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**Project title:** A qualitative study exploring the experiences of students living with disabilities in the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Howard College): Application of the PERMA Framework.



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**A qualitative study exploring the experiences of students living with disabilities in the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Howard College): Application of the PERMA Framework.**

By

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A research project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for a degree of Master in School of Applied Human Sciences  
in Health Promotion at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

**Supervisor: Mr L. Makhaba**

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## **Declaration**

I declare that this dissertation is my own work. All the citations, references and borrowed ideas have been duly acknowledged. No part of this work has been submitted anywhere else in application for any qualification and I am aware that using others' work without proper acknowledgement is an academic offence.

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Signature

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Date

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## **Dedication**

*I dedicate this dissertation to my mother Hlengiwe Pretty Dladla.*

## Abstract

**Background:** In South Africa, approximately 80 per cent of people living with disabilities are restricted to access education and employment. In addition, those who are admitted to higher institutions are facing barriers and limitations in terms of accessing quality education when compared to students without disabilities. Previous studies acknowledge the prevalence of depression and psychological stress among students living with disabilities. No single study known to the researcher looked at what makes these individuals happy. The aim of this study is to explore the experiences of students living with disabilities at the University of KwaZulu-Natal through the application of the Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishments (PERMA) model.

**Method:** Data were collected using qualitative interviews. One-on-one interviews were conducted with students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal Howard College campus. They were all living with disabilities. Eight participants voluntarily participated in this study. The study purposively selected students living with disabilities in order to generate rich and thick data about their experiences.

**Findings:** The study found that positivity helps students living with disability to take control of their lives and accept responsibility. It also revealed that by engaging themselves in social activities, student living with disability enhance their well-being, create a source of enjoyment and promote a sense of belonging to their local communities. The findings further indicated that students with disabilities engage in intimate relationships, however, they sometimes experience difficulties with sustaining these relationships. Therefore, students decide not to stress themselves about intimate relationships and focus on empowering themselves by participating in the university programmes that contribute on inspiring greatness.

**Conclusion:** The adopted core elements of the PERMA model encourage students living with disabilities to continuously seek for what makes them happy regardless of their condition. They also promote well-being, a sense of fulfilment and satisfaction in life that can lead to finding the true meaning of life.

**Key words:** *Disability, university students, PERMA model*

## **List of Acronyms**

|              |  |
|--------------|--|
| <b>EWP6</b>  | Education White Paper Six  |
| <b>DHET</b>  | Department of Higher Education and Training                              |
| <b>DU</b>    | Disability Unit  |
| <b>PERMA</b> | Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishments |
| <b>PWDs</b>  | Persons with Disabilities  |
| <b>SWDs</b>  | Students with Disabilities   |
| <b>UKZN</b>  | University of KwaZulu-Natal  |

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# CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

## 1.1 Introduction

Disability reduces the capacity of individuals to effectively participate in society. Before the announcement of policy on disability, disabled individuals tend to encounter various limitations and exclusions from social life (Phillips & Noubissi, 2004). Phillips and Noubissi (2004) further argued that in some countries, especially in the developing world, approximately 80 per cent of those are people living with disabilities and are restricted to access education and employment. Furthermore, research shows that disability is closely related to poverty in Africa because poverty can negatively impact on disability by making individuals more vulnerable to malnutrition, sickness and poor living and working conditions (Grut, Olenja & Ingstad, 2011). These authors argued that the situation of people with disabilities living in poverty can be comprehended as a double exclusion as they are prevented from social and political participation and forbidden the opportunity to advance abilities because of poverty, which is a situation that is worsened due to the impairment.

The literature found various arguments and perceptions about disability in different countries. In Ghana for instance, disabilities are mostly understood as curses or punishments for transgression committed either by the person living with disability (PWD), the parents or one of his or her ancestors (Slikker, 2009). Slikker (2009) further argued that in Ghanaian society, the birth of a child is honoured as a blessing. Therefore, if a child is born with disability, they consider it as a manifestation of God's anger. Moreover, disability in Ghana is also regarded as a result of witchcraft, because many people believe that parents can use disabled child's body in exchange of money to become rich. Due to these superstitious beliefs and preconceived ideas, individuals living with disabilities are maltreated (Naami & Hayashi, 2012). For instance, in many communities in Ghana, children born with disabilities are regularly murdered during childbirth, and those who are not killed grow up discriminated. Furthermore, Naami and Hayashi (2012) argued that those with visible disability or physical disability like impairment that limits other facets of daily living such as blindness, are generally isolated into special schools. This could be because of negative insights about disability or inaccessible accommodation.

Literature on the experiences of persons living with disabilities mostly touches the challenges faced by women, especially in Zimbabwe. For example, global studies prove that women living with disabilities still face challenges of accessing sexual and reproductive health services

(Rugoho & Maphosa, 2017). Rugoho and Maphosa (2017) continue and argue that government and other development partners, particularly in developing countries, have neglected to offer affordable and accessible sexual and wellbeing facilities. In relation to be above, Chikumbu (2014) concurs that women living with disabilities are as yet seen as non-sexual or as not having the ability to take part in sexual exercises and they are considered as broken objects which cannot take part in sexual activities.

Looking at the context of education in South Africa, prior to 1994, education was segregated along racial lines, ethnicity, and language with more money being supplied per capita on White learners (Walton, 2011). However, Walton (2011) further noted that Black learners living with disabilities either attended local schools without receiving any tangible support, or more often, they did not attend school at all. The literature also revealed that students living with disabilities in the university setting are more than just a phenomenon, but they are a reality. All in all, little attention is rendered to their needs in spite of the fact that they need more support, care and attention (Pudaruth, Gunpath, & Singh, 2017).

The findings by Pudaruth et al. (2017) also revealed that people living with disabilities are frequently subjected to serious stigma, discrimination and harassment that force them to live under pressure and cling to the belief that their lives are shameful and not deserving to be respected. This has resulted in the formation of a culture of exclusion and discrimination, particularly in developing countries where children living with disabilities do not have access to education. Moreover, literature shows that the South African Constitution prioritises the wellbeing of students living with disabilities and ensures the enjoyment and exercise of human rights and fundamentals freedoms.

In order to ensure the wellbeing of students living with disabilities, this study considered use of the PERMA model as the conceptual framework, made up of five pillars (Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishments) because its foundation is based on positive psychology. According to Gable and Haidt (2005, p. 3) positive psychology “is the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions”. Gable and Haidt (2005) further contend that the aim of positive psychology is to study the opposite side of the coin, where it considers the manner in which people experience happiness, joy, show altruism and the establishment of healthy families and institutions. Literature shows the need for movement in positive psychology

because it helps to understand what goes wrong in individuals, groups and families. In this case, it understands students with disabilities and understands what is right for them.

### **1.2 Rational of the study**

The rational of the proposed study revolves around building institutional awareness toward improving the existential conditions of students living with disabilities. Therefore, the PERMA framework (Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment) is used in the current study as a strategy to document the experiences of students living with disabilities and to explore their subjective feelings with regards to these aspects of the framework. Furthermore, the study also build awareness of documenting disability not as a unique South African phenomenon, but as a universal phenomenon.

### **1.3 Problem statement**

The current study explores the experiences of students living with disability at the University of KwaZulu-Natal's (UKZN) Howard College: Application of the PERMA model. A review of previous studies shows that there are several studies conducted at UKZN in the area of disability. However, they all focused on such negative aspects of disability as mobility and none has looked at the psychological needs and well-being of these students. Therefore, after reading about positive psychology which focuses more on human well-being, the PERMA model inspired the researcher to conduct a study on disability, with a focus on the positive side of it.

### **1.4 Aim of the study**

The study aims to explore the experiences of students living with disability at UKZN (Howard College) through an application of the PERMA model.

Research questions:

- What are the experiences of students living with disabilities at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Howard College)?
- How does PERMA Framework (Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment) encourage adaptation of positive psychological wellbeing amongst students living with disabilities?

## **1.5 Objectives of the study**

Objective(s) of this study is to explore the experiences of students living with disabilities on campus through the PERMA model:

- Positive Emotions
- Engagement to the society and people
- Relationship with others and themselves
- Meaning of life
- Accomplishment of their goals

## **1.6 Structure of the dissertation**

This dissertation comprises five chapters that seek to illuminate the topic.

### **1.6.1 Chapter One: Introduction**

The chapter introduces the study. It briefly gives the relevant background information to the study, outlines the research problem, and states the aim and objective of the research. This introductory chapter is simply a road map as it directs and informs the reader about what to **expect in this study.**

### **1.6.2 Chapter Two: Review of Literature and Conceptual Framework**

This chapter reviews literature relevant to the study. The literature is presented under various sub-headings which include a description of disability, disability in higher learning institutions, disability in higher education in South Africa, inclusion of students living with disabilities, university accessibility of students living with disability, opportunities, experiences and challenges, disability in the South African context and the wellbeing of students living with disabilities. Included in this chapter is the PERMA model (Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishments), which is introduced as the conceptual framework for this study.

### **1.6.3 Chapter Three: Methodology**

The chapter describes the methodology component of the study. It starts with the study approach and design, followed by the research paradigm, study setting and context and a short description of the role of the researcher as an instrument in the study. Other relevant sections include selection of participants, data collection instruments and procedures, and data analysis. The chapter ends with a presentation of ethical considerations and trustworthiness of the study.

#### **1.6.4 Chapter Four: Findings**

In this chapter, the reader is taken through the findings from the one-on-one interviews. These are responses from the students who are living with disabilities and are adequately shaded in order to give the reader a clear picture of the context within which the data were collected. The chapter is not a mere list of utterances from participants but rather the various quotations supported by brief narratives which form a logical conversation between the researcher and the participants.

#### **1.6.5 Chapter Five: Discussion, recommendations and conclusions**

The chapter discussed the significance of disability by focusing on the different views from individual interviews. It draws the conclusion which examines the experiences of students living with disabilities at the University of KwaZulu-Natal through the application of the PERMA framework.

#### **1.7 Important terminology**

The following terms are used in this study. In the context of the study, the terms are explained as follows:

**1.7.1 Positive Emotions (PE):** Feeling good, optimism where you have a brighter way of looking at things, pleasure and enjoyment.

**1.7.2 Engagement (E):** Fulfilling work, or taking part in any activity, “flow”.

**1.7.3 Relationship (R):** Social connections, love, and intimacy.

**1.7.4 Meaning (M):** Having a purpose, finding a meaning to life.

**1.7.5 Accomplishment (A):** Ambition, realistic goals, and important achievement.

#### **1.8 Conclusion**

The first chapter gives a short background of the study. It looks at the main purpose, aims and objectives of the study, and statement of the problem. Chapter two looks at the existing literature on disability. Chapter three outlines the research methodology. It looks at the sampling method, data collection method and techniques of data analysis. Chapter four presents the findings of the individual interviews which were conducted with students living with disabilities who are currently registered at the University of KwaZulu- Natal. Chapter five presents a conclusion of the current study and presents recommendations for future research on similar or related topics.



## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Introduction

Students living with disabilities tend to face certain challenges related to their disabilities, making their experiences at institutions of higher learning an issue of general concern. The main focus of the current study is the lived experiences of students living with disabilities, using a theoretical framework that focuses on the strengths and positive aspects of life, instead of the trauma and negative experiences of these students. According to Hefferon and Boniwell (2011), the foundation of Positive Psychology is on individual wellbeing, happiness, flow, positive strengths, wisdom, creativity and positive characteristics of the groups and institutions. Therefore, the PERMA framework (Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishments) was adopted in this study. It is closely linked to Positive Psychology and acknowledges the positivity in the life of students living with disability. This chapter presents a review of relevant literature on students living with disabilities, particularly focusing on their experiences at higher learning institutions such as universities and the adoption of a theory of wellbeing called the PERMA model (Tansey et al., 2017).

### 2.2 Defining disability

Looking at the South African context, disability is completely a social issue (Ambati, 2015). However, the literature revealed that numerous studies conducted define disability in diverse ways (Ambati, 2015; Howell, 2005; Howell & Lazarus, 2003). According to Howell (2005, p. 2), disability is viewed as “a tragic occurrence that classes individual as sick or incapacitated in some way and thus dependent on others for care and good will”. Howell (2005) further argued that the above explanation of disability is a dominant way of understanding disability and is most often referred to as the medical discourse on disability, or in more popular language the medical model of disability. On the other hand, disability is considered as something that is urged by society when a person with impairment is denied access to full economic and social participation. Howell (2005) emphasized that if disability is defined in this way, then a definition of disability must describe the relationship between a person with impairment and the society or environment of which he or she is part. This alternative way of looking at and defining disability is most often referred to as the social model of disability. According to the social model, disability is defined as “the disadvantage, or restriction of activity, caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes no or little account of people with impairments

and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities” (Howell & Lazarus, 2003, p. 62). Furthermore, based on the type and the seriousness of the impairment, persons living with disability encounter disability differently (Ambati, 2015). This is mainly because of the fact that the needs of persons living with disabilities differ depending on the type of impairment. For example, the total population of this country have different people who encounter different types of disabilities such as visual impairment, hearing, and mental challenges, albinism, dwarfism and locomotor disabilities among others.

### **2.3 Disability in higher learning institutions**

Disability is an unavoidable phenomenon that is characterised by inadequate access to resources for individuals who are regarded as functionally disabled (Zungu, Tugli, Ramakuela, & Anyanwu, 2013). Tugli, Ramakuela, Goon, Anyanwu, and Zungu (2013) argued that for students living with disabilities in higher learning institutions, insufficient support services can socially, emotionally and academically exclude them. In relation to the challenges faced by students living with disabilities, Tinklin, Riddell and Wilson (2004) argued that the institutional structure can pose a formidable challenge not only in terms of accessing the physical environment, but also in terms of the wider issues found around the institutions. These wider issues include negative attitudes, inappropriate services, and lack of social interaction, curricular barriers and progression. Earlier, Howell and Lazarus (2003) had echoed similar sentiments, arguing that poor resourced institutions and poor infrastructural designs can cause a huge impact on the institution and students. Such impact is regarded as the main leading cause to limited support, impact and equity.

The challenges faced by students living with disabilities in the higher learning institutions place enormous strain on both the institution and the students. Without proper support and assistance, their academic aspirations are limited. In line with this, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) (2012) sees the need to create significant special programmes and services for the inclusion of students living with disabilities. , Therefore, it is not surprising to note that in South Africa, a number of tertiary institutions ranging from the most resourced to the least resourced ones have established Disability Units (DUs) to create and promote open environments with equal participation of students living with disabilities in all spheres of university life (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2012). In this regard, DUs tend to be the first point of contact for many students living with disabilities (Naidoo, 2010).

Several studies have been conducted among students living with disabilities in higher learning institutions. For instance, a study to explore the factors that hinder access to higher institutions

by students living with disabilities in the Free State region revealed that students living with disabilities were being marginalised, and were placed under domination than those without disability (Zungu et al., 2013). Ramakuela and Maluleke (2011) also conducted a study in a higher institution to examine the views of students living with disabilities in terms of the social and learning environment. They found that most students (80%) living with disabilities feel rejected by their counterparts (non-disabled learners), staff and the institution. Therefore, this is a sign of the prevalence of an atmosphere of unfair treatment towards students living with disabilities. Furthermore, findings continue to report other challenges such as an unaccommodating physical environment, unavailability of seats in some lecture halls and inappropriate learning support materials as well as ablution facilities that are not conducive for use by people living with disability (Ramakuela & Maluleke, 2011). Similarly, Tugli et al. (2013) concurs, that poor sanitation and hygienic practices in the learning environment could also be a high health risk factor to the group of students living with disabilities.

#### **2.4 Disability in higher education in South Africa**

In the South African context, researchers found that a lot needs to be considered when looking at the life lived by students living with disabilities. Looking at the experiences of students living with disabilities, Howell (2005) found that there are two essential aspects that need to be considered when researching about students living with disabilities in South Africa. The first is the lack of precise, reliable and applicable data about disability in the South African context. This was due to different definitions of disability, the utilisation of differing methodologies in the process of data collection, negative attitudes given to disabled people which undermine the conduct of research and inappropriate infrastructure for disabled people (Howell & Lazarus, 2003). The second is the difficulty experienced by disabled people in South Africa, mostly Black people living with disabilities, who have been historically excluded in a number of ways under the Apartheid era, including considerable exclusion from all levels of education. Howell (2005) continue and argue that the exclusion that people encountered was not only caused by race, gender and class inequalities during the Apartheid era but also by how the apartheid government understood and responded to disability.

Focusing on neighbouring countries, people also experience disability in diverse ways. In Zimbabwe, for example the government embraced the policy (Disabled Persons Act) in 1997 as a way to increase the psychological well-being of people living with disabilities (Mpofu et al., 2017). Moreover, the literature further notes that the inclusive communities' programmes that are being implemented in Zimbabwe and in other developing countries are based on

Western views of disability. The findings also show that the Western perspectives of disability are not the same as those of African communities that focus on local cultures.

## **2.5 Inclusion of students living with disabilities**

In higher learning institutions, inclusion and improvement of equality in opportunities seem to be crucial the legal contexts of most Western societies (Hadjikakou, Polycarpou, & Hadjilia, 2010). In some countries around South Africa, it was established that students living with disabilities were unfairly treated and marginalised (Howell & Lazarus, 2003; Ambiti, 2017). In a recent study, researchers found that in many Westernised countries, higher education institutions attempt to promote inclusion, enhance involvement of students living with disabilities in the planning and implementation of services and maximise the participation of disadvantage groups (Vlachou & Papananou, 2018). In relation to the literature on the inclusion of students living with disabilities Vlachou and Papananou (2019) found that in many countries, including Greece; students living with disabilities are still under pressure of not being given opportunities to raise their voice and to express their feelings, not only in policy-making processes and practices, but also in the field of research.

The inclusivity of people living with disabilities seemed to be the issue that needs further exploration. According to Mpofu, Sefotho and Maree (2017), disability inclusive communities are those communities that regard the inclusion of people living with disabilities, and those without disabilities, rather than placing individuals to fit into existing group arrangements. Mpofu et al. (2017) further argue that it is significant to note that the major value of an inclusive community is to admit that people are not the same and that diversity should be valued. Moreover, literature reveals that an inclusive community takes part in both sustained and sustainable procedures that take note of the needs of its diverse people, including those living with disabilities (Howell, 2005).

The existing literature reveals that in developing countries, people living with disabilities were accommodated by special institutions and residential rehabilitation hospitals because the inclusion has its own limitation (Howell & Lazarus, 2003, Ambiti, 2015). However, Mpofu et al. (2017) argue that some parents still lack knowledge about people living with disabilities; therefore, they decide to keep their children indoors for many reasons, including those that are attitude-related. For instance, an attitude-related reason would be when family members believe their children living with disabilities are not capable of socialising with other people.

## **2.6 Accessibility of students living with disability**

The matter of students living with disabilities higher education institutions is not yet considered. They face many challenges due to the inappropriate structural and academic accessibility in their institutions (Ambati, 2015). Howell and Lazarus (2003) stated that closer attention must be paid in terms of the factors that restrict access and sabotage opportunities of students living with disabilities. Howell and Lazarus (2003) further state that proper steps need to be followed so that disabled students will get a chance to participate equitably in the process of teaching and learning, which is an important move towards enhancing the success of these students.

The literature shows that education in institutions of higher learning were divided along racial lines, and in that way, the limited provision was found among black students with special needs (Howell, 2005). Howell and Lazarus (2003) argue that after 1994, changes in education sector were implemented which have assisted to mitigate the barriers faced by students living with disabilities and granted them better opportunities for participation. This implies that people living with disabilities are now exposed to the new world where opportunities are given to all people regardless of race, gender, class and state of health.

## **2.7 Opportunities, experiences and challenges**

Various studies conducted on disabilities pay more attention to certain issues that may have an impact on the lives of students living with disabilities rather than focusing on the in-depth, daily experiences (Howell, 2005; Ambati, 2005). Therefore, it is important to explore the experiences of students with disabilities. The process of listening to students with disabilities has an advantage of allowing the individuals to express their feelings and the lived experiences of being a student at the university. It also allows them to discuss the barriers they encounter on a daily basis as they navigate their way around the environment.

### **2.7.1 Disability at the University of KwaZulu-Natal**

Generally, students living with disabilities encounter different challenges at institutions of higher learning. The study conducted by Naidoo (2010) focusing on the perceptions of the Disability Unit on students living with disabilities at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College campus, found that the lack of student funding, resources and shortage of staff created barriers that make it difficult to provide support to students living with disabilities. Naidoo (2010) also reported that the main reason for the poor performance among students living with disabilities is that lecturers fail to provide relevant study materials to students in advance for the preparation for examinations, assignments or tests. As a result, many experience such

negative academic outcomes as failure. Moreover, Devar (2015) further notes that the institution as a whole should take responsibility for transformation, embracing difference and creating an inclusive environment to students living with disabilities.

This study is conducted to emphasize the fact that people are disabled by barriers that exist in their environment. In this regard, people living with disabilities face barriers because the environment is not properly designed for them. In that way, they face difficulties in going around campus, hence, they are restricted from enjoying the higher education institution environment (Naidoo, 2010). This is so because the university structures may be having stairs leading to schools or departments, similar to UKZN Howard College campus where some students living with disabilities may experience difficulties to access such areas due to their condition.

### **2.7.2 Learning and teaching**

The existing literature points out that students living with disabilities face challenges during the teaching and learning process. The challenges that they may face include coping with the pace of the lecturer in the lecture hall and assimilating with the content as well (Fuller et al., 2004). Furthermore, Fuller et al. (2004) argue that students living with disabilities encounter difficulties taking notes during lecture time, participating in class activities or discussions because of not hearing and seeing the lecturer. Similarly, Naidoo (2010) notes that those with visual problems also encounter difficulties of contributing in the lecture room during discussions particularly if a picture or a video clip is involved.

### **2.7.3 Inequality among the university**

Challenges around the university environment mostly affect the life of students living with disabilities. Inequality is mentioned as the most prominent issue among disabled students in higher institutions (Howell & Lazarus, 2003). Prior to 1994, education was categorised not only in terms of race, but also by identifying and categorising learners into those who were considered to be normal and those who required special needs (Mutanga, 2017). Mutanga (2017) argues that disability is not an issue per se but barriers to accessing higher education play a crucial role and exacerbate inequalities in the South African institutions. Ambati (2015) on the other hand agrees that the impact of barriers limit the ability of disabled students to participate equitably in the teaching and learning process, thereby reducing their opportunities to attain their dreams.

Education is a powerful tool for enhancing social change. However, barriers in the educational system extremely undermine and place students living with disabilities into a continuous disadvantage (Ambati, 2015). Similarly, Swart and Greyling (2011) argue that disadvantaging students living with disabilities makes them to perform below expectation and lower than their counterparts without disabilities. This promotes the prevailing negative attitude and prejudice, leading to their abilities being questioned. Furthermore, students living with disabilities are being marginalised in the society and are limited in decision making; their psychosocial wellbeing is extremely affected, and they fail to socially integrate with other people because of the stigma people place on them (Swart and Greyling, 2011).

The findings from previous studies conducted reveal that students living disabilities are usually either considered by the most people in some societies (Mpofu et al., 2017). The literature continues has it that the rejection of disadvantage status groups is explained in terms of stigmatisation. Apparently, the stigmatisation of students living with disabilities can lead to greater disturbances to social or personal relations with others.

## **2.8 Disability in the South African context**

Since 1994 when majority rule government was built up in South Africa, there has been an extreme update of government policy from an Apartheid framework to providing services to all South Africans on an equitable basis (Dalton, Mckenzie, & Kahonde, 2012). The means of education for students living with disabilities has been part of that process and the advancement of an inclusive education system can be detected back to the nation's establishing document, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act No. 108 of 1996 (Republic of South Africa, 1996). In Section 29 (the Bill of Rights), it is stated that everyone has the right to basic education. It further declares that the state may not discriminate directly or indirectly against anybody, including those who live with disability.

Focusing on the South African context, literature shows that many students completed their education after the implementation of South Africa's inclusive education policy called Education White Paper 6 (EWP6) (McKinney & Swartz, 2016). In spite of this, findings propose that all these students experienced similar challenges as those individuals who received their education during the Apartheid era. McKinney and Swartz (2016) further argue that under Apartheid rule, most South Africans faced discrimination on a daily basis in all spheres of life including employment, health services and education. This discrimination considered various components including race and disability. As such, all government schools in South Africa

were segregated into European and Non-European categories. This education system promoted division in terms of race, gender, class and ethnicity, thereby promoting segregation instead of common citizenship and nationhood.

In South Africa, inclusive education has been recognized as a model for education (Chiwandire & Vincent, 2019). It is further argued that proponents see inclusive education as foundational, because it enables mainstream educational institutions to focus on increasing the participation of SWDs as a historically marginalised group. Chiwandire and Vincent (2016) argued that deaf students in South Africa are currently facing challenges related to the shortage of professional sign language interpreters, which has led to these students to depend on ‘fake’ sign language interpreters who also take advantage of the situation. Deaf students desperately need access to education, and they cannot complain about their interpreters’ poor sign language skills.

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa has established the rights that protect students living with disabilities. The strategic policy framework states that every individual with a disability has the right to education. It also includes that the State parties should ensure that individuals with disabilities have the right to education on an equal basis with students without disabilities (DHET, 2018). According to the DHET (2018, p. 8), the education of students with disabilities should be directed to “a) the full development of human potential, sense of dignity and self-worth b) the development of their personalities, talents, skills, professionalism and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential c) educating persons with disabilities in a manner that promotes their participation and inclusion in society and d) the preservation and strengthening of positive African values”.

## **2.9 Perceptions of Disability in international universities**

Through the examination of the current study the researcher found that disability is not a unique South African phenomenon, however, it is universal one. Therefore, people possess different perceptions of disability locally and globally. For instance, In Germany, the research and political social practice in educational system has been centralising disability on the primary, secondary or pre-school system (Aust, 2018). However, Aust continued and said, given that tertiary education is also part of the education system, there is a wider field of research desiderates concerning disability in higher education in general and students living with disabilities specifically.

In 2009, Germany adopted a UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN-CRPD) which was ratified in German parliament and committed itself to allow for full



inclusion and effective participations of people living with disability more specifically in education system (Aust, 2018). Thereafter, the EU project “European Action on Disability within Higher Education” (EADHE) was established by seven universities “Aarhus (Denmark), Bologna (Italy), Coimbra (Portugal), Crakow (Poland), Ghent (Belgium), Gothenburg (Sweden) and Leipzig (Germany) to close this gap in knowledge about the situation of students living with disabilities and about studying with disabilities in higher education in Europe”( Aust 2018, p. 125). The main focus was documenting the effects higher learning education structures have on students living with disabilities as well as identifying best practises of dealing with the needs students living with disabilities.

In the United Kingdom (UK) the literature found that the number of students enter higher education do not declare that they are living with disability because they assumed that disclosure will negatively impact upon the application decision and lead to exclusion of a student (Eccles et. al, 2018). Furthermore, attitudes towards disability may vary. In Thailand, some parents who have children living with disabilities consider themselves as being punished for their previous deeds in life. On the other hand, some Chinese - Thai considered that having a child with Down syndrome was a sign of good luck.

### **2.10 Prevalence of Disability in South African universities**

Disability is a global phenomenon. The literature issued by the World Health Organization and the World Bank on the first *World Report on Disability* (2011) has estimated that more than one billion people, namely 15% of the world population, are affected by some form of disability. The studies continued and found that disability is also a growing phenomenon. Therefore, In the 70s only 10% of the world population was affected by some form of disability. The World Health Organization and World Bank (2011) further discovered that the number of disabled people will most certainly continue to grow in the future due to an aging population and the higher impact of disabling chronic diseases. The growth will become even more serious in specific areas at risk because of additional health, social, and cultural factors. Environmental pollution, unhealthy lifestyles, work-related injuries, wars and violence – all these phenomena can have disabling effects (World Health Organization & World Bank 2011).

The research conducted on disability highlighted that high-income countries have consistently reported greater disability prevalence rates compared to low-income countries (World Health Organization & World Bank 2011). The National Census of South Africa estimated the

prevalence of disability to be 7.5% in 2011 of the total population (Statistics South Africa, 2012). The highest prevalence of disability has been reported among those with lower income, particularly those who had no schooling (10%) compared to those who had post-secondary education (3%) (Statistics South Africa, 2012). Black Africans, who generally reside in under-resourced communities, were still found to have the highest rate of disability (7.8%) in the 2011 census (Statistics South Africa, 2012). In relation the above-mentioned, the literature relieved that the prevalence of disability in South Africa is still closely associated with race and development, with those communities who have encountered greatest disadvantage presenting with the highest disability prevalence (Statistics South Africa, 2012). Rural provinces such as the Free State, North West and the Northern Cape have reported disability prevalence rates between 10% and 11% (Statistics South Africa, 2014).

Looking at the prevalence of disability in South African universities. The study conducted reported that the number of disabled students at the different institutions varies from 21 – 400 (Pretorius, Bell, & Healey, 2018). Pretorius, Bell, and Healey (2018) continued and argued, this is not, and is not intended to be an accurate estimation of enrolled students with disabilities currently at HEIs in South Africa. It only reflects the number of students making use of the services of the DUs at the participating institutions. The various DUs keep statistics only on the students who come to them for assistance and make use of their services. The number of students with disabilities studying at the institutions not making use of their services is unknown. The above points are indicative of trends locally and elsewhere that accurate statistics on disabled students are lacking. Students, for various reasons choose not to self-identify.

### **2.11 Wellbeing of students living with disabilities**

Researchers reported that a limited number of students living with disabilities were previously admitted to higher learning institutions. Studies conducted largely focused on issues and struggle encountered by students living with disabilities in university settings (Allan, 2010; Mutanga, 2017). These include factors such as lack of resources, discrimination, neglect of their rights and the inaccessible university infrastructure (Naidoo, 2010). Relating to the above-mentioned issues, Vaughn and Swason (2015) indicated that students living with disabilities experience strong feelings of frustration, sadness, shame or anger that may lead to psychological difficulties such as anxiety, depression, loneliness, hopelessness etc. Vaughn and Swason (2015) further note that these psychological difficulties can affect people mentally,

emotionally, socially, spiritually, physically and could be the reason for poor academic performance. In this regard, the literature shows that prior research largely focused on the negative aspects encountered by students living with disabilities and only a few studies found on positive experiences.

Research on inclusive education in institutions of higher learning points to a need to investigate the challenges faced by students living with disabilities (Mutanga, 2017). Previous studies have largely focused on issues of mobility and access to universities..., and not so much on the psychological needs and well-being of these students (Blasé et al., 2009; Mutanga, 2017). However, available literature has demonstrated that obstacles to education are not necessarily due to inherent capacities but rather to the neglect of social needs and psychological well-being of these students (Darbyshire & Stenfert Kroese, 2012). There appears to be a need to explore how students with disabilities cope with the stressors of life on campus, over and above how they access learning materials or issues related to reading, writing and memory.

The findings from previous studies have generally indicated that university students living with disability report higher levels of depressive signs and psychological distress, compared to those without disabilities (Blasé et al., 2009; Mutanga, 2017). Studies have also suggested that these students encounter challenges of effectively dealing with attitudinal and structural barriers on campus (Tansey et al., 2017; Ambati, 2015; Mutanga, 2017). Moreover, students living with disability show lower levels of social support, social skills, as well as lower levels of quality of life, all of which are regarded as the main cause of low academic performance when compared to students without disabilities (Darbyshire & Stenfert Kroese, 2012). Similarly, some studies suggest that students living with disabilities experience psychological difficulties such as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, loneliness and behavioural problems such as substance abuse (Vaughn & Swanson, 2015). These psychological difficulties can be devastating and can also lead to low academic performance among other negative outcomes. Of note, however, is the fact that previous research has largely focused on the negative experiences and there appears to be limited research on the positive experiences of students living with disabilities.

Psychological well-being seems to be a concept made up of numerous features. Generally, it is assumed that it comprises the five major psychological aspects. These aspects include autonomy and choice, having purpose in life, positive relationships with others, personal growth and self-acceptance. Autonomy and choice involve displaying ability of self-control,

self-governance and regulation of self-behaviour. So, students living with disabilities are described as having sufficient inner locus of evaluation, that is, they do not need to look for significant others for approval, but they evaluate themselves by personal standards (Vaughn & Swanson, 2015). Purpose of life refers to having beliefs that motivate and give students living with disabilities feelings that there is purpose in, and meaning to life. Personal growth involves maximising the cognitive function among students living with disabilities and strategically approaching new problems or tasks at different periods of life. Moreover, self-acceptance is regarded as the ability to hold positive attitudes towards people living with disabilities and it is good for self-actualisation and optimal functioning.

The PERMA model is a scientific theory of happiness which comprises five pillars that help us to reach life of full happiness (Seligman, 2011). The model has been used in studies such as the one focusing on the *The Role of Wellbeing and Wellness: A Positive Psychological Model in Supporting Young People with ASCs*. In the current study, it is envisaged that the PERMA model will further help students living with disabilities to have a positive view of life and be able to view past, present and future from positive perspectives, engage in particular activities without undermining themselves. They will be able to build strong lasting relationships with others, find purpose in their lives and to contribute meaningfully to the world, live the life of happiness and fulfilment or having ambition that can lead them to have a sense of accomplishment.

For purposes of this study, the PERMA model will be adopted as a framework (Tansey et al., 2017). This model consists of five key positive constructs that contribute to the overall psychological well-being and happiness among people. These constructs are positive emotion, engagement, relationship, meaning and accomplishments. In addition, the model of well-being (PERMA model) has been suggested to provide a framework based on principles of Positive Psychology where its effect can lead to increased health, life satisfaction, increased and promotion of creativity, and ultimately moral development and civic citizenship (Roncaglia, 2017).

Some researchers have contended that schools are ideal institutions to provide positive opportunities to students living with disabilities to expand their focus beyond academic learning to also include the promotion of character and well-being (Kern, Waters, Adler, & White, 2015). These researchers have argued that the incorporation of Positive Psychology into education can decrease depression among students living with disabilities and help enhance the

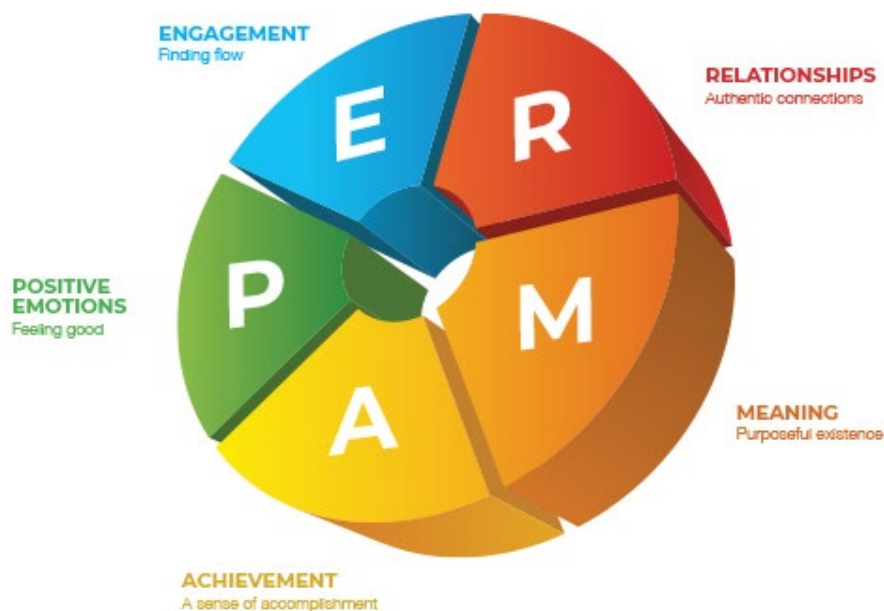
students' well-being and opportunities to flourish through an application of the five elements of well-being.

## 2.10 Theoretical Framework

### 2.10.1 PERMA Well-Being Model

The founder of positive psychology and the head of the American Psychological Association proposed a systematically measure and build wellbeing across the whole world to minimise the number of people suffering from catastrophic mental illness and to improve the resilience of the population in a rapidly changing world (Roncaglia, 2017). In 2011, the PERMA well-being model was found that identify five crucial elements of well-being: Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment which serves as the building block of wellbeing to understand how each well-being element was realised among students living with disabilities (Tansey et al., 2017). The following section further focuses on how each element of the PERMA well-being model can render applicable theoretical perspective in the present study.

**Figure 1: Seligman's PERMA Model**



### **(a) Positive Emotion (P)**

The first element of the PERMA model is positive emotions. As a cornerstone of the well-being model, encountering positive emotions such as amusement, hope, interest, joy, love, compassion, gratitude, pride, empathy is regarded the most vital element contributing to wellbeing of individuals (Seligman, 2011). In school context, Noble and McGrath (2008) examined how schools assist students experience positive feelings such as: (a) belonging to their school; (b) safety from bullying and violence; (c) satisfaction and pride through experiencing and celebrating success; (d) excitement and enjoyment by participating in fun activities or special games; and (e) optimism about their success and/or school. With regard to the focus of the current study positive emotions element help students living with disabilities to have positive perspectives of the university environment and to feel safe and accepted. It further helps students enjoy the university life and feel equal as other students without disability and to participate in all activities without feeling discriminated or rejected. Furthermore, Seligman argue that encountering positive emotions on a regular basis in school settings is considered essential for well-being and provides many opportunities for students living with disabilities to feel happiness.

### **(b) Engagement (E)**

The second element of the PERMA model is engagement, which is referred to someone who is deeply engaged to a particular task or something in life such as work, personal interest, or any activity you done regularly in your leisure time for pleasure (Seligman, 2011). Seligman (2011) concurs and said when we engaged in things we love to do, we ended up losing track of time. Seligman further argued that in positive psychology, this is introduced as a flow. According to Csíkszentmihályi (1990) a number of human activities regard music engagement, such as an instrumental playing, as one of the activities that best facilitate the experience of flow. Looking at students living with disabilities exposing them to a variety of musical activities with consideration of students' interests and strength could be an effective way to engage students with their school activities and promote their wellbeing (Lee, Krause & Davidson, 2017). This further implies that participation of students living with disabilities in school programmes like extra mural activities would make them more engage to the university and feel as part of the school and able to build long lasting relationships.

Engagement could be identified in different perspectives. It could be engagement in social engagement or engagement in activities. The definition of social engagement varies among researchers. Kimura, Yamazaki, Haga, and Yasumura (2013) define social engagement as personal interaction and participation in social activities, the maintenance of many social connections and a high level of participation in social activities, and making social and emotional connections with people and the community. On the other side, engagement in social activities is part social engagement, where people engage in different activities, build friendships and so forth. In relation to the current study, students living with disability highlighted that they socially engaged through engagement in social activities like doing art, singing, and participating in certain sports that the university offers, such as tennis. Additionally, Social engagement contributes to physical and mental health, subjective wellbeing, self-rated health, and life satisfaction (Kimura, et al, 2013).

### **(c) Relationships (R)**

Relationships, the third element in the PERMA well-being model, focus on whether a person has an ability to build and maintain positive lasting relationships with others (Seligman, 2011). In the university setting, building strong positive relationships with peers and lecturers help students living with disabilities to experience support, and to feel connected to the university environment (McFerran, 2010). For example, McFerran used music and identified it to be a useful method for building relationship among students more specifically those living with disabilities. Lee, Krause, and Davidson, (2017) argue that music is a key in maintaining interpersonal relationships between people, in that case participating in music seem to be a social act. Therefore, considering musical activities could lead to a perception of being included and valued through communication, interaction, and mature teamwork in school contexts.

### **(d) Meaning (M)**

The last two elements, the fourth and fifth of well-being are meaning and accomplishment (Seligman, 2011). According to Seligman (2011) in order for us to have a sense of meaning, requires us to feel what we do is valuable and worthwhile. Seligman also argue that the search for meaning is an essential human quality and involves belonging to something that we believe is greater than ourselves. Similarly, having meaning in your life, or working towards your lifetime goals, is not the same for everybody. Therefore, meaning may be achieved through your profession, a cause you are impassionate about, a creative pursuit, or religious or spiritual beliefs. Seligman further argue that a number of people seek meaning and purpose through work professionalism. For others, sense of meaning seems to be found on what they do on their

leisure time rather than on what they do for a living. That may include volunteering for a community group, raising money for a charity, lobbying for cause, inspiring their child's sporting team or spending time with their family. For most people, their sense of meaning is strongly related to their personal values. For students living with disabilities sense of meaning can be successfully attained through inspiring greatness within themselves, to inspire them to meaningful lives, value themselves, find social support, participating in school activities and by proving positive feedbacks to their deeds.

### **(e) Accomplishments (A)**

The fifth element of the PERMA acronym is accomplishment, which is also known as attainment, mastery, or proficiency, that is regarded as having ability to do something successfully or efficiently (Seligman, 2011). Seligman goes on and says to have sense of accomplishment means that you have worked towards and reached your goals, attained mastery over an endeavour, and had the self-motivation to complete what we set out to do and to fulfil our lifetime goals. Accomplishment contributes to our well-being when we are able to look back on our lives with a sense of achievement and say, 'I did it, and I did it well' (Seligman, 2012, p.2). Related to the literature above, the researcher Angela Duckworth introduced the concept of 'grit' (Seligman, 2011). Grit is defined as 'perseverance and passion for long-term goals' (Duckworth & Gross, 2014, p.1). Duckworth and Gross (2014) further argued that people who display 'grit' don't just finish what they started; they persevere at their goals over time. For students living with disabilities, a sense of accomplishment gives them the strength to fight any circumstance coming their way and enhances the passion to believe in attaining their dreams.



## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides a description of the research process. It provides information concerning the method that was utilised in conducting this research study and gives a justification for the use of this method. The chapter also describes the various stages followed when conducting the study, which includes the research design, sampling method used as well as a description of the study. Further, the data collection process and the process of data analysis are presented as well as the ethical procedures followed during the process of conducting this study. The chapter also discusses the role of the researcher in qualitative research in relation to reflexivity. Furthermore, it ends with a discussion on ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research.

### **3.2 The research approach**

This study is concerned with the quality and texture of the experiences of students living with disabilities in an institution of higher learning, UKZN Howard College campus. Its focus is on how they adapt to the educational learning environment and how they further adopt the PERMA framework, which basically focuses on the individual's positive experiences. In the current study, the focus is on students living with disabilities, therefore the model helps disabled students to possess a positive view of life and positive perspectives for their academic journey in relation to the condition they are living with.

This study adopted a qualitative research approach. It is the most appropriate to generate data through active engagement and to allow a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of students living with disabilities. A qualitative approach provides an opportunity to understand the students' perspectives in terms of their treatment in the university. According to the Crowe, Inder and Porter (2015), qualitative research is defined as an interactive process, multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach which attempts to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the stories people share with the researcher. On the other hand, Denzin and Lincoln (2008, p.14) argue that the term qualitative carries overtones of "an emphasis on the qualities of entities, and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity or frequency". In this way, qualitative research highlights depth more than breadth.

The overall aim is to obtain both the exploratory and descriptive data which intends to reveal:

- a) The experiences of students living with disability at UKZN (Howard College) through an application of the PERMA model.

The advantage of a qualitative approach is that it creates a dialogical space for students living with disabilities to open up about their personal experiences and day to day challenges at the university. Patton (2002, p. 2) contends that “qualitative research is characterised by its aims, which relate to understanding some aspect of social life, and its methods which (in general) generate words, rather than numbers, as data for analysis”. This methodological approach enables students living with disabilities to describe their personal experiences in-depth, in terms of how the university environment is structured and the challenges they face in the lecture halls, tutorial venues, at the library and in the halls of residences among other facilities. It further focuses on their experiences in terms of how they build positive relationships with other students and staff members and their engagement in any activities around campus as well as the progress of their studies.

Qualitative research utilises a real-life outlook that focuses on understanding the facts in context-specific settings (Crowe, Inder, & Porter, 2015). Unlike quantitative research, which basically focuses on structured questions that require students living with disabilities to tick either *Yes* or *No* answers to a given questionnaire. The questionnaire with the questions is constructed by the researcher based on the problems and challenges encountered by students at the university as imagined by the researcher. Therefore, the qualitative approach used in this study empowers the participants in such a way that it grants them the opportunity to provide rich and thick data, which is relevant to their specific contexts. Furthermore, the qualitative approach was also used to help participants to actively engage with the researcher in the process of collecting the data in order to answer the research question, through semi-structured interviews.

### **3.2.1 Research paradigm: An interpretivist approach**

The term paradigm is understood differently by various scholars. According to Ulin, Robinson and Tolley (2002, p. 12), a paradigm “is a worldview that presents a definition of the social world linked to the related sources of information (data) and appropriate ways (methods) to tap these sources”. Thanh and Thanh (2015) contend that a research paradigm is made up of three elements: a belief about the nature of knowledge, a methodology, and criteria for ensuring validity. This study adopted the interpretivist paradigm because researchers assume that the

interpretivist/constructivist paradigm mostly employs qualitative methods (Thomas, 2003; Willis, 2007; Nind & Todd, 2011). In this way, the qualitative approach mostly generates rich reports that are essential for interpretivists to fully assimilate the context. Consistent with Willis' (2007) ideas, Thomas (2003, p. 6) found that qualitative methods are usually supported by interpretivists, because the interpretive paradigm "portrays a world in which reality is socially constructed, complex, and ever changing".

Interpretivists researchers understand "the world of human experience" (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p. 36). Consistent with Cohen and Manion's (1994) view, Creswell and Creswell (2017) and Yanow and Schwartz-Shea (2011) assert that interpretivist researchers obtain reality through the participant's sights, their own background and experiences. Thus, the interpretive paradigm enables researchers to comprehend the world by focusing on the perceptions and experiences encountered by the participants. In this case, students living with disabilities are the participants. Through an interpretive approach, methods such as interviews that allow elicitation of perspectives of students living with disabilities were used.

According to Willis (2007), interpretivism generally attempts to understand a particular context, and the major belief of the interpretive paradigm is that reality is socially constructed. It includes "accepting and seeking multiple perspectives, being open to change, practicing iterative and emergent data collection techniques, promoting participatory and holistic research, and going beyond the inductive and deductive approach" (Willis, 2007, p. 583). Interpretive research focuses more on the subjective than the objective because the goal of interpretivism is to value subjectivity, hence, "interpretivists eschew the idea that objective research on human behaviour is possible" (Willis, 2007, p.110). Furthermore, interpretive researchers do not attempt to answer questions in fixed ways. Instead, they approach the reality from subjects, typically from people who own their experiences and are of a particular group or culture. In this study, allow students living with disabilities to answer the questions in a flexible way for them to fully feel and understand what students go through, and for them to suggest possible solutions to the problem.

### **3.2.2 Researcher as the key instrument**

The phrase researcher-as-instrument refers to the fact that the researcher is considered to be an active respondent during the whole research process (Pezalla, Pettigrew, & Miller-Day, 2012). However, in order to do that, each interpretive researcher must turn the basic skills into specialised research skills. Pezalla et al. (2012) aver that across the years, literature have

considered the essence of researcher-as-instrument as interpreter of empirical materials and as involved in the construction of ideas. In that case, before entering the field, attempts were made to develop basic skills for a successful data collection process. As primary instruments, researcher utilise their sensory organs to understand the study objects, mirroring them in their consciousness, where they then are converted into phenomenological representations to be interpreted (Pezalla et al., 2012). This all happened through the researcher's facilitative interaction that created a conversational space which is an area where participants felt safe to express themselves and share stories about their experiences and life worlds.

### **3.2.3 Entry into the field**

Access to the research field was negotiated through the Registrar of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The Registrar is the traditional gatekeeper for university students. A gatekeeper is considered to be someone with the authority to control access to an institution or an organisation such as an administrator, managing director or head of school (Singh & Wassenaar, 2016)., Kelly, Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999) contend that gatekeepers are people who have the ability to decide who is permitted or denied access to conduct research. Usually, gatekeepers are parties concerned with the subject under examination or the welfare of prospective participants.

To conduct research, a researcher is required to gain what is called community entry. Vermeulen et al. (2015) argue that the process of community entry is a subjective experience which entails mindfulness and awareness as the researcher seeks to become a part of the community in question. The process involves understanding the community, interpersonal relationships and group processes in order to bring people together and effectively prepare them to work as a group. In this case, this enabled the researchers to interconnect with the community and its members.

Vermeulen et al. (2015) argued that community entry is a prelude to any endeavour that will take place in a real partnership with the community. Community entry considers willingness to listen and learn and then the power to change the situation because of an assumed authority obtained in academic knowledge and professional expertise (Vermeulen et al., 2015). There are five steps that must be followed to obtain entry into a community. These include; "initiating and establishing conversation with the community members, identifying community problems, discussing issues affecting health outcomes, allowing the community to participant in all

actions, and establishing strong partnerships within the community” (Vermeulen et al., 2015, p.6).

In the current study, the researcher needed to build a strong relationship with students living with disabilities in order to gain access. The process involved visiting them, creating dialogical space so that they can easily express their feelings, freely share their stories and also identify issues they are facing around campus. Furthermore, by knowing someone who is a friend with two students living with disability in the campus, it made it easier for the researcher to gain access to participants by using them as key informants. From there on, they referred me to other participants they know were living with disability. In that case, it was easier for me to select participants who genuinely suited the purpose of the study, specifically those who were living with disability on campus.

### **3.2.4 Selection of participants**

As indicated above in this chapter, the methodology was influenced by an interpretivist approach. In qualitative research, when researchers collect data participants include individuals who are knowledgeable or who directly experienced with the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2013). In this study, the participants included are students who were registered at UKZN Howard College at the time of the study, specifically those who were living with disabilities. Ten participants participated in the study, 5 males and 5 females, age ranged from 18-35 who possess different types of disability. The researcher met with participants on campus and the interviews were conducted at UKZN psychology clinic. The interviews were conducted in four days, the researcher had different slot of interviews, meeting two participants per day and each interview lasts for 45-60 minutes.

Generally, sampling is performed in two ways: probability and nonprobability. In this study, selection of participants was performed through the combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling. In this case, the nonprobability sampling strategy was utilised. Nonprobability sampling is a sampling technique where the samples are gathered in a process that does not allow all the participants or units in the population equal chances of being selected in the study (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). These scholars aver that the most significant reason for choosing nonprobability sampling is that it is cheaper than probability sampling and can often be applied more quickly. However, the technique to be utilised depends on the type, nature and purpose of the study.

The first technique used in this study is purposive sampling, also known as judgment sampling. Purposive sampling is the deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant has (Etikan et al., 2016). These scholars describe purposive sampling as a non-random technique that does not need underlying theories or a set number of participants. In simple terms, the researcher makes a decision in terms of what needs to be known and sets out to find people who can and who are willing to give the information by virtue of knowledge or experience. The technique is typically used in qualitative research to find and select information-rich cases for the most proper utilisation of available resources.

Purposive sampling involves the identification and selection of individuals or groups of individuals that are competent and well-informed about the phenomenon of interest. The idea behind purposive sampling is to focus on individuals with specific characteristics who will be able to assist with the relevant research (Prilinkas, 2013). Purposive sampling methods place primary emphasis on saturation (i.e., obtaining a comprehensive understanding by continuing to sample until no new substantive data is acquired) (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). When using purposive sampling, participants are selected based on the purpose of the study, with the expectation that each participant will provide unique and rich information that is of value to the study. In this study, the selected participants were students living with disabilities and the researcher had the hope to collect pragmatic data from them as they constituted the backbone of the study and had had different experiences around campus, both positive and negative.

Purposive sampling was enhanced through snowball sampling. A researcher using snowball sampling asks the first few participants if they know anyone with similar characteristics with them, and willing to take part in the research study (Naderifar, Goli, & Ghaljaie, 2017). In the current study, the researcher used snowball sampling to identify individuals or groups of students living with disability around campus to share their experiences.

### **3.3 Data collection**

There are a variety of methods of data collection in qualitative research, including observations, textual or visual analysis (e.g. from books or videos) and interviews (individual or group (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). However, the most common methods used are interviews and focus groups (Gill, et al., 2008). In this study, one-on-one interviews were used. Qualitative interviews were a more suitable method as it allowed each participant to share their experiences. They were also particularly appropriate for exploring such a sensitive topic as disability, where participants may not be comfortable to share such issues in a group

environment. Confidentiality is an important principle that guides the lives of students living with disability. As such, engaging in questionnaires and surveys with such participants would have been inappropriate because this topic requires deep interaction with individual participants to obtain the detailed insights required.

In a qualitative interview, best questions should be open-ended that require more than a *Yes/No* answer), neutral, sensitive and understandable (Gill et al., 2008). These scholars further argued that usually it is best to begin with questions that participants can answer easily and then proceed to more difficult or sensitive topics. This can help participants to build rapport and generate rich data that subsequently develops the interview further.

The study was conducted at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Howard College). The researcher collected data among students living with disabilities using individual interviews to learn about their positive experiences of living with disability. Ten participants participated in this study. There were males and females. The interview process lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Furthermore, a digital audio recorder was used to record the individual interviews. The researcher requested consent from the participants to use an audio recorder. Field notes were also taken to supplement the recordings.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

In this study, thematic analysis (TA) was used to analyse the interview data. The procedure followed in thematic analysis has been described by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 6) “as a theoretically flexible method that organises, describes and interprets qualitative data”. Thematic analysis consists of six phases of analysis data. These are: familiarising yourself with your data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis has a strong connection with interpretivist approach, adopted in the current study. Both thematic analysis and interpretive approach focuses on the interpretation of data. Thematic analysis, similar to interpretive approach obtain reality through the participant’s sights, their own background and experiences. Furthermore, the two methods enables researchers to understand the world by focusing on the perceptions and experiences encountered by the participants (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2011). Additionally, the literature revealed that the knowledge of the two above mentioned methods are created through interactions of individual with the world, therefore, there is no meaning outside of a person’s perception. We construct our understanding of the world through our own realities (Douglas, 2017).

The first step in TA involves closely familiarising with the data by reading and re-reading the interview transcripts. Following this close reading, initial codes are generated. This involves examining the data keeping the research question (not the interview prompts) at the forefront. For example, while reading the transcripts; the researcher needed to focus on what is the participant was saying in relation to what they thought about disability. This involves noting down additional materials that might not be directly related to the question but may provide a context to understanding the participant's experiences. The next step involves searching for themes. After generating codes, the researcher clustered them into related ideas. Once the tentative themes were identified, the next step involved defining and naming themes. The themes needed to be refined in relation to the overall meaning that was captured, and definitions for each theme were generated. The final phase can be described as the process of synthesis. This involved exploring the relationship of the themes to each other and to the socio-cultural context within which they emerged. It is at this point that the presentation of findings shifts from the description of data to the meanings that would have emerged, which Braun and Clarke (2006) described as making an argument in relation to the research question.

### **3.5 Ethical considerations**

Ethical considerations are described as one of the most essential parts of the research project. In that case, if ethical considerations are missing, the study would fail to protect data provided by the participants. The following principles of ethical considerations are discussed below: voluntary participation, do not harm, informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality.

#### **3.5.1 Voluntary participation**

Voluntary participation is an ethical principle emphasizing that people should not participate in research study if they do not feel comfortable with that, therefore they can participate if they like and if they do not like they should not participate (Neuman & Robson, 2014). Therefore, the above explanation emphasizes that the participation was voluntary; no one was coerced to participate or lured deceitfully. No certain incentives like money were given to participants. Participants were allowed to leave at any stage of the data collection process if they felt so. At the end of the interviews, the participants were debriefed about the aim of the study, and individuals were allowed to ask questions if they had any.



### **3.5.2 Do not harm**

Among all the principles related to research ethics, the literature revealed that it is safe to say that this admonition is the backbone of ethical conduct (Lichtman, 2012). A reasonable indication should be expected by those participating in a research study that they will not be involved in any situation in which they might be harmed (Lichtman, 2012). In that case, the researcher should take responsibility and ensure that participants are not involved in any harm or danger whether physically, emotionally or spiritually. This was particularly important, given that participants were those living with disability. The research had to pay much attention to their needs.

### **3.5.3 Informed consent**

Informed consent is a statement (usually written) that clarifies the details of a study to participants and for voluntary agreement to participate before the study begins (Neuman, 2014). Firstly, the participants were not aware of the philosophical principles guiding ethical research which are autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence and justice. Furthermore, participants were fully informed about the procedure and risks involved in the study and they gave their consent. The researcher ensured that the participants were free to demonstrate their feelings and allowed them to make their own decisions. The participants signed the informed consent form that included a confidentiality clause that they needed to abide with. Furthermore, participants were told that the study was ethically cleared; they were shown the ethical clearance certificate and gatekeeper letter to show that the study was approved. Further explanation assisted participants to understand their rights, and other ethical issues that guided the research as expressed in the informed consent form (see Appendix 1B), copies of which were distributed to each participant for their signatures prior to each formal interview.

### **3.5.4 Anonymity and confidentiality**

Anonymity is the ethical protection ensuring that participants remain nameless, and their identities are protected from disclosure and they remain unknown (Neuman, 2014). Anonymity is one of the significant ethical considerations that allows participants to express their feelings freely. Anonymity is good foundation for confidentiality where participants know that the information given will not be misused. If they want to have their real names reported, the researcher is allowed to do that. According to the current study, participants were provided with the consent form that had the whole procedure to be followed by the researcher and the participants. In terms of ethical considerations, all participants asked their real names not to be disclosed.

### **3.6 Trustworthiness of the study**

Korstjens and Mosers (2018) noted that in all qualitative designs, some quality criteria are applied. Korstjens and Mosers (2018) further argued that quality criteria utilised in quantitative research like internal validity, generalisability and objectivity are not well appropriate to judge the quality of qualitative research. Literature revealed that qualitative researchers consider trustworthiness, which directly asks the question ‘can the findings to be trusted’. Furthermore, numerous definitions and criteria of trustworthiness exist, however the well-known criteria are credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Shenton, 2004; Gunawa, 2015).

#### **3.6.1 Credibility**

The findings of the study revealed that a study is trustworthy if and only if the reader of the research report judges it to be so (Gunawan, 2015). Credibility is the correspondence of internal validity in quantitative research and the focus is on the aspect of truth-value. It is regarded as the confidence that can be placed in the truth of the research findings (Korstjens & Mosers, 2018). Korstjens and Mosers (2018) further argued that credibility establishes whether the research findings represent plausible information drawn from the participants’ original data and is a correct interpretation of the participants’ original views. In this study, credibility was achieved through triangulation with data from participants with different levels of formal education drawn from a wide spatial area in order to establish if this could produce discrepant findings.

#### **3.6.2 Transferability**

Transferability concerns the aspect of applicability (Korstjens & Mosers, 2018). The responsibility of the researcher is to provide a ‘thick description’ of the participants and the research process, to enable the reader to assess whether the findings are transferable to other settings; this is the so-called transferability judgement. This implies that the reader, and not the researcher, makes the transferability judgment because they do not know the specific settings. Since transferability in qualitative research is influenced by the degree of similarity between sending and receiving contexts, the researcher collected adequately detailed data and reported on it with the necessary accuracy. This was done to allow the reader to make judgements about transferability, also known as extensibility (Ulin et al., 2004).

#### **3.6.3 Dependability**

Dependability includes the aspect of consistency (Korstjens & Mosers, 2018). The researcher needs to check whether the analysis process is in line with the accepted standards for a

particular design. In this particular study, the researcher guaranteed the attainment of reliability by providing thick descriptions of the various steps taken and giving justifications for decisions taken during the execution of the study in the field. For example, it is the researcher's estimation that key research questions in this study were not difficult and they fitted well into the research design and study objectives.

### **3.6.4 Confirmability**

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the findings of the research study could be confirmed by other researchers (Korstjens & Mosers, 2018). The interpretation should not be based on the researcher's own preferences and viewpoints but needs to be grounded in the data. Here, the focus is on the interpretation process embedded in the process of analysis. In this study, confirmability was accomplished through maintaining and reviewing field notes, field diary and reference to proposal notes to enable realigning with the original focus of the study.

### **3.8 Conclusion**

The goal of this chapter was to outline the research method used to answer the research questions. A discussion of the procedure, study participants, data collection, and interview questions outlined the specifics of how the study was conducted and who participated in the study. The goal of Chapter IV is to provide the study results and demonstrate that the methodology described in Chapter III was followed.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### THE EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS LIVING WITH DISABILITIES: THE PERMA MODEL

#### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the themes that were generated from the data in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps of conducting thematic data analysis. The four main themes that emanated from the data were 1) perceptions of living with disability, 2) disability and romantic relationships, 3) engagement in social activities, and 4) the accomplishments and achievements of students living with disabilities.

#### 4.2 Perceptions of living with disability

Participants were asked to give their views and perceptions of living with disability. All participants highlighted that disability can be understood in different ways especially when you look at its variety since people live with different types of disabilities. This is mainly due to the fact that the needs of persons with disabilities vary based on their impairment. Out of ten Participants, nine participants viewed disability as something simple; however, others looked at it as a problem that hinders them from functioning well or taking part in certain activities like other people without disability. One of the participants highlighted that disability was not something that you are necessarily born with, which means you may be born as a normal able-bodied person and out of nowhere fail to walk and become a disabled individual without being injured or involved in an accident. However, all ten participants claimed that they have gained positive thinking about their situation and understand that disability should not be a barrier in their lives. In that case, all participants have accepted that they will be a disabled individuals for the rest of their life and accepted that there are things that they may not be able to perform on their own but still they consider to live a happy and prosperous life without self-imposed limits based on one's disability.

*The type of disability I have is called vision impairment. Basically, my understanding of disability is that it can be explained in different ways depending on the kind of disability you are living with and it can affect and limit you at some point (P#1).*

*To me my disability is not like something that is difficult; it simple, the only thing is that I couldn't walk. My disability is fine there is nothing wrong with it beside that if I could walk it would be much better (P#2).*

*What happened is that during my childhood, I never had a problem with walking on my own. As time went on, I just failed to walk... it was something that just happened. I then realized that I had to face reality that I could not walk anymore yet I was born without any disability (P#3).*

Literature shows that “disability results from the interaction between people with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their full and active participation in society on an equal basis with others” (World Health Organization, 2011, p. 4). The World Health Organization also reveals that people living with disabilities are diverse and heterogonous and can include a child born with a congenital condition such as cerebral palsy, or a soldier who got injured and paralysed, or a middle aged woman with severe arthritis that can result in chronic pain, failing to do daily tasks such as walking or climbing stairs, or an old person with dementia, among others.

The findings further revealed that there are many other factors that may lead to disability. For instance, some genetic disorders are believed to be among the contributing factors to disability. Taylor and Mykitiuk (2001) found that abnormalities in genes and genetic inheritance can lead to intellectual disability in children, physical growth delay and Down syndrome. Down syndrome is considered as the most common genetic condition, and about 6,000 babies are born with Down syndrome each year in South Africa. Furthermore, the findings show that Down syndrome is usually caused by an error in cell division called nondisjunction, where one is born with an extra chromosome, containing 47 chromosomes instead of 46 chromosomes.

*The doctors said I have some physical disability because I have a problem with hands, legs and ligaments. As such, I don't function the same way as other people. I don't know much about my disability, the only thing I'm aware of is what I was told by the doctors (P#4).*

*My disability is called congenital myopathy, so what it actually means is that I have muscle weaknesses and sometimes it affects the way I breathe. It's not really a constant thing though, but I was told by the doctors that as I grow old, it might become a constant thing...so I think for now I can handle it, but I'm just a little bit nervous in terms of future and how things would be (P#5).*

Two participants highlighted that they were living with albinism, which is a reduction or absence of melanin pigment which affects the eyes, hair and skin. Uromi (2014) argues that, in albinism, abnormal development and damage of the visual system are the major results caused by the absence of melanin pigment. The two participants indicated that, as far as they were concerned, living with albinism might sometimes give them problems such as having visual impairment, discrimination, trauma, stress and anxiety but participants insisted that not all these problems were barriers especially when it comes to achieving their goals. They also highlighted that the University gives them amazing positive support in terms of meeting their needs as required, and they generally have positive interaction with peers around campus.

*I'm partially sighted with albinism. I cannot see things from a distance, what happens is that I can't see the projector properly so if I attend, I go there just to listen to the lecturer (P#6).*

*I've got a vision impairment whereby I can't see things from afar. I can only see things that are nearby or short distance away. I would say that the disability that I'm living with gives me problems everyday especially here on campus. For instance, I can't see things like working construction; I can only notice the construction when I get closer (P#7).*

*Since I'm living with albinism, my eyesight is not normal like other people without albinism. I'm partially sighted; I cannot see things in distance. However, it is not as bad as people think but at some point, it limits me from doing some things. For example, I can't walk at night alone. As much as I can see, but I cannot walk alone because I might be injured, hence, I need to be with someone all the time (P#8).*

### **4.3 Disability and intimate / romantic relationships**

The findings of this study revealed that people living with disabilities are not regarded as suitable partners by those persons without disability. This finding is consistent with (Hunt et al., 2018) who found that people with disabilities experienced difficulties in terms of finding partners. Many individuals without disability would seek friendships with people living with disabilities, yet far fewer would think about a romantic relationship. Hunt et al. (2018) learnt that people living with disabilities might be viewed as lacking in sexuality, while some individuals without disability may be worried and uncomfortable if enter into a dating relationship with a disabled person, fearing being condemned by society for their relationships with individuals with disabilities.

Nine participants mentioned that they were engaged in intimate relationships and it was a good feeling for them to have people to share good memories with in life. However, the findings indicated that while it is good to know that students with disabilities do engage in relationships, sometimes they experience problems in sustaining these relationships. Two participants highlighted that they prefer dating people with the same condition as theirs while nine participants preferred dating individuals without disability because they do not want to feel excluded; they regard themselves as normal, so they didn't want people to feel sorry for them. Participants living with disability wanted to be treated equally, with no special treatment.

Four participants highlighted that for disabled individuals, it's a challenge to find a loving and caring partner because people assume that dating someone with a disability comes with its own set of issues. Six participants demonstrated that in the country as a whole, normal people believed that it is a taboo to openly talk about entering into a romantic relationship with a person living with a disability. This is mostly due to people not wanting to be seen or come across as being politically incorrect and insensitive. Hence, it is totally justifiable to have fears and anxieties around entering into such a relationship with a partner living with disability. Additionally, two participants further indicated that they felt that having a romantic relationship with normal persons can hold that person back and cause a barrier between them because there are things that normal persons can do and cannot be done by disabled persons. They also highlighted that they felt that the other person would want to date someone who's also not disabled.

*I am single because I got disappointed by someone, I trusted them, and was the least person I ever thought would cheat on me (P#3).*

*I was in a romantic relationship but now I am single. In my previous relationship, I wouldn't say it was something serious because it didn't last long and I wouldn't also say maybe it's because he was discriminating me because I'm living with albinism but I would say he was not ready for a relationship; he cheated on me and he had a lot of partners. I would regard him as someone who's a womaniser (P#5).*

All participants highlighted that they were involved in romantic relationships and their partners understood them. Their partners showed appreciation for having them in their lives, admired and made them proud. Out of ten participants, five participants demonstrated positive relationship with their partners because they would normally share their personal stuff with them including dreams and fears, achievements and mistakes, or anything else and they would create personal space and time for them. On the other side, three participants highlighted that their partners were their supporting structures; they supported them when facing major challenges like death of a loved one and for minor challenges. They further highlighted that they bought them gifts and made sure that they committed at least an evening every week or two to be with them. They would also have new experiences, share stories, and just generally enjoy each other's company. They also mentioned that they were very happy with their partners; they were even thinking of taking their relationships to the next level because they valued one another and that totally contributed to their well-being.

*I'm dating a guy who also has eye problems. We met in primary school. Before we dated, our thing started as friends. Our relationship is based more on friendship, the engagement is good, we always appreciate each other and now we're parents we got a kid (P#4).*

#### **4.4 Engagement in social activities**

All participants declared positive engagement with all people on campus and pointed out a relatively good social interaction patterns, richer friendship networks and good social support from peers without disabilities. This finding is similar to Wilson (2017) who found that students with disabilities created good interaction with their peers through participating in social activities.



All participants highlighted that life circumstances could make it difficult for them to socially engage, participate in social activities and stay connected to family and friends. However, they understood that feeling socially isolated could affect their health and well-being, so they believed that it was important to stay connected and make new connections with like-minded people. They also highlighted that they believed that social connection could keep them active and healthy. Therefore, participants tried to keep themselves socially connected by going out with their friends, learn new skills and do what they loved. Mostly, they highlighted that they joined social activities in order to meet new people and to maintain their fitness with exercise classes.

Two participants pointed out that being disabled is a challenge, so to keep their thoughts positive all the time, they listened to spiritual music and that helped them to think positive and to focus on their purpose of life and to achieving their goals. According to Barksdale (2003), music is a therapy and its major aim is to actively engage individuals in their own growth, development, and behavioural change and for them to transfer musical and non-musical skills to other aspects of their life, bringing them from isolation into active participation in the world. The literature further argued that music therapy has been successful in treating individuals with emotional disturbances, helping to reduce anxiety, treating impairments in affective functioning, and improving emotional responsiveness (Barksdale, 2003).

*I love music. I started singing when I was young in primary school. Even now, I got two gospel music albums and I am a founder of the Gospel team named Masters of Tomorrow. I can say music plays a huge role in my life ...if ever I face a challenge in life, music brings back hope of life to me because here on campus; we are facing many things especially as living with disabilities, a lot is happening in our lives, so by singing, I relieve myself from life challenges; I forget about what is happening around the world and it basically helps me to find the reason to live and the reason why God created me (P#1).*

All participants highlighted that they engaged themselves in social activities played to manage stress and to building strong relationships with peers. Participants highlighted that the university do not offer activities (sports) that they can participate on since they live with disability. However, to keep them positive, happy, and forget about the challenges of their disabilities, they visited churches around campus, attended events and went to sport grounds just to watch matches taking place at that time. Participants further highlighted that music

played an important role in their situation to find who they are when life gives them problems. They further emphasized that engaging themselves in social activities gave them strength to face the world.

The findings further showed some evidence that participating in positive activities impacted positively on disabled individual's outcomes in terms of physical and psychological well-being (Beresford, 2010). Taking part in positive activities can be an essential source of enjoyment for people living with disabilities and can be as, or even more, important as the activity itself. Beresford (2010) avers that playing and interacting in positive activities helps disabled individuals' social development, particularly in terms of their understanding of peer culture and to learn and develop skills, both those specific to an activity (for example, a particular sport) and more generic life skills. Positive activities can also provide the means by which disabled people can make a positive contribution to their local communities and there is evidence that inclusive positive activities help to promote disabled individuals' sense of belonging to their local communities.

#### **4.5 Achievements and accomplishments**

All ten participants highlighted that sometimes they lack the confidence to stand strong and speak about the things they have done that have made them feel proud. They continued and said the reason of them failing to appreciate their good achievements it is because people believed that a disabled person could not be completely able to function as a living being of which disabled students, believed that was the opposite of what they believed. Participants also highlighted that they believed that they were capable and talented, and their disability did not limit them in terms of accomplishing their goals.

Participants went on to that say that when people see someone living with disabilities; they often notice his or her disability and not the accomplishments they would have achieved. Participants further highlighted that people need to shift the focus on what people bring to the table rather than their disability and that would make them to focus and stop thinking what other people's thought about them. The participants also mentioned that if people think positive about them, they would also think positive about themselves. Furthermore, participants also highlighted that the way people looked at them made them feel that even when acknowledging disability in a positive way or using it as a source of inspiration for themselves, they felt that they were still putting the disability before the person's individuality. However, that made that strong every day because they have accepted the way normal are constructed about disability and they have made a decision for focus on accomplishing their desired goals.

Furthermore, the ten participants further highlighted that being at the university comes with achievements and accomplishments. However, the participants indicated that while it is good to know that students with disabilities are given a chance to study further in universities, sometimes they experience problems such as accessing lecture venues, absence of significant facilities and services, lack of mentors with disabilities and so forth. However, they mentioned that the problems they were facing at the university gave them the strength and power to achieve their goals.

*I wouldn't mention much beside the fact that with regards to what I came here for, everything is well. My academic performance is good because I'm that kind of person who focuses on their studies (P#1).*

*I can say that I managed to pass all my modules even though we had difficulties (P#2).*

*During my undergrad, I couldn't use a computer and we were introduced to the new system learning using braille. It was a challenge on its own because I had no prior exposure to the system. Well, I can say this is a skill I obtained on my university journey (P#3).*

The findings reported that, out of ten participants, two participants had different experiences in relation to the PERMA elements especially in relationships (romantic relationship), while the eight participants had positive experience of romantic relationships. One participants had not experience positive romantic relationship, all his partners cheated on him because of his disability. The other participant, the partner failed to handle the relationship because he was not disabled, so the participant considered to involve in romantic relationship with someone who possess a similar condition in future, so that they can understand each other. In term terms of engagement, all participants were socially engaged and participated in social activities and the participants highlighted that to socially engage helped them to make new friends to socialise with and to kept updated about things happening around campus. Furthermore, all participants mentioned that goals are obtained, specifically academically. Additionally, all in all, ten participants showed an optimistic view of their positive psychological wellbeing more specifically in relation to university life. The ten participants highlighted that the PERMA five elements are more significant in helping individual to think positive about life and about future.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

### SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

#### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the research findings based on evidence elicited from data collected. The discussion topics in this chapter come from the arguments from the literature on students living with disabilities and from data collected during the study.

#### 5.2 Discussion

Although South Africa has a powerful policy framework aimed at improving equity and inclusion of students living with disabilities in higher learning education, empirical studies point out that there is still a long way to go in acknowledging equal access and participation (Mutanga, 2017). Mutanga (2017) argued that the literature points that the establishment of Education White Paper Six (EWP6) reflects on the South African government's dedication towards the improvement of an inclusive education system that would empower all students to unleash their potential. However, McKinney and Swartz (2016) revealed that the execution of this policy is impeded by the lack of facilitator's in adapting skills and knowledge in differentiating the curriculum to announce a broad range of learning needs.

Since 1994, South Africa has moved away from the medical model of disability, where students living with disabilities were educated in separate facilities and adopted an inclusive education approach which is known as the social model of disability (McKinney & Swartz, 2016). However, despite all students being currently seen as having equal rights and access to education, in reality many still experience barriers in education due to the limited understanding of disability. The evidence found in the literature concurs that universities were segregated in terms of disability. In relation to McKinney and Swartz (2016), Donohue and Bornman (2014) had previously argued that schools for White students living with disabilities were well-funded, whereas support services for students living with disabilities who attended Black schools were insufficiently funded.

The findings also revealed that most students living with disabilities shared that the time they spent in special school was positive in terms of being able to socialise and interact with other students with disabilities, being understood by others who shared similar disabilities and life

experiences, and being taught by people who had empathy for people with disabilities (McKinney & Swartz, 2016).

Literature shows that higher learning institutions have demonstrated the importance of maintaining good relationships between students with and those without disabilities. Lecturers are being urged to help students develop cooperative relationships, and research examining student attitudes toward their peers with disabilities has proposed that contact with students living with disabilities might lead to positive attitudes (Milson, 2006). In fact, Milson (2006) noted that positive contact with students living with disabilities is the only effective way to enable students to gain an understanding of and knowledge about students living with disabilities. Therefore, student interaction seems to be a significant goal, and structured activities have been recommended with regard to helping students develop skills to successfully interact with each other (Milson, 2006).

In creating social interactions between students with and without disabilities, the literature from conducted study revealed the importance of cooperative learning groups, which they indicated could provide both social and academic benefits to students with disabilities (Milson, 2006). Additionally, Milson (2006) suggested that the university should engage students in collaborative problem-solving (for example, through regular classroom meetings) in order to give students a voice to articulate concerns related to students with disabilities and to help them develop understanding or empathy. Peer tutors also were suggested as a way both to assist students with disabilities academically and to promote positive interaction among students. Finally, lecturers should create effective ways to teach students how to interact. Through observing how a lecturer interacts with a student with a disability, other students will not only learn how to interact with that student will also see that the student is like them in many other ways.

The findings further highlighted how well students communicate with one another in class. It emerged that they considered classes as the platform where students have opportunities to communicate with each other, help each other to effectively construct their knowledge. The findings also emphasize the importance of collaboration and cooperation with other students where students share responsibility for learning with each other, discuss divergent understandings, and shape the direction of the class. The studies also highlighted that the interaction with students living with disabilities in the same classroom with those students without disabilities made them feel comfortable in terms of raising their opinions and

suggestions. It also made them feel that they are an asset in the university, both valuable and meaningful at the same time.

The purpose of this study was to focus on disability in relation to the PERMA (Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationship, Meaning and Accomplishments) framework. A review of the studies conducted in Psychology found that most studies focused more on negative aspects of life such as depression, racism, violence, self-esteem management, irrationality, and growing up under adversity. Yet the studies had much less to say about character strengths, virtues, and the conditions that lead to high levels of happiness or engagement (Gable & Haidt, 2005).

In the field of close relationships, numerous studies have analysed how couples respond to each other's misfortunes like social support or bad relationship behaviour like criticisms. However, little attention in terms of how couples react to each other's triumphs such as good relationship behaviour, compliments, and affection; and there are volumes of work exploring how couples and families resolve conflict yet very few studies looking at how they having fun and laughing together (Gable & Haidt, 2005). Gable and Haidt (2005) argue that in the area of morality, there are thousands of published studies on the negative moral emotions, the emotions we feel when others do bad things like anger, contempt, and disgust or when we do such bad things as shame, embarrassment, and guilt; however, there are only a few empirical studies on positive moral emotions, the emotions one e feel when others do good things (gratitude, admiration, and moral elevation). In that way, the PERMA model was adopted as a framework which focuses on the positive aspect of life in relation to students living with disabilities to help society mitigate the stigma that is associated with disability and encourage engagement, happiness, and appreciating achievements among students with disabilities.

### **Positive Emotion (P)**

Positive emotion, which is the first element of the PERMA model, is considered as one of the major components of well-being as a science (Nebrida & Dullas, 2018). Positive emotions can reduce stress, help people to cope and deal with problems they are facing and help to have a clear state of mind. In relation to students living with disabilities, positive emotions can help them to manage the stress caused by the problems they encounter at campus such as inability to access lecture halls, pressure from peers without disability, shortage of health facilities and lack of social support. Therefore, positive emotions create a sense of happiness, contentment

and resilience among these individuals, promotes wellness and help students living with disability to achieve short term goals.

### **Engagement (E)**

The second element is engagement, in the current study, engagement was identified as social engagement and engagement in activities. Social engagement is the psychological connection of people to particular activities, while engagement in activities is participation in particular activity in a group or individually. According to studies conducted elsewhere, the activities that people engage in lead to skills development, growth in participation and promote self-determination (Nebrida & Dullas, 2018). Furthermore, engagement helps people in terms of managing mood disturbance, improve competence, increase quality of life and self-satisfaction, which basically help to promote subjective well-being. In the context of students living with disabilities, engagement helps them to focus on specific activities and makes them feel accepted and not excluded. Engagement also leads to creating opportunities for them to connect with other students around campus.

### **Relationships (R)**

The third element is positive relationship, which is the relationship that makes one to feel that that they belong to the society. This relationship includes social support and an amazing feeling of social connections and being loved and accepted by others. Previous studies highlighted that having a positive relationship with others especially family members and friends can make a person happy (Nebrida & Dullas, 2018). To students living with disabilities, building positive relationships with them raises their self-esteem, self-worth and confidence. Generally, it helps them to feel better about themselves.

### **Meaning (M)**

The fourth element is meaning, which is the belief in oneself as being a valuable individual. Meaning sees the self-fulfil specific goals and see life with a sense of purpose. Previous studies revealed that this sense of meaning in life will help activate and boost mental strength to fight against negativism (Nebrida & Dullas, 2018). The meaning of life also serves as source of inspiration. In relation to the current study, participants highlighted that being at the university and meet lot of people who are living with disability prosper in life and academically gave them strength. Furthermore, it also brings them hope and purpose of life and help them to think positive about life and future to reach their lifetime goals.

## **Accomplishments (A)**

The fifth element is accomplishment, which is a process of fulfilling goals, capability in doing daily activities and having perception and sensation about achievement (Nebrida & Dullas, 2018). Accomplishments promote growth in terms of developing new ideas among individuals and restrict barriers for people to advance their potential. Moreover, a sense of accomplishment also builds self-confidence and promotes happiness and joy among people. Therefore, this element helps students with disability to forget about their impairments and to view life in a positive way and to see the impossible as being possible, especially when it comes to achieving their dreams.

The students living with disabilities identified and recommended the PERMA framework to be a useful tool to improve and boost their positive psychological wellbeing. The findings revealed that students have adopted optimistic perspectives of disability, where they forget about depression, anger, discrimination, low self-esteem and considered paying attention to positive emotions such as happiness, satisfaction, and love in order to reduce the stressful situations that they encountered on campus because of their impairments. Furthermore, the findings revealed that participants characterised themselves to be happy individuals, having high self-esteem because they believed in themselves to be more ethical, more intelligent, less prejudiced and to be better able to get along with others. Additionally, the findings also revealed that the participants are feeling control; they believed they have personal control over their lives and future and often see the best in them and in the circumstances they are facing daily. Lastly, participants insisted happiness whether they are alone or with others.

The results revealed huge engagement between students living with and those without disabilities. The findings also showed that the engagement became strong enough when students participating in social engagements and engage in activities. In that case, students living with disabilities recommended socialising, making friends to be a good dimension to their life and they insisted that disability should not stop them from enjoying their social life. Furthermore, the students recommended that the university established programmes where they could engaged themselves with many other more individuals on campus, like sports, art work/painting and music.

The findings of the study showed relationship to be a key instrument among people whether with disabilities or without disabilities. A number of participants experienced positive relationships with family, friends and peers. However, in terms of intimate/ romantic



relationships some participants experienced rejection from their partners while others are being cheated on. Participants highlighted that they experienced rejection from their partners because they doubt that people living with disabilities can be fulfilling partner in a loving relationship. Others, believed that they are not fit for sexual intercourse because of their situation. On the other hand, some participants reflected positive intimate relationship with their partners, they highlighted that their partners are taking good care of them, spent quality time, take them out to watch movies, and support them when they need support. Participants also highlighted that they would not consider their impairments to be a barrier to their happiness, if their partners bring them smile they will continue to involve in intimate relationships.

The results revealed that students living with disabilities encountered discrimination and insubordination. However, our study highlighted that after all the challenges that students faced because of their disabilities. They were able to complete their degrees and other have passed their modules. Therefore, the findings revealed that students possessed positive psychological wellbeing toward achieving their goals and meaning of life.

### **5.3 Limitations of the study**

The limitations of the study involved the inability to generalise the findings to other students living with disabilities because of the qualitative nature of the study and small sample size. The researcher suggest that more qualitative studies should be done across different institutions of higher learning to be followed by surveys to assess the value of the PERMA framework in understanding the factors that enhance wellbeing among students living with disabilities etc.

### **5.4 Recommendations**

After a discussion of the experiences of students living with disabilities, the following recommendations were made:

(a) The students living with disabilities recommended that lecturers build strong relationship with them so that they can communicate effectively if they have problems. For instance, students living with disabilities sometimes faces problems of accessing lecture venues because of the structure of the university premises. So, for them building a positive relationship with lecturers, will make things easier because the lecturers will be able to send them lecture notes separately, have individual seminar sessions with them and communicate the yearly module structure.

(b)The students also recommended that the university establish a programme for students living with disabilities. Where they can all meet together maybe once in a month, share their positive experiences more especially those who are now postgraduates to tell them about their university journey, support from the university and all other students and what they can do to reach their goals. The students believed that the programme could bring positive energy and help them to deal with daily challenges.

(c)The students also recommended that for them to have social engagement and engagement in activities, the university should have sports that are specifically designed for students living with disabilities, and sports designed for both students with and without disabilities because most of the sports the university offers do not accommodate them. So, in that way they can socialise, make friends with other students during those activities.

(d) Students living with disabilities showed seriousness about their achievements in relation to school work. However, some of them addressed that their brains function slowly, sometimes they take things slowly in the classroom. Therefore, they recommended that the university offer them extra classes for each and every module so that they can improve in their performance and get much better marks.

### **5.3 Conclusion**

Tertiary institutions are more challenging especially for students living with disabilities than it is for those without disabilities. Those living with disabilities must overcome disability-related attitudinal and structural barriers on campus and the society at large. University students living with disabilities also have poorer academic records and psychosocial outcomes than students without disabilities because of the challenges they face every day. University students living with disabilities often report higher levels of depressive symptoms and psychological distress and experience a lower level of subjective well-being. Because of the above-mentioned challenges, this study recognised that many studies focused on the negative aspects among students living with disabilities such as depression, poor performance, discrimination, and lack of self-confidence. These studies have much less to say about character strengths, virtues, and the conditions that lead to high levels of happiness or civic engagement among students living with disabilities. Therefore, this study adopted the PERMA model in order to highlight five elements that encourage positivity for disabled individuals on UKZN Howard College campus. Furthermore, the current study helped the psychological wellbeing of students living with disabilities. The participants were able to identify and understand five elements of the PERMA framework without focusing on their disability. Additionally, the participants understood the

importance of positive emotion, such as feeling good, being optimistic and so forth. Moreover, engagement to the society and people, building positive relationship with others and themselves, meaning of life and accomplishment of their goals.

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## **Appendix 1A: Structured interview schedule**

### **Demographic questionnaire**

1. Reference number:
2. Email address:
3. Contact number:
4. Date of birth:
5. Sex:
6. Programme currently registered for:

### **Interview questions**

1. How do you explain the nature of your disability?
2. What activities do you engage in for purposes of recreation and upliftment?
3. How is your engagement with students living with and without disability?
4. Are you involved in a romantic relationship?
5. What experiences help you to derive meaning in life?
6. What have been your accomplishments and achievements as a student on campus?

## Appendix 1B: Letter of Consent

A Qualitative study exploring the Experiences of students living with disabilities in the University of KwaZulu natal (Howard College): Application of the PERMA Framework.

Dear Participant,

My name is Thobeka Nolwazi Zuma, student number: 214534720. I am a master's student studying at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College campus. The title of my research is: A qualitative study exploring the experiences of students living with disabilities in the university of KwaZulu-Natal (Howard College): application of the PERMA model. The key objective of the proposed study is to explain the experiences of students living with disabilities at this university campus. The aim is to understand the academic difficulties faced by disabled students and highlight the need of improvement in teaching, learning and assessment methods to create a helpful learning environment for disabled students. I am interested in interviewing you to share your experiences and observations on the subject matter.

Please note that:

- The information that you provide will be used for scholarly research only.
- Your participation is entirely voluntary. You have a choice to participate, not to participate or stop participating in the research. You will not be penalized for taking such an action.
- Your views in this interview will be presented anonymously. Neither your name nor identity will be disclosed in any form in the study.
- The interview will take about one hour.
- The record as well as other items associated with the interview will be held in a password-protected file accessible only to myself and my supervisors. After a period of 5 years, in line with the rules of the university, it will be disposed by shredding and burning.
- If you agree to participate please sign the declaration attached to this statement (a separate sheet will be provided for signatures)

I can be contacted at: School of Applied Human Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College Campus, Durban. Email: 214534720@stu.ukzn.ac.za;

Cell: 073 429 0585

My supervisor is Mr Luvuyo Makhaba who is located at the School of Social Sciences, Howard College Campus, and Durban of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Contact details: email Makhabay@ukzn.ac.za, Phone number: 031 260 7729

My co-supervisor is ..... who is located at the School of Social Sciences, Howard College Campus/ Howard College Campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Contact details: email ..... Phone number: .....

The Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee contact details are as follows:

Thank you for your contribution to this research.

#### Participant Declaration

By signing this consent form, you agree to participate in the researched explained and you show you understand the intention of the study, its aims, purpose and your role as a participant.

I.....participating in this study and I understand that I can withdraw at any point should I choose to no longer participate, and that this decision will not affect me negatively. I hereby agree /do not agree to have this interview recorded. I understand that this research will not benefit or harm me personally, and I understand that my participation would not be disclosed to anyone it will remain confidential.

Respondent Signature..... Date.....

Researcher Signature..... Date.....

# Appendix 1C: Study Approval Letter



10 June 2019

Ms Thobeka N Zuma 214534720  
School of Social Sciences  
Howard College Campus

Dear Ms Zuma

Protocol reference number: HSS/1923/018M

Project title: A qualitative study exploring the Experiences of students living with disabilities in the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Howard College): Application of the PERMA Framework.

**Full Approval – Full Committee Reviewed Application**

With regards to your response received 20 March 2019, to our letter of 30 November 2018, the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee has considered the abovementioned application and the protocol have been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number. Please note: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

The ethical clearance certificate is only valid for a period of 1 year from the date of issue. Thereafter Recertification must be applied for on an annual basis.

I take this opportunity of wishing you everything of the best with your study.

Yours faithfully,

Dr Rosemary Sibanda (Chair)

/px

cc Supervisor: Mr Luvuyo Makhaba  
cc Academic Leader Research: Prof Maheshvari Naidu  
cc School Administrator: Ms Nonhlanhla Radebe

Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

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Website: [www.ukzn.ac.za](http://www.ukzn.ac.za)

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