THE PRE-UNIVERSITY PATHWAYS OF DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS FOR GAINING ENTRY TO UNIVERSITY STUDY

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ABSTRACT

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

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

INTRODUCTION

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

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

The article builds on the work of Thesen (1997), Smit (2012) and Kapp, Badenhorst, Bangeni, Craig, Janse van Rensburg, Le Roux, Prince, Pym and Van Pletzen (2014), who call attention to the nature and extent of university students' navigations within their community and family contexts that enable them to access university education. These authors argue that the knowledge and practices of working-class township and rural students provide them with important resources for their university education. Factoring these resilient practices and resources into their educational platforms would provide universities with a key basis to get students to participate more meaningfully in their university education. Universities would be able to organise their student engagement platform better to work with the community-based cultural capital that disadvantaged students bring with them to university.

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

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY OF STUDENTS' PRE-UNIVERSITY ADMISSION PATHWAYS

This article employs Bourdieu's (2006) notion of 'cultural capital' and Yosso's (2005) 'community cultural wealth' (CCW) to understand how disadvantaged students create pathways to gain admission to university. Bourdieu (2006) argues that middle-class homes reproduce the type of cultural capital that is in alignment with their formal education. Cultural capital refers to the knowledge, skills, habits and values that one acquires through being part of a particular social class. He contends that the cultural capital of different classes is unevenly valued. He explains that the value placed on any particular form of cultural capital is arbitrary—that is, it 'cannot be deduced from any universal principle, whether physical, biological or spiritual' (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977:8). Bourdieu (2006) gives credence to the family as a source in which cultural capital is created and argues that it is 'the best hidden and socially most determinant educational investment'—that is, the domestic transmission of cultural capital (Bourdieu 2006:107). He argues that what is generally seen as natural 'ability' or 'talent' is actually the product of an investment of time and cultural capital by the family. He thus argues that cultural capital is not naturally acquired, but that it is arbitrarily formed and that the cultural capital of the middle class has a higher status than that of the working class. Bourdieu (2006) argues that time is needed for the acquisition and accumulation of cultural capital.

Extending Bourdieu's views on cultural capital, Yosso (2005) points out that his conceptualisation is limited to understanding how middle-class homes reproduce cultural capital for their children in alignment with their formal education. She contends that Bourdieu does not provide explanatory purchase for understanding how the cultural and social capital and networks of poor people are put to work in their

educational processes. Yosso challenges traditional deficit approaches, which claim that working-class students do not have the cultural capital to engage successfully in their education. Instead, she (2005:82) argues that 'poor families draw on their community cultural wealth (CCW) in order to establish social and racial justice'. Community cultural wealth refers to the 'accumulated assets and resources found in the lives and histories of disadvantaged students' (Yosso 2005:77). She argues that there are various forms of capital that are nurtured in impoverished communities that must be recognised in order to understand how these students access and engage in their education. She identifies aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational and resistant capital as forms of capital that students draw on to access the resources and networks present in their communities and families. Yosso (2005) explains that disadvantaged students acquire various forms of capital characterised by the abilities, skills, resources and knowledge that they build up over time. They use cultural resources such as family and community support networks to navigate the social structural contexts in which they live and to access their education. Yosso (2005) maintains that each form of capital is made up of a dynamic process that develops, intersects with, and corresponds to forms of resources upon which students rely. She argues that a CCW framework provides one with the ability to understand the 'multiple forms of cultural wealth' (2005:78) that are located in communities and families, as well as the 'various types of capital' (2005:78) that are mobilised by disadvantaged students in their educational processes.

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

Another theoretical element at play in this article is the students' recognition and utilisation of community circumstances, social resources and networks. The students deploy these as forms of capital in their quest for a university education. Some of these circumstances are unstable and dysfunctional, and pose a constant threat to their educational aspirations. Zipin (2009:330) refers to 'dark life world assets' that poor students encounter and navigate to establish their pathways to university. Zipin (2009) shows how disadvantaged students who manage to succeed in their education are confronted on a daily basis by tough (dark) community circumstances. They are, however, able to employ a range of navigational assets (various forms of capital) to circumvent the worst consequences of these community influences.

The ways students navigate their paths in light of these circumstances are central to understanding how they gain admission to the university. My theoretical approach emphasises the agency of students who establish their educational engagements in difficult circumstances; it stresses the forms of capital and social networks that they mobilise in order to access and maximise their chances of gaining admission to the university.

Through my combining of Bourdieu's (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977:2006) concept of cultural capital and Yosso's (2005) CCW and other forms of capital, I provide a framework for an analysis of the students' construction and navigation of their application and admission routes to the university. By highlighting their pre-university social locations, this framework allows me to look beyond normative or linear expressions of admission pathways that fail to register the multifaceted routes, processes and difficulties that disadvantaged students have to navigate to gain entry to university study. My approach thus allows me to offer a perspective that acknowledges the diverse routes and complex ways in terms of which disadvantaged students gain admission to university.

METHODOLOGY

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

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

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

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

The four students selected for this study provided rich stories about their circuitous paths towards university admission. They are all currently registered at the university for an Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP) in three different programmes related to the Applied Sciences. Each of the four selected students was given a pseudonym. Noluthando hails from the Eastern Cape. She moved to Cape Town after she completed high school. She comes from a single-parent home and is the first in her family to study at university. She currently lives in Khayelitsha. Pulane moved from the Eastern Cape when she was in Grade 10. She completed high school in Philippi, Cape Town and lives with her aunt in Cape Town. Her mother and younger siblings live in the Eastern Cape. Thabisa grew up in a family of three in Temba township in the Gauteng Province. She came to Cape Town after she was accepted at the university, where she lives in a university residence. Sindiswa comes

from Hammanskraal in Gauteng. She is the youngest in her family of five children and the first one to attend university. She currently also lives in a university residence.

ACTIVATING FAMILY CAPITAL TO PURSUE UNIVERSITY STUDY

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

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

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

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

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

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

university. She reported that her father motivated her to further her studies and spoke about his lack of opportunity to go to university:

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

This comment by Sindiswa highlights how the lack of financial resources could prevent poor students from pursuing higher education. Sindiswa's family was motivated by the possibility that through education they could escape poverty. Noluthando's, Thabisa's and Sindiswa's parents' overwhelming moral support for them to pursue university studies provided them with the motivation to find a way to achieve their goals of attending university. This type of motivation for pursuing university education is rooted in their families' awareness of their own lack of opportunity and resources in the past to pursue further education. Yosso (2005) refers to this as the memories and histories of disadvantaged students' families which inspire students to pursue university education. The ways in which their families talked about university and obtaining a qualification served as a powerful motivating factor for the students. These four students drew on the discourses of the family that viewed education as a route to break out of poverty. These discourses in turn acted as a resource and a form of capital to encourage Noluthando, Thabisa and Sindiswa to apply for a university placement.

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

students draw. Yosso (2005) suggests that families become connected with each other around common issues and share family resources. The family members of these students were willing to pool their limited resources to invest in the students' education and used their resources to engender a supportive network, which opened up the possibility for the four students to enter higher education. The extended family members were therefore influential in activating the processes necessary for opening up a pathway to the university.

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

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

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

These findings are similar to those of Gillies's (2006) study of working-class mothers, which shows that mothers' emotional support acts as a resource and a form of capital that is advantageous to their children. The type of love, care and encouragement that Noluthando, Pulane and Sindiswa received from their mothers is described by Allat (1993) as a form of emotional capital. Allat defines emotional capital as the 'emotionally valued assets and skills, love and affection, support, patience and commitment that even wayward children can draw upon' (1993:143). Mothers compensate for the lack of financial support by encouraging, caring and motivating students to further their education. The mothers' emotional capital served as a driving force that motivated these students to seek a university education.

This section highlighted aspects of the students' family contexts in their quest to gain access to the university. It discussed the type of resources and support available for them to establish a path towards university entry. Their engagement with their families is key to understanding their access paths. Parents' moral discourses about university education, the instrumental support of extended family networks, and

mothers' emotional capital are significant resources that the students drew on to open a path to university. The next section focuses on how the selected students accessed and worked with their township community resources to prepare them for university entry.

MEDIATING THE COMMUNITY CONTEXTS TO OPEN UP A PATHWAY TO THE UNIVERSITY

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

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

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

> You see in my community there's a lot of, I can say the people at my age are not that interested in education, I can say most of them they don't even have their matric. The learners that I was studying with, they are just having babies, they are not doing anything in their lives (Pulane).

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

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

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

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

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

> In the township there are 24-hour taverns open and they are busy playing music. But you just have to cope with the situation because you have nowhere to go. The township library is only open at 10 and at about 2 pm they are closed. I'm not sure what's happening in those libraries (Sindiswa).

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

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

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

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

Sindiswa's and Thabisa's accounts show the lack of connection that they felt with their peers in the township as they pursued university studies. They did not talk to people in the community about their plans and ambitions for fear of eliciting bouts of jealousy and gossip. Sindiswa described some of the people in the township as having negative attitudes about university studies. She pointed out that,

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

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

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

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

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

And one of my classmates that I got to pass with he was very supportive and I still thank him,
even today. He arrived during my matric year from Joburg and the rules were that a student
that came to the school in the matric year is not normally allowed to be accepted in a school.
But he was accepted due to his marks. He passed very well. And what he will do, if you are

being taught something in a class and you don't understand, he wouldn't just give you the answers or you would be given the homework to do and if you don't understand that thing, he would show you how to do it. So that even if you are writing a test or an assignment, you get to know how to do it. He wasn't just going to give you answers just to copy. He would teach you how to do it and you get to know (Pulane).

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

Besides peer support from like-minded peers and extracurricular classes, their respective churches provided them with religious support and spiritual comfort while they were preparing for and writing their examinations. Sindiswa commented that 'we used to have exam prayers for matrics on a specific day. Ja, so we get like, we get that strong feeling that we have to go on and on' (Sindiswa).

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

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

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

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

university admission. I argue that the students' ability to differentiate between the constructive and the negative aspects of their community is a critical practice in their educational lives. I now go on to focus on their application processes, aspirational routes and eventual admission to the university.

CIRCUITOUS ROUTES TOWARDS THEIR UNIVERSITY ADMISSION

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

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

While Sindiswa made a realistic assessment of the types of courses she would qualify for, she maintained her interest in the field of science. Pulane's choice represents a similar pattern. She wanted to become a chemical engineer and was very practical about her aspirational routes: 'What changed me were my marks, I did not get good marks in Maths and Physics, but I wanted to do work in the science field' (Pulane). Pulane reported that her teachers and older siblings informed her about the benefits of studying Science. Explaining how she began to think about her potential field of study, Pulane said 'When you're doing your – when you did Physics, you can even be a pilot. You can even be a doctor. I was hearing like there are so many opportunities when you did your Physics' (Pulane). Pulane's account illustrates that she identified studying courses in the science stream in secondary school as a route that would provide her employment in an attractive profession. At the same time she recognised the constraints of her low marks in Grade 12, but remained committed to the possibility of obtaining a university education.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

> I realised that the time is running, I'm running out of time now. I have to study and I asked the gentleman who was doing this course to bring me the forms and he got them for me. So I applied and they said in three months they will respond but they didn't. So, I had their telephone numbers, everything, so I called (Pulane).

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

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

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

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

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

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

CONCLUSION

In this article I presented four disadvantaged students' pre-university pathways towards their university application and acceptance. I argued that recognising these pathways would provide universities with a basis for establishing an appropriate access and engagement platform to immerse these types of students effectively

into university study. The discussion showed the ways in which the students were positioned in their family and township networks, and how they went about maximising their contextual resources to gain university entry. They activated family capital such as parents' moral discourses, extended family networks and their mothers' emotional support as a means of channelling themselves in the direction of university study. They made strategic decisions to deflect and avoid some of the 'darker' aspects of their poor communities that would have prevented them from achieving their academic goals. The selected students were able to utilise support structures in the community in their attempt to establish an educational pathway.

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

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

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