



**Exploring Resilience among South African Female Masters Students: An Ecological
Systems Perspective**

By

Mbalenhle Felicia Ngubane

212521470

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a degree of Master of Social
Science (Health Promotion) in the Discipline of Psychology University of KwaZulu-Natal

Supervisor: Professor Yvonne Sliep

Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation is entirely my original work unless otherwise indicated in the text. All citations, references and borrowed ideas have been duly acknowledged. No part of this work has been submitted to any other University in the application for any qualification.

Signature: M Ngubane

Mbalenhle Felicia Ngubane 212521470

Date: March 2019

Dedication

To my dear mother who has gone to be with the Lord, thank you for all your sacrifices. For without them none of this would have been possible.

Acknowledgements

“Oh, give thanks unto the Lord for He is good! For His mercy endureth forever” Psalms 136: 1 (NKJV)

I would like to express my gratitude to the following people:

My supervisor, Professor Yvonne Sliep I would like to thank you for your tireless contributions throughout the research project and for believing in me. Thank you for your advice, encouragement and guidance that helped sharpen my research and writing skills. I consider myself to have been immeasurably fortunate to have a supervisor who cared and nurtured me the way you have.

Dr Kemist Shumba, thank you for your invaluable contributions and for always availing yourself whenever I was not clear about certain issues. Your critical but constructive insights on my dissertation challenged my thinking. You did indeed train a research solidier.

My fiancé, Mvungeyezwe Zulu who has been my council, mentor and prayer partner. Thank you for walking side by side with me in every step of this journey and for constantly helping me realise my capabilities and dreams. I would have not done it without your love and support, Ndabezitha.

My sister, Thembi Swana a very big thank you for always cheering me on and reminding me that there is nothing we can do outside of God. You remain my source of encouragement and inspiration to become more.

To the lovely ladies that were my participants, a sincere thank you for allowing me into your personal space and sharing your experiences with me. This dissertation would not have be possible without each of your valuable contributions, I have learnt a lot from you.

Finally, I would like to extend my gratitude to the National Research Foundation (NRF) for awarding me with the scholarship that funded my masters’ studies. I remain grateful for all the opportunities the organisation has granted me.

“This work is based on the research supported wholly by the National Research Foundation of South Africa (Grant Numbers: 114476)”

List of acronyms and abbreviations

CHET- Centre for Higher Education Trust

DHET- Department of Higher Education and Training

HEIs- Higher Education Institutions

LMICs- Low Middle Income Countries

SES- Social Ecological System

UKZN- University of KwaZulu-Natal

WHO- World Health Organization

Abstract

Background: South Africa is a low-middle income country (LMIC) characterised by factors such as poverty, high teenage pregnancy, poor education and high levels of unemployment. However, recent South African Higher Education statistical reports have indicated a significant increase in the number of students enrolling for post-graduate courses particularly master's qualifications. These are also predominantly female students. Master's degrees are intensive and require extensive academic and personal development, knowledge synthesis and adequate resources to attain satisfactory results. The main objective of the study is to identify factors that contribute to the resilience of South African female master's students in response to adversity and challenges.

Methods: The study used a qualitative approach and analysed secondary data from life stories together with the individual semi-structured interviews of seven South African female post-graduate students enrolled for a master's in Health Promotion at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), Howard College. Data was categorised into codes using NVivo qualitative software and further analysed into themes manually using thematic analysis. The Ecological systems theory was used as the study's theoretical framework. The theoretical framework is an integrated, holistic approach that is relevant when exploring subjective experiences. In this study, the socio-ecological systems model explores the interactions between students and their social environments as well as the impact of contextual factors on personal development. In addition, Resilience theory was applied as the study's underpinning conceptual framework to explore the concept of resilience as it is experienced in the different contexts. The use of these theories helped obtain an in-depth understanding of the context and enhanced the analysis of the data set.

Findings: The study unveils key findings relating to the influences of context on the adversity faced by South African female post-graduate master's students and their coping strategies. At the micro- level, the study shows the positive contribution of students' retrospective interpretations in gaining insight and making sense of past experiences. This propelled students towards a positive outlook on their experiences, including the challenges faced as students became more conscious of their personal strengths and internal ability to overcome adversities. The study found that at the meso- level, most students reported to have mobilised their internal resources such as agency, self-esteem and locus of control to overcome high risk factors imposed by their immediate

environments. Most students did not receive external support. However, where support was available, within a family system for example, students reported it acting as a buffer to other external hardships at school or in the broader community.

Lastly, at the macro- level, findings indicate that cultural beliefs, gender norms and policies around education and welfare in the South African context dismantle women's aspirations in terms of furthering their education and succeeding in life. Participants indicated that males and females were not afforded the same opportunities, with females being expected to assume domestic roles while males are encouraged to go out and work for their families. The above listed contextual factors were experienced negatively, and participants reported dependency on their internalised abilities as preferred coping mechanisms in overcoming the adversities caused by those contextual factors.

Conclusion: South Africa is a multifaceted country that is rich in diversity and the study depicts how participants individually have a role to play in their own development within broad contextual factors. Context was found to significantly influence the responses to adversity and inform coping. Based on the findings, dissemination of evidence-based research such as this study through conference papers, community presentations and policy briefs can be used to involve communities and policy-makers to work towards eradicating negative contextual factors experienced by students. The current research study also encourages government departments and university bodies to be more instrumental in creating access to more resources that are supportive to alleviate the pressures that students endure when they rely on their inner strength in response to external environmental hardships.

Keywords: academic resilience, adversity, contextual factors, ecological system theory, resilience, socio-ecological model, South African female students.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

Social psychological researchers have over the years demonstrated how traumatic life experiences can pose as a threat to the basic assumptions of resilience (Borden, 1992). According to the author, stories can be adapted as ways of organising the lived experiences and interpreting life events. Moreover, for people to revise the accounts of the experience in light of an unexpected or adverse event, it is through a narrative line of inquiry that they are able to maintain coherence, continuity and meaning (Borden, 1992). To a certain extent, narrative processes can and are understood as reflective attempts to help effectively deal with negative life outcomes and to better manage the impact of either change or loss (Borden, 1992). In exploring the concept of resilience, it is important to deliberate on the contributions that emerge from the interactions between people and the environment and the study delves specifically on the South African context.

South Africa has a long-standing history of unequal distribution of funds and resources, with educational, employment and economic factors challenging the status quo of individual's career developments post higher educational training Nicholas, Naidoo and Pretorius (as cited in Watson 2010). South Africa's socio-economy standing is characterised by predominately high levels of poverty, unemployment and informal settlements (Zinn, 2011). Moreover, the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) (2009) has failed to underline the national priorities and persisting numbers of undersupply of unskilled workers. Williams and Bryan (2013) describe the global trends asserted on school-going students originating from low-middle income urban, suburban and rural communities to overcome dire circumstances such as poverty, food insecurity and financial instability to succeed academically. According to Williams and Bryan (2013, p.291), "these students defy the stereotype that poverty precludes academic success and that low economic and low academic performance are inextricably linked".

1.2 Background

The master's degree professional programme within the discipline of Psychology is very extensive and requires thorough personal development and self-reflection (Edwards, Ngcobo, & Edwards, 2014). The University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College runs a master's programme called Health Promotion which is housed in the discipline of Psychology. One of the core modules for the course is *The Person is the Professional*. The module makes use of critical reflexivity to

develop awareness and agency in both the learners' personal and professional capacity through experiential exercises, working with life stories, readings and theory. Students are requested to share their life stories in a dialogical space with fellow health promotion students and the module lecturer. The life stories shared may include both positive and challenging life experiences. The dialogical space is created by the lecturer through reinforcing a neutral and safe space for the student to interact in.

Students come into an educational setting such as the masters in health promotion course from different backgrounds that are constitutive of age, culture, racial group. In addition to students' variety of lived experiences, their expectations of the course also influence the facilitation of the module dialogical space where everyone makes meaning and contribute to their accessible body of knowledge (Sliep, & Kotze, 2007). The impact of teaching through life stories differs from one individual to the other and there are both positive and negative effects of this specific approach to teaching. An ecological systems framework is used to provide the researcher with a better perspective in studying individuals' experiences within context (McGregor, Camfield, & Woodcock, 2009).

Life stories and narrative approaches are adopted to understand human behaviour and experiences, but most importantly, they are there to construct the internalised realities to the outside world (McAdams, 2001). The study aims to understand the multiple facets that help shape the resilience of South African female master's students in response to adverse events from an ecological systems perspective. The study further explores the contextual factors of students' adversity and coping. Resilience is a concept that is highly researched because of its appropriateness in both psychological and social paradigms. Despite the fact that many studies have been on resilience, a selected few focused on the use of life stories to obtain greater understanding of the context of resilience for each individual (McAdams, 2008). Furthermore, very limited research has been conducted on South African female students who have openly shared their lived experiences through life stories and reflected on the role education plays on their ability to cope with life adversities. In light of this, the researcher explored the concept of resilience among health promotion master's students who have participated in the person is the professional module.

1.3 Problem statement

Low and Middle Income Countries (LMICs) including South Africa have been characterised by having low resources and unemployment, poverty and, a lack of education (Mampane, & Bouwer, 2011). One of South Africa's continuing socio-economic burdens is poverty which is experienced by the majority of the country's citizens (Musgrave, 2015). The majority of South African communities are characterised by underdevelopment, poverty-stricken and disorganised (Zinn, 2011). Van de Merwe (2012) further asserts that poverty within family systems has an influence on child development. In the year 2015, 53.8% of South Africans were existing in conditions of poverty and of that, 21.75% were living in extreme poverty (Musgrave, 2015).

When people do acquire employment, it is often jobs that pay minimum wages and the entire family lives off the wage (Mampane, & Bouwer, 2011). The latest statistics report obtained from the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) indicated that in the five year tenure, there has been a progressive incline in the number of young people who pursue post-school education. The report reveals an overall of 953 373 enrolled students in 2015 and of those students, 58.3% were female while males made up 41.7% of students in the public sector (Department of Higher Education performance report, 2015).

The Centre for Higher Education Trust (CHET) also issued a statistical report in the year 2015 on South African higher education institutions in the private and public sectors which showed similar trends as illustrated in the DHET report however further identified a prominent difference between the gender of students enrolled (CHET, 2015). The study focused merely on female students pursuing post-graduate qualifications, specifically a master's degree at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), Howard College. These reports served as meaningful take off point in exploring the increasing numbers of South Africa female students furthering their studies to post-graduate qualifications. The UKZN was one of two institutions with the highest number of female students enrolled for Master's and Doctoral degrees according to the CHET report. The study thereafter explored the multiple factors contributing to educational aspirations amongst UKZN South African female master's students.

The researcher consequently sought factors that have, over the five-year tenure, had any influence on the incline of female students pursuing post-graduate qualification as opposed to seeking employment after obtaining undergraduate degrees as stipulated by Mampane and Bouwer (2011).

The statistics mentioned above did not particularly raise problematic concerns but rather investigates why more female students enrol in higher education institutions than male students and opted further their studies to masters and doctoral degrees within the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Centre for Higher Education Trust, 2015; Department of Education and Training, 2015). The study focused on South African female students who were able to defy the status quo and furthered their post-graduate studies to master's and doctoral level. The study explored the diversity of adversities students have had to overcome and what coping mechanisms have been adopted in the process. The study further looked at contextual factors that informed students' academic resiliency and the motivation behind the decisions of furthering their studies despite the adverse experiences.

1.4 Research aims and questions

Overall research question: What influences resilience in female master's students within a South African context?

1. How does context influence South African female students completing their masters in Health Promotion in 2016/7 at UKZN?
2. What are the coping mechanisms South African female master's students resort to?
3. How does context and coping contribute to resilience of South African female master's students?

1.5 Ethical clearance

The process of obtaining ethical clearance for the current study was first through the university of KwaZulu-Natal registrar's office for gatekeeper approval. Upon the approval of the gatekeeper letter, the researcher then obtained full ethical clearance from the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Protocol reference number HSS/0901/017M (see Appendix A).

1.6 Outline of dissertation

Chapter One is an introduction to the study, this chapter elaborates on the background of the study. The chapter also outlines the problem statement and further states the research aims and

questions of the study. The introductory chapter serves as a roadmap of the dissertation as it directs and informs the reader on what to expect.

Chapter Two presents a review of literature relevant to the study. The literature is arranged and presented under several headings and sub-headings which include literature on life stories, concept of resilience broadly and resilience within African traditional, educational and social contexts. The chapter also presents Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory and Norman Garmezy's (1979) Resilience Theory as theoretical frameworks. The study adopted the theoretical frameworks for conceptual understanding and as a method of analysis providing greater insight to the data presented in the study.

Chapter Three provides a descriptive explanation of the research methodology. It begins with the research design followed by the research paradigm, a brief description of the sample site, selection of participants, data collection methods including relevant information such as the instruments, data analysis and measures taken that ensure issues of trustworthiness validity and reliability are addressed.

Chapter Four takes the reader through the findings from the life stories and the semi-structured interviews. The chapter presents the findings in categorised themes. NVivo software was used as a first point of data analysis to generate the themes. The study further integrated thematic analysis to structure formulated themes and analyse appropriately. Each theme was supported by an extraction from the data to give credibility to the emergent themes. The discussion of the study findings was also assimilated into the chapter to develop a coherent argument for the outcomes presented.

Chapter Five concludes this study which explored the resilience of South African female master's students in response to adversity from an ecological perspective. The study explored the multi-layered systems of socio ecological factors that contributed to either the adversity or coping of South African female students. Furthermore, the chapter provides recommendations emanating from the findings for future research where gaps still persist.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Chapter two presents the literature relevant to the current study, which intends to achieve the objectives and provide an in-depth understanding of the kinds of adversities encountered by students in institutions of higher education. The chapter explores the existing literature on students' resilience and how they respond to adverse experiences during the course of their life. Furthermore, the study explores the contextual factors that influence the adversity and coping of students within the South African context (Williams, 2011). The theoretical framework guiding the study is deliberated in this chapter with special regard given to resilience theory as it helps gain insight of the adversities within the multi systems that one operates from (Masten, 2016).

In the current study, education is conceptualised as a phenomenon that the researcher explores to determine the impact it has on informing rehabilitation after a threat or an adverse experience occurs (Masten, 2007), however it is pivotal to highlight that the phenomenon is not defined as a measure of resilience. Due to the complexities that may emerge from resilience studies, the study adopts the ecological systems theory as its overarching framework to unpack the complexities of the resilience data. Moreover, the study delves into a research area that also focuses on the strength-based resilience rather than just the negative effects caused by exposure to adversity (Banyard, Hamby, & Grych, 2017). This chapter serves as a brief snippet of the recent developments in resilience studies and educational progress of female students within the South African context.

The apartheid regime ended legally in the year 1994 in South Africa, however the country's wealth remains skewed with the 10% minority predominantly white people controlling 80% of the country's economy (Murray, 2002). A report by Orthofer (2016) supports the claim and further stipulates that South Africa is known for its extreme income inequality. The reported figures indicate that the poorest 50% of the population still earns about 10% of the total income with own no measurable wealth (Orthofer, 2016). Hence, most citizens (black people) still experience poverty, homelessness and unemployment (Orthofer, 2016). Despite these indicators, there are still students who have achieved academic excellence over and above the situational risk factors faced and reach post graduate levels (Mampane, & Boucher, 2011). The resilience theory has received increased attention within the social science research field since the years it was first pioneered (Windle, 2011).

The literature discussion extends to examine how students perceive their adversities and how they internalise and interpret those experiences. The chapter addresses the following aspects; *the use and appropriateness of life stories, the evolving concept of resilience as a conceptual framework, self-efficacy, and, African traditional contexts* specifically amongst women in South Africa.

2.2 What are life stories?

The use of autobiographical recollections, life stories and narrative approaches as forms of data collection by theorists and researchers has shown increased interest in life stories as a form of data for their studies (McAdams, 1985; Singer, & Salovey, 1993; Singer 2004). Furthermore, there is considerable research that has been done that evidently shows that life story work enhances critical thinking. Bruner (2004) argues for the importance of taking into account how autobiographies are developed, the manner in which people talk about themselves changes and how stories can control the way people perceive their own lives. It is stipulated by McAdams (2001) that there is an increased interest in the application of approaches that seek to better understand human behaviour and experiences. McAdams (2001) further argues that identity is embodied from a life story, the manner in which an individual restructures his/her personal past, perceives the present and foresees their future is closely correlated to the internalised and evolving self-story.

McAdams (2001) also claims that although life stories are based on autobiographical information, they extend substantially beyond the facts as people consciously construct their experiences to articulate stories that make sense to them and their audiences. The author gives insight on how life stories reflect the class and gender constructions found within society, in ways more than one prevailing patterns of hegemony in cultural, economic and political contexts of where people are situated (McAdams, 2001).

An idea pertaining to life stories forming an individuals' identity resonates with multiple prominent themes in cognitive, cultural, developmental and personality psychology (McAdams, 2001). The telling of life stories is often used as means of enhancing understanding of numerous identity constructs within small group settings (Essers, 2009). McAdams and Guo (2017) assert that personality is embedded in life story, the authors argue that this does not imply that whatever happens in our lives is influenced by our personalities. However, the stories people tell about their own lives are a reflections of personality factors and processes which, in effect, personality influences how these stories are constructed (McAdams, & Guo, 2017).

Habermas and Bluck (2000) ascertain that the full formulation of an integrated life story entails an insightful understanding and the use of four kinds of coherences, which are the temporal, biological, causal and thematic coherences. The aforesaid coherences start emerging in childhood, but because they occur at varied points and develop at varied rates, people can tell stories about themselves prior to the adolescence stage. It is only once they have reached adolescence that they are able to effectively organise their lives into a story (Habermas, & Bluck, 2000).

Life stories express one's sense of self, and they provide the individual an opportunity for them to primarily understand the person that they are as they continue to share their life stories. Furthermore, life stories are very important means to capture how these senses of self are communicated and negotiated with others (Linde, 1993). Life stories also touch on the extensive forms of social constructions, this is through making presumptions regarding what can be taken as expected, what the norms are and what common belief systems are used to establish coherence in social constructs (Linde, 1993). According to Hammack and Toolis (2015), culture refers to a system of shared meaning that manifests in social practice. The notion of culture in life stories is deeply entrenched in social construction as it provides a menu of story options where people pick and choose from when making sense of their own lives (McAdams, & Guo, 2017). Moreover, the context of culture goes beyond providing options but also sets parameters for what kind of stories can be shared and are affirmed in society (McAdams, & Guo, 2017).

Habermas and Kober (2015) briefly state that an individual's life story can signify different empirical selves within their chronological sequence whereby both thematic coherence and causal-motivational coherence are highlighted. Thematic coherence emphasizes on sameness across time and causal-motivational coherence emphasizes change and development (Habermas, & Kober, 2015). The term life story is considered an overarching concept where the life is told as remembered or thought through. The dissertation looks at life stories from an autobiographical reasoning ideology; this speaks to autobiographical reasoning and "designates a process of thinking or talking about personal past that involves arguments that link distant elements of one's life to each other in attempt to relate the present self to one's personal past and future" (Habermas, & Kober, 2015, p.149). Autobiographical reasoning has the capacity to create a dynamic development story, and this occurs when a person links diverse events to the self (Habermas, 2011).

A study conducted by Theron (2013) focused primarily on South African black students and recollecting their resilience pathways through drawing on narrative data using life stories. The study found that students made great emphasis on the importance of Africentricism, which is what shaped their resilience processes (Theron, 2013). The use of life stories was to draw more understanding on the perceptions of students and to scrutinise what resilience meant for everyone. Conducting life stories work through reflexivity has the capacity to enhance resilience as it points to the opportunity to change channels of thinking and understanding social constraints which serves as a prerequisite for adaptive capacity at an individual level (Krasny, & Roth, 2010).

Pagis (2009) stipulates that discursive self-reflexivity is a process that is predominantly focused on language, the relation of how one engages with self and with others is analysed in pursuit of gathering much insight on ones' self-knowledge and self-awareness. The importance of the past is very vital in understanding how an individual reflects on the self in different cultural contexts. There has also been a noticeable shift from discursive narrative studies to self-reflexivity, whereby when one talks about their life experiences (Pagis, 2009). Self-reflexivity brings about other emotions and feelings that are reminders of their previous experiences and in other instances, serves as an additional lens to how individual interpret and understand their experiences. The reason for re-visiting previous feelings and emotions is to analyse the self-narration that links the past experiences with the present physical, emotional and mental conditions (Pagis, 2009). Part of the appropriateness and use of life stories is the ability of individuals to recollect and organise their life experiences and gives lea way for the exploration of resilience through the pathways of lived experiences.

2.3 Resilience

The field of resilience research emerged in the early 1970s with research focusing on positive adaption of children at risk of psychopathology and has over the years through review in the literature, evolved and has been refined to holistically understand the concept (Cherewick, Tol, Burnham, Doocy, & Glass 2016). Subsequent research has shifted the focus towards identifying factors that permit some individuals to cope better compared to others when confronted with adversity (Garmezy, 1971; Masten, 2013). This study revisits a variety of definitions using different literature to arrive at an operational definition for resilience that is relevant to it.

The American Psychological Association (2014) defines resilience as process of effective adaptation in light of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats and or even significant cause of stress. Edwards et al. (2014) formulated a functional definition of resilience; it is understood to be a positive adaptation, the capability to maintain and regain physical and mental health after an adverse life event. Masten (2007) ascertains that resilience is often referred to as a positive adaptation in the time of or following exposure to an adverse experience that has potential to tarnish development. This act of behaviour is often unconscious at the time of the adversity but as one revisits the lived experience, it becomes possible to trace resilience.

According to Windle (2011) resilience can also refer to a dynamic process which encompasses positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity. The concept of resilience is significantly complex and as a result may be defined differently in the contexts of individuals, family, organisations, societies and cultures (Southwick, Bananno, Masten, Panter-Brick, & Yehuda, 2014).

Toland and Carrigan (2011) further make a premise that an individual is only considered resilient if there has been a significant threat to their development and mental well-being. It is vital to emphasize that resilience is not considered a personality characteristic but rather it is an outcome of a dynamic process, whereby the individual does not eradicate the risk of stress, rather, it permits the individual to effectively deal with it (Wright, & Masten, 2005). The concept of resilience acknowledges that pain, struggle and suffering are part and parcel of the process of being resilient (Waxman, Gray, & Padron, 2004). Another premise by Mampane and Bouwer (2011) on resilience is of having a disposition to identify and effectively use personal capacities, competencies and assets in instances where one is faced with perceived adverse situations.

According to Ungar (2011), positive adjustment is not considered as an attribute that an individual acquires but it depends on dynamic transactions that require young people interacting with their ecologies to gather support, and ecologies reciprocating young people's actions in culturally suitable ways. Resilience consists of four domains listed as follows; stressors or challenges, external environment context, individual characteristics and positive outcomes, the study focuses on external environmental context and the individual characteristics domains however still takes into account the stressors and positive outcomes (Kumpfer, 1999). Numerous literature has elaborated on the external environmental factors, thus the study does not focus exclusively on

external factors as mutually exclusive but considers the internal factors that contribute to resilience (Kumpfer, 1999). Kumpfer stipulates internal factors of resilience as “internal individual spiritual, cognitive, social or behavioural, physical and emotional or affective competencies or strengths” (Kumpfer, 1999, p.184).

The broad concept of resilience encompasses a wide range of phenomena which the research study is interested in exploring. The phenomena of doing well under adversity, it also includes the process of coping with challenges, post-traumatic growth and the achievement of good outcomes among a high-risk of failure or maladaptation population (Masten, 2014). After carefully considering the existing definition and literature on resilience, the study has formulated its own operational definition of resilience which henceforth will be what is meant by the term resilience in this particular research study context. Resilience refers to the internal and external factors that influences ability to withstand adversity as well as the ability to adapt and transform in face of high risk factors. This definition focuses more importantly on the individual characteristics of resilience and the environmental contextual factors that contribute to the positive outcomes of adverse experience and can be established as a strength-focused approach. The focus on both individual characteristics and external contextual factors allows the study to examine the interrelatedness of the different systems and the influences asserted on individuals.

Ungar (2013) stipulates that the process of resilience requires young people to actively pursue appropriate resources crucial to enable positive adjustments and is important for their ecologies to provide such resources in a conducive way. Theron (2015) supports the aforementioned claim and further describes resilience as a process that is reinforced by the interactive relationship between individual and environmental protective factors which cooperate simultaneously to produce desirable outcomes.

Characteristics appearing to be consistently associated with the concept of resilience as stipulated by Earvolino-Ramirez (2007) are the quality of rebounding and reintegration. Individuals tend to want to readjust with life as they know it or an improved way of living. High expectancy as stated by Earvolino-Ramirez (2007) as a characteristic where a person may become successful without openly planning it or for someone else imposing it on them (Earvolino-Ramirez, 2007). Self-determination includes the notion of self-worth, without an overwhelming feeling of hopelessness.

According to Earvolino-Ramirez (2007), positive relationships and social support studies conducted with children report how at least one healthy attachment to a meaningful adult is significant in overcoming adverse experiences. Among adult studies, social support and significant relationships with a minimum of one friend or a family member have been consistent with resilient outcomes. Some studies found that a sense of humour is considered as a characteristic that has the capacity to make light of adverse situations to improve coping mechanisms (Earvolino-Ramirez, 2007). The above-mentioned characteristics constitute resilience and an individual does not need to have all of them to be considered resilient but they serve as attributes to a resilient person. A holistic perspective to resilience encompasses multiple facets inclusive of behavioural, emotional and psychological well-being.

2.3.1 Mental health

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as a state of well-being in which every individual can realise his or her own potential, is able to cope with everyday stressors of life and is able to contribute productively to his or her community (WHO, 2014). The report further stipulates that mental health exists as a fundamental component of resilience and positive adaptation that enables individuals to deal with adversity and reach their full potential.

Psychological resilience is the quality that allows a person to manage and react effectively to life stressors (Neill, & Dias, 2001). Psychological resilience is increasingly being utilised in education and health programs. Neill and Dias (2001) further claim that they have been able to classify social support as one of the top predictors of psychological resilience. The perceived existence of compassionate social networks enhances an individuals' capability to overcome life's challenges, vis-à-vis a challenging life event that has the capacity to enhance an individual's psychological resilience and is related to social support perceived as positive during an adverse experience (Neill & Dias, 2001).

Mental health services in South Africa remain scarce as allocation of resources is still not prioritised with psychological services disproportionately available in the private health sector (Bezuidenhout, 2017). A large body of untreated trauma survivors do not access professional care; however, an unstipulated number of trauma survivors do not only survive trauma and adversity but they also thrive (Tedeschi, & Colhoun, 1995; Wild, & Pavia, 2003). Harvey (2007) provides insights to the above-mentioned argument and suggests that an individual has the ability

to mobilise internal resources that exist prior to the traumatic event, where they manifest positive or adversarial growth post-trauma and continue to have high level functioning.

With regards to mental health interventions, psychological resilience is viewed as more than a personality attribute, and rather as a process that involves an interaction between an individual, their life experiences and their current life contexts (Meredith et al., 2011). These authors established that resilience is possible to either prevent the exposure of significant stressful experiences or to efficiently recover from the harmful effects the stressful experience an individual could have had. The importance of positivity is crucial in maintaining or regaining mental health well-being. This is achieved through processing knowledge and changing preferred options in hopes to make sense of situations and reinforce positive outcomes (Meredith et al., 2011).

According to Bonanno (as cited in Davydov, Steward, Ritchie, & Chaudieu, 2010) mental health constitutes to far more than merely the absence of a disorder, rather it resonates with the identification of innate and attained biological as well as environmental characteristics which safeguard mental health amidst risk factors. The notion of ‘mental resilience’ which emerged in the 19th century has in common the contemporary aims of the current study of broadening research concepts of mental health beyond risk factors and toward strength-based approaches by considering wellness enhancement and health promoting factors as discussed below.

2.3.2 Resilience, education and context

When applied within an educational context, the concept of resilience predominantly develops empowerment, education, engagement, this form of resilience has the capacity to assist students, staff, and the wider community develop the abovementioned attributes (Weller, & Anderson, 2013). Research studies have also looked at foundational and intermediate phases of education to trace the developments of resilience and how it is correlated with education. A study by Burton (2008) has confirmed the high incidence of crime, violence and adverse conditions in townships that affect the developmental environments of youngest school pupils in South Africa. In the pre-apartheid era, South African township residential areas originated as racially segregated, low-cost housing and black labourers ought to remain within their place of employment close enough to cities and towns. Fast forward to the democratic South Africa, townships are often associated with poverty, crime and violence, and, the safety of residents in these areas is often compromised (Prinsloo, 2007).

Factors such as the socio-demographic and socioeconomic distribution of townships also have an influence on how racial segregation and scarce resources are perpetuated in public schools within township areas (Mampane, 2008). Mampane and Bouwer (2011) attempt to understand the role of township schools as developmental and societal systems of constructing resilience. Furthermore, an investigation on whether having one racial group in a school accounts for the resilience on its learners. There are reasons to believe that learners identify with one another, something that draws on their sense of resilience (Mampane, & Bouwer, 2011).

Learners in poverty-stricken communities have to live in constant fear of experiencing crime, rape and abuse. Over and above that, many are faced with the absence of adult guidance (Mampane, & Bouwer, 2011). Communities within townships areas are characterised by high levels of crime and unemployment, young people adopt strategies to manoeuvre between the rigged societal factors which pose as risk factor at a tender age (Mampane, & Bouwer, 2011). Fergus and Zimmerman (2005) take a stance in understanding why factors such as poverty result in negative outcomes; their research found that other risk factors that may well relate to poverty include the limited community resources and lack of parental monitoring. Theron (2013) claims that young people whose parents are illiterate, incapacitated and unavailable bestow a negative impact on their life outcomes and pose as risk factors to their education aspirations.

Mampane and Bouwer (2011) ascertain that it is necessary for learners residing in townships to have a great deal of protection and resilience as stepping-stones to overcoming the adversities of life in their context of development. Thomsen (2002) adds that social systems such as communities and schools are those that play the most important role in enhancing the inherent resilience potential of an individual. One may find that in the absence of supportive and nurturing conditions in home environments, it would make more sense for learners to have their schools as the next resource in line. Empirical research studies have shown that schools with supportive and safe environments often buffer the repercussions of risk by offering protective factors and promote resilience among learners (Mampane, & Bouwer, 2011). Literature on poverty-stricken townships and former-homeland communities in South Africa have adopted disadvantage and suffering as a norm and have reached a point to which hardships become normative and adverse experiences are seen less as personal burdens and more as the common fate that everyone faces (Theron, 2015). The psychological and behavioural processes of mental resilience serve as protective factors

amidst risk imposed within educational context and academic achievements posit as strategic process of reducing the negative impact of risk factors.

2.4 Aspiration to academic achievement

According to Pikó and Pinczés (2015), the relationship between a teacher and a scholar has a lifelong impact on a child's development, value systems as well as their social perspective. Dass-Brailford (2009) has articulated that poverty strikes children at their very core due to the limited access to basic human rights, which correlates with poor academic performance. The inclusivity of academic achievement as an indicator of resilience is because it has been considered as an accomplishment of an important developmental task that is reported to relate to cognitive competence, competence in school as well as in other social settings (Dass-Brailford, 2005). Furthermore, the aforementioned author asserts that academic achievement has been categorised as a local and international indicator of resilience among adolescents and youth. Developmental tasks describe the major expectations held by a particular culture or society in historical context for the behaviour of children in different age groups and situations (Elder, 1998; Masten, & Coatsworth, 1998). These historical contexts base the development and progress of an individual on the predetermined tasks.

Numerous authors have affirmed that cognitive competence and competence in school are both markers of and requisites of resilience within an educational context (Baruth, & Carroll, 2002; Maluccio, 2002; Dass-Brailford, 2005). Academic progression is not, however the only measure of resiliency nor is it the greatest indicator but serves as an applicable marker and is sought after by poor South African families (Dass-Brailford, 2005). Dass-Brailford (2002) chose to use academic achievement as an expression of resilience because within the South African context, education is perceived as important for upward mobility (Dass-Brailford, 2005). What may seem as a developmental task in one context may be perceived as an obstacle in another in such a way that at certain periods of life, these developmental tasks are hindered by ones biological, psychological and cultural basis (Dass-Brailford, 2005).

Within the South African context especially for the non-white communities, academic success was and can still be attributed largely as a measure of resilience even though it may be that in other countries or contexts, it is simply regarded as an ordinary task (Dass-Brailford, 2005). South

Africans still experience unequal distribution of funds and resources and therefore some are not afforded the same opportunities and do not aspire for academic success.

Thomas and Wagner (2013) conducted research around the relationship between ethnic identity, collective self-esteem and academic self-efficacy among black and white South African students. According to the study, collective self-esteem refers to feelings of high regard involving an affiliation of a certain group, while academic self-efficacy refers to an individual's perception pertaining to the effectiveness with which he/she performs towards academic tasks or achieves academically. The above-mentioned collective self-esteem works best as a mechanism when faced with an adversity because it creates a space where an individual interacts with people whom s/he shares values with and thus serve as a support structure to overcome the adversity. Ethnic identity relates to individuals who belong to a given social group that distinguishes them from others by their race, common language and shared history (Thomas, & Wagner, 2013). South Africa has a history of apartheid predominantly between the black and white racial groups with negative implications transpiring to the democratic generations as the previously oppressed still attempt to catch up with the system that was against them (Thomas, & Wagner, 2013).

Thomas and Wagner (2013) have unearthed links existing in ethnic identity and general feelings of esteem in members of minority groups. Findings further suggest that having a minority status and concurrently being marginalised in a broader social context, most likely cultivates a strong sense of identity among group members which enhances self-esteem (Thomas, & Wagner, 2013). The results of the study reported a positive correlation between ethnic identity and academic self-efficacy among black students. Academic self-efficacy has, time after time been identified as an accurate predictor of academic achievement in different contexts. Furthermore, the study posits that students who were considered as being a minority and scored higher in ethnic identity were also inclined to have stronger positive feelings about self (Thomas, & Wagner, 2013).

According to Roy (2014), black South African women in the post-apartheid era do not necessarily define their career success only by the advancement in title and ranking or by obtaining higher positions in the workplace. Rather, the extent to which academics viewed themselves as being successful in their careers and personal lives is based on what they define as being success. Moreover, the study found that there are four existing domains that influence black women's academic and career experiences, and these are the context, community, commitment and

competency. The domains interact and have inter-relationships with one another embedded within an individual and inevitably influence the educational aspirations of one (Roy, 2014).

2.4.1 Context of education attainment

According to Williams and Bryan (2013), educationally resilient students are those who flourish at school despite the occurrence of adverse conditions. Students classified as educationally resilient are often from challenging backgrounds, however, they are still able to succeed in school. By the essence of its origins, the resilience construct was not linked to educational outcomes but instead on positive mental health outcomes regardless of the psychological stressors. Nevertheless, recent resilience literature has shifted towards focusing on the academic success of individuals confronted with risk factors (Morales, 2002).

Students from low-income urban settings are at an increased risk of being exposed to an environment that does not foster education and economic success compared to their counterparts from suburban and rural settings (Bryan, 2005; Chau, Thampi, & Wight, 2010). Moreover, students residing in urban areas also tend to attend schools with fewer certified educators, a less concise curriculum, limited access to technology and minimal parental involvement in education both at the school and in the home (Bryan, 2005; Chau et al., 2010). Researchers have identified contextual factors that impact student outcomes namely; academic performance, educational aspirations and access to higher education include school size and culture, school district, funding and resource allocation, teacher-student ratio, home environment, neighbourhood conditions and parent participation among others (Artiles, Harry, Reschly, & Chinn, 2002; Evans, 2004; Fenning, & Rose, 2007).

2.5 Self-efficacy

Literature has pointed out that self-efficacy is an important factor when faced with adversity (Sanders, & Lopez, 2000). The term self-efficacy coined by Albert Bandura and briefly refers to a set of beliefs an individual hold in his/her ability to successfully complete a task or problem (Bandura, 1989). The author defined the construct as

People's judgement of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of actions required to attain designated types of performances. It is concerned not with the skills one has but with the judgement of what one can do with whatever skills one possess (p. 391).

Moreover, scholars have further argued that self-efficacy can also refer to the confidence of a person to successfully complete or overcome a task or problem (Glanz, & Rimmer, 2005; Maddux, 2016). Bandura (1997) ascertains that belief in one's efficacy is an essential personal resource for change and development at an individual level. Efficacy beliefs influence whether an individual think optimistically or pessimistically and in self-enhancing or self-debilitating ways. Furthermore, these beliefs contribute to peoples' goals and aspirations, how well they encourage themselves, and their steadfastness in light of difficulties and adversity (Bandura, 2006).

Personal agency according to Bandura (2006) suggests that the self ought to be socially constructed through transactional experiences with the environment. Bandura further denotes that developmental progression stemming from the notion of personal agency manoeuvres from observing causal relations between environmental events, to understanding the causation via action which differs for each individual on the basis of what the context prompts (Bandura, 2006). This perspective of resilience is important to consider primarily because countries such as South Africa are vastly diversified and social structures are experienced differently across contexts.

2.6 African traditional contexts

Different cultural groups are argued to differ considerably in what they posit to be resilient and what is not attributed (Hobfoll, Jackson, Hobfoll, Pierce, & Young, 2002). Authors such as Ungar (2013) and Masten (2014) echo the importance of looking at resilience from a culture sensitive perspective; this means that resilience studies should be conducted across different cultural contexts and geographic locations. Geographic information is important in sense that it accounts for the contextual differences that exist in different environmental settings (Banyard et al., 2017). Ungar (2008) argued the pre-existing notion of resilience and defined it as the capacity of individuals to do well and the belief in the inherent superiority of one's own ethnicity or cultural beliefs. Moreover, these aspects greatly inform the choices of outcomes that are correlated with resilience such as remaining in school, delaying sexual initiation and to maintain a positive attachment to a primary caregiver (Ungar, 2008).

South Africa is a diversified country and numerous contextual factors are taken into consideration when assessing how an individual is influenced by their environment. A deconstruction of the above posits by Ungar (2008), students staying in school for instance, could be due to economic issues and having parents spending all their savings on the child's education and will then alleviate

the financial burden. The sexual initiation is not always up to the women, with the recent alarming rise in femicide and rape cases in the country, some women are deprived of that choice of when to debut on sexual intercourse (Makou, 2018). Primary caregiver in this context refers to one's legal guardians or a family member that one is in the custody of by default.

Numerous researchers have made attempts to penetrate the African culture in hopes of deconstructing the tendency of seeing culture from the coloniser's precepts and accessing education according to their agenda (Mkabela, 2005). There has been no reference to indigenous education and transmission of indigenous knowledge that Africans already had or originates from the ancestral opinions that influence African thinking Mkabela (2005) asserts. Thus, African researchers have taken the initiative of reminding themselves of the origins of African culture and education ideologies and this is done through an Afrocentric method. The Afrocentric approach derives from an Afrocentric paradigm which addresses questions of African identity from the perspective of African people and more especially for African people Asante (as cited in Mkabela, 2005).

There are several accounts where authors reported on resilience being informed by cultural resources. For example, Theron (2015) accounts for cultural resources such as spirituality, great respect for elders, active supportive kinship systems and cultural pride are components that effectively contribute to the sustainability of young people's resilience. Africans predominantly black communities that ascribe to traditional African processes of being and doing are characterised by strong women, conscious of ethnicity and spirituality and an education-facilitated forward-focus (Ramphele, 2012; Swartz, & Bhana, 2009). According to Gqola (2011), influential political veterans such as Nelson Mandela and Steve Biko upheld the value of education for black South Africans to help transform their personal and collective pathways. Intersectionality amongst women in South Africa is increasingly being experienced within discourses such as culture, education, power-sharing dynamics evident within the same social and ethnical contexts.

2.6.1 Gender dynamics in South African context

Feminism according to Mohan (2008) is stipulated as an ideological perspective of economic, political and social equality of sexes. During the 1960s, there was a rise in the feminist ideology which influenced social norms for females, henceforth the study reviews the literature pertaining to gender dynamics and how these translate to South African females (Mohan, 2008). Campbell

and MacPhail (2002) argued that the increase of feminist ideology was a result of concerns about the way in which women issues are perceived in terms of their biological differences from men. Attention given to gender as opposed to women make it crucial to look not only at the category of women but look at women in relation to men in socially constructed contexts (Campbell, & MacPhail, 2002). The study delves the notion of gender and places emphasis on the continuing gender dynamics specifically within the South African context, this focuses on the different roles men and women play in society as influenced by cultural, economic and political determinants. Women in social group are often not offered the equal opportunities as men and do not hold any resources. Hare-Mustin and Meehan (1988) state that men always had the privileged access to education, thus have higher rates of literacy which is found to be true in developing countries such as in South Africa.

Gender roles, marriage and family remains at the core of South African cultures and is structured by the traditional, social and political systems (Afolayan, 2004). Ethnic groups generally have different cultural practices however, they have to have some commonalities in bride-wealth exchange processes and the socialization of men and women within cultural structures (Afolayan, 2004). The author argues that aspects perceived to legalize marriage in African context favour the husband more than the wife, for instance rights over the woman are transferred from the father or guardian to the husband. These rights include sexual access and right to control over the woman's labour and productive powers (Afolayan, 2004). The Bantu societies, children are valued by the parents for a range of practical reasons, boy children are taught to herd cattle which is perceived as the family's wealth and assume full responsibilities of their parents. While a girl child serves as a maid performing chores in the domestic area which bring relief to the mother and brings cattle home through bride-wealth when they marry.

Considering the literature provided above, the study gained insight based on existing research on resilience among students and intends to further explore the contextual factors that inform resilience following an adversity. The literature has also informed the applicability of the ecological systems framework taking into consideration the diversity of the South African context. Insight accumulated from the literature stands to advocate for the need of a framework that can assist understand and describe these contextual factors with a holistic approach. Thus, the ecological systems allow a platform of understanding the influences of contextual factors on

students' adversity and coping. The resilience theory further maps out the interactive relationship of participants and their environment and how those influence the outcome of resilience. The framework is explicitly deliberated below and considers the different levels of the ecological systems and how those transpire on participants' lives.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A theoretical framework refers to the collection of interconnected concepts that provide the study with a guideline and further assists in determining the ‘how’ and ‘which’ of the factors to consider (Inglis, 1990). There is an immeasurable deal of importance to deliberate the concept of resilience from a theoretical framing perspective to reduce fragmentation within the literature (Toland, & Carrigan, 2011). The current study therefore employs the Ecological Systems theoretical framework by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1974). As a continuation of the conceptual framing, the study further adopts the Resilience theory (1974) as an underpinning framework. This process is termed theory triangulation; the researcher assimilates the previously mentioned theories into the exploration and conceptualisation of resilience relevant to this particular study. The use of theory triangulation in the study is to understand the resilience concepts from the multiple levels of the ecological system.

The ecological systems theory has, since its inception, evolved as it wrestled with the need to be cognizant of the ways of thinking that include individuals’ and families’ capacities required for effective coping. Furthermore, the theory also recognises the critical importance of environment (Rothery, 2001). The purpose of formulating the ecosystems perspective among social science researchers was to encourage holistic view of situations, attending simultaneously to individual, family and whatever other contextual factors existing within the systems that is regarded as important to their need (Rothery, 2001). Rothery (2001) denotes an ecological systems perspective to be inherently transactional in nature meaning that the different levels always reciprocally influence each other.

The ecological systems theory inspects development from as early as childhood stages occurring within the systems of interactions that constitutes one’s environment (Ryan, 2001). During child development, authors such as Toland and Carrigan (2011) assert that biological factors become the primary environment and are located within the micro- and meso- systems of an individual; the primary environment consists of contextual factors such as community, immediate family, friends and personality characteristics. The ecological systems theory explores environmental factors that contribute to resilience (Williams, 2011). The theory is commonly used in social science research to examine interactive relations between individuals and their social environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The theoretical framework is ideal for the current study because it regards

a wide range of aspects within students' social environment to assist in identifying individual characteristics that influence student outcomes as they operate in multiple systems simultaneously (Williams, 2011).

Wang (1995) argues for the appropriateness and relevance of an ecological framework in resilience research such that this framework is critical because its environmental focus is what permits the researcher to instigate beyond individual characteristics of adversity and coping. It also explores and addresses the environmental factors that either deteriorate or enhance the resilience of individuals within a given context. The ecological systems model compels the researcher to regard not only the internal factors but rather to consider the external factors such as family, school and the society at large to also have a significant effect on the resilience of individuals when confronted with difficulties (Williams, 2011). The ecological perspective further allows the researcher to focus explicitly on the environmental and individual aspects of development with a particular focus on youth and their academic achievement as so to understand the factors students adopt to alleviate the pressures of an adversity.

Bronfenbrenner (1994) posits that an external observer generates minimal information about an individual in the microsystem level apart from directly interacting with the individual. Similarly, the macrosystem may be too vast and large for the observer to encompass. However, this level of the systems can be interpretable through understanding various sociological, environmental and time factors influencing an individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The time factor as well as the position of the individual within history influences their psychological development, which is an important factor in developmental studies (Skinner, 2010).

Figure 2.1: A ecological systems framework depicting links between the systems (Paquette, & Ryan, 2001)

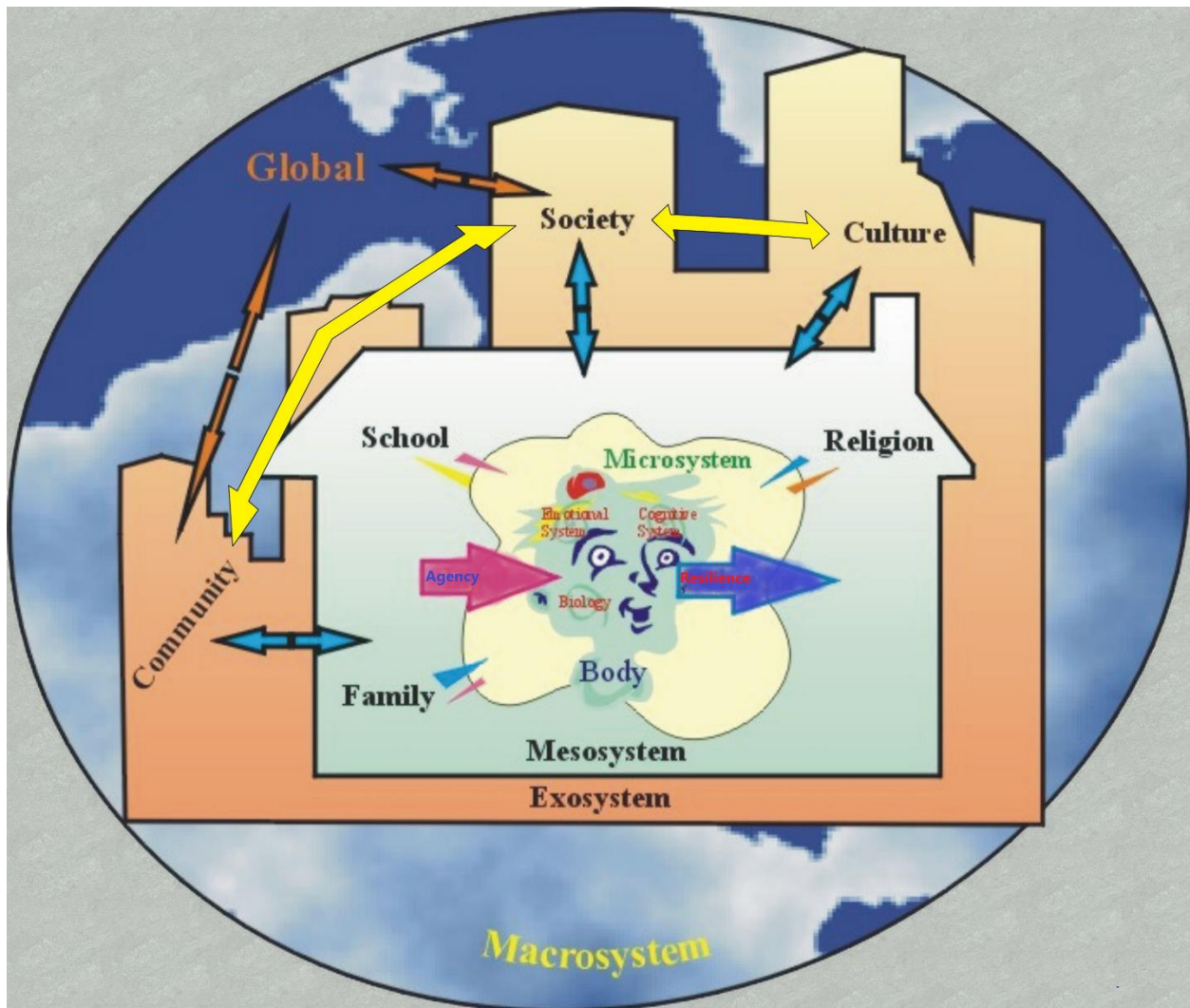


Figure 2.1: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. Reprinted by Paquette, D. & Ryan, J. (2001). National-Louis University.

2.7 Ecological systems theory

The ecological systems theory incorporates numerous facets from different theoretical framings in addition to general systems and provides a more holistic perspective of the influential contextual factors (Rothery, 2001). An ecological theory further draws concepts from social support, stress and coping perspectives as well as cognitive-behavioural theory (Rothery, 2001). According to Harkonen (2009), the ecological systems theory bestows much emphasis on the quality and context of an individual's surroundings from childhood. Moreover, the ecological systems theory is well matched for the description of human socialization as it focuses on the development of humans and traces one's growth into a fully competent member of society (Harkonen, 2009; Puroila, & Karila, 2001).

The ecological systems framework is structured in four layers, which are arranged from the one closest to the individual to the furthest as stipulated by Skinner (2010). The levels of the ecological system are as following: microsystem is where an individual directly engages with the immediate environment and is physically present (i.e., community, home, peer group). Mesosystem is the connections and interactions between the structures found within microsystem which form a miniature social circle. Exosystem layer consists of the wider social system where an individual does not have direct interactions with, however does impact on their development in the microsystem structures. Macrosystem is stated to have flowing influence throughout all the other layers and structural includes the values, laws and norms held within community and national level which are supposedly meant to provide resources to assist individuals (Williams, 2011).

Fraser (2004) postulates that within each sub-system persists risk factors; those are commonly referred to as adversities and are reported to inflict negative influence on development. There are also protective factors, which are known as supportive structures and are mostly likely to foster resilience. For the researcher to completely understand the kinds of adversities that South African female students face and how their resilience is informed, an ecological perspective was crucial (Williams, 2011). The socio-ecological framework allows the researcher to investigate the problems from multiple levels of the systems such as community, family, school, society and from the students themselves (Ford, 1994; Winfield, 1991).

The ecological systems theory is adopted to guide the development of contextual models to explain a range of phenomenon including academic and psychological outcomes, developmental risks,

family influences and protective factors (Neal et al., 2013). The study integrates the ecological systems as an enabling framework to identify contextual predictors for each individual and to identify the factors that counter act as motives in furthering their studies. Research conducted by Ungar (2011) stipulates that in circumstances of adversity and coping are monitored when individuals engage in behaviours that assist them find their way around the resources within their environment that are needed for the to thrive. Ungar (2011) also states that the abovementioned processes happen only in instances when the individual's social ecology has the ability to offer resources in ways that are distinctively meaningful to them.

2.7.1 Microsystem

The microsystem refers to a series of activities, roles and interpersonal relations experienced by a developing person in a provided face-to-face setting with specific material and physical features (Harkonen, 2009). Berk (2000) asserts the microsystem as the direct environment for an individual and is inclusive of the structures which the individual upholds direct contact. A further elaboration of the current system is presented by authors Paquette and Ryan (2001) with an example of a child's parent exerting influence on his/her behaviour and beliefs. However, argue that the child can also influence the parent's behaviour and beliefs (Paquette & Ryan, 2001). The aforementioned interactions is what Bronfenbrenner called the bi-directional influence where the author highlighted how such interactions exist on all levels of the ecological systems. Moreover, bi-directional influences particularly in the microsystem are perceived to be at their strongest and have the most powerful influence on an individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Harkonen, 2009). In the case of individual characteristics, microsystem is the human body which consists of biology, a cognitive system and emotional system

2.7.2 Mesosystem

The mesosystem consists of the connections and processes occurring between two or more settings comprising of the development of a person such as the interactions between home and school and again between school and parents' workplace (Harkonen, 2009). Henceforth, it is extremely important to be cognizant of influencing factors of socialization support one another or are perceived by the developing person as conflicting pressures. Bronfenbrenner (1984) critiques his previous work, and argues that the mesosystem analysis has been one-sided as influence factors have been studied separate entities and often overlooked the joint influences of the factors.

2.7.3 Exosystem

The exosystem similar to the mesosystem comprises of connections and processes that occur between two or more settings, with at least one which does not pertain to the developing person. However involves the occurrence of events that influence the processes within the direct environment with immediate influence on the person and the setting they operate in (Bronfenbrenner, 1987; Harkonen, 2002). Authors Paquette and Ryan (2001) defined the exosystem as the larger social system in which the person does not function directly however are impacted by the system through the interactions with his/her microsystem.

2.7.4 Macrosystem

The above-mentioned system comprises of an overarching pattern of mirco-, meso- and exo-characteristics of a particular culture, sub-culture and the broader social context. The overarching pattern pays special regard to developmentally-instigative belief systems, resources, hazards, opportunity structures to mention a few that are embedded in each of these systems. The system can be thought of as a societal blueprint for a particular context of any individual (Harkonen, 2009). Bronfenbrenner (2002) reiterated that the behavioural and conceptual models are characteristics of the macrosystem passed down from one generation to another through the means of engaging with different cultural institutions like the church, family, school and through managing the processes of socialization.

The macrosystem is the outmost layer of an individual and has no absolute framework however holds the cultural values, traditions and laws of the society in the greater schemes of things (Berk, 2002). Although the macrosystem is said to be the outmost layer of the systems, Berk (2002) argues that it has the capacity to penetrate through all other layers and can have direct influence on an individual. For instance, if in a culture, it is believed that the women and/or wife's responsibility is to take care of their home while the men and/or husbands go out and work for their families. This in turn has effects on how boy and girl children are raised up and the gender roles that they are ascribed into from a young age (Berk, 2002; Paquette, & Ryan, 2001). In closing remarks, Bronfenbrenner (2002) pointed out that the impact of the macrosystem can be evident when comparing individuals from different societies however is not limited to societal context rather is inclusive of culture and subcultures as well.

2.7.5 Theory triangulation

As previously mentioned, the study employs two theories to which each serves a distinct purpose and contributes significantly to the study. The ecological systems theory is employed as a framework, which depicts clearly how an individual maneuvers between different systems and the resilience theory is an underpinning framework that helps to better understand resilience within the systems. It is pivotal for the study to capture the synergy between the ecological systems and resilience theories as they feed on to each other.

An implication of the ecological perspective ascertains that resilience is transactional in nature, which then is evident in qualities nurtured, shaped and activated by a host of person-environment interactions (Harvey, 2007). Resilience is not only a result of biological traits, but also resonates in people's connectedness to complex and dynamic social context (Harvey, 2007). Riger (2001) argues that individuals in social contexts are not just passive recipients of contextual forces, but they are agentic and capable of negotiating as well as influencing their environment. The author's argument extends to state that the engagement of persons and the environment creates enabling factors for the enhancement of both individual and community wellness (Riger, 2001).

Ungar (2007) reports on adolescents' resilience studies conducted in eleven different countries, where seven predominant aspects of resilience were established pertaining to the environment young people assimilate in. These aspects were associated with doing-well and are as follows; constructive relationships, a powerful identity, power and control, social justice, access to material resources, a sense of cohesion, belonging and spirituality, and cultural adherence. Another study by Beckett (2006) reveals that when an environment is adequately resourced, it is more likely that the child's motivation, temperament and special talent would lead to successful developmental outcomes.

Positive platforms that seek to support development are created by the nested structures of the environment (Scroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005). The authors further argue for the importance of resilience should not only be understood from the changing factors that affect ones' life but rather on their ecological processes and the way those interact with one another. Resilience applied at an individual level as well as at a systems level, thus there is no contradiction between individual work and systems work. At each level within the systems, there can be difficulties which are known as risk factors and protective factors. Risk factors are translated to be those that cause

an individual to be more prone to develop problems in amidst of adversity while protective factors are the characteristics that reduce the negative effect of an adversity (Masten, & Reed, 2002; Theron, & Carrigan, 2011).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.8 Resilience theory

Resilience theory is included as a conceptual framework that assists in understanding what accounts for resilience for this particular research study. Resilience theory is essentially adapted as an underpinning theory in attempts to improve the examination and understanding of adversities as confronted by individuals within the multiple systems (Ungar, 2008). Moreover, the theory has documented numerous relational protective processes that predetermine favourable outcomes amidst of adversity and this is at different domains of resilience. The notion of resilience in ecosystem is growing in importance and relevance as it is a concept for understanding, handling and governing difficult interrelated systems of people and the environment (Folke et al., 2004). According to Southwick et al. (2014) determinants of resilience consist of the interaction between the biological, psychological, social and cultural factors to determine how one responds to adverse experiences.

The earlier resilience literature has largely focused on the individual and their accounts of positive adjustment. The latter work done on resilience theory has added a new set of lenses on how resilience is viewed and has accounted for the socio-cultural ecologies that are co-responsible for the processes of positive adjustments by individuals. Resilience is therefore explained to be a systemic or a co-constructed process (Masten, 2001, 2011; Ungar, 2011). In accord to the recent developments in resilience theory, Ungar (2011) further states that for young to be considered resilient, it is crucial for their adaption efforts to be facilitated and supported by their social ecologies.

There has been an increased prevalence of studies on resilience and these studies focus primarily on one particular subset of the processes associated with human development and further on those that enhance the experience of well-being among individuals who face significant adversity (Ungar, 2011). The research focus has over the years shifted towards bio-psycho-social factors that facilitate the development of well-being when under great stress (Ungar, 2011). Psychological

factors such as personality are said to be influenced by the environment which results in the likely contribution to meaningful coping behaviours that seek to optimise developmental advantages.

Masten (2014) posits that during the 21st century, where it is possible to share in stories through various platforms such as the social media, newspaper articles and television, people remain captive with stories young people tell. These stories entail how they have faced grave danger or grew up in poverty but still turned out well. The reason behind the fascination on the stories is that they are the kinds of stories that capture a fundamental truth about human resilience (Masten, 2014). Resilience is stated to have emerged from the same adaptive systems for human development. Adaptive systems are those such as close relationships with competent and caring adults as well as effective schools and communities with positive interactions that facilitate self-nurturing (Masten, 2014). Thus, this highlights a condition in which the life story work has to happen in a safe, trusting, nurturing environment.

The current study explored adversity and resilience of female South African students through the analysis of their narrative life stories. Furthermore, it assessed how education has impacted their resilience. This theory allows for a better understanding of the underpinnings that are constitutive of ones' resilience. The theory helps to consider the interrelated discourses such as cultural and societal norms. The ecological framework is appropriate for focusing on the individual within the different ecosystems and to understand how one interacts with the other systems. Theron (2015) underlines the efficiency of having youth-generated accounts of attributes of supportive youth living in majority world context to beat the odds.

2.8.1 Resilience within the systems

Masten (2016, p.298) defines resilience in systems perspective as *“the capacity for successful adaption to disturbances that threaten system function, viability and development”*. Moreover, the broad system definition is accommodative and allows for generalisability across different system levels, and this facilitates assimilative conversations and science disciplines concerning human adaption (Masten, 2016). The author revealed that the fatal threats to human development are entrenched within multiple systems such as poverty, family conflicts and disease epidemics (Masten, 2016). This calls for an increase in resilience capacity building into diverse and multi-level systems ranging from families, communities or computers and ecologies that respond to the systems.

Literature relevant to the current study examined the risk and protective factors as two imperative concepts that are intrinsic to understanding resilience (Rutter, 1990). The study also focused much on how both these concepts may significantly contribute to the understanding of how students continue to succeed in school despite the presence of adversity (Green & Conrad, 2002).

2.8.2 Defining risk factors

Toland and Carrigan (2011) stated that resilience can be defined only when an individual has experienced some form of risk factor or adversity. Masten and Reed (2002) asserts that it becomes rather difficult if there is no significant risk which then leads to children being labelled as competent, well-adjusted and normal but cannot be resilient. According to Green and Conrad (2002), conditions that increase the prospect of a likelihood of problems are described as risk factors.

According to Williams (2011), risk factors constitute individual characteristics or contextual conditions of a sub-population, commonly related to children and youth. These factors are suggested to induce the likelihood of undesirable outcomes (Masten, 1997). Fraser (2004) reiterates the importance of acknowledging that risk factors do not guarantee that children will have academic and behavioural problems, rather they increase the probability that problems of such nature may occur. Hence, genetic, biological, behavioural, socio-cultural and socio-demographic conditions all constitute to the many facets that attribute to the probability of a poor developmental outcome for children (Fraser, 2004).

2.8.3 Adversity

A general overview of an adversity stipulates low achievement levels among children and youth originating and/or born in socio-economically impoverished backgrounds. However, a striking variation persists in outcomes of individuals exposed to high adversity (Ellis et al., 2017). Adversities facing young people can range from long term chronic stressors to short-term acute stressors or even traumatic stressful events. Fergus and Zimmerman (2005) stipulate that some risk exposures may have an immediate, acute effect on the youth. The authors also state that another issue persisting with adversities is how the same adverse event or condition may differ across different youth and it is pivotal to refrain from assuming that an event is normatively experienced negatively by all youth (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Some of the individuals residing in high-risk backgrounds are still able to beat the odds. Literature has revealed that multiple adverse

conditions impact negatively on the resilience capacity and healthy development of children and youth (Williams, 2011). Fergus and Zimmerman (2005) argue that resilience literature has limited the focus to typically single risk and protective factors whereas in reality, most young people are confronted by multiple risk factors which in turn possess multiple assets and have access to multiple resources.

2.9 Towards a strength-based approach

Payne (2005) presents an argument on how educational research have disproportionately focused on factors related to school failure and underachievement rather than looking into high level of academic success amongst students who experience adversities. Theron and Theron (2010) conducted a critical review on resilience studies within the South African context. The authors reviewed the conceptualisation of resilience amongst young people, and protective factors proved to be prominent in defining resilience. Moreover, the authors emphasised the strong urgency to promote assistance provided by professionals such as teachers, psychologists and social workers (Theron & Theron, 2010). The paper then explored on the strength-based approaches to resilience and attempts to gain an understanding of how South African students perceive this phenomenon as it occurs in different systems.

Numerous researchers have documented the negative implications of being exposed to adversities during childhood (Masten, Powell, & Luthar, 2003; Turner, Finkelhor, & Ormrod, 2006; Varese et al., 2012). However, this stands as an illustration of how little is known about resilience protective factors (Banyard, Hamby, & Grych, 2017). Previous studies had a shortfall of limiting their research to only one protective factor at a time. Researcher such as Lenzi et al. (2015) with work on school victimisation among high school learners revealed that protective factors such as self-efficacy, social support and positive family relationships assisted in fostering protection against victimisation. Despite the negative outcomes anticipated from children and young people in socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, resilience literature has turned the focus into studying the developmental assets and highlights the importance of positive resources including enabling factors in overcoming adversities (Ellis et al., 2017).

2.9.1 Defining protective factors

Arguably, resilience studies following traumatic events have misguidedly focused mostly on mechanisms of flourishing but neglected the processes on greater resilience which also buffers the

impact of factors that put individuals at risk (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Wingo, 2010). Protective factors are defined as factors that moderate the effect of risk young people encounter in their different environment which extensively encourage resilience (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992). Furthermore, protective factors are suggested to vigorously lessen an individual's vulnerability to risk factors and increase resilience to these risk factors by means of protecting them from developing, internalising and externalising problems (Hawkins et al., 1992). The authors claim that these promote positive outcomes. It is both the individual's internal assets along with their systemic external strengths that are referred to as protective factors or defensive mechanisms (Johnson, & Howard, 2007). Therefore, Toland and Carrigan (2011) later asserted that protective factors refer to those factors that act to protect an individual from developing a problem even in the face of adversity.

2.9.2 Protective resources anchored in personal life

Protective factors that are instilled within personal life persist in numerous studies on resilience more so among young people (Theron & Theron, 2010). Personal traits were previously argued to form the foundational basis of the early definition of resilience. However, studies now have progressed to include factors found within personality traits to be contributing towards resilience. Achievement orientation, autonomy and the ability to self-regulate forms part of the personality traits and are acknowledged as individual factors of resilience (Theron & Theron, 2010). In addition to traits, the authors discovered that skills such as problem solving, positive cognitive appraisal and having an internal locus of control are linked to resilience (Theron & Theron, 2010).

Many scholars such as Ellis and Del Giudice, 2014; Frankenhuis and de Weerth, 2013; Mittal, Griskevicius, Simpson, Sung and Young, 2015 (as cited in Ellis, Bianchi, Griskevicius, & Frankenhuis, 2017) support the claim and further state that individuals who grow up in harsh and unstable environments develop the ability to specialize their cognitive to match the high impact of the adversity. The abilities developed thereafter tend to enhance any intervention outcomes and resilience. Moreover, Ellis et al. (2017, p.562) proposed that “harsh, unpredictable environments do not exclusively impair cognitive abilities, instead individuals become developmentally adapted for solving problems that are ecologically relevant in such environments”.

2.9.3 Protective factors embedded within social environments

According to a report by Theron (2007), both parents have the capabilities that encourage resilience. However, mothers were singled out to have prominent impact. These mothers displayed a strong bond with their children which encouraged resilience more so in violent contexts (Theron & Theron, 2010). Young people are said to most likely to imitate the parents' response considering an adverse or traumatic experience (Theron & Theron, 2010). They are reported to draw from the strengths and positive qualities perceived as worth imitating.

Families with supportive relationships are perceived to buffer violence and promote enabling factors to overcome molestation and motivate black youth to thrive in their tertiary studies (Theron & Theron, 2010). Masten (2014) adds that effective caregiving; close relationships with capable adults and romantic partners also promote resilience. Supportive family relations extend to shared participation in activities, experiences of belonging, a sense of love and being valuable within the family. Dass-Brailford (2005) also noted how siblings play an eminent role in moulding youth resilience.

Teachers play a pivotal role in impacting, inspiring and motivating young lives (Theron, 2007). In addition to teaching, schools provide a safe and secure space in which others have an opportunity to vent emotions (Theron, 2007). Schools are regarded as a community of young people that functions at maintaining academic excellence, with extra-curricular activities significantly promoting resilience (Theron, 2007). Community support is often referred to as resilience-promoting, however the particulars of the nature of the support are not clearly defined (Theron, & Theron, 2010). Dass-Brailsford (2005) further attempts to conceptualise the specifics by connecting attributes found in resilience literature such as support of youth success from adults, provision of therapy and bereavement counselling and encouraged peer interactions.

2.10 Chapter summary

The chapter has indicated relevant literature that substantiate the multiple systems that interplay in facilitating resilience among children and young people. The evidence extended to the contextual factors that contribute towards academic resilience and academic achievement amidst adversity. Several researchers have stipulated that factors responsible for academic resilience among students are diverse however their social environment such as family support, positive teacher-learner

relationship and school environment plays a pivotal role in influencing positive outcomes. Individual characteristics namely self-efficacy and human agency reported to also be contributing factors of how students respond to adversity and maintain academic ambitions.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The research methodology that any study uses should articulate the phenomena of interest that the study in question pursues, and this is largely influenced by the study objectives (Neuman, 2006). Therefore, the research design serves as a roadmap that indicates the research aims and objectives and how This study intends to fulfil those (Terre Blanche, Durheim, & Painter, 2012). The chapter elaborates on the nature of the research design adopted in the current study and motivates the choice, which in this case is qualitative. Over and above the research design, the chapter delves into the research paradigm, which is interpretivism. The research methods adopted in the current study are discussed explicitly within the chapter and a careful consideration is focused on the proceedings and instrumental resources namely the life stories and semi-structured interviews as well as procedures undertaken to ensure the plausibility of the study (Babbie & Mouton, 2010). The process entails the selection of participants. In this study, This study used purposive sampling. Purposive sampling has been argued to be effective for qualitative research because the method uses fewer participants (Carter & Little, 2007). The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews and used secondary data in the form of life stories in formulating the interview schedules for each participant.

3.2 Research aims and objectives

The study aims to provide a better understanding of the concept resilience among South African female master's students in response to adversity

1. To understand the influence of context on female master's students adversity and coping
2. To understand which coping mechanisms female master' s students resort to
3. To understand how context and coping contributes to resilience of female master's students

3.3 Research design

The theoretical perspective of the study was guided by the qualitative, narrative approach which was interested in the participants' lived experiences. The study further explored the different adversities individuals have faced and which contextual factors have an influence resilience as well as educational aspirations. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), "the term qualitative implies an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not

experimentally examined or measured” (p.8). In qualitative studies, researchers are more interested in the way individuals socially construct their reality in uncontaminated settings (Denzin, & Lincoln, 2011). Therefore, this study explored the response of postgraduate students to adversity and how their resilience is informed within the multi-layered ecological systems.

Qualitative methodologies are ideal for identifying factors and accumulating new information relevant to the population or subgroup of the research study that have been previously marginalised or understudied (Merchant, & Dupuy, 1996). A qualitative approach was therefore deemed as an applicable study technique due to its naturalist approach that seeks to provide an in–depth account of the students’ understanding of multiple truths and the extent of resilience. The context and coping phenomena of this study were studied within the real-world setting where the researcher had no intentions of manipulating the results (Golafshani, 2003). The author loosely described the qualitative approach as the kind of research that produces findings that are otherwise not achieved by any means of statistical procedures (Golafshani, 2003).

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) argue that the nature of qualitative inquiry consists of a closely knitted relationship between the inquirer, what is under investigation and the situational constraints that mould the inquiry. The qualitative design proved to be appropriate for the current study because the study aimed to not only to describe adverse experiences but also to interpret students’ emotions and experiences in more human terms. This suggests that experiences are captured in characteristics that extend to critical hermeneutics rather than to quantification and measurements (Terre Blanche et al., 2012). The qualitative approach allowed the researcher an opportunity to ask open-ended questions to further probe for more insight and obtain rich data (Holliday, 2002).

According to Connelly and Clandinin (1990), human beings are perceived as story-telling organisms who both individually and socially lead storied lives. The above statement by authors therefore suggests that the study of narratives explores the ways in which humans experience the world (Connelly, & Clandinin, 1990). The term “narrative” presumes a more structured quality of experience that the researcher delves into and suggests a pattern of inquiry for the study (Connelly, & Clandinin, 1990).

The current study adopted a narrative methodological approach to give account to the question of how the concept of resilience is shaped by South African female health promotion master’s students who have had adverse experiences and went through the process of writing life stories as

part of the master's course. The current study used narrative data in the form of life stories, which comprised written out biographical information about the participants and their overall life experiences. The life stories were however not in a timeline format where life events were documented as they happened chronologically. Instead, participants shared what they felt were significant life events and this was done in a free text manner. The narrative life stories were adapted into the study as secondary data since they were first conducted as part of the scope of the health promotion module. However, for the purpose of the study's data set, this was the researcher's first data set.

In addition to the life stories, seven semi-structured individual interviews were formulated and conducted with seven health promotion students from the classes of 2016 and 2017 that met the study's selection criteria. In brief, the selection requirement included South African nationality, female student, enrolling for a master's in health promotion between the years 2016-2017 and completed *The Person is a Professional* module as part of the health promotion coursework.

Furthermore, accounts of self-narrated life stories were used during the interviewing process to improve the understanding of multiple ways in which individuals create meaning in their own lives amidst significant life events. As the significance of narratives is embedded in the capability of the method to show the perspective of the participant, the method was embedded in participants remembering the experiences and being able to share those experiences within entrusted spaces. In this regard, it is the researcher's responsibility to create a space that is comfortable for the participants to share their life experiences (Clandinin, & Connelly, 2000). Moreover, the research was attentive to how the participants referred to their adversities both in written text and verbally.

The telling of stories is regarded as a natural human instinct and a fundamental way of making sense of an experience (Holstein, & Gubruim, 2011). Moreover, narrative approach helps focus on the stories of an individual and draw from their experience to understand what informs their behaviour and social construction (Holstein, & Gubruim, 2011). The work involved in life stories is believed to illustrate how the self and others are constructed and deconstructed which allows for a deeper consciousness of how experiences are expressed. For example, "narratives are multi-layered and woven together through many strands and story lines, in which we are inscribed, and in which re-inscribe ourselves and others" (Sliep, & Kotze, 2007, p.140). According to Holstein

and Gubruim (2011), research gathered through narrative data is a distinctive form of discourse which shapes meaning through the rigorous ordering of story material.

3.4 Research paradigm

A paradigm is perceived to be a worldview which presents the meaning about a social world that is connected to related sources of information and appropriate ways to uncover those (Ulin, Robinson, & Tolley, 2004). According to Wahyuni (2012), research paradigms seek to address the philosophical dimensions of social sciences. Moreover, other authors describe research paradigm as a set of fundamental assumptions and beliefs as to how the world is perceived which is translated to how people frame their thinking which guides the behaviour of a researcher (Jonker, & Pennik, 2010). In brief, Denzin and Lincoln (2011) also went on to state that the term paradigm refers to a basic set of beliefs that which guides actions.

Interpretivism is the paradigm that is on the forefront of the current study. The interpretivist paradigm holds that the exploration and understanding of any socially constructed world must be done through the perceptions of both the researcher and the participants. Hansen (2004) highlights that interpretivism advocates that reality is constructed in individuals' minds rather than existing externally as a singular entity. It is then pivotal to echo the importance of the paradigm in the study context emphasising how human acts, interactions and language shape social worlds (Ulin et al., 2004). Furthermore, meanings in social contexts are found to stem from perceptions, experiences and actions (Ulin et al., 2004).

3.4.1 Entry into the research site

This study was conducted at a higher education institution called the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The University of KwaZulu-Natal was formed in 2004 because of a merger between the University of Durban-Westville and the University of Natal. University of KwaZulu-Natal History (2017, June 06). The University of KwaZulu-Natal consists of five cluster campuses in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The distinctive Howard College building was opened in 1932 following a generous donation by Mr T B Davis whose son Howard Davis was killed during the Battle of Somme in World War one. The study was conducted at the Howard College campus is situated in Durban under the eThekweni municipality.

The UKZN was a preferred study site for numerous reasons. The fact that the researcher is a currently registered student made the process of obtaining gatekeeper approval through the

university registrar's office was a convenient and efficient route. The study participants were enrolled students of the university which was advantageous to the researcher since all applications for gatekeeper approvals were done internally. The study site continues to prove it was a better option because most of the participants were still traceable and the researcher was able to get them in one venue for information sharing and consent form signing. Furthermore, the UKZN Howard College proved to be a convenience institution because it is where the course with the module *The Person is the Professional* is offered and the use of life stories for course requirement which is not found in many sites.

3.5 Selection of participants

The study made use of purposive sampling to select participants. The research sample was thought through and guided by the research aims and objectives. The sampling approach was appropriate for the study because it prescribed a criterion-basis of female South African students who were registered at the time of the study or those who had completed their Health Promotion masters' course at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College during the years 2016 and 2017. The participants should have experienced some form of adversity during their lives and shared their experiences through the life story as part of their coursework (Ritche et al., 2014).

The researcher approached all female students that were registered for the course either in the year 2016 and/or 2017. Seven participants were keen to be part of the study with one participant who only consented to having her life stories used but did not want to be interviewed. From the total of seven participants, three of the participants were students from the class of 2016 and four were from the class of 2017. Six of the female students were Africans but were from different cultural backgrounds being predominantly from either Zulu or the Xhosa tribes. Only one participant was Indian.

Participants are purposively selected with a clear intent of what is needed to obtain the study's objectives and depended on the participants availability and willingness to participate in the study following their eligibility to form part of the study (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013; Terre Blanche et al., 2012). The selection criteria was applied to all participants. Therefore, a homogeneous sampling technique was further applied, this sampling technique enabled the researcher to select elements from a particular subcultural group presented within the South African context. The researcher opted to use South African students, and this assisted in exploring

a particular context of South African education system. Another selection requirement for the research participants was that, the participants had to have completed an honours degree and enrolled for a master's degree in Health Promotion at the University of KwaZulu–Natal's Howard College campus. All Health Promotion master's students would have had completed the module *The Personal is the Professional* as per course requirement.

3.6 Data collection method

In qualitative research, data collection refers to how the material for the research was accumulated (Flick, 1998). Life stories together with semi-structured one-on-one interviews were adopted as the data collection methods for the study. Seven health promotion master's candidates were interviewed using semi-structured one-on-one interviews. Life stories are considered as very rich source of information to adopt in exploring lived experiences (Habermas, & Kober, 2015). Semi-structured one-on-one interviews on the other hand facilitate rapport and empathy which allow for greater flexibility of coverage. Moreover, semi-structured interviews tend to produce rich data because they allow the interview to go into novel areas (Smith, & Osborn, 2007). Semi-structured one-on-one interviews were the most appropriate method to use as the interviews were to triangulate the information presented in the life stories. Triangulation of data in this study combined two different data collections methods with each conducted at different times. Triangulation of data was an important principle in the study which guided the factors that the researcher followed up on pertaining to how academic resilience is informed amongst university students (Flick, 2004).

3.6.1 Data collection instruments

According to Terre Blanche, Durheim and Painter (2006), a qualitative approach is suitable if the reality to be explored is that of people's subjective experiences. Semi-structured individual interviews seek to establish how students feel about a particular phenomenon and therefore are likely to create an environment of openness and trust allowing the interviewee to express herself more freely and authentically (Babbie & Mouton, 2010; De Vos et al., 2002). According to Terre Blanche et al. (2006), qualitative interviewing allows the researcher to conduct an interview in a more naturally interactive form. Marshall and Rossman (2011) have argued that a natural, conversational type of interview is always preferred in qualitative studies, due to how it elicits expected and unexpected responses which then contribute to the richness of the data.

In preparation for the interview process, the researcher attended a five-day qualitative research training held at her workplace. The qualitative research training covered a wide spectrum of qualitative data collection methods including semi-structured one-on-one interviewing. All interviews in the study were conducted in English which was the participants preferred language. However, selected participants were conversant with IsiZulu expressive terms therefore code-switched between English and IsiZulu. The researcher's mother tongue is IsiZulu and was compatible of translating some of the IsiZulu terms into English.

An interview schedule was used (see Appendix C). The researcher generated interview schedules specific to each participant and this process was informed by the life story of each participant. The use of an interview schedule as recommended by Bell (1997) has stipulated that in as much as participants should be allowed to freely talk about pressing issues, there still needs to be some structure in interviews to ensure that relevant topics are covered. Therefore, interview schedules assisted the researcher to adhere to the study's overarching concerns. They also allowed probing for information that would contribute significantly to the study objectives. Majority of the participants were willing to share in information. However, participants may require guidance regarding the amount of detail they are expected to provide hence probing plays a pivotal role in semi-structured interviews (Doody, & Noonan, 2013).

The researcher ensured that the interviews were audio recorded for the purpose of transcribing and analysing at a much later stage of data analysis (Holloway, & Wheeler, 2002). Due to each interview schedule being guided by the individuals' life story, follow-up questions were developed and adapted from the first phase of the life stories' thematic analysis conducted manually by the researcher using the source documents. All the interviews were all 45-60 minutes long and a brief five-minute bathroom break was provided where necessary.

3.6.2 Pilot testing

Prior to the researcher commencing with the interview process after obtaining full approval from the ethics committee, she opted to work with two of the participants from the sample group as her pilot test. Dikko (2016) defines a pilot study as a smaller version of the research study which is conducted in preparation of the full-scale study. The aim of conducting a pilot test was to assess if the interview schedule formulated from the respective life stories contribute significantly to the research question. The study recruited two individuals with the same characteristics to prospective

participants, but these were not admitted into the study sample. In this particular study, the pilot study provided the researcher an opportunity to make any refinements to the interview schedule such as removing ambiguities and improving own interviewing skills.

3.6.3 Semi-structured interview process

Qualitative studies that seek to explore the perceptions as well as opinions of participants regarding complex and often sensitive issues are well suited because they enable probing for additional information and allow for clarification of answers (Barriball, & While, 1994). In the current study, the researcher conducted semi-structured individual one-on-one interviews, where the interview questions were developed based on an extensive analysis of the life stories of key participants. Key questions were aligned with the research questions (Barriball, & While, 1994). The themes that emerged from the life stories informed the development of interview questions with an intent to address and to follow up (triangulate) on the content of the life stories presented by everyone.

The recruitment and interviewing processes were both conducted by the researcher. The researcher also opted that the participants suggest the venue where they would like to meet to have the interviews (De Vos et al., 2002). Six interviews were conducted on the University of KwaZulu-Natal Howard College premises and one was done at the Pietermaritzburg campus because the participant resides there.

According to Arksey and Knight (1999), the use of an audio recorder during an interview gives the participants the impression that their responses or contributions in the research are valued in the greater schemes. However, De Vos et al. (2002), cautions researchers by stating that participants might be intimidated when they are aware that they are recorded, and this may impact negatively on their responses. As such, the researcher explained to the participants that audio-recording was done to capture all the worthwhile contributions made and that the researcher had no other ulterior motive whatsoever.

The researcher used a small audio recorder that she placed in a discreet place where it was not too noticeable to the participant though they were aware of being audio recorded. This allowed for the participant to be comfortable during the interview and to create a setting that is as close to a natural dialogue as possible (De Vos et al., 2002). In using the audio recorder, the researcher was at an advantage because she was not unduly distracted by having to ensure detailed note-keeping during the interview (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). The researcher was able to interact and concentrate

more on the proceedings of the interview rather than being worried if they were able to note down every important point that the participant had shared (De Vos et al., 2002).

3.7 Data analysis

Flick (2013) defines qualitative data analysis as “the classification and interpretation of linguistic (or visual) material to make statements about implicit and explicit dimensions and structures of meaning-making in the material and what is represented in it” (p.7). The author further states how qualitative data analysis can also be applied in discovering and describing subjective experiences and cultural practices (Flick, 2013).

Qualitative data analysis consists of several aims, some of which the study adapted pertaining to describing the phenomenon of interest in greater depth. In this instance, phenomenon of interest refers to the response to adverse experiences of South African Health Promotion master’s students. This form of analysis provides an opportunity for the researcher to focus on the individual cases and report on correlations between the cases and to further compare any similarities and differences between them.

The researcher used thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a method that allows the researcher to identify, analyse and report on patterns and themes that emerged from the data set. In attempts to manage high volumes of data sets, thematic analysis organises and describes the data sets in detail. The authors ascertain that, interviews entrench themes and concepts that are discovered only through thematic analysis (Braun, & Clarke, 2006). Boyatzis (1998) further states that over and above organising and describing data, thematic analysis also provides interpretations of the different perspectives of the research topic. Thematic analysis was appropriate for this study because this analytic approach allows for dominant themes and sub-themes that have related information identified in both the life stories and interviews.

As stated by Braun and Clark (2006), in terms of personal, social and cultural experiences, a thematic content analysis is considered an appropriate method of analysis for the content of the semi-structured individual interview data, which consists of a sizeable and multipart data set. According to these authors, “a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun, & Clark, 2006, p.82). Qualitative data analysis is quite a complex process. The analysis process in qualitative research is iterative and is an on-going process where the

researcher/s immerse themselves and engage from the initial encounter with the dataset up to the final stages of thematic analysis (Braun, & Clarke, 2006).

Prior to the transcription and analysing proceedings that led to the second phase analysis, the researcher uploaded life stories on a qualitative software package called NVivo. The computer software allowed the researcher to skilfully arrange and categorise each life story into specific codes and groupings according to areas that the researcher was interested in exploring for further analysis using thematic analysis. The NVivo software served as a tool that assists in analysing the data. NVivo was initially designed for qualitative researchers working with very rich text based on multimedia information, where deep level of analysis on small or large volumes of data sets (Anderson, 2010). This analytic approach allows for dominant themes and sub-themes of related information to be identified from the content of the interview and life stories data.

3.7.1 Thematic analysis process

Patton (as cited in Braun and Clarke 2006) provide a six-phase analysis guideline. The authors have highlighted the necessity to acknowledge that qualitative research does not adhere to rules but is important for the researcher to follow the basic precepts that are appropriate for the research questions. Braun and Clarke (2006) stress that the analysis is not a linear process and does not move from one phase to the next, however, it follows a recursive process, moving back and forth as required throughout the phases. The researcher then adapted the six phases of analysis guideline into the study to complete the analysis process.

Phase 1: Getting familiar with the data

The study comprised two sets of data, the life stories which were already narratively written and were obtained from the module coordinator which were the study's raw dataset. The researcher then later conducted individual interviews where the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed into text. However, the researcher did not transcribe the interviews in a verbatim manner. Reasons for the interview recordings to not be transcribed verbatim was because they followed after the information obtained from the life stories, hence the significance of the individual interviews in this instance was to clarify, follow up and probe further on aspects that the participants had previously presented on their life stories. By so doing, the researcher reduced cases of redundancy. Transcription was done on aspects that were on the study objectives and rich in valuable data.

The researcher first familiarised herself with the data whilst analysing life stories, during the development of the interview schedules. The process of engaging with the data set was of great importance, and particularly an excellent start point for the researcher to be acquainted with their data (Riessman, 1993). The researcher noted down initial thoughts and ideas that she later brought forward into the interview, and when she was transcribing the interview. The researcher had prior knowledge about some participants as she was also part of the module. Therefore, the development of the data and initial notes had to follow a rigour guideline of thematising. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that although the researcher might be familiar with the data if they had collected themselves, it is crucial that they immerse themselves in the data and acquaint themselves with the depth and breadth of the content. Moreover, Bird (2005, p. 227) argued that this step ought to be recognised as “a key phase of data analysis within interpretative methodology”. The interpretative act expands towards creating meaning rather than simply a systematic act of translating spoken words into paper (Lapadat, & Lindsay, 1999).

Phase 2: Generating initial codes

The analysis proceeded to the researcher generating initial ideas regarding what she found within the data, which then progressed to producing initial codes from the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Codes seek to identify features from the data set that emerge to be of interest to the researcher. The ecological systems theoretical framework guided the coding process. Boyatzis (1998) posits that raw data that is in its most basic segment or element has capability to be assessed in a meaningful manner regarding the phenomenon the study is exploring. This process was conducted manually as the researcher organised the data into meaningful groups (Tuckett, 2005). The researcher also approached the data with specific inquiries that she was keen to code around.

Phase 3: Searching for themes

Potential themes were generated once all the data was initially coded and collated. The researcher created a list of different codes that she was able to identify throughout the data set (Braun, & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, this phase provided the researcher with an opportunity to re-focus the analysis on a much broader scale of themes which was different from the coding process (Braun, & Clarke, 2006). The codes were later sorted into potential themes. From this step, the researcher was able to analyse the codes in detail and differentiate one from the other to combine

and create overall themes found in the data (Braun, & Clarke, 2006). During this phase, the researcher also assessed the relationship between the codes as well as between themes. This analysis extended to looking at the overarching themes and their relationship with the sub-themes, an essential step that the researcher had to consider when ensuring that the final themes that emerge from the data are of relevance to the research questions.

Phase 4: Reviewing themes

The reviewing and refinement of themes helped the researcher filter candidate themes that did not surface due to insufficient data to support them or the content being too diverse. The phase consists of two levels of reviewing and refinement of themes. The first level was conducted on the coded data extracts, where the researcher read and reviewed the collated extracts to assess whether these formed a coherent pattern. The second level was to consider the validity of individual themes and their linkage to the data set, to ascertain whether the themes were a true reflection of it. Any new themes that were possibly missed during the initial coding stages were assimilated in this phase (Braun, & Clarke, 2006). The process of reviewing themes was informed by the ecological framework, as translated from the life stories to the interview schedule.

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), this current phase was a continuation of the analysis that refined the particulars of each theme. Through the defining and refining process, the researcher was able to identify the essence of each theme and determine certain aspects of each theme captured in line with the ecological systems framework in place.

Phase 6: Producing the report

Once all the themes and sub-themes had been fully established, the final step was for the researcher to draw up the report. It is of great importance that the analysis report presents data extracts on the final write up. According to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 93), it “provides a concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and interesting account of the story the data tell”. By providing enough data extracts, they serve as evidence of themes the data encloses and a demonstration of the prevalence and the authenticity of the theme. Moreover, it presents the value and how rigour the analysis process progressed (Braun, & Clarke, 2006).

3.8 Trustworthiness of the study

Trustworthiness is often concerned with how the researcher can both be convinced and also convince others that the research findings are valuable (Babbie, & Mouton, 2005). The current study explored the role of education on how students overcome adverse experiences. Its trustworthiness rested on the utilisation of credible methods and sources of information which resulted in the dependability, confirmability and transferability of the study. The research study used the Guba's model of trustworthiness to confer the accuracy of the findings of this study (Shenton, 2004). Furthermore, the model speaks to the above mentioned four criteria for achieving trustworthiness of one's conclusions and these criteria are as follows; credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability (Shenton, 2004).

3.8.1 Credibility

According to Durrheim and Wassenaar (1999), a research study can only be defined credible if the findings are said to be both convincing and believable. The above principle stipulated by the authors was what guided the research, where the researcher ensured that every information that participants shared during the data collection process was respected and reflected appropriately in the presentation of findings as well as in the analysis. Lincoln and Guba (1985) have argued that the most important component of establishing trustworthiness in a research study is by ensuring that it is credible. Therefore, the researcher assumed numerous provisions that seek to promote confidence in the findings and are discussed briefly below.

The study attained credibility through adopting well established research methods accepted in qualitative research. Research methods for data collection and data analysis derived from previous comparable projects that have been successful in exploring lived experiences (Shenton, 2004). The interview schedules were designated for each participant and therefore they were not all the same, however, the process of generating the schedule was uniform. Moreover, the process of clarifying, probing and summarising took place during the individual interviewing process i.e.: iterative questioning (Shenton, 2004). Triangulation also formed part of strengthening the credibility, the research used different methods such as narrative life stories and semi-structured individual interviews which were to verify what the participants shared on the life stories, and these formed the main strategies for data collection (Shenton, 2004).

According to Shenton (2004), “tactics to help ensure honesty in informants” as suggested (p.66), echoes the importance of each participants to be allowed an opportunity to refuse to participate. The researcher also emphasised this important point to every participant, ensuring that participants were aware of their voluntary participation and the freedom to withdraw from the study at any point of the research process. Moreover, Shenton (2004) expressed that this procedure was highlighted to ensure that there was no obligation for them to be part of the study. The participants were assured of full confidentiality in terms of the information gathered from them. Anonymity was also ensured by not using any names or any form of identification. The researcher used pseudonyms in the research write up (Shenton, 2004).

3.8.2 Dependability

The dependability of a study addresses the issue of reliability. Shenton (2004) argues that for one to directly address dependability issues “the process within the study should be reported in detail” (p. 71). By doing so, this enables other future projects to repeat the work. The researcher ensured reliability by using thick descriptions of numerous steps taken and provided justification for the decisions taken in the execution of the study. The study also elaborated on the operational details pertaining to data gathering (Shenton, 2004).

3.8.3 Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the extent to which the study findings direct outcome of the study focus rather than the biases of the researcher (Babbie, & Mouton, 2004). In qualitative research, researchers’ biases are inevitable due to the complexities of ensuring real objectivity (Patton, 2001). However, Shenton (2004) presents steps that may perhaps be followed in ensuring that the research findings are the results of participant experiences rather than the researchers’ preferences. In maintaining confirmability, the study adopted triangulation as means of reducing the effects of the researchers’ biases. The researcher was able to distinguish between personal values and those of the study participants through self-reflexivity (Rubin, & Rubin, 2005). The researcher also kept reviewed field notes, field diaries and referred to proposal notes to realign with the initial vision and mission of the study.

3.8.4 Transferability

External validity is often concerned with the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations (Shenton, 2004). Transferability in qualitative approaches is influenced

by the degree to which contextual information regarding the fieldwork is sufficiently provided by the researcher Lincoln and Guba (as cited in Shenton, 2004). In attaining transferability, the researcher gathered sufficiently detailed data and further reported it in an articulated manner. This process was undertaken to provide the reader the opportunity to make such judgements on transferability.

3.9 Ethical considerations

Ethical concerns are a very important component of qualitative researcher, and for that matter are included from the development of the research proposal right up to disseminating the research findings (Willing, 2008). Davies and Dodd (2002) presents their stance to ethical considerations and argue that ethics are more than a set of principles and abstract rules thus should not be treated as separate entity to our research. Moreover, a contemporary approach to ethics ought to be flexible and integrate the context of each study to protect both the participants as well as the researcher. The authors echo the importance of demonstrating respect for ethics in practice, i.e. ethical issues encountered every day during data collection e.g. voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, justice, beneficence, non-maleficence, right to withdraw without facing any negative consequences. To ensure issues of ethical consideration were upheld, participants were required to give consent to participating in the study (see appendix B) (Davies, & Dodd, 2002).

The current research study was part of a bigger project, titled, “Developing critical reflexive professionals who can provide appropriate service to individuals, communities and societies” conducted in South Africa. The above information was used to ensure that the research was ethically sound as stipulated in the research proposal. The proposal included instruments that the researcher used during the data gathering processes, the proposal was then reviewed by the University of KwaZulu-Natal Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee which granted the research full approval with protocol reference number HSS/0901/017M (See appendix A).

3.10 Chapter summary

The aim of this chapter was to address aspects pertaining to research design, research paradigm. The chapter then extended to elaborate explicitly the selection of participants and data collection processes as well as the ethical considerations, Measures taken to ensure trustworthiness of the

study, reflexivity and the role of the researcher as an instrument formed part of the literature discussion. The next chapter reports on the major findings of the study and discussion.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

Chapter Four presents main findings of the current study. The information provided below reflects on participants' socio-demographic information and includes an overall thematic analysis in which the data is presented. The chapter further contains direct excerpts from both the semi-structured individual interview transcripts and the life stories, which are utilised to demonstrate major themes and sub-themes that have emerged from the data set. The inclusion of individual interview and life story excerpts extend beyond demonstrating the themes, rather it also provides evidence found within the data set and most importantly allows an understanding of experiences and realities of all participants within their contexts.

Literature in this current chapter is assimilated into study findings to aid in the discussion and interpretation thereof. The discussion thus highlights the important research findings that dominate in the data and predominantly focuses on the subjective experiences of resilience among South African female master's students, in response to adversity. The analysis is informed by an ecological systems framework.

The study opted to use the ecological systems framework to provide a detailed understanding of the trajectories students undertake in maintaining resilience as well as to consider individual, environmental and societal factors that influence the responses to adverse experiences (Williams, & Bryan, 2013). The ecological framework encouraged the researcher to look beyond single factors and consider the dynamic influences of contextual factors on resilience among female master's students. Furthermore, through triangulation, resilience theory allowed the researcher to describe and interpret the experiences and achievements of South African female master's students across different contexts (Williams, 2011).

4.2 Description of study participants

Prior to deliberating on the study findings, the chapter reports on the socio-demographic information of the study participants, thus the presented section outlines the socio-demographic characteristics of participants in-depth. Seven South African female students who were enrolled

for a Health Promotion master's degree in the years 2016/17 were interviewed for the study. Four of the seven participants were completing their subsequent year (M2) while the other three were in the first year of their master's programme. The ages of the students' ranged from 22 to 44 years. The researcher categorised the ages to align with the South African political timeline to get an explicit understanding of the context of the experiences. According to the constitutional timeline, three students were born when the Apartheid regime was still well underway, this was between the years 1974 and 1988. Three other students were born during the negotiations of becoming a democratic country which was in the year 1993 and one participant was born when South Africa was legally a democratic country.

The study also reports on the ethnic backgrounds of students. Six students identified themselves to be African and one student reported to be Indian with English as her home language. Among the six students who are from an African ethnic group, four were Zulu while one was Xhosa. The sixth participant was ethnically mixed with Xhosa and Sotho parents; however, she identified more with her Sotho background. The names of the participants were changed to pseudonyms in line with 'best practice' in the ethical conduct of social research.

4.3 Findings according to the Ecological systems framework

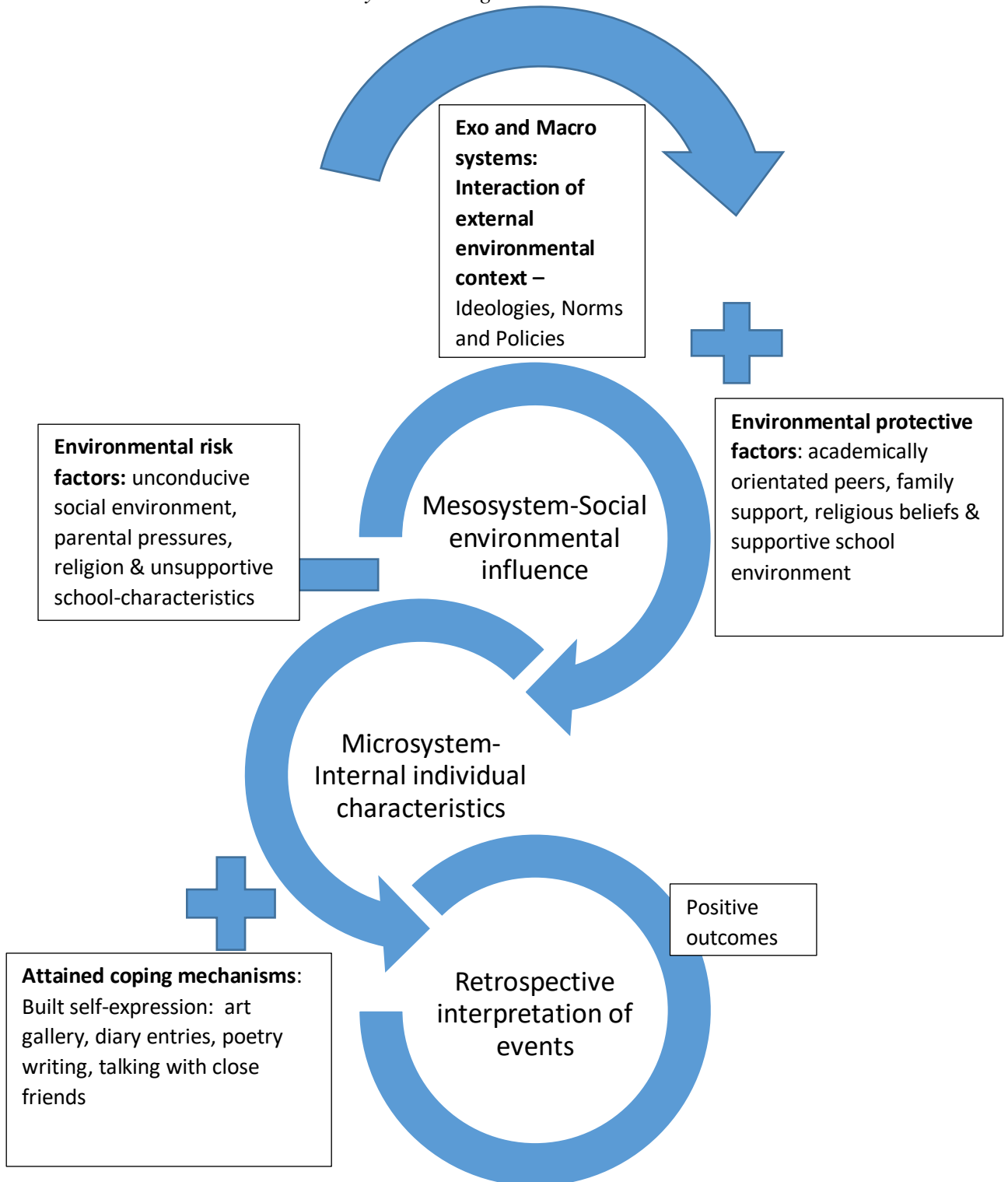
As previously stated, this study explored the resilience of South African female master's students in response to adverse circumstances. The exploration was done from an ecological systems framework, with resilience theory tracing the interactive patterns of the concept of resilience throughout the systems. The themes emerging from the findings reflect participants' experiences and responses. They also reflect the researcher's interpretation of the data by quoting relevant excerpts supporting the themes with relevant literature. Themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data are categorised according to the ecological systems framework with each theme speaking to at least one level of the ecological system. The four domains of the concept of resilience have also been assimilated into the themes to clearly illustrate how each exerts its influence on individuals and other domains.

The microsystem layer consists of two main themes, namely the internal *characteristics* and the *retrospective interpretation of events*. The microsystem unpacks elements of the evolving reflexivity of students as they are taken through the journey of sharing their life experiences. Sub-themes for the aforesaid themes include reflective emotions, positive outcomes and stressors. The

mesosystem layer entails the socio-environmental influences as its overarching theme with environmental risk and protective factors as sub-themes. The exosystem briefly touches on the influence of parents' workplace. Lastly, the macro system consists of the *external environmental context* such as the indigenous *beliefs and ideologies, political transition and socio-economic status*.

In ensuring dependability and credibility, the study triangulated the findings from three aspects: the researcher, the participants and existing literature. This chapter presents findings of the study, which are discussed in the following pages under four main themes, each with sub-themes summarised in figure 4 below.

Figure 4: Themes and subthemes summary visual diagram:



The above-mentioned overarching themes are defined by numerous aspects that intensify the understanding of how participants perceive and describe the adversities they have experienced during their lives and from the multiple levels of the ecological system. The sub-themes also assist in reflecting on the many facets relate to how participants perceive their adverse and coping experiences. In exploring the aspirations to academic achievement, the researcher found that an overwhelming number of students reported to have focused most of their coping towards thriving in school and making progress in their academic endeavours despite facing adverse circumstances.

As an emergent finding, the study then looked closely into academic resilience. According to Morales (2008), academic resilience research focuses on the study of high educational achievement which denotes how further one gets with their academic journey as opposed to academic excellence. Following the ecological framework, themes and sub-themes of the study findings are reported in correspondence to the framework layout, starting with the system that is closest to the individual and is stated to have direct impact and extends to the outer levels to synergize the findings to the framework:

4.4 Microsystem: Individual internal characteristics

4.4.1 Retrospective interpretation of events

Contemporary social science literature ascertains that reflexivity is often used in contexts of research, professional practice or therapy to highlight the process of generating an understanding of how ones' actions are formed by and from the world and others (Swartz, Gibson, & Gelman, 2002). Reflecting on an adversity can arouse feelings that were either not felt or not apprehended at the time of the adversity. It took most of the students to move away from that adverse experience for them to acknowledge the feelings and the influence it had on them. This theme considers influences of negative and positive experiences.

Participants brought forward the emotions that were aroused when they had to think about their experiences. Majority of the participants who had reported to have experienced adverse circumstances in their childhood mentioned how reflecting on those experiences brought new insight and caused them to make sense of the situation at the time it occurred as well as in the current state as they reflected back on it. The participants mentioned the following:

So, at first I didn't really understand what was happening and now that I think about it, there are stuff that I did not add on the story. If you read my story, you would realise that I said I am closer to my dad than I am to my mum. When my mother moved out to stay wherever it was that we were staying in town, she actually used me as a pawn to get to my dad. Participant 1

My mum grew up in the village and she remained in the Eastern Cape. She was living in small towns so her moving to a city was also an experience for her, so I think she was afraid. That was a symbol of her fears and she didn't want to tell anyone but she was moving because she was feeling defeated, her marriage was falling apart and so for her it was like 'I'm running away, I am leaving in the middle of the night, I don't want anyone to see me and stop me'. I feel like that's also what it was about because she didn't communicate to anyone, she just made the decision. I don't know, it's something that still hurts me till this day, I mean the way we left. I never really got over it because we had to make sense of it when my mother was not communicating much we just had to pack and go. I mean I still loved my life, I had a life there. I had friends, I was young, but I was still attached to the place and I felt like she didn't consider any of that. Participant 2

I described falling pregnant as all my hard work being in vain because a baby is a lot of responsibility, you can't get anything done. As amazing as my baby is, it is a lot of stress and I don't get anything done that I am meant to. I just go to work, come home and bond with her. That is my routine, I do it every day and as much as it sounds selfish but there was so much more I wanted to do before I could start taking care of someone else, so much more I wanted to accomplish and now I can't. As much as she was not planned, now my life is centered on her. Participant 5

The above excerpts illustrate the significance of reflexivity and the meaningfulness of retrospection in one's life, more so in adverse events where participants would rather not dwell on undesirable experiences. When students reflected on their experiences, they started unpacking the layered emotions they might not have acknowledged during the time of the incidences. This provided a platform of gaining insight into their experiences, with some discovering embedded truths about the circumstances they were confronted with. For the students to be able to thoroughly overcome certain ordeals, the excerpts show that they had to also make sense of why it happened

and how they were impacted by it. Evolving reflexivity took the participants on a journey of retrospective interpretation when they were offered the opportunity to retell their life story, and in that, they started to understand the experiences through different lenses as the excerpts have shown.

These findings support those of Shaw (2010), which indicate that reflexivity is an explicit evaluation of the self, it involves looking again, reflecting back to oneself and concluded by stating that in a nutshell, it is when one turns their gaze onto themselves. Research by Dailey and Browning (2014) concurs with the current study findings highlighting that the rise in scholars exploring narratives repetition suggests that they have become aware of their importance and further identified three dualities produced during the process of narrative repetition. These dualities are namely the sameness/differences in cultural issues, an understanding of inherently complex narratives as a form of interpretation and one that offers transformation in the view of narrative shift and the differed meaning of the story over time (Dailey, & Browning, 2014).

Two additional participants reflected on the positive attributes they assumed after retelling their life stories which were not realised at the time of adverse experiences:

I started doing exceptional things when I was quite young but because I couldn't point out that this is good, it was the things that I wanted to do which I enjoyed doing but I didn't think of them having an impact on me at that time. For me, it was something that I did because I had the ability to do it but when I reflect back and I thought to myself that God has been with me, it has been so great. At the times, it was like because I studied, I was smart and was in the top three it was not something big for me. When I look back, I realize that was something.

At some point there are things that we look down upon because they had to be done but looking at the circumstances that which you did them in you are astonished at how remarkable you were. Especially for me, most of the time I took things as a given and think it is what I was supposed to do. Participant 4

Another participant also said the following:

With my personal experiences I have always carried values taught by my parents which have probably saved me from a lot more horrific experiences that I could have

encountered. I often took it for granted that my father covered us in every aspect of life, I mean he was a Pastor- you cannot go wrong there. Participant 6

As the students recounted their experiences, they also took pride in how well their end results were and that contributes as an important aspect of reflexivity. The positive attributes that the students share is considered as enforcement that although they might have faced some adversity at some point of their life, there was still something good that they were able to account for and this contributes as a positive factor when responding to challenges. Retrospective interpretation of experienced events came out as one of the strongest themes during the coding process of the thematic analysis. Because the semi-structured individual schedules were not the same for every participant, as each was adapted to further inquire on the thematic gaps reported on the life stories.

The reflexivity which began from the time of writing life stories for participants in the study findings concur with that of Gilgun's (1999) which also found that reflection and introspection were supportive of a resilient outcome. Participants used the presented opportunity during the lecture to reflect on their experiences and try make sense of them. The significant role of reflexivity and the use of life stories to reflect on the past came out strongly in all the narratives which suggests that participants identified this notion to have impacted their perceptions on how they respond to adversity, which included coping strategies.

Current study findings support the literature stating that one can never truly know the impact an experience has on them unless they look back to it and try make sense of everything. Research findings by Mezirow (1990) indicate that individuals make sense of their experiences through interpreting them. In addition, much of what is learned about an experience entails making new interpretations that enable one to elaborate and further differentiate the experiences (Mezirow, 1990). Learning is then referred to as the process of making a new or revised interpretation of an experience, which subsequently guides action, appreciation and understanding thereof. The study findings further concur with Mezirow (1990) as they revealed that the more frequent participants speak about their experiences, the more they are drawn to making sense and interpret those experiences.

The reflective standards of individuals as articulated by Jarymowicz and Imbir (2015) stem from an individual's understanding of what is negative or positive with reference to the self and what is generally constructed as good or bad. Furthermore, the evaluation of experiences and emotions is

close to impossible to reach without the intellectual engagement, thinking and reasoning of an individual (Jarymowicz, & Imbir, 2015).

4.4.2 Reflexivity-life story processes

Human beings are social beings. Shaw (2010) highlights that human experiences should be understood in their context. Moreover, the way humans make sense of their experiences and themselves is bound by time and place (Shaw, 2010).

This sub-theme is to precisely demonstrate how participants describe and understand their adversities over a period of time and after retelling their life story. The sub-theme uses the excerpts in the data set to illustrate this. In doing so, the sub-theme reports on one randomly selected participant whose reflexivity progress the researcher tracks to demonstrate how participants interpret their adversities over a period of time on different platforms. The study includes the data found in the participants' life story and semi-structured individual interview transcripts to discover the trajectories of resilience development.

Following a brief thematic analysis of the life story, the study found that the participant's conversation was centred on family and education.

The relationship I have with my family makes me exceptionally glad of my identity and make me feel more grounded and positive about existence, they encourage me to accomplish progressively and be excited about existence. Knowing that I have younger siblings whom I should take care of propels me to strive for more progress in my life, I cherish my family.

I have learnt that somehow our parent's actions and their parenting styles shape us, our behaviours, psychological well-being and perspectives. Since family is the main source of knowledge and socialization. Therefore, parents are given a role to shape and guide their children. Participant 4

The brief snippet of her perceptions regarding parental roles reflects her understanding of the relationship that exists between children and their parents within a socio-ecological environment. This sheds light to the excerpts below on the decision made during retrospection regarding parents' influences.

In September 2010, I was diagnosed with pneumonia and I could not attend the last term at school. And in November 2010, I was diagnosed with Tuberculosis (TB) which made me write my matric year end exams in the hospital. Gladly I could make it, even though I suffered a lot but I did not want people to feel pity for me, I remained strong. I remember that even my parents told me to defer school and return the following year but I denied and told them that I would write my exams then we will see from there, because more than all I did not want to see my family hurt. I always tried to remain strong and positive even though I felt it was hard.

Participants were instructed to refer back to the original life stories which they shared with the class and to further add reflections based on their experiences of sharing part of themselves in a dialogical space. From the task of added reflection, the researcher noticed how Participant 4 digressed from conversing about her relationship with family and her appreciation of the family towards self-actualisation and awareness of her own strength and capabilities.

I was doing my matric the same year I was diagnosed with pneumonia and unfortunately could not return to school for the final term. My family was agitated by all of this and insisted I do not write my exams until the following year, but I persisted, and I passed outstandingly. After all pneumonia was not a case but a blessing in disguise, I am glad I never let go of my dreams.

She then went on and said:

My difficulties have equipped me with tenacity, wisdom and courage to face everyday life. I have been disputed and rejected in other parts of my life, but courage has been my shield, it has helped me push boundaries and work hard for the thing that I want. Courage has helped me shape my confidence and handle my fears. Recognising, accepting and accommodating all these challenges has also improved my self-esteem after all conquerors are born in the face of adversity. Glory be to God the Almighty, the creator of heaven and earth, indeed from concrete a flower can grow. Participant 4

Excerpts show that time and space have a significant impact on narratives and the meanings that emerge each time the story is told. The series of quotes taken from the original life story through to the added reflection and last on the individual interview depict a narrative shift, from family

orientation to self-awareness. A possible contributing factor for the shift is the audience to which the story is told, which then suggests that having commonalities or sharing sentiments with the audience favours a certain version of the story. When participant 4 realised that someone else or her peers had also gone through adverse ordeals in their lives, she started to acknowledge her internalised strengths and capacity to overcome.

Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) reported that resilience research has now accepted that a significant percentage of the population that experiences traumatic events will demonstrate post-traumatic growth thereafter. Research by Peterson, Park, Pole, D'Adrea, and Seligman (2008) found propelling evidence that reinstates that character strengths are likely to improve amongst individuals who have suffered trauma such as witnessing someone's death or surviving a life-threatening illness.

Problem-focused coping and acceptance, reinterpretation and positive religious coping were found to closely correlate with growth (Linely, & Joseph, 2004). Moreover, the authors also found that emotion-focused coping including social support also positively contributes to one's growth following an adversity (Linely, & Joseph, 2004). The presented data findings were also widely found in numerous literatures, philosophers and religions pertaining to the value of one's sufferings and the potential of growth through adversity (Linely, 2003; Linely, & Joseph, 2004). Participant 4 now understood and spoke differently about her adversity, after reflecting on the life story she acknowledged what she went through and with that was able to come to understand her internal forces that helped her not just what her family and teachers did. This stands to support the study by Rosenthal (2003) as it revealed that it is pivotal for the researcher to take into consideration the entire life story from its genesis to how it is constructed in the present.

4.5 Microsystem: Internal factors fostering coping mechanisms

The internal characteristics theme presents and discusses findings that influence coping strategies and inspire academic success among South African female master's students. Research over the years has emphasized the relevance and significance of personal and environmental resources that buffer the effects of normative and non-normative stress on health (Dumont, & Provost, 1999). Phasha (2010) emphasizes on how the presence of protective factors do not automatically imply positive responses to adversity. The author goes further to explain the importance of understanding that factors do not operate in isolation, rather there ought to be some form of interaction with other

factors (Phasha, 2010). Participants in the study present diversified factors that they ascertain to contribute to their holistic well-being and further influence their academic achievement. The study reports on the following findings: human agency and self-esteem, self-efficacy and self-expression.

4.5.1 Human agency and self-esteem

Human agency in this study context refers to the social cognitive processes that seek to influence the development, adaptation or change. The agentic perspective which derives from the social cognitive theory is the study's point of interest as this suggests that one has full capacity to influence their own functioning and life circumstances (Bandura, 2006). Excerpts below elaborate:

As much as I bunked school and all of that, I still did my homework, or I would still study but not as much as I normally did. Like I would study two days before the exam, my routine changed not that I completely stopped studying. Hence I checked my timetable before bunking, I would not bunk maths so I had some value in my studies. Participant 1

I automatically knew that something was wrong here where education is not encouraged well. They are discouraging students from aspiring and seeing themselves as graduates in universities. I remember they had an open day and they invited colleges. I am thinking 'why didn't they invite Wits University, why didn't they invite University of Johannesburg' and I was questioning that in my head like where are the universities. Participants 2

I can say that I realised when I was doing my honours that it is not enough for me to just have an honours degree. I need to be exclusive, to be different from other graduates so in a way I also have my own drive or motivation of being great or achieving more in terms of education. Participant 3

All the quotations relate to the role of education in a participant's life and how decisions or the actions they made were aligned with their own educational aspirations and personal interests. Based on human agency and the agentic perspective, these excerpts clearly show that participants were not just behaving but they were self-regulated and intentional in accommodating their self-interests at the time.

According to Kabeer (1999), agency refers to the ability one has to define their goals and to act upon them. However, agency is far greater than observation action which refers to actions based

on what it observe on a daily basis but includes the meaning, motivation and purpose brought forward into the action (Kabeer, 1999). Other forms of agency mentioned were those of which are likely to take beyond conceptualisation and include the form of having the ability to negotiate, analyse and reflect (Kabeer, 1999). The reported data excerpts have been very instrumental in illustrating the sense of agency throughout the data. The trajectory of agency in the study was sourced from different systems and having different influences on participants. Education was still prioritised regardless of the situational circumstances that the students might have found themselves in.

The study found that a substantial number of participants reported high esteem and positive regards on their educational aspirations and what they had achieve despite facing hardships in their lives. Support in students' lives plays a vital role in building confidence and developing high esteem. On the contrary, not having any support or encouragement in turn results in a negative impact in the level of confidence. This emerged as a great contribution to the study as participants perceived achieving academically and progressing in one's education as an important aspect of overcoming adversity. This study refers to this finding as academic resilience, where students are highly motivated to excel academically despite all the other external threats they faced.

The excerpts below indicate how the change of environment and having teachers who did not instil value in education or encouraged higher education learning resulted in Participant 2 being intimidated and having low self-esteem because of constantly being told they would not amount to anything in life:

Then I went to Senate house and checked for my name and it was right there "accepted". I felt so disappointed I think it was more fear more than anything. I felt disappointed, I wasn't even happy I was just like "am I going to come here?" The whole place was intimidating already but my mum was excited. Participant 2

The quote is an illustration of the severity of not being encouraged and motivated to be or to do the best, the participants mentioned the detrimental and negative effects of being discouraging by teachers. This is not something that the participants vocally admitted to, but the excerpts clearly indicate that she felt intimidated by the university and coming to learn the fact that she would be attending one of the top universities in South Africa. Self-esteem, which falls under the notion of social cognitive has a lot to do with psychological processes and having positive agency.

4.5.2 Self-efficacy

The above-mentioned sub-theme includes factors that derive internally from the participants that informed their resiliency, factors such as self-confidence and agency. One participant takes us through an incident that occurred which denotes self-efficacy:

Eish I don't know, at the time I did not have a concrete reason, but I think I always had that thing in me that I want to prove people wrong and prove to myself that I can do it. I remember even before my exams because I did not go back for my third term so when exam period came, my sickness had already worsened. Before that time, I still wanted to go to school, I did not like staying at home though teachers told me that I should focus on healing and see what happens next. I persisted on going even though I felt it was beyond my strength but in my heart. I wanted to do it and I would do it.

So, when I got to school wearing two jerseys that were of different colours, some learners were laughing at me saying 'why did they allow you to wear a different jersey, is it because she is better than us?'. You know I didn't have answers for those questions, but I kept it together and told myself that I won't let them get to me. Just because I am feeling like this or wearing like this, I know what I came to school for so it's not something I had it in me that I knew how to answer to those questions or respond to certain situations it just happened.

I could've easily said, "I'm done!" and give up because it was not easy. I won't lie, I failed. I had supplementary exams to write and my family would understand and say it is okay it is because I am still unwell. But I couldn't allow that, I could not accept that! I didn't want to make my illness an excuse, I felt like I could do more than that. Participant 4

The excerpts were all from one participant however the participant speaks of three different events which challenged her in their own respective ways. Although the sub-theme (self-efficacy) is substantiated with one participant's quotations, this does not make the circumstances less of adverse experiences. Having self-efficacy as an individual is having the capability of constantly having to fight challenges and overcome life's hurdles and not allowing those circumstances to consume you and make you lose confidence in yourself.

The important role played by the socio-ecological systems in this instance was that as Participant 4 was sharing and re-telling her life story, there were traces of the different layers of the systems and how the participant manoeuvred and interacted with them. In resilience studies, self-esteem is seldom considered a coping strategy or social support system. However, research has proved that individuals with high self-esteem or a high feeling of control are most likely to adopt active coping strategies focused on problems (Dumont & Provost, 1999). Moreover, the research findings are consistent with studies which report that assets are those factors that reside within an individual such as competence, coping skills and self-efficacy which serve as promotive factors when faced with risk (Fergus, & Zimmerman, 2005).

4.5.3 Self-expression

Findings in the data indicated that majority of participants could not account for their coping mechanisms or plan how they would overcome an adversity. Some reverted to expressing their emotions through journal entries, poetry writing, talking about the incident and visiting art galleries. Three participants stated how these mechanisms were not intentional but found that they helped in getting them cope with an adversity and maintain resilience.

The way it happened was parallel to the life story exercises that we were doing in Prof's class. It was an indirect thing though, because we had to talk about our life stories. So, I can say that writing about her for academic purpose was sort of healing for me. I do not usually write my feelings or if I'm upset about something that is not the route I usually use. Looking back at how I actually dealt with that helped. Participant 1

I am very artistic right, so I would also go to the local art gallery after school it's in Joubertpark and so it was this little spot of art in all this chaos. It is crazy where the Johannesburg Art Gallery is situated so I would just go there after school and I would just be in that space of art and it's a beautiful gallery and I feel like in a way protected myself from all the things that were going on. In a way I just kind of kept myself in my own world and that protected my aspirations even though I was not very clear. I knew I loved writing and would love to be a journalist that was as far as it went. It wasn't as very vivid as some other children's goals are, but I feel like I really worked hard to protect that, protect my intellectual space and still do my best even though I felt I was in an environment that didn't encourage that. Participant 2

Well, I don't know if I did like a methodological or like a strategic coping mechanism I didn't do that, I found that it really helped to have someone to talk to, so I did have my best friend. She is the one friend who has been around, she was very helpful, and I did a lot of diary writing. I diarized everything, from the time I got pregnant till after my baby turned one year. That really helped because I got to express my feelings even if no one heard, I got it out, and so it helped me a lot. Participant 5

None of the study participants admitted to having a preferred routine copying strategies that they resorted to in face of challenges or when circumstances became unfavourable. It is however apparent from the excerpts that when participants were confronted with a challenging situation, they were able to devise whatever resources they had at their disposal to resolve the challenges they faced. According to Dumont and Provost (1999), coping strategies refer to the actions used to deal with a problem or find solutions available within the individual. Participants in the study demonstrated a high level of self-esteem and confidence in overcoming difficult circumstances. The study considers coping mechanisms that the participants revert to from childhood right up to the stages of data collection which include the work of life stories. Current findings revealed that sharing experiences within a safe, trusted and non-judgement environment within a dialogical space was indicated to have great impact on responding to adversity, coping, and attaining academic resilience.

Findings also reported on one participant who was very conscious of how she preserved and protected her educational aspirations. Participant 2 took up a coping strategy that helped her sustain her academic ambitions. Ng-Mark, Salzinger, Feldman and Stueve (2010) ascertained that it is still important to note that the social ecology is single-handedly responsible for constraining or liberating peoples' options with regards to copying strategies that result in positive behaviour. Moreover, Ungars' (2013) study reinstates how the ecological perspective in resilience studies purposely decentre the individual to avoid self-blame for not flourishing when there are few opportunities to access resources.

4.6 Mesosystem: Social environmental influences

The study substantiates emergent findings on the influence of social environment with excerpts from the life stories and interview transcripts to derive on a credible conclusion on the claim made by Ungar (2011). The claim speaks to how individuals have an interactional relationship with their

external environment by deliberating on the impacts of social environmental factors on students' adversity and coping. Most participants raised the point of how the environment they were in impacted them on different aspects of their lives and the theme maps out all the reported environmental factors reported in the study. The following was mentioned under each sub-theme:

4.6.1 Family system

Parental pressures

Participants were asked the question: "How do you perceive the expectations your family has regarding your academic and personal career?", none of the participants reported to have been encouraged by the expectation held by their family or parents regarding their education or careers. Instead, most of the participants measured how they perceived the expectations to be too high and posing as pressures more than motivation. Majority of participants mentioned how burdensome the high expectations were on them. The excerpts report:

I would say that with my family. It is never enough, like even when I got my first degree no one just said you have done well you can go look for a job now. They keep on saying "you need to continue, you need to continue" so I think they see me as this one educated woman someday and going further than any of them. Maybe a post-doc or whatever, because even now they are encouraging me to continue after my masters and do PhD which means it is never enough for them. Participant 3

My family thinks that I am very smart, hence in matric they were very disappointed that I only got one distinction and I would say I got caught up in being a teenager that I ended up neglecting my studies. There's always expectation that I am going to get good results and that one day I will be living in Umhlanga. They perceive me as that person. Even now, the fact that I am doing my master's to them I am Oprah. Those pressures motivate and demotivate at the same time. Motivate in a sense that people already have expectations of you, so you need to try meet them. Demotivates, because you don't get low marks because you want to, you really tried but then that's the best you could've done. Participant 1

Participant 1 continued to share another incident when she experienced the parent's expectation mounting as pressure:

My father found this RDP house that he wanted to buy so that I could have a decent home because he felt he couldn't take me away from my mother so it was the least he could do. My mother refused the house, right now we would be talking about renovating. Those decisions that she made, I don't know hey. Like how she puts pressure on me right now like asking "when you working, you must buy me a house", which then means I have to work hard to afford to buy her a house. Participant 1

The parents' expectations regarding students' academic achievement and career successes were shown to have unfavourable effects on their educational aspirations and the general outlook of life. These parental pressures were interpreted by participants as too high expectations whereby they constantly find themselves trying to match those expectations which then adds to their adversity. In turn, participants perceived the expectation negatively and mentioned that these tend to tire them down and demotivate them because too much an expectation to try live up to. Some quotations also indicated how some participants felt that as much as the parents might have had good intentions and meant well. When they asked of certain things, knowing that there is this milestone that you still need to achieve, it becomes too much weight on their shoulders and amounted to the many other things that they need to overcome.

The above findings are in accord with those of by Deb, Stroal and Sun (2015) as they stipulate how parental pressure can presume negative outcome on children; the authors extended to state that academic stress is often the outcome of those parental pressures inflicted upon students. According to Deb et al. (2015), academic stress in this context refers to the mental distress regarding an anticipation of academic challenge or possibility of failure. Academic stressors have often been associated with the students' environment, namely: home, school and neighbourhood, and parental pressures for better performance report to be mostly responsible. Patel and Kleinman (2003) have argued that the socio-economic standing for most developing countries propels parents to have concerns for the welfare of their children and has provoked them to put pressure on their children to perform better and thrive for excellence to ensure a better life.

Another participant also reported that in other instances, parents did not articulate their expectations to them. However, she revealed how she internalised and interpreted the non-communicated expectations as pressure and in several ways where the parent had not said anything. The participant felt it was what was "expected" of them by the parent. The participant

went on to report how she felt indebted to her parents for all that they had done and the sacrifices they made to ensure that she got the best education.

I felt like I needed to show my parents that I was worthy of all the sacrifices they made and things they gave up for us. Even with studying, I never went out. I always studied, my parents always told me “you study, you do this, and you do that”. It was always like that, my entire life I do not remember anything else except studying, even now it is just studying, that’s the only other thing I do. Participant 5

The findings of the study correspond with those by Williams and Bryan (2013) and ascertains that family history of having parents and/or extended family members who were not afforded the opportunity to complete their high school or reach tertiary level contributes as a drive for participants to succeed and graduate. The authors stated that they further found that students were encouraged and motivated to succeed academically by what is referred to as non-traditional ways of educational support (Williams, & Bryan, 2013). The non-traditional ways include the narratives of personal hardships and narratives of education as a means to navigate out of poverty (Williams, & Bryan, 2013).

Majority of participants’ responses as illustrated above counteracted with the research claims in the literature as the study participants reported on the burdensome pressures. As Williams and Bryan (2013) stated, the missed opportunities and personal hardship narratives are often used by parents to encourage if not to motivate the participants’ educational aspirations. However, as the data excerpts indicated, such is not received as motivation on their end but rather as too high expectation that becomes difficult to fulfill.

Lived expectations of parents

Another aspect of parental pressures that participants raised was that of having educated parents and how this had left them feeling pressured to assume roles that their parents wanted them to perform. The excerpts below depict the vocational influences educated parents have over their children:

My mum loves education, she is someone who really loves education and I think she is someone who always believed that I could go further and further than she did. She in a

way, lived through me and realised her dreams through me so she would've stopped me and I didn't want that, enough is enough I needed to go and work.

After completing my honors in Sociology, I applied for a course work masters in Sociology as well as NRF funding. The following year which was year 2011, I got accepted into the master's programme, I also got the NRF funding but decided to take a job instead, without my mother's knowledge who would have insisted I continue with my studies. Participant 2

My father who was a veterinary scientist, he always wanted me to study medicine. The initial plan was for me to go to MENDUSA to study medicine but when that failed, my dad suggested I apply to study in Cuba the following year. I then I decided to do something for that year. When I got here at UKZN, I decided to stick to Psychology and not go to Cuba anymore. It was a bit of a disagreement between father and because I did not want to go to Cuba anymore but to remain in South Africa and do Psychology. What my father still says to me is that I should at least get my PhD and get a title of being a doctor, not necessarily a medical doctor but he needs to have a doctor in his family. Participant 3

Parents appeared to have rigidly enforced their own agendas and intentions on their child's lives, which unfortunately has negatively affected the relationship they had. In the quotes included above, participants mentioned how their parents either directly or indirectly made attempts to dictate their academic careers for them. Any disputes to the proposed options would possibly jeopardise their relationship, often resulting in the participant feeling like they had failed their parents because they would have failed to do what was required of them. Moreover, the excerpts also revealed that to keep the peace between participants and their parents, the participants sometimes had to be dishonest or hide things from their parents because they would not take their children's disagreement well.

Floyd (1996) found that young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds display a strong belief in the power of hard work, which in most instances occurred in the presence of parents' high expectations as well as support from family members. However, the current study has brought an additional dimension to the claim and posits that parents can also impose their own self-centered expectations on their children and these to an extent disempowers the young people because they do not take into consideration what the child might want. A study by Shaw (2010) concurs with the findings and reports that mothers from low-income families with higher education

often hold high expectations for their children's academic achievements. The aforesaid study corresponds with the findings of this current study. However, findings from the current study extends to include both parents holding high expectations of the participants' academic achievements.

As also indicated in the current study findings, the study critiques existing literature stating that parents' education strongly influences students' academic success. The more educated parents are, the more they are able to mobilise cultural and social capital for their children (Crede, Wirthwein, McEvanly, & Stainmayr, 2015). In as much as educated parents are considered to better foster students' motivation to succeed academically and have higher education aspirations for their children (Crede et al., 2006). Findings of the current study also suggest that educated parents do not consult with their children regarding their own educational aspirations and academic careers. Instead of consulting, educated parents impose their aspirations on their children. Participants reported significant academic progress because it was what was expected of them or they were encouraged by their personal aspirations apart from the parent.

Family support

Upon being asked about how they described the support they received from their families and how that support contributed to their response to challenges and coping, participants mentioned the following:

My parents even told me that they didn't expect it to work out the way it did because I was not well. For me, it was a compliment, in as much as parents were proud it is rare to hear them utter those words. So, for me it was a proud moment because I got to hear them say they were proud. Participant 4

My greatest supporters are my mother and my grandmother by far. With the little that my gran has, she managed to help pay for my fees whenever she could and continues to encourage me to study further. Had it not been for my mom and gran, I probably would have given up half way through. At the beginning of every year, it is always a battle for me to register because I always have outstanding fees from the previous year. Participant 6

She further mentions how the expectations her mother had for her positively influenced how she lived her life and the decisions she made as she grew older:

I have a single mother who tirelessly makes every efforts to give my siblings and me everything. I cannot thank her in any less of a way than to do what she expects of me. I already disappointed her by having a child at a young age and even with that, she supported me and stood by me till today. Participant 6

My mum was instrumental in me getting into Wits. I remember when I went to check whether I was accepted, they would put a list on the notice board at Senate House. So, I went there and I checked because I even had to write an entry test so I didn't think I was going to pass because the test was just like crazy. The whole place was intimidating already but my mum was excited, so she had to scrap money together. I remember her having to call my uncle, her brother that she hadn't seen for years asking him for R2000 registration then he said well he doesn't have it and so we were trying to borrow money around.

Participant 2

Participants indicated that they had benefitted primarily from the support that was shown by their parents and extended family members in their education endeavours and personal difficulties. Excerpts listed also illustrate that the kind of support received was either in the form of financial means where they funded their studies or even worked hard to ensure they had money for their studies. Others expressed the psychosocial support that made all the difference to them and the successes they made academically. Participants' responses portray the significance of exploring experiences from an ecological systems perspective. These findings confirm the role of mesosystem which relates to the interactions between the different systems, which can be overlapping protective factors on other levels of the socio-environment.

A study by Williams (2011) supports the aforesaid findings. Williams (2011) found that academic support from family members may considerably contribute to positive academic outcomes. These findings indicate how having family members who actively supported students financially also contributed to their positive outcomes. It also emerged from the findings that when parents and family members show support towards education endeavours, it propels them to further their studies due to knowing that someone else believes that they can achieve academically even when they thought they would not perform well.

Parental involvement and having family as enabling factors within the immediate environment has been reported to have a more significant impact on achievement than other factors found in the

external environment or socio-economic factors (Williams, & Bryan, 2013). The current study findings are accord with those of previous research, which revealed how academic-related parenting practices are important contributing factors in participants' academic success amid adversity. These factors constitute of "verbal praises for good marks, setting high but realistic expectations, monitoring academic progress in school, supervision of and help with school work" (Williams, & Bryan, p. 293).

The present study participants, as previously mentioned were all post-graduate students. In exploring the notion of family support further, the study also investigated any differences or similarities in the support given to students during their undergraduate degrees and when they decided to pursue post-graduate qualifications:

I always felt guilty that I wasted my parents' money, but I now realize that our parents want the best for us, in as much as we may think otherwise of their opinions. But above all. I am grateful that my parents supported me and never in one day I heard them complaining about it. I remember beginning of the year, I went to Johannesburg to look for jobs and went on my own. When I got there, I realized this thing of me rushing to work was not a good idea because I was inexperienced and only knew theory. I then told my dad that I am not ready for work and thinking of going back for masters, he told me that if I think that's what I needed to improve myself I should do it. I then had to come back and try. Participant 4

My parents never pushed me, even now when I was disappointed with myself that I did not get in for clinical psychology, they never pushed me. My parents instead said 'maybe you should take a break' because since my degree, I always work and study I've never just studied. So, they always tell me 'do not push yourself too hard'. Participant 5

With the little that my grandmother has from her pension, she has managed to help me pay for my fees whenever she could and continues to encourage me to study further. Had it not been for my mom and gran, I probably would have given up half way through. Participant 6

The excerpts quoted above suggest that there is a significant amount of support that students received from their family regardless of the level of study they pursue. The excerpts above show

no prominent evidence that suggests that there was any difference between the time when participants were doing their undergraduate studies and when they studied towards post-graduate qualifications. The quotes clearly show the parents' constant support towards their children's educational aspirations and progress even when the participants themselves might have felt derailed along the way. Furthermore, similarities that the study can report on would be the parents' consistency in the support they give to their child, both emotionally and financial. The participants reported that these factors positively contributed to their educational progress and also encouraged them to reach greater heights.

On the contrary, one participant reports how her parents wanted her to go back to university to further her post-graduate studies but did not assist in any way:

It is a must for a parent to give you something and if the parent does not give you that thing, then that is not okay. So, me being always understanding put pressure that okay it's all on me, now I have to work hard for something. Like for example, when I had to register for my masters'. My worry was that I was still owing my honours fees, so I felt like the stress was only on me alone and not on my parents because they were like "you need to register" but they were not saying what I must I register with because I was owing. "You guys need to pay my fees" and they would say "no you need to find funding" so it was like no "you need to sort yourself, you are old enough to sort out yourself ". So, it is that and it hits now that I raised myself up actually. Participant 3

Three of the study participants reported that their parents were very active in supporting their educational aspirations even when they themselves were sometimes demotivated. One other participant reported a different stance to the rest of participants when she indicated that her parents were not instrumental in assisting her financially to pursue her studies further, which then posed as an adversity because she had to find other means to ensure that she enrolls for the post-graduate qualification she aspired through her internalised agency.

According to Lopez (2001), young people originating from lower socio-economic backgrounds often perceive education as the means to better their lives and escape the difficult lives their parents lived. Moreover, parents are also found to continue instilling in their children, the expectations of attending college can provide encouragement and emotional support (Lopez, 2001). Parents unanimously see the expectation as support towards their child's life. These findings also echo an

argument raised by Moyo and Siraj (2015) on the importance of parents to show emotional and practical support towards their children's school and learning. The authors further highlighted that offering practical help in times of need is effective in ensuring success academic progress (Moyo, & Siraj, 2015). Thus, the reported quote show that parents need to actively provide support, either emotionally or financially for the students as this could also be a symbol of approval and pride from the parents.

4.6.2 Access to education services: Private versus public schools in South Africa

Unsupportive school characteristics

Every participant in the study had been a part of the South African education system either through the private or public sector. The private sector tends to differ significantly from the public sector. The significant difference is evident even in the education department. Service delivery and availability of resources from the state government are often far stretched from the privately owned organisations. Henceforth, the sub-theme reveals participants' personal experiences of the South African education system of either the private or public sectors. The participants had the following to share on their education experiences:

I think going to a private school and being taught to value education at a young age had a lasting impact because I automatically knew that something was wrong here where education is not encouraged. Well they were discouraging students from aspiring and seeing themselves as graduates in universities. Participant 2

Participant 2 reported to have attended a private school before her family relocated and had to start in a new school which was a public school. The following was stated:

There was this resentful I felt that Jules High School was more of a zoo than a school. I looked down on the education I was receiving, English class meant reading James and the Giant Peach by Ronald Dahl which I had read in primary school, which felt like an insult to my intelligence. I used to walk because my school was up the road, then I get to this school like it's mad, it's crazy. I did not understand why those kids were so badly behaved, I mean I had an English teacher who was teaching English in Zulu, and it's crazy.

There were also other bright students who didn't make it because they were in an environment that didn't encourage that, they didn't aspire too much, but they could've done even better than me. So, I think so, I think being in that private school in eMatatiele. Psychologically, I was made to respect education and even though it was primary school but there was a lot of pride so that pride was instilled in me when it comes to education and excellence so that really helped a lot because I had that exposure. Participant 2

Participant 5 reports on her education experiences attending a private school in South Africa:

I do not want to mention names, but the school was extremely racist, and teachers were even worried, I did feel a lot of racism. As in when I ask questions and stuff, they would ignore me and would not want to help. I would see other students who would stay after school and get extra help but did not need the extra help because they were getting 80s and 90s in maths and here I was struggling and telling my teacher I'm getting 26 in my trials. In school it was just that one white block that I could not get into.

It was a private school, we didn't have any facilities, but it was a private school. Literally had this perforated rooms with the cardboard ones where you could hear other classrooms. We had those so there were conditions of a rural school but it was a private school because we wrote IEB exams, so we wrote international exams, but I knew the sacrifice they were making because my fees at that time were like 46 thousand a year. Participant 5

A non-discriminative but comparative analysis was done between the presented experiences of the private and public education system in South Africa. The study first looked at participants whose experiences were in private schools and the transitioning participant moving from private to public schools. In the reported quotes, it became evident that learners attending private schools do not experience the same treatment or receive the same benefits from that environment. Protective factors at school level (private sector) are materialised by the human resources within the school environment to make it nurturing and welcoming for its learners. As presented above, some schools were very adamant in ensuring that learners valued their education while the other private school was discriminatory or selective in terms of who to offer remedial lessons, with some “special” services offered to some students and not everyone who sought assistance.

The study's emergent findings pertaining to racial discrimination within the educational systems concur with those of Boyat and Sayed (2014), and Ndimande (2009). The findings state that more than two decades after Apartheid was officially dismantled yet features of the educational order in South Africa still constitute class-based institutions, continuing disparities and inequities and poor academic achievement. The authors argue that with over 20- years of democracy, there is still a lot that needs to be realised in anticipating freedom of education (Boyat, & Sayed, 2014). In the plight of institutional racism in South Africa is still dealing with, findings in this current study articulate the reality that is lived in the lives of individuals as issues of race still exempt other learners from getting the education they needed. Moreover, the above excerpt proves how factors at a macro level have a ripple effect on the other levels of the system.

In reporting on the participants' development of academic resilience, one may find that the school is expected to be a context where students are mostly encouraged to excel and succeed academically. However, some participants mentioned how their school context was perceived as an adverse experience. Study findings further reveal that a powerful sense of cultural identification reinforced by a family or school may be highly functional in promoting academic resilience in students. Evans (2004) reported that school environments differ among private and public schools which then is apparent in the learners attending those schools. The current study found that maintaining values of being in a good school and thriving for excellence from a young age manifested as a protective factor that helped participants attain academic resilience. The excerpts support the relevant literature and further reveal that school characteristics held by a school contribute to the academic performance of the learners (Evans, 2004).

Supportive school characteristics

Considering the sub-theme of *supportive school characteristics*, the study further reports on the enabling and supportive factors persisting within the educational system reported by participants to have a significant impact in their responses to adversity and with coping.

Friends also helped me get back to my studying regime again, I remember Gift and I were usually the ones who spoke the most in class and it was easier for the teachers to point at us for answers. I recall in matric when Gift asked me what would I be applying for and immediately I was reminded that I needed to apply to go to university then that is when I started applying alongside with him. Participant 1

Coming to this school, I did realize that there was a small group of kids that strived to do better even though they were in a volatile environment and I would associate myself with that group from time to time because I felt like those were the people I could identify with.

Participant 2

Peer support in school stands out to be an enabling factor in the participants' life during their high school careers. Associating oneself with peers who have a positive outlook in life and whom one can draw aspirations from becomes one of the mechanisms that propel the learners not to lose courage in their own educational aspirations. Moreover, positive competition between peers also encourages healthy competition where learners always work hard to remain on the top in their class or grade.

Participants in this study were of the view that supportive school environments induce positive academic outcomes among students. Findings report on the good values and principles instilled by the school as well as positive teacher-learner relationships in the school.

I left eMatatiele when I was getting into my teenage years but I have always felt safe in that town. It created a very safe space, my school in eMatatiele was two streets away from my home. It was also a very small school and they prided themselves in being a good school in excellence. Participant 2

The gospel that was always preached at school, telling us that education is the key, if we want to be successful we should study and so I took that seriously. Since then I realized and understood that numerous things in life can be achieved through education and hard work.

Teachers also have an ability to be able to discovery something in a person, I think they discovered the potential in me and the kind of person I am. That helped me to realise that for me to become the person I wanted to be, I should continue improving and furthering my studies. Mrs Ngcobo was so awesome and a lovely lady, to think that you have those people who shape you at that very young age also encourages you because you have this kind of support. It shows that they care about you and you don't want to disappoint them, for me she had that kind of impact in my life. Participant 4

Participants in this study presented the positive contributions peers had on their own educational aspirations. A study by William and Bryan (2013) found that students acknowledge the importance of having school-orientated peers and close relationships with peers who have gone through the same challenges but still value education, as this serves as a source of accountability and motivation for others to succeed academically. Eccles and Roeser (2011) posit that children of school going age spend most of their time in school than any other setting except when they are in bed. It is considered as a place where they get to be exposed to their culture's knowledge, engage in activities that shape their identities and prepare for the future. Furthermore, school experiences influence several aspects of development during adolescence, ranging from the breadth and depth of intellectual capital and psychological well-being (Eccles, & Roeser, 2011).

Supportive school environmental factors were moderately reported by participants. Positive school-related factors were also found to persist in other studies including a study by Williams and Bryan (2013), which found that positive teacher-learner relationship improves the student's educational aspirations. Theron and Theron (2014) posit that educational services rendered by teachers should be both academic and non-academic. The above excerpt (Participants 4) clearly illustrates that teachers also provide support and engage with their students at a personal level. Another study also revealed that teachers that trust, value, respect and identify with their students and the families and communities that surround them foster resiliency (Greene, 2002).

4.6.3 Unconducive social environments

Disabling environment

The aforesaid sub-theme reports on the findings pertaining to the environmental factors and processes that contribute as risk factors or barriers to developing confidence in coping and overcoming adversity:

Participant 2 shares two different environments, which she felt were negatively impacting her psychological as well her physical well-being:

I mean I was caught in between these two worlds and I struggled in the other world. Like in my grandmother's world in the rural, I struggled a lot there and I feel like it was one of the cases that in a way eroded my confidence as a child because I was never as good as my cousin.

I went to school on the other side of town, I took taxis. I became adept at walking in between crowds and finding my way through the many streets and alleys. I became street wise and avoided the Nigerians that hollered at all costs. I was flung in a world of confusion and chaos, it felt so chaotic for me. That world just silenced me, I become so silent. I think I became depressed. Participant 2

Other participants shared the following:

I did not want to be home the following my matric year, so I needed good marks to get into a university of my choice and study what I wanted to study. So, it was that, which drove me to studying hard and get good grades despite having my parents separated and living with just one parent for years. At that time, I didn't want to be at home although my dad was back at home, but I still didn't like being in the environment I was in at home anymore.

Coming to university wasn't a great experience, I won't lie to you. It was so demanding emotionally and psychologically, because even though I had that thing of "I am grown up" but at the time I really had to grow up. I had to be independent you see, and had to step out of my comfort zone of thinking I have people around me that speak Zulu that I can interact with. When I got here, I had to understand that people are from different places, so I had to adapt to speaking English which wasn't something I was not familiar with because back home we all conversed in IsiZulu. Participant 3

I remember when I told my parent I didn't want to continue at the institution I was attending, we were on our way from a hospital in Dundee. I just woke up in the car and said I didn't want to continue and I had decided to do something else. I feel like I needed to move away from home and that environment maybe that way I would get better. Participant 4

My mother was looked down upon by other community members because she used to walk to work while others took public transport. People looked down upon us because we did not have much and it was not pleasant for me to see my mother become the laughing stock in our community. So, I told my heart that one day I will make my mother proud.

Because of the society I grew up in, I decided I would never live in rural areas again. That is when I refused when my husband said we must move from Umlazi to Umgababa. Rural

areas are now better than before but the trauma I experienced in the rural areas when I was young made me want to change rural areas and make them more like urban areas where people lived in decent houses. Participant 7

Participants quoted above were all from relatively different contextual backgrounds, and three of the participants believed that their environmental context had a negative impact, which either added to the adversity or hindered coping. Some participants reported that being in an environment that they were not familiar with and what they considered to be outside their comfort zone yielded negative and undesirable outcomes. Scholars such as Wang (2005) and Williams (2011) were the few to stress that external factors such as the environment also facilitate and inform resilience, hence any disturbances caused to the environment can have a negative impact on participants. Findings from the study are like those in resilience literature which also state that the quality of the environment serves as an important aspect of recovery and growth following an adversity (Ungar, 2013).

4.6.5 Religious beliefs

Participants identified religious beliefs as a factor that contributes significantly to how they respond to adversity as well as how religion plays a role in their coping. Religious beliefs in this context refer to both the spiritual aspects of one's religion as well as to the church body within the community and these will be deliberated under each sub-theme. The concept around religion is that often people of that religious belief perceive that in circumstances where it seemed beyond their power or control, they knew that that was a higher being that would make a way for them henceforth religion was an enabling force and a coping mechanism amid an adversity. Participants had the following to share on regarding their religious beliefs:

When I lost my grandmother instead of being sad, I was thankful because God could've taken her way before I was born but He prolonged the process. Participant 1

I come from a very spiritual family and I am also a believer, so I knew that if I pray, everything will turn out for the good because I believe so much in prayer and that God will fix things for me. And also accepting the situation, if something is beyond my control. Let me just accept that it is like this and move on. Participant 3

When I reflect back to that time, I am like God has been with me. When I moved this side, everything went well with my psychology degree, I never had a supplementary exam or failed any module. God was so great! Participant 4

Even though my mother was trying her best to keep us in good condition, my younger brother soon after quit school but I on the other hand pressed on focusing on my studies. That is when I learnt to depend on God which was at a very young age, and I continued to pass up until my standard five. Participant 7

The excerpts listed above relate to the spiritual aspects of religion. Participants mentioned that when things were beyond their own control or understanding, they often reverted to their belief in a supreme being that has the capability and capacity to resolve any challenge they might be faced with. Furthermore, participants also expressed their acknowledgment and gratification to their spiritual God as they believed they are the ones who made their prospects better and when they were dependent on God, any adversity they faced were somewhat “manageable” because they knew God would overcome or resolve on their behalf.

Findings correlate with the work done by authors Masten (2004), Wright and Masten (2005) concluding that religious faith or affiliation are commonly listed as protective factors in resilience literature. Similarity persists in what the participants identified as enabling social environmental factors which according to the excerpts mitigate the negative impact of an adversity. A study by Haight (1998) stated how churches are often the centre of the community and one context that promotes social interaction and nurturance, particularly amongst young people. A similar study by Dass-Brailford (2005) supports the claim by Haight (1998) and extends to mention that religious practices have the capacity to provide comfort in knowing that the “supreme beings” watch over them and cannot neglect them during difficult circumstances. Phasha (2010) emphasizes on the significant role the church and religious beliefs contribute towards academic resilience among African students.

In instances where religion was seen as an institutional body, the following was mentioned by participants:

I grew up in a controlled and closed environment. My father is a pastor and I had to set an example of a good child in my community as a Christian. The fact that I'm from a religious

family is interesting to note that religion has played a major role in my life. I think that the morals and values that our family and in society adopted were based on that of the Christian church which have filtered down into the 'way of life'. Participant 3

Participant 2 reports on the negative impact her religious beliefs had on her educational aspirations

So religiously, there was a discourse, a counter discourse where it was when you go to university, children become corrupt in that environment because there is so much influence from their peers. Going to university was not really encouraged, it was more about as a child it's either you finish your matric and work or you finish your matric and get into ministry and do the Lords' work and you preach. I do feel like that's influenced me a lot because I was very deeply entrenched in the religious realm and I wanted to do right by it.

I would go to church meetings and there would be this discourse about being careful of your children doing higher education, they will change and all of that so that was not encouraged. This was my spiritual home where I spend most of my time if I am not at school or at home I am at meetings. That was hard, I would feel guilty about having been a university student and there were lots of other children who were studying but fundamentally the organization didn't encourage it. I always felt guilty especially because I wanted to do right by my beliefs so that chipped me away, I would go to university and feel so defeated because I also wondered what I am studying and I would panic.

The above quoted excerpts illuminate the influences of religious organisations and how the norms and regulations held by the organisation affect the individuals that are part of their membership. Participant 4 takes us through her experiences of having a rigid religion that did not encourage young people to pursue higher education while having a mother who was very instrumental in ensuring that her daughter received the best education even if it meant defying the rules set forth by their religious organisation. The excerpts suggest that within the context of the religious organisation, school education was encouraged but any schooling post high school was not supported. Instead, young people were encouraged to go into ministry or work to help their parents.

Participant 4 explains how breaking the rules and doing something that was considered forbidden by her religion caused her to lose confidence in her studies and felt discourage. This intricate

situation is exemplary to how beliefs and customs becomes indwelled in a person's life that they always thrive to abide and do right by them.

Considering the aforesaid findings, a study by Umberson (1985) concurs with the current study's findings which suggest that religious beliefs and customs have an impact at several levels of the ecological system. Umberson (1985) postulated that religious communities may promote fundamental norms specific to them regarding health behaviours, familial relationships and other dimensions of personal lifestyle. Another stance taken by Ellison (1991) suggest that strong churches require higher- level of organisational commitment and social solidarity than weak ones. Such organisation demand distinctive lifestyle and behaviour lifestyle and also focus primarily on encouraging personal spiritual growth and life in ministry (Ellison, 1991).

4.7 Exo and Macro systems: Interaction of external environmental factors

The above-mentioned theme highlights the influence external contextual factors found within an exo- and macro- systems and how it infiltrates right through the ecological system. The current level also makes emphasis of the compatibility of this framework as it illustrates of each level on the next and in further understanding that these systems do not operate in isolation to each other. Subthemes below will deliberate further:

4.7.1 Socially constructed ideologies

Participants were not directly involved in the systems but findings have stipulated the extent to which the functions within each system has either positively or negatively affected the participant at an individual level. The following contextual factors were reported to have influenced participants:

Culturally embedded norms

My parents had to toil the soil to support their families and ours. I am the eldest of two younger siblings and like most traditional Indian homesteads. The eldest has the duty to take care of the household and their siblings while their parents were at work. Participant

5

In our isiZulu culture, man had to be dominate over his wife or wives and as a result my father had two legally wedded wives with my mother being the second wife. My father still had girlfriends and had children outside his marriage, but my mother and the first wife did

not have a problem because our customs allowed men to exercise polygamy as he wished.

Participant 7

Cultural and traditional norms have a potential effect on individuals' decision-making because they influence the decisions made by the person. Often, people belonging to a certain cultural group make collective decisions or rather enshrine the social identity of their supposed cultural group where shared knowledge and belonging to a particular group means one has to adhere to the "recipe of living". Individualism ceases to exist in culture because the mere definition of culture refers to the social behaviours and norms regarded collectively and so participants in the study also acted upon the collectively shared behaviours and norms.

Gender discourse

The study participants reported on the indigenous beliefs, ideologies and knowledge that is held in the greater societal context but manages to continue affecting the way participants live their personal lives and the opportunities afforded to them. One very prominent factor that came out strongly in the life stories was the concept of gender dynamics through numerous standpoints. Issues around gender have to be the most time-honoured indigenous beliefs and norms that have been greatly influential across generations and racial groups in many parts of the world. The study delves and present findings that are context-specific to South Africa.

Participants shared their experiences and perceptions on gender dynamics based on the teachings that have been passed on by the elders, the ascribed gender roles given to males and females, culturally validated customs and norms held within different communities:

Funny enough we always make a joke that when she is about to give you a lecture about life she would say "uzogana ngelinye ilanga" simply meaning one day when you're at your in-laws you will remember her teachings. I get the point she was always trying to make. Her teachings were mainly to submit to being a wife, how to treat your husband, how to love everyone at your in-law's family and what duties to enroll in. Participant 1

When my mother left, I had to look after my siblings and do house chores while my brother went out to look for piece jobs. Although my brother was older than I was, automatically those things fell on me, the girl, and that was not communicated it was just by default. No one said "that now you're staying with your brother, your brother is not going to make

sure that the laundry is done, he's not going to make sure that things are sorted. As the girl you going to have to fill in and take care of your siblings". Participant 2

Coming from a community like mine where women were not allowed to pursue education and believed that women did not need to be empowered educationally, I regard myself as very fortunate to have been afforded that opportunity to get to tertiary level. Basically, it was a perspective of the communities, but it wasn't the same with how my family did things because I mean I'm the last born and all my sisters are educated. So, that in a way kind of showed me that education is also important for women as well. It is important for women to get education regardless of what the community says. Participant 3

Within the gender discourse, we find that there are different dimensions to the ideologies around gender. In the quotes, the study reports on three noticeable dynamics that were experienced by the participants. Firstly, it was the gender roles that females were taught or passed down to them in the form of indigenous knowledge by the older generation. The knowledge passed regarded how females or wives should behave and carry out themselves when they reach puberty as well as assume desirable characteristics from a young age in preparation for marriage. Secondly, participant 3 also touched on the societal norms concerning vocational roles women can take in the community, and that opportunities such as pursuing higher education or technical training was only for the men and women were not allowed to study further.

The last noticeable gender role distress was the responsibility that automatically fall on female children in the absence of a mother. This case was of great interest to the study because one of the participant had an older brother but when the mother left them to work, the participant although younger than the brother had to be the one who was responsible for their younger siblings and made sure that the house was kept while the brother went out for pursue his passion for TV and acting. This goes to show how deeply entrenched are the prescribed gender roles, hence in as much as the government is trying to compensate for the unequal gaps by crafting policies such as the national gender policy framework and government plan for gender equality (2016-2019), the society also needs to unlearn a lot in terms of traditionally influenced gender dynamics in South Africa.

The findings on cultural ideologies and gender dynamics emanated from varied perspectives that the participants shared. The reported excerpts covered a spectrum of ideologies and norms that

participants have experienced such as the reminiscent valuable lessons that have been passed down to them by the older generations, the ascribed roles they found themselves because they were female and how beliefs held at societal level informed the actions of different genders within the community. Two participants (participant 5 & 7) promptly shared the cultural ideologies that influenced their childhood, and these cultural worldviews were from different cultural groups and are distinctively different but the study interestingly found that the concept of ideologies cut across different groups of people even when the “belief” is essentially different.

According to Ridgeway and Kricheli-Katz (2013), the disaggregation of gender, race and class are commonly considered as culturally distinct systems of difference and inequality and this is not because they are essentially different. Rather, it is because people have routinely understood them to do so, which has over time resulted in social relational implications. Fiske (2010) argues that the content of gender and race stereotypes are widely known to differ in numerous ways. However, research prevails that these systems have in common, the inclusion of beliefs that one category of difference is somewhat of a higher status and is more competent especially in societal contexts. Ridgeway (2011) further argued that people tend to use the notion of gender as a ‘primary cultural frame’ for organising their social relations with others. The premise of ‘primary cultural frame’ is described as social relation where one is required to find a way to coordinate with others, which helps to anticipate how others ought to act and how individuals may decide to act thereof (Ridgeway, 2011).

4.7.2 Socio-economic influences

A person’s economic standing can determine the kind of life they live as well as their aspirations. Specifically, in the South African context, having financial freedom has the capacity to provide opportunities and platforms that are not accessible to the vast majority. Therefore, poverty has been experienced by the study participants as an adversity as it posed as a threat to their progress and a constant barrier in their lives. As children grow older, they often are inclined to take the responsibility of alleviating the financial burdens of their parents.

When my mum moved to Johannesburg she never found another teaching job, so she started selling fruits. I remember we had those public phones where people could come and pay R1 so she was doing that on the streets, like she was a street vendor. This was me in grade 11/12 and my mum was selling on the streets. I just really felt like I needed to work to help

her, so when I passed matric I didn't really want to go to university because I just felt like what's the point. It would be good to help out at home.

Then I applied for a master's in Sociology, I got accepted and also got a scholarship from the NRF but I declined the offer. I didn't tell anyone, not even my mother because I thought she would insist that I do it. I realized the situation at home was bad and that I really had to work now because my mum really needs it, although she would not say it Participant 2

Other participants also mentioned how they devised resources at their disposal to finance their basic living conditions and their education:

So, me being always understanding towards my parents put a lot of pressure to on me, because I now I had to work for anything that I needed. Like for example, when I had to register for my masters'. My worry was that I was still owing my honours fees, so I felt like the stress was only on me alone and not my parents because they were like "you need to register" but they were not saying I must I register with because I was owing. Participant 3

My parents said maybe I should take a break because after my master's degree. I always worked and studied from my first year, I have never just studied. So they would always tell me do not push yourself too hard. Participant 5

I always had a problem with registering beginning of the year because I would still be owing school fees from the previous year. However, with the little that my grandmother has from her pension, she has managed to help me pay for my fees whenever she could and continues to encourage me to study further. Participant 6

My mother then got employed by town with a salary of R800 per month, the money was not enough to sustain us throughout the month, but we were a happy family because we were getting some form of income in the household.

I registered for my standard nine, but I was challenged because my school was too far and taking a bus to school was troublesome because I did not have enough bus fare. My mother also walked to her work. I later applied to work at Kentucky fried chicken (KFC) when schools were closed to help my mother with money. Participant 7

Clearly, student financing was not available to the participants. They either had to work alongside their studies or place additional demands on household income which could contribute to higher stress levels for everyone involved. The issue of participants paying for their studies was a common adversity among the participants. Participants reported on the challenges they faced in accessing education especially at tertiary level due to the lack of financial means which became very stressful for them.

An interesting finding by Catalano et al. (2004) supports the data findings and suggests that, students from lower socio-economic brackets must focus primarily on their basic needs before they begin their academic career, which places them at a significant disadvantage. Research information such as this perhaps explains why suburban students who attend good schools in safer surroundings and can prioritise their learning often out-achieve those from rural settings because they focus more on the immediate needs (Catalano et al., 2004).

Burney and Beilke (2008) argue that school success often focuses on the elements of ethnicity, gender, language and location of the school. Issues of poverty have not necessary been investigated in determining the school achievement. However, research has revealed that although not all schools have racial diversity, it has been found that at least some students are living in poverty (Burney, & Beilke, 2008). The current study's three participants attended school in the rural areas where there was no racial diversity, however amongst those three participants, at least one participant was living in poverty.

The Apartheid regime actively instilled the notion of social exclusion in non-whites and people with some resources and services not being made available to people of colour. Apartheid policies deprived black people of an education and did not support non-menial employment or the tertiary aspirations of black people. The one participant in the study who experienced the Apartheid regime reports on the perception she had as a "poor person".

Even though I wanted to be a psychologist or a social worker, I doubted my calling because I thought going to university was for rich people only and I did not know anything about NSFAS. Participant 7

Government subsidies and financial schemes are been made available to students who are from disadvantaged households and do not afford to pay for their fees. Organisations such as the

National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) were some of the measures taken by the government to assist students who did not have money to fund their studies and important to note is that this scheme was not available to everyone, but one had to meet the eligibility criteria. In the year 2017, as former president Jacob Zuma stepped down as president, he announced that there would be free education for first year students from the year 2018. Although this is only limited to students whose families earn less than 350 000 per annum, legislation is changing to alleviate the challenge of not affording tertiary education, which most students face. The next generation of first year students who fall within the stipulated bracket after the 2018 will have access to free education and such changes in legislation contribute towards positive contextual factors.

Belsky and Pluess (2009) ascertain that differential impact is an outcome of people's perceptions of the resources at their disposal and the opportunity structures that either make it more or less possible for them to take up in full capacity the resources that become available and accessible to them. The wide wealth gap in South Africa persists with education being an indicator in the forefront. A study by Graven (2014) ascertains that after Apartheid era ended in 1994, and thereafter, education became a vehicle for transforming society and a political rhetoric of equity and quality education as well as prioritised education for all South African citizens.

The above findings were reported systematically according to the ecological framework that the study adopted. This segment encapsulate the significance findings for at each level of the framework. Within the microsystem, the study found that participants' responses to adversity are often through individual and internal characteristics that they mobilise to overcome the challenges. Participants reported that they were relying more on their internal characteristics such as agency, locus of control and self-efficacy. The mesosystem was found to be the level at which participants reported their biggest distress in that their immediate environment posed too many risk factors that were perceived as adversity. These risk factor include risky environment they live in, unsupportive school teachers who were discouraging learners and the high levels of pressures that participants received from parents. The exo- and macro systems were found to have a direct impact on participants at the individual level although they did not directly engage with the levels. Furthermore, issues of not having access to school due to the Apartheid regime related restrictions and living prescribed lives according to cultural dictates were some of the issues that were reported by the participants in the study.

4.8 Chapter summary

The chapter has reported on the study findings. It also assimilated the discussion supported by adequate literature to present an overview of the data presented by participants. In answering the research questions, the discussion purposively adapted the ecological systems framework to map out how each level of the ecological system influenced the participants and presenting findings based on a South African context. The empirical data offers evidence-based accounts of the necessity and importance of understanding context when exploring resilience. The study sample was very diverse with participants from different levels of the social-classes. The study further shows the influences of the macro level factors and how those affect the broader population. However, the meso- and micro systems in particular facilitate how participants experience and respond to the adversities.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

5.1 Conclusion

The study, conducted at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College located in Durban explored the resilience of South African female master's students in response to adverse life circumstances. Participants originated from different parts of the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal provinces and the majority had moved to Durban for study purposes. The aim of the study was to understand the influences of contextual factors on students' responses to adversity. This conclusion chapter summarises the study findings, which are of relevance to resilience literature, particularly in the context of South African. In addition, the findings reflect on the experiences of female post-graduate students (master's level). The findings are briefly summarised based on the data set and relevant literature. The chapter also reflects on how the participants responded to adversity using the ecological systems framework.

According to the study's operational definition, resilience refers to both the internal and external factors that seek to influence the ability to adapt and transform in the face of high risk factors. Several individual, environmental, social and contextual factors were reported to contribute to adversity as well as enhancing coping by South African female master's students. The chapter makes conclusions in relation to the research objectives and further reports on the significance of the findings within the broad scope of resilience literature.

Research findings suggest that context was experienced both negatively and positively by students. Where context had a negative impact, students reported adversities and hardships to associate with negative contextual factors such as poverty and risk environments. The three major contexts found to have influence on students were the family, school environment and broader community. An overarching factor common throughout these contexts was support. Study findings reported that in cases where there was no support at each of the three levels mentioned above, students experienced hardships and become despondent. However, where there was support at least in one of the three levels, it acted as a buffer to the hardships on the same micro- level. These findings are significant to resilience literature as they highlight the importance of supportive environments in the development and nurturing of students' educational aspirations.

In response to understanding the different coping mechanisms that students resort to in the face of adversities, findings revealed that most students reported to rely on their internal individual

characteristics. Students did not have routine (pre-determined) strategies which they resorted to in times of need, however findings suggest that internal resources are predominantly the preferred coping mechanisms. Findings show that students mobilise such internal attributes as agency, locus of control and self-esteem to counteract risk factors imposed by their external environment. In instances where the community was risky, or school was unsupportive of students' educational aspirations, participants showed how internal resources were adopted to overcome those hardships. Human agency persisted as an individual factor that students adopted as a copying mechanism, hence students' educational discretions were informed by their personal agency.

The study makes premise that students used their agency to discern what was beneficial or detrimental to their development and activated agentic internal characteristic to produce positive outcomes. The relevance of these findings manifest in the way students through patterned experiences had to rely more on their own capabilities. Findings also depict that despite the external support available in the immediate environment (i.e. family and the school environment), students were accustomed to relying on their personal agency more than external support. The study does not deny the importance of external support but rather shows how students who were part of the study managed to succeed without receiving any external support.

In understanding how context and coping with adversity contributes to resilience, the study found numerous challenges and hardships that students reported at each layer. Based on the study's operational definition, resilience refers to the internal and external factors that influence the ability to withstand adversity as well as adapt and transform in the face of high risk factors. The study shows that over time, students developed resilience in response to adversity at the different levels and with different experiences of the ecological context. In many cases, it was not until the students were asked to reflect on the past experiences and what they had achieved, that they described their experiences as being successful against all odds.

According to the reported findings, the micro- and meso- systems there the prominent levels that facilitated how participants experienced and responded to adversities. The systems were further found to have elicited the most risk and protective factors respectively. Although the study findings cannot be generalised to all female post-graduate students across all the ages and racial groups, most of the findings concurs with the relevant literature particularly with the generation born after 1994 when Apartheid ended. The ecological framework also assisted to understand the situation

in context and conclude that additional external support would alleviate the pressures on individuals relying more on their inner resilience.

5.2 Limitations

The study has provided some new insight pertaining to the significant role that contextual factors have on resilience. This helps to fill the gap that exists in the current literature. However, these findings reflect the perspectives of a specific group within a particular context which is the Health Promotion master's students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College.

Conclusions and recommendations of the study cannot be generalised to different groups neither can they be applicable to a different context. The study acknowledges the possibility of arriving at different findings in the instance of exploring the subjective experiences of different participants. However, trustworthiness was maintained through ensuring that the provided data was respected and reflected appropriately by following the six-phase analysis guideline by Patton (1999). The researcher also compensated for this shortfall by providing thick descriptions of the steps followed in coding the data and generating themes for the study. The study findings cannot be transferred to a context outside South Africa as contextual factors may not be the same for other countries and therefore research may not yield the same findings.

Among the participants recruited for the current study, some were previously acquainted with the researcher as they were in the same master's cohort, while others had no form of interaction with the researcher prior to the start of the recruiting process. This may arise as a limitation in how the participants responded to the interview and could be the determining factor of how much participants from both the 2016 and 2017 cohorts shared with the researcher during the individual interviews. The interview schedules were formulated from the content presented by students in their life stories. The researcher generated overall themes that emerged from participants' life stories and other thematic areas that were explored in individual interviews that were of relevance to the study yet they were not reported on life stories.

5.3 Recommendations

The following recommendations have been formulated with an intent to remedy the challenges that have emerged in the exploration of resilience among South African female post-graduate (master's) students and their responses to adversity:

- The study recommends the creation of youth-led peer educational programmes from senior primary through to tertiary level in a form of a dialogical space where students in the community occupy a communal space such as a hall to address or redress pertinent issues. This platform will allow students to share knowledge and draw strength from one another. Student support services like those made available in universities should be implemented from primary school level. Participants reported on the values instilled at a young age to have helped them overcome some of the external risk factors, thus having supportive systems in place in school from primary level will help equip learners with expertise and skills needed to overcome hardships.
- Due to insufficient data, the study was not able to show the generational shifts in contextual influences of socially constructed ideologies of cultural beliefs and gender norms amongst the different generations. A brief illustration of the generational shift is only shown when participants reported on their parents' support in furthering education despite being female and after obtaining either an undergraduate or honours degree. Henceforth, the study recommends future research to be conducted exploring socially constructed ideologies and their contributions on today's generation of young people.
- The South African government is currently moving towards working closely with research institutions and that civil society to influence policy frameworks and inform implementation. Part of informing policy is adopting strategies that not only align with the sustainable development goals but what is relevant to the varied contexts. The current study provides a qualitative inquiry of research which is "the meat to the bone" of quantified reports where it takes into consideration the experiential factors of particularly female students within the context of South Africa. Inter-sectoral collaborations that are currently put in place where the different government departments are collaboratively involved in the implementation of policies such as the Integrated School Health Programme (ISHP) where education departments work collaboratively with the health department in schools could benefit tremendously from this nature of research due to its insightfulness and in-depth inquiry. In addition, higher education institutional boards could make use of the current study to enhance the external support required by post-graduate students.

The exploration of resilience in response to adversity among female master's students uncovered the numerous facets that interplay in adversity and coping. Adversity and resilience could mean

different things to different people especially in such a diversified country as South Africa, which bring us to the importance of context and the significance it has in understanding phenomena such as adversity and resilience. Henceforth, the factors uncovered in the current study could be point of departures for any future research within the field of adversity and resilience.

5.4 Chapter summary

The chapter consisted of the conclusion, limitations and recommendations of the study. The study refers to the contextual factors reported in the data set guided by the ecological systems framework. Limitations of the study were discussed, and recommendations were made to inform future research. The study also highlighted the gaps that need to be investigated to get a better understanding of factors that influence resilience amongst female students in South Africa.

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APPENDIX A: ETHICAL CLEARANCE



UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL

22 November 2018

Ms Mblenhle Felicia Ngubane (212521470)

School of Applied Human

Science— Psychology Howard College

Campus

Dear Ms Ngubane,

Protocol reference number: HSS/0901/017M

Project title: Exploring the resilience of South African Female Masters students in Response to Adversity from an Ecological Systems Perspective

Approval notification —

Amendment Application This letter serves to notify you that your application for an amendment dated 15 November 2018 has now been granted Full Approval as follows:

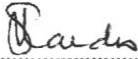
- Change in Title

Any alterations to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study must be reviewed and approved through an 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 3 years from the date of issue. Thereafter Recertification must be applied for on an annual basis.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research protocol.

Yours faithfully



Dr Shamila Naidoo (Deputy Chair)

Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Cc Supervisor: Dr Yvonne Sliep

Cc Academic Leader Research: Dr Jean Steyn

Cc School Administrator: Ms Ayanda Ntuli

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Dear Participant

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. My name is Mbalenhle Ngubane, I am a student in the Health Promotion master's class of 2017. Part of the requirements for a Master's degree in Health Promotion is to complete a short dissertation. I am interested in "*Exploring Resilience among South African Female Master's Students: An Ecological Systems Perspective*". My

supervisor is Prof Yvonne Sliep in the Discipline of Psychology, School of Applied Human Sciences, at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

You are required to give consent to the access of your life story from Professor Yvonne Sliep and to participate in an individual semi-structured interview that will take about 45-60 minutes to complete. All information that is shared in in this study will be treated as confidential and anonymous by myself as the interview facilitator and researcher.

Please note the following:

- The information you will provide will be treated confidentially and will be anonymous as no name or information can be linked to you personally
- The information that will be shared in the interviews will be treated confidentially and will be recorded and reported anonymously.
- Reporting of research information will only be done at a group level.
- You have a choice to participate, not participate or stop participating in the research. There will be no negative consequences should you decide not to participate in the study.
- Data will be stored in secure storage in the Discipline of Psychology and destroyed after 5 years.
- Your involvement is purely for academic purposes only, and there are no financial benefits involved.
- We request your permission to audio-tape the interview

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Human Social Science research Ethics Committee protocol reference number: HSS/0901/017M. Should you require clarification of further information regarding the study, please do not hesitate to contact me, my supervisor as well as the Humanities Social Science Research Committee. The contact details are below.

If you are willing to participate please indicate so by signing be section below. You may keep this letter for your information.

Contact details of Researcher

Supervisor

Mbalenhle Felicia Ngubane

Prof Yvonne Sliep

SAHS, Psychology

SAHS, Psychology

Howard College

Howard College

University of KwaZulu-Natal

University of KwaZulu-Natal

E- mail: ngubane_mbalenhle@yahoo.com

E-mail: sliepy@ukzn.ac.za

Cell phone: 0837515399

Tel: 0824989343

University of KwaZulu-Natal Ethics Committee

Simangele Shezi

Research Office: HSSREC Research Office

Govan Bheki Building

Tel: 031 260 8350

E-mail: sheziS@ukzn.ac.za

□=====

PARTICIPANT DECLARATION

I (Full names of participant) hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of this research project, and consent to participating in this study.

I understand that:

- Information I provide will be confidential and anonymous
- Participation in the study is voluntary

- I am at liberty to withdraw from the project at any time, should I so desire
- I give permission to audio-tape the focus group discussion

Signature of Respondent

Date

Signature of researcher

Date

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Greetings/ Salutations

Welcome to our individual interview, my name is Mbalenhle Ngubane and I am working with Professor Yvonne Sliep as my supervisor. I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for availing yourself to be part of this study in *Exploring resilience among South African Female Master's students: An ecological systems perspective*.

For this interview session, questions have been predetermined and some generated from your life story following analysis. Before we start with the interview, I would like you to take note of the following points:

- The interview session will be recorded, this is to help me not miss any important points
- I will be facilitating the interview by asking listening and further questions. It is important to note that I will not be contributing anything during the conversation.
- Any information given by you will be confidential and anonymous using pseudo names, I will not ask for any identification information.
- All information discussed in the interview will be used for purposes of this research only
- Participation in the study is completely voluntary and you are allowed to withdraw from the study at any time. Refusal to participate in the study, or withdrawal from the study, will not have any negative consequences for you.

Reported thematic areas presented on the participants' life stories

1. What would you say has counted as motivations of furthering your studies?
2. From your own perspective, what role does high level education play in your personal life?

- If you were to reflect on your past experiences, who would you say was your role model or impacted your life?
3. Which life experiences would you say had the most significance in your own life?
 4. Through what means have you dealt with the challenges that you have faced in your life?
 5. What would you say your social environment has imparted (positively or negatively) in the person that you are today?
 6. How have you internalized the support or lack of support (formal or informal), which instances would you say are the result of it?
 7. Briefly elaboration on the experience of sharing life stories and what is meant for you?
 8. With the dominant discourses of power, agency, identity and values discussed in the Person is the Professional module, what links can you make between your resiliency and education?
 9. What perceptions do you hold on the expectations of your family/ parents pertaining your educational aspirations?
 10. Where do you see yourself in the next five years? What do you think will help you get to where you want to be?

NB: Additional questions may be adapted to each interview schedule to follow up on the thematic gaps reported in the life stories.