratives that would serve no meaningful purpose for our argument, our attention focused on evidence provided by the most expressive and data-rich quotations from the participants.

CONFRONTING AN UNFAMILIAR ENVIRONMENT: CONTEXT AND CHALLENGES

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 competencies associated with independent learning and academic practice, including resourcefulness and time management, are often not sufficiently addressed in schools. The challenges can be overwhelming. First, most students face problems with language competence, which is central to developing conceptual confidence. Mastery of the multifaceted conceptual skills that higher education demands (e.g., being able to think at a theoretical level and relate knowledge to new and different circumstances; the vital ability to engage critically with academic literature as well as writing academically, etc.) is easily achieved by students who are fluent in English as the language of instruction—and widely accepted as an unproblematic institutional requirement in most higher education institutions in South Africa. For those who struggle to master the language, it represents an almost insurmountable conceptual and practical barrier.

Second, the highly regimented environment in schools where, according to the Rural Education Access Programme, learners are being ''spoon fed'' by their teachers, exacerbates the transition to the almost open university environment, with little personal contact between students and lecturers, restricted explicitness in requirements, and greater freedom in student decision making. Such an environment requires considerable levels of individual self-regulation, autonomy, and independence within the campus as a learning space. As some students point out: here ''no one nags you;'' ''you are not constantly being watched, you're being monitored . . . so that you don't break the rules'' (Cross et al. 2009, 25). The tertiary environment also requires a greater sense of individual responsibility and work ethos, rooted in a tradition of hard work, frugality, and diligence. As Cross et al. (2009, 27) describe, it requires ''the expansion of self as the center of power, action, and change, and as the primary locus of responsibility.''

Third, within a university environment, teaching, and learning are conducted in particular ways and according to different mixes of explicit and implicit norms of behavior, and codes of rules and procedures. Understanding these is important for expectations and is central to creating a social order in which there is consistency and predictability, or in Bernstein's (1975) words, in providing

structure and habituation (60). However, at university, rules are very often inscribed in the institutional culture; they are not always made explicit, which clearly requires student effort for appropriation, internalization, and adaptation: ''sometimes you are left to guess or you rely on what you see from colleagues; you are not told like in the [school] assembly,'' according to Dumisani. The worst scenario is when this implicitness of university rules characterizes the forms of communication in the teaching and learning domain in terms of structures of authority, formal contact arrangements, time frames, course outlines, evaluation criteria, and so on. As Cross et al. (2009) indicate, ''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'' (31).

Fourth, although information and communication technology (ICT) has proved to be a necessary resource in teaching and learning processes, it has also influenced, and to some extent, changed the nature of the university campus as a learning space. ICT has changed the notions of place, time, and space within higher education. Learning can no longer be confined to the physical space of the classroom, lecture hall, or seminar room; it takes place beyond these narrow boundaries, on and off campus where learners are increasingly discovering social learning opportunities. It is against this background that Oblinger (2005) argues that ''the notion of classroom has expanded and evolved; the space need no longer be defined by 'the class' but by 'learning''' (14). Such opportunities pose considerable challenges to students who never had access to ICT in the past.

Fifth, in South Africa, the student learning experience cannot be separated from the social stigma of under privilege produced by race, gender, ethnic, and other forms of discrimination. As illustrated by repeated racist incidents amongst students, or between students and university staff, student experiences are very often mediated by discourses of racism, sexism, and xenophobia (Soudien et al. 2008). Further, students who do not share the academic code and have knowledge gaps (owing to historical disadvantage) tend to seek explanation about their failures within these discourses and to translate their experiences into feelings and perceptions of racism, xenophobia, and alienation.

Finally, 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 socioeconomic circumstances. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds do not always have access to information on institutional processes regarding application for financial aid, which then excludes them from this benefit. Even when application, registration and tuition fees have been paid, there is still a range of other financial challenges that students encounter. Financial problems at home may also affect their ability to focus on their studies. However, as Borden (2009) indicates, ''financial support may improve access, but its role in promoting persistence and degree attainment is less certain'' (3). Financial support is necessary but not sufficient, argues Herzog (cited in Borden 2009). Besides financial problems, students still have to find affordable accommodation in an unfamiliar city and pay for meals,

transport, textbooks, and equipment. Accessible accommodation is not always conducive to studying:

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

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. (Selina)

Overall, it appears, as Mellone (2002) 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 career and lifestyle, maintaining personal health, wellness and developing an integrated philosophy of life'' (6). They have to become used to a new lifestyle with further challenges, such as sharing a room for the first time, finding their way around campus, adapting to living away from home, learning to manage their own time, and adapting to new learning methods. They need to contend with language barriers, social divisions, and numerous academic and environmental challenges. How historically disadvantaged students deal with these challenges has some bearing on whether they complete their courses successfully or drop out of university.

EXPLAINING SUCCESS IN DISADVANTAGE: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This article uses Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital, particularly the concepts of habitus and social capital, and Bandura's (1977) theory of behavioral change centered on the concept of self-efficacy. We found these theories useful in understanding experience and learning in the context of marginalization by virtue of social difference (race, gender, class, sexual orientation, nationality, etc.); in other words, allowing us to take into account some characteristics perceived as constitutive of disadvantage or marginalization or, in our case race, class, gender, or rurality. Two important observations must be considered in this regard. First, in line with Bourdieu's (1986) theory of social capital, one could argue that students from rich backgrounds (''middle class'' in his terminology) possess suitable assets, which give them an advantage in navigating within a university environment. Similarly, their habitus help them to adapt to this environment. In contrast, this could mean that students from poor or disadvantaged backgrounds, who in Bourdieu's terms do not possess the required forms of capital (social, cultural, or symbolic) and whose habitus appears misaligned from the university environment, are generally condemned to fail.

As already indicated, this theoretical framework does not account for the possibility of students from poor backgrounds developing alternative assets (forms of capital), cognitive and attitudinal, which also enable them to succeed at university. *Social capital* could well be understood as ''resources stored in human relationships whether casual or close . . . the stuff we draw on all the time, through our connections to a system of human relationships, to accomplish

things that matter to us and to solve everyday problems'' (de Souza Briggs 1997, 112). Such relationships provide a source of connections, information, and understandings (Bryan 2005, 221). It is in this perspective that Howell, Williams, and Lindsay (2003) suggest that the life events experienced by nontraditional (working-class) students may positively impact their approach to learning. Sometimes, such events or experiences may make students more autonomous and self-directed, and allow them to develop skills such as social competence, problem solving, autonomy, and a sense of purpose. These skills may be associated with other factors such as motivation and goal orientation, positive use of time, and so on. Without ignoring the main thrust of Bourdieu's theory, it is our epistemological break with this theory that represents our point of departure in this article.

Although other philosophers (e.g., Marx and Althusser) have used the concept of ''epistemological break'' to refer to the critical moment when new theoretical consciousness emerges, Bourdieu narrows down this concept to refer to the modes of vigilance required for achieving truthful outcomes in knowledge production. Bourdieu's epistemological breaks enable researchers to be reflexive about their own epistemological position. He refers to three distinctive kinds of epistemic breaks operationalized through ''three degrees of vigilance'' (Bourdieu, Chamboredon, & Passeron, 1991, 87). The first is the epistemological break with ''pre-constructed objects,'' ''pre-notions,'' and ''pre-concepts''—these are fixed constructs of social facts demarcated or perceived out of experience. This type of break refers to breaking free from practical knowledge, that is, free from the representations, questions, and problem formulations of common sense understanding.

The second type of break requires researchers to break from the objectivist and subjectivist dilemma. For Bourdieu, subjectivity is neither determined by, nor free from, objective conditions, and objectivity is never free from subjective conditions. One has to be vigilant about possible distortions emanating from both the objective and subjective conditions of our inquiry.

The third type of break requires researchers to break from the hegemony of theoretical knowledge—whether subjectivist or objectivist—because of its tendency to abstract reality, to confuse ''the things of logic'' (established theory) with the ''logic of things'' (empirical phenomena). Without considering such an epistemic break, knowledge claims could shrink into celebration of one's theoretical constructs, leading researchers to present only their theories with little explanation of the object. Thus an epistemological break with the absolute theory, the ''absolute of method,'' and subjective inclinations is needed. It is this particular break with fixed interpretations of Bourdieu's theory and concepts of capital and habitus that our conceptual framework rests on.

Against this background, we have re-conceptualized the concept of ''capital'' to encompass particular assets that marginalized groups develop as a result of survival strategies, hardship and deprivation in their own impoverished social spaces. Accordingly, we refer to this form of capital as *compensatory capital*; another example would be the methods that blind or deaf people develop for navigating in life. Drawing on Bandura's (1977) theory of behavioral change, we have associated the concept of habitus with a range of attributes that enable students to adapt to

the university environment. Thus we have moved from the conception of habitus within Bourdieu's parameters (dispositions and predispositions to conform) to include attributes such as intrinsic motivation, resilience, self-determination, self-efficacy, and self-reliance (dispositions and pre-dispositions to change or adapt). These attributes tend to be cultivated within poor African communities and were captured from the constructs mentioned by the students interviewed.

Although we found this transformation of Bourdieu's theory useful, it remained limited since its explanatory power is confined to the domain of social relations. We needed to conceptualize the assets historically disadvantaged students bring to campus as a form of accumulated learning (i.e., to explore the cognitive dimensions of compensatory capital). First, we considered the concept of *agency*, which Reivich and Shatte (2002) refer to as "response ability," or the different ways in which students respond to external pressures in their lives, which characterizes their positionality. In this context, *positionality* refers to openness to being challenged or having enough self-confidence to challenge or defend one's view. The positionality of students has some bearing on the possibilities for their success or failure.

Further, we considered Bandura's theory of behavioral change based on the concept of self-efficacy to unpack the cognitive dimension of learning, through positive responses to adverse situations, or learning through positive outcomes. Briefly, Bandura (1977) argues that "persistence in activities that are subjectively threatening but in fact relatively safe produces, through experiences of mastery, further enhancement of self-efficacy and corresponding reductions in defensive behaviour" (191). He suggests that cognitive processes play a prominent role in the acquisition and retention of new behavior patterns. For him, by reflecting on one's actions leading to positive outcomes (positive responses) or by observing others, one forms a conception of how new behavior patterns are acquired, and on later occasions the symbolic constructions emanating from these observations serve as a guide for action in new situations. Thus, under adverse conditions, people learn from the consequences of their responses to the challenges they encounter, and these consequences serve as "an unarticulated way of informing individuals what they must do to gain beneficial outcomes and to avoid punishing ones" (Bandura 1977, 192).

What follows is a close examination of students' constructs with reference to the theoretical basis just discussed.

EDUCATIONAL RESILIENCE: "I DON'T GIVE UP EASILY"

We were struck by the constructs of eight students related to their responses when confronted with unfamiliar and difficult situations. Although they are articulated in different forms, they converge in at least four main aspects. The first is embedded in the "never give up" idea, or determination "to beat the odds" (Wayman 2002, 6):

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 come 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 . . . hmm or it will make

a loud sound and everyone will turn to look at me and know that it's my first time to make use of it. (italics added for emphasis, Tsepo)

For Tsepo, the once unfamiliar computer gradually became a necessary tool for project work. Lerato sums up her experience as follows:

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... (He laughs) I've come a very long way, you can't imagine. (italics added for emphasis, Precious)

Such an attitude is primarily rooted in the students' past experiences—their *individual biography* or *background*:

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. Hmm, hmm, *I have to work hard* with all that the university has put in place to help me with the education. (italics added for emphasis, Selina)

More specifically, 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:

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 as I didn't want to go back to the life of fetching water from distant streams, fetching wood etc. (Makhnana)

The ''never give up'' principle is also tied to the desire and commitment to build a better future or the opportunity for a better life:

I'm not from a rich family and I'll 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...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. (italics added for emphasis, Sipho)

Or

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 my family and me; therefore I'm not turning back. I must get that which I came to get: a certificate in education. (Sipho)

Students attach to their educational experience the goals they set for their future and their emerging identities, whether these goals are market-oriented or altruistic:

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 be strong now. I know

there will be challenges, but I will brace them when the time comes, just as I'm dealing with those that I'm encountering here now. (italics added for emphasis, Makhanana)

Realizing that university studies provide an opportunity for a better life is not just a given, but an outcome of reflective and evaluative activities (cognitive activities), which enables Thabiso to say, ''I know why I'm here and not at home. I must pass so that I can save my family from poverty.'' Such cognitive activities, which, in Bandura's words, constitute a measure of self-efficacy, also lead to the realization that, besides persistence, changing a life situation or striving for a better life requires a high degree of discipline, characterized by hard work, self-determination and endurance (see the following sections).

Emerging from these constructs is the notion of educational resilience, as articulated in the phrases ''I don't give up easily;'' ''I must...I have to make it;'' ''I've learned how to endure;'' ''my visa to a better life;'' and ''I like to be an agent of change.'' A central attribute of successful individuals in marginalized communities is the ability to make choices and execute them under duress though not exclusively, which they learn from their families, relatives, or the surrounding community. Habituation into such lifestyle in disadvantaged communities results in individual resilience. This insight has been endorsed in several studies in other contexts (Bandura 1977). For example, Reyes and 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 at either low or high risk of dropping out of school; all of them shared a similar socioeconomic status, parent–student involvement, and parental supervision. They found that high-risk students reported strong resilience and agency, an attribute that the low-risk students were significantly lacking. It was found that although the participants worked through different phases in the change process, their final reaction was to choose to become victors rather than victims and to thrive despite their circumstances. Their insight and self-knowledge gained through setbacks and difficulties helped them to become more resilient.

Educational resilience has been conceptualized in similar ways in different contexts, for example, ''the heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences'' (Wang, Haertal, and Walberg, 1994, 46; Waxman, Gray, and Padrón, 2003); the capacity of individuals to overcome difficult and challenging life circumstances and risk factors, or the ability to succeed academically when risk factors make it difficult for them to succeed (Benard 1997); the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation in the face of challenging or threatening circumstances; and so forth. Resilient children are those who experience one or more difficult life circumstances or traumatic events, but somehow find the power to overcome their adverse impact (Bryan 2005, 220). In this respect, Alva (1991) stresses 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...and ultimately dropping out'' (19).

There are three important attributes associated with educational resilience that characterize *individual agency* (i.e., the ability of the students to position

and reposition themselves towards constraining structural conditions or adverse circumstances). First, individual motivation appears to be a primary consideration in their accounts about persistence in their studies. Second, self-determination with a strong belief in and sense of self also appears to be central to their persistence. Their narratives show a rare predisposition to be critical change agents for reshaping their past. Third, they display core attributes such as control, ownership, reach, and endurance, strengthened by the ability to seek help when needed. We consider each of these aspects in more detail in the following sections. An important question here is whether resilience is just an intrinsic trait or something that can be learned or enhanced. We argue that, although some psychologists agree that there are individuals who seem to be born with more resilience (Siebert 2005), it can be found in a variety of behaviors, thoughts, and actions that can be learned and developed across one's life.

(INTRINSIC) MOTIVATION

As in the case of students from rich backgrounds, some students from disadvantaged backgrounds carry with them specific enabling assets, which play a role in their academic success. One such asset is motivation, well-captured in Peterson, Rayner, and Armstrong's (2009) notion of intrinsic motivation, which is characterized by a high-degree of academic motivation, a sense of self-esteem, and a positive attitude. The main factor behind their motivation is the opportunity offered by their studies to escape from the kind of life they grew up in and to strive for a better life, thus motivating them to work harder:

You see, the community I come from taught me to be strong, to stand on your own, stay positive, to push and 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. (Sipho)

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 at home have shaped me to be who I am now. (Makhanana)

Some of the students do not seem to be bothered by what they consider ''soft'' challenges on campus: ''I don't consider these as challenges; if you want to know what it means to suffer, go live where I come from''. This is well illustrated in the following:

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 the 'res' [residence], 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 a lack of basic needs like food, electricity, and water; yet I'm surrounded by all those here on campus but no food (laughs). (italics added for emphasis, Makhanana)

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. 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. (italics added for emphasis, Lerato)

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. (Sipho)

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. (italics added for emphasis, Precious)

As they set new goals and direct their actions to these goals, the students feel more motivated: ''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'' (Selina).

Gottfried, Fleming, and Gottfried (1998) argue that the home environment in poor communities can have a stimulating and significant effect on academic intrinsic motivation. This is not to suggest that poverty confers a positive effect. Children whose homes had a greater emphasis on learning opportunities and activities were more academically intrinsically motivated. The same claim can be found in Niebuhr (1995) who suggests that the elements of both school climate and family environment have a strong direct impact on academic achievement because these elements motivate students intrinsically to study hard. Similarly, intrinsic motivation has been consistently linked to reduced dropout rates and increased levels of student success (Halawah 2006). This can be seen in the strong desire of these students to succeed at university, to avoid having to go back to the poor and miserable life they have left behind.

The cognitive dimensions of motivation implicit in the narratives are also important, particularly when they refer to the learning experience or the pedagogy of life in marginalized circumstances. Once again, we resort to Bandura's suggestion that motivation is rooted in cognitive activities, an aspect implicit in students' narratives. There are three important dimensions to this aspect. The first is that learning can be derived from positive responses to past experience. The second is that the capacity to represent future consequences (the cognitive representation of future outcomes) can generate current motivators of behavior. The third dimension is that a cognitively based source of motivation can operate through the intervening influences of goal setting and self-evaluative reactions (Bandura 1977, 193).

SELF-DETERMINATION, FLEXIBILITY, AND ADAPTABILITY: '' . . . . IF YOU WANT SOMETHING BADLY ENOUGH YOU WILL MAKE SACRIFICES''

Underpinning student motivation is a strong sense of individual self-determination, which Deci et al. (1991) define as ''the process of utilizing one's will'' (35): ''I'm in level three now because I was determined from the 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.'' Self-determination necessitates that people accept their strengths and limitations, are aware of the forces acting on them, make choices

and decisions, and determine ways to satisfy their needs (Pintrich and Schunk 2002). Hence, self-determination, flexibility, tolerance, and adaptability are interconnected; to be self-determining, individuals need to decide how to act upon influences in their environment. According to Wehmeyer, Kelchner, and Richards (1996), self-determination has three essential characteristics: 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). However, 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 influence me negatively'' (Tsepo); or ''I can easily adapt to any situation because I know what I want to achieve here at the university'' (Lerato); or

  ''Gosh, 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.'' (Makhanana)
- Self-realization through goal-setting around becoming agents of social change with an altruistic purpose: ''I want to be an agent of change in my family and community'' (Thabiso); or role models: ''I'm working hard so as to be a role model for others where I come from'' (Selina).
- Self-regulation: Such students set goals to work harder so as to be on the ''same academic page'' as their friends, and not to make excuses that they lack reading tables or books, or that they live in a place that is not conducive for studies.

A key element in achieving these goals successfully is the set of dispositions and predispositions for hard work that students have built up as a result of their survival strategies in the village, which enable them to adjust their habitus. These include the predisposition to make sacrifices (''If you want something badly enough you will make sacrifices'' [Precious]); the pre-disposition to make difficult choices (''guys I'm studying today, I'm going nowhere, so please, give me a break'' [Lerato]); the predisposition to adapt to new situations (''I can easily adapt to any situation . . . that has been keeping me going'' [Makhanana]); the predisposition to appreciate the limited services that the university is able to offer (''Coming from the rural area has made me appreciate the different sources 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?'' [Thabiso]); and above all, the pre-disposition to do more with little.

Self-determination appears to be one of the key internal factors that enables these students to negotiate their success, particularly during the first year at university, when they are still adjusting to the university environment and experiencing challenges that may force them to drop out. This trait clearly displays how determined such students are. The result of a study on self-determination in the classroom proves that providing students with opportunities for self-determination increases their intrinsic motivation (Gottfried 1990). It has shown how intrinsic motivation and self-determination positively affected academic achievement among elementary and junior high school students. Deci et al. (1991) demonstrate a direct relationship between self-determination and

academic achievement in fifth-grade students. Similarly, Ryan and Deci (2000) establish that autonomy-supportive environments impact positively on the academic achievement of college students.

SEEKING HELP FROM SIGNIFICANT OTHERS

The ability to make decisions and use them to enhance one's skills to maneuver on campus requires particular kinds of skills, which include seeking help from significant others. The ability and confidence to seek help when in desperation is highly entrenched in poor communities: ''I know which doors to knock when I'm facing difficulties with my work and I don't fear to knock at those doors'' (Thabiso). This is easier on campus, where a wider range of options is available. The primary sources of help and support lies with family members, when they are available: ''My mother calls me once a month to know how I'm faring and to wish me luck with my academic work'' (Precious). This is an important consideration, particularly when marginalization is associated with passivity or under-preparedness. Depending on one's perceptions, there is also the option of getting help from peers, tutors or lecturers:

I don't go to the tutors, after or before discussing an assignment with my friends. I go to the lecturers for clarification. I don't go to tutors because they are mere students like me. My English is very poor but the lecturers take their time and listen to me. (Thabiso)

I turn to my friends first, if I don't get it clear, I'll go to a tutor. 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. (Selina)

The Internet and the library are 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. (Selina)

The importance of establishing networks of support (learning communities) for collaborative consultation is increasingly being valued, and sometimes encouraged by 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...Create networks; don't think you know too much because no one knows too much in life. Go to other people to get fresh and different ideas. (Makhanana)

The key to successful networks is collaboration and sharing of ideas and resources. Collaboration enables students to achieve goals that cannot be achieved alone, but rather ''through shared vision, responsibility, and resources; parity; joint work; mutual skills and learning; and shared outcomes in accomplishing the goals'' (Bryan 2005, 223). What benefits do students gain from such encounters? The benefits are varied, but issues such as writing assignments and academic projects feature at the top of the list:

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? (Precious)

There are also benefits of a different kind, which reflect the nature of support networks within poor communities: the sharing of resources. For example, students use economic ways of assembling study materials, just as they did in their life in the village: ''One of my friends gave me books that he borrowed from his own friends. I used these books till the end of that academic year and then I gave them back in good condition. I'm a good caretaker'' (Lerato).

Resilient students frequently form informal support networks of friends and family, which provide them with support in tough times. Peer support plays a central role in this process. It enables students to learn to trust while providing and obtaining academic support, and it contributes to the mediation efforts provided by tutors or lecturers.

CONCLUSION

Rural students come from backgrounds in which particular values and socio-cultural systems are prevalent. Thus their primary experience of higher education is not the same as it is for urban students or those who come from economically privileged backgrounds. Rural disadvantaged students face considerable challenges when they join higher education institutions, since there is a much greater gap between their sociocultural practices and those of the institution, than is the case for the traditional student population in universities.

This article has shown that students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds can negotiate their success at the university successfully, and that their background plays an important role in the way they deal with the academic challenges they face. They carry with them learning resources of a different kind that are not always liabilities according to Bourdieu's logic, but rather an asset. They come to the university with their own mechanisms and strategies that may enable them to cope with the challenges they face. Primary factors for their success are educational resilience, motivation, and self-determination. The article has argued that these personal characteristics reflect the patterns of behavior and the outcome of cognitive processes acquired from their day-to-day life in poor rural communities. In the community lies the ability to set goals, choose and decide where and when to seek help, who to turn to in case of need, how to manage the scarce resources available to them efficiently (e.g., bursaries, sharing resources such as books), how to draw on team work when necessary, and so on. All these skills reflect common practices within poor communities.

The article highlights three main epistemological and theoretical implications for comparative and international education:

- We challenge the tendency to approach historically disadvantaged/marginalized groups as being homogenous or monolithic, since some of these students come to university and succeed, whereas others fail. A generalized approach constrains how we design pedagogical and student mediation strategies.

- We call for an epistemological break with the Western theoretical hegemony in analyses that require modified or different analytical lenses that are sensitive to local complexities. Such a break has profound implications for the particular ways in which we conceptualize and operationalize 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. We reframed Bourdieu's concepts of social capital and habitus to do justice to the experiences of historically disadvantaged students. An important question to ask in this regard is: How can research practice be conceptualized and operationalized in ways that minimize misrepresentation and consequent marginalization of historically disadvantaged groups?
- In doing so, we open considerable opportunities for maximizing student agency in designing pedagogies that deal with marginalized groups. The key to success rests on their strong individual agency and the positive pre-dispositions and attributes that characterize them. These traits enable them to make the most of the opportunities they are presented with and to devise strategies that lead to positive outcomes.

REFERENCES

Alva, S. A. (1991). Academic Invulnerability Among Mexican-American Students: The Importance of Protective Resources and Appraisals. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, *13*, 18–34. doi:10.1177/07399863910131002

Bandura, A. (1977). Self-Efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change. *Psychological Review*, *84*(2), 191–215. doi:10.1037/0033-295x.84.2.191

Benard, B. (1997). *Turning It Around for All Youth: From Risk to Resilience ERIC/CUE Digest No. 126*. New York: ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education.

Bernstein, B. (1975). *Class, Codes and Control*, vol. 3. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Borden, M. H. (2009, August 23–26). Using Evaluation Research to Meet Expectations for Educating Students from Disadvantaged Backgrounds. Paper presented at the 31st Annual EAIR Forum in Vilnius, Lithuania.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The Forms of Capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241–258). New York: Greenwood.

Bourdieu, P., Chamboredon, J., and Passeron, J. (1991). *The Craft of Sociology. Epistemological Preliminaries*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Bryan, J. (2005). Fostering Educational Resilience and Achievement in Urban Schools Through School-Family-Community Partnerships. *Professional School Counseling*, *8*(3), 219.

Cross, M., Shalem, Y., Backhouse, J., and Adam, F. (2009). How Undergraduate Students 'Negotiate' Academic Performance within a Diverse University Environment. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, *23*(1), 21–42. doi:10.4314/sajhe.v23i1.44800

Czerniewicz, L. and Brown, C. (2011). The Habitus of Digital ''Strangers'' in Higher Education. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, *44*(1), 44–53. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8535.2012.01281.x

De Souza Briggs, X. (1997). Social Capital and the Cities: Advice to Change Agents. *National Civic Review 86*(2), 111–117. doi:10.1002/ncr.4100860204

Deci, E. L., Vallerand, R. J., Pelletier, L. G., and Ryan, R. M. (1991). Motivation in Education: The Self-determination Perspective. *The Educational Psychologist*, *26*, 325–346. doi:10.1207/s15326985ep2603&4_6

Fataar, A. (2012). Pedagogical Justice and Student Engagement in South African Schooling: Working with the Cultural Capital of Disadvantaged Students. *Perspectives in Education*, *30*(4), 52–75.

Goodson, I. and Sikes, P. (2001). *Life History Research in Educational Settings: Learning from Lives*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.

Gottfried, A. E. (1990). Academic Intrinsic Motivation in Young Elementary School Children. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *82*, 525–538. doi:10.1037//0022-0663.82.3.525

Gottfried, A. E., Fleming, J. S., and Gottfried, A. W. (1998). Role of Cognitively Stimulating Home Environment in Children's Academic Intrinsic Motivation: A Longitudinal Study. *Child Development*, 69, 1448–1460. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.1998.tb06223.x

Halawah, I. (2006). The Effect of Motivation, Family Environment, and Student Characteristics on Academic Achievement. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, *33*(2), 21–35.

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge.

Howell, S. L., Williams, P. B., and Lindsay, N. K. (2003). Thirty-Two Trends Affecting Distance Education: An Informed Foundation for Strategic Planning. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, *6*, 1–18.

Jones, J., Coetzee, G., Bailey, T., and Wickham, S. (2008). *Factors that Facilitate Success for Disadvantaged Higher Education Students. An Investigation into Approaches used by REAP, NSFAS and Selected Higher Education Institutions*. Johannesburg, South Africa: Athlone: Rural Education Access Programme and Research & Academic Development.

Kloot, B. (2009). Exploring the Value of Bourdieu's Framework in the Context of Institutional Change. *Studies in Higher Education*, *34*, 469–481. doi:10.1080/03075070902772034

Maynes, M. J., Pierce, J. L., and Laslett, B. (2008). *Telling Stories: The Use of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences and History*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Mellone, C. (2002). *Best Practices for Teaching First-Year Undergraduates*. Pittsburgh, PA: Elberly Centre for Teaching Excellence. Carnegie Mellon University.

Naidoo, R. (2004). Fields and Institutional Strategy: Bourdieu on the Relationship between Higher Education, Inequality and Society. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *25*, 457–471. doi:10.1080/0142569042000236952

Niebuhr, K. (1995). *The Effect of Motivation on the Relationship of School Climate, Family Environment, and Student Characteristics to Academic Achievement*. Report No. EA 027467, National Center for Research on Teacher Learning, East Lansing, MI. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED393202).

Oblinger, D. (2005). Leading the Transition from Classroom to Learning Spaces – The Convergence of Technology, and Space can lead to Exciting New Models of Campus Interaction. *Educause Quarterly*, *1*, 14–18.

Peterson, E. R., Rayner, S. G., and Armstrong, S. J. (2009). Researching the Psychology of Cognitive Styles and Learning Style: Is There Really a Future? *Learning and Individual Differences*, *19*, 518–523.

Pintrich, P. R. and Schunk, D. H. (2002). *Motivation in Education: Theory, Research, and Applications*, 2nd ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice-Hall.

Reivich, K. and Shatte, A. (2002). *The Resilience Factor: Seven Essential Skills for Overcoming Life's Inevitable Obstacles*. New York, NY: Broadway Books.

Reyes, O. and Jason, L. A. (1993). Pilot Study Examining Factors Associated with Academic Success for Hispanic High School Students. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *22*, 57–71. doi:10.1007/bf01537904

Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Ryan, R. M. and Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-being. *American Psychologist 55*, 68–78. doi:10.1037//0003-066x.55.1.68

Siebert, A. (2005). *The Resiliency Advantage: Master Change, Thrive Under Pressure and Bounce Back From Setbacks*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Soudien, C., Michaels, W., Mthembi-Mahanyele, S., Nkomo, M., Nyanda, G., and Nyoka, N. (2008). *Report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions*. Pretoria, South Africa: Department of Education.

Tzanakis, M. (2011). Bourdieu's Social Reproduction Thesis and the Role of Cultural Capital in Educational Attainment: A Critical Review of Key Empirical Studies. *Educate*, *11*(1), 76–90.

Wang, M. C., Haertal, G. D., and Walberg, H. J. (1994). Educational Resilience in Inner Cities. In *Educational Resilience in Inner-City America: Challenges and Prospects*, edited by M. C. Wang and E. W. Gordon, 45–72. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Waxman, H. C., Gray, J. P., and Padrón, Y. N. (2003). *Review of Research on Educational Resilience*. Santa Cruz: University of California, Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence.

Wayman, J. C. (2002). The Utility of Educational Resilience as a Framework for Studying Degree Attainment in High School Dropouts. *Journal of Educational Research*, *95*(3), 167–178.

Wehmeyer, M. L., Kelchner, K., and Richards, S. (1996). Essential Characteristics of Self Determined Behavior of Individuals with Mental Retardation. *American Journal on Mental Retardation*, *100*, 632–642.